

A Road Less Traveled

By Joseph Enge

Travelers between Tartu and Tallinn race along the main connecting highway at breakneck speeds, passing one another in the most dangerous of situations in their hurry to get to their destinations. With their concentration focused on keeping up the pace and/or the avoidance of becoming another highway statistic, few notice a little sign designating the location of Kursi Church 3.5 kilometers off the highway. It is but a short distance up the meandering Pedja River that cuts boldly across Highway 2 at its own regal, unhurried pace. For those who dare to leave the familiar, but hectic highway, a reward awaits in getting a glimpse of the relaxed, rural heart of Estonia that has changed little over time. The center of discovering this world is Kursi Church.

The sense of rush diminishes immediately as you turn off the highway and drive through Puurmani, 150 kilometers south of Tallinn, past the area's farms to get to the church. The strikingly tall front spire with the distinctive green of oxidized copper is in direct contrast to the relatively flat surroundings. It demands your immediate attention. The architect's desire for the tower to lift the viewer's eyes up towards the cross and the message of Christ behind it continues to have the same affect over 350 years later.

The church itself is a microcosm of Estonian history. The original Kursi Church was destroyed during the Livonian War (1558-1583). The present church was rebuilt during the Swedish period and completed in 1648. It resembles the Cathedral of Chartres and was expanded in 1872. Renown for having excellent acoustics, it also has the first church bell made in independent Estonia by the Teguri factory in 1922.

The pastor of Kursi Church is Sulev Sova. Young, articulate, and intelligent, Pastor Sova made history in 1990 by being the first Estonian Lutheran pastor to be able to visit Israel. He literally went on a wing and a prayer to see first-hand the Holy Land. While visiting Israel he came across the Kursi National Park on the Golan Heights. The Israeli national park is named after the ruins of the Kursi Monastery complex that was the largest in the Holy Land during the 3rd century. He believes that it is not a coincidence that three years later he became a pastor at Estonia's Kursi Church.

Pastor Sova has been at Kursi with his wife Alikée, daughter Rebekka, and son Esra since 1993. There had not been a permanent pastor assigned to it in 30 years. He has had to oversee the difficult tasks of the return of the property to the Lutheran Church and the extensive renovations required after decades of neglect during Soviet times. In addition to his duties as pastor, Sulev and Alikée are responsible for running the farm surrounding the church. The attached land and farm buildings served for centuries to support the pastor and church activities until disrupted by Soviet occupation.

Pastor Sova enjoys collecting and studying history. He has collected artifacts from church and secular history, making one of the rooms of the pastor's house into a fascinating little museum. A rusty bayonet, perhaps from the Independence War, that he found on the grounds hangs by the door. Photos of former pastors and members of the congregation from the 1920's and 1930's leave a distinctly personal impression of times and events.

The first challenges at Kursi Pastor Sova and Alikée faced were getting the farm operational, making the pastor's house livable, and renovating the church's roof. The replacement of the roof was a priority in order to stop further damage to the interior from

the weather. The Central Board of Antiquities through the Cultural Ministry designated the church to have a new roof and proceeded with the project in the summer of 1995.

The old, decaying roof was taken off, flimsy plastic sheeting was laid across, and then the contractors simply left without a word. Greatly concerned to protect the priceless interior of the church, its rare Walter Sauer organ from Germany, and other numerous valuable items, Pastor Sova started inquiries into when the restoration of the roof would continue. Unable to obtain a definitive answer, he pursued the matter. Toes were stepped on and feathers were ruffled at the temerity of the local pastor's inquiries, but after a six-week pause the contractors returned and roof's renovation continued.

Directly across from the church is a memorial to the fallen soldiers during the Independence War. Pastor Sova is himself a soldier, having recently joined the Kaitseleit as an army chaplain. He completed training as an officer chaplain this last July at Paldiski. People who come to see the church may discover that the soldier in a camouflage jacket is indeed also the pastor.

During the summer months, which invite exploration of the Estonian countryside, diverse and interesting visitors drop by unexpectedly to Kursi Church. A few university students, artists, and tourists find their way there. Last summer an actor and actress couple from Tallinn made an impromptu stop while rafting down the Pedja River.

These visitors are hospitably greeted; given a tour of the church and grounds, then later to sit down and enjoy good coffee and conversation in the relaxing and tranquil atmosphere provided by the hosts and the surroundings. Alikée's farm fresh, homemade culinary delights are treats to be savored. These visits have at times developed into deeper friendships and contacts of people who appreciate the significance of the church and are interested in helping to restore it to its former glory.

In startling contrast to the large number of people the church can seat, is the relatively few attending the weekly Sunday service at noon. It is as if the physical damages and neglect to the church building during Soviet occupation reflects the displacement and alienation of the society towards it. Rebuilding a roof is a straightforward and easy task compared to reconnecting people to their spiritual and religious heritage.

The greatest challenge for Pastor Sova is to convey a spiritual message to a society preoccupied with secular matters and problems. He is like a match trying to re-ignite embers that have grown cold with time.

The barriers were obvious during Soviet times when the local school principal or "red" teacher stood outside the church doors taking down names of any students daring to attend service. Today the barriers are more subtle and complex in attitudes scarred by the recent past and present.

It is as if Kursi Church with its creaking floorboards rises above the damage of time to itself and its people, waiting silently and patiently to provide the spiritual answers that cannot be found along the fast-paced secular highway that runs past it.