

Elisabeththal Church Building

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[Translator's Note: Pastor M. Fr. Schrenk comments on the construction of a new church building in the village of Elisabeththal, which was located in the Caucasus region of Georgia.]

[Begin Translation]

The Church Building in Elisabeththal

From the notes of Pastor M. Fr. Schrenk

The new church in Elisabeththal is an ornament for the whole colony. I still recall a walk which I made with Senior Pastor Ross to the heights of the Elisabeththal hills from where one had an immediate overview of the entire colony. As we enjoyed the magnificent view from up there for a while, Senior Pastor Ross remarked, “Either the church does not belong to the village or the village does not belong to the church.” Such was the contrast between the construction of the church over against the houses of the colonists. The houses were so plain and simple. In contrast, the church was a work of art with its sleek, octagonal tower.

How is it that Elisabeththal came by such a beautiful church? There lived in Tiflis [Tbilisi, Georgia] a German architect, N. Salzmann, the son of colonist Mr. Salzman, who like the others, immigrated from Württemberg and, back then, maintained a lodge on the “sandy banks” (“*Sand*”) of the Kura River for the German colonists. Later, however, once he himself became a man of means, bought a place in the colony of Neu-Tbilisi and built right there. The son of this old Mr. Salzmann, a gifted, industrious young man, enjoyed good schools and learned architecture, which made him a rich and famous man afterwards. During my time in Tbilisi, he was the first architect who came up with the plans for all the Crown buildings. Because this Mr. Salzmann found out that the people of Elisabeththal intended to build a new church, he suggested that he would draw up some plans, free of charge, which, naturally, the congregation willingly accepted. Now, once half of the cash necessary to build (the church building was estimated to come to 14,000 rubles in cash) came in through collections and levies, the community petitioned the senior administration in Tbilisi, asking for permission to build a new church. At the same time, with this petition, the blueprints, which Mr. Salzmann, in the meanwhile, had drawn up and the community then had adopted, were presented for ratification. After the senior management of the government of Trans-Caucasus approved the request of the Elisabeththal community and confirmed the plan with some marginal notes, the congregation took vigorous steps in beginning the construction. But before the new church could be built, the small old church, which stood on the grounds, had to be torn down since, after lengthy deliberations, it was decided that this spot was the most appropriate place to build. Prior to the demolition of the small old church, where I had proclaimed the Word of God for a full seven years, a final worship service was held and some older members were very reluctant to be separated from the holy place which had become

so dear to them. From then on, (if I am not mistaken, it was in March of 1868), worship services were held in the large hall of the school, which had to be enlarged for the purpose of worship so as to make room for about 300 persons. The residence of the school teacher, which was on the other side of the school house, was added to the school and living quarters were rented for the family of the teacher. It was certainly not an easy task to hold worship service for three years in a narrow, low ceiling and musty room, notably throughout the summer the air in this place was often stifling and many times I came from the church to the house bathed in sweat. Since otters and snakes liked to hole up in the old, somewhat dilapidated, school bricks, it so happened once, during a worship service, that the people sprang up from their seats to evade a large copperhead snake that slithered around under the benches.

The demolition of the old church and the digging out of the footings of the new one proceeded energetically. The foundation of the new church was immediately bricked and on 12 May, also the day after the Ascension of Christ, the cornerstone was solemnly put in place. To celebrate the laying of the cornerstone, present, besides me, were pastors Knapp from Marienfeld, Lemm from Katharinenfeld, and Stuber from Alexandershilf. Placed into the cornerstone were a written document concerning the construction of the church with an indication of the architect, area pastors, area leaders and the members of the church convention (*Kirchenkonventsmitglieder*), as well as one each of the coins used in Georgia at the time, plus a New Testament and a hymnal. Then the cornerstone was solemnly closed during which every pastor present gave it three hammer blows, accompanied by an appropriate blessing in the form of a Bible verse. Then followed a petition for God's blessing on the construction of this new house of God, to be enjoyed in the next three years as the church was being built. Not a single accident was to be reported by those working on the construction of the church. In the course of three years, the building project came to an end and the new church was able to be dedicated on 26 August, 1871 with Senior Pastor Ross officiating along with other brothers in the pastoral office.

What an uplifting celebration this dedication ceremony was for me and for the whole community. I held on to the text of the festival sermon, but, unfortunately, 11 years later, I have now forgotten it. Also, the sermon is no longer in my files. But one of us attending the dedication and a member of the Elisabeththal choral group, wrote the following song which is found in his collection of poems. The first verse of this dedication hymn goes like this:

Great King, Lord Jesus, we dedicate to you this house
And humbly implore you to pour out your blessing
On this festival gathering, who stand assembled here,
So that they will be yours and lift up praise to you.

The festival ceremony was further embellished in that the military was moving through Elisabeththal at that time. The commander of the Georgian Infantry Regiment in *Bjeloklutsch* was a German by the name of N.N. Golizin. Before the people departed from the church, he was kind enough to let his musicians play the choral number: *I Pray for the Power of Love* ("Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe"). Many more beautiful musical numbers were provided by the musicians of the congregation that evening. So everyone rejoiced in this festivity over the beautiful, new, specially decorated church in Elisabeththal. The actual cost of construction far exceeded the original cost estimation. The cost amounted to 15,000 rubles in actual cash and an

estimated amount of 6,000 rubles donated by community labor at the church construction site. All in all, the cost of the church came to 21,000 rubles. However, the community had to admit that, after the completion of construction, it was not impoverished by building the church. On the contrary, the Lord gave his visible blessing to them at that time. There remained a couple of 1,000 ruble debts on the church, but they were taken care of by the congregation within the next few years. How happy and grateful I was to the Lord that we were able to exchange the small, musty school hall for the new, spacious house of God. This was set up for 600 seats and, on either side of the pulpit and altar, two balconies and, behind the pulpit and altar, on the upper floor, a choir room for the choir to prepare itself. The harmonium, which was obtained for the old church by Pastor Baumann from Marienfeld for 300 rubles, was too small and weak for the new church. But the funds in the congregation were now exhausted. In order to purchase an organ for the new church, I subsequently, by way of a church collection, and my successor's small fund of 60 rubles, started the Organ Fund. There was a marked improvement in the church life in the Elisabeththal community through the construction of this new church in that attendance at worship service and notably the preaching was always good in those first years. The once fragmented and inwardly distracted community became more united through this joint undertaking. The construction of the church building also provided a noticeable blessed influence on the Christian way of life in the community. It even influenced the way the houses in the colony were painted. Then, after there was so beautiful a church in the village, the people began to be in competition with each other to better clean up their own houses. Even the road through the village was improved. Already before the dedication of the church, the central part of the village received a sewage system and both sides of the oval village street (*oval angelegten Dorfstrasse*) were graveled and the sidewalks paved with stone slabs which eventually continued throughout the whole village. In this regard, it could probably serve as a patten and model for all German colonies in Georgia, in the Kherson Province and also in Bessarabia.

31 August, 1939

[End Translation]