

First Missions – Eastern Europe & Ukraine

First Missions – Pioneering Workers – Eastern Europe & Ukraine

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Revised March 4, 2024

Ukraine

When did the workers first arrive?

Who were the first brother workers? Jack Annand (Australian) & Tom Axelson (naturalized Canadian, who was born in Ukraine)

Who were the first sister workers?

Who was the first to profess?

Who was the first native to go in the work?

When & Where was the first meeting?

When & Where was the first baptism?

When & Where was the first convention?

Where have subsequent conventions been held?

Where is the convention currently held?

Who have the Overseers been? Dan Sherick (from Iowa US)

Ukraine has its own large group of workers, including several native Ukrainian brothers. Along with them, there are mostly American workers in Ukraine thus far. They have several conventions throughout the country.

The Gospel in Eastern Europe

This is an effort to record some of the known history of the gospel in **Eastern Europe including Ukraine**. It is to the best of our knowledge accurate, but no doubt contains some mistakes. Any comments that will make it more accurate and/or complete are welcomed.

Although the apostle Paul visited countries not that far from **Ukraine**, we are unaware of any workers arriving in **Ukraine** before 1925, and at that time it was not into the Ukrainian portion of the USSR, but rather into a portion of **Poland**, which was traditionally part of The **Ukraine** and is currently a part of **Ukraine**.

These first workers in Ukraine became companions in British Columbia in the fall of 1923. The more experienced worker, **Jack Annand**, was from Australia and had a very strong interest in taking the gospel to Russia. The younger companion was a naturalized Canadian, who had been born in the Ukrainian region of the USSR at the village of Podol close to the city of Komienets Podilsky in 1895 and immigrated to Canada in 1913. **Tom Alexson** had started in the work earlier that year in Saskatchewan.

Late in 1924, Jack and Tom went to England where they found that they could not get Visas for the USSR. They obtained **Polish** Visas and left for that country in about March of 1925. They had some interest shown by Mr. & Mrs. Gargas and Mr. & Mrs. Martinovski in Zdolbunov, a railway hub south of the city of Rovno. Rovno is relatively close to where Mrs. Fred Leonhardt Sr. was raised. Mrs. Emile Puffalt, **Don's [Puffalt]** grandmother was also born close to Rovno.

After six months, Jack's Visa expired. Jack was able to obtain a four-month extension, but because of problems with officials, they left the country. The Gargas and Martinovski families were not forgotten as they professed some years later through **Carl Leonhardt and Vasyl (Willie) Evanov**. While in Zdolbunov, Jack wrote a poem, which he wrote in four languages on a postcard sent to the Andersons of Theodore SK. **Don Puffalt** has composed a tune for this poem. Thus, it is the first hymn composed by friends or workers in Ukraine. There are hymns composed by **Jack** in our hymnbook.

From Zdolbunov, the workers went to Daugavpils, **Latvia**. They rented a room and Jack found a Russian teacher. This teacher introduced them to a Mrs. Rudinski, the wife of a doctor, who began to show an interest. One night when Jack was speaking at a small Baptist Church with the preacher interpreting, a Mrs. Vargulan thought to herself, "This is what we need! This is what we have been waiting for."

Jack Annand returned to Australia in 1927 for his home visit, and **Carl Leonhardt**, who had started in the work a couple of years earlier in Saskatchewan, joined Tom. They held meetings in their batch. It was here that Mr. Walfried Pihrag first attended meetings. Mr. Pihrag did not profess at that time, but his wife, Klara later professed, and Mr. Pihrag professed many years later in Saskatoon Saskatchewan. Their son Rhodey and wife Nora now live in Latvia, making a home for meetings, conventions and special meetings. We understand that Rhodey is the only man professing in Latvia. Walfried and Klara's granddaughter **Jill Affleck** is laboring in the work in Latvia.

During the 1927–28 mission, Mrs. Vagulan, Mrs. Rudinski, and Mrs. Engelhardt made their choice. When Mrs. Rudinski announced in the Seventh-day Adventist church that she was leaving because she had found the people of God, a Mrs. Zamyatnina began coming to meeting with her. Mrs. Zamyatnina later professed. Tom and Carl also contacted Mr. and Mrs. Pinko and his sister Varya Pinko who professed later. Through Varya others were helped including Mrs. Anna Stabulyanetz and her daughters Maria and Regina, who accepted truth. As a result of Varya's life, her two nieces Else and Zina Pinko professed later. During the Second World War Varya kept true in spite of having no fellowship.

In 1930, **Tom** had to leave Latvia and spent eight months in **Lithuania** with **Jack Craig**. This country was in such political turmoil that it was very difficult. They contacted **Rasmus Prip's** uncle who was the head of the Danish Consulate. He told them all he could do to help them was provide money for them to leave the country. Tom then spent some time in **Poland** with **Vasyl (Willie) Evanov**; then attending a convention in Germany before returning to Canada through England.

In 1939, at the time of the non-aggression agreement between Stalin and Hitler, **Bert Todhunter and Willie Evanov** were in **Poland**. **Bert** realized that he had to leave the country and took the last train out. However, **Willie** felt that it would be safe for him to remain in the country because of his Ukrainian heritage. He seemed to ignore the fact that he was born in Chicago and had an American Passport. Under the non-aggression agreement, the eastern part of **Poland** that had been part of Ukraine in earlier years was given to the USSR. Fortunately, **Willie** was in **Zdolbunov [Ukraine]** when the **USSR** authorities caught up with him. He was put under house arrest—not being allowed to leave that town. There were a sufficient number in town professing to form a good church. **Willie** lived in one half of a duplex with the Martinovskis. A professing couple lived in the other half of the duplex. **Willie** was assigned to pass out the coal evenly to residents from the coal freight cars sent in by the government.

Vasyl (Willie) Evanov lived with the Martinovskis until his death in 1957. We understand that the Martinovskis were the last professing people left in Zdolbunov. Mr. Martinovski died in 1964 and his wife died two years later. We believe it was at Mrs. Martinovski's funeral that Dina from Dubno heard a neighbor tell a story about the wonderful man (**Willie Ivanov**) that lived with the Martinovskis until his death. In the Ukraine anyone that wishes to, can speak at a funeral. The man told a story that went something like the following. "There used to be a very honest man that lived with this honest couple. Vasyl was assigned by the government to distribute the coal evenly to residents from the railway boxcars. This was a preferred job, because most people with this job would short change everyone a little and what was left over they would be able to sell and pocket the money. There was always a shortage of coal, so there was always a high demand for extra coal even at a high price. **Vasyl**, who died nine years ago, was such an honest man that not only did he not short anyone on their share of coal, but when the coal was all gone, he swept out the coal dust in the boxcar which he then sold and turned the money over to the government. I believe that the Martinovskis lived by a similar moral code as **Vasyl** did."

After the Second World War, other workers made short, often only three-day visits behind the **Iron Curtain** to visit and encourage the friends. Some of the workers that made such excursions were **Carl Leonhardt, Jack Craig, Bert Todhunter, Arnie Foss, Bernard Manning, and Olga Nichols**. After Communism fell, workers could more freely work in the **USSR and other former Communist States**. Initially, Ukraine was worked as part of the Russian field and some missions were held in Ukraine. It seems that Ira in Dubno professed as a result of a mission **Anna Maria Grassi and Maria Sigismondo** conducted, probably in 1992.

However, with the independence of Ukraine, it was deemed to be wise for Ukraine to have its own workers who could speak Ukrainian, which was the official language of the new country. **Dan Sherick** could no longer study in **Romania and Yugoslavia** where he had been before his home visit was no longer open for the gospel, so it was arranged that Dan would return to western Ukraine where the Ukrainian language is spoken. About 60% of the Ukrainian population still claims Russian rather than Ukraine as their native tongue.

Bernard Manning and Richard Maxwell were in Dubno, where the only church in Ukraine existed. They wanted to find a place where **Dan** could teach, thus **Dan** would qualify to stay in the country. There were bus connections from Dubno leading to three cities with Universities. Since they had no preference regarding either the universities or cities, they decided to go to the bus depot and take the first bus leaving for one of these cities. The first bus to arrive was destined for Lutsk, the smallest of the three cities and the one with the least frequent bus service. That very day they arranged for **Dan** to teach in a new Applied Linguistic program being set up at the Volyn Regional University.

Thus, in 1993 **Dan Sherick and his first companion Martin Hnizdil** from Colorado, became the next wave of workers bringing the same messages that had been pioneered by others such as **Jack Annand, Tom Alexson, Carl Leonhardt, Jack Craig and Willie Evanov**. Others followed.

Editor's Note: Willie Evanov was the only worker in Russia caught behind the iron curtain in 1935. He died on April 26 and was buried April 27, 1957 in Ukraine.

TTT Editor's Note: Corrections or additions are most welcome; as well as other historical accounts for other countries.

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