

GRACE UNDER FIRE

**A HISTORY OF THE
DIASPORA DISTRICT**

**OF THE
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN FREE
CHURCH
IN GERMANY**

**SENIOR CHURCH HISTORY
PROF. JOHN BRENNER**

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The story of the Diaspora District of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany is a fascinating page in the history of the Church of God. It is the story of a church body whose history is marked by extremely harsh conditions and strong attacks by Satan and his cohorts. It is a story which witnesses to the fact that the Lord is the ruler of history. It is a story of great human achievement brought about by God-given strength. It is a story of men who labored faithfully in love, in spite of the physical and spiritual challenges which they faced as individuals on a daily basis, to nourish God's people with his saving gospel. It is a story which testifies to the power and grace of God; his almighty, gracious, empowering hand at work in his servants to preserve his elect in spite of tremendous difficulties and all-out war waged against the church by Satan. It is a story of God's grace under fire, and his faithfulness in preserving it.

NEW BEGINNINGS IN POLAND

The history of the Diaspora District has its roots in pre-World War I Poland. In the early 19th century many Germans left their homeland for Poland. Pastor Otto Engel (nephew of the Pastor Otto Engel who was instrumental in Wisconsin Synod ties with this group) asks: "Why did my ancestors leave their settled homes in Germany and migrate to a country that was very much unsettled in far-off Poland? My forebears were all of pure German stock. Why would they want to move to a land where not only the language but also the customs were far different from those they were used to?"¹ Part of the reason lay in the political and religious conditions in Germany at the time. Friedrich Wilhelm III, who ruled Prussia from 1797 to 1840, decreed in 1817 that all Lutheran and Reformed churches were to unite into one church organization, called the "Evangelical Church in Germany." This was known as the Prussian Union. "It is true that the decree was not enforced rigorously until a few years later, but still the strict Lutherans living in his kingdom at the time must have feared for the future and wondered how this would affect their religious freedom if the liturgy they were to use in their churches, the church they were to

¹Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 37.

attend and even their pastor were fixed by law."² Economic and personal hardship had also come to areas of Germany as a result of Napoleon's campaigns in 1806.

Following Napoleon's defeat, the new regime in power did away with serfdom. Former serfs, who had at least been assured of fuel for their homes and a meager living under serfdom, now flocked to the cities to find jobs only to discover few opportunities due to the large number of other people doing the same thing. Unemployment, overcrowding and extreme poverty resulted, to the point that many lived on the brink of starvation. The same hardships occurred among the craftsmen when their trades, which had previously been strictly limited to a small group of well-trained craftsmen, were opened up to anyone. Many distraught Germans were lured to Poland by large landholders and industrialism. The town of Lodz (situated about 100 miles east of Germany's eastern border; 50 miles southwest of Warsaw) was opening up a new textile industry around this time. "In order to attract workers for the industry, the Polish government promised all immigrants large grants of land, good working conditions, and the guarantee that no one would interfere in matters of language or religion."³ At the same time a number of weavers and clothmakers from Schliesen and Posen moved to a little village just outside Lodz called Alexandrow in 1819. (Among these immigrants were the three sons of Daniel Gottlieb Engel.) A group of confessional Lutherans who had come to Alexandrow organized themselves into a congregation in 1823 and dedicated their church building in 1828. By 1871, under the shepherding of Pastor P. Rauh, this congregation numbered 6,000 souls. During the same time there was tremendous growth in the much larger city of Lodz as a result of Germans storming in for jobs in the booming textile industry. Trinity Church in Lodz was founded in 1829. By 1870 Pastor Clemens Bertold Rondthaler ministered ^{to} over 20,000 souls! Just to get an idea as to the demands of his ministry: in one year Pastor Rondthaler conducted 1,145 baptisms and 642 funerals (up to 8 funerals in a day). In order to help meet the spiritual

²Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 37.

³Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 38.

needs of its members, lay workers were sent out into different parts of the city to conduct reading services. Pastor Otto Engel's father, Julius Engel, Jr., was confirmed by Pastor Rondthaler on April 7, 1884. In 1884 the congregation, which now numbered 40,000 souls, decided it was time to found a daughter congregation. St. John Church was founded, and W.P. Angerstein, a graduate of Erlanger Theological Seminary in Germany, was called to be the pastor. A third congregation, St. Matthew, was later started under his guidance. Already beginning in 1886, these churches encouraged their students to go to New Ulm, MN, for seminary training at the Minnesota Synod's Doctor Martin Luther College. A number of these men stayed in the United States and became pastors in the old Minnesota Synod.

A FREE CHURCH BORN

After World War I, the Allies redrew the boundary lines of the countries surrounding Germany and set up new governments. The new regime in Poland wanted to keep religion under control. The government tried to unite all the Protestant churches into one church organization. The only legal Lutheran church was the Evangelical Augsburg Church in Poland. However, their Lutheranism was questionable at best. Pastor W.P. Angerstein of Lodz, the recognized leader of a relatively small group of confessional Lutherans, wrote a tract which showed that the Augsburg Church was out of harmony with the Augsburg Confession in all 28 articles. Pluralism and rationalism had infected this church body, to the point that it fellowshipped with various sects and even with the Polish National Catholic Church. In reaction to pressures by the government and its favored church, the Catholic Church, the Augsburg Church came down hard on Pastor Angerstein and any others who objected to its loose confessionalism. In spite of the hardships he faced, Pastor Angerstein continued to encourage students to go to Synodical Conference seminaries, including the Wisconsin Synod's Wauwatosa Seminary. As a result there soon was a decent size group of confessional Lutherans in and around Lodz who recognized the need to break from the Augsburg Church in order to maintain orthodox Lutheran doctrine and practice. They established an unofficial "free" church which was faithful to the confessions.

The key player in the founding of this group was a lay evangelist by the name of Gustav Malschner-Maliszewski. Having been encouraged by Wisconsin Synod pastor Otto Engel (a native of Lodz whose family had migrated to America in 1896), Gustav attended the theological school of the Saxon Free Church of Germany in Kleinmachnow (then known as Zehlendorf) near Berlin to improve his theological knowledge. In June of 1923 he returned to Lodz and held private services in homes. In 1924 Maliszewski along with thirty-five Lutherans founded the Ev. Lutheran St. Paul's congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in Lodz. Having agreed to the constitution drawn up by young pastor Maliszewski, they held their first public service on May 11, 1924. On August 3rd of that same year Maliszewski was ordained by Pastor Otto Engel, and later that month a second church in Andrespol joined St. Paul's in Lodz to found the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland.

WELS' FIRST FOREIGN MISSION

At this point it is necessary to discuss the Wisconsin Synod's involvement in this field. Due to the physical hardships facing the Germans in Poland during and after WWI, Wisconsin Synod pastors and lay people who had originated from the area and still had relatives there sent money and other gifts to help support them in their need. They also were aware of the far greater spiritual needs which their relatives in Poland were lacking. Pastor Otto Engel of Randolph, WI, was authorized by the Wisconsin Synod in 1921 to study the field. He toured Poland in 1922 and came back to the 1923 synod convention with this report: "that many preachers in Poland were apostate, that thousands of souls lacked a shepherd, and that many people hungered greatly for God's Word." ⁴ The convention then took an historic step, its first overseas endeavor into the world mission field. (The second foreign language field; the first being outreach to the Apache Indians in Arizona). The convention minutes read: "The result was that the synod after lengthy deliberation resolved that our General Board for Missions

⁴Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 69.

should undertake the mission in Poland with all energy" and granted \$10,000 for this purpose.⁵ Early in 1924, Pastor Engel accepted the call to superintend the work.

EARLY GROWTH IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION

Following the founding of this new "free" church, inquiries came from small groups of Lutherans all over Poland, mostly disillusioned Augsburg Church members. This small church body had very tough beginnings, as alluded to above. "The Augsburg Church was not reluctant to use its favored position to throw legal roadblocks in the way of the emerging mission."⁶ The congregations experienced "intense opposition" from both the Augsburg Church and the Polish government.⁷ This opposition could be better described as harassment. The church was allowed to exist, but it was not officially recognized by the government. It had to notify authorities of all meetings, so they could send observers. Reports of all business transactions had to be given to the government. Only Polish citizens were permitted to perform official pastoral acts. (Keep in mind that many of these pastors and members were considered German citizens.) The state church officials regularly sent the sheriff around to collect dues from Free Church members, who had not set foot in the state church for years. State church members barred the free church members from using the only available cemeteries. They were forced to use the plots reserved for suicides. In one instance, the chapel built in 1930 in Danowiec was padlocked shut by the government and was not opened up until April of 1934.

Yet, by God's grace the young seedling church body did grow. An historically key blessing for the group was the withdrawal of August Lerle (a city missionary) from the Augsburg Church in 1926/27. He was ordained and installed in Andrespol on Feb. 20, 1927. By the summer of '27, the church body numbered two congregations, ten preaching stations, three

⁵Fredrich, Edward C. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 165.

⁶Fredrich, Edward C. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 167.

⁷Kiessling, Elmer C. *Our Church: It's Life and Mission*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1990. Pg. 200.

pastors (G. Maliszewski, A. Lerle, and Adolf Dasler, the WI synod superintendent from 1926-29 - also a native of Lodz), and six students sent to study at the seminary in Kleinmachnow. There were 200 communicant members at Lodz and 69 at Andrespol. In 1929 the WI synod sent Pastor William Bodamer to serve as the director of the work in the mission field. The mission continued to prosper under God's guiding hand. In 1937 an agreement was worked out with Polish authorities which enabled the pastors to perform official pastoral acts that were recognized by the government. By the beginning of 1940 it could boast 20 congregations, 12,000 members, and 8 pastors.⁸

WAR-TORN AND SCATTERED

The horror which struck the world on September 1, 1939, when Hitler declared war on Poland, had terrifying effects on this church body composed primarily of German immigrants. Pastor Armin Schlender, in a series of articles published in the church paper *Durch Kreuz Zur Krone* ("Through Cross to Crown") recounted years later that the few weeks of Hitler's *Blitzkrieg* were "days of terror, of extreme unrest, of indescribable suspense and unheard of spiritual misery."⁹ The message sent out throughout Poland by both Warsaw newspapers and radio broadcasts was: "Smite all Germans dead. They are spies!"¹⁰ "'Open season' was declared upon all Germans, who tried to hide in every possible place of refuge. Hordes of released criminals swarmed over their villages, plundered their homes, terrorized their women. The Polish were like people possessed."¹¹ Over 60,000 Germans were murdered in Poland, some of whom were butchered like cattle. "The remains of martyred Germans were recognizable only through

⁸Herrmann, Gottfried. "The Diaspora District of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Volume 89, Number 4. 1992. Pg. 284.

⁹Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 44.

¹⁰Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 75.

¹¹Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 44.

remnants of their clothing as their cries for help filled the countryside."¹² In Pastor Armin Schlender's two congregations, fourteen members were killed and a number of others "disappeared." Neighborhood mobs and Poles fleeing the German army terrorized, vandalized, and brutalized innocent Polish citizens who happened to be of German descent. "With the beginning of World War II it was as if an impenetrable curtain was drawn between the mother church in America and its adopted offspring. . . . All that could be done on this side was to pray and wait for developments."¹³

From 1939-1945 the Nazi military ruled over Poland. Due to rigid censorship, no contact was permitted to be made with outside churches or organizations. Mail service outside the borders ceased altogether. Pastor Bodamer of the Wisconsin Synod had been stateside, reporting to the synod convention in the summer of 1939, when the *Blitzkrieg* and WWII prevented his return to Poland. No offerings were allowed to be taken during church services. Because paper was valuable to the German government, no monthly newsletter could be published. Two Free Church pastors were drafted (Reit and Napp, with whom Prof. Ernst Wendland spent the 1938/39 school year at the Zehlendorf seminary) and never returned from the Eastern Front. All theological students were also enlisted in the army. Yet in spite of such chaotic circumstances, by the grace of God there was a net growth of 450 souls between the years 1939 and 1945.

Near the end of the war in 1945 with the German army retreating and the Russian army advancing, most of the Free Church members, along with millions of other Germans, were driven out of Poland. Many were forced to leave their homes and possessions at gun point by the German army, which was retreating before the quickly advancing Russian army and didn't want to leave anything behind for the Russians. "Often even the members of a single family were

¹²Wendland, Ernst H. "Our Synod's First Mission Overseas." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 2, Number 1. Spring, 1984. Pg. 38.

¹³Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 44.

separated, sometimes never to meet again."¹⁴ Many people who had refused to leave were slaughtered by the Russian army, whose orders from Stalin were to do whatever they wanted to whomever they came across in order to achieve the goal of unconditional surrender by the Germans. One of the pastors was put in a Russian prison camp during the war and related stories of enduring intense beatings. In the chaos which marked the end of WWII, these exiled Christian brothers and sisters were scattered throughout East and West Germany. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965* records:

The end of the second World War brought catastrophe to the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Poland. People of German descent were forced to leave their homeland. Some of the German people came to Germany from Poland and the Baltic states in a somewhat orderly manner; some came in a very dishevelled flight under unspeakable want by train, or in many more cases by horse and wagon or on foot. Among them also were the pastors and congregation members of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland.¹⁵

As a German church historian sadly records: "The end of WWII brought the dissolution of all the congregations of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland."¹⁶

GATHERED IN GERMANY

Once back in Germany, things did not go any too much smoother for these German/Polish exiles. Conditions were disastrous. Germany had been devastated by the war. The refugees from Poland were considered unwelcomed intruders from the beginning. "Arriving in Germany the refugees found a cold welcome because the country was already overcrowded

¹⁴Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 45.

¹⁵German Text: "Das Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges brachte den Gliedern der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche in Polen eine Katastrophe. Menschen deutscher Herkunft mussten die Heimat verlassen. Zum Teil noch einigermassen geordnet, zum Teil schon in aufgeloester Flucht kamen deutsche Menschen aus Polen und dem Baltikum unter unsaeglichen Entbehrungen mit der Eisenbahn, vielfach aber auch auf Pferdewagen oder zu Fuss nach Deutschland, darunter auch die Pastoren und Gemeindeglieder der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche in Polen." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 1.

¹⁶Herrmann, Gottfried. "The Diaspora District of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Volume 89, Number 4. 1992. Pg. 287.

with impoverished people who had lost everything in the great defeat."¹⁷ ("Our church: its life and mission, pg. 200). "It [Germany] could barely sustain its own population, let alone care for millions of displaced persons pouring in from the East People who had been hated as Germans by the Poles among whom they had lived for so long were as welcome as a plague of locusts in the land of their ancestors."¹⁸ A report at the 1947 WELS Synod Convention described them as "ragged, emaciated and unwelcome beggars."¹⁹ These Christians had no money and no possessions; they were forced to beg for food; they were separated from friends and loved ones; they had been torn apart from their brothers and sisters in Christ and were separated from their pastors; and they were unwanted by their ancestral countrymen.

"When the Lord of the church closes one door, he often opens another."²⁰ Under these conditions, being refugees themselves, the displaced pastors did not sit around feeling sorry for themselves and bemoaning their woeful situation. Instead with tremendous pastoral hearts, these *Seelsorgers* began a "truly heroic" effort. Already in 1945 six pastors (Maliszewski, A. Schlender, Zielke, Wagner, H. Schlender, and Lerle) met together in Zwickau and divided up responsibilities in the attempt to figure out where their Christian brothers and sisters were now living, to organize them again into congregations, and to continue to shepherd them with God's Word. These courageous men of faith considered it their "God-given duty to search out their people and resume their ministry to them in Germany."²¹ The pastors wrote to the Wisconsin Synod to replace their lost ordination certificates and provide them with credentials as pastors of the WI Synod. They officially organized in June of 1946 as the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission Church. "The name these pastors chose defined their reason for being. . . . in some part

¹⁷Kiessling, Elmer C. *Our Church: Its Life and Mission*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1990. Pg. 200.

¹⁸Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 77.

¹⁹Wendland, Ernst H. "Our Synod's First Mission Overseas." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 2, Number 1. Spring, 1984. Pg. 39.

²⁰Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 45.

²¹Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 78.

of their minds this original group would always be refugees, serving refugees, dependent on the Wisconsin Synod to help them do it." ²²

Recognizing their dire physical needs, the Wisconsin Synod authorized the development of the Committee on Relief for War Sufferers and elected Rev. Karl Krauss of Lansing, MI, as its chairman. (This committee eventually developed into what is now called the WELS Committee on Relief, serving people in need around the world.) The committee raised money by a synod-wide appeal for free will offerings. By April 30, 1947, the fund had collected \$160,125.99. The money was not able to be sent directly to Germany yet at this time, because the rate of exchange had not been fully developed. So CARE packages consisting of food, clothing, etc. were sent. These gifts were greatly appreciated by the refugees: "In the years after 1945 gift parcels also arrived, which were received from foreign Lutheran brothers in the faith. During the regulated distribution, the congregation members became skillful, and it contributed to the alleviation of the greatest need during the post-war time." ²³ In May of 1947, Pastor Alfred Maas made his first trip to Germany as the WELS representative to reestablish contact with the remnant of the former Polish Free Church.

The story of the refugee pastor's travels throughout Germany to gather their scattered sheep is one of adventure, exhaustion, and great God-given physical and spiritual strength. "All the pastors were circuit riders, traveling widely and laboring mightily."²⁴ Each of the pastors traveled great distances by train, bicycle, and foot. Pastors Armin Schlender and August Lerle would be gone for three months at a time. "When Helmuth Schlender was too tired to pedal his bike, he walked it and kept on going. . . Lerle had lost 90% of his vision, but did much of his

²²Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 78.

²³German Text: "In den Jahren nach 1945 konnten auch Liebesgaben, die von auslaendischen lutherischen Glaubensbruedern eintrafen, verteilt werden. Ueber Verteilerstellen wurden sie Gemeindegliedern geschickt und trugen zur Linderung der groessten Not waehrend der Nachkriegszeit bei." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 10.

²⁴Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 79.

traveling by bicycle." Lerle was known to say: "When they see me coming, they should have enough sense to get out of the way."²⁵

A quick note concerning the Refugee churches in West Germany is in order. Maliszewski and a number of the other pastors made their heroic efforts to gather the scattered Polish members in the West. They soon formed congregations and united as the Bekenntnis Kirche (the "Confessional Church"). By 1952 15,000 refugees had been gathered into thirty congregations, served by ten pastors. This church body existed under a triangular fellowship for a number of years after the WELS and the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod broke fellowship with one another, receiving monetary and spiritual support from both church bodies. The WELS strongly encouraged the Bekenntnis Kirche to discontinue its ties with the Missouri Synod. However, effective January 1, 1976, against the advice of the WELS and in spite of WELS' long history of support, nearly all of the congregations of the West Germany refugee church body joined the Selbststaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK), a Missouri Synod supported coalition of churches. These congregations are no longer connected to the WELS in any way. From this point on this paper will concentrate on the history of the current Diaspora District of the ELFK, whose history lies behind the Iron Curtain.

AUGUST "OPA" LERLE

The founding of the Diaspora ("Scattered") District in former East Germany (the Deutsche Demokratik Republik - DDR) goes hand in hand with the ministry of Pastor August Lerle, a Polish refugee and former pastor in Andrespol, Lodz, Siemiontkowo, and Wola Mlocka of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland. In the history of the congregation in Dahme/Mark, Pastor Artur Ortel wrote: "After God for all things, we have to give thanks to district preacher August Lerle (1884-1965) for the beginning of our Diaspora District. With untiring mission zeal he founded the Diaspora District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Free Church after the second

²⁵Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 79-80.

World War in the former DDR. . . . With the help of God, he made the almost impossible possible."²⁶

August Lerle was already sixty-two years old at this time and had poor eyesight. Therefore, "Pastor August Lerle appealed to his brothers in the ministry with the request that someone would like to organize the work. But he did not find anyone willing to come, since the work load of the pastors was also too great there. In spite of his impaired eyesight, Pastor August Lerle trusting in God determined to begin the work himself."²⁷ Between September of 1946 and October of 1947, August "Opa" Lerle made eight "missionary journeys" into the northern Russian Zone of Occupation, or DDR.^{28 29} *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965* describes these trips:

Pastor August Lerle conducted these trips under the most severe conditions. Half blind he traveled in the winter through the cold and the blowing snow on poor streets with a bike to care for the widely scattered congregation members. The train changed very irregularly; it was not punctual; it often stopped for long periods of time on the open track; it also fell completely off the tracks many times, so that the worship plans often had to be readjusted.³⁰

²⁶German Text: "Die Entstehung unseres Diasporabezirkes haben wir naechst Gott vor allem Bezirkspraeses August Lerle (1884-1965) zu verdanken. Mit unermuedlichem Missionseifer gruendete er nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg in der fruerehen DDR den Diasporabezirk der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche. . . . Mit Gottes Hilfe hat er fast Unmoegliches moeglich gemacht." Ortel, Artur. "Parochie Dahme/Mark." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94 Pg. 13.

²⁷German Text: "Wandte sich Pastor August Lerle an seine Amtsbruder mit der Bitte, es moechte jemand die Arbeit organisieren. Aber es fand sich niemand bereit zu kommen, da die Arbeitsbelastung der Pastoren auch dort zu gross war. Trotz seines schwachen Augenlichtes entschloss sich Pastor August Lerle im Vertrauen auf Gott, selbst mit der Arbeit zu beginnen." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 2.

²⁸The first trip, September - October 1946: Mecklenburg; second trip, November 1946: Mecklenburg; third trip, January - February 1947: Jueterbog, Luckenwalde, Weizenfels; fourth trip, March 1947: Weizenfels; fifth trip, Easter 1947: Mecklenburg; sixth trip, June 1947: Luckenwalde, Jueterbog, Weizenfels; seventh trip, end of July 1947: Altmark; eighth trip, September - October 1947: Mecklenburg, Mark Brandenburg, Weizenfels. Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 5ff.

²⁹See Appendix A for a map for reference throughout this paper. The map is taken from page 93 of Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992.

³⁰German Text: "Pastor August Lerle fuehrte diese Reisen unter den schwersten Bedingungen durch. Halberblindet fuhr er im Winter bei Kaelte und Schneeverwehungen auf schlechten Strassen mit dem Rade, um die weit zerstreuten Gemeindeglieder zu betreuen. Die Eisenbahnzuege verkehrten sehr unregelmassig, unpuenktlich, hielten oft lange auf freier Strecke, fielen manchmal auch ganz aus, so dass der

Following his trips in 1947, former Free Church of Poland members who lived in towns where Lerle had not yet organized a group began to get in contact with him. Lerle received forty-five letters from families and individuals later that same year. Beginning in January of 1948 and extending into 1949, Lerle sought out these families and individuals and gathered them into small groups. With help from his son, Ernst Lerle, 4000 members were located and organized into five parishes (called *parochie*), made up of fourteen congregations and more than one hundred preaching stations by 1949.

Throughout these years, the state churches were apparently "Good Samaritans." *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965* relates this story:

Although the member count had grown to about 4000 souls, there was not a building of their own at their disposal for the spiritual care of the resettled [immigrants]. The services and, in some cases, even the official acts were held in the church buildings and parish halls of the Evangelical State Church. At the beginning of 1949 there was not any difficulty with it. But then the circumstances changed. One pastor and superintendent within the Evangelical Church of the Union brought the church use into question. . . . On Wednesday, April 20, 1949, a discussion was set in Luckenwalde, at which Pastor A. Lerle, the general superintendent, Dr. Braun, and three superintendents along with their pastors participated. During these negotiations the decision was supposed to be made whether further use of the [state] churches would be permitted. . . . The Lutheran Free Church had no communion fellowship with the Evangelical Church of the Union. The Lutheran Free Church had their own financial affairs, and the members of the Lutheran Free Church were free from all church taxes of the state church. Church furnishings, buildings, and cemeteries of the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg were placed at the disposal of the Lutheran Free Church. It was agreed that [there would be no charge, and] any contributions for use of the buildings would be freewill.³¹

Gottesdienstplan haeufig umgestellt werden musste." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 6.

³¹German Text: "Obwohl die Gliederzahl auf etwa 4000 Seelen angewachsen war, standen fuer die kirchliche Betreuung der Umsiedler eigene Gebaeude nicht zur Verfuegung. Die Gottesdienste und teilweise auch die Amtshandlungen wurden in Kirchgebaeuden und Gemeindehaeusern der evangelischen Landeskirche abgehalten. Bis Anfang 1949 gab es dabei keinerlei Schwierigkeiten. Doch dann aenderte sich die Lage. Einige Pastoren und Superintendenten innerhalb der Evangelischen Kirche der Union stellten die Kirchenbenutzung in Frage. . . . Fuer Mittwoch, dem 20, April 1949, wurde aber eine Dienstbesprechung in Luckenwalde anberaunt, an der Pastor A. Lerle, der Generalsuperintendent Dr. Braun und drei Superintendenten mit ihren Pfarrern teilnahmen. Waehrend dieser Verhandlung sollte die Entscheidung ueber die weitere Kirchenbenutzung endgueltig fallen. . . . Die Lutherische Freikirche hat keine Abendmahlsgemeinschaft mit der Evangelischen Kirche der Union. Die Lutherische Freikirche hat ihr eigenes Kassenwesen, und die Glieder der Lutherischen Freikirche sind von allen Kirchensteuern der Landeskirche befreit. Kirchliche Einrichtungen, Gebaeude und Friedhoefe der Evangelischen Kirche Berlin-

It was Lerle's hope that these congregations could join the existing Saxon District of the ELFK, but great distances and already heavy burdens on that district president led Lerle to found a separate church body, the Diaspora Mission in Germany. Lerle became the district's first president.

"Opa" Lerle, as he was respectfully known by members and colleagues alike, served his Lord and his church up until his death. He traveled by train and then used a bicycle to get to the villages and homes of his people. He never had access to a car. As he attempted to cross the border once, the Berlin border official demanded to go through his "documents." Lerle's Bible was his only document, and he told the official: "Go ahead, read! I'll sit here all day if you want to study the whole thing!"³² He became terribly nearsighted in his older age, yet he continued to ride his bike and visit his congregations. Once he got into trouble with police for riding his bike in a dangerous manner. He pointed to the patch which identified himself as a blind man and said, "That's why I wear this, so people watch out for me!" He then continued on his way. When he could no longer ride the bike, he brought it along to steady himself as he walked and to carry his books in the basket. Even when nearly blind, Opa Lerle would go back to places he knew and "read" from memory.³³

Shortly after his death on February 9, 1965, an article in memory of Lerle appeared in the 1966 edition of the *Evangelisch-Lutherischer Volkskalender*, written by Pastor Armin Schlender. Because Lerle was held in such high respect and was the recognized grandfather of this church body, that article is reproduced here in its entirety as translated by the author of this paper.³⁴

Brandenburg, werden der Lutherischen Freikirche zur Verfügung gestellt. Beiträge fuer die Benutzung werden frei vereinbart." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 11-12.

³²Wendland, Ernst H. "Our Synod's First Mission Overseas." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 2, Number 1. Spring, 1984. Pg. 41.

³³Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

³⁴For the original German text, see Appendix B.

District Preacher Pastor August Lerle

- in memory of -

After an active, battle-filled life in the service of the Church - in the holy preaching office - the Lord God called the spokesman and President of the Diaspora District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Free Church at the age of 80 years to himself into his heavenly kingdom of peace. Without apprehension or horror of death, in his heart joyfully certain of salvation, singing and rejoicing, like a victor after a well-endured fight, he followed to the last the call issued to him by his Lord and Savior, who in the evening hours of February 9, 1965 released him from his suffering and delivered him to his heavenly kingdom. His last words are uplifting, which testify that he was a true disciple of Jesus and his death was a blessing: "Today I leave your circle . . . I have preached salvation in Christ, and I have refuted the false teachings. I have bore testimony to Christ as the only foundation and Jewel of our salvation and faith . . . Now my work has come to an end . . . and I wish for home . . . Rejoice! The hour of grace has come . . . O, how beautiful . . . Jesus is here . . . and I am able to see him in perfect beauty . . . Home, home to the heavenly Jerusalem . . . ! Today I am permitted to see the heavenly homeland . . . Sing still a song . . . and I am going home . . ."

And what he wished to sing over and over again, and he sang along in a voice which was getting weaker and weaker, and then he just hummed it. And we sang over his bier of God's grace, which was manifestly displayed in him, the last verse of the well-known eternity song: "May glory be sung to you with human and with angel tongues, with harps and with beautiful cymbals. The gateway to your city is made of twelve pearls, we stand in the choir of the angels noble around your throne. No eye has ever perceived, no ear has ever heard such joy. Of this we rejoice and sing to you the Hallelujah forever and ever." Each person who came into contact with him should sing and be joyful. He invited the doctor himself to sing. What made him sing in this way and gave him the pleasantness of death, the certainty of redemption in Christ Jesus, the certainty: "He has destroyed what brought death with it [i.e., sin and Satan]."

"Opa Lerle," as he was commonly called, was born on August 3, 1884 in Sanie near Lodz in Poland and grew up in a devout, Christian home which remained in close contact with the church. The determination was ripened in him already early on to study theology and to serve the Lord of the Church in the holy preaching office. His pastor, Pastor Holz, who confirmed him and was the university professor of archeology at the Evangelical University of Warsaw and pastor of Serim, contributed to this determination and its realization and befriended him. After he fulfilled the necessary prerequisites and the way to the set goal was smoothed, he devoted himself to the study of theology, to which he applied himself with great enthusiasm and obvious success. After he completed his studies in Germany, he entered first of all into the service of his homeland church, the Evangelical Augsburg State Church of Poland. After rather long, beneficial work, eventually as the superintendent of the Evangelical school in Zgierz near Lodz, which educated the preachers for the remote border district of the Augsburg Church of Poland, he found his way into the faithful Lutheran church, which at that time was the

Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland. He served them in great faithfulness in the congregations of Andrespol, St. Peter - Lodz, Wola Mlocka and Zichenau, until he left the homeland in the winter of 1944/45, and he had to give up the growing work which was so dearly beloved to him.

The following years saw him in Saxony and in Thuringia, until the Diaspora District within the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in the DDR was formed, and Lerle assumed the care of this widely spread district. An enormous task, which made huge demands on him, awaited him here. Distant, time-consuming, often very fatiguing service journeys - in the winter by bicycle over slipperiness and through snow drifts, he guided himself this way and that through the remote territories of his large jurisdiction, distant from one another, scattered situated congregations and preaching stations. With exceptional faithfulness, with great skill and exemplary diligence and zeal, he fulfilled these demands until in his last days.

Pastor Lerle was a blessed preacher. A good, resonant voice and a refreshing, vivacious ^{delivery} ~~deliverance~~ were at his disposal. He was listened to gladly, not only in his own congregation, but also elsewhere. His preaching was very carefully thought out, in agreement with the text, arranged well, full of meaning, warm, coming from his heart, popular, and understood by everyone. The first requirement of a preacher was given to him: he was "apt to teach" and his preaching "rich in doctrine." Sensationalism was far from him. He was conscious of what God says of the preacher: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God," I Peter 4:11. One thing stood firm for him, that the truths, ^{advice} ~~advise~~ and secrets of faith, the heavenly offspring are opened up in the Holy Bible. And it has to be put into the hearts of the hearers, if out of it should grow the fruit of repentance, faith and love. He preached God's Word and sought to promote knowledge of the truth in his hearers through the salutary teachings. He was full of the teaching, that only through Christ you can get salvation. So he also said: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," I Cor. 2:2. He proclaimed Jesus as the only salvation for all sinners and preached him into the hearts of his listeners, which was the goal toward which he navigated all his preaching. He could also speak very earnestly, if the situation called for it, to lead the secure, satisfied, and self righteous to honest repentance over their sins. However, one also indeed felt the love of his Savior penetrate him and entrusted him with his soul. How he could then again beg and implore: "Let yourself be reconciled to God." He was a faithful Seelsorger (carer of souls), which the solitary soul followed. He admonished the lukewarm, rebuked the sinner, warned the secure, sought the straying, comforted the grieving, visited the sick and blessed the dying. There was for him no road too distant, no weather too unfavorable and no night too dark. He did not take himself into consideration, even though due to his old age his eyesight had become very diminished. So he proceeded in his congregation, aged and loved by many and every inch on him a pastor. Thus he went through this life, a man full of faith, love and peace, a servant of Christ, a preacher of righteousness, a guide to salvation. But he never wanted to be anything in his humility, and he always credited everything to the account of God's grace. At his funeral at the south cemetery of Halle on February 15, it was demonstrated in what

love and respect he had stood. A large congregation of grievors - among them 22 pastors - made their appearance, in order to catch one last glance at his pale countenance in death and to display their sympathy to the family. Now the servant and soldier of Jesus Christ of long standing is in his grave until that great resurrection morning. To him applies what we are able to confidently look forward to, which the Lord has given to all his faithful servants: "The teachers will shine like the brilliance of the heavens and those who point many to righteousness as the stars always and forever."

A. Schlender³⁵

ORGANIZED INTO A CHURCH BODY

Lerle was assisted in the new Diaspora church body by fellow Lodz native, Pastor Helmut Schlender. Pastor Schlender had been ordained on September 9, 1934 in Lodz and served a congregation in Petrikau, Poland. His first permanent congregation in Germany was in Schoenfeld. Two other pastors were also serving in this church body by the end of 1952. They were Lerle's son, Dr. Ernst Lerle, who was ordained in 1948, and Pastor Waldemar Schmidt, ordained on May 27, 1951. At the end of 1952 the statistical reports of the four pastors read as follows:

August Lerle (Halle)	5 congregations, 29 preaching stations	774 total souls
Dr. Ernst Lerle (Halle)	2 congregations, 28 preaching stations	406 total souls
Helmut Schlender (Jueterbog)	2 congregations, 17 preaching stations	485 total souls
Waldemar Schmidt (Kuhblank)	5 congregations, 10 preaching stations	579 total souls

Total soul count: 2244 souls³⁶

This church body sought closer ties with their sister church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (also known as the Saxon Free Church). The ELFK asked that first each congregation submit a constitution and written application for membership in the synod. The *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev-Luth. Freikirche: 1945-1965* records the official uniting of the Diaspora District with the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church: "On May 31 and June 1, 1953,

³⁵Schlender, Armin. *Evangelisch-Lutherischer Volkskalender: Auf Das Jahr 1966*. Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965.

³⁶Reported in *Verzeichnis der Gemeinden und Pastoren: Ev.-Luth. Freikirche von 1876 bis 1996*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1996.

the district convention of the Saxony District met in Leipzig . . . On the occasion of this convention, the pastors and congregations of the Diaspora District were unanimously adopted into the synod union."³⁷

STRUGGLES UNDER COMMUNISM

In the years which followed shortly thereafter, there was a mass exodus of members from these congregations. Forchheim reported in the *Chronik*:

"The years 1953-1956 were marked by a severe migration of congregation members to West Germany. A comparison of the soul count at the end of 1953 and the end of 1956 illustrates this fact:

	<u>1953</u>	<u>1956</u>
Mecklenburg parish	269 souls	146 souls
Altmark	334	234
Jueterbog	455	336
Prignitz	573	335
Sernow	591	431
	-----	-----
	2222	1485 ³⁸

This rapid decline may have been in part due to a certain portion of the membership which had been lured by the physical charitable support provided by the WELS through these churches. When they realized, however, that the offerings necessary to support the church were higher than the relatively small taxes required in the state churches, they soon severed their ties

³⁷German Text: "Am 31.Mai und am 1.Juni 1953 tagte dann die Bezirksversammlung des Saechsischen Bezirks in Leipzig. . . . Anlaesslich dieser Versammlung wurden die Pastoren und Gemeinden des Diasporabezirks einstimmig in den Synodalverband aufgenommen." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 20-21.

³⁸German Text: "Die Jahre 1953 - 1956 waren durch eine starke Abwanderung von Gemeindegliedern nach Westdeutschland gekennzeichnet. Ein Vergleich der Seelenzahl Ende 1953 und Ende 1956 verdeutlicht diese Tatsache: . . ." Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 21.

with the Free Church. History clearly points out, though, that the reasons for such tremendous membership loss lie primarily in the area of economic and social concerns, and not religious concerns or weak faith. *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History* mentions the unrest in the DDR in 1953: "Despite their intense integration into the Soviet Cold War bloc, Eastern European nations remained restless. Dissatisfaction with living conditions, plus the hopes raised by more liberal Soviet post-Stalinist policies, led to riots and other convulsions in East Germany in 1953."³⁹

Until the DDR constructed the ominous wall at the orders of Soviet Communist party boss Nikita Khrushchev, completed on August 13, 1961, people from the DDR were fleeing the communist controlled country in droves. Before the wall was built, "green zones" and fences had been established with guards at all the roads to limit passage between the two sides of the divided country. East Germany wanted itself to be viewed by its citizens and by the rest of the world as paradise, yet people were leaving en masse and destroying their image. Therefore, the wall was constructed to prohibit such free passage. After this point, citizens of the DDR were rarely allowed to cross over into West Germany. They were basically held hostage within the borders of their own country. The Diaspora District existed completely behind the wall.

Why was life behind the "Iron Curtain" so terrible that people were willing to risk their lives to escape? The following paragraphs are primarily descriptive of life in the Soviet Union before World War II. However, the communist government of the DDR after the war was set up by Stalin and, although it remained an independent state, was controlled tightly by him. He imposed much of the same measures on the East German people and society. Even after his death, many of his policies and forms of intimidation continued.

In practice, German Nazism and Stalin's Soviet communism had much in common. Both Hitler and Stalin were dictators, and the respective parties they dominated exercised almost complete control over all phases of life: government, the judiciary, the military, police forces, the economy, ideology, education, the press, and cultural

³⁹Goff, Richard; Walter Moss; Terry Janice; Jiu-Hwa Upshur. *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. Pg. 320.

institutions. Massive propaganda, as well as terror and fear, were regular instruments of their policy.⁴⁰

The aim of Stalin's five-year plans was to create a new kind of society and human personality, as well as a strong industrial economy and a powerful army. Stalin and his helpers were good Marxian economic determinists. Once everything was owned by the state, they believed, a socialist society and a new kind of human being would inevitably emerge. They were by no means totally successful, but they did build a new society, whose broad outlines existed to the early 1980s. . . .

The most frightening aspect of Stalinist society was brutal, unrestrained police terrorism. First directed primarily against the peasants after 1929, terror was increasingly turned on leading Communists, powerful administrators, and ordinary people for no apparent reason. As one Soviet woman later recalled, "We all trembled because there was no way of getting out of it. Even a Communist himself can be caught. To avoid trouble became an exception." A climate of fear fell on the land.⁴¹

While the purges of former leaders and party members were the most dramatic events, others also suffered in these years [pre-WWII]. Prominent among them were intellectuals, and those minorities accused of "bourgeois nationalistic tendencies." At times the police arrested ordinary individuals for no apparent reason other than to fill "arrest quotas" and to terrorize Soviet citizens into becoming more docile. While estimates of the number arrested and killed from 1935 to 1940 still vary widely, recent findings suggest that at least 7 to 8 million were put to death then and slightly more than that lived on in prison and prison labor camps.⁴²

The mass purges were a message to the people: no one was secure. Everyone had to serve the party and its leader with redoubled devotion. . . .

Another aspect of life in the 1930s was constant propaganda and indoctrination. Party activists lectured workers in factories and peasants on collective farms, while newspapers, films, and radio broadcasts endlessly recounted socialist achievements and capitalist plots. Art and literature became highly political. Whereas the 1920s had been considerably experimentation in modern art and theater, the intellectual elite were ordered by Stalin to become "engineers of human minds." . . .

Although the government persecuted religion and turned churches into "museums of atheism," the state had both an earthly religion and a high priest -- Marxian socialism and Joseph Stalin. . . .

Life was hard in Stalin's Soviet Russia. The standard of living declined substantially in the 1930s. The masses of people lived primarily on black bread and wore old, shabby clothing. There were constant shortages in the stores, although very heavily taxed vodka

⁴⁰Goff, Richard; Walter Moss; Terry Janice; Jiu-Hwa Upshur. *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. Pg. 328.

⁴¹McKay, John P.; Bennett D. Hill; John Buckler. *A History of Western Society*. Volume II. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991. Pg. 930.

⁴²Goff, Richard; Walter Moss; Terry Janice; Jiu-Hwa Upshur. *The Twentieth Century: A Brief Global History*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. Pg. 238.

was always readily available. A shortage of housing was a particularly serious problem.

Life was hard, but by no means hopeless. . . . The keys to improving one's position were specialized skills and technical education. Rapid industrialization required massive numbers of trained experts, such as skilled workers, engineers, and plant managers. Thus the state provided tremendous incentives to those who could serve its needs. It paid the mass of unskilled workers and collective farmers very low wages, but it dangled high salaries and many special privileges before its growing technical and managerial elite. . .

The vast majority of women simply *had* to work outside the home. Wages were so low that it was almost impossible for a family or couple to live only on the husband's earnings.⁴³

The present pastors of the Diaspora District added a few personal remembrances of hardships faced by the people in their country: The trains were always filled with people from the city who went out into the country to try to buy foodstuffs, since there was nothing available in the cities. This was illegal, however, and on their return the guards would confiscate the food or at least keep about half for themselves. The average amount of time a person had to wait to receive his car after ordering it was thirteen years. In the early days everyone had ration cards. Those who worked at hard physical labor were allowed larger amounts. Pastors, because they weren't doing physical labor, were allowed only the smallest allotments. Showing tremendous pastoral hearts and God-given judgment, the pastors declined a raise in their salaries in the early 60's, not wanting to be better off than their people.

Perhaps the most unbearable burden endured by these citizens was knowing that their every move was being watched and made note of. Everyone was known thoroughly by the government. On those whom the government had some reason to be suspicious of, the Staatsicherheit (State Security) would conduct a full scale investigation. Each of the pastors of the ELFK was such a person. After the reunification of Germany on October 3, 1990, any person was invited to obtain a copy of his Stassi report compiled under communism. None of the pastors who were active in the ministry during that time retrieved their report. They were sure that there was always a spy or two planted in every service by the Stassi. They did not want to know which members had been reporting on them for all those years, concerned that this

⁴³McKay, John P.; Bennett D. Hill; John Buckler. *A History of Western Society*. Volume II. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991. Pg. 931-933.

knowledge would dangerously hamper their ability to minister to those who were still members. Pastor Jonas Schroeter had not been a pastor before 1989, and out of curiosity he did retrieve his report. For a half a year the Stassi intercepted all his mail and typed much of it into his Stassi record. He is convinced that he has only a small part, and the least incriminating part, of the full file; the rest having been destroyed. What the file did contain were copies of ELF youth activity invitations, which had been carefully, word-for-word typed into his file. Then came the conclusion: "It is merely known that his family is very religious . . . and in the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church. Negative activities of this church body were not found by us." Finding that while he was a religious person, he, his family, and his church body were not politically active, the file was then closed; no further investigation was deemed necessary.^{44 45}

Strangely enough, in the opinion of the pastors who lived through the era of the DDR, life under communism wasn't so terrible. Perhaps to a person with a background of complete freedom and relative peace with which residents of the U.S. have been blessed in this century, the way of life in the DDR between 1945 and 1989 would be intolerable and overbearing. However, if one remembers that these people had spent up to twelve years under Hitler, had experienced the ravages of war, had seen their homes and churches bombed, and had endured the loss of their loved ones in war, then apparently by contrast even communism wasn't that bad. It seems that things got gradually better, as far as government pressures was concerned, after the death of Stalin in 1953. This does not in any way detract from the fact that these people experienced extreme hardship throughout the forty plus years of communism.

ATHEISM AND INTIMIDATION

Perhaps here it is worth noting the anti-religious atmosphere in which the church was working. The government, established by communist Russia, was strongly atheistic and attempted to engrain atheism into its people. From youth on, in the schools, the communist

⁴⁴Schroeter, Jonas. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 8, 1997.

⁴⁵A photocopy of two portions of the Stassi record, including the concluding report, is attached. See Appendix C1 and C2.

youth organizations, and the propaganda promoted through the media, the people of the DDR were brainwashed with atheism and anti-Christian sentiments. Christianity, however, had taken a deafening blow already before this communist government ever came to power. Hitler and the Nazis had made a bad name of Christianity. Facist ideology had warped Christian principles and attempted to justify their horrific cruelties to the public with twisted Christian motives. For example, Hitler tried to defend the Holocaust by saying, "It was the Jews who put Christ to death!" The people who were unaware of true Christian principles associated Christianity with Hitler and facism. Once they were freed from the shocking terrors of such a leader, many East Germans turned against anything which even resembled facism and its ideology. Thus, to some Christianity was public enemy number one.

What additional struggles did the orthodox Lutheran Christians face as members of a "free" church under this communist government? Contrary to what one might think, the churches under the atheistic communist government were not persecuted or treated very differently than other organizations in the country. The pastors were free to preach and teach God's pure Word in their churches and in homes. For this the Christians of the DDR had great reason to rejoice and raise their voices in praise to God. Pastor Helmut Kaufmann relates: "I worked in a steel mill. When I decided to become a pastor, I turned in my resignation. It became known. People would say: 'You're going to become a pastor?! Are you crazy? That's a dying profession.' This was the official propaganda in the DDR: Christianity is going to die. The DDR philosophy was: Christianity is going to die, so we will not openly persecute it. In fact, until the church dies, it can do some good, i.e. nursing homes, etc." ⁴⁶

This does not mean, however, that there weren't stumbling blocks put in the way of the members of these churches to remain faithful members and attend regular worship services and Bible studies. Bible classes were held in private homes. They were, therefore, required to register such gatherings with the government. There never was a problem, but some people stayed away because they knew that attendance at these gatherings was reported to the

⁴⁶Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

government. Many were intimidated by that.⁴⁷ Intimidation seems to have been the name of the game. This intimidation began to take its toll on the spiritual leaders of these congregations. Pastor Johannes Wilde relates that all of the pastors during this era were plagued by ill health. Such poor health resulted from the physical demands their traveling put on them, no doubt. But one cannot deny the far greater burden which these men of God carried, recognizing that this abusive government was not supportive of their work and knowing full well that it could snuff out their lives and the lives of their members at any time. Since the Diaspora District was being financed through money illegally smuggled through the black market from the WELS, these pastors had even more reason for anxiety. The pastors were aware that the parsonage telephones were bugged and monitored by the Stassi. They also had to be concerned when people came to them with "spiritual problems" -- often times they were government agents seeking to trap the pastor into saying something against the government. Looking back ⁱⁿ hindsight, the pastors remark that they never were in real danger to their lives, but they always felt that they were and lived in fear of what they might do. When asked "Was your life or your member's lives ever in danger?", Pastor Schroeter responded: "You should ask: 'Did you ever fear you were in danger?' It turns out there was nothing to be concerned about if we were not political, but we did not know that. We *felt* we were in danger. We were aware of Lenin quotes which said that persecution should come. And we were well aware of what Stalin did in the 50's -- the prison camps and disappearances. We feared that open persecution could come at any time. We prayed the Lord that he would spare us open persecutions, and He did!"⁴⁸

Controlled by God's powerful protecting hand, this sparing of persecution to the church by the atheistic government was due primarily to the fact that the ELFK was not anti-government nor was it a politically active organization. In fact, the DDR seems to have felt that the ELFK and the other small free churches could be allies for their cause; namely, that small free churches would help break down and weaken the state church in the DDR. Once a government official

⁴⁷Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

⁴⁸Schroeter, Jonas. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 8, 1997.

offered a villa on the Balkan Sea to Pastor Johannes Wilde for his cooperation. In another instance, Wilde was listed by name in the communist newspaper as an outstanding citizen, because he had gone to the polling place very early on election day. (He had gone early because he had to travel somewhere on church business, but feared his failure to vote might be held against his church.) The next day the newspaper cited what a good example he was for all the people.⁴⁹

While the communist government of East Germany tried to avoid open confrontation and persecution of the church, it did persecute individuals. Pastor Arthur Ortel admits that the pastors often had it easier than the members, because they were shielded from the daily pressure and criticism heaped on the members by co-workers and communist party bosses where they worked in the factories. There were few influential people in the ELF; either the Christians never advanced nor were given good positions or else they compromised their Christianity for advancement and so left the church. Every youth was strongly encouraged to join the communist youth group, called the "Pioneers." Those who did not, like Pastor Jonas Schroeder who was the best student in his class, were not allowed to go on to receive higher education in the universities and thus lost the opportunity to get the good jobs. They were forced to accept lives as factory workers and common laborers. As a result, some baptized youth members chose not to be confirmed and rather joined the Pioneers, so that they wouldn't be excluded from the public universities. One pastor's wife was never allowed to work in a childcare center. Mrs. Kaufmann lost a job at the local post office because, as it was explained to her by her supervisor, "You aren't politically reliable because your husband is a pastor and you have not been voting in the elections."⁵⁰

The church in Kleinmachnow (Berlin) and its pastor, Johannes Wilde, endured particularly troubling burdens throughout all the years under communism. Located near the wall, the Kleinmachnow grounds were under constant observation from the guard's barracks only

⁴⁹Wilde, Johannes. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 9, 1997.

⁵⁰Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

twenty yards away next door. Cars of all visitors were photographed and licenses were recorded. Guards and dogs patrolled along the fence. The fence was booby-trapped with a line stretched along the fence which would set off rockets if it were tripped. If there was a wedding or other festivity at church, some of the border guards occasionally came through holes in the fence and crashed the parties. They went skinny dipping in the pool, which was on the church grounds. Often the border guards would sneak across the church grounds to buy beers or schnapps. They left their booze hidden in tall grass on the church grounds and then forgot where. Occasionally Wilde returned the bottles he found to an officer through the fence. Wilde was required to keep a *Hausbuch*, take it to the police when guests arrived and again within 24 hours of when they left, and have the necessary stamp applied. His book shows this practice continued until 1973. After that time, the book still had to be kept, and police would occasionally stop by to make sure it was up-to-date. At youth activities, police would check the book and take roll-call to make sure everyone was listed. It seems the Kleinmachnow congregation was treated more strictly than others, very likely because of its nearness to the wall. Things were less intimidating in Saxony. When the Saxon pastors visited Kleinmachnow, they didn't understand what that congregation faced. They would speak loudly and laugh. "We (at Kleinmachnow) never spoke loudly. We watched every word because it might be reported."⁵¹

Other hardships endured by these congregations included: Pastor Ortel being forbidden to advertise his services or post a sign giving service times in Dahme, the congregation having to put up with communist rallies and speeches being held on their front yard at the same time as services were being conducted, and communist graffiti being sprayed on the church sign and fences in Kleinmachnow.⁵²

In spite of being bombarded by attacks on every side from Satan and his cohorts, the grace of God was not bound and his church did not fall apart. Regarding this era it was written: "In some ways the churches in the East were healthier than in West Germany. Maas wrote to

⁵¹Wilde, Johannes. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 9, 1997.

⁵²See Appendix D for a picture. There also note the pictures of the present chapels at Kleinmachnow and Seehausen.

Lerle: "Would God that the reports from the West were as thoroughly enjoyable." Although many were led astray by the strong temptations and attacks brought on by the communist youth movement, "On the other hand, young adults who had been steeped in atheistic philosophy hungered and thirsted for God's righteousness and became members of our church."⁵³ Out of the harsh and oppressive climate provided by the atheistic DDR come such God-inspired words of faith: "Once you were committed to Christ, you really didn't have to worry. You were already on the black list and had nothing to lose and little to fear. The people in the communist system, who had ambitions or aspirations, were under far greater pressure from the Stassi (Secret Police). They lived with greater fear of what they did or said."⁵⁴ By his grace, God preserved the Diaspora District from overbearing or life-threatening persecution. He also graciously provided his children with the strength of faith and courage to endure the additional hardships which they faced for the name of Christ. As always, the Lord was proved faithful to his Word: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (I Corinthians 10:13).

ROADBLOCKS TO GROWTH

The Diaspora District had other crosses to bear, which hampered their ability to grow numerically and spiritually. The repercussions of these are still being felt to this day. The first is the fact that they were "refugee" churches. They were "different" and were treated as foreigners and outcasts, unaccepted by German society. They were even separated within their church body, the ELFK, as is reflected in their separate Diaspora District. As a result of being regarded as special churches just for refugees, the mission outreach potential was extremely ^{limited} tough. In fact the only native Germans who ever joined their congregations were those who came in through marriage. One might ask why this wasn't the case with the refugee churches in West Germany. The answer, quite simply, lies in the different forms of government and the

⁵³Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 94.

⁵⁴Schroeter, Jonas. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 8, 1997.

resulting economies. Under a democratic, capitalistic system, West Germany's economy thrived. Money and jobs were more easily available. Under East Germany's communist system, jobs, housing and food were limited. Each refugee was considered an unwanted competitor for the jobs and another mouth to feed. Another result of a very large percentage of the refugees being unable to find jobs and remaining unemployed was that this made it difficult for them to support the ministries of their congregations financially. However, the most destructive burden lay in the nature of the ministries which the pastors had to conduct, due to the shortage of pastors and the great distances the few pastors were required to travel under poor conditions: "As a result of this constant travel to serve tiny groups, the pastors sometimes neglected the needs of the larger congregations and did not always nurture them to stability."⁵⁵ What is said concerning the Diaspora pastors in West Germany can also be applied with emphasis to those in the East: "Due to the unsettled conditions and the itinerant ministry, instruction classes could not be conducted in Germany as they had been in Poland...Meanwhile, the public schools were effective in alienating youth from the church and the truth of God's Word."⁵⁶

WELS SUPPORT UNDER COMMUNISM

Very little of this history was known by those on the west side of the wall, including WELS members and officials. In fact, no mention of WELS' continued ties with this mission is even made in *Our Church: Its Life and Mission*. This was primarily due to the nature of existence of the churches under the suspicious and oppressive communist government. Communication across the wall was minimal, and personal passage was very limited. Pastor Johannes Wilde crossed over only twice in the forty years since he received his call into East Germany. His wife never crossed to the other side of the wall, which lay only two blocks from their house.

⁵⁵Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg.84.

⁵⁶Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg.89.

Although little was known, the WELS completely supported the ministries of all the pastors in the Diaspora District throughout the years that the DDR was in existence. The amount provided by the WELS was somewhere around the \$15,000 U.S. dollar mark annually. (In 1994 the amount was \$16,400.) There are a number of stories regarding how this money was smuggled across the border to the congregations behind the Iron Curtain. Some say it was sent to a SELK pastor in West Germany who had relatives still living in East Germany. Others say that an East German government official was involved. It has been said that the money was carried across the border in cash in a hollowed-out shoe. Strong evidence points out that the money somehow went through the black market and was worth seven times its value by the time it reached the hands of the Diaspora pastors. What is known as fact is that the WELS did not know much about it at all, nor did it want to know. WELS World Mission Board officials had an address to which they sent the money in one lump sum each year. Those who benefited from this financial support are very thankful to whomever the person(s) was, for he risked his life in order to allow God's Word to be heralded among them for over forty years.⁵⁷ The small sum the WELS sent was sufficient under communism to pay the full salaries of the pastors, as well as 40% of the operating costs of the Leipzig Seminary.

STEADY DECLINE

The decade following the mass exodus between the years 1953 and 1956 already noted above continued to notice steady decline in membership. The statistics at the end of 1965 were as follows:

<u>Pastor</u>	<u>Congregations</u>	<u>Souls</u>
Johannes Wilde	Bad Wilsnack, Damerow Gandow, Kleinmachnow Kletzke, Koetzelin, Krampfer Muggerkuhl, Nitzow (9)	300

⁵⁷Gawrisch, Wilbert. Phone interview on April 10, 1997.

Helmut Kaufmann	Jueterbog, Sernow w/ Werbig Schlenzer, Graefendorf Herzberg, Grosstreben (6)	273
Rudolf Seyboth	Dandtedt, Wendemark Giesenslage-Behrendorf Potsdam, Boos by Wittenberg Geestgottberg, Eiche Schneidlinge, Behrendorf-Siedlung Dessau (10)	240
Johannes Forchheim	Luckenwalde, Heinsdorf	232
Vicar Artur Ortel	Dahme, Nonnendorf, Remsdorf Gross-Jehser, Lubbenau (5)	145
Ernst Boehm	Alt-Steinbeck, Bad Kleinen Schwerin, Kleeekamp Beckerwitz, Wismar, Plate Redderstorf, Sievertshagen Stralsund, Hohen Pritz, Woosten Gallin, Leisten, Teschendorf Goldberg (16)	106

Total Souls: 1296 ⁵⁸

The decline was more gradual, and yet continued steadily. In 1980, it was reported to the synodical convention in Karl-Marx-Stadt that there were 987 members grouped into four parishes and being served by four pastors.

An interesting and unique aspect of the ministries of a number of these congregations throughout the years was the brass choir (*Posaunenchoer*). Brass choirs, consisting of a total of forty-seven wind-players (*Blaesern*), glorified God and enhanced the musical worship life of five congregations in 1959.⁵⁹ The pastors of the Diaspora District met in convention with the Saxon District annually.

⁵⁸Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 26-27.

⁵⁹Forchheim, Johannes. *Chronik des Diasporabezirks der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche 1945-1965*. Printed in Erlangen. Pg. 23.

DIASPORA PASTORS: REISEPREDIGER

The men who served as the spiritual shepherds of the souls of this district had zeal for the gospel and love for the flocks which the Lord had placed under their care. No history of this church body would be complete without mentioning the work of each of the pastors who served it as *Reiseprediger* ("traveling preachers").

Pastor Helmut Schlender (mentioned briefly above) had been a pastor already in Poland before WWII and, along with August "Opa" Lerle, was instrumental in organizing the Diaspora District in Germany after the war. He served the district in congregations in Schoenfeld, Crimmitschau, and Jueterbog. In 1961 he accepted the call into the Ev. Lutheran Confessional Church at Blomberg in West Germany (which was in fellowship with the ELFK at the time). Health problems and the availability of better medical care in the West were factors in his move. Pastor Schlender served a total of forty years in the ministry and retired in 1974. He died on February 17, 1989.

Pastor Waldemar Otto Schmidt was born on February 8, 1917, but was not ordained until May 27, 1951 in Koetzlin (Mecklenburg). He was one of the four pastors active in the ministry at the time when the Diaspora District joined the ELFK in 1953. Pastor Schmidt served Diaspora parishes based in Mecklenburg, Prignitz, Schoenfeld and Annaberg-Buckholz. In March of 1958 he accepted a call into the Ev. Lutheran State Church of Saxony. In that church body he served as pastor in Muelsen (near Zwickau) until 1983.

Dr. Ernst Lerle ("Opa" Lerle's son) served as pastor in the Diaspora District at Altmark from 1948 until 1958. He, also, was one of the four pastors active when the district joined the ELFK. From 1958 until 1981 he served as a professor at the theological seminary of the ELFK in Leipzig. He was elected president of the Diaspora District shortly after his father died in 1965 and served in that capacity until 1981 as well. After 1981 Ernst Lerle taught as a professor at the universities of Erlangen and Basel.

Pastor Johannes Gerhard Forchheim was ordained on November 1, 1964 in Luckenwalde. He served as pastor in the parish based in Luckenwalde from 1964 until 1974. In 1974 he

accepted the call to a congregation in Furstenwalde, which was a member of the Old Lutheran Church. The ELFK was also in fellowship with the Old Lutheran Church at the time. Since 1991 the Old Lutheran Church has been a member of SELK and is no longer in fellowship with the ELFK.

Pastor Rudolf Seyboth was ordained on October 24, 1954 in Altengesees after serving two years of vicarship in Zwickau and Altengesees. He served parishes based in Altengesees and in Lothra from 1954 until 1958. From 1958 until 1979 he served the parish in Danstedt while living in Potsdam. In 1979 Seyboth accepted a call into the Old Lutheran Church in Potsdam (Christ) and served there until he retired in 1986.

Pastor Arno Ferdinand Boehm was ordained at the ELFK congregation at Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) on October 15, 1961, after serving his vicar year in the Diaspora parish at Mecklenburg. He served the parish at Mecklenburg until 1975. Beginning in 1970 he also served as pastor of a congregation in Schwerin, a member of the Old Lutheran Church. From 1975 until 1985 he was pastor of the ELFK congregation in Zwickau. From 1977 until 1985 he also taught as an instructor at the seminary in Leipzig. In 1985 he accepted the call to the Old Lutheran Church in Weigersdorf and served there until his death on May 23, 1991.

Pastor Ernst Boehm was ordained in Hohen Pritz on October 24, 1965, after vicaring the year before in Mecklenburg. From 1965 until 1980 he served the Diaspora District parish in Mecklenburg. He also served an Old Lutheran Church parish in Neuruppin much of the same time, from 1968 through 1981. From 1980 until 1989 he served as a pastor of the Diaspora District in Luckenwalde. On August 27, 1989, Bohm and his parish declared their departure from the ELFK and their subsequent union with the Old Lutheran Church. Along with his parish Boehm brought the parish based in Heinsdorf and the parish based in Mecklenburg into the Old Lutheran Church. The reason given for this departure from the ELFK was the ELFK's impending break with SELK.⁶⁰

⁶⁰All the above information reported in *Verzeichnis der Gemeinden und Pastoren: Ev.-Luth. Freikirche von 1876 bis 1996*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1996. Pgs. 70-104.

BRAVE CONFSSIONAL STAND

Before taking a look at the pastors and congregations which currently make up the Diaspora District, it is probably a good idea to discuss the issues surrounding the breaking of fellowship with Boehm and the Old Lutheran Church. Ever since 1876 the ELFK had been in fellowship with both the Missouri Synod (LC-MS) and the Wisconsin Synod (WELS). At the time both U.S. synods were in fellowship with each other as members of the Synodical Conference. Throughout the years the ELFK received physical and spiritual support from both synods, although the WELS and the LC-MS had broken their fellowship ties in 1963. The ELFK was also in fellowship with SELK in West Germany. The WELS was never in fellowship with this church body, although one of the groups that joined SELK (the Bekenntnis Kirche) was the western part of the former WELS Polish mission. Due to the travel and communication restrictions under communism, this triangular fellowship issue was difficult to address properly. The brotherly instruction and discussion necessary to deal with such a situation was just not possible. Therefore, fellowship ties remained somewhat murky.

The fellowship issue was finally addressed shortly before the Berlin wall fell in November of 1989. At the same time as German reunification was being discussed, the WELS and the LC-MS were renewing their old friendships in the former East Germany. Three or four trips were made by Professors Wilbert Gawrisch, Armin Schuetze, and Richard Strobel of the WELS in which serious doctrinal discussions on fellowship and Church and Ministry were conducted. These men came back with some interesting observations on the country and the good impression its government attempted to give to foreigners. The WELS delegates were not permitted to stay in the homes of the East Germans in the small villages where the ELFK churches were located. Instead they were forced to be put up in a hotel in Leipzig, about an hour's drive away. It was a very nice, modern hotel; the men were served elegant meals. However, President Gerhard Wilde of the ELFK, a native East German, was not even allowed to

enter the hotel or visit them in their rooms. They were forbidden to stay out too late, as well. As a result of all these restrictions, time for actual study and discussion was limited.

Just before the historic ELFK convention, President Gerhard Wilde (who had attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary during the 1952/53 school year, brother of Johannes Wilde) attended the WELS synod convention in August of 1989. At the 76th synod convention of the ELFK in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) held from October 6-8 of that year, Pastor Werner Stohr delivered a lecture entitled: *"Lehret sie halten alles, was ich euch befohlen habe"* ("Hold to all the teaching, which I have commanded you"). Guests at the convention included three officials from SELK, Professor Wilbert Gawrisch, Prof. Richard Strobel and Pastor Martin Jahnke from the WELS, Pastor George Orvick from the ELS, and two men from the Old Lutheran Church. *Chronik der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche 1945-1995* records the historical decision: *"Aufhebung der Kanzel- und Abendmahls-gemeinschaft mit der SELK wegen unüberwindlicher Differenzen in Lehre und Praxis"* ("Termination of pulpit and communion fellowship with the SELK because of insurmountable differences in doctrine and practice").⁶¹ The ELFK had taken a strong and courageous stand for confessional Lutheranism. They decided to remain in fellowship with the WELS and suspended their fellowship ties with the much larger SELK and LC-MS. At this time the ELFK, including the Diaspora District, was 3,000 members and 18 pastors strong.

CURRENT DIASPORA PASTORS

At the 78th ELFK synod convention held in 1991, President Gerhard Wilde announced that there were 483 souls in the Diaspora District being served by three men, Pastors Johannes Wilde, Helmut Kaufmann, and Arthur Ortel. A closer look at the ministries of these three men, all of whom have dedicated their lives to faithful service of the Lord in the Diaspora District, will now be made.

⁶¹Herrmann, Gottfried and Martin Wilde. *Chronik der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche 1945-1995*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1996.

Johannes was born on July 11, 1929. The father of Johannes and Gerhard Wilde was an LC-MS-trained pastor in Brazil for seventeen years. He and his family came back to Germany on a one-year furlough. While back in Germany, Mrs. Wilde was diagnosed with an illness that would not permit the family to return to Brazil. Soon after this World War II began. While waiting for seminary to begin, Johannes' father gave him a twelve week crash course in Hebrew. Johannes learned so well that he was allowed to skip the first semester of Hebrew. (He is now the ELFK's Hebrew professor.) Johannes went to West Germany to study at Oberursel. On his first trip to school he was turned back at the border by Russian soldiers. He was advised by someone to go to a certain milk-wagon driver, who for a fee transported Johannes illegally through the border guards. At this time the border was called "the green border" because there were no fences, yet it had guards and border checkpoints. After this Johannes' parents were able to obtain "permission cards" for him to cross the border on holidays.

When Johannes graduated from seminary, the Diaspora District needed a pastor. His dad told "Opa" Lerle, "Take Johannes." Although he may have been able to serve a congregation in West Germany, Johannes showed great faith and trust in the Lord's providence, as he willingly accepted a call back into the communist-ruled, depressed-economy plagued country of East Germany. By many he was considered a "hero." Johannes vicared in 1952/53 at the Saxon church in Stuttgart and again in 1953/54 in the Diaspora District at Desau. He was ordained in Sernow on May 2, 1954, and served as the pastor of the Prignitz parish, replacing Waldemar Schmidt who had accepted the call to the Mecklenburg parish. He lives in Kleinmachnow (Berlin) on the former seminary grounds. His home was less than two blocks from the wall and was right next to the barracks of the border guards, which were constructed on property seized from the congregation. Johannes used only a motorbike for transportation for the first ten years of his ministry. He would travel two and a half hours one way in winter to Damerow. Three times his face was badly frostbitten. He still has trouble in cold weather because of that. Since 1981 Johannes has served as the president of the Diaspora District in addition to his pastoral

responsibilities. He has also served as an instructor for the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Leipzig since 1988. (The seminary students come to Kleinmachnow for Hebrew study.)

Besides his teaching responsibilities, today Johannes travels 250 miles on a typical Sunday to conduct three services for a total of about fifty people. About seventy-five souls are under his care at five different locations: Bad Wilsnack, Damerow, Karstaedt, Seehausen, and Kleinmachnow. Pastor Wilde is past retirement age at sixty-seven years, but continues to serve his people and his Lord "because there is no pastor to take my place."⁶²

Pastor Helmut Kaufmann ("Opa" Lerle's nephew) was born on April 27, 1932 in Poland. As the German army retreated from the Russians near the end of World War II, strongly encouraging the Germans living there to leave Poland, the Kaufmann family refused to leave. The family may have done well to heed the German army's advice. For shortly after the war, the Russians placed Helmut's father (along with most German men still living in Poland) into a prison camp. Helmut's father was imprisoned from 1945 to 1949 in Russia. As he was set free, he listed "Opa" Lerle in Germany as his address and so was released to Germany. Once in Germany, he contacted the Red Cross, which helped him to find and move his family to the DDR.

Following his seminary training, Helmut vicared one year, 1962/63, in Jueterbog. He filled the vacancy created by Helmut Schlender's acceptance of the call to the Ev. Lutheran Confessional Church in Blomberg. He was ordained in Jueterbog on December 1, 1963 and has served there as pastor ever since. When he first came to Jueterbog as a young pastor, a single man was not allowed to rent as large a home as the former pastor with a family had. So "Opa" Lerle signed as the second occupant of the house. Soon Helmut got married which made it legal to have the larger home. Besides Immanuel congregation in Jueterbog, Pastor Kaufmann serves the following brother congregations: St. Johannes in Schlenzer, St. Matthews in Graefendorf, St. Paul in Sernow, and a group in Mellensee. He also holds regular worship services in the

⁶²Wilde, Johannes. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 9, 1997.

Bugenhagen Room of the City Church in Wittenberg. He shepherds about seventy-five total souls at these six congregations. He also is right at retirement age, at sixty-five years.

Pastor Kaufmann has been a faithful and bold servant of his Savior, as the following anecdote testifies. "I remember one time when I was questioned by a government agent about our church's involvement in the state church's anti-government movement. I told the man that we are a free church, separate from the state church. I asked: 'What is wrong with this movement?' I invited the government official to come to a church service and see what we teach. He left quickly."⁶³

Pastor Artur Ortel, like Helmut Kaufmann, is one of the Polish refugees and had been a member of the WELS Polish mission. He was born on December 13, 1934 in eastern Poland. His family was German with German passports living in a German-governed city. However, in 1940 his family was uprooted by Hitler and relocated to central Poland. There they were settled on farms seized from the Polish people. Arthur's father was soon afterward enlisted in the German army. In central Poland the WELS mission had reorganized the congregations following Hitler's *Blitzkrieg*. The pastors traveled from place to place to serve groups. Even Lutheran schools had been reorganized and operated during WWII.

In 1945 the German army forced their relocation to Germany as it retreated. The Ortel family had been moved two times on short notice in only six years. Later that same year when the Russian tanks came into Germany, the Ortels were living in an old castle. The Russians plundered the castle. After they had left, Poles joined in the plunder. The Ortel family lost what little they had been able to bring with them from Poland.

After the war the government of the DDR gave little plots of farm land to the people. The Ortels received one such plot. They were required to turn in a certain amount of produce to the Red Army. Arthur's parents never produced enough to meet their quota. In 1961 the collective farms began, and the Ortel's land was taken for the third time. For many of the refugees this triggered their flight to West Germany.

⁶³Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

In 1956 "Opa" Lerle looked for students for the seminary. Lerle sent them first to a *Missionhaus* for preliminary study. Arthur studied in the *Missionhaus* for one year. Then the Leipzig Seminary was opened by the ELFK. Ironically, the opening of the seminary was forced by the Communist government, so the students did not go to West Germany for study! The first three professors under whom Arthur studied were Pastor Rueger, Dr. Ernst Lerle, and Dr. Gottfried Wachler. In 1964 Ortel was examined by Dr. Lerle in Halle. Following two years of vicaring from 1964 to 1966 in Dahme, he was ordained on June 26, 1966 in Dahme (located about 30 miles east of Wittenberg, 50 miles south of Berlin). Like the other current Diaspora pastors, this has been his only call throughout his entire ministry. In addition to the congregation in Dahme, Pastor Ortel continues to serve St. Peter congregation in Nonnendorf and a group in Golszen. He ministers to about 75 souls. After forty-one years of work, however, on an average Sunday he preaches to only five people at his largest church in Dahme. Pastor Ortel is the youngest of the active Diaspora pastors at age sixty-two.⁶⁴

CURRENT CONGREGATIONS

The Diaspora District does not own even one of its own churches. Three of the congregations have chapels for worship in the pastors' homes (Jueterbog, Dahme and Kleinmachnow). The rest rent a room in one of the state churches or meet in people's homes. The only exception is the group of Christians in Damerow, which rents a small cemetery chapel located near the front of the cemetery. In all there are fourteen gatherings of believers, served by the three pastors. Not all of the congregations are able to meet for worship services every Sunday due to the distance from their pastor.

Immanuel congregation in Jueterbog (located about 40 miles SW of Berlin, 20 miles NW of Wittenberg) was able to obtain a parsonage of its own under communism. Gottfried Herrmann speaks of this blessed acquisition in his history of the congregation: "In the time of the DDR with its difficult circumstances, it was virtually impossible to change something. But a

⁶⁴Ortel, Artur. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 5, 1997.

gratifying exception developed at Jueterbog. There, after prolonged efforts, a house was obtained for our church, in which the pastor's family lived and a small worship room was set up. The ceremonial dedication took place on December 25, 1981.⁶⁵ The story behind this purchase is that a woman in Jueterbog wanted to unload the house. There was some private ownership of homes under communism, but the rent one was allowed to charge was regulated and kept too low to make a profit. The woman sold the house to the ELFK for 10,000 DM. The church could not buy property under communism, however, so Pastor Kaufmann bought it with ELFK funds on behalf of the church.⁶⁶ Today the congregation has preaching stations which meet in Graefendorf, Mellensee, Schlenzer, Sernow, and Wittenberg.

The congregation served by Johannes Wilde in Kleinmachnow (Berlin) owns the former seminary and its grounds. The Theological Seminary of the Ev.-Lutheran Free Church was opened on November 15, 1922.⁶⁷ The site and its four buildings had been constructed in 1910. It was built as a "Seaman's Home" (*Seemann's Erholungs-Heim*) for rest and rehabilitation of sailors. It belonged to the government and was built to honor the Kaiser's 25th wedding anniversary. The property for the seminary was purchased from the government through mainly LC-MS donations. The seminary operated at this site for twenty-four years. In 1946 there was only one student enrolled, a man from South Africa. Hitler's armed forces had enlisted the rest. President D. Martin Willkomm was killed on June 1, 1946 and the seminary subsequently closed its doors. The ELFK sent its students to the seminary at Oberursel in West Germany until it was forced by the DDR to open the current seminary in Leipzig.

Today the property at Kleinmachnow is a bit smaller and holds only two buildings. A portion of the property had been seized by the DDR following the war to build barracks for the border guards. Two buildings had been bombed out as a part of the Allied attacks on Berlin

⁶⁵German Text: In der DDR-Zeit war es weithin unmöglich, an diesem misslichen Zustand etwas zu ändern. Eine erfreuliche Ausnahme bildete aber Jueterbog. Dort konnte nach langen Bemühungen ein Haus für unsere Kirche erworben werden, in dem die Pfarrfamilie wohnt und ein kleiner Gottesdienstraum eingerichtet wurde. Am 25.12.1981 fand die feierliche Einweihung statt." Herrmann, Gottfried. "Jueterbog und Parochie." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94. Pg. 22.

⁶⁶Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

⁶⁷See Appendix E for pictures of the seminary taken at the dedication service.

during WWII. The church obviously did not have enough money to replace the buildings. In fact, Berlin had no room for the rubble anywhere either. Here the ingenuity of these members is apparent: as much rubble as possible was put in the basement of one bombed-out building; the left-over rubble was placed in the other bombed-out basement on a slant. One of the members got ahold of some concrete and poured it over the rubble to form a swimming pool. In spite of the hardships these Christians were forced to endure under communism, for years they had their own swimming pool for church gatherings and youth outings! It is troubling to note, however, that at this time SELK is taking the necessary steps through the legal system to reclaim the campus as its property. Neither the small congregation nor the ELFK are able to pay the attorney fees to fight this in court.

PRESENT DAY STRUGGLES

The post-communist era marked by the fall of the wall on November 9, 1989, has been an era of blessed peace for the churches in former East Germany. Following his attendance at the 81st Synodical Conference of the ELFK, Pastor John Vogt commented: "All sessions can be described well by means of Psalm 133: 'How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! . . . For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.' The ELF clearly was enjoying the peace God has given it after years of oppression behind the Iron Curtain and years of struggling with triangular fellowships."⁶⁸

In spite of this blessing of peace, the Diaspora congregations still face many struggles and challenges as they strive to serve their members and countrymen with the saving message of the gospel. Membership in the churches (totalling about 225 souls at this time) and attendance at worship gatherings continue to decline steadily. As a result, it is virtually impossible for any of the congregations to support a pastor and keep their church going.

No one cause can be blamed for this dangerous trend. The devil continues to attack from many directions. Perhaps the least significant, and yet a very real, cause is the church

⁶⁸Vogt, John F. "Update on Germany." July, 1996.

location problem. They don't have any, really! As has been mentioned, all of these congregations of believers meet either in homes, rented state church rooms, and even in a small cemetery chapel (Damerow) not much bigger than the size of a tool shed about fifteen miles from anything resembling a town. In *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche* Pastor Ortel concludes the history of the Dahme/Mark parish in this way:

In spite of all the mission efforts, as far as one can judge at this time, a growth of the soul count is not foreseeable. A substantial cause for this lies in the lack of our own church locality. All our services are held as guests in state churches or meeting rooms. That is a very humbling situation. With all the ups and downs in the history of the church we desire to ask God that he preserve our small true Lutheran church in the province of Brandenburg.⁶⁹

Nearly all of the ELFK congregations are situated off the beaten path tucked away on back streets of small villages. This reflects the former communist government's allowance for the churches to exist, but greatly hampering their ability to share the message of the gospel with others.

Another detrimental cause for the dwindling numbers in the Diaspora District is the refugee image which clings to these congregations. This group of believers was made up exclusively of German/Polish refugees driven out of their country by WWII. They were not welcomed by the local Germans, because they came with nothing except their foreign customs into an already devastated society. When they organized as a church body in June of 1946, they took on the name "The Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission Church." In *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People* this comment is made: "The name these pastors chose defined

⁶⁹German Text: "Trotz aller missionarischen Bemuhungen ist ein Anwachsen der Seelenzahl derzeit nach menschlichem Ermesses nicht abschbar. Ein wesentlicher Grund dafuer liegt in dem Mangel an eigenen kirchlichen Raeumen. Alle unsere Gottesdienste finden gastweise in landeskirchlichen Kirdch- oder Gemeinderaeumen statt. Das ist ein sehr demuetiger Dienst. Bei allem Auf und Ab in der Geschichte der Kirchen wollen wir Gott bitten, dass er unsere kleinen treulutherischen Gemeinden im Bundesland Brandenburg erhalte." Ortel, Artur. "Parochie Dahme/Mark." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94 Pg. 13.

their reason for being. In some part of their minds this original group would always be refugees, serving refugees, dependent on the Wisconsin Synod to help them do it."⁷⁰

Even within their own church body, they had been separated and asked to form their own district. Pastor Kaufmann comments on this refugee image: "We were regarded as special churches just for refugees. It is still known among other people that our churches are for refugees. In the present congregations, all members are from refugee families. The only new members we have ever received from the outside came in by way of marriages. Even then, only the spouse came into the congregation; never other relatives. Moreover, we have lost a number of members, as well, because the opposite has happened. German families from outside the church have said to their children, 'You cannot be a part of that church.'" It is a two-way street, however. Mrs. Kaufmann complained that the refugee members even in her husband's congregation have never fully accepted her because they said, "You didn't live through those things; you don't know what it was like."⁷¹ Pastor Vogt commented in the July 1996 issue of "Update on Germany": "In general the members remain outsiders in their communities." Such a negative image continues to make evangelism efforts extremely difficult.

Although all people by nature are born with a stubborn hatred of God and the gospel, the devil seems to have a tremendously strong hold on the people of the former East Germany as a whole. There seems to be a general apathy toward religion of any kind in Germany, as huge beautiful cathedrals sit practically empty on Sunday mornings. In an interview which Pastor John Vogt printed in the March 1996 issue of "Update on Germany", Martin Wilde (son of ELFK president Gerhard Wilde - Martin studied at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary during the 1995/96 school year) said: "There are many people in Germany who are fed up with all this 'Christian stuff.' Especially in eastern Germany, many people think Christianity is just a different ideology than the Communism before. Most of the Germans are indifferent and cold to the wonderful message of the cross. Last summer's issue of 'Update on Germany' mentioned how hard mission

⁷⁰Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 78.

⁷¹Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

work in Germany is. According to my experiences, the ungodliness in Germany is worse than in the U.S."

The following quotes from an article entitled "In the Former East Germany, No Place for God," printed in the "Religion News Service" dated October 8, 1996, support Martin Wilde's observations (written by Andrew M. Greeley, a Roman Catholic priest at the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center):

After a half-century of Communist rule, the former German Democratic Republic has succeeded in driving out God. Today, 47% of the general population are hard core atheists. The numbers increase to 60% among those thirty-five years and younger. These are people who are firmly convinced that God does not exist and that there is no hope of life after death. (Compared to 1% in U.S., 7% in former West Germany, 7% of Britons, 15% of Russians, and 1% of Poles.) . . .

The campaign against religion in the former East Germany was subtle and sophisticated. Few were killed, not many sent to prison. Rather, the state intervened in the socialization process in the schools, in the mass media, in popular culture and in organized youth groups, effectively canceling out family attempts to transmit religious faith. . .

It was not the conflict between science and religion that caused the triumph of atheism in East Germany. Rather it was a state administered brainwash. . .

[After claiming that nearly nothing remains of the socialist era, the author comments:] Pollution and atheism seem to be all that remains.⁷²

When asked "What problems do Bible-believing Christians face in Germany today?", Pastor Ortel answered: "The worst problem is the ever-increasing secularization of society."⁷³ Pastor Kaufmann answered: "In the east we battled the atheistic world view. Now comes the surprise that the atheistic view continues from the West, even in the state churches. Everything said about the church via radio and TV is social gospel. Only 20% of East Germans belong to any church. In general the people are completely disinterested in religion. How can you talk to them about it?"⁷⁴ Pastor Vogt reported in "Update on Germany", July of 1996: "Oppression has

⁷²Vogt, John F. "Update on Germany." December, 1996.

⁷³Ortel, Artur. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 5, 1997.

⁷⁴Kaufmann, Helmut. Interview with Rev. John F. Vogt on March 4, 1997.

been replaced by a spiritually indifferent society. Only 2% of West Germans attend church. (Speak of state-church syndrome!)"

The state churches have been referred to a number of times now. The state church, already questionable as to its confessionalism before communism, lost much of its faithfulness to God's Word under the pressures of the atheistic DDR. People who are concerned about their eternal welfare can join the state church and satisfy their consciences. They figure that their signature on the membership list assures that their name is written in the Lord's book of life. The mentality among the average "Christian" in Germany is: "If I want religion, I can get it in the state church. - Why go through the sacrifices necessary to be a part of the free church and get all worked up about it?" As mentioned, few members of the state churches attend services or are active in their church in any way, and those who do attend receive very little law and gospel preaching. This is sometimes referred to as state-church syndrome. Greeley mentioned in his article: "Organized religions here are often subsidized by the government. And they strike as lazy monopolies -- not much interested in their people as long as the government picks up the tab for clerical salaries and other ecclesiastical expenses."⁷⁵ In a report to the 1957 WELS Synod Convention, Professor Wendland expressed these problems which were already evident then:

Parishes with memberships reaching into the thousands have less than one hundred people in attendance at a service. Still the average individual considers himself a member in good standing Opportunities for doing intensive mission work are restricted by the fact that most people in Germany already consider themselves to be church members. The appeal of our mission must be made primarily to refugees, and the surge of refugees is diminishing rapidly. Thus the outward growth of our mission is practically at a standstill.⁷⁶

Martin Wilde had these thoughts:

Now Germany is united again. It considers itself a Christian country. Many people consider themselves Christians just because they belong to one of the two main churches

⁷⁵Vogt, John F. "Update on Germany." December, 1996.

⁷⁶Wendland, Ernst H. "Our Synod's First Mission Overseas." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 2, Number 1. Spring, 1984. Pg. 42.

in Germany, Lutheran or Catholic. They imagine Christian life means paying church taxes and maybe going twice a year to a service. However, they have no idea about our Savior, Jesus Christ. The big Lutheran church in Germany is very liberal. They don't preach God's Word anymore in most cases. No wonder that many people have lost their faith. It is very hard to bring to such people the gospel. They think they are already "Christians." They imagine they know, although they don't know.⁷⁷

Along with the freedoms which the breaking down of the wall and of communism provided, came a number of additional hardships in the economy of the former East Germany which have affected the members of the Diaspora District. Once the two halves of Germany united in 1990, prices in East Germany rose drastically, factories closed, and unemployment increased. Each of these continues to plague the country, especially the already poor members of the Diaspora. Pastor Johannes Wilde commented in his history of the Kleinmachnow parish in *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*: "Ever since atheism is no longer the 'state religion,' capitalism supports its victimization. Many members have to travel 600 kilometers to their places of employment. They do it so that they can support their families. This is not very conducive for worship attendance."⁷⁸

Perhaps the most alarming and ultimately devastating factor is within the Diaspora congregations themselves. This is a trend toward very small annual offerings. Described as "the poorest of the poor," the average communicant gives sixty dollars per year to support the work of the church. That is compared to an average five hundred dollars per year in the rest of the ELFK. Some of this may be explained by their low economic status. Most have quite menial jobs and are on the lower end of the economic scale. Yet they all have their basic needs provided for and live in decent, clean homes. Obviously one would be foolish to attempt to judge a person's heart, but some of this situation can be blamed on extremely poor stewardship among the members. The members of the Diaspora District seem to allow themselves to be in

⁷⁷Vogt, John F. "Update on Germany." March, 1996.

⁷⁸German Text: "Seitdem der Atheismus nicht mehr "Staatsreligion" ist, fordert der Kapitalismus seine Opfer. Manche Glieder haben 600 km bis zu ihrer Arbeitsstelle zu fahren. Sie tun es, um ihre Familie ernähren zu koennen. Fuer den Gottesdienstbesuch ist das wenig forderlich." Wilde, Johannes. "Kleinmachnow und Prignitzparochie." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94. Pg. 24.

this position, enjoying the benefit of free pastors and free spiritual care because of the Wisconsin Synod.

Some of this situation can be explained by two historical insights. The first is the false impression given by a promise allegedly made to the district by "Opa" Lerle. Shortly before he died, Lerle promised "Don't worry . . . the WELS will take care of you." Already in December of 1960 Professor Edgar Hoenecke, who was chairman of the Board for World Missions, made the comment in a letter to Pastor Ernst Wendland concerning the Diaspora churches in West Germany (whose average communicant offerings totalled \$2.58 for the year 1955): "It appears that our brothers over there are living and laboring under the delusion that our synod is both able and responsible for their perpetual support. I believe that we once upon a time created and encouraged that delusion because we were guilty of some very foggy thinking and planning regarding this 'mission' in the 'fatherland.'"⁷⁹ That same year the Diaspora churches in West Germany benefitted from an essay by Pastor Wendland entitled: "The Indigenous Church: It Governs Itself, Reproduces Itself, and Supports Itself." In the following years the WELS made a concerted effort to foster self-ownership and self-supporting values in those churches. Because of the restrictions on travel posed by the Iron Curtain, the Diaspora churches in the East did not receive the same training. For over fifty years the WELS took care of basically 100% of the support for these congregations and their pastors, leaving no reason for stewardship (and even evangelism) in their minds. As a result, bad habits and an unhealthy mindset developed among the Diaspora's members. As recently as 1996, the WELS was still supporting 96% of the District's pastor salaries. In recent years the WELS sent as much as seven thousand dollars per month (about \$80,000 per year) to the churches.

The second cause leading toward poor stewardship is a lack of understanding of gospel-motivated stewardship. The state churches receive their money by charging a small tax to each member. Offerings are not given freely from a heart overflowing with thanksgiving to its Lord.

⁷⁹Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 87.

Obviously, the gospel is proclaimed in all its truth and purity in the Diaspora congregations, but gospel-motivated stewardship has not been taught as clearly. We must not point the finger of blame, however. Recall the types of ministries the pastors have had to conduct. They have always had to travel tremendous distances to serve the many small scattered groups under their care. Recall this quote from earlier: "Due to the unsettled conditions and the itinerant ministry, instruction classes could not be conducted in Germany as they had been in Poland."⁸⁰ The lack of time and energy due to poor means of transportation, difficulties faced by an overbearing government, and the hard work necessary to scrape up a living made it difficult both for pastors to give and for members to receive the proper instruction in God's Word necessary to produce spiritual maturity in every aspect of sanctified Christian living.

The youth did not have the advantage of going to Lutheran elementary schools. In fact, throughout the communist era they were being regularly indoctrinated with atheism. The education received in the public school system today is not much different. Martin Wilde rejoiced in the Lord's grace for Lutheran children in America who are "protected from all atheistic or liberal, faith-destroying influences of public schools like in Germany." He then continued:

The ELF doesn't have Christian schools like you do. In general, all German children and young people attend public schools. According to the education plan, all schools have to teach a religion class. In consent with the education books, the religion teachers teach a liberalism in the most negative, faith-destroying form. Our church tries to release its children from these religion classes and to teach them on its own. However, the ELF education in this subject isn't accepted by the government so far. People of our church are most of the time under atheistic influences.⁸¹

In an attempt to plant Christian values into the few youth of the Diaspora churches, pastors conduct *Christelehre* (Christian education) classes for about fifteen to twenty minutes immediately before the services on some Sundays. Otherwise, the aging pastors, who are in

⁸⁰Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 89.

⁸¹Vogt, John F. "Update on Germany." March, 1996.

charge of every aspect of the work of their congregations (there are no church councils), do very little Bible instruction outside of regular worship, wedding, and funeral services.

CURRENT WELS INVOLVEMENT

Presently the WELS Committee on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) has the responsibility of oversight of WELS support of the Diaspora District. The CICR gradually took over this responsibility from the Board for World Missions. As the Diaspora became a part of the ELFK, an independent church body from the WELS, it became clear that this church body was a sister church and no longer a mission in the same sense of the term as those church bodies that the WELS was influential in founding. The ELFK, including the Diaspora District, and all the church bodies from around the world with which the WELS is in fellowship, were charter members of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) when it was formed in 1991.

Pastor John Vogt, who replaced Pastor Wilbert Gawrisch in 1995, is the contact man for the CICR with the ELFK. When he preached in Damerow and Seehausen in June of 1996, it was the first time an American had ever preached in a Diaspora service. Part of his responsibilities include attending the ELFK Synod convention every other year, increasing awareness of the ELFK among WELS members through a quarterly paper entitled "Update on Germany" sent to interested individuals in the synod, and raising financial support for the Germany Support Fund through special offerings from WELS members. He also makes presentations on the ELFK at mission festivals and for various church groups. The CICR also monitors the periodicals of the ELFK and offers spiritual guidance if asked to address a question by that church body. In the summer of 1998, the WELS plans to host an evangelism seminar in Germany conducted by Pastor Robert Hartmann.

TROUBLING CROSSROAD

With the current situation in the Diaspora District and WELS' history of support both financially and as spiritual advisors kept in mind, the present dilemma is now staring both church bodies in the face: How long should the WELS support these apparently weak and dying sister congregations, which it has supported since their founding? This is a troubling question to address with no completely satisfying answers. After much prayer, long hours of deliberation, and patient discussion with its sister church bodies, the CICR felt it was necessary to cut back its financial support of the Diaspora District. Its confidence is that the Lord of the Church will find a way to do what is best under these circumstances for all involved.

The resolutions approved by the CICR on January 23, 1997, and accepted by the Diaspora District and the ELFK in meetings conducted between March 3-9, 1997, consist basically in this: 1) the WELS will gradually cut the funding back, so that by the year 2001 no money will be sent for salary support of the Diaspora District; 2) the three Diaspora pastors will have the option of taking what amounts to semi-retirement calls, meeting the basic spiritual needs of their people while living on their pensions; and 3) the WELS will subsidize all three pastors', and if necessary their widows', retirement income indefinitely. All this is contingent on WELS members continuing to give sufficient support to the non-budgetary Germany Support Fund.⁸²

As was mentioned above, the Diaspora congregations may have been under the false impression that the WELS would support them indefinitely. This latest course of action may have left them feeling upset and even betrayed. Some may feel the WELS is renegeing on its promises. What were the CICR's reasons for reducing WELS support of the Diaspora? The CICR, first of all, recognized that it is not a mission board and does not have the funding for the ongoing financial support nor the authority to send manpower to this church body. It also recognizes that the Diaspora District is not really a mission of the WELS. Due to WELS' earlier ties to the church and out of Christian concern for fellow believers in need, however, the CICR desires to do what it can to help. Two other reasons are: "If members of the Diaspora District

⁸²See Appendix F for a copy of the actual resolutions and suggestions adopted by the CICR.

are unwilling to support the Lord's work in their midst, neither the WELS nor the Saxon District has a responsibility or obligation to do it for them" and "Faithful stewardship of the Church's resources sometimes requires painful decisions. The WELS frequently must close congregations if there is no potential for growth and self-support."⁸³

The question now arises: How will these congregations make up for the decrease and eventual termination of funds? One might think that their own church body, the ELFK, would help make up the difference. However, this possible solution does not appear likely. The financial responsibilities of the Saxon District are already overwhelming. Imagine a total of 1600 members supporting fourteen full-time pastors, thirty congregations, a seminary, a publishing house, and missions in three countries. The Saxon District is doing all this in spite of the fact that they also face the high unemployment and greatly increased costs that came with reunification.

Another factor is the apparent fact that the rest of the ELFK never fully accepted the Polish refugee churches as equal partners within their synod, nor has it ever felt any real ownership or responsibility toward these congregations. Hints of this attitude were expressed in the book *Lutherische Freikirche in Sachsen, Geschichte und Gegenwart einer lutherischen Bekenntniskirche* which was printed in 1985 and was partially printed in translation in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly in 1992. There the author, Gottfried Herrmann, states: "The first joint district synod of the Saxon and Diaspora Districts took place in Dresden, June 10-12, 1955. Since then the *two synods*, [i.e., district conventions] as a rule meet jointly" (italics are mine).⁸⁴ Even Pastor Johannes Wilde, the president of the Diaspora District in which he has served his entire ministry, continues to regard himself as a "Saxon" pastor "on loan" to the Diaspora District. The World Mission Board obviously recognized this situation, because in its January

⁸³CICR Decisions re. ELF Support, January 23, 1997.

⁸⁴Herrmann, Gottfried. "The Diaspora District of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Volume 89, Number 4. Fall, 1992. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 290.

1994 minutes it reports that among the significant decisions made during a recent visit to Germany was that the ELFK "agreed to merge the Diaspora with the ELFK."⁸⁵

The CICR hopes and prays that the Diaspora congregations will rise to the challenge and find a way to stand on their own two feet. The following objectives might form the components of a plan to follow toward that goal. The first objective would be to teach the members to realize a sense of responsibility for and involvement in their own congregations. The second objective would be to conduct serious stewardship education, so that the members might grow in regular, faithful, firstfruits giving to the Lord. The third objective would be to give training in friendship evangelism and lay leadership to help the members better reach out to their neighbors, relatives, and co-workers with the gospel message; in other words, to promote the kind of mission zeal and gospel-motivated love toward their present-day countrymen that was characteristic of this church body in its early days in Poland. A fourth objective would be to produce a more brotherly working relationship between the Diaspora District and the rest of the ELFK.

CHALLENGES, FEARS, AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

The pastors of the Diaspora District have serious concerns as they look to the future of their congregations. These are found in the list of causes for decreasing membership in the District as mentioned above, that is, their lack of church facilities, aging pastors, lack of spiritual maturity especially in the area of evangelism and stewardship principles, general German indifference to the gospel, the state-church syndrome of their country, the refugee image their churches carry, and the continued poor economic conditions of their people and eastern Germany in general. As Pastor Ortel lamented: "In spite of all the mission efforts, as far as one can judge at this time, a growth of the soul count is not foreseeable."⁸⁶ Perhaps the most troubling

⁸⁵"Japan Europe Asia Visitation." WELS World Mission Board minutes submitted by Chairman Ronald F. Freier. January, 1994.

⁸⁶German Text: "Trotz aller missionarischen Bemuhungen ist ein Anwachsen der Seelenzahl derzeit nach menschlichem Ermessen nicht absehbar." Ortel, Artur. "Parochie Dahme/Mark." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94 Pg. 13.

is the disinterest of the youth. Because most of the churches are in small country villages, there are so few young adults in their congregations. There are children in the churches, but the kids grow up and go away to the big cities for university study or to get a job and are then lost. The churches have no place in most of these larger cities to refer these young Christians to for spiritual care.

As a result, the congregations are currently dying. For some the only question is "who will die off first . . . the pastors or the people?" Although the pastors continue to hope and trust in the power of the Word, they are quite doubtful and pessimistic. They feel they have tried and are convinced that it is hard to teach old dogs new tricks. In each case, once the current pastor is no longer able to serve, the congregation will need to demonstrate its willingness and ability to support a new pastor. If that is not possible, the congregation will be forced to close, and the remaining members could only be served in a limited way by means of taped services from existing ELFK churches.

At this point in history, one might legitimately say that perhaps the Lord has accomplished his purpose for this district. In that case, the church historian's comment would have been quite insightful: "The name these pastors chose [the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission Church] defined their reason for being. In some part of their minds this original group would always be refugees, serving refugees, dependent on the Wisconsin Synod to help them do it."⁸⁷

However, the CICR and others are not giving up yet. They have other plans, according to the Lord's will. Pastor John Vogt is quick to admit that "they have definitely got many obstacles to overcome,"⁸⁸ and that for growth to occur a drastic change is needed in the mindset of the congregations' members. Yet he and his colleagues on the CICR see the potential for growth in these churches. They feel that, although the preaching stations out on the fringes of the district may soon fade away, yet the Jueterbog and Dahme congregations, which are only twenty miles

⁸⁷Sauer, Theodore A. *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. Pg. 78.

⁸⁸Interview with John F. Vogt on September 26, 1996.

apart from each other, could combine into one congregation and that Kleinmachnow and its preaching stations could form a second congregation. Both congregations would have a starting nucleus of thirty to fifty members. The current pastors, although they are in their sixties already, could by the grace of God still serve a number of years under semi-retirement calls. An increased awareness and involvement in stewardship, evangelism, and lay leadership could convert these dying congregations into mission congregations with solid nuclei and potential for growth into thriving congregations. Within five or ten years one or both of these congregations mentioned above may be able to support a pastor of their own and could at that time request a young candidate for ministry from the Leipzig seminary. The CICR, faithful WELS supporters of the Germany Support Fund, and confessional Lutherans around the world share the hope and prayer of Pastor Johannes Wilde: "Perhaps Kleinmachnow [and Jueterbog] can become a starting place and rallying point for true Lutheran Christians."⁸⁹

GOD'S GRACE GOES FORTH

In the concluding remarks of his brief history of the early days of the Polish mission, Pastor Otto Engel commented: "This little group was trained in a hard school. But throughout it all, they remained true to their confessional heritage and found ways to keep it even in a strange land and among a different people."⁹⁰ Our Christian brothers and sisters in the Diaspora District have existed most of their lives under severe trials and tribulations. They have been career students in the school of hard knocks. And in a sense, these Christians continue to live in a "strange land and among a different people." The Lord has blessed them with faithful pastors and a faith which has held tightly to strong confessionalism in the face of rationalism and increasing pluralism in the state-churches. The Church lifts its voice in the words of the Apostle

⁸⁹German Text: "Vielleicht kann Kleinmachnow Anlaufstelle und Sammelpunkt werden fuer treue lutherische Christen." Wilde, Johannes. "Kleinmachnow und Prignitzparochie." *Die Gemeinden der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*. Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 1993/94. Pg. 24.

⁹⁰Engel, Otto. "The Wisconsin Synod Mission in Poland." *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Volume 6, Number 2. Fall, 1988, pg. 45.

Paul in thanksgiving for God's grace in preserving these Christians: "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15).

Yet, the Lord would not have them keep this light of the gospel, which has been so graciously preserved among them, under a basket. He would not ask them to lie about and simply wait out the days until the call to their heavenly home. Rather, as the apostle Paul went on to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:16,17).

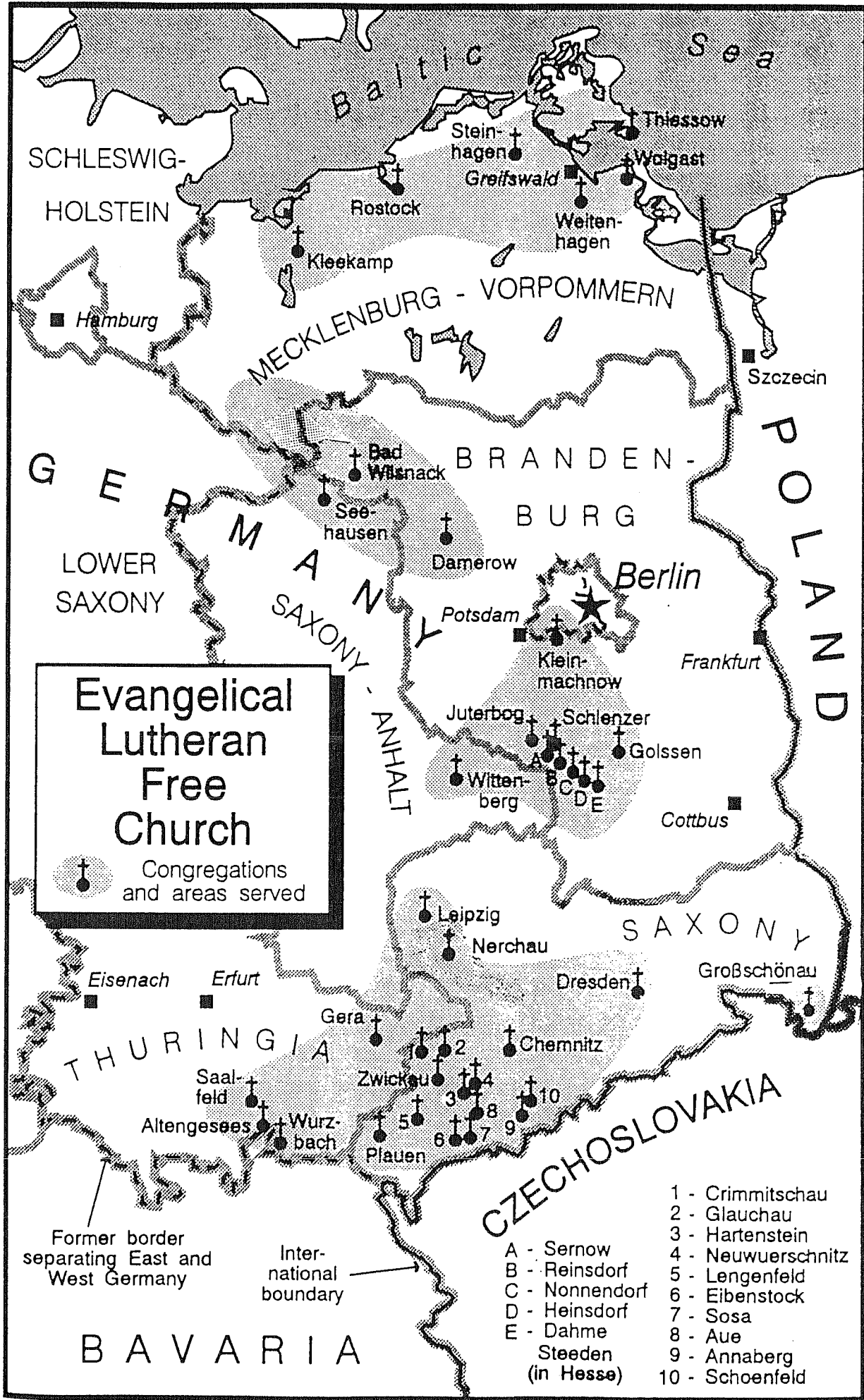
May the Lord of the Church, the Ruler of History, the Gatherer and Preserver of his elect continue to grant his grace to the Christians and their pastors in the Diaspora District and enable them to be a bright and powerful beacon of gospel light in the sin-darkened country of Germany.

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Evangelical Lutheran Free Church

 Congregations and areas served

- 1 - Crimmitschau
 - 2 - Glauchau
 - 3 - Hartenstein
 - 4 - Neuwerschnitz
 - 5 - Lengenfeld
 - 6 - Eibenstock
 - 7 - Sosa
 - 8 - Aue
 - 9 - Annaberg
 - 10 - Schoenfeld
 - A - Sernow
 - B - Reinsdorf
 - C - Nonnendorf
 - D - Heinsdorf
 - E - Dahme
- Steeden (in Hesse)

Former border separating East and West Germany

International boundary

B A V A R I A

Bezirkspraeses Pastor August Lerle

zum Gedächtnis

Nach einem arbeitsreichen, kampferfüllten Leben im Dienst der Kirche - im heiligen Predigtamt - rief Gott der Herr den Senior und Praeses des Diasporabezirks der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche im vollendeten 80. Lebensjahr zu sich in sein himmlisches Friedensreich. Ohne Furcht und Todesgrauen, freudigen heilsgewissen Herzens, singend und jubilierend wie ein Sieger nach wohlbestandenem Kampfe folgte er dem letzten an ihn ergangenen Ruf seines Herrn und Heilandes, der ihn in den Abendstunden des 9. Februar 1965 von seinem Leiden erlöste und ihm aushalf zu seinem himmlischen Reich. Erhebend sind seine letzten Worte, die bekunden, dass er ein wahrer Juenger Jesu und sein Sterben ein seliges war. "Ich scheid heute aus eurer Kreise . . . Das Heil in Christo habe ich verkündigt und die falsche Lehre widerlegt. Ich habe Christum bezeugt als den einzigen Grund und Eckstein unseres Heils und Glaubens . . . Nun ist mein Werk beendet . . . Und ich moechte heim . . . Freut euch! Die Gnadenstunde hat geschlagen . . . O, wie schoen . . . Jesus ist hier . . . und ich werde ihn schauen in vollendeter Schoenheit . . . Heim, heim nach dem himmlischen Jerusalem . . . ! Heute darf ich schauen die himmlische Heimat . . . Singt noch ein Lied . . . und ich gehe heim . . . ".

Und was er wieder holt zu singen wuenschte und mitsang oder bei immer schwaecher werdender Stimme nur noch mitsummte und was wir dann an seiner Bahre zum Ruhme der sich an ihm so offenkundig verherrlichenden Gnade Gottes sangen, war die letzte Strophe des bekannten Ewigkeitsliedes: "Gloria sei dir gesungen mit Menschen- und mit Engelzungen, mit Harfen und mit Zimbeln schoen. Von zwoelf Perlen sind die Tore an deiner Stadt, wir stehn im Chore der Engel hoch um deinen Thron. Kein Aug hat je gespuert, kein Ohr hat je gehoert solche Freude. Des jauchzen wir und singen dir das Halleluja fuer und fuer." Jeder, der in seine Nahe kam, sollte singen und froehlich sein. Selbst den Arzt forderte er zum Singen auf. Was ihn so singend machte und ihm die Sterbefreudigkeit gab, war die Gewissheit der Erloesung in Christo Jesu, die GewiBheit: "Der, der hat ausgeloeschet, was mit sich fuehrt den Tod."

"Opa Lerle", wie er allgemein genannt wurde, war am 3. August 1884 in Sanie bei Lodz in Polen geboren und in einen frommen, christlichen, in enger Fuehlungnahme mit der Kirche stehenden Elternhaus aufgewachsen. Schon frueh war in ihm der Entschluss gereift, Theologie zu studieren und dem HERRN der Kirche im heiligen Predigtamt zu dienen. Zu diesem Entschluss und seiner Verwirklichung trugen ein nicht Geringes sein Konfirmator, Konsistorialrat Pastor Holz, und der ihm befreundete und sehr zugetane nachmalige Universitaetsprofessor fuer systematische Theologie an der Warschauer evangelischen Fakultaat, Pastor von Serini, bei. Nachdem die notwendigen Voraussetzungen erfuellt und die Wege zu dem gesteckten Ziel geebnet waren, widmete er sich dem Studium der Theologie, dem er mit grossen Eifer und sichtlichem Erfolg oblag. Nach beendigtem Studium in Deutschland trat er zunaechst in den Dienst seiner Heimatkirche, der evangelisch-augsburgischen Landeskirche Polens. Nach laengerem segensreichen Wirken, zuletzt als Leiter der Evangelistenschule in Zgierz bei Lodz, die Prediger fuer die entlegenen Randbezirke der augsburgischen Kirche Polens ausbildete, fand er den Weg in die treulutherische, die damalige Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche in Polen. Ihr diente er in großer Treue in den Gemeinden Andrespol, St. Petri-Lodz, Wola-Mlocka und Zichenau, bis er im Winter 1944/45 die Heimat verlassen und die ihm so lieb gewordene Arbeit aufgeben musste.

Die folgenden Jahre sahen ihn in Sachsen und in Thueringen, bis es zur Bildung des Diasporabezirks innerhalb der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche in der DDR kam und Lerle die Leitung dieses weitverzweigten Bezirks uebernahm. Eine grosse Aufgabe, welche hohe Anforderungen an ihn stellte, wartete hier auf ihn. Weite, zeitraubende, oft sehr beschwerlich Dienstreisen - im Winter mit

Appendix B (continued)

Fahrrad bei Glaette, und Schneeverwehungen - fuehrten ihn kreuz und quer durch die weiten Gebiete seines grossen Amtsbezirks in die weit voneinander verstreut liegenden Gemeinden und Predigtplaetze. In seltener Treue, mit grossem Geschick und beispielhaftem FleiB und Eifer suchte er diesen Anforderungen bis in seine letzten Tage hinein gerecht zu werden.

Pastor Lerle war ein begnadeter Prediger. Ein gutes Organ, eine klangvolle Stimme, ein frischer, lebendiger Vortrag standen ihm zu Gebote. Gern wurde er gehoert, nicht nur in seinen eigenen Gemeinden, sondern auch anderwaerts. Seine Predigten waren wohldurchdact, textgemaess, gut geordnet, inhaltsreich, warm, von Herzen kommend, volkstunlich, jedermann, verstaendlich. Das erste Erfordernis eines Predigers war ihm gegeben: er war "lehrhaftig" und seine Predigten "reich an Lehre". Effekthascherei lag ihm fern. Er war sich dessen bewusst, was Gott den Predigern sagt: "So jemand redet, dass er's rede als Gottes Wort", 1. Petr. 4, 11. Eins stand ihm fest, dass die in der Heiligen Schrift geoffenbarten Wahrheiten, Ratschluesse und Glaubensgeheimnisse der himmlische Same sind, der in die Herzen der Zuhoerer gesenkt werden muss, wenn darin die Frucht der Busse, des Glaubens und der Liebe hervorwachsen soll. Er predigte Gottes Wort und suchte durch die heilsame Lehre seine Zuhoerer in der Erkenntnis der Wahrheit zu foerdern. Selbst davon durchdrungen, dass in keinem andern Heil ist als in Christo, hiess es auch bei ihm: "Ich hielt mich nicht dafuer, dass ich etwas wuesste unter euch, ohne allein Jesum Christum, den Gekreuzigten", 1. Kor. 2, 2. Jesum zu verherrlichen als den einzigen Heiland fuer alle Sunder und ihn seinen Zuhoerern ins Herz hineinzupredigen, das war das Ziel, auf das er in allen seinen Predigten hinsteuerte. Er konnte auch sehr ernst reden, wenn es galt, die Sicherer, Satten und Selbstgerechten zu aufrichtiger Reue ueber ihre Suende zu fuehren. Aber man merkte wohl, auch dazu drang ihn die Liebe zu seinem HERN und den ihm anvertrauten Seelen. Wie konnte er dann wider bitten und flehen: "Lasst euch versoehnen mit Gott." Er war ein treuer Seelsorger, der den einzelnen Seelen nachging. Er ermahnte die Lauen, strafte die Suender, warnte die Sicherer, suchte die Verirrten, troestete die Traurigen, besuchte die Kranken und segnete die Sterbenden ein. Da war ihm kein Weg zu weit, kein Wetter zu unguenstig und keine Nacht zu finster. Davei nahm er keine Ruecksicht auf sich selbst, obwohl infolge seines Alters die Sehkraft sehr abgenommen hatte. So ging er einher in seinen Gemeinden, geachtet und geliebt von vielen und jeder Zoll an ihm ein Pastor. So ging er durch dieses Leben, ein Mann voll Glaubens, der Liebe und des Friedens, ein Diener Christi, ein Prediger der Gerechtigkeit, ein Fuehrer zur Seligkeit, der aber in Demut nichts sein wollte und alles auf das Konto der Gnade Gottes buchte. Bei seinem Leichenbegangnis auf dem Hallenser Suedfriedhof am 15. Februar zeigte es sich, in welcher Liebe und Achtung er gestanden hatte. Eine grosse Trauergemeinde - darunter 22 Pastoren - hatte sich eingefunden, um einen letzten Blick auf sein im Tode erblaBtes Antlitz zu werfen und ihre Teilnahme den Angehoerigen zu bekunden. Nun schlaeft der langjaehrige Diener und Streiter Jesu Christi in seinem Grabe bis zu henem grossen Auferstehungsmorgen. Ihm gilt, wie wir zuversichtlich hoffen duerfen, die Verheissung, die der HERR allen treuen Dienern gegeben hat: "Die Lehrer aber werden leuchten wie des Himmels Glanz und die, so viele zur Gerechtigkeit weisen, wie die Sterne immer und ewiglich."



Pastor "Opa" Lerle
in his pulpit
at Christmas



A. Schlender

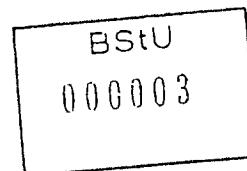
Kreisdienststelle Grimma

Grimma, den 03.05.1994

Abschrift eines Briefes

von

Dr. Gottfried HERNANN
9550 Zwickau, Fr.-Engels-Str. 19
Tel.-Nr. 2761



an

Jonas SCHRÖTER
7240 Grimma, L-Urbaniak-Str. 08

An die Gemeinden des sächsischen Bezirkes der
Evang.-Luth. Freikirche!

Zur nächsten Jugendmitarbeitertagung unseres Bezirkes laden wir für den 19./20. Nov. nach Crimmitschau. Jede Gemeinde möchte wieder zwei Vertreter entsenden. Folgende Themen wollen wir erarbeiten:

1. Bibelarbeit zu Mathias 25, 1-13
2. Vor 250 Jahren: Josef Schaidberger gestorben (Was wissen wir über die Salzburger Emigranten?)
3. Warum glauben an einen dreieinigen Gott?
4. Gesprächsführung - Wo mache ich das?

Beginn: Samstag, den 19.11.83 14.00 Uhr
Treffpunkt: Gemeinderaum der Gemeinde "Heiligen Kreuz"
9630 Crimmitschau, Glaucher Landstr. 16

Anreise:

mit Bahn:

von Bahnhof Crimmitschau zu Fuß in etwa
10 min zu erreichen (rechts halten, Bahn-
linie unterqueren, Richtung Glaucha Autobahn
laufen bis Glaucher Landstr. 16)

mit Fahrzeug:

von Zwickau aus Richtung Morane/Autobahn;
bis zur Kreuzung vor der Autobahn, dort nach
Crimmitschau abbiegen, die Kirche liegt an
der Einfallestraße (starkes Gefälle, Park-
möglichkeit in Seitenstraßen)

BV für Staatssicherheit Leipzig
 Kreisdienststelle Grimma

BSU
 000002

Grimma, den 03.05.1984
 Vo/na 162/84

BV für Staatssicherheit Karl-Marx-Stadt
 Kreisdienststelle Zwickau

Karl-Marx-Stadt

Verbindung Voigt, Andreas zu Schröter, Jonas
Ihr Cfs 200 vom 22.02.1984

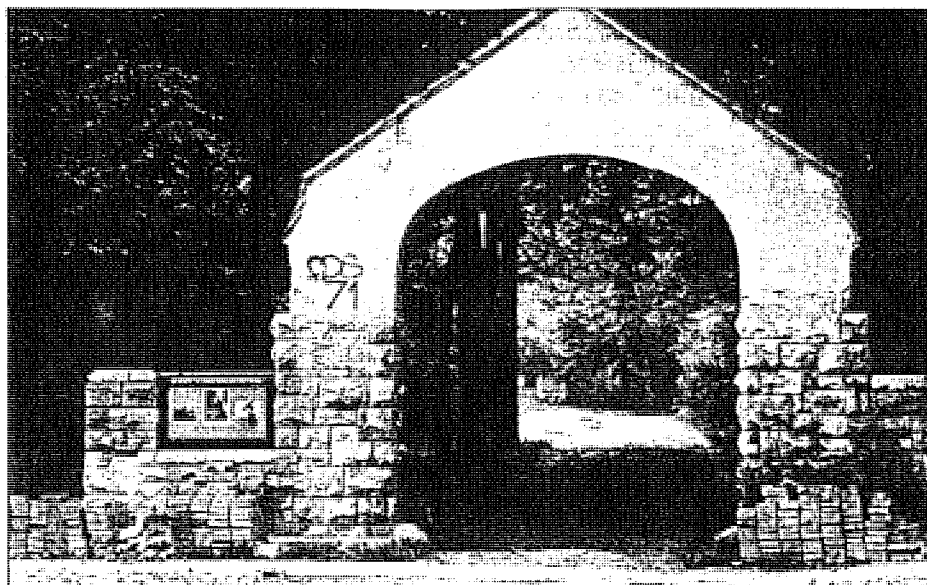
In Ergänzung zu dem mit Ihrem Stellvertreter des Leiters, Genossen Major Hösel, geführten Telefongespräch teilen wir Ihnen mit, daß der Schröter als Maschinenschlosser im Bereich Wissenschaft und Technik des VEB Maschinenanlagenbaukombinat Leipzig/Grimma arbeitet. Für die Absicherung dieses Kombinates ist die Abteilung XVIII der StB Leipzig zuständig.

Schröter ist in unserem Verantwortungsbereich noch nicht operativ in Erscheinung getreten. Es war lediglich bekannt, daß seine Familie sehr religiös gebunden ist. Jetzt gelangten uns im Zuge der Aufklärung von Postunterschlagungen durch einen Angestellten der StB der Inhalt zweier an den Schröter adressierten Briefe in die Hände, aus dem hervorgeht, daß Genannter der Evang. Luth. Freikirche angehört. Negative Aktivitäten dieser Kirchengemeinde waren bei uns bisher nicht zu verzeichnen.

Anbei übersenden wir Ihnen Abzüge aus der Kaderakte des Genannten sowie Abschriften der o. g. Briefe, die ihm ausgehändigt worden sind.

Leiter der Kreisdienststelle

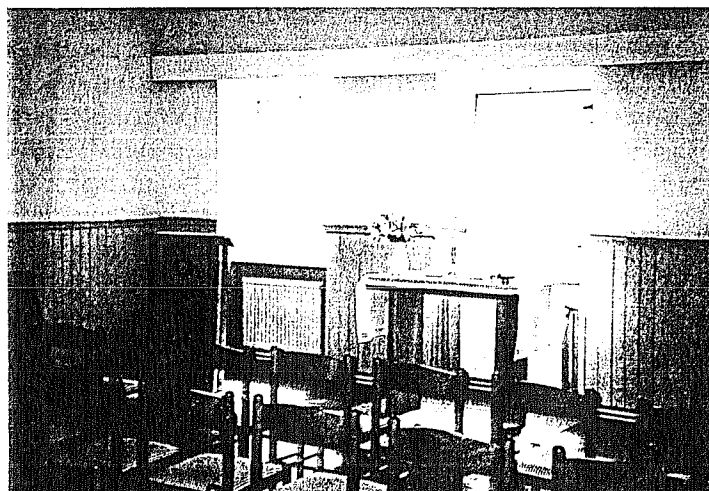
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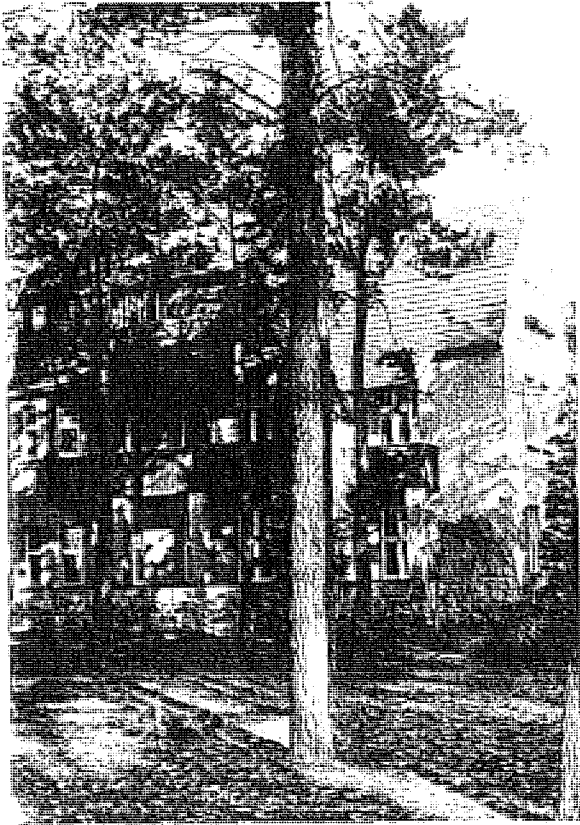
Communist graffiti covers the entrance to the ELF property in Berlin, Germany.



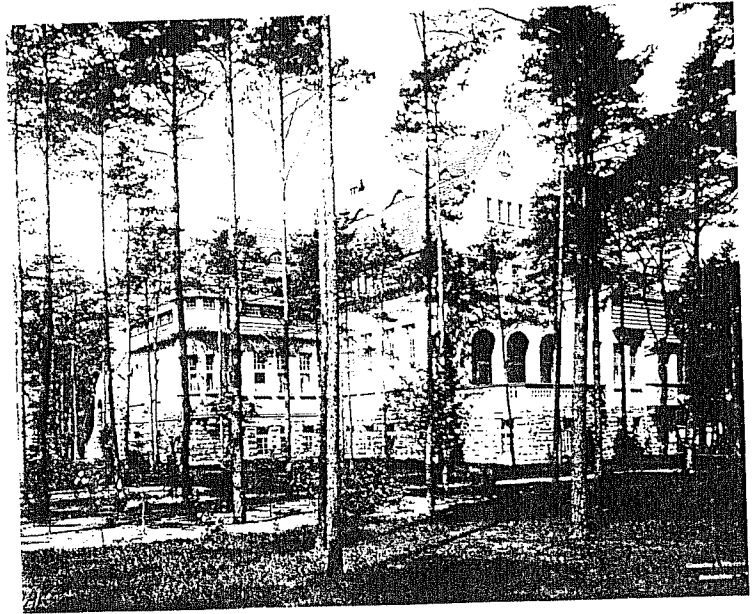
Kleinmachnow



Seehausen

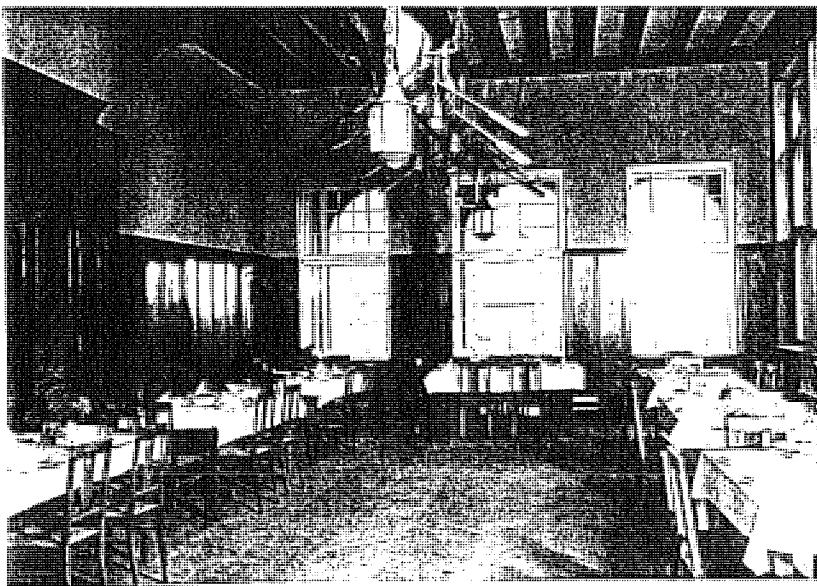
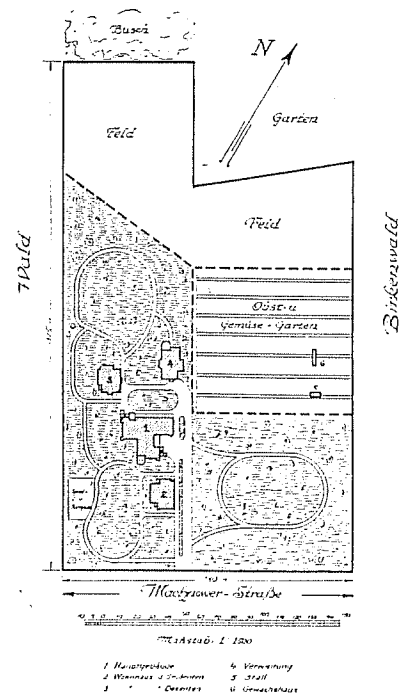


WOHNHAUS DER STUDENTEN.
Student Dwelling-House

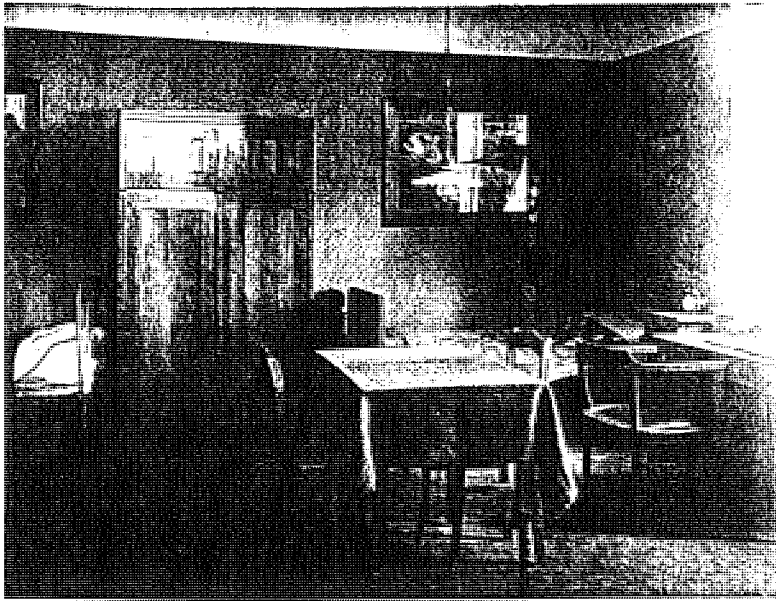


HAUPTGEBÄUDE.
Main Building

Lageplan

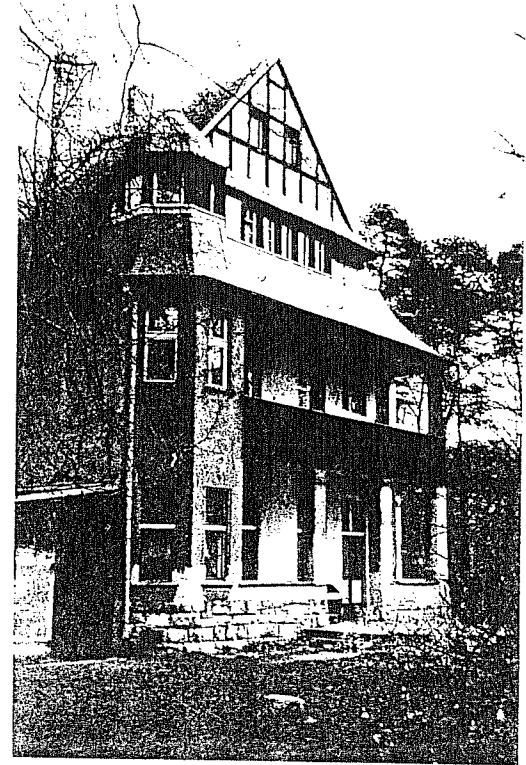


GROSSER SAAL.
Big Dining Hall

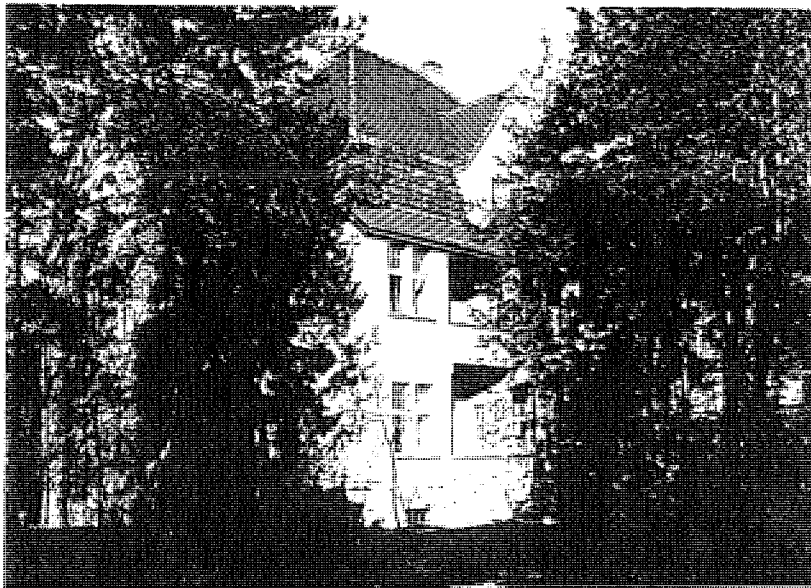


EIN STUDENTENZIMMER.

A Student's Room



A more recent picture
of the former "Seeman's House."
Now Pres. Johannes Wilde's home,
which also serves as the Kleinmachnow
congregation's chapel.



WOHNHAUS DER DOZENTEN.

Professors' Dwelling-House

CICR Decisions re. ELF Support

Approved by the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) on January 23, 1997 --

1. The CICR through the Germany Support Fund will try to continue assistance to the ELF for the Diaspora pastors at a decreasing rate, cutting the present \$4,100 by \$500 per month at six-month intervals (\$3,600 beginning July 1, 1997, \$3,100 beginning January 1, 1998, and so on). Support under this provision will end no later than 2001.
2. The CICR through the Germany Support Fund will try to assist with the pension supplement for the three Diaspora pastors and their widows -- in an amount no greater than other ELF retired pastors and widows are actually receiving. (Note: This assistance will not begin until the amount of help under provision one falls below what is needed for the pension supplement. At that time support under provision one ends, and provision two takes over.)
3. The ELF will furnish financial reports to the CICR at least annually, which show how money from the Germany Support Fund is used.

Understandings regarding the above efforts to assist the ELF --

1. The CICR is not a mission board. Therefore, it does not have funding for ongoing financial support and can not send manpower.
2. All assistance comes from freewill, nonbudgetary offerings to the Germany Support Fund. The CICR will not be able to provide the assistance it hopes if offerings to the Germany Support Fund fall short of what's needed.
3. The more money that is used for the assistance listed above, the less money will be left over for other forms of assistance to the ELF (such as books for the Seminary or travel to CELC or WELS conventions).
4. The CICR and the WELS assume no responsibility beyond the present three Diaspora District pastors.
5. In the face of reduced salary support from the CICR, the ELF will need to make realistic plans for the future of its Diaspora congregations and pastors.
6. The ELF is not expected to make up for the WELS reduction by increased support from the Saxon District.
7. It is not God-pleasing to enable members or congregations to shirk their responsibility to be faithful stewards and supporters of God's work.
8. If members of the Diaspora District are unwilling to support the Lord's work in their midst,

neither the WELS nor the Saxon District has a responsibility or obligation to do it for them.

9. Faithful stewardship of the Church's resources sometimes requires painful decisions. The WELS frequently must close congregations if there is no potential for growth and self-support.

10. The ELF will notify the CICR if increased offerings, membership growth, retirements or congregation closings reduce the amount of assistance needed from the Germany Support Fund.

11. The ELF will not solicit money directly from WELS members, but rather will encourage interested WELS members to send their offerings to the Germany Support Fund.

Ideas and thoughts for discussion --

1. Increased offerings, consolidation to central locations and membership growth through outreach are some positive ways to offset the reductions in support money from the WELS.

2. Serious efforts at stewardship education may help the members of the Diasporabezirk to understand their responsibility to support their pastors and congregations.

3. Weekly offerings gathered in the worship services and brought to the altar with prayer may increase awareness of the need for regular, faithful, firstfruits giving.

4. Training in friendship evangelism may help the members of the Diaspora District reach out to their neighbors with the Gospel.

5. Another possibility is for the pastors to enter retirement and continue serving the basic spiritual needs of their people. In the U.S. the WELS has many such "Social Security calls." In fact, Professor Kaesmeyer's tour of duty in Germany was such a call.

6. The retired pastors could be allowed to remain in the ELF-owned parsonages in exchange for providing basic service as suggested in the previous sentence.

7. Kleinmachnow seems to be a prime location for establishing an ELF mission with the potential for growth into a thriving congregation.

8. If the decision is made to establish a centralized congregation at Jueterbog, the congregation could apply for a building loan from the Germany Support Fund. The loan would need to be repaid by the congregation with interest.