

Our Village—The Church

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As previously mentioned, our ancestors had also emigrated for religious reasons. In the new homeland of Bessarabia they could follow their faith, their religious convictions, freely and undisturbed. They were strict Lutherans. The "Pietists" among them remained to our days. They formed "brotherhoods" in each village. Even today, they still address each other as "brother" and "sister." They led a strictly religious life. Two or three times weekly they met in the house of a brother and held their prayer meetings. Several read a text and explained it. They also met Sunday afternoons. They felt God's presence and sought to live life by God's word. They helped and supported others as much as they were able to. If someone offended against the rules of the "brotherhood," then a punishment was imposed upon him; he "was put back"—stopped—and, for a set time, was not allowed to speak about the "Word."

As we saw, the first generation had death, the second misery, only the third had bread. A proverb tells us: "misery teaches praying." It was like this also with our forebears. After a few years they established a house of prayer in each village. Here they held their divine services on Sundays and religious holidays. When a confirmation candidate entered the church, he remained standing at the place where he wanted to sit, and first said a prayer. For example: "Speak, Lord, your servant listens!" That was the rule and duty. This was so up to the day of our repatriation to Germany. The Swabian re-settlers do this even today, if they enter church. It was a foregone conclusion for everyone to go to church on Sunday. There one received comfort, strength and hope. In the afternoon "children services" were held. All confirmation candidates up to 18 years of age attended these. Everyone had to copy a page from the Bible and learn some Bible verses. Strict discipline prevailed. Nobody was allowed to speak in the house of prayer or in the church. This place was always regarded as a holy place. As there were insufficient ministers at the beginning, farmers were found who were able to read and write to hold the services on Sunday. It was quite impossible for the few ministers to serve each village personally. For this reason our "Werner School" made it their business to train the young school teachers so that they were able to hold the services, baptism and funerals, as well as the religious education in the schools. For seven years a minister instructed them in the holy writings, church history, etc., so that they would be up to the task.

Most fulfilled their obligations with a lot of devotion. Our teachers also took over the organist duties: they were then called sextons. As there were too few ministers, our villages were divided into parishes. Several villages belonged to one parish. The pastor was the head of the parish. Each village had a sexton (parish assistant).

In the course of time our villages were materially much better off. They insisted upon building themselves the most beautiful places of worship in place of the prayer houses. Their high towers proudly rose up to the heavens. They were witnesses of the strong and deep beliefs which inspired our ancestors. A choral gallery was also always built in these places of worship. A strict seating order had to be kept by all churchgoers. At the front right sat the married men, on the left the women; above in the choral gallery the boys and the young males sat on the right and on the left the small and single girls. So that order prevailed and nobody spoke during the sermon, a churchwarden was selected from the parish. If someone was guilty of a serious offence, then he kept them back after the service and punished them. This was a warning for all the juveniles. It was, of course, a huge disgrace to be punished in the church.

Each village also had a church council, elected for several years. At the head of the council was

the curator. The church representation for the entire Bessarabian Lutheran Christianity was the Synod. Their members—representatives of the villages—were called Synodals. The Consistory was the church's highest authority. The head was the high priest; the lay leader was its president. The seat of the high priest and the Consistory was in Tarutino, county Akkerman. After the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, the consolidation with the Lutheran church of the Siebenburgen region took place after a long and difficult fight. It was high priest Haase who had achieved the consolidation. He was the head of the clergy for many years. He did a lot of good for the Bessarabian Swabians in his capacity as high priest and parliamentarian. His name will not and cannot be forgotten.

After the resettlement to Germany, our Lutheran Christians experienced an immense disappointment that in Germany, the homeland, so many people approached the church perfectly indifferently, even hostilely. In Bessarabia the church was the establishment which not only cared for us, but was the one that protected us from alienation and sheltered us; indeed she was the tie which bound us together. Church and school were like Siamese twins. God be praised that we had our church and school. Without them we would not be what we are today. After all the hardship, which we had to go through and endure in the course of one and a quarter centuries, and then again after our escape from the east, we believe more than ever in the kindness and omnipotence of God and sing with Luther:²

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doeth seek to work us woe
His craft and pow'r are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same
And he must win the battle.

And tho this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph thru us.
The prince of darkness grim
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly pow'rs
No thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours

Thru Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever.

Translators' Footnotes:

1. This is referring to the "Bruderschaften," the Brethren movement. Brethren meetings, also called "Stunden," almost always were open to both men and women but only men made any decisions. They were held to compensate for the absence of a pastor (i.e. there weren't enough pastors for each village). A once-a-week gathering in the church, usually without the pastor, was not enough for many of them to grow spiritually. Often these "Stunden" had revivals, and a whole village was touched spiritually. During times of revival like this, meetings were held every evening, often at several places in a village. Very few pastors looked favourably on these meetings, although they did not prevent them. This was unfortunate because the people in these meetings were usually the strongest supporters of the pastor.

2. The lyrics included here are from the hymn "Ein' Feste Burg," written by Martin Luther (1483-1546). There are several translations of this hymn, entitled "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," in English. This version was translated by Frederick H. Hedge (1805-1890). The German lyrics used in this original article are as follows:

Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,
Ein' gute Wehr und Waffen,
Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,
Die uns jetzt hat betroffen.
Der altböse Feind,
Mit Ernst er's jetzt meint,
Groß' Macht und viel List,
Sein' grausam' Rüstung ist,
Auf Erd' ist nicht seinsgleichen.
Mit unserer Macht ist nichts getan,
Wir sind gar bald verloren,
Es streit' für uns der rechte Mann,
Den Gott hat selbst erkoren.
Fragst du, wer er ist?
Er heißt Jesus Christ,
Der Herr Zebaoth und ist kein anderer Gott,
Das Feld muß er behalten.
Das Wort sie sollen lassen stah'n
Und kein Dank dazu haben!
Er ist bei uns wohl auf dem Plan
Mit seinem Geist und Gaben.
Nehmen sie den Leib,
Gut, Her', Kind und Weib,
Laß fahren dahin!
Sie haben's kein Gewinn,
Das Reich muß uns doch bleiben.