

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE NEUDORF CHURCH

by
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Sunday, September 16, 2007 marks the 100th anniversary of the dedication of the new sanctuary of the German Baptist Church in Neudorf, Russian Volhynia. The village of Neudorf is located approximately 30 km northwest of Zhitomir. Neudorf in German simply means *new village*, a common descriptor of a newly established colony or village. Quite likely that is how the village got its name. Although Alitza Cording of Westerstede, Germany, who grew up in the area, claims the village was named after her maternal great grandfather, *Neu*, who came to the area as one of the early pioneers. Perhaps both are true.

The Baptists initially came to Volhynia from East Prussia and Congress Poland in the early 1860s when the Russian government granted freedom to its serfs in 1861. No sooner did they arrive than they gathered for worship. First in the open black forest surrounded by primeval oak trees so large that two men could not get their arms around the trunks of the trees. In 1863 they acquired approximately four dessiatins (16 acres) of land and built their first sanctuary, a small wooden chapel made out of *eisen holz* (iron wood), as they called it. In 1872 the chapel was doubled in size. Several years later a new chapel was built. Interestingly, according to archival records, it contained a wall proclamation in both Russian and German on one side of the front of the sanctuary designed to show that the German Baptists were law-abiding citizens and respected the government. It read, *Fear God and honor the Tsar*. This was in addition to the usual motto of the German Baptist churches in Germany and Eastern Europe, *Ein Herr, Ein Glaube, Ein Taufe* (One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism), based on Ephesians 4:5, which appeared on the other side of the front wall.

The early organization and expansion of the Baptist movement in Volhynia was largely the result of the tireless missionary efforts of Gottfried F. Alf (1831-1898), progenitor of Baptists in Poland as well as the German Baptist movement in the Russian Empire. He was the first Baptist person baptized in Poland and the first Baptist missionary to Russia. Alf, never one to miss a mission opportunity, made a number of trips to Volhynia in the early 1860s to encourage the brethren, who had left his church in Adamowo, Poland and migrated to Volhynia. The Neudorf church, the third established in the Zhitomir region was officially founded by Alf on October 31, 1866. Because of its strategic location, evangelistic fervor, rapid influx of people and early notable pastor, Karl Ondra, the church soon outgrew its third building.



In 1905 the ever-expanding congregation undertook the construction of an entirely new church building, a large red brick building seating over 2,000 people. The church, when completed, was a dominant landmark and could be seen from many miles away. The building had a high ceiling, stained glass windows inscribed with Bible verses, ornate chandeliers, which could be raised and lowered, an organ and an indoor baptistery, though the baptistery was seldom used. "It was too much trouble getting it ready," a former member said, "and so we walked to a nearby dugout lined with stones. Besides, it was quite a sight to see the long procession of people, led by the pastor and baptismal candidates dressed in white, accompanied by the brass band, make their way to and from the place of baptism, singing all the way." Following the tradition of the Baptists in that day, the men sat on the right side and the women on the left. The pulpit was in the middle on a raised platform with the communion table in front of it. The choir sat to one side of the pulpit and the brass choir and male choir, led by the famed Josef Ittermann, sat on the other side. At the front of the sanctuary facing the parishioners, the traditional motto of the German Baptists was again boldly proclaimed. According to Albert Wardin, Jr, notable Baptist historian, "In so doing, the Baptists, like earlier Anabaptists, Mennonites and members of the Church of the Brethren, repudiated the territorial churches of the day with their infant baptism, sacramentalism (including baptismal regeneration), and a mixed membership of regenerate and unregenerate." Behind the pulpit, there was a small room where the church records, communion trays, baptismal gowns, musical instruments, songs books, Gospel tracts and Bibles were kept.



There was a fence around the church building, hitching posts for horses and a long wooden barn. Each family had its own stall. A beautiful row of linden trees lined the driveway. There was also a parsonage on the grounds, an orchard and small garden. Members worked the acreage adjoining the church and gave the grain and produce to the pastor to help supplement his salary. The main sanctuary, which also housed a balcony, was only used once a month when believers came together from the surrounding villages to celebrate communion and hear a sermon given by the main pastor. On the other Sundays the people met in homes and small chapels scattered throughout the area. Those belonging to the Neudorf church met in the upstairs back chapel. In 1894 the church opened a special school for the spiritual instruction of its children. It had two levels. There was also a public school in the village. In the late 1800s the government sent several officials to the church to report on its life and ministry. Among other things they stated that it appeared that the condition of the spiritual life among the Baptists was better than that of the other religious groups and that there were "no poor among them, because they take care of them."

It was in this church that the German Baptist interest in music received its highest expression. In addition to its *gesangchor* (singing choir) and *posaunenchor* (brass orchestra), it had a choir of stringed instruments. In June 1908, the area Baptists held a *Posaunenfest* (Brass Band Festival) in Neudorf with Josef Ittermann directing. There were over 5,000 in attendance. The German Baptist

Church in Neudorf was considered to be the “mother church” of the German Baptists in Volhynia. It had the largest membership, the largest building and the largest sphere of influence. It ministered to over 50 stations and was one of the best well-known churches in the entire Union of Baptist Churches in the Russian Empire.

The construction of the large sanctuary, which still stands today, was undertaken in 1905 during the tenure of Eugen W. Mohr as pastor. Its cost was 15,000 rubles, but with donation of the volunteer labor of parishioners and skilled workers the cost was reduced by 3,000 rubles. Because of the generous giving and enthusiastic support of the members the building was virtually debt-free upon completion. The sanctuary, the largest in Volhynia and the second largest in all of Russia, was dedicated on Sunday, September 16, 1907. Friedrich Brauer, notable pastor from Poland, who wrote up a report of the dedication service in *Der Hausfreund* (N. 42, p. 334-335) said that when he arrived on the scene on Wednesday prior to the festivities, the church was not yet finished. The people worked day and night to complete it in time for Sunday’s services.

There were over 6,000 people present for the three-day weekend event. Since the sanctuary only held about 2,000 people, the remainder were required to listen through the open windows and doors and from an overflow shed nearby. The dedicatory activities included a history of the church’s early beginnings, including a glowing tribute to Alf, numerous words of greetings from area pastors and visiting dignitaries, many musical renditions, an ordination service and a large baptismal service. For the occasion the church invited J. A. Frey from Riga, esteemed author of the book *The Land Where Jesus Walked*, as guest speaker. It also included a farewell to Mohr, the pastor, who was scheduled to leave the congregation immediately after the dedication to become the first teacher of the newly-organized seminary in Lodz, Poland.

I first came across the Neudorf church building in May 1993 while on my first *Ancestral Village Adventure* tour. At the time I had no idea that any of the church buildings of the German Baptists had survived the repression of the Bolsheviks in the 1930s. But driving through the area one afternoon, we came upon the building quite by accident. On that day we found a group of men working around the church in an effort to restore it. The building, closed down by the Communists in 1934 and used as a granary by the local collective farm, was in total disrepair. The roof was off, the doors hung from their hinges, the windows were broken and there was bird dung all over the floor. From the pastor Vasily Chernyak, we learned that a small group of about 100 German Baptists had used the sanctuary for a brief interlude in 1941-1943 during the German occupation, but after the retreat of the German army, it was again reclaimed by the Communists and used as a storage bin. In 1991, after nearly 50 years of plunder and abuse the Government gave the building to a small group of Ukrainian (Evangelical) Baptists, who were meeting in a home. Before we left that day, the pastor begged us to help them restore the building. A few months later when my

mother died, our family chose to help restore the sanctuary as a fitting memorial to my mother and father, Samuel and Tusnelda Miller, who had on occasion attended the church before their immigration to Canada in 1927.

Through the years thousands of people attended the church, were married in its sanctuary (including many of my aunts and uncles), baptized and received into membership and buried in the nearby cemetery. The church and its five pastors, Karl K. Ondra (1866-1877), Severin W. Lehman, (1877-1894), Eugen W. Mohr (1897-1907), Eduard A. Wuerch (1907-1923) and Wilhelm R. Schmidgall (1925-1934) have had a powerful impact on the Baptist movement in Ukraine, Russia, Germany, Canada and the United States, Australia and even South America. Many Volhynian Baptists can trace their spiritual heritage back to this one church. It is a great honor and privilege to be in attendance at the centennial celebration in Neudorf to pay tribute to this legacy of faith.