

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LATVIAN
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN
ADELAIDE**

By Valdis Andersons

**Paper presented to Friends of Lutheran
Archives, at Bethlehem House,
Monday 11th April 2011, at 7.30pm**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LATVIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH IN ADELAIDE

Thank you, and before I begin I wish to say at the outset that I am not a member of the Latvian congregation in Adelaide, nor do I have any connection with that church. Therefore any comments I make tonight are my own and are in no way representative of the Latvian church in Adelaide.

Nevertheless, the short history of the Latvian Lutheran congregation in Adelaide is intimately connected with the integration of the Latvian community into Australian society. To understand the founding of the church it is necessary to understand the background of why the Latvians found themselves on the other side of the globe following the end of World War 2.

It is also important to know where this country is. To the north is Estonia, the south Lithuania, to the West is the Baltic Sea, and to the East– Russia.

Throughout the centuries Latvia has been ruled by foreign powers: the Teutonic Knights, Poland, Sweden, and for almost 200 years by Russia, gaining independence at the end of World War 1. The 22 years to 1940 have been remembered by Latvians as a kind of ‘Golden Age’, which was cut short when the Soviet Union forcibly incorporated Latvia into its territory. 1941 is referred to in Latvian as *Baigais Gads*, literally ‘The Really Bad Year’, or more correctly the Year of Terror, which reached its height on the night of June 14, 1941, when around 16,000 people were taken from their homes and deported by railway in cattle trucks to Siberia.

With a population of around 2 million at that time, the chances were very high that everyone knew of someone who had been taken: a father, mother, brother, sister, close relative, a distant relative, an old school friend, a government official, the local policeman.

In 1942 the Germans drove out the Russians, and were regarded as liberators. With the end of the War Latvia was fated once again to fall under the sway of the Soviet Union, and remained there until 1991. Those

Latvians who found themselves in the Western zone of Germany after 1945 feared being caught up in the descending Iron Curtain and willingly emigrated abroad when circumstances permitted.

Persons of Latvian nationality have been identified as having arrived in South Australia in the first half of the 20th century, but their numbers were very small indeed, and have no bearing whatsoever on the future planting of a specifically Latvian church in Adelaide. Consequently I will be focusing on the large emigrant group that began to arrive here from the late 1940s.

In the Australia of the 1930s-40s, certain problems had emerged affecting national politics and the economy.

- (a) The 1930s were a time of low birthrate – this meant there would be an inevitable decline of people entering the workforce (Kunz 1988, p11).
- (b) The Japanese attacks on Australian soil during World War 2 left a strong feeling of vulnerability.

In July 1945, Arthur Calwell became Minister for Immigration of the Commonwealth of Australia, and led the Chifley Labor Government sentiment that

“An increase in the white population would strengthen Australia’s military potential against Asiatic infiltration” (Ibid, p13).

Such population growth was regarded as having the potential to

- (a) enhance Australia’s national independence
- (b) allow the nation the opportunity to become a middle power
- (c) safeguard national security
- (d) and increase Australia’s influence in world affairs

One writer has said that

“In 1945 (Calwell) alone had the vision and determination to propose and set in motion such a programme (Ibid, p14).

Prior to 1945 there had been no cohesive immigration policy-Calwell’s plan was “the quantitative and qualitative transformation of the whole nation, while maintaining the White Australia concept widely subscribed to by Australians of that period (Ibid, p14).

Calwell acknowledged the huge numbers of refugees, or Displaced Persons.....DPs as they came to be known..... in Europe from the conclusion of World War 2, formed a large pool of potential immigrants to Australia, and he realized by July 1947 that

“other countries were keen competitors for the best migrant types, and unless Australia acted quickly they might lose the opportunity of securing migrants on a selection basis”
(Ibid, p35).

Calwell set about systematically preparing Australians for a large influx of European refugees:

- (a) he made public the Government’s plans, to counter any possible resentment
- (b) created interest in and aroused sympathy for the refugees
- (c) highlighted the important economic/cultural/and demographic contributions the refugees would make to the nation
- (d) and took steps to ensure the trade union movement were on side to counter fears of the immigrants taking over the jobs of Australians.

Remember, this was a Labor government embarking on this policy, which we all know led the nation to becoming the multicultural society it is. It is all too apparent, that the carefully constructed immigration policy of the late 1940s, is in stark contrast to that of the last decade or so.

The DPs were all assured of employment. For 2 years they had to complete an obligatory work contract, where employment was allocated to them. This work included the railways, government utilities, hospitals, forestry.....some even went to Queensland to work on the cane fields. I have not encountered any instances of resentment of the work allocation: it seems all were content to work out their 2 year contract out of gratitude to this country which had provided them with shelter following their life in Europe as Displaced Persons, or more correctly, persons without a country.

The occupational choices, however, were restricted. This was to ensure that the

- (a) immigrants would present no competition to Australian labour
- (b) & that the scheme would have the support of the unions (Ibid, p38).

Between 1947-1954 just over 19,000 Latvians arrived in Australia (Ibid, p43). Not all were refugees, however. My family, for instance, paid their own way to get here.

The offer to come to Australia was highly attractive, and all of the Latvian DPs had similar reasons coming here:

- (a) Firstly, to get away from devastated Europe. Everywhere there were reminders of the War, with cities and towns in ruin.
- (b) Life in Europe was somewhat unstable. Not only was Europe devastated, but there were problems of employment, and food was scarce.
- (c) There was the very real fear of the Russians taking over the part of Europe where they were residing.
- (d) In certain parts of Germany, in particular, the Russian authorities had been active in so-called "repatriation" of refugees to their native countries, now under control of the Soviet Union.
- (e) Hence the fear of Communism was a driving factor in Latvian minds to get away from Europe "as far as possible". One writer has noted the paradox that "The most obvious refugees were the Latvians.....none of whom had a country of their own, but who were technically Soviet citizens' (Jupp 1966, p7).
- (f) The 1920s had been a time of economic crisis in Latvia, following the ravages of World War 1. Some Latvians had traveled to Australia at that time, and had spread the news that Australia was a land of opportunity, and these glowing reports were recalled when the Australian authorities were looking for prospective immigrants after World War 2.

Subsequently there were those Latvians who did not miss Europe, and did not want any memories of the war years.

Potential emigrants were interviewed and "inspected" by Australian officials, obviously taking into account their first impressions of whether or not the DPs looked clean. This was important because sickly persons would be passed over. One Latvian lady noted that

"the Australian doctor and consul were impressed by the fact that

my children were well-dressed, and that I was wearing a clean, white dress, and (my husband) wore a handsome suit.women (of other nationalities) went along to the interviews and health checks looking as if they tended to cows, and their children looking like pigs”.

That on face value sounds incredibly racist, but when read in the original Latvian is merely a statement of what was a Latvian world view.

The same writer went on to observe that

“Women of other nationalities had the idea that by looking poor and disheveled, they would attract greater sympathy and thereby be allowed to emigrate easier”.

It is important to note, however, that this is not meant to be a bleak and negative image of those post-war years. Because of the huge numbers of Latvian refugees in the Displaced Persons camps, of which there were a number throughout the Allied-occupied zone in Germany, these were, for a few years, centres of a very rich social and cultural life. Thus people who had been teachers or university lecturers set up Latvian schools in the camps, artists formed choirs, and theatrically trained persons began dramatic societies. Almost every evening was for socializing and dancing, and a number of marital relationships ended during those years. Women would add a few drops of cheap spirits to the bed-time milk of their young children, so that the kids would sleep soundly while the evening partying was going on, or if the women were able to sneak a male partner into their small room.

We often hear how horrible war is for children. I have heard those who were very young children during the War years refer to that as the most exciting time of their lives.... One, who just happens to be my brother, recalls watching at a distance an aerial dog-fight between fighter planes.....playing on discarded and burnt-out army vehicle and tanks in the fields surrounding the DP camps.... Another person told of finding live and unexploded ordinance and firing it.....in one instance some young boys discovered a machine gun, complete with live rounds of ammunition, tied the gun to a tree and attached a string to the trigger. The plan proved dangerous because the retort of the gun sent it whizzing around the tree and the boys had to duck for their lives. Eventually the authorities put a

stop to these activities when a number of children were injured, some fatally.

The camp life progressively died out as the refugees went overseas, some to the USA, Great Britain, Canada, South America, and of course Australia.

The refugees were transferred to Australia by ship, and in future years people would refer to themselves as having been part of a particular "transport"the 1st, or 2nd, or 3rd transport.....and so on.....and some to this day still hold reunions of those arriving on a particular transport ship.

To accommodate these DPs until they were settled in employment, a former military camp at Bonnegilla, near Wodonga, was fitted out as a reception and training centre. These facilities were corrugated buildings that were notoriously cold in winter, and like a furnace in the heat of summer, but generally everyone I have talked to says the same: "We survived". In other words, few complained about the conditions, because at least there was a roof over their heads.

It was also novel at night time to see these cuddly-looking creatures moving about the roofs and climbing into the buildings. This quickly lost its novelty when possums urinated on sleeping residents!

Food did present a challenge, simply because it was so different to what everyone was used to in Europe. Basic staples such as Baked Beans were quite boring to those used to European palates. From time to time a refugee who had been a chef would get to work in the kitchen, and was able to influence the cooks to present food which was more European in style.

Because food was plentiful many would take leftovers with them, in case their children wanted a snack. Otherwise it was thrown in the bin. When local farmers heard this they were disgusted at these people who had come from a life of poverty in post-war Europe and now were throwing food away!

Everything was different to the new arrivals: there were new ideas and customs to get used to.....invited to someone's house for a meal some took quite literally the request to "bring a plate", but were confused over what sort of plate was required!

Christmas was so different to the European Xmas. Having grown up with "White Christmases" the mindset was difficult to attune to a sweltering summer's day on December 25th.

Foods were different, with the newcomers having to get used to eating fritz and lamingtons.

For some it took many years to get used to everything being so different. On the other hand there were those who found those first few years fascinating, and were captivated by the new culture, people, and traditions.

The reaction to these so-called "New Australians" seems to have been mixed: some report highly favorable reactions, while others encountered distrust. In the Mile End railway shunting yards were many foreigners, but the Aussies would not talk to them. At lunch, the Europeans sat by themselves, with the Aussies at separate tables. This came to an end when the new arrivals met at the local pub after payday, and learned to "shout" the Aussies to a beer. Thus the "brown liquid" broke down barriers, when the locals saw that the New Australians could drink really well!

Almost all of the people I have spoken to have said the same – in those early years they did not expect to stay here forever. The ideal was to return to Latvia should one day it regain independence. In hindsight it was an unrealistic expectation. Nevertheless it was tragic to remember those left behind in Latvia. Families were split up, and some did not receive any word of what had happened to relatives and friends for many years. (My father was separated from his first wife and very young daughter in this way).

Consequently the need for togetherness was paramount in those early years of settlement in Australia. They were extremely patriotic, and for many being "Latvian", not as a person, but as a notion, was in essence a

“holy” calling. This was their “religion”, and they took it very seriously, referring to it as their *sirds lieta*, or duty of the heart. However,
“Having arrived in a foreign country and confronted with unusual circumstances, national feelings (that is, towards “being” Latvian) were realized in differing ways” (Adelaide Latvian Association, p12).

One group had experienced negative relationships with fellow Latvians in the refugee camps in Germany, and therefore consciously avoided Latvian society. Another had as their first and foremost aim to stabilize themselves and their families materially, and had no desire to direct finances to Latvian society.

Still a third

“saw it absolutely essential.....for every Latvian to belong to and remain a part of Latvian society in exile” (Ibid).

From the outset in large numbers arrived those persons who conformed to this 3rd group (Ibid), and besides setting up various Latvian organizations in Adelaide, they were also instrumental in forming the Latvian church.

The first arrivals in 1948 were met at the Adelaide Railway Station by officials from the Immigration Department, together with representatives of the UELCA, including the President Dr Johannes Stolz, and the legendary Reverend Alfred Zinnbauer. They conversed with the new arrivals in German and warmly invited them to attend services in the Lutheran churches. The services were of course in English, and as their knowledge of the English language was limited, church was not in any way personal. From the outset they constantly missed not having the Word proclaimed in Latvian.

Early in 1949 the Australian Lutheran Church approached the newly constituted Adelaide Latvian Association to both identify and confirm a Latvian representative to the Australian Church to

- (a) organize Latvian Lutheran affairs
- (b) and prepare for the eventual planting of a specifically Latvian congregation.

Subsequently the Latvian Association unanimously elected one Voldemars Malins, who just happened to be my godfather, who in concert with the UELCA President (Dr Johannes Stolz) determined immediately that

- (a) Latvian Lutherans need to be organized
- (b) and that a Latvian pastor needed to be called.

The 3rd of February 1949 can be taken as the date on which the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation came into existence, when a meeting of Lutheran believers from a Latvian background, came together at a meeting called at the then Emmanuel church in Wellington Square. This building is now part of the studios of television station channel 9. A committee was elected to organize a congregation with its Chairman the aforementioned Voldemars Malins. He had been an officer in the Latvian Army, so he was used to giving orders. Highly proactive, he characterized many of the leaders of the Latvian society in Adelaide.

Subsequently the new Church Council invited Dr Stolz to become interim pastor, as he had already been providing spiritual guidance without payment. Stolz with great pleasure accepted this invitation.

The Church Council now began an active program.

- (a) organizing Sunday services
- (b) maintaining contacts with Latvians in Adelaide
- (c) electing work place representatives to the places where Latvians had been assigned, and some of these names will be familiar:
 - the Repatriation Hospital
 - Hendon Camp
 - Port Adelaide Camp
 - Kilkenny factories
 - Islington Railway Hostel
 - Bedford Camp
- (d) organizing monthly social meetings
- (e) organizing a congregational choir with their conductor, one Arvids Kants, who just happened to be my uncle.
- (f) and coordinating aid to invalided and aged pensioners who were forced to remain in Germany.

The following year, at the beginning of 1950, it was proposed that a call be extended to the former Latvian Army chaplain Verners Voitkus, who at that time had been ministering to various Displaced Persons camps in Germany.

On his arrival in Australia he was relieved of the obligatory 2 year work requirement as he had been called as pastor of the Latvian congregation, and was directed by the General President Dr Stolz of UELCA to “seek out and visit those Latvians who as yet had not become members of the congregation”. Of course Voitkus knew neither Adelaide nor the English language, and so a Pastor Hartmann, who together with Pastor Zinnbauer, had conducted services in German for the Latvians, was assigned to help. Hartmann owned a motor vehicle, and he and Voitkus traveled throughout Adelaide.

One Monday morning they “visited” a home, and of course being a weekday, only a woman and her young children were at home. The conversation somewhat like this:

(Pastor Hartmann) “Wie geht’s, Frau X?”

(Reply) “Danke schon, Herr Pastor, sehr traurig....gestern nicht gehen Kirche – Kind krank!”

This and similar excuses came from many.

Better known amongst the Latvians than either Dr Stolz or Pastor Hartmann was Pastor Alfred Zinnbauer. It was often said that there was probably not a single Latvian in Adelaide who did not know of Zinnbauer. His house was a virtual hostel.

- He aided many new arrivals, helped with housing, either in Adelaide or surrounding areas;
- He worked especially among the immigrant community and the Baltic communities
- A diary entry for one immigrant, who just happened to be my grandfather, notes that on Sunday 7th October 1951, “At 1pm, Pastor Zinnbauer came to take us for a drive in the hills to see the reservoirs”.
- In March 1956, Grandfather wrote in his diary: This evening we went to see Reverend Zinnbauer so he could sign our papers

that we have been resident in Australia for 5 years. We need 3 signatures so Reverend Zinnbauer, his wife, and (a) Mrs Hofmeiers all signed.”

- he was always in a hurry
- he wedded and christened: wherever required
- on Sundays, he conducted services in German, Swedish, and English
- he never bothered about how he looked personally and therefore often looked unkempt
- some made fun of him
- some took advantage of his kind-heartedness
- but always he was regarded for his sincerity and generosity

Rev. Zinnbauer’s personal ministry activities are legendary, so I’ll just mention one. My Uncle, Arvid Kants, as part of his work compulsory 2-year work contract, was employed on the railways. During the course of his work, one day he fell from a locomotive. In hospital he found himself visited by none other than Pastor Zinnbauer, who offered Uncle Arvids, a total stranger, money should he find the going difficult due to being unable to work for a time. Apparently this impressed Arvids, the fact that a man of God wanted nothing but to just help someone in possible need.

PASTOR Voitkus stayed at the Latvian church for 24 years, between April 1951 and July 1974, which gave the congregation immense stability. He was highly respected because of his involvement with the Latvian army, having been chaplain to the 19th Division of what was known as the Latvian Legion. It was highly regarded in its day, being an army unit fighting for the Latvian homeland. There were 2 Divisions formed, the other being the 15th, an officer in which just happened to be my father.

Immediately prior to end of the War, Pastor Voitkus was on the last ship to leave the province of Kurzeme, the final outpost of defending Latvian forces against the advancing Red Army. He told this story in my Confirmation class and apparently all his classes, describing the silence of those massed on the port as the ship pulled away, there having been no room for them, and knowing that they would be left to face the renewed terrors of the Soviet Union. When the realization that the final ship had left sunk in, there was shouting and firing of guns in the air, which finally died away as

the ship receded into the distance. This incident obviously left an indelible impression on Pastor Voitkus, and I believe he retold it to demonstrate the Lord's guidance of him. I recall that this reminiscence perhaps more than any other demonstrated to Confirmees what the tearing away from their homeland meant to our parents' generation.

From 1949 church services were held in St Stephens in the city. Initially it was difficult to get used to holding services at 4pm on a Sunday afternoon, but St Stephens was also accommodating German, Polish, and Estonian congregations.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of these early years of the Church was the unavoidable dependence on the Australian Church. They certainly wanted to help, but at the same time wanted to prescribe and lead. The greatest surprise for the new arrivals was having to contend with the 2 synods. The Adelaide Latvians came under the UELCA, but in other states Latvian congregations belonged to the ELCA.

In 1960 the Church Council established a fund to collect money to build the congregation's own church. Donations came in large numbers, even from other Australian states. The church building was erected with voluntary labour, over 22 months. Once again Malins saw to it that the work did not stop: he was a building contractor and often directed his own workers to the construction site so that the building work would be uninterrupted. On the 3rd of October 1971, the new church was consecrated.

The importance of having their own church was expressed by a past archbishop of the Latvian church when he said that

"The homeland in a strange land is our Church".

Here is proclaimed God's Word, here it is heard in the Latvian language, and here are raised prayers for the homeland of Latvia and its current fate.

The church is made up of 2 distinct parts:

- 1 the church proper
- 2 a free-standing tower topped with a copper steeple, which is a smaller reproduction of the steeple of St Peter's Cathedral in Riga, symbolizing

- 3 links to the Latvian Lutheran church, but is remote from the church
- 4 as the local church is separated from the Church in Latvia.
- 5 The cross above the altar is made from branches of a birch tree, as would have been the case for a fallen Latvian soldier on the battlefield.
- 6 The vertical arm of the X is shorter than traditionally depicted, as the soldier's helmet would have been put on a X
- 7 And to stop it from rotating the brim of the helmet would have rested on the cross arm.

I remember one of my fellow confirmees (we were the first group to be Confirmed in the new church) as describing the X as *drausmigs*.....in the vernacular "bloody awful"to which Reverend Voitkus replied that for the ex-soldiers it was "meaningful" and "highly symbolic". At the time I didn't fully appreciate his explanation. It wasn't something that we could relate to.

It should be noted that in Latvian the word for "church service" is directly translated as divine service, or *dievkalpojums*, as in the German *Gottes dienst*, which is probably more correct than "church service" which is now common.

In 1949 and 1951, 2 separate Latvian schools, with classes on Saturday mornings were begun. Within a short time these amalgamated, and with the arrival of Pastor Voitkus leadership of the school passed to him, where he remained until he left Adelaide. Thus he was not only the congregational pastor, but

- (a) every Saturday he held devotions at the School, before commencement of classes and after the end of class.
- (b) He took part in all pedagogical meetings
- (c) and all school activities.
- (d) He aimed to foster both religious and Latvian identity
- (e) and was highly respected because of his pedagogical qualifications

Over the years there were numerous organizations associated with the church, all of which have dwindled for the primary reason of numbers. One was the Youth Group, led in the late 70s-early 80s by Deaconess Regina Freidenfelds. For a few years, the Christian religion was made alive to a

group of young people, incidentally all girls, and one boy who was at the time described as a “floater”. This information was provided by one former member of this group, who just happens to be my wife.

It was the first time that they got to sing songs that weren't the typical Latvian Lutheran dirges. Songs such as “This is the Day’ were translated into Latvian, and were more fun and uplifting than the hymns used in church, which were always sung at a funereal pace.

All the girls were friends, knowing each other from Latvian school, and everyone cared about everyone else, with no factions. They met together for Bible studies and prayer, but it was the first time that Bible stories were actually explained. It was the first time they saw Christianity in action, and that it was OK to actually talk about it, without any feeling of intimidation, unlike Church Council where one would be put on the spot to say something.

Mrs Freidenfelds really connected with the young girls. She was the actual grandmother to 2 girls who were participants, and is remembered as a lovely and loving lady who was like a grandmother to all of the girls involved. A sleepover at Mrs F's house was kind of like a Retreat. A few interstate Christian youth Gatherings were held, which not only was an opportunity to meet people from other states but a meeting of other Latvians who were Christians.

The Youth Group effectively came to an end when Mrs F died.

In retrospect the Youth Group symbolizes the problems that have led to the decline of the Latvian church, the fact it was always seen more as one of the “pillars of Latvian society”, and did not present the Faith as personal and real as experienced by members of the Youth Group.

Religious practice since 1948 was another way to replicate pre-war Latvian society, which led to a focus on ritual. Hence the pastor and the participating congregation had defined roles. In essence this has meant a clinging to that Big Word *Adiaphora* – the things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God.

.....that is, it was like this in Latvia, therefore it must be the same way in Australia". Australian religious sociologist Gary Bouma in his book Australian Soul, describes it this way:

“correct practice (centers on) doing things in the right way, in the right manner.....This correct practice, by implication (pleases) God; getting it wrong (displeases) God”
(Bouma 2006, p94).

I remember one Christmas Eve, having attended the Latvian church, remarking that I got no Christmas feeling by singing *Lo A Rose is Blooming* at a drawn out funeral pace, to which my wife’s uncle replied gruffly “But it’s tradition!”

I mentioned earlier that the new church building was opened 40 years ago. In a single generation the congregation has dwindled to very few regular attendees. Natural attrition, the decline in numbers of Latvian generally, due to intermarriage, and irregular church attendance have taken their toll. For his diary entry of Sunday 22nd January 1956, my grandfather wrote:

“We all went to the church in the city for a Latvian service led by the Reverend Voitkus. As usual the attendance was very poor – only about 20 people out of a total congregation of 500 to 600. On special days like Christmas, however, they get attendances such that there is hardly even standing room”.

In addition the church, as with all Latvian institutions was in the hands of older generations, with no succession plan ever devised. For instance, Latvians have always been a “singing” people, but the Latvian choir set up from the earliest arrival consisted of what was regarded as the “older generation”, even if they were persons in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Similarly church was seen as an old peoples’ activity.

In contrast, young people across Australia joined the folk dancing groups. In fact, it was common to think in terms of the “3 F’s”, namely
Folk Dancing
Fun
Fornication.

Folk dancing was a physical activity, it brought together large numbers of young people to socialize in a fun atmosphere, and many marriages resulted from couples who met at folk dancing groups, my wife and I included.

Confirmation was not seen as “confirmation of one’s faith”, but rather as a “rite of passage”.....a “coming of age”. It was “the done thing” and what everybody else did, as well as a good excuse for a party afterwards.

A perfect example of how the older generation shunned younger persons not conforming to their ideals of transplanted Latvian society was the so-called “Cultural Ties Movement” (Latvian: *Kulturas Sakarnieki*) of the 1970s, which flowered briefly here in Australia and other Western countries with Latvian youth. These were young people with the amazing foresight that Latvian culture in the West could not continue to exist in a vacuum, especially as older generations eventually died out, and even though at that time Latvia was firmly under the Soviet yoke, nonetheless there were Latvian musicians, composers, writers, playwrights, poets, and other artists who were producing works in Latvian, albeit within the political confines of the Soviet system. It was suggested that we should form cultural ties with these Latvians, but the Movement was completely derided by the “oldies”. Many of the prime motivators became disillusioned with Latvian society and moved away, not only from Latvian society, but Australia.

Another reason for the decline of the church is historical. Religion was not really seen, nor presented, as a personal encounter with God. Whatever foreign power claimed Latvia as its own, throughout the centuries there was a ruling noble class of German background. This German nobility did not accept the indigenous population as equals. Moreover, for many centuries the language used in churches was either Latin or German. Consequently the Latvians had little or no idea of what was being preached from the pulpit. Religion was forced upon the people with barons appointing priests who in turned inculcated a work ethic: “if you work hard, that is, for the Lord of the Manor (Latvian: *Muiza*), God will reward you”. As a result, the indigenous population secretly kept to their old traditions, basic social structure, and natural deities.

I won't go into this at length, simply because it is too broad a subject and I am certainly not an expert on this topic. However, for centuries Latvians have had a concept of God or *DIEVS*, frequently referred to in the diminutive form *DIEVINS*. This is not the God we know in our Christian religion, but more of a life-force, full of good, omnipresent. This animist religion throughout the centuries was a way of life. Spirituality could not be reduced to dogma. *DIEVINS* was seen in all of creation and the natural cycle of life. The Ancient Latvians personalized and embraced nature into this natural cycle of life.

There were other "gods": *MARA* – representing matter, which is in constant flux. Hence *MARA* could be at once the Earth Mother, Wind Mother, and Mother of the Sea.

LAIMA was the goddess of Fate/good fortune/good luck.

There were many sky divinities, for instance

SAULE – the Sun

MENESS –the Moon

PERKONS – Thunder,

as well as numerous agricultural divinities. All are personalized natural phenomena and processes, reflecting the tendency of ancient Latvians to personalize and encompass all of nature within the recurring cycles of life. For the ancient Latvians (*senlatviesi*) meaning and purpose of life was to live in harmony with the repeating rhythms of Nature and other members of society. The attitude to life was positive and optimistic, with one striving for possession of virtue(s), not the avoidance of sin(s).

Because this religion was so nationalistic, it is little wonder then that it was banned by the Soviet Union.

It is quite possible that this sober attitude to all of life explains the Latvian sober approach to organized religion.

One tradition that has survived is that of wishing a deceased person "soft earth" (Latvian: *vieglas smiltis*). In Latvia the soil is very sandy, especially around the coast. People were usually buried on an incline on a sandy

mound. So the wish was for the deceased to have an “easy earth” to lie in, and also so that the spirit could easily rise from the ground. The final honour given to the deceased was that the assembled, that is, the men-folk, would help to fill the grave. If the dead person had been a dishonorable character, the grave was left open, and the mourners just walked away. In addition, when the grave was filled, a mound was built up and the sign of the X was made with a spade, a tradition that continues to the present day.

In those early times tradition required everyone intending to receive Holy Communion to “register” in the pastor’s study, where he would be paid money, with the extra expectation that he would give a special prayer on the side. Interestingly this “registering” for Communion continued in the early years of the Adelaide church, to supplement the pastor’s meager income. There are still older Latvians who believe to this day that if they are in an Australian Lutheran Church they cannot receive the Sacrament if they have not previously registered with the pastor!!

The Church in present day Latvia has even more tradition and ritual. A long time friend who resided in Latvia for some years following the regaining of independence, and who just happens to be our son’s godmother, told me of some Lutheran churches where communicants approach the altar on their knees for Holy Communion. She said the idea is to sit close to the front so that it is less far to crawl, and she learned to tie socks around her knees under her long pants to make the process more comfortable.

Finally it must be said that the fact that the Australian church gave the Latvians so much independence ultimately created problems when certain difficulties were encountered during the tenure of some pastors. Here the call process was somewhat questionable when the over-riding factor was no matter the pastor, so long as he was Latvian.

The Church is in a fairly stable position financially, but the question is how long will they continue to function with dwindling numbers. Considering the history of those who set up Latvian society here in Adelaide, I wonder if they would literally turn in their graves if the day ever comes when the building has to be deconsecrated.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for having me here tonight.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adelaide Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation: 35 Years; 1949-1984, Roneo Alcatel, Adelaide

Bouma G 2006, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge, Port Melbourne

Jupp J 1966, *Arrivals & Departures*, Landsdowne Press, Melbourne

Krumins B (et. al) eds., 2010, *Footprints: Latvians in South Australia*, Digital Print, Adelaide

Kunz E 1988, *Displaced Persons: Calwell's New Australians*, ANU Press

Lumans V O 2006, *Latvia in World War II*, Fordham University Press

Malins V ed., 1986 *Adelaide Latvian Association 1949-1986*, Kitchener Press, Adelaide

Pavils E (translator) *A 1950s Chronicle: Anna & Jekabs Kants – Letters and Diaries* (unpublished)

