

## BISHOP ANTONIUS ZERR (1849 – 1932)

### NEW GRAVE-MARKER PLACED IN SELZ CEMETERY



Antonius Johannes Zerr was born 10 Mar 1849 in the German colony of Franzfeld, which today is called Nadlimans'ke. It lies roughly 50 kilometers west of Odessa city. He was the youngest of nine children born to Peter Zerr and Anna Maria Braun. His special talents were recognized at an early age, and at the age of twelve he was sent to the Saratov seminary. He was ordained in 1872 and spent the first years of his priesthood in the Volga region. In December of 1889 Pope Leo XIII appointed Father Antonius Zerr as the Bishop of Tiraspol, the third person to hold this position. As the first native-born colonist son to achieve this honor, he was much loved by the Germans of South Russia. He served as Bishop of Tiraspol from 1890 to 1902, when declining health prompted his resignation.

Joseph Height, in his book *Paradise on the Steppe*, (pages 353-355) provides a good summary of Bishop Zerr's life. Adam Giesinger also writes about Zerr's work on pages 216-219 in *From Catherine to Khrushchev*. You can also read more about the Diocese of Tiraspol at: <http://www.blackseagr.org/church-catholic.html>

Although relieved of the pressures of administration, Bishop Zerr continued his work as an educator helping young men prepare for the priesthood, and later, secretly ordaining several young clerics as priests. He regained his health while living some years in Feodosia, Crimea. In 1911 he moved to Odessa where he collaborated with Rev. Conrad Keller regarding Volume II of "The German Colonies in South Russia 1804-1904". In 1924 he traveled to Rome to discuss the ever-worsening religious restrictions being forced upon his people. Returning to Odessa, he was continually harassed by the Soviet NKVD. Eventually ordered to leave Odessa, Bishop Zerr moved to Selz in 1926. A short time later he moved to Kandel, and lived there for 5 years before his death on 15 Dec 1932. He died in the home of Barbara Schmaltz and her seven children. She was the widow of Nikolaus Schmaltz. Height writes that more than two thousand people gathered two days later inside and outside of the beautiful basilica in Selz which Zerr himself had consecrated in 1901 as Bishop of Tiraspol. It was the largest funeral ever held in the

German colonies of South Russia. At his request, Bishop Antonius Zerr was laid to rest in the Selz cemetery, overlooking the village and the liman.<sup>1</sup>

The Soviets continued to denigrate the churches and the cemeteries. The twin towers were torn off the cathedral. The stone markers were taken from the cemetery and used in various ways as building blocks and paving stones. Vandals began to open graves to remove valuables like rings and other jewelry, even gold teeth. Bishop Zerr's grave was likewise blasphemed, and in order to protect his grave from further desecration, his remains were secretly re-buried without a marker in 1934 [1936 according to another source –MW]. In 1944 all the Germans of Odessa district were forcibly evacuated and with them went those who knew the secret location of Bishop Zerr's grave – except for one German woman who was able to quietly remain in Selz because of her marriage to a Russian man. (Her name has been withheld by request.) She kept this secret to herself for 65 years. Shortly before her death in 2009 she shared her precious information with Luise Riesling, a German woman who has returned to live in the village of her birth. Luise had known all along that Bishop Zerr was buried in the Selz Friedhof. This was information which her mother had told her long ago. I was in Selz in September, 2008 to attend the two-hundredth Jubilee celebrations of the founding of Selz. Frau Riesling told me then that the relative location of Bishop Zerr's grave in the Selz cemetery was now known to her, and it was only a matter of time before it would be found.



*Memorial marker installed 25 Sep 2012.*

*“Wir sind Fremdlinge von Dir und Einkömmlinge wie alle unser Väter. Unsere Tage sind wie ein Schatten auf Erden und ist kein Bleiben darauf.”*

*--1 Chronicles, 29:15.*

*We are strangers and wanderers before you Lord, as were all our fathers before us. Our days on the Earth are like a shadow and will pass without a trace. (MW translation)*

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<sup>1</sup> In a very few years, attendance at this funeral was the cause for the arrest of many Kutschurganers, cited as evidence of agitation against the Soviet regime. Because she had cared for the Bishop in her home, Frau Schmaltz was arrested in 1935 and held for two years before being shot in Odessa in 1937.

In 2009 a new grave at the Selz cemetery was being dug for a recently deceased villager, when workmen uncovered a large stone several feet below ground level. Having struggled to remove several large stones out of the way to continue their digging, the workers discovered a burial crypt and recognized immediately that they had discovered a pre-war, ie. German burial vault. Frau Riesling was summoned. Part of the vault had caved in and it was soon obvious that a clergyman was buried there. At this point, Frau Riesling phoned to the office of Bishop Bronislaw Bernatzki in Odessa. Bishop Bernatzki and Father Jan Dargievich of near-by Razdelnaya arrived within hours to investigate further. Father Jan climbed down into the vault and took photographs. The vestments and cross with the corpse were in good condition and clearly identifiable as belonging to a Catholic bishop. Bishop Zerr was the only bishop to be buried in Selz.

The Odessa office of the Catholic Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol with Bishop Bronislaw Bernatzki in charge immediately claimed jurisdiction of the gravesite. Plans to erect a new memorial marker of some kind began almost immediately. When the Catholic Church in Odessa had confirmed that the remains found in Selz definitely belonged to Bishop Antonius Zerr, members of the Zerr family in Germany approached Michael Wanner to spearhead a fund-raising campaign to contribute to the cost of a new memorial gravestone for the Bishop's grave. Herr Wanner is current chair-person of HFDR or Historischer Forschungsverein der Deutschen aus Russland e.V. (HFDR) which handled the money. The design and actual placement of the memorial were coordinated through regular communications with Fr. Jan and with Bishop Bernatzki. The Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol has also contributed funding to the project, as has the Russian-German Catholic Chaplaincy in Bonn (Rev. Dr. Alexander Hoffmann). The new Memorial was set in place on Tuesday, 25 September, 2012. A formal dedication has been scheduled for 04 November 2012.



*07 Sep 2012. Luise Riesling of Selz tells Merv Weiss the story of the discovery of Bishop Zerr's grave. Frau Riesling played a lead role in the drive to find the grave and to dedicate a proper memorial. This photo was taken less than two weeks before the new granite memorial marker was installed. (Note the liman in the background.)*



Photo credit Alexey Köhler

Selz Friedhof  
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