

A Journey in Volhynia and Canada

Pages from the diary of Ernst Althausen, a former Lutheran pastor in Volhynia. Translated from German by Rev. Gerhardt W. Becker for Wandering Volhynians (a quarterly magazine). First printed, 1921. English translation, 1993.

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Summary by HSGPV volunteer, Erhard Pinno, August 2019

“Rev. Althausen was born the 13th March, 1863 in Kurtuseki, Cauasus, Russia; graduated in Theology from Dorpat University; Pastor at Tuczyn, Volhynia, 1888-1902; in Rowne 1902-1908; in Soellenthin 1908-10 and Rashkow near Ostrowo, Posen 1910-20. He passed away at Dallgow, Neu Mark, the 29 April, 1946.”

“In the period 1918-1920 many of Pastor Althausen’s former parishioners from Tuczyn and Rowne returned penniless from their exile in Siberia only to find their property confiscated and in the hands of the local Polish and Ukrainian peasants. Pastor Althausen decided to travel to North America to seek aid for these people from former parishioners who had settled in North America prior to the outbreak of WW I.”

Pastor Althausen set sail on December 18, 1920, arriving in St. John, New Brunswick on December 29. During his time at sea, he reflected on his time in his parish in Rashkow, Poland and pondered the purpose of his journey to raise support for the returning Volhynians. He recalled the many nationalities included among the 1,500 passengers, only few Germans and even fewer Lutherans. A few other passengers joined him in celebrating Christmas. When the high seas threatened the safety of all the passengers, he reflected on the suffering and plight of all, especially the Jews.

From St. John he travelled by train to Montreal where he briefly visited in a Lutheran congregation. On January 1, 1921, he travelled to Winnipeg. With the exception of a brief visit with the Neche congregation in North Dakota, the rest of his time (until about mid-February) was spent visiting congregations in Manitoba including Friedensthal, Emerson, Rosenfeld, Gretna, Winnipeg, Morris, Morden, Brown, Beausejour, Golden Bay, Green Bay, Libau (Latvian immigrants), Whitemouth, Camper, and Moosehorn. In each congregation he met with former parishioners and friends from Volhynia. Much time was spent reminiscing on the “olden days” but the focus was on sharing the plight of the Volhynians and encouragement for the relief efforts. He held the Russian church (Orthodox) responsible for the exile and persecution of the Volhynians because of their influence with the Tsar. Pastor Althausen established a German Settlers’ Bank Account to which his listeners were invited to contribute. Of course, many congregation members still had family or friends in Volhynia. It should be noted that he was invited to preach in every congregation, including some that were not Lutheran. Much of the diary entry for that day includes a summary of the sermon which usually focused on the application of the Bible readings to the plight of the Volhynians. (Note: Many of the congregations Pastor Althausen visited still exist and some of the names of the leaders of those congregations are well-known in Lutheran circles today.)

Readers may find some of Pastor Althausen’s impressions of church life in Canada of some interest. He lamented the sectarianism in many communities as a fever – Baptists, Adventists, and especially the Holy Rollers in Beausejour and Winnipeg. He was “quite confused” with the Lutheran synodical divisions in small towns like Moosehorn: “...here the sheep rule over the shepherd and the children over the parents”. Yet, he saw a rich spiritual church life: “When the congregations appear at the service in full numbers even on weekdays, when the elders are active in the worship service, when there is powerful singing, then you notice with joy, here there is real joy, it is active spiritual life, how they listen to the Word, how thankful they are for the sermon.” (pp. 42-3)

The selected diary days do not record the results of the relief effort nor how this aid was distributed in Volhynia. Nevertheless, it sheds some light on the plight of the Volhynians in the post WWI years and is a significant contribution to the history of the establishment of the Lutheran church in Manitoba. Faith, persecution, history and geography converged to strengthen the German-Volhynian spirit and community across the seas.

