



An early convention in Ukraine (before WWII)

Memoirs of Sister Maria Kravetc

I was asked by brethren to tell the story of the first Bible Student classes in Ukraine. Maybe I cannot tell much, for I was only nine when World War II occurred. Nobody took any notes because it would have caused trouble under the Soviet regime. I hope, with God's help, to describe all I heard from various brethren and from my father.

I don't know when and how the Truth first came to Ukraine. In 1911 Br. Russell visited Lviv (then Lemberg), but as far as we know, his object on that occasion was to meet with the Jews. Nothing is known about any local brethren at that time. Probably the Truth came later from Poland. The class in Lviv was growing rapidly during the years 1925-1935. There were about 400-500 brethren, with six smaller classes in the neighborhood of Lviv.

I think it was 1937 when a city reporter visited the convention being held in Lviv. He was intently listening to and looking at everything that was going on, even talking to some of the brethren, and later wrote an article "The people who are in this world, but not of this world."

Meetings were held every Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. Generally, God's Plan of the Ages, as well as Tabernacle Shadows and the Bible, were studied. However, as soon as "Johnson's teaching" began to destroy the true understanding, there was a separation, and the brethren rented another hall where they had their meetings until September 1939.

With the beginning of the war, some were swept away by its strong wind, and some moved to Poland, so the brethren remaining were only a small group. They met at their homes in small numbers, because German authorities disfavored such meetings very much. Many

were called to the Gestapo and were cast into camps. With the coming of the Soviets in 1944 the persecutions became much more severe. Some brethren were arrested and driven out of Ukraine to Kazakhstan. These were brothers Penherek, Gladysek, Bodnar, Biletcky, and sisters Gradovska, Galushchak and Kuchkovska. They were treated atrociously, being transported in freight cars as animals. They had great difficulties in Kazakhstan: Br. Penherek was beaten and had all his teeth knocked out.

Sr. Galushchak (a widow) was taken with her two children. Her older son was only twelve, and in the severe cold of the freight car he suffered frostbite and died. Probably his body was just cast out from the train by the way. Sr. Galushchak worked in Kuibyshev as a cleaning lady in a local business. Her chief (a woman), having known the cause of her condemnation - God's Word - was very anxious to talk to her. One day she shut the door to her office and asked Sr. Galushchak to tell her everything about God, Jesus, the Bible, the Volumes and the Millennium. So she had an opportunity to show God's greatness. Sr. Galushchak's five-year-old daughter was placed in a boarding school, and was not permitted to see her mother. When the prison term was served out, she returned with her mother to Poland, where she is still living and is a member of the Wroclaw class.

In 1951 the same story was repeated. There was a "cleaning" among all illegal groups of Christians. Bible Students fell into this category, but since there were only a few of us they took only two: Br. Wituszynsky and Sr. Gladysek. A Sr. Kitc and I went to the freight part of the railway station to find our brother and sister. All of the prisoners were put aboard freight cars, and were peeping through the small windows, trying to see someone they knew outside or to see what was going on.

I had a package for our brother and sister. A guard, having intently checked everything, let me come close to the car. The bundle wasn't small, so he had to open the door for a moment. I gripped Br. Wituszynsky's hand, Sr. Gladysek made a dart for the door, too, but she was too late, the door was shut. However, we began to talk through the small window. I failed to see that I had crossed into the "forbidden" area. A guard came up at a run and began to huddle me into an open car, saying, "If you want it so much, you will be there right now." Sr. Kitc cried out and tried to drag me down. Another woman came running up to help her, and thus they saved me from Siberia.

Sr. Gladysek, a noble woman with a melodious speech, worked very hard in the Siberian woods. Br. Wituszynsky lived in Siberia only six months, when he died. His wife came to Sr. Gladysek asking for help with the burial. None of the brethren had been there. Sr. Gladysek took the situation very hard. Having come to the place where the body was laid, she and a sister from Jehovah's Witnesses sang the hymn "Many sleep, but not forever." Then Sr. Gladysek bowed on her knees and said a little longer prayer than usual, mentioning the resurrection from the dead, etc. It was a difficult experience for her, but she had to do this.

Brother and Sister Gladysek had many difficult trials in their life. Just after marriage, he was arrested and sent to Krasnoyarsk. It was later that Sr. Gladysek was sent to Siberia. The long distance of thousands of miles parted them. They wrote many letters to Moscow applying for permission to serve time in the same place. After many years this petition was granted. But in 1958 a decree was issued allowing Polish people the right to go to Poland. Brother and sister Gladysek used this opportunity and returned to Kszanow, the native town of brother Gladysek. Here they had a nice house. I visited them in 1967. Both of them have now finished their earthly course.

Now, I want to tell about the first brethren in my area, Dubliany. My father's cousin, Maria Pasirska, was an invalid and an orphan. She served a professor's family in Dubliany (near Lviv) during the years 1931-1934. From time-to-time, one of our sisters from Lviv visited the professor's neighbors. Her name was Orłowska. Meeting Maria, she always comforted her by telling her about the coming Kingdom of God, where all would be equal and happy. She also gave her a Bible. Maria read and began to think whether she had chosen the right way. Living near the Catholic Church she always went to pray there. Before Easter (according to the custom here), she wanted the priest to receive her confession, but he was always late, being very busy with confessing the entire county. After coming many times and waiting many hours, she finally decided not to come any more.



Sr. Marija Pasirska (on the right) and another sister

When coming to the meeting for the first time she saw the illustration of the Tabernacle on the wall. There were priests, animals, etc. She quailed at the thought that SHE HAD EXCHANGED THE "HOLY MOTHER" FOR A GOAT! However, when the brethren began to sing and talk about God's Word, her fears grew dim and she came to appreciate everything there.

Sr. Pasirska made a consecration, which was immediately followed by hard trials. Her health prevented her from working in the professor's estate anymore; therefore, having no place to live, she accepted her brother's proposition to help her in building a small earthen house. The oldest son of her older sister Kateryna, carrying some timber for this building on a horse-drawn cart, had an accident. Right near the statue of the "Holy Mother" (which is in every village) the horses were scared by something and darted forward. The boy (24 years old) fell under the wheels, which crushed his lungs. Three days later he died. The whole village revolted against this sister. People cast dust on her and spat in her face, saying that the "Holy Mother" was punishing her for her betrayal. Nevertheless, her relatives, as well as some of our brethren from Lviv continued to help her in finishing the

building. Later that small house became the usual place of meeting for the brethren there. Later, her older sister also came to the Truth and made a consecration. So then there were two in that place.

In 1935, my father and his oldest sister became interested in the Truth. Our mother was opposed at first, saying, "What will happen with our children?" Later, however, she also followed our father's example. Every Sunday we had meetings in Sr. Maria's house in Dubliany. Brethren from Lviv sent two or more brothers for the service who went on foot 10-15 km. Sometimes our father went to the conventions in Lviv, telling us later about the brethren and about brother Stahn who was able with a word and with an example to comfort the brethren -- he often visited brethren in different classes, strengthening them. There were many classes before the war. It was easy to get the Volumes and other literature. With the beginning of the war, there was a lack of all Truth literature. Brethren began to make handwritten copies of the hymnbook, the Manna, the Comments, the Volumes and even a Bible Concordance.

Beginning with the year 1939 we met illegally. Every meeting was on some pretext or other: Either a birthday, anniversary, or something else. Marriages were few because the young were few. Nevertheless, we had such joy, such zeal, even though sometimes we were expelled from a job, or unable to go to the institute or college. We always were ready to do the worst and the most difficult work so that they would let us meet together. We always had a cause to come to the throne of grace asking for help. The heavenly Father is always ready to help and is able to save. I remember an event, which happened in 1946. In the region where Br. Wituszynsky lived, a garrison came with an order to search every house. Br. Wituszynsky had a bookcase full of Polish Biblical literature, which was published in the U.S.A. His wife, who was not consecrated, was in a panic. The brother assured her that God would overrule everything. And so it happened that a crow, busy with something it had found, engaged the eyes of the soldier, who was on his way to search the brother's house. He observed its habits so long that meantime the other soldiers finished their search in a neighbor's house and called him, thinking he had done his job, and he left.

I remember another story. One evening bandits came to our house to kill us all, but our father began to tell them about God's Kingdom. Our Heavenly Father overruled that matter in a way that all of us were left alive. And later when one of those men was caught and was in Court, he was asked why he visited Pasirsky's house. He said, "I had an order to kill them, but why I didn't I don't know to this day"

Another example of God's special care: During WW II, when Lviv was being bombed, one our sisters, hearing the air raid siren, ran to a bomb shelter, but the people would not let her in, saying, "You're a misbeliever. We could all perish because of you". She had no choice but to return home. She thanked the Almighty for all and took the Bible in her hands. Meantime that bomb shelter was destroyed by a direct hit and all those inside were killed. How unforeseen are God's ways!

Another story: In Berestiany, near Sambir, the KGB came to the family of some brethren for a search to confiscate religious literature. But there was a vat with feedstuff in the mud room. Sister Zabo, the homemaker, put a Bible under that vat before their very eyes. Thus, she saved the spiritual food for the entire family.

Another event happened with brother Vignanetc from Lutck. In 1944 he received the sentence of death because of refusal to bear arms. But the Lord saved him from that direful condemnation. He received 10 years in the third division in prison. He didn't have a right

to write to his wife. But later they let him to do this. The first thing he asked her to do was to send a Bible. She sent him a parcel, including a Bible, but when he came to receive it, the officials refused to give it to him. He was very sad, and this was noticed by one of the chiefs of the camp. Having known the reason for his sadness, the chief helped him to get the parcel. That brother was in a cell together with two dangerous convicts. Twice a day he prayed on his knees, and they observed this. Some time later they asked him to teach them to pray. He explained to them what a prayer was, and taught them the Lord's Prayer. They asked him to write this prayer down on the wall, which he did. When it came time for him to leave that cell, the other prisoners asked him to leave the writing on the wall.

Once, when the German army was here, brethren in Poliany drew the attention of the Gestapo, which came to a registry to receive some materials to arrest brethren. They called a woman that spoke German to be their translator. That woman gave such a good characterization of our brethren, that the Gestapo left them in peace. Later that woman became our sister. Her son was a chief of a local Soviet and always helped and spoke in defense of the brethren.

Now, thank God, we can freely meet together and we are grateful for this opportunity to serve Him.



Dowhan Family



Pasirsky family



Early years