Rathke: An East German in the Far East

Bill Yoder

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
RATHKE: AN EAST GERMAN IN THE FAR EAST

by Bill Yoder

On June 6, 1992, Rev. Heinrich Rathke found himself in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan, loaded down with presents, on foot in a snowstorm. After eight hours on a rickety bus, he and an accomplice had been dropped off several miles outside of town. Finally, a motorcyclist gave them a lift. They arrived at the house of a lay pastor only to discover once again that inhabitants had emigrated to Germany. But by 7 p.m., a house church of twelve people had been located on the opposite end of town. Conversations there lasted until far into the night. "They have a very inadequate mail and telephone system," Rathke explained. "So I simply traveled to where I thought a congregation was, or might be."

Rev. Rathke's most trying night in formerly-Soviet Kazakhstan was spent alone on a train surrounded by unknown foreigners and drastic hygienic conditions. "Yes, I could probably have obtained a Land Rover," he conceded. "But as bishop I hadn't visited the folks in small-town East Germany in a Mercedes either. I wanted to travel as the people there travel. I would tell them, 'Brother, go with me to the next location,' because I probably would not have survived those trips alone." The former East German bishop made a special effort to avoid big cities and hotels during this trip. Without sleeping where they sleep, he insisted, "We cannot comprehend the harshness of their everyday lives."

During his two-month stay last year, Rathke traveled 3,600 miles, visiting 35 cities and villages while holding 55 sermons and countless more meditations. Many older persons insisted on being confirmed. Remarkably, this pastor had retired eight months earlier due to poor health!

As a pastor, Rathke has not shied away from adventure. In 1954, during the midst of the Cold War, he left the West behind and returned to his native East German state of Mecklenburg. A highly-successful pastor, he was elected Bishop of Mecklenburg in 1971. He made a second unusual move thirteen years later: Retiring voluntarily as bishop, he gave up the trappings of power and returned to being a small-town pastor in Crivitz, near Schwerin.
Rathke believes in the beauty of smallness. "I still hold to the principles which were important to me in the GDR [East Germany]," he added. "Churches should first of all cover their own expenses. Foreigners dare not appear as wealthy donators. We don't want to install grandiose projects; rather, we want to help congregations function within a budget which they themselves can afford. There will still be more than enough opportunities to help financially."

Rathke, who serves as Visiting Bishop [Bischoeflicher Visitator] in Kazakhstan, expected the local churches to pay his expenses while he was there. Did this offend his impoverished hosts? "By no means!" he retorted. "It's a great joy for them to host a guest, and it's insulting for them if we leave the impression that our money is worth so much more than their's. I want to be a brother among brethren, not a rich uncle from the West." When he departed last June, they handed him an additional 13,584 rubles for mission and relief work in Africa. Kazakhstan boasts nearly half of the 500 Lutheran congregations in the former Soviet Union; there are even slightly more Germans in this country (950,000) than in the entire Russian state. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan still qualifies as hardcore diaspora.

Rathke claims some congregations he visited had not been visited even by the nearest Lutheran congregations for sixty years. These ex-Soviet churches have had virtually no professional clergy since the late 1930's when Stalin cut short the work of Lutheranism's 250 Soviet pastors. After the amnesty of 1956, only one of the few pastors who survived the labor camps came to Kazakhstan to preach again.

The newly-independent state of Kazakhstan has only fourteen million inhabitants, but it is the seventh-largest country on earth. Despite being largely desolate, the country is plagued by major ecological worries. In a region near Semipalatinsk in the northeast, 467 atomic devices have been exploded since 1949. Many congregations were not visited because they had been declared off-limits due to the atomic testing zone.

At its first synod in May, the new "Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Kazakhstan" is to be formed. It will be an independent church affiliated with a federation of Lutheran churches most likely based in St. Petersburg. The present federation, still based in Riga, carries the name: "German Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republics of the East."

The creation of this church will be met not only with cheers; Kazakhstan has truly experienced the priesthood of all believers. For decades, grandmothers and aunts have done much of the baptizing. The surrender of church power to an educated or foreign clergy is unsettling and frightening. "Centralization is something very foreign," added Rev. Rathke. "Hardly anyone in Kazakhstan is equipped for study in a seminary. They've always had to labor in the mines and on the fields. But, of course, this says nothing about their spiritual qualities."
But since the downfall of the Soviet Union, change and transition are inevitable. The cry for lay training is clear. Lutherans are being asked to counsel in hospitals and prisons, and to offer Bible instruction in schools. The workload is often breathtaking. In the capital city of Alma-Ata, a lay elder recently prepared 202 persons, from 16 to 60 years of age, for confirmation within three months.

Lutherans are being forced to answer unfamiliar questions: May the divorced remarry? May those who commit suicide be buried by the church? How is a prisoner on death row to be counseled?

May women in pants or without a head scarf attend church? According to Rathke, it is difficult to scrap an iron tradition which had once sustained them through decades of persecution. Yet the need to transition remains if the young are to be retained for the church.

The former bishop concludes: "If one takes them seriously as people, one can achieve a closeness to them, and only then can one ask some of the many necessary, critical questions. After twenty visits there, I am much more reserved about making judgments than I was after the first or second visit."

Political and economic chaos are also threatening the future of the Kazakh church. The ruble, which had once been valued at over $2, is now being traded at over 200 rubles per dollar. For owners of Western currencies, this is of course good news: Rathke booked a flight over the entire length of the country for the equivalent of $4. But a bus ride will cost a citizen of Kazakhstan 100 rubles, or one-third of an average monthly salary. Kazaks are earning less than two dollars per month in hard currency.

At the beginning of this year, Kazakh replaced Russian as the official language. Lutherans, many of whom struggled mightily to learn Russian, are now settled with a third language. Though the Orthodox church is hardly present, the growth of Islam, Christian sects and ethnic hatred threaten the Lutheran faith.

Rathke will be back in Kazakhstan during April and May. German Lutherans in the neighboring republics are faring even worse, especially in the war-torn country of Tadzhikistan. The "Visiting Bishop" also hopes to pay them a visit this time.