

The Baptists in Poland.

TO the average stranger observing our denominational life in Poland, the principles and the faith of the Baptists appear as a new heresy, and a recent departure from the ancestral faith of the people. Not many are such who know that already in the sixteenth century there had been in Poland a people who held and practised some of the tenets for which our denomination has always stood. The principle of the baptism of believers by immersion was, in the second part of the sixteenth century, an outstanding issue among the Polish reformers. As early as the year of 1562, tracts in support of immersion were published in Poland. There is reliable and trustworthy information in the old polemical writings produced by the Reformation, that some of the adherents of the evangelical movement, who preferred to call themselves "Polish brethren," practised adult baptism, by immersion, in Cracow, already in 1570, which is about seventy years before the baptism of believers by immersion, was introduced in the Baptist churches in England.

The antipedobaptist movement had, for the most part, found its way to Poland from Moravia, by way of Hungary, and chiefly through the instrumentality of the Anabaptist refugees who sought in Poland a safe place in which to live and witness to the principles of their faith. Poland in the sixteenth century had been well known all over Europe as a country that was hospitable to new religious movements. This freedom of the danger of the inquisitorial persecution, attracted to Poland many religious preachers and thinkers from abroad. Some of the outstanding evangelical leaders of those days, like Andrew Lubieniecki, John Niemojewski, Martin Czechowicz, and many others, had openly held and practised the principle of the Church consisting of members who had confessed their faith and were baptised by immersion. How deeply was the Baptist position, regarding the mode of administering the rite of baptism, imbedded in the minds of the Polish dissenters, is shown by the fact that, as early as the year of 1577, there was published in Poland a translation of the New Testament, and in this translation the Polish equivalent of the word "immersion" was used to denote baptism.

Unfortunately, after the Catholic reaction had gained strength, stern and rigid laws against all Antipedobaptists were enacted and enforced. The Roman Catholic ecclesiastics, whose

bearing on the affairs of the Polish kingdom towards the middle of the seventeenth century had become decidedly strong, prevailed on the Jesuit-king, John Casimir, to banish from the country all adherents of the Antipedobaptist teaching. The king's order had been rigidly enforced, and by July 10th, 1660, those of the Polish evangelicals who had refused to renounce their connections with the Antipedobaptists, and unite with the Church of Rome, were forcefully led across the border of the country, to banishment. Some of them went to Hungary, others emigrated to Prussia, still others went to Holland, and even to England, carrying everywhere with them their stern conviction rather to perish than to become traitors to what they believed to be the true teaching of Christ and His apostles. Dr. A. H. Newman writes :

“The Polish anti-trinitarian Antipedobaptist movement is of great importance to Baptist history. From this party the English General Baptists derived much of their impulse, by it they have been greatly influenced, and between it and them there has always been a close affinity, from it through the Rhynsburgers, or Collegiants, of Holland, the Particular Baptists of England seem to have derived their immersion (1641), having already come to the conviction that immersion and immersion only is the New Testament baptism.”¹

The beginning of the Baptist churches in Poland, of our time, has had, however, no organic connection with the Antipedobaptists of the Reformation time in Poland. It does not carry us back beyond the year of 1858. On November 28th, in that year, a group of German settlers, nine in number, confessed their faith and were immersed. They were the nucleus of the first church that was soon to be organised. During the next ten years that followed the number of Baptists in Poland had reached one thousand. This was in no small measure due to the tireless and unfaltering missionary work of the missionary preachers, some of whom came to Poland from Germany. Very much of the pioneer work had been done by G. F. Alf, who was among the first converts. The first church was organised on August 4th, 1861, in the village of Adamov, with brother Alf as the first pastor.

From that time on, the number of the Baptist churches and missions in Poland has been growing steadily. The membership in the early churches was composed, almost exclusively, of the German farmers who settled in Poland, but sincerity of their faith, and earnestness of their lives, could not pass without affecting their Polish neighbours. Of course, the State, as well as the churches supported by it, opposed the Baptists bitterly.

¹ *History of Anti-pedobaptism*, p. 339.

But in spite of all persecution, the number of converts increased. Baptismal services were held frequently. As there were no chapels built, baptisms were held, for the most part, in the open, and it was not at all unusual to see the entire Baptist company being marched by the Russian police, from the river bank straight to prison. In many such cases the police had acted upon the instigation of the Lutheran, as well as Catholic, and Orthodox clergy.

While, at first, the Baptists, being themselves German, gained new converts chiefly from the people of their own nationality, those of them who knew Polish, carried the Gospel message to the Poles as well as to other peoples in Poland, whose language they could speak. In that way, as time went on, in some German churches, Polish, Bohemian, and Russian congregations were gathered.

The first distinctly Slavic church in Poland was organised in the year of 1872, in the village of Zelov, near Lodz, with Carl Jersak as the first pastor. This church still exists, and is regarded as the mother church of the Slavic Baptists in Poland.

Toward the year of 1922, Polish churches were organised in Warsaw and Lodz, and new mission stations were opened in many other places. However, the scarcity of trained preachers, as well as the lack of other means to take advantage of the opportunities that were open, were the unavoidable obstacles on the road of faster expansion.

Until the year of 1922, all Baptist work in Poland, both Slavic and German, was regarded, at least officially, as belonging to the Union of German churches. But for reasons racial as well as linguistic, the Slavic churches and missions organised, in 1922, a separate body under the name of the "Union of Slavic Baptists in Poland." The Union has incorporated Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, White-Russian, and Bohemian churches and missions. The lines of demarcation, within this Union, are based on the language spoken. Each group is trying to minister and preach to the people of its own tongue, but total exclusiveness is not practised, and there is much intermixture, as well as co-operation, among the various churches and individuals. The Baptists in Poland are known for their aptitude to submerge their differences to the extent that enables them to work and pray together as brethren and believers in Christ as their common Lord.

The growth of the Slavic group of the Baptists in Poland has been remarkable. In the year of 1922, when the Slavic Union was organised, there were ten churches and missions, with 936 members. After ten years the statistics for 1932, show seventy-three churches and missions, and 5,479 members. This has also been true of the German churches. Having started in 1858 with

one church and forty-four members, their reports for the year of 1932 show thirty-eight churches, and 7,574 members. These figures include only members received through baptism, leaving aside those who are under the pastoral care of our churches, but are not regularly accepted as members.²

In recent years the growth of the German churches has somewhat slowed down. The statistics for 1932 give 318 as the total number of baptisms in German speaking churches, while the Slavic Union reported for the same year 644 baptisms. It is hoped that this lessened growth of the German work is but temporary. It may be a breathing space before bigger achievements. It is in no small measure due to the fact that our German brethren are ministering almost entirely to their German speaking constituencies, and do not preach in Polish, except on very rare occasions. This naturally confines the scope of their appeal only to those who understand German.

But what of the future? Have we, as Baptists, really a chance in Poland? Will the investment of funds in helping the Baptist work in Poland, as well as the attention given to it, bring the expected results?

The question is inseparably connected with the question of the future of evangelical Christianity in general. In the light of the past progress of our churches and missions, there can be no doubt that evangelical Christianity and the Baptist approach to it, will continue to find increasingly larger place in the religious and spiritual life of the people in Poland. The ancestral beliefs, as well as the traditional modes of living, are being gradually weakened by the sheer forces of progress and education, even in the far-away villages. It is not too much to claim that no evangelical denomination has a better chance in Poland, than ours. To what extent it is true may be shown by the fact that, in some parts of the country, Baptist churches have been organised spontaneously, simply as the result of the hunger of the people for something that brings them closer to God, and satisfies the deeper yearnings of their souls. There is a degree of evidence that the people in Poland are approaching the period in their history which is sure to call for vastly more than the Roman Church can offer to satisfy man's search for spiritual realities. How soon it will come, is now difficult to predict, but the handwriting on the wall is already visible.

The future of a young denomination, in a country like Poland, at least during the plastic period of the beginning, depends very largely on the quality of leadership. For well

²The church statistics, both Slavic and German, give 25,786 as the number of those who are under the pastoral care of the churches. This gives 11,802 for the Slavic churches, and 13,984 for the German group.

grounded reasons, ministerial education is the most serious one among the problems connected with the growth of our Baptist churches in Poland. We cannot hope to have strong and vigorous churches, and to extend the sphere of our spiritual influence on the life of the people, unless we have leaders that are well prepared, spiritually as well as mentally, for the work of preaching the Way of Life to men, in these days that present many opportunities but also many demands.

To meet this particular end, a Theological Seminary has been conducted in the city of Lodz, which is the centre of the textile industry in Poland. The school was started in 1923, as a joint undertaking of the two groups of Baptists, the Slavic and the German. But since 1930, the school has been divided into two branches, one for the German students, and the other for the students speaking Slavic languages. It is planned to move the school to Warsaw, where it would be more centrally located, and where educational advantages are doubtless much better, and more abundant in opportunities for the future growth.

The poverty, which still obtains in the rural districts of Eastern Poland, where the majority of our churches are located, presents a problem along different lines. In the incipient stage of the work, our brethren could gather for worship in small rooms. Often-times, an austere, one-room peasant's dwelling was the only available "hall," where a small group of our Baptist brethren could meet. But since those days, these small groups, in many a place, have grown into large congregations, which can no longer meet in stuffy and crowded rooms, without coming in collision with the government laws regulating the construction of buildings used for public meetings. For such reasons, the need of chapels and churches, for the people that are already with us, is pressing itself to the front more and more. It taxes the resources of our brethren much above their financial ability. It is encouraging that in many places, small and modest chapels have been built without much outside help. Those who were too poor to give money, gave their work. The brethren in Poland are not lacking in willingness to support their churches and work, but they are poor, particularly in the rural districts. The situation becomes much harder where churches, aside from carrying the burden of the cost of church building, have also to support their missionary pastors. There are, however, no indications that such hardships react destructively on the growth of the work. They call for self-sacrifice and endurance that are needed in Christian work everywhere.

To be a Baptist still means sometimes to be exposed to intolerance and ostracism at the hands of the Romish clergy, even though the government in Poland is just and tolerant toward

the Baptists. The brethren, however, are willing to work for Christ's kingdom and train themselves in patient endurance and pioneering trials that the Gospel might be preached and men freed from the bondage of sin and from ignorance of the truth.

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The Monastery of Sinai.

IN the sixth century, a new dynasty at Constantinople rent the Church of the East permanently, by a change of policy to conciliate Rome. The whole of the Christians of Syria and Egypt stood in the old ways, and nicknamed the few adherents of the Greek Established Church, "King's Men." They were very contemptuous of the official hierarchy sent from Constantinople, but they had a struggle to maintain their own organisation. In Syria there arose an indefatigable worker, who ranged from the Caucasus and the Bosphorus to Alexandria, owning one garment and one rug, both cut out of a horse-cloth, from which a surname was coined for him; his memory is enshrined in the name of his church to-day, the Jacobites. On the Arabian frontier, King Hareth was won, but in the desert most of the Bedawy remained pagan.

Justinian had far-reaching plans to extend and consolidate the empire. Among them he decided to plant a colony of Greek monks just where Syrians and Copts and Arabs met, in the peninsula of Sinai, hallowed by long associations. As the situation was dangerous, it was strongly fortified, and fifty monks were placed to live under the rule of Basil. Since it was intended as a centre of propaganda for the Established Church, yet Greek was not a popular language anywhere near, a library was founded which became rich in other tongues. Of Coptic manuscripts there were very few, but besides a wealth of Syriac and Arabic, there came to be some of the Caucasus, and later on of the Slavic tongue.

Justinian endowed the place, and others followed his example. Moreover daughter-houses were founded to feed it, on the plan afterwards adopted at Cluny. They came to be scattered in Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, Crete, Greece, Asia Minor, Constantinople, and up into Russia, so that the Abbot became a great potentate.