

# Beginnings of the Pentecostalism in Latvia

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This paper includes information and reflections from my doctoral Thesis on the history of Pentecostalism in Latvia. This subject so far has not been well-researched. This is due to the fact that Pentecostalism in Latvia has existed as marginalised phenomenon and historical self-understanding of Pentecostals themselves has not reached maturity. My interest in the beginnings of this movement was greatly stimulated by the paper presented by Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. during the theological conference which took place in Prague in 1997.[1] I got acquainted with the resources found in *Confidence* and *Pentecostal Evangel*. I have combined testimonies of these early Pentecostal witnesses with materials found in archives and Latvian publications.

## Pentecostalism in Latvia before the First world war

### ***Putting Pentecostalism in wider context***

Pentecostalism often has been viewed as exotic implant of foreign missionaries who came to disturb traditional religiosity. Wider context would help to show that Pentecostalism was born in Latvia in time when we cannot anymore talk about Latvia as monolithic ethnic, religious or cultural entity. In fact, it doubtful whether in history we can find the golden age of homogeneity. 20<sup>th</sup> century came with intensification of globalisation. New religious trends appeared as part of larger complex of changes in the society. Let's point to some of the signs of that time:

#### **- urbanisation**

If in 1863 14.8 % of all population of Latvia lived in cities, in 1914 this figure was already 40.3 %. It was more than in Sweden where in 1910 in cities lived 24.8 % of population. In this sense Latvia was not different from France where in 1911 in towns with more than 2000 inhabitants lived 44.2 % of all population.[2] Urbanisation showed itself especially in the Riga. If in 1897 Riga was the fourth in the rank of 5 largest cities of the Russian empire (Poland not included), in 1913 it took the third place after St.Petersburg and Moscow. Growing fast was not only Riga but also Liepaja - another important place in the Pentecostal story. If in 1863 Liepaja had 9900 inhabitants, in 1897 it had 64 500 inhabitants.[3]

Peasants who moved to industrial areas often did not find their new life satisfying and stable. For example, in 1907 in Riga were 12 000 unemployed people. In period from 1908 to 1910 average wage in the factories of Riga decreased per 25-30 % (growing level of prices and rent expenses taken into account).[4]

#### **- political changes**

Revolution of 1905 turned against both - Tsar's authoritarian regime and Balt-German rule. It had tragic consequences for all sides because in ruins were not only almost half of German manors in Kurzeme and Vidzeme but also hundreds of peasant farms. Many people were killed and exiled. But still we can say that massive political and social change came out of revolution. Government suppressed revolutionary forces but it had to liberalise its policies towards mass media, societies and political parties. Relative openness came also in religious matters thus creating ground for establishing new denominations and more diverse work of already

existing religious minorities.

### **- cultural novelties**

Dr. Walter J. Holenweger in his book on Pentecostalism makes comparison between Dadaism and Pentecostalism.[5] Looking from local context I would like to draw a similar line between Pentecostalism and *Art Nouveau*. The later was the style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries finding its embodiment in all visual arts. Riga experienced at the turn of centuries a real boom in building activity. It was a period when many Jugend style buildings were created. The conceptual framework of this new art was anti-historicist and it emerged as a reaction against academic Eclecticism. Latvian publicist Vidridýu Pèteris (Pèteris Ozoliðø) propagating the new art wrote in 1900 - "modern artists do not draw on the remains of bygone times and the folk art of other nations, as it was done by Renaissance art, which was built on remains of Ancient Greek art, but they turn to nature for inspiration and look upon the world in a novel way.."[6] Likewise early Pentecostals reacted against stiffness of established dogmatic systems and liturgical forms and looked for new expressions of faith crossing ethnic and social borders. 'Looking upon the word in a novel way' - it could be considered as a catch-phrase for many revolutionary political, cultural and religious movements, including ones born at the beginning of this century.

### **- growing religious plurality**

Since the Reformation Lutheranism has been the main organised form of Christianity spread in Latvia. Catholics remained the dominant religious group in Latgale - one of the regions of Latvia. By all means, Lutheranism has played an important role in the history of Latvia however it did not become a real people's church. In the minds of people it was too closely associated with the Balt-Germans. Historian A. Øvåbe mentions the fact that till 1905 among 103 Lutheran pastors serving in Kurzeme and Zemgale (parts of Latvia) only 35 were Latvians, in Vidzeme (another part of Latvia) in 1892 among 104 pastors serving rural parishes only 16 were Latvians. There is a saying which has been attributed to the one of Balt-German barons - "As my sheep do not need to know what dog I find for them, peasants have nothing to do with appointment of clergyman (directly translating from Latvian - church lord, *ed.*)".[7] Church historian L. Adamoviàs admits that even independence of Latvia did not stop this crisis and ??Latvian evangelical people's church is more ideal than reality.??[8]

With the fast urbanisation at the beginning of this century Lutheran church faced additional problems. Superintendent of Vidzeme Rev. G. Èrns in his report on the church life in year 1902 says that average size of parishes is 6590 persons but in Riga it is 14 240.[9] Superintendent was worried that with such a size pastoral care becomes a difficult task and soon it will be impossible to reach the gap between parishioners and clergy.

Factors mentioned above stimulated indifference and scepticism in religious matters as well as growth of other religious traditions. In 1890 in Vidzeme were 124 Orthodox churches, it is estimated that from 1845 to 1849 about 100 000 Latvians joined the Orthodox church.[10] From 18th century in the territory of Latvia existed Moravian churches which played important role in national and religious awakening of Latvians. Baptist churches in Latvia exist from 1860 and in 1910 the Baptist Union united 60 congregations with 6823 members. [11] Latvian intelligence often turned for inspiration to pre-Christian period. Their world-view was based on folk-traditions and romanticised past. Raising up of pre-Christian culture is not unique for Latvia because it had its counterparts continent-wide as alternative to perceived anachronism of Christian tradition.

### ***Birth of Pentecostalism in Latvia***

Pentecostalism in Latvia did not start in empty space - like in other parts of the world it was historically linked with the Holiness movement. Vilhelm Ebel who belonged to the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) travelled in 1902 through Russia and stayed briefly in Riga where established his mission station and a publishing house. His teaching mainly spread amongst the Germans living in different parts of Russian Empire.[12] His mission reached Latvians through regular worship services and newspaper. One of the adds informing about meetings in Riga shows what were main themes of these gatherings - "as in times of apostles there will be preaching through the power of the Holy Spirit. There will be preaching on justification, sanctification, healing of the flesh and unity of the children of God." [13] The Church of God in Latvia got established as a denomination and continued its ministry till Soviet occupation. V. Grazhdan who has done research on Pentecostalism of the Soviet era states that Vilhelm Ebel was the first person who brought Pentecostal message to the Russian Empire and the first Pentecostal denomination established in this part of the world was the Church of God.[14] Probably this confusion was caused by the fact that designation 'Church of God' is used by many

groups, including Pentecostal denominations.

Doctrine of the baptism of Holy Spirit promoted by the Holiness movement reached Latvians not only through independent Holiness denominations but also through the printed works of evangelists like Reuben Torrey and Charles Finney. Translations of their works were published in Christian publications. For example, Baptist magazine *Avots* in 1906 published "How we can come under the influence of the Holy Spirit" written by Ch. Finney and translated by Baptist pastor Jānis Iļāis who later was instrumental in the revivalist movement of twenties.<sup>[15]</sup> A Bible course was held in Liepāja by Baptists in 1906 and among lecturers were famous Russian pastor I.Kargel from St.Peterburg and Latvian pastor A.Podiļņ from Estonia. One of the listeners wrote that Kargel "clearly showed that we have full right to wait to the promise of the Father to be filled with the Holy Spirit. So far our ears have not heard this teaching."<sup>[16]</sup>

Pentecostalism message reached Latvia early. As we can gather from the British Pentecostal periodical *Confidence* at the beginning of 20th century E.Patrick developed mission work mainly amongst Baltic Germans. Eleanor Patrick, was an English woman who earlier has been fascinated by revivalist preachers Torrey and Inwood. According to her own testimony she has received the sign of tongues during meeting with A.A.Body in Hamburg in December, 1908.<sup>[17]</sup> She had worked at a mission in Frankfurt visited Russia in 1909 spending time in Revel (now Tallinn, Estonia), Riga and Dwinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia) and Witebsk (Belarus). She reported about her mission back to the pioneer of British Pentecostalism Alexander A.Boddy. E.Patrick claimed that 200 people have converted within two months of her ministry.<sup>[18]</sup> In 1911 Patrick wrote to A.A.Boddy that she had recruited a German deaconess to take on some of the work in Riga but G.Rabe is mentioned as a leader of the work. Patrick moved to Libau (now Liepāja) where the Town Council allowed her to use a hall with 700 seats free of charge. She also noted that a German evangelist Eugen Edel had preached in Riga and Libau. <sup>[19]</sup> It is reported that in Libau "H.Rabe (brother of Riga Rabe) is doing a wonderful work. He was converted and received his baptism in our Frankfurt work, and works in the power of the Spirit."<sup>[20]</sup> Later Patrick moved further to Dwinsk, and Witebsk then settling in Saratov, Russia.

There is another person from Latvia whose name appears at the dawn of Pentecostalism. It is K.Vetšgavers from Liepāja who was amongst co-workers of Russian Pentecostal pioneer A.Ivanov who pastored congregation in Helsingfors (Helsinki) but there are no historical data about his direct influence on Pentecostalism in Latvia. Ivanov's pacifistic views found supporters in the Russian navy and it caused a conflict with state authorities. Some of the sailors were persecuted and it affected Vetšgavers too - he was arrested and exiled together with others.<sup>[21]</sup>

The personality of Latvian pastor William Fetler deserves a special attention. He is one of few Latvian Baptist pastors whose name because of his evangelistic efforts in many countries is known outside the country. During his studies at Spurgeon's College (UK) he was influenced by the Welsh revival and Holiness movement. Therefore it is not surprising that he was sympathetic to renewal movements like Pentecostalism even if he never left Baptist movement. His sermon delivered in 1914 in Liepāja is one of examples of his passionate claim that "those gifts which God through the Holy Spirit gave to the first Christian church the Lord at the end times wants to give to his church ... When church of God will move ahead it will receive more gifts of the Holy Spirit."<sup>[22]</sup> He believed that "preacher of the word of God may be only a person who has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and gift of preaching."<sup>[23]</sup> His pneumatology remained within the framework of the Holiness movement however it was not an obstacle for being positive towards Pentecostalism. In 1907 in *Avots* appears his article about the work of the American Pentecostal pioneers Parham and Seymour. The magazine *Apostolic Faith* is mentioned as the source of information.<sup>[24]</sup> At the beginning of 20th century while pastoring the church at St.Petersburg W.Fetler met pastor Niblock of Aston, England. Niblock openly spread Pentecostal ideas already in 1907.<sup>[25]</sup> Fetler made arrangements for a series of his meetings. Niblock had a great respect for Fetler, saying that "Russia has not got a nobler, better, or more faithful son."<sup>[26]</sup>

Pentecostalism influenced also Latvians living abroad, especially in Brazil. The controversy arose around the pastor of Rio-Nova Latvian Baptist Church Kārlis Andermanis who got converted to Pentecostalism. We can understand from the letter to *Avots* that for some years Andermanis received Pentecostal literature in English, German and Latvian and distributed amongst relatives and friends. He had to leave because of the tension in the church.<sup>[27]</sup> Besides news from Brazil *Avots* published the summary of the *Berlin declaration* (1909) which strictly condemned Pentecostal movement.

Because early Pentecostals were not interested in structures they did not establish ecclesiastical organisations and therefore we

cannot speak about Pentecostalism as established denomination in Latvia before the First World War.

## Development of Latvian Pentecostalism during the First Republic

### ***New political paradigm and its consequences***

The First world war turned old Europe upside-down. Empires vanished and as mushrooms after the rain one after another appeared new national democracies. The Republic of Latvia which became a historical reality in 1918 was one of them. Dream about independent Latvia arouse already at the beginning of 20th century in the ranks of Social-Democrats despite their denial that Latvians as a nation could have common national interests. 1918 was crucial on the way to independence because both political giants - Russia and Germany become too weak and Latvian politicians were able to use the moment of time to fulfil their dream. Legislative work in the republic of Latvia was done the Parliament of one hundred members. From 1934 till Soviet occupation in 1940 Latvia was governed by authoritarian government of Kārlis Ulmanis who stopped work of all political parties and dismissed the Parliament. Latvia had no state religion however larger denominations had special agreements signed with the state.

### ***Pentecostals: Shift from movement to organisation***

There are two connected flows in the development of Latvian Pentecostalism in twenties - one linked with James Grēviðø who came to Latvia as Assemblies of God missionary and Pentecostal-type movement within Baptist churches.

Organised Pentecostal movement in Latvia was started by James Grēviðø who at the age of 20 went to USA and became Pentecostal. Before that he was a member of St. Mathew Baptist Church at Riga and earned living as a shoemaker.[28] Than after the graduation from the Elim Bible Training School he together with his wife on June 4th, 1926 arrived from New York in Latvia. His father was an elder in the Baptist church in Dobele and wanted his son to take over the pastoral work as the congregation had no pastor. However, the theological disagreement made it impossible. A woman who had been excommunicated by the Baptist church due to fraudulence asked Grēviðø to use her house for services. Thus regular meetings started and a little congregation was created.[29] New church and its young converts often were by hostility from the side of outsiders. Rachel Grevin reports that "some of the parents of these young converts have been persecuting their children severely, shutting them in the home and trying to prevent them from coming to meeting." [30] In 1927 Grēviðø established the Latvian -American Mission Society with sections all over Latvia and started to publish journal *Misionārs* (Missionary). His activities met with the opposition of the state authorities and he was ordered to leave the country in 1930 leaving behind nine preaching stations with about four hundred members.

Another wave which was Pentecostal in character rose at the midst of Baptist movement. Economical depression in Latvia and political uncertainties created a background for intensive religious enthusiasm. The beginning of this revival traditionally is linked with meetings held by a small group of believers in Lidere (district of Madona) in 1918. This group belonged to the St. Mathew Baptist Church at Riga and was lead by Jānis Skraba. They started daily prayers for renewal. Soon group had more then one hundred members and flame kindled by them touched also neighbouring districts.[31] Later this awakening which at the beginning stimulated growth of churches resulted in the emigration to Brazil because of religious motives. According to some data more then 1500 members of Baptist churches emigrated to Brazil.[32] Baptist pastor Jānis Inæis was particularly distinguished personality in this movement. Before the war he was opposed to Pentecostal practices but later 'speaking in tongues' became for Inæis very significant doctrine. Iðæis often read from a notebook where different 'prophecies' and 'revelations' had been written down in the meetings at the Matthew's Church.[33] Iðæis left Latvia in 1921 to become pastor in Nova Odessa, Brazil. When the Baptist Union finally split in 1926 (to be reunited in 1934) emigration movement already was over but waves of religious enthusiasm were still in air. The First Union opposed the Pentecostalism but congregations of the Second Union with their emotional style of worship and revivalist recruitment techniques were quite open to *glossolalia* and the Pentecostal teaching in general. Their periodicals published articles with the Pentecostal flavour. For example, Fetler's magazine *Kristigais Vēstnesis* inserted a part of the book written by George Gefreys, founder of the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance of the British Isles.[34] W.Fetler expanded his contacts with Pentecostals. In 1935 together with one of the two main founders of the Apostolic Church Daniel P.Williams he unveiled the foundation stone of the Bible School in Wales. D.P.Williams also has been preaching at Fetler's church in Riga.[35] It is not surprising that the Apostolic Church in Latvia traces its roots back to W.Fetler.

Tensions gradually developed between the Second Union and the Pentecostals. They were charged with proselytism and extremism. Partially it was caused by Grēviðø' polemic and offensive attitude towards Christians who were not sharing his views.

Thus former member of the Latvian-American Mission Society Mārtiņš Ēmiņš has called Baptists as traitors and sectarians.[36] Controversy developed in the Riga Āgenskalna Baptist Church pastored by Jānis Bormanis. He moved beyond revivalist lines and became enthusiastic about the Pentecostal message. In June, 1927 he was elected as a Board's Secretary of the Latvian-American Mission Society (later he resigned from this position).[37] J.Bormanis had to leave his Baptist congregation in 1930 because he put too much emphasis on *glossolalia* and healing of the sick.[38] It is interesting to note that secretary of the pastoral commission appointed for Bormanis' case was W.Fetler who as we know from earlier evidences was not anti-Pentecostal.[39] It seems that J.Bormanis had an extreme view regarding to the cause of sickness believing that "diseases are not from God. Believers who have received the Holy Spirit cannot be sick." [40]

After Grēviņš was forced to leave the country the leadership role in the organised Pentecostal movement was taken over by Jānis Bormanis who after leaving the Baptists organised the Pentecostal church *Vasarsvētku Blāzma* (Pentecostal Down) in Riga and published a journal under the same name. The church had 650 members in 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1933. In 1932 one hundred persons were baptised, another hundred joined the church from other churches.[41] Services were held also in Russian and German. In 1932 the Latvian-American Mission Society was closed but the Pentecostals found way out of restrictions by creating small religious associations. Authorities often closed them but Pentecostals managed to re-establish them under different names. The authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis (1934-1940) introduced restrictions on religious minorities. The new *Law on Religious Associations and Their Unions* (1934) stated that religious association needed at least fifty people to be registered (instead of five as stated in the law of 1923).[42] Sometimes Pentecostals found support in mainline denominations. For example, in 1939 the Lutheran Archbishop approved the establishment of a prayer group called *Ātzešanas pulciņš* (Gethsemane group) formed by Baptists, Pentecostals and others in the Riga Evangelical Lutheran Mission's Church.[43]

Pentecostals in Latvia maintained links with missions abroad, especially with the Russian and Eastern European Mission which from 1928 had an office in Dancig. This mission worked in close connection with the Department of Foreign Mission of the Assemblies of God. From 1930 to 1938 it had the Bible Institute.[44] Information about these connections can be found in the minutes of interrogations taken by Soviet authorities after the Second world war because Soviets were especially interested in any links between "suspects" and Western "capitalists". Thus Pentecostal preacher from Liepāja Arvīds Kūmiņš told about the financial support some of the Latvian Pentecostal preachers received from the mission in Dancig. Kūmiņš himself for two months attended Bible courses in Dancig. In 1939 he took part in the European conference of Pentecostals in Stockholm.[45]

There are following conclusions which follows from my research on the beginnings of the Latvian Pentecostalism: (1) Pentecostalism came to Latvia in the time of Azusa Street revival - this is a fact which is in need for further research and popularisation because so far Latvian Pentecostals are counting years of their existence from the beginning of Grēviņš' mission; (2) legal status of Pentecostals in Latvia was unstable and uncertain; (3) Pentecostalism in Latvia developed not only as the result of missionary efforts but also as outcome of the outburst of religious enthusiasm amongst Baptists in twenties; (4) all Latvian Pentecostal leaders of twenties and thirties came out of the Baptist church - this still is a challenge for the local Baptist movement and its pneumatology. Let's not be surprised by that - it remains a fate of Pentecostalism and other revolutionary religious movements to be a challenge for their older sojourners on the road of faith.

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