

The Formative Years of Immanuel Lutheran
Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin

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Senior Church History Paper

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April 16, 2003

Introduction

“If you could turn back the clock to the [early 1900s] and stroll down Sawyer Street in Oshkosh on an autumn day, you’d no doubt be greeted by a fascinating sight: bearded and mustachioed men wearing tall leather boots, tight-fitting pants, belted shirts with high collars buttoned on the side in the Russian fashion and sheepskin-lined coats. The attire of their wives: loosely fitting dark skirts and blouses draped with floral wool shawls. Most of the latter would have their hair pulled back, fastened in a bun and partially covered with a bright kerchief.

“If you wanted to say hello to these interesting-looking folk, ask them the time of day or comment on the weather, you’d have better luck communicating if you spoke German. However they’ve come to Oshkosh, not from Germany, but from the steppes of Asia, the Eastern frontier of the Russian Empire.

“Because of their origins and exotic-looking clothing, you might have heard other Oshkosh townsmen call these people “Rooshans,” but you’d do well not to say that word aloud in their presence, for it is a label they abhor. Although they recently arrived from Russia, they think of themselves first and foremost as Germans.

“The story of how these German-speaking people happened to go to Russia in the first place and why they eventually left prosperous farms and villages there to come to the United States is a fascinating one. It is a story of courage and perseverance, unspeakable hardship—and an indomitable will to survive.”¹

They were a people who had a hard life, but who knew what was important in their lives. They gave up their homes for a new home. They gave up their lifestyle for a new life. But one thing they would never give up is their religion. They were Lutheran. And they would stay Lutheran.

The intention of this paper is to record some historical markings of the Immanuel Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. It will not be an exhaustive paper. In fact, it is not possible to record everything that took place. Through the years, records have been lost, or records were not kept. The church minutes do not contain any information on what took place during the formative of Immanuel Lutheran Church. The author of this paper, however, has talked with some members who remember firsthand what happened, or who remember hearing

¹ Hiles, Mary. *Ethnic Heritage Series: The West Side Volga Germans of Oshkosh*. 1989 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, Oshkosh Division.

stories from their ancestors. It may be possible in the future that records will be found, and the information in this paper rebutted. But at the present time this is the story of the formative years of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Catherine the Great's Manifesto of 1763

Immanuel Lutheran Church was born, so to speak, a little more than eighty years ago—1920. However, the people and events responsible for its conception can be traced directly back for more than 200 years, to a time when the world was as plagued by wars as is our present age, to the mid-eighteenth century.

In 1756-63, during the Seven Years' War, the Prussian duchy of Saxony became a battleground for the forces of Prussia and Austria. The inhabitants suffered all the tortures of devastation and hunger, as well as the dreaded enforced military service, which war always brings. Then, in 1763, the people of Saxony, among them the ancestors of the founders of Immanuel Lutheran Church, were offered deliverance. It came not from a famous man, but from a famous woman.

A German princess had become Empress of Russia through an arranged political marriage with Peter, heir to the Russian throne. This man became the Emperor, as Peter III, in 1762. He was unintelligent, immoral and unpopular, and he met his death the same year he came into power. The German princess, now Catherine II, succeeded him. Her accomplishments were so outstanding that she soon became known as Catherine the Great. She was uniquely endowed with the personal qualities and resources necessary for leadership. One of her policies was to encourage immigration, especially of capable and industrious people. So,

In 1763 she issued the Great Manifesto and sent her agents into Germany preaching the gospel of the "New Paradise." Under the terms of the manifesto,

the German settlers would be given homes, agricultural implements and seeds with which to start their own 80-acre farms. They would pay no taxes on this land for the first 10 years. In addition they would be guaranteed religious freedom forever and exemption for life from serving in the Imperial Russian Army. They could keep their own language and culture and establish their own civic government.²

Within the next four years about a quarter of a million people emigrated and settled in colonies on the Volga River. Their lot was not easy.

To a people who had just suffered through the Thirty Years War, it sounded too good to be true. And it was. But the thousands of Germans who took Catherine at her word would be deep into the Russian interior—far too deep to return—before they discovered the lie. What they would find on their arrival was an untamed land inhabited by half-savage nomads, exiled convicts and packs of howling wolves. And the houses that were supposed to await them? The exhausted settlers had to pass that first fierce Russian winter living in caves and in holes they dug in the ground. To avoid starving they ate the seed they brought to plant in the spring. But that did not suffice. More died than survived. One despairing settler wrote bitterly to a relative back in Germany, “This is paradise all right...the *lost* paradise.”³

They suffered from famine, fevers, robbers, and wolves, but bolstered by ideals of freedom, they survived and eventually established a high degree of autonomous culture and learning, maintaining always their German heritage and Lutheran faith. They built homes, towns, schools, and finally established a stable life that lasted peacefully for several decades. Catherine had known what she was doing.

Within 50 years the settlers had turned the region into a breadbasket for the Russian Empire, as well as a major producer of sugar beets and tobacco. In addition, cottage industries such as weaving and leather-making thrived in the prosperous little villages that now dotted the region. These hardy Germans had gained success through grit and determination. Their families were large, and everyone worked. During the warm month when they could till the soil, plant seeds and harvest the crops, whole families moved from their homes in the village, camping out in the fields for weeks at a time. During the cold months when no field work could be done, the women of the family kept household looms operating 24 hours a day. Life was hard, but the settlers had uprooted

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

themselves from their homeland in search of more than the good life. Above all they wanted freedom—the right to live in their own way. Fortunately Catherine kept some of her promises—the ones that didn't cost any money. The land was theirs. They were not conscripted into the army. And they could retain their own language, make their own village rules and worship as they chose.⁴

But there seems to be something in nature which cannot long endure quiet equilibrium. The 19th century is characterized by restlessness and change, and one of the principal manifestations of this mood is the efforts of almost all European nations toward expansion of their boundaries and their commerce. Expansion brings conflict and war, and Russia became deeply involved. Also, in Russia late in the century the teachings of Marx and Engels, informed especially by hatred of the church as well as of established government, penetrated and undermined the German communities. Germans as well as Jews were looked upon as foreigners and traitors, and they were subjected to intense pressures to give up their German ways, to become Russians. Furthermore, they were forced to serve in the Russian army, (contrary to one of the freedoms Catherine the Great had given to them).

But this relatively brief period of tranquillity drew to an end in 1870s and '80s—a period of fervent nationalism. The new czar, Alexander II, pushed strongly for general Russification. Alexander decreed that all citizens of the empire must learn to speak Russian, adopt the Russian Orthodox faith and give up their separate civil governments. And perhaps more importantly, all men between the ages of 16 and 40 would be eligible for conscription into the Imperial Army, where a term of service lasted six years.⁵

Compulsory military service was enough alone to send many Europeans away from their homelands to seek peace and freedom elsewhere. So it was with the Volga Germans, whose original charter had been revoked by the Russian government. “In 1874 alone, the year the general conscription was announced, 115,000 Germans left the Volga district. The Russo-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Japanese War of 1905 brought a still greater exodus, which swelled to floodgate levels with the onset of World War I.”⁶

Move to America

Most Americans perhaps know that in the 18th century, a large number of Germans immigrated to the United States and settled in Pennsylvania. These immigrants later became known as the “Pennsylvania Dutch”. Fewer Americans probably know how the descendants of the Volga Germans came to America in order to find a new home. Many of these Volga Germans, these Germans from Russia, settled in Wisconsin and formed tight colonies in areas such as Oshkosh’s “West Side.”

They began to hear of the “land of the free,” the United States, and, as the 20th century began, vast numbers sold their properties to emigrate. These Germans settled in many places in America: New York, Kansas, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Washington, Canada, and, of course, Wisconsin.

Most of the Volga German immigrants from the village of Jagodnaja Poljana came to Oshkosh in 1899. Four names of these first settlers are known: John Weigandt, Henry Luft, Conrad Luft, and Conrad Pfaffenroth.⁷ In fact, these Volga Germans made up most of the population in Oshkosh during the end of the 1800s. “At one time, 99 percent of the people who lived on Oshkosh’s west side were these transplanted Germans, who arrived here from Russia.”⁸

As was already mentioned in the previous section, most of these people came to America to escape serving in the Russian army. One immigrant flatly stated, “I left Russia because I was

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lautenschlager, Peggy A. *The West Siders: The Development and Disintegration of the Volga German Community in Oshkosh, Wisconsin*. Lake Forest College: Senior Thesis. 16 May 1977, p. 52

⁸ *Oshkosh Northwestern*, Sunday, January 2, 1983.

not about to serve in the Russian army.”⁹ Although this land of their adoption did not actually force its immigrants to become Americanized, neither did it issue charters guaranteeing their national autonomy. The United States was peopled by immigrants from many lands, languages, and cultures. This fact, together with the emphasis on universal education and literacy, inevitably results in the giving over of the various indigenous languages and customs and the taking on of a new national coloring. So the Volga Germans could not expect to live their lives as Germans, the way their forefathers had in Russia. However, there was one very vital aspect of life in which they attempted to retain their autonomy, and that was in their religion. They would worship in German!

When these Germans came to Oshkosh, they found ready employment at the Paine Lumber Company. These people were hard working farmers who gave their best efforts in working for the Lumber Company. They became an important part in developing the Oshkosh community. Recently in a newspaper article it was said of the Volga Germans...

“They were a solid, working class of people, not many professionals,” said Kutchera (former mayor of Oshkosh) of the 600 to 800 Volga Germans who immigrated to Oshkosh during the late 19th century. “There were some bankers, and a doctor, but mostly they were just hard working people. They were the backbone of the city. Everybody—fathers, uncles, brothers, aunts—they all worked for Paine Lumber.” Settling within walking distance to the Paine Lumber Company, mostly on Dove and Sawyer streets, the Roosians left their mark on the city in more ways than just instilling a strong work ethic. They are also responsible for the founding of Roosevelt School, Zion Lutherans Church and Immanuel Lutheran Church.¹⁰

They worked for their own sustenance. One Volga German remembers, “We all paid our own way, or relatives helped us and we paid them back their money.”¹¹ It becomes obvious

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Oshkosh Northwestern*. Monday, March 17, 2003.

¹¹ *Oshkosh Northwestern*, Sunday, January 2, 1983.

from recorded stories that the Volga Germans were a people who knew what it meant to work hard. One newspaper records...

In winter, these powerful men chopped down the trees, trimmed the branches, and dragged the logs over the snow with horse-drawn sledges to the edge of the river. When the ice broke up, the logs were rolled into the river by the "jacks" until they arrived at the newly built sawmills at Oshkosh. There, the logs were cut into boards to be used as doors, window, shingles, and building materials.

Source ?

These people not only worked hard at their jobs. They also zealously worked at the English language. Learning English was one of the biggest hurdles for the newcomers, and special classes were held at night. It was tedious for them to work all day at the Paine Lumber Company and then go to English classes at night. But these were Germans. And they were going to accomplish that to which they set their minds. In an interview with one of the members of Immanuel, Alice Baier recalled, "I was a mule head. I refused to talk German. I wanted to be an American."

Becoming an "American", however, wasn't the easiest thing to do. When these folks arrived in Oshkosh, they were faced with segregation. In the eyes of the people already living in Oshkosh, these people were different. One person writes in the newspaper...

It is part of my family's tradition that grandma was scared by the Russians even as *her* grandma was by the Indians. Mother was born on the West Side (West Algoma, the family still called it) but the family removed soon thereafter to a more congenial place on the North Side. The move was prompted by the arrival of the "Russians" in West Algoma. They were, if anything, too friendly for my quite delicate maternal grandmother. They had just come from "Russia" and were alien in language, custom, and social attitudes. They were clannish, the clan being led by one called "King Peter." They were unlikely subjects for the American melting pot, or so it seemed to Grandma who was herself a melting pot product of Scotch, English, Irish, Dutch and French ancestors. My earliest impressions, then, of the people of West Side Oshkosh were clouded by some misconceptions, and it took a number of years to understand, 1) why they denied being "Russians," and 2) What it was that differentiated them from the German-speaking Catholics of

South Side Oshkosh and the German-speaking Lutherans of North Side Oshkosh, especially the latter since they also were Lutherans.¹²

Another newspaper article comments...

The river was the dividing line for the city. On the northwest side lived the "Roosians," peasants from the Volga. We considered them barbarians and had nothing to do with them. On the north side, the rich people lived on the high land, enjoying their beautiful homes and landscaped yards. The south side housed the poor people—the factory workers and the immigrants who were brought to Oshkosh by the lumber barons, who paid their passage in exchange for service in the mills and factories. Many of these men left their homes in the old country to avoid conscription into the Prussian army. The south side of the river was called Brooklyn. Most of the residents were of German extraction. The people on the south and southwest sections were predominantly Catholic and were called "Hi-Holders."¹³

Since these Volga Germans had a rough time integrating with the other people who lived in Oshkosh, they became very close to each other. When the author interviewed one of the members, she exclaimed, "Das sind unsere Leute! These are our people!" They relied on each other. They looked to each other for help and support. These "Rooshians", as they were tauntingly called, thought of each other as family. One article in the newspaper states, "But for the most part, recreation and entertainment of the people on the west side meant visiting with other Volga Germans. The bond of their common heritage and the struggle to establish roots in this new place made them closer than friends."¹⁴

This familial trait that was so common in the early 20th century still has bearings on the people today. They remember what it was like to be segregated. They remember what it was like to be "the outsiders". If they didn't experience it firsthand, then they certainly remember the stories that were told them. They don't want anybody to experience what they experienced. If

¹² *Daily Northwestern*. April 8, 1978.

¹³ *Oshkosh Northwestern*, Saturday, December 3, 1988.

¹⁴ *Oshkosh Northwestern*. Sunday, January 2, 1983.

one has the fortunate opportunity to meet some of these people, he will notice that they are some of the most hospitable people around. These hard working, amiable people were the founders of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

The start of Immanuel Lutheran Church

As was mentioned in the introduction, it difficult to say with certainty what is included in the formation of Immanuel Lutheran Church. When it happens that not many sources are available, the author who is writing a history of the beginnings of a congregation needs to do some detective work and form conclusions based on his discoveries. So it is with the start of Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Most of this author's resources can be found in newspapers and in interviews conducted with members. Unfortunately, it appears as though there are some contradictions in the research conducted. This author will do his best to present what he has found.

In Immanuel Lutheran Church's Dedication Booklet of June 6, 1965, only this information is given concerning the start of Immanuel Lutheran Church:

Immanuel Lutheran Church was organized in 1920 by German emigrants who had lived in the Volga District of Russia. The above church building was erected at the time of the founding of the congregation with most of the construction work done by the members.¹⁵ For many years worship services were conducted in the German language with but one English service per month. Its first pastors also served the Lutheran congregation in Pickett.

The first pastor serving at Immanuel Lutheran Church was Reverend M. J. Nommensen. He served from 1920 to 1922. He signed his name in the church registry as the recorder beginning on June 18, 1920. In the Oshkosh newspaper during June 1920, his name is recorded as the one serving a congregation named "the Jackson Street Lutheran Church." Unfortunately,

¹⁵ Since they worked at a lumber yard, this author speculates that they were quite enabled to do the construction of their building on their own terms and by their own labor.

the exact date of the dedication of Immanuel's church building at 1135 Arthur Ave. cannot be found. It is assumed that the construction of that church building was completed some time after June of 1920, at which time the church changed its name to "Immanuel Lutheran Church."

In the Oshkosh newspaper of 1919, the church where Rev. M. J. Nommensen served was referred to as "the church of Martin Luther." It is also recorded that a Reverend E. R. Sitz also served at the church of Martin Luther. In the October 31, 1917 newspaper of the Daily Northwestern this article was found:

The Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran congregation, organized about two years ago by former members of Christ Lutheran church, is about to have a new church home. Negotiations have been practically completed for the purchase of Christ Episcopal church on Jackson Street, which structure was erected some years ago by the late Bishop C. C. Grafton, as a memorial, and which has been conducted under Episcopal auspices since, with varying success. It is stated on authority of a leading member of the Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran congregation that the deal is so near being definitely closed that the papers have been sent to Bishop R. H. Weller at Fond du Lac for signature and are expected to be returned here in the next few days.

The pastor of Bethelhem Evangelical Lutheran Church is Rev. E. R. Sitz, who resides at 60 Church Street. Mr. Sitz was at Neenah today and could not be reached, but Mrs. Amelia Smith, who conducts the apartment house where the pastor resides, and who is an active member of the church, stated today that the purchase of the Jackson street church edifice had been closed except for the actual signing of the transfer documents. Other leading members of the congregation made the same statement. One of them said, "We expect to begin services in the former Episcopal mission church just as soon as the purchase is completed and a few improvements are made in the building. There are about twenty-six families represented in our congregation and we hope for considerable growth when we get into our permanent quarters."

Asked about the history of the organization of the Bethlehem congregation, this member of the church said the church society was formed about two years ago in November. At that time the teacher of the Christ Lutheran church parochial school, located on Central Avenue, was dropped through the influence of the pastor, Rev. George M. Weng, following a controversy in the congregation as to the work of the school. The teacher was Fred Luis, and he had a considerable following of sympathizers, his friends maintaining that he should have been retained. These friends then left the Christ church congregation and decided to have a society of their own.

At first the secessionists had meetings without a pastor. Then Rev. E. R. Sitz was engaged to lead them and arrangements were made with St. John's

Universalist church for the holding of services in that edifice at the corner of Church and Union streets. Each Sunday afternoon the pastor has preached there. With the deal for the Jackson street building about to be realized, it is stated that probably no more services will be held in the Universalist church edifice.¹⁶

Here are some conclusions based on these excerpts. 1) Reverend E. R. Sitz served at Bethlehem congregation from the fall of 1917 to 1919. 2) In 1919 Reverend E. R. Sitz served at "the church of Martin Luther." 3) When the name "the church of Martin Luther" appears in the newspaper under "Church Announcements" in 1919, the name "Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran congregation" ceases to be printed as such. (Is it possible that it was the same church with a different name? Or did he serve two congregations?) 4) It appears as though Bethlehem became known as "the Lutheran Church on Jackson Street" in 1920.

To make matters even more complicated are the names listed in the October 31, 1917, newspaper article. Reverend George M. Weng served as pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Oshkosh. When the founders of Immanuel Lutheran congregation came to Oshkosh, they affiliated themselves with the already established congregation of Christ Lutheran Church. It appears that in 1915, some members left Christ Lutheran because of a controversy dealing with the school teacher. They then formed their own congregation of Bethlehem Lutheran. This author believes that some of the members of Bethlehem congregation later split from Bethlehem in order to help form Immanuel Lutheran Church.

However, they were not the only ones to form this new church in 1920. Based on interviews with members of Immanuel Lutheran Church, this author found out that most of founders of Immanuel came from a congregation known as Zion Lutheran Church. When the first immigrants arrived from Jagodnaja, they found the Lutheran Church named Christ Lutheran. It and its pastor, the Reverend G. M. Weng, welcomed the newcomers who worshipped with

¹⁶ *The Daily Northwestern*, Wednesday, October 31, 1917.

them for about seven years, from 1903 until 1910. But late in 1909, when there was about seventy-five families living on the West side, the Volga Germans determined that the time had come to organize a congregation of their own. Less than a year from groundbreaking, the new building was dedicated on the third Sunday in October, 1910. Zion Lutheran Church had become a tangible fact. Peggy A. Lautenschlager writes...

Upon their arrival in Oshkosh, the Volga Germans affiliated themselves with Christ Lutheran Church, located across the Fox River, several miles from the West Side community. The pastor of the church, Reverend G. M. Weng, conducted Sunday services in German, and aided the Russian-Germans in adjusting to their new environment. Until 1909, the West Siders regularly attended weekly services at Christ Lutheran, traveling across the Fox River and out of the West Side in horse-drawn wagons with the children bundled on the platform.¹⁷

In 1909, the Volga Germans of Oshkosh decided to separate from Christ Lutheran Church. Under the chairmanship of Reverend Weng, about seventy-five West Side families held a meeting on 7 November in the Old Hall on West Algoma Street. The following six resolutions were passed:

- 1) Inasmuch as the distance to Christ Lutheran Church is too great, the people wish to organize their own church.
- 2) They therefore beseech the Christ Lutheran Church to grant them a peaceful dismissal, effective the first of the year.
- 3) Furthermore, two lots on the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue should be boughten (sic). In case they are not to be had, then two on the north corner should be purchased.
- 4) Plans for a church should be made, its size should be 40 x 60 without room for the steeple or the alter (sic).
- 5) A building committee of the following members was elected: Conrad Hannemann, Conrad Schuhart, John Hartman, Henry Hergert, John Weigandt, Conrad Pfaffenroth, George Weigandt, and Henry Goerlitz.
- 6) A building fund of \$1,800.00 was subscribed to in this first meeting.

Meetings were organized throughout the month of November. Two lots were purchased on the northeast corner of Sixth Avenue and Sawyer Street, and the name Zion Lutheran Church, for reasons apparently unknown, was chosen for the new building. The church was affiliated with the former Iowa Synod.¹⁸

Reverend F. Preu was the first in a succession of German-speaking ministers to serve at Zion. He was installed as pastor in June of 1911. However, during his ministry at Zion, a division arose within the congregation because of

¹⁷ Lautenschlager, Peggy A. *The West Siders: The Development and Disintegration of the Volga German Community in Oshkosh, Wisconsin*. Lake Forest College: Senior Thesis. 16 May 1977, p. 70

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 75

which almost half of the members of Zion started a new church.¹⁹

It appears that this division that arose was the reason for the start of Immanuel Lutheran Church. The exact date of this division was not mentioned. However, Rev. Preu served beyond 1920, so it is very possible that the division occurred at that time.

In some interviews with the members of Immanuel, it was discovered (based on their recollection) that the reason for the split from Zion dealt with the issue of “the Brethern,” or “Brüders”. In Oshkosh, these prayer meetings were held by the Brüders every Sunday afternoon and Wednesday evening, usually in the church or at the home of a Bruder. At these sessions, passages from the Bible were read and interpreted, prayers were prayed, and hymns were sung in German. Based on information from the members of Immanuel, it appears as though there was conflicted of interest between these Brüders and the pastor of Zion. He expressed his dislike in these meetings and told the members that they would no longer go on. The members then decided to leave and form their own church, at which time Rev. M. J. Nommensen became the sole pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Conclusion

This author is regretful that more solid and definite information could not be attained at this time. The members of Immanuel Lutheran Church have supplied this author with information as they recall it and that they could find. Unfortunately, much has been lost due to failure to record history or due to records being lost. If anyone has more credible and solid information on the formation of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, WI, it is asked that you submit your information to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Sadly, it is quite possible that this part of history will remain unknown for years to come.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 76

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