

Back in East Prussia after 50 Years¹

By *Werner Gitt*

Fifty years after first fleeing and then finally being expelled from East Prussia², we went back there for the first time. We visited the north part of East Prussia, in which Raineck where I was born also lies. The north part of what used to be East Prussia is now Russian while south East Prussia is part of Poland. We spent 10 days in the north part, holding lectures. Before the trip we had anxiously wondered how we would be received in an area which had been a military no-go area for so long, where Westerners had been refused access. After the fall of the Soviet Union, even this door had swung open.

In the ten days we were there, we experienced both the wonderful as well as the negative. The results of fifty years of communism were devastating. The towns and villages of a once beautiful country have been completely destroyed. The people were not in much better condition; they lived their lives without hope and orientation. Karl Marx once said, "Practice is the criteria for truth." At least he got that right. If anyone wants to examine the practical effects of communism, there are plenty of examples to be found here. How would the people who live here now react to the gospel? Our first stop was in Palmnicken.

1. Palmnicken: Palmnicken used to be a beautiful spa town on the Samland coast of the Baltic Sea which is famous throughout the world for its amber. In Russian, amber is called 'jantar' which is how the town got its present name (Jantarny). The town is responsible for 94% of all amber production. We arrived around lunchtime on a Saturday. Originally we had been invited to talk at a Bible Study and I imagined we would be visiting a small church housegroup. Anyone who has been to Russia to preach the gospel will know that everything is quite disorganized. It was no different for us in Jantarny. When we arrived, it seemed as if no-one had been expecting us. It was a lovely sunny day, and we passed away the time sitting on the lawn in front of the cinema. Nothing happened at first. But then some of the people from the village started to turn up. At first there were just one or two, but in the end fifty people had gone into the cinema. I wondered whether a film was about to start. We were curious to see what was going on so we went inside. It was only then that we realized this was our meeting. We still couldn't find anyone who was in charge but it seemed that the people there were expecting something special. It was a very mixed group of people. Most of them seemed to be unbelievers. After speaking to Harry, I realized that an evangelistic sermon was what was called for. So it wasn't a bible study group as we had originally presumed. If you go to Russia, you often have to react and change your plans quickly. And that's we did. We gave a simple evangelistic talk. The most amazing thing was that of the fifty people present, twenty gave their lives to Jesus at the end of the meeting. It was a miracle.

2. Railwaymen's Palace: Our actual destination was Königsberg (in Russian Kalininograd), where we had planned to hold an evangelistic campaign for a week. The once East Prussian metropolis, as well as the other places in the area, have been made completely 'Russianized'. There's hardly any indication of the German roots of these towns. Any German writing on the buildings has been removed. Our meetings were to take place in this town and we were very interested as to how it would go.

¹ Translation of chapter 2.3 "Nach fünfzig Jahren wieder in Ostpreußen" in the Book „Wunder und Wunderbares“ of the author Werner Gitt, CLV-Verlag, Bielefeld, 2005, 320 pp.
Download of the complete German book: www://clv.dyndns.info/pdf/255658.pdf

² Our first lecture tour to north East Prussia 7 to 15 May 1994, accompanied by Dr. Harry Tröster, Waldemar and Annerose Busse, Klaus and Katrin Freudenthal, Marion Gitt, Dietrich and Dorle Müller, Ewald Reschke, Karl Schumann, Eckhard Veit.

The meetings were to be held in the Railwaymen's Palace, a trade union building near what used to be the south train station. When we arrived shortly before the meeting was set to begin on the first evening, we were quite disappointed to see that the large car park outside the building was nearly empty. It seemed as if no-one would come. We were amazed to see a great crowd of people when we entered the building. The majority of them had come with public transport or had walked. After the sermon, we invited all who wanted to accept Jesus Christ to join us on the stage. Each evening a large group accepted the invitation and Harry and I had to stand on a bench in order to be seen and heard by all.

The last evening was unforgettable: we invited all of those who had made a decision that week to come up onto the stage. It was very moving to watch as the first few came and then more and more until the stage was completely full. Many of them had tears in their eyes because they had come out of darkness and found eternal life.

The thanks we received was like nothing we had ever experienced before. They gave us a bouquet of roses which was worth a fortune when you consider that a single rose would have cost them € 2,50. Three roses would have cost 15,000 roubles, € 7,50 at the conversion rate at the time. That was around ten percent of the average monthly wage! Others expressed their thanks to God through poems they had written. They were so glad that they had found Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. This left a lasting impression on us and we were glad that we had we had come.

3. University: In the days that followed, we had planned to hold some lectures at the University of Königsberg. During a discussion after a lecture at the Institute for Mathematics, one of the professors got up and said, "You shared some very interesting things with us, but I found what you said about God most interesting". I can't imagine anything like that happening at a German university: a professor getting up in front of the students, assistants and all his colleagues and saying that he was more interested in the issues of faith than about his own subject. By the way: in the lecture hall was a large portrait of one of the most important German mathematicians, David Hilbert³ (1862-1943). Underneath, in large German letters was a famous quote: "We must know. We will know."

Note: We have been back to East Prussia three times since, as can be read in the accounts below, and have always experienced God's grace while we were there. However, in the subsequent trips, we never experienced quite such an openness to the gospel as during our first visit.

God's Strange Mathematics⁴

In June 1996,⁵ we went to my former home of north East Prussia for the second time to hold evangelistic talks in different locations.

In Insterburg (in Russian Chernyakovsk), we had an appointment for a lecture in the 'House for Culture'⁶. As we had left Königsberg early, we reached Insterburg over two hours before the meeting was set to start. To put the time to good use, we stood outside

³ David Hilbert, born in Königsberg, Professor in Königsberg from 1892.

⁴ Translation of chapter 2.8 "Gottes nicht nachvollziehbare Mathematik"

in the Book „Wunder und Wunderbares“ of the author Werner Gitt, CLV-Verlag, Bielefeld, 2005, 320 pp.

Download of the complete German book: www://clv.dyndns.info/pdf/255658.pdf

⁵ Second Lecture tour to north East Prussia (Königsberg, Insterburg, Tilsit) from 17 to 28 June 1996, accompanied by Dr Harry Tröster, Annerose and Waldemar Busse, Dietrich Müller.

⁶ A House for Culture (Russian dom kultury) could be found in every town and most villages in the former Soviet Union. They were used for cultural and political events.

the House for Culture, which was on the main road, and handed out evangelistic books to the passers-by, inviting them to come to the evening meeting.

At this point I would like to ask a purely mathematical question: at any given place in any town we distribute some books for an hour. One day two years later, we come back to the same town. We are in a completely different place and are handing out books again. How great is the probability,

- that we meet someone who received a book two years earlier,
- that this was one of just a few people who had requested a signature,
- that this person has their book with them when we meet this second time,
- that this person became a Christian as a result of reading that particular book?

And yet that is just what happened in Insterburg. A man around thirty came walking down the street. When we offered him a copy of the Russian version of “Questions I have always wanted to ask”, he pulled exactly that book out of his briefcase and said, “I’ve got that already!” I was amazed and asked how he had come by the book. He answered as if it were the most normal thing in the world, “You gave it to me two years ago in the street here in Chernyakovsk. I read it and, as a result, I gave my life to Jesus.” While we were standing there quite astonished, he opened his well-read, somewhat dog-eared book and showed me a signature, which I could confirm was mine. How did this young man come to have this book? That is a story in itself.

Flashback: Two years earlier (1994)⁷, we had led an evangelistic campaign in Königsberg in the Railwaymen’s Palace. May 9th is a special bank holiday in Russia (“Victory Day”) and we were advised not to hold any meetings on that day. Thus I could do something I had wanted to do for a long time – go and visit the area around the village where I was born, Raineck. Relatives had told me that the village no longer existed. The Russians had dismantled it completely in 1957, leaving just a wide open space. Viktor Schumeev, pastor of the Baptist church in Preußisch-Eylau borrowed a small bus and so I was able to travel to the place of my birth. This bus was so old and shaky that it would never have passed its MOT⁸ in Germany. Driving along in this vehicle was a real adventure! Every time we had to stop, we wondered, “Is it going to start again or not?” Now and again, I wondered whether the motor was more reliant on our prayers than on anything else!

With his shaky, old thing we drove eastwards along the former ‘Reichstraße’, German Imperial Road Number 1⁹. In Gumbinnen (Russian Gusev) the gear lever snapped off and that was that. We were stranded. What were we going to do? It was a bank holiday, so even if there had been a garage in this village, it would have been closed. But God is an ever present help in trouble. After just a few minutes, Harry met a Russian on the street and he said he had an electric drill at home and he could help us. He drilled a hole in both ends of the gear lever and stuck them back together with a makeshift splint. So off we went again, although we wondered whether we’d ever get back to Königsberg again! I’ve written about how we found Raineck and what happened there in the following chapter “The Search for my Place of Birth Raineck”.

⁷ First lecture tour to north East Prussia from 7 to 15 May 1994, accompanied by Dr. Harry Tröster, Waldemar and Annerose Busse, Klaus and Katrin Freudenthal, Marion Gitt, Dietrich and Dorle Müller, Ewald Reschke, Karl Schumann, Eckhard Veit.

⁸ MOT is the British “test or test certificate”. In Germany it’s the “Technischer Überwachungsverein” (TÜV).

⁹ The former Reichstraße 1 ran from Eydtkuhnen (Russian Chernyshevskoye) on the border between East Prussia and Lithuania to Aachen in the west. The modern B1 (Federal Road 1) still follows the same route from Küstrin, via Berlin, Magdeburg, Braunschweig, Hildeshim, Paderborn, Dortmund, Düsseldorf to Aachen.

After this unforgettable and deeply moving day, 9th May 1994, we started off back to Königsberg. Would we ever make it? If we could at least make it to the old Reichstraße! Fortunately, the gear lever held out across the bumpy terrain and we drove along the main road westwards. It was another 120 kilometers to Königsberg. We drove through Gumbinnen and finally got as far as Insterburg, where the gear lever snapped again. The lever was so thin because of the drill hole that it broke again. Who could help us now – it was still a bank holiday?! Harry and Ewald found someone on the street who had a welding torch in his country cottage. He took them to his cottage where he welded the gear lever. For the rest of us, this meant an involuntary break. We decided to distribute the remaining 30 “Questions” book to passers-by in Insterburg.

That was how this young man ended up with a copy of my book. I am convinced that God wanted to use this incident to encourage us to carry on evangelizing by distributing books. What we thought was a hindrance and a waste of time, God used for good. Someone was saved for all eternity as a result. And if Jesus says that someone’s soul is of more value than the whole world (Mark 8 v 36), then we rejoice at how God works. May be we should remember more often: God doesn’t always show us how he uses the difficulties we experience to bring fruit for eternity.

The Search for my Place of Birth Raineck¹⁰

We drove 120 kilometers from Königsberg on the old German Imperial road ‘Reichsstraße 1’. After leaving the main road, we soon reached what was left of Kattenau (in Russian, Fumanovka), which was close to Raineck. There really wasn’t very much left. Some friendly but seemingly very poor Russians were living in the few houses that were still standing. They gladly took the clothes and books we offered them. When we asked whether they could remember there having been a village just two kilometers away, they shook their heads. I already knew that Raineck no longer existed. But when did it disappear and how? It didn’t happen during the war, I knew that much. Later a man of about sixty joined us and said that he had seen the village before it was destroyed. It had stood until 1957 and was called Simonovka in Russian. But then the village was destroyed to make room for a collective farm. Raineck was the central village with other villages around it forming a circle (Kattenau, Tutschen, Burgkampen, Eichhagen). It was the most obvious thing to do to flatten the central village in order to make space. And what happened to all the rubble? After the war, every brick and crooked nail was collected and used again. People even came from as far away as Lithuania to get valuable building material.

The man said he would show us where the village used to be and so he climbed into the old bus and we drove along the bumpy road through the village of Tutschen (in Russian, Vatutino). On the way out of the village, we turned right. Soon the road ended and before us was a wasteland. The land that farmers in days gone by had treasured and worked intensely was now a rambling, barren wasteland. Where on earth could our farm have been? We had nothing to give any indication of where the village used to be. We left the bus at the end of the road and set off on foot. Ewald Reschke was the first to discover a small hill where some birch trees were standing and he went over. We followed him, glad to have found any landmark at all. I realized straightaway: this must have been the former cemetery in Raineck. The graves were no longer recognizable. There were only a few pieces of edging from the graves spread about the hill. Plunderers had dug up the graves looking for any valuables that might still be there. My

¹⁰ Translation of chapter 2.9 “Die Suche nach meinem Geburtsort Raineck” in the Book „Wunder und Wunderbares“ of the author Werner Gitt, CLV-Verlag, Bielefeld, 2005, 320 pp. Download of the complete German book: www://clv.dyndns.info/pdf/255658.pdf

mother's family were buried here. My brother Dieter, born almost exactly a year before me (b. 2.29.1936), had died when he was just a few weeks old and was also buried here. I could remember his small, tidy grave well from the many times my mother had taken me with her when she went to plant flowers there or water them. Childhood memories from fifty years earlier suddenly rose up inside me. We had left Raineck with a horse and cart during the war in October 1944.

Now I knew roughly where our farm must have been. In my childhood recollections, the cemetery had been about a kilometer north of our farm. But as I knew that children tend to overestimate the distance between things, I guessed that, realistically, the cemetery must have been about 500 meters from our home. I also remembered that there had been a stream not far from the farm, on the edge of the fields which bordered on the farmyard. The stream was called 'Rain', giving the village its name. "If we turn southwards we should be able to see the stream," I said to my companions. I was right: there was the 'Rain' – at least that was still there. Crossing this East Prussian 'river' without getting our feet wet was child's play as it was hardly a meter wide at this time of year. Another 400 meters south of the stream and we were standing on the place where I was born. I was born at home on my parents farm, as was usual then. You may wonder how I recognized the spot. We discovered a rusty hinge which must have come from the double gates which had once closed the entrance to the farmyard. The gates had hung between two huge square posts set in the wall with bricks. This rusty hinge was all that was left to remind us of the farmyard with its farmhouse, two stables, a house for peat and a barn. What else could I do but take this little piece home with me to Braunschweig, where it now sits rusting in our garden.

Standing there in the place where I was born, I began to cry. So many childhood memories suddenly came alive. I thought about my parents, my elder brother Fritz and all those who used to live here. Nothing in this world is constant. Everything will pass away. Romans 8 verses 18-20 is no theory. It's something that I have experienced and there's nothing I can add to it.