

Activity of the Moravians in Estonia and Latvia

Lecture at the 5th International MORAVIAN conference, 16th –18th of October 2009 in Suchdol nad Odrou /Zauchtel

Paul Neustupny, Berlin

The area which is identical to today's Estonia and Latvia was called Livland for a long time so that we would like to speak of the "Livland-work of the Moravians". What was the political and social situation of this area and its inhabitants in the year 1729, when the Moravian Christian David visited Livland for the first time?

At the beginning of the 13th century the indigenous inhabitants (Estonians and Latvians) were subdued by the Order of the Teutonic Knights. The area was not colonized by settling a large number of German farmers or craftsmen but was dominated by a small but influential stratum of gentry, which owned the conquered ground and ruled over the local farmers as bondmen.

Christianity was brought to Livland by the German knights. Although the Latvians and Estonians seemed to give up their pagan beliefs, they went on to bring sacrifices to their ancient gods of nature on hills, in forests and near some lakes in secret and continued with witchcraft, magic dances and incantations (2). Even the Lutheran Reformation, which came to the Baltic provinces in 1521, did not bring a change to that. At that time the territories of the Order of the Teutonic Knights changed into princedoms with a secular government and stood under shifting political predominance.

Livland was ruled by the Swedes until the beginning of the 18th century. They designed the state administration as well as the church according to their standards. The German nobility, for whom the Estonian bondmen worked, exercised their patronage over the Lutheran church, which was the main denomination in Livland, by ordaining only German clergymen. Very often a certain amount of farmland belonged to a parson's rectory. The bondmen considered the parsons to be part of the ruling class, to whom they not only had to pay a tribute but also had to till their fields. (1)

In 1700 the so called Great Nordic War between Sweden and Russia broke out. It was raging a long time, had as devastating results as the Thirty Years' War in the heart of Europe and was also accompanied by a pestilence epidemic. In 1710 Tallinn capitulated and in 1721 the war ended with the so called Peace of Nystad. Tsar Peter I. The Great won the war and Estonia and Livland became Russian provinces for more than 200 years. However, no Russian citizens settled in that area so that the German-Baltic nobility was able to keep its dominion and identity.

The land was devastated, the manor houses were burnt down, the landed gentry was left behind impoverished and the churches were only ruins. The Estonians expected heavy seas ahead. Conventions became rough and moral standards went down. The demands for compulsory labour were constantly raised. The German nobility and the Lutheran clergymen began to enforce their right of corporal punishment towards their villains and very often also abused them. The execution of cruel means of castigation, combined with a violent temper of the landlords and the villains literally having no rights at all, had disastrous effects. Since almost all noble landholders were military officers they forced their subordinates under the military rule of that time. In addition to this the pagan beliefs and the rituals which were never really done away with experienced a frightening renaissance among the Estonians and Latvians. On the outside they carried out a multitude of church duties as good Lutherans but inside their hearts they were far away from a biblical kind of belief. The Lutheran church was helpless. The gap between the German ruling class and the subordinated Estonians and Latvians became wider and wider. (2)

However, among the German nobles and clergymen were those who clearly saw this hopeless situation and felt a deep responsibility before God to bring a solution and a change. Among them were General von Campenhausen, Countess von Hallert and others. At the beginning of the 18th century German ministers came to the Baltic provinces that were influenced by Pietism which had its origins in Halle (at that time theology was not taught in Livland). So Pietism began to attract supporters also from the noble class. Through the teachings of Pietism people began to put a focus on the social and spiritual situation of the local farmers and started to build village schools and prepared a revision of the existing Bible translations (the New Testament was translated into Estonian in 1676; the first translations into Latvian began in 1689).

Right from the beginning the nobility influenced by Pietism tried to make contact to the developing Moravian church in Herrnhut and to Count Zinzendorf. In 1726 and 1727 General von Hallert and Count Zinzendorf corresponded with each other and von Hallert asked to send teachers for a seminar which he intended to establish on his manor in Wollmar (today Valmiera in Latvia) (1). That meant that the Moravian church and Count Zinzendorf were really expected and highly welcomed in Livland and Estonia. In 1729 Christian David and Timotheus Fiedler undertook a first journey. This was, in terms of number, the beginning of the greatest diaspora of the Moravian church (3). They visited Riga, Wollmar (where they met General Hallert's widow) and Reval (today Tallinn). They had intensive contacts to the farmers and were able to hear from their Latvian hosts a lot about their current situation. Christian David was the first one to learn Latvian. In the middle of the year 1730 they visited the area again for a shorter period of time. In 1735 Bishop David Nitschmann and in 1736 Count Zinzendorf himself came to visit.

Zinzendorf's three-month trip in 1736 via Berlin and Koenigsberg was one of the most successful journeys of his life (3). It is known as the "triumphal course" (1). He visited Riga, Wollmar, Reval and on his way back again Riga. He held several sermons in well attended churches and his sermons as well as his personality were enthusiastically accepted not only by the nobles but also by clergymen and commoners. This made way for the Moravian church to establish an effective work for the next decades. Zinzendorf was inspired by the widow of General von Hallert and introduced the so called "Livland-plan", in which the Moravian church offered to send brethren from the community in order to support the Lutheran ministers who were overburdened with work, if only they would ask. Their task was to mainly hold bible classes, to do practical work and to train the church members in small groups for their participation in church life. This would not affect the position of the senior minister and is a typical example for a work in a diaspora situation. The plan was to support these brethren in their duties of pastoral care and later on to replace them by indigenous believers, the so called "national workers".

In 1738 the first college for elementary teachers was finally founded on the manor of General von Hallert's widow with Magister Buntbart from Jena as rector (1). In the same year the Moravian Christian David visited the manor and his sermons together with the work of the other brethren being present (until 1740 about 50 of them came to Livland) caused a revival, which quickly spread around the whole of Livland. The brethren worked among the locals as physicians, teachers or craftsmen and took pastoral care for the revived Latvians and Estonians in different parishes in their spare time.

They shared their modest lives with the afflicted farmers, gained their confidence and thus broke the yoke of hatred against the Germans which the Estonians and Latvians bore for such a long time. In the beginning even the Moravian brethren were hated, mocked and dispraised as being German. However, they took the local people including their pagan cult seriously and overcame it by preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his blood sacrifice. (2)

A great breakthrough was achieved by the so called "quarter of an hour talks", a confession of sins, which the Moravians offered to the Estonians and Latvians in order to set them free from demonic bonds to their ancient pagan beliefs. As a result of these talks, the villagers went to their landlords and handed back stolen goods. The Estonians and Latvians themselves destroyed their old sacrificial altars. For example in 1736 in the area of the parish Urbs, farmers destroyed 24 secret sacrificial altars of their own accord (2).

The brethren won the hearts of the local peasants by their way of preaching, an emotionally involved Christianity, hymns, the use of the Estonian and Latvian language and above all by their friendly way of behavior, which nobody expected to be shown by any German. Already by the end of the year 1739 about 5.000 people met in regular gatherings. It is said that by the end of the year 1742 the Moravians worked among 14.000 up to 15.000 "nationals" (1).

This development resulted in a revival first among the Latvians and then also among the Estonians. The revival had an exceptionally deep impact on the island of Oesel (today Saaremaa) where mostly Estonians lived. Here the situation for the peasants was worst. All public offices were held by approximately 25 noble family clans, who treated their villagers with arbitrariness. (2)

The whole population on Oesel was touched by the upcoming revival, including the nobility and the German commoners. No parish, no village remained unaffected by this revival. The taverns became deserted and uninhibited sprees on the occasion of marriages and christenings stopped. A new kind of working morale influenced the relationship between the manorial lords and their bondmen. Soon the assembly rooms could not hold the number of believers any more so that many gatherings had to take place out in the open. (2)

After those turbulent beginnings the Moravians began to install consolidated structures. Leadership of the single congregations was given to the "national workers". Soon religious tensions with the Lutheran church occurred. In 1743 Tsarina Jelizaveta Petrovna banned the Moravians from working in the Russian empire and as the Moravians continued their efforts in secret, persecution arose. The situation advanced when Tsar Alexander I. succeeded to the throne in 1801. The Moravian church experienced an upswing since the new Tsar was very open to European Christianity and supported the Moravians. The work of the Moravians in Estonia and Latvia grew until the first half of the 19th century and thus lasted for more than 100 years in its positive development. (1)

The Moravians built wooden prayer houses on the farm yards. Guntram Philipp set up a list of those prayer houses in Estonia and Latvia (Livland) according to the available references: Between 1738 and 1840 253 (4a) prayer houses were built and by the year 1854 276 prayer houses (4b) existed. According to a report to the head synod which was issued in 1857 the number of "all souls in pastoral care" was stated with 83.272. For comparison: the total number of adult members of the Moravian churches including England and the United States was only 11.998 (4b). Philipp calculated that during that time about 9,6% of the population in Estonia and on the island of Oesel (today Saaremaa) 15,5% of the population must have met in the gatherings of the Moravian church (4c).

The Moravians had a strong influence on the social and economic life of the nation. The personal experience of a new found faith in God gave a new kind of self-confidence, self-respect and maturity both to Estonians and Latvians. Education, schooling and overcoming of the system of the states of the realm brought forth a new and never experienced intellectual and social freedom. The "nationals" who were now aware of their talents, developed them by taking over the new challenges that were given to them. Dull callousness, alcoholism and other problems gave way to a disciplined, inornate way of life and brought forth economic success and wealth. (4d)

The nobility that was now organized in fraternal structures opened up to the Estonian and Latvian way of life, fiercely repelled any drift towards Germanization and supported the national awakening of the people. Many of them gave their lives wholeheartedly to this development among the Estonians and Latvians. One of them was Karl A. Chr. von Bruining (1782-1848), who very actively supported the institution of a public school-system. He was buried on an Estonian graveyard in order to "rest in the midst of the people for whom his heart was beating all of his life". A great number of Estonians who belonged to the Moravian church attended his funeral (4e).

Literature:

- (1) Kuták, Tomáš: Jednota bratrská v Pobaltí. (Die Brüder-Unität im Baltikum.) Vydal Bratrský listář, Společnost pro uchování a rozvíjení dějinného odkazu Jednoty bratrské, jako Přílohu 1-1997.
This article consists of 8 pages and gives a good survey of the history of the Moravians in the Baltic states. It was the only Czech reference covering this issue which was available for me.
- (2) Beyreuther, Erich: Die große Zinzendorf-Trilogie. Band 3, Zinzendorf und die Christenheit. Verlag Francke, Marburg an der Lahn, 1988. (ISBN 3-88224-600-6), pp. 128-137.
Basic and probably the most comprehensive German publication on Count Zinzendorf (approx. 850 pages).
- (3) Weinlick, John R.: Hrabě Zinzendorf. (From the American original Count Zinzendorf.) Vydal STEFANOS, Jindřichův Hradec 2000, pp. 87 and 128.
Captivating and well-arranged biography of Zinzendorf. Weinlick is a son of German parents, professor at the Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem and cleric in the Moravian church.
- (4) Philipp, Guntram: Die Wirksamkeit der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine unter den Esten und Letten zur Zeit der Bauernbefreiung. Böhlau Verlag Köln, Wien 1974. (ISBN 3-41292-672-8)
This dissertation which was published as a book by G. Philipp is the most comprehensive (480 pages) German speaking publication covering this issue until today.
- (4a) Philipp, pp. 410-411
(4b) Philipp, p. 220
(4c) Philipp, p. 221
(4d) Philipp, pp. 361-362
(4e) Philipp, pp. 286 and 361

Translated from German by Kai Münzing.
Published on www.go-east-mission.de, heading "Estonia-Outreach", in December 2009.

Additional languages available:

German [here](#)
Czech [here](#)
Estonian [here](#)
Latvian [here](#)