



## Over the Iron Curtain: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia Meets the West

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## **Over the Iron Curtain: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia Meets the West**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the international relationships of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia after 1945, and puts them into the context of the Cold War. Although church contacts were meant to support the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, they also offered Church leaders an opportunity to re-establish historical relationships with Lutheran Churches in the West. Contacts between Churches in the East and West were considered to be highly controversial by all the institutions concerned. Nevertheless, Lutherans from the both sides of the Iron Curtain engaged themselves in a form of cooperation which promoted the development of the Soviet Lutheran churches.

The Iron Curtain was certainly one of the things that occupied people's minds throughout the whole time that the "Communist" and "Free" world were divided. Motives for trying to overlook or deepen this division differed, as did the methods used. Now and then Western society received scattered information about the situation "behind the Iron Curtain" due to the work of missionary organizations, the so called Eastern Missions, which saw their task as one of smuggling<sup>1</sup> the Good News behind the Iron Curtain. This article, however, deals with official, or at least more or less legal, contacts across the artificial division of Europe. In addition, Churches in the Soviet Union will be regarded here not only as objects of mission and aid, but also as an active partner in the relationships between Churches in the East and West.

The first contacts between Church leaders began around the time that Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous speech on de-Stalinisation, and announced the policy of coexistence that quickly gained popularity. It is not our task here to explore all the reasons behind this policy; however, it opened up an opportunity for communication between people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The idea of cooperation became especially popular in Western Europe, where society was rather critical of the policies and ambitions of the United States of America. Although the coexistence policy opened up a little more space for encounters, Cold War disputes continued in the field of rhetoric. At a time when everybody was suspicious and

mistrustful of each other, leaders of Christian Churches tried to meet and create a space for mutual respect and understanding.

Contacts between Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War have always been viewed with a certain degree of mistrust. How was it possible that totalitarian and atheistic states permitted their churches to contact those abroad? Which Churches in the West were interested in communication with clergymen praising the Soviet regime, and why? What form did these meetings take, what were their results and significance? These are the issues to be addressed in this article, which is mainly based on primary source materials such as archival documents and eye-witness accounts.

### **Political Conditions**

In the mid-1950s, the ideological leaders of the Soviet Union started to reevaluate the role of Churches in Soviet foreign policy. In 1956, the Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, G. G. Karpov, suggested that the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party should make more use of Churches and religious organizations in this sphere. His argument was that almost all foreign delegations, even if they were not church-related, showed great interest in religious life in the country; so the churches should be involved more intensively in disproving Western propaganda concerning religious freedom in the Soviet Union. In addition, he argued that by stimulating relations between Soviet and Western Churches, networks would emerge through which a wider audience for Soviet propaganda could be reached in the West (Капов 43-44).

The first trips to the West, where a representative of the Latvian Lutheran Church (Archbishop Gustavs Tūrs<sup>2</sup>) took part, were to Great Britain in 1955 and to the USA a year later. In both cases Archbishop Tūrs joined a delegation of Soviet Church leaders, headed by the Russian Orthodox Church. After the trip to the USA, the head of the delegation, Metropolitan Nikolai, recommended that Tūrs should not be sent abroad any more, as his behavior had been inadequate and shameful. For instance, in conversation with professors of a theological seminary, Tūrs had told them that he himself had a rather poor theological education, and did not see the necessity for intensive study at all. Comparing Marxist and Christian morals, he opined that there was no big difference between them, since both preach that you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery and so on. Worst of all, however, had been the political error that he made in thanking the Council of National Churches in the USA for supporting refugees from Latvia (Капов 1956, 71). Nonetheless, Gustavs Tūrs

continued to represent the Latvian Lutheran Church abroad because the Soviet authorities cared more for representatives' loyalty to the Soviet regime than they did for quality of theological discussions. The representation of Latvian and Estonian Churches in the West was important because ecumenical organizations, as well as Protestant Churches were concerned about the situation of the Lutheran Churches in the Soviet Union. The Latvian and Estonian Churches were the biggest of their kind within the Soviet Union, and were for a long time the only ones that could be visited by foreign guests and whose representatives were allowed travel abroad. Furthermore, although Soviet officials asserted that Church and state were separate and that no Church enjoyed any privileges or support from the latter, many foreign guests had gained the impression that the Russian Orthodox Church had a special relationship with the state (Информация 80; Moritz). In order to dispel this view, representatives of other denominations had to be involved more actively in contacts with foreign guests.

At the same time it is necessary to admit that Gustavs Tūrs -- his poor theological competence and rough manners aside -- was positively regarded both in the West and at home due to his diplomacy and organizational ability. For instance, in 1966, when foreign guests were still not allowed to travel to Lithuania, Tūrs took advantage of the absence of the Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Latvian Republic,<sup>3</sup> Prolets Liepa, and sought permission to include a visit to the Lithuanian Church in the program for a delegation of the Lutheran World Federation that was visiting Latvia at that time (Saharov 38). In the event the plan did not succeed, and the wily Tūrs excused his behavior on the grounds that he was old and did not remember that the Representative had forbidden visits to Lithuania. The Representative, however, did not believe this, knowing Tūrs as a man who always tried to get some benefits for the Church (Liepa, *Letter* 35). Indeed, Tūrs was very cautious, and always tried to find ways which could not be regarded as illegal or anti-Soviet, but at the same time would be good for the Church. Western Church leaders knew this as well, and trusted his judgement in practical matters. Thus, Ms Schäder, an employee of the Department for International Relations of the German Lutheran Church (FRG) wrote in a note that: "if archbishop Tūrs, who -- according to my observations -- is a very cautious old peasant, writes to us about a plan to send books to pastor B. in Akmolinsk [now Astana, Kazakhstan -- Z.M.], it means, in my opinion, that he has an absolutely legal contact there" (Schäder). Also the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Carl E. Lund-Quist, who met the Latvian and Estonian Archbishops for the first time during their visit to Great Britain in 1955, had noticed that both men were open to

contacts with Christians in other parts of the world and willing to share real information. Although Türs was known for making generalizations about war and peace and the new situation, he also offered some information about the hidden side of Soviet life -- for instance the fact that people who had been deported to Siberia in earlier years were beginning to return to their homes, and Pastors among them could once again serve their parishes. The Archbishops did not hide the problems of Church life such as the lack of Pastors, religious education and religious literature. It was admitted that the parishes operated in difficult conditions, and that religious education was prohibited (quoted in Altnurme 2003, 8).

In 1956, the Estonian and Latvian Lutheran Churches received an invitation to participate in a meeting of the Lutheran World Federation. The invitation initially created some confusion in the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, since the Soviet Embassy in Switzerland was not able to gather all the necessary information about the organization. However, referring to the positive impact of previous visits where leaders of both Churches had taken part, the Foreign Ministry suggested permitting this visit, too (Заклучение 84-6). Although this particular meeting did not take place, from this point onwards more intensive relations between Latvian, Estonian and Western Lutheran Churches developed: Church representatives met on several occasions and exchanged information about Church life and needs.

At the beginning of 1960, the Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, Karpov, was replaced by Kurojedov, a man with a new vision of how to use Churches in Soviet foreign policy. His ideas and working methods also had a great influence on the work of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, which was responsible for all other Churches and religious organizations in the Soviet Union. The new policy envisaged active participation by Soviet Churches in the activities of world Churches, in order to spread Soviet views abroad. The recommendation of the Central Committee of the Communist Party was that: "the international policy of Churches should be inspired by the state's institutions and used as one of the most effective channels for spreading Soviet propaganda and contra-propaganda in Western countries; also it should be used as a good tool in the fight for peace." (qtd. in Шкаровский 322)

An excerpt from a meeting of the Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults with Soviet clergy before a peace conference in Prague in September 1960 gives an example of the new strategy of the Council and the Communist Party. The Chairman of the Council, Andrej Puzin, had called Church leaders together "to exchange ideas not only about the coming peace conference, but also concerning future work ... to

discuss openly and from different perspectives issues concerning the further involvement of clergy in protecting peace” (Запись 31). In his speech, he introduced a new strategy and new methods for fighting for peace:

It must be admitted that in the last phase [of peace work] the activities of the churches brought a certain contribution in the fight for peace. In some respects, it made it possible for believers to join the national movement for protecting peace. However, today this is no longer sufficient, since with prayers, appeals for peace, and simply saying that peace is better than war alone, it is not possible to guard peace; with sermons and prayers alone it is not possible to stop atom-bomb maniacs and warmongers. One must scream, shout at the top of one’s voice, and expose those who preach “Cold War” and speak against détente, who play with the atomic bomb and call for war, and bless atomic war. We must not be calm and passive. (Запись 31)

In particular, this policy meant that in their future speeches Soviet Church leaders would have to condemn the policy of the Vatican and the United States, as well as several European politicians and Church leaders, such as Konrad Adenauer, German Bishop Otto Dibelius and others. At the end of the meeting Puzin asked conference delegates to revise their speeches according to the new strategy (Запись, 34).

During the period before any visit abroad the Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults instructed delegates in how they should behave. Candidates were given and obliged to study materials about the Church or organization they were about to visit, and also had to acquaint themselves with information about the particular country and the political situation there. Certain instructions were given concerning the content of potential interviews or speeches, and the amount and character of information that should be given about the Latvian Lutheran Church (Лиєпа 1976, 57).

This policy regarded the participation of the Soviet Churches in international Church organizations favourably, too. Consequently in 1962, the Latvian Lutheran Church joined the World Council of Churches (WCC) and in 1963, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Through its membership in these bodies, the Latvian Church obtained the opportunity to maintain permanent contacts with Churches in the West and to participate in their common work. From the 1960s onwards, Latvian Church delegations regularly travelled to conferences and meetings in the West, and their colleagues from the West visited Latvia. More intensive visits began in the 1970s, when conditions for tourist visits to the Soviet Union became easier.

### The Lutheran World

Many people in the West were sceptical about church life in the Soviet Union, as they were about people who came from there, and the stories they told. At international meetings, Western delegates would smile and turn away from a person they were about to initiate conversation with, as soon as they realized that this person was from the Soviet Union (Ozoliņš, *Ekumēniskās* 251). Many in the West were convinced that almost all Church representatives who travelled abroad were KGB agents, working for the Soviet state and reporting every word pronounced at the meetings. The so-called East Mission organizations in particular spread this attitude among Christians in the West through their publications “which created an impression that ‘the true Christian life’ in eastern European countries is mainly to be found ‘underground’” (Hansen 1976). Reports by Soviet clergy about religious life in their countries were regarded as propaganda.

While the real situation was certainly less ideal than Soviet delegates were required to pretend, many Christian leaders believed that excluding the Churches of communist countries from the Christian world community would not make the situation there any better. The Europe Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), an organization which intended to unite all Lutherans of the world, argued with people in the West that, despite the atheistic state ideology, churches in Eastern Europe “have in common with churches everywhere the primary task of proclaiming Gospel, truly and faithfully, and all the joys and difficulties associated with this. However, as churches in countries governed by communist parties, they have experiences of a very special kind that are peculiar to them” (Hansen 1978).

The leaders of international church organizations were sometimes accused of being too conciliatory in their dealings with the Soviet Union, and they themselves were aware of the difficulties inherent in their work. The General Secretary of the LWF, Carl Mau, wrote to the Latvian exile Archbishop Arnolds Lūsis in 1976 that:

I think our dilemma has almost always been to what extent can we speak as openly as we would like without harming the leaders who have to bear the cross each day. This is a dilemma which has never been easily solved anywhere. I know for example that Dr Paul Hansen has spoken very clearly about the great and grave difficulties that the churches face in Latvia. I myself have participated in meetings with authorities where we have complained openly in behalf of the world Lutheran family about the conditions which have to do with so-called religious freedom. We will continue to do so, but must select our ways and means and times for doing so until the Gospel is given free course. I can only support your

fundamental thesis that the Gospel does live and move in that area of the world also and shows its victorious power. Much is happening also in the Lutheran Church of Latvia that is an inspiration to us all and helps us in the united witness to the Gospel [sic]. (Mau 1976)

In another letter Mau outlines his approach (and that of the LWF) in more detail:

I have to know, of course, that the life of the church in the Soviet Union is extremely difficult. I have to know that life in general in the Soviet Union is pretty horrible. Knowing that, I have to try to choose with some care the ways in which I want to get at that. I do feel that we should be making more calls on the churches in the Soviet Union, and I think we ought to always use the occasion to ask government why it wants to make life so difficult for Christians and the Church. I think we ought to use every occasion we can to indicate that the world opinion with respect to the Soviet Union here is that it is very repressive, especially toward Christians. I know that the Soviet leaders have been somewhat sensitive to this, although they have also rather quickly smashed down the fist on this kind of talk [sic]. (Mau 1974)

However, not everybody in the West regarded the situation in this way or knew about the dilemmas which Soviet Church leaders had to resolve in their work. In this context, LWF Europe Secretary Paul Hansen, saw his primary duty as getting to know these Churches and interpreting them for the remainder of the LWF and beyond. In this respect, Hansen stressed that: “frequent visits are essential in order to remain up-to-date on the current situation, and to be able to judge what possibilities there are for contacts with these Churches, what kind of help they need, and what contribution they can make to the worldwide fellowship of Churches” (Hansen 1978). He therefore paid regular visits to Churches in Eastern Europe and kept the West informed about life there.

Lutheran Churches in East and West Germany and Scandinavia were especially interested in reestablishing relations with the Latvian Lutheran Church. Contacts between the societies of the Baltic Sea Region had profound historical roots. Before World War II, there was a great deal of cooperation between peoples and between different organizations, including Churches. The enforced severance of contacts was a traumatic experience for the partners, who took every opportunity to overcome their separation. Western countries hosted refugees from the Baltic and helped them to establish their own congregations and schools, while also remaining anxious about those who remained in the Soviet Union. The preservation and continuation of the historical relationship with the Churches in the Baltic states was highly important, and “the reason [for it]



was very simple, very human: they [people in the West] just wanted to know how their neighbours were living" (Pāvuls 2003).

The Secretary for Relationships with Central and Eastern Europe in the German Evangelical Church (FRG), Reiner Rinne (2003), gave three main reasons for his Church's willingness to develop good relationships with the Latvian Lutheran Church. These were theological, historical, and a "particular German motivation." Theologically, the Church is sent to seek community with Christians across the world, especially those in need. From a historical perspective, German and Latvian Lutherans were united by their common heritage of Western Christianity and Reformation, as well as by a common theological tradition until World War II. In addition, many of the initiators of these relationships were Baltic Germans who still felt themselves bound to the Baltic countries. What Rinne described as a "particular German motivation" was the policy followed by those in German politics and society who sought reconciliation with nations that had suffered from German aggression during World War II -- these countries and nations were provided with special support.

Interest in Lutherans within the Soviet Union arose in Germany even before regular visits and exchange of information had begun. At the beginning of 1957, Günter Heidtmann from the German Christian newspaper *Kirche in der Zeit* (Düsseldorf) asked an employee of the Department for International Relationships of the German Evangelical Church (FRG), Dr Hanfried Krüger, to write an article about evangelical congregations in the Soviet Union for the newspaper. After consultations with Dr H. H. Harms, a co-worker from World Council of Churches, Krüger gave him a negative reply, citing Harm's letter as follows: "the available material is not very reliable; it contains mainly news, which has reached us accidentally, furthermore it is biased, so it does not give the whole picture. Therefore we believe that the time is not ripe yet to write an informative article about the situation of evangelical Christians in the Soviet Union" (Krüger 1957). This is one of the reasons (although not the only one) for the information vacuum regarding churches in the Soviet Union that existed in the Western press until the mid-1960s.

The leaders of the Latvian Lutheran Church were especially interested in reestablishing historical relationships with the Church of Sweden. This was once called their "Mother Church" (Türs 1963), since the Bishop of Sweden, Nathan Söderblom, had consecrated the first Bishop of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kārlis Irbe. Great emphasis had been placed on this fact in relationships between the two Churches, and it later became an argument for inviting Swedish Archbishop Ruben Josephson to consecrate Archbishop Jānis Matulis.<sup>4</sup> In 1969 Latvian Church Consistory member Viktors Ozoliņš wrote to Swedish Pastor

Hennrik Svenungsson that “From a historical perspective, the Latvian and Swedish Churches are connected by old traditions, which allows us to hope that the right moment has come to reconfirm and renew these Christian and fraternal bonds between our Churches” (Ozoliņš, *Letter*). At that time, Latvian Pastors saw this as a very important, perhaps even symbolic action (Mesters, *Latvijas evaņģēliski* 178-9). The recently-elected Archbishop Matulis wrote to Bishop Sven Danell that:

... I would like to draw your attention to the crook that you will hand me over at last. The crook has a historical meaning in the life of the Latvian Evangelic Lutheran Church. This crook was brought by blessed Archbishop ... N. Söderblom in 1922 as a consecration gift to the first Latvian bishop D. K. Irbe. After the tenure of Bishop Irbe, the crook was not handed over to the next bishops (Dr T. Grīnbergs (†), G. Tūrs, emer.), and only now after almost forty years I ask you to entrust me this crook on 14 September, in order to confirm the cordial and historical traditions between our churches. (Matulis)

It therefore seemed that with a new Archbishop and the reestablishment of closer relationships with former partner Churches, the leaders of the Latvian Lutheran Church hoped to begin a new and perhaps better phase in its history.

### Types of Contacts

Although contacts between Latvian Lutherans and Christian Churches and organizations in the West were rather limited, they were still diverse. It is possible to speak about three kinds of contacts -- official, unofficial and private -- each with a different character and a different set of results.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, there has been much discussion about whether it was really worth pursuing official contacts or, more precisely, collaboration with the regime in order to obtain -- *inter alia* -- permission to travel abroad. Indeed, conversations at an official level mostly involved repetition of positive statements about the Soviet state and the degree of religious freedom there. The only critical remarks were aimed at Western policy, society, and values.

It is often argued (Zikmane 2001, 164; Ķiploks and Vasks 1999, 31; Mesters, *Desa virsū* 6; Mesters, *Latvijas evaņģēliski* 259-74) that the end -- meetings and exchange of information -- justified the means -- i.e. collaboration with Soviet state. Latvian Church leaders also thought that “they were playing a devilish game: pretending to be loyal, they used opportunities to tell in the West a true story about life in the Soviet Union”

(Kavacis 2000). And of course, in very many instances this was in fact the case. Yet one must also consider the other side to this policy, which Modris Plāte (2000) has characterised, somewhat emotively, but still rather appositely, as follows: “they [the leaders of Latvian Lutheran Church] thought they would be wiser to give a little finger to the devil and get back something that would be good for the whole Church. This giving of a little finger brought with time greater losses than anyone had noticed.”

Discussions about the identity of the Latvian Church and consequences of collaboration are beyond the scope of this article; nevertheless, the complexity of the issue must be noted here. Among the many problematic aspects of Church international relations was the fact that very often they diverted the attention of Church leaders away from internal matters. In 1960, for instance, the Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Latvian SSR wrote a report outlining the rather [un]satisfactory situation in the Latvian Lutheran church: many congregations had been closed down and their church buildings surrendered to local authorities, only a few churches had been renovated, and parish members were not willing to make donations, since they suspected Pastors of using that money for other purposes. Revealingly, the Representative observed that “Türs is not aware of the real situation, since he is busy with international activities and the fight for peace. ... We should use Archbishop Türs even more in international contacts in order to draw his attention from inner matters in Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvian SSR” (Пизанс 1960, 30-30a). This policy was duly followed, and subsequent Archbishops also complained of finding international relationships too time consuming (Kiploks and Vasks 1999, 30; Mesters, *Latvijas evaņģēliski* 187).

Official contacts had always been viewed with suspicion and mistrust in the West, too. It was clear to everybody that people who travelled abroad had received special permission from the state, which meant that they had to represent the official position. Similarly, during visits to Latvia there were certain things that had to be told to foreign guests and certain places to be visited. Western Church leaders who travelled frequently to Eastern Europe were aware of this. In his report about the visit by Mau and Hansen to Latvia in 1968, Prolets Liepa wrote that guests had displayed mistrust and criticism towards the official program, and were very cautious in conversation (Liepa 1968, 198). Reporting on the same visit, Latvian Pastor Voldemārs Plāmsis noted an ironic remark by Paul Hansen, who said that while he certainly listened to what he had been told, he had eyes of his own to see and evaluate things without any explanations (Plāmsis 1968, 204). At the same time, official relations between the Churches and their leaders opened opportunities for contacts on an unofficial and a

private level and added some realistic traits to the ideal picture of life in the Soviet Union.

In every meeting -- either in the West or in the Soviet Union -- time and opportunities were found for the undisturbed exchange of some essential information. Most frequently illness was simulated in order to skip the official program to be able to meet somebody in private (Liepa, *Report 1966*, 46). In some cases the strategy was as follows: the first part of a meeting took place in a hotel room, restaurant or in some other place where there were bugging devices, and all "official texts" were recited there. Afterwards the conversation was continued somewhere outside where finally free and sincere talk could begin (Wittram 2003).

Unofficial conversations were the forum for discussing difficulties and giving practical hints. For instance, during one conference Archbishop Jānis Matulis pointed out fellow delegate Ēriks Mesters to some Western Pastors and stated that this man must not succeed him as Archbishop (Wittram 2003). Of course, Western Church leaders were not in a position to hinder his appointment as Archbishop; however, they were at least informed about his predecessor's opinion. However, exchange of information on this level was rather limited as well. The main reason for this was the danger that the information might reach people for whom it was not intended. German Pastor Martin Hübner, for instance, recalls that Soviet delegates told him very little during their encounters, since they were afraid that the conversation could turn out to be a provocation. In addition they could not be sure how the information would be used afterwards (Hübner 2003).

At the same time there were certain people in the West who were deemed trustworthy in the eyes of Soviet and East European clergy. One such person was Paul Hansen, the Europe Secretary of the LWF. Hansen was of the opinion that personal relationships were of the utmost importance in encounters between East and West. In one of his last reports, he wrote that:

The style of work of the Europe Secretary has made it possible to make the "grass roots" of the minority churches in Eastern Europe acquainted with the everyday reality of the LWF. Moreover, it is through visits in the congregations and in homes of the pastors that we become familiar with the real challenges and problems of the churches there and are thus better equipped to convey these to fellow Christians in the rest of the world. I hope that this personal character in the relations with our member churches in Eastern Europe will never be lost, since I believe it belongs to the nature of the LWF and the mandate of the Committee for Church Cooperation. (Hansen 1978)

Sometimes even parish members had an opportunity to meet foreign guests in an informal atmosphere after church services. They were eager to listen to their stories about Christian life in Europe, the Christian world community, and trips to the Holy Land (Aderkas 2003; M. Baumann 2003). Meetings with congregations were not welcomed by the state authorities, and were never included in official programs; it always depended on the local Pastor and the Western visitors as to whether such encounters took place. Several Pastors such as Roberts Feldmanis, Haralds Kalniņš, and Uldis Rožkalns organized meetings with Christians from the West for their congregations where different matters concerning church life were discussed, sometimes even until midnight (J. Baumann 1983; 1986).

The Director of Church Music in the Hanoverian Church, Johannes Baumann, unofficially assisted in the training of church musicians during his visits to Latvia. Mainly these were people who had a musical education and worked in parishes as organists, yet were not trained in playing the organ. The Latvian church lacked an instructor for organists, so parish organists were eager to learn something from Baumann every time he visited Latvia (Baumann 1983; 1986).

However, in some cases even more substantial relations developed from regular meetings and conversations. These were friendships or private contacts. The number of people who were trusted was rather small (Hübner 2003). Latvian Archbishop Ēriks Mesters<sup>5</sup> recalled only three people in the West with whom he “could discuss everything without fear or suspicion -- they were Latvian exile pastor Jāzeps Urdze, and two Baltic Germans, Johannes Baumann and Claus von Aderkas” (Mesters, *Desa virsū* 6). Nevertheless, it was precisely these kinds of contacts that made an important contribution to mutual understanding and brought some improvement in the situation of the Latvian Church. Private contacts mainly developed between Church leaders who maintained their positions over many years, and who met each other rather often and had chances to speak to each other in private. In this respect, meetings at houses of recreation such as *Casa Locarno* (the property of the World Council of Churches) or in several places in East and West Germany played a very important role. All really important information about conditions of work in the Soviet Union and persons involved in Church work was exchanged on this level, while plans of action and ways of aiding the Latvian Church were also mostly elaborated in private meetings. For instance, until the late 1980s Churches in the Soviet Union were not allowed to receive any financial aid from the West. According to official rhetoric, repeated also by Church leaders in official meetings, Soviet Churches wanted for nothing; in reality, however, there was a shortage of Bibles and hymnals, theological literature and finances for the repair of church buildings. Plans for

resolving these difficulties were made exclusively in private conversations, and financial aid was obtained privately, too.

Private talks were not only important for planning practical support. Baltic Germans (because of their command of Latvian), and Johannes Baumann in particular, spoke of endless discussions with Latvian Pastors and Consistory members about the situation in their Church. During the Soviet regime mistrust and suspicion had grown among Latvian clergy, so that they were no longer able to discuss any matter openly with one another. From the 1970s and 1980s, as the new generation of Pastors began working, several distinct groups formed within the Church, and these did not engage in mutual communication. Sincere conversations with Christians from the West communicated to Latvian Pastors a feeling of acceptance and being taken seriously, even if the guest did not agree with their position. This was not a feeling that they had experienced in dealings with their own Church leaders and colleagues. A rather typical example is Baumann's description of his meeting with a female Pastor, Vaira Bitēna:

Pastor Vaira Bitēna is the most talented and flexible among female pastors in Latvia. She is very appreciated by her congregation in Saulkrasti. ... She has been through some difficult years, both because of her divorce and because of the excluding attitude towards her from several pastors who oppose the ordination of women. It seems she has only a few colleagues who she can talk to. During the meeting with her one could get the impression that she took her chance now to articulate and get rid of everything that oppressed her. (Baumann 1986)

Sometimes friends and colleagues from abroad were the only ones who had an overview of the whole spectrum of arguments and accusations, since every group wanted to share its view with them. All Western visitors who were in such a position tried to observe a substantial rule: to pronounce no judgements and to urge Latvian Pastors to attempt dialogue with one other. Although this advice was seldom followed, different groups were made aware of other possible opinions and ways of acting (Aderkas 2003; Baumann 1986, 1987). In his report about Pastor Mesters, Baumann wrote that "I want to help him as much as possible. We have very nice, friendly relationships. I have the feeling that he is happy about all our meetings" (Baumann 1983). And some years later, when Mesters was an Archbishop and involved in a serious conflict within the Church, Baumann noted: "As he himself said he felt like he was between two millstones. He needs support, our prayers and a wise advice" (Baumann 1987). Although it could seem that Latvian Pastors in these relationships were receivers rather than givers, all Western colleagues who were involved claimed that

these contacts carried great substance for them, too (Wittram 1999, 38; Rinne 2003; Stahl 2003; Hübner 2003; Aderkas 2003).

### **Significance of Relationships**

On the eve of the European conference of the LWF, which was to held in the Soviet Union for the first time in 1980, the main organizer, Paul Hansen, sought to underline the importance of the event, and wrote that:

Apparently European church leaders share the idea formulated at the last conference of the LWF: 'it is our duty to bring a testimony about the unity of God's congregation, which overcomes all borders and divisions, even those created by military conflicts.' Or as it was stated in the report of a working group of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe: 'because of the international character of Christian community Churches can build bridges of understanding between people without any danger of being misunderstood or abused, they can foster contacts between Christians, congregations, Church leaders across all political borders, they can exchange information about life of churches and the societies in which they live. We have to seek and use as well as possible any opportunity to create such trust. (Hansen 1980)

In fact, this character and role of the Christian community was not as uncontested as Hansen and the other Christian leaders quoted by him would have had us believe; this was especially so in the context of 1980. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the end of December 1979 and the response to this by the United States brought détente to an abrupt end and ushered in a brief but intense period of Soviet-American confrontation. Among other punitive sanctions, the United States also urged Western European states to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics, which were to be held in Moscow (Painter 1999, 91-2). Consequently, the granting of permission to organize the LWF conference in Tallinn in 1980, when the request to organize such a conference in one of the Baltic republics of Soviet Union had been repeated every year since 1964, was widely regarded in the West as a purely political step. In fact, the conference turned out to be an impressive event, and a source of inspiration for both sides. The conference took place on 7-14 November, and brought together one hundred delegates representing thirty-two European Lutheran Churches, including large delegations from Latvia and Lithuania. This was the first time that such large numbers from Western countries had visited the Soviet Union (Matulis 1980, 113-8). At last, the world had been reminded of the three Baltic republics, and for the first time people from

the West could meet Pastors and their parishioners, other than those few who were allowed to travel abroad (Hübner, 2003).

Inspiration and sharing faith with Christians in the West was very important for people in the Baltic republics. In the Soviet Union, attitudes towards believers were straightforward: they were said to be either fools or cheats. This viewpoint was widely disseminated in the press and was also taught in schools. Scorn and contempt for believers and their children was the “normal” attitude of an atheist (Plāte 2000). For this reason, meeting Christians from Western countries or, when permitted, travelling abroad carried particular significance for believers. First and foremost, they were able to experience an environment in which it was “normal” to have faith, and to enjoy the fellowship of other Christians. Spiritually, too, people in the Soviet Union were kept in isolation. Religious life was confined to within the church building and limited to the church service. No other activities such as Bible studies or lectures were allowed; nor was it possible to provide information about religious life in Western countries. Johannes Baumann characterized the Latvian Lutheran Church as one “for which the church service is the centre of its existence, where people pray much and sincerely, and long for community with their brothers and sisters in faith” (Baumann 1984).

Every time a delegation from the West visited Latvia, as many meetings as possible with congregations were organized. Special services were held at which visiting Pastors preached or delivered greetings from their home Church or organization. If a foreign guest came to a church service, attendance was high. When, for example, a delegation of the Lutheran World Federation visited the Soviet Union in June 1964 and participated in services in churches in Estonia and Latvia, the congregation was almost 2000 in Riga and Tallinn, and several hundred in Kõmeri, Latvia, and Hageri, Estonia (Kirche im Osten, 156). People in the Soviet Union were eager to meet Christians from other countries because it reminded them of the fellowship that had once existed between Baltic and Western countries, and because they could see that faith was still alive in people’s hearts and was not going to vanish. Last, but not least, there was an opportunity to hear a sermon different from the kind they were used to. Being aware of this, many people in the West regarded it as their duty to visit and aid their fellow Christians in the Soviet Union. Paul Hansen claimed that this should be the policy of the LWF, arguing that “Estonian and Latvian member Churches belong to the most isolated Churches and live in a very difficult situation, so in my opinion we have to use every opportunity to visit them” (Hansen 1972). Besides visits, Christians in the West continued to pray for Churches in the Soviet Union and so expressed their sympathies and solidarity (Baumann 1983; Noko 2005).



However, there were a lot of practical needs that had to be responded to. Amongst the most pressing of these was financial aid for Pastors whose parishes could not grant them a proper salary and for renovation of church buildings. The most suitable method of providing financial aid was through purchases in hard currency shops in Riga. If direct financial support to Soviet people was prohibited, purchases in hard currency shops were more than welcomed. Since citizens of the Soviet Union were only allowed to visit hard currency shops in the company of foreign guests, visitors from the West had to reckon with many hours of shopping during each of their stays in Riga. Guests from abroad -- mainly Baltic Germans with their command of the Latvian language -- therefore went shopping with Latvian colleagues in order to provide them with everyday items such as shoes, clothing, umbrellas, and shampoo (Baumann 1986). Moreover, it was possible to deliver a large number of donations for the renovation of church buildings in the form of valuable goods. Tyres, but sometimes also cars were later sold on the black market, and the money used for church needs (Aderkas 2003; Mesters, *Latvijas evaņģēliski* 261; Wittram 2003). Another way of aiding the Latvian Church financially was suggested by Archbishop Matulis following a number of accidents in which several church buildings in Latvia were damaged by fire. He wrote:

If they [exile Latvians] really want to help they should not do by demonstrative actions which do not help anybody, but rather see to it that some of the numerous exile Latvians, who visit their home country as tourists, attend services and give their offerings there -- instead of wasting their money in the restaurants in Riga. In this way the parish communities could get vital financial support in a legal way [sic]. (Matulis 1974)

Theological literature was also required, both in Latvia and across the whole Soviet Union. In his letter of 1957, Latvian exile Pastor Edgars Ķiploks urged the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the USA, Fredrik A. Schiets, to find ways of helping Latvian Pastors with literature. He cited letters from Latvia:

‘We fail any religious literature. The library of the former Theological Department is still under seal, most of the private libraries were destroyed during war, scientific research hasn’t been done. Do not be surprised that we ourselves are starting to dwindle.’ When the American church leaders visited Moscow in 1956, a Latvian pastor sent through them a letter to his friend in the US, asking just for one new Bible commentary. ‘I need it more than bread,’ he remarked [sic]. (Ķiploks 1957)

Until the mid-1970s there still were cases where theological literature sent from the West was returned, while books in Latvian (publications by exile Latvian theologians) almost never reached the addressee. Books

brought by tourists and foreign delegations often got confiscated too (Aderkas 2003; Baumann 1984). Nevertheless, even the limited number of books which reached Latvian Pastors and lecturers of the theological seminary was of utmost importance.

Taking into account the particular situation and needs in Eastern Europe, Western colleagues tried to assist with some practical hints as well. The LWF, for instance, organized special conferences for minority Churches in Europe, to which all Eastern European Lutheran churches belonged along with the Lutheran Church in France, Austria, and a few others. The organizers always tried to find topics for meetings that would be both relevant and inspiring for Churches in communist countries (Hansen). During official visits to West Germany, clergy from Latvia became acquainted with the different branches and methods of work there in order to give them inspiration for their work at home. Yet after 1991, it emerged that Latvian Church leaders had not learned quite as much from their colleagues' experience as had been previously supposed, a fact which confused their German partners (Rinne 2003). This can be explained, however, by state policy, since those Pastors sent abroad tended to be less talented theologians. On the other hand it is difficult to imagine how the changes that occurred after the restoration of independence could have taken place as rapidly as they did without the knowledge gained through official and personal relations. The contacts from the Soviet period had created a kind of Lutheran network, which opened up more opportunities for further development, and this not only for Latvian Lutheran Church itself.

Probably the most important benefit of contacts between Latvian Lutherans and the West was the involvement of the Latvian Church in supporting the Lithuanian Church, as well as German congregations in the Soviet Union. This was the opportunity for the Latvian Church to become a giver instead of being simply a recipient.

The Lithuanian Lutheran Church was the smallest of the Churches in the Baltic republics, and it faced a greater degree of repression than its Latvian and Estonian counterparts. For instance, it was not permitted a school for training new Pastors, and could not receive visitors from abroad (since the Lutheran Church was located in territory closed for foreign visitors), while its clergy had only limited possibilities to travel to meetings in the West. Trainee Lithuanian Pastors therefore enrolled in the theological seminary of the Latvian Church, ignoring bans pronounced by the Representatives of the Councils for the Affairs of Religious Cults in both republics. A large number of meetings between Lithuanian churchmen and visitors from the West took place in Riga (Zikmane 2001, 155).

The first information about scattered German congregations in Russia reached the Baltic republics and the West as early as the mid-1950s. However, it was a further decade before tourists from abroad were allowed to visit them, and the first official visit on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation took place only in 1976. In this situation, Western Churches and Church organizations used visits to Latvia and Estonia (official member Churches of the LWF and WCC) in order to learn more about the fate of German congregations. Although LWF officials did not visit Latvia and Estonia only to provide help to Lutherans in other parts of the Soviet Union (Hansen 1972), they did encourage and support Latvian and Estonian Pastors who were ready to assist scattered Lutheran congregations outside the Baltic republics. In 1967 during his visit to Latvia, the General Secretary of Gustav-Adolf-Werk (GDR) Paul Wilhelm Gennrich had asked Latvian Pastors about the possibilities of assisting German-speaking congregations in Siberia (Gennrich 1976). At that time the necessary permission from the state was not given, so the plan remained unfulfilled until the early 1970s. However, during visits to the Soviet Union, representatives of international Church organizations and national Churches in the West always sought the opportunity to discuss matters relating to German congregations with state officials in Riga, Tallinn, and Moscow (Hansen 1972; Mau 1976). Cooperation between the LWF and the Church in Latvia was rather important for assistance to German congregations in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Western Church leaders were aware that “it is not welcomed [by Soviet officials] that Churches or Church organizations from abroad undertake initiatives in the life of Churches within the Soviet Union. It is different of course when local congregations and Churches take the initiative and invite Churches or ecumenical organisations to cooperate.” (Lebendiges Lutherisches 1972, 2) Latvian and Western Church leaders therefore worked together to develop certain plans and strategies for assisting German congregations.

The position of German and Finnish congregations was especially difficult. First and foremost they lacked an organization; many of them were not even registered, which meant that they were acting illegally and were not allowed to buy or build a church or prayer house. In addition, with only a few exceptions, German congregations did not have Pastors. Their leaders were lay preachers without any theological education. These would preach every Sunday, but were not in a position to baptize, confirm, or administer Holy Communion. In this situation, encouraged and supported by Western colleagues, Pastors of the Lutheran Churches of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania started travelling to scattered German congregations to conduct baptismal and confirmation services, and to consecrate Holy Communion. Several Pastors from Latvia visited German

congregations or took care of German congregations in Latvia; however, the greatest contribution in this area was made by Latvian Pastor Haralds Kalniņš, later Bishop of the German Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union. In June 1976, German congregations in Russia became officially affiliated to the Latvian Church, which could now represent their interests in the LWF. In the same way, Finnish congregations were affiliated to the Estonian Church, which spoke on their behalf in international meetings. (Hansen, *Kirchliche* 3) At the end of the 1980s, this work resulted in the establishment of a German Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union, which after the break-up of the Soviet Union became a basis for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other Countries.

### Conclusion

Even before the first encounters between Eastern and Western Europeans were possible, Western clergy had tried to gather information about the Churches in the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet press and statements by state officials remained the only source of information for about ten years after the war. In mid-1950s, the state authorities changed their policy regarding Church involvement in foreign affairs, seeking to enlist the Churches in the fight for peace and to use Church channels for spreading Soviet propaganda in the West. Contacts between the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Christians in the West were thereby initiated by the Soviet authorities, meaning that Soviet Churches were to some degree obliged to engage in international relationships. This did, however, provide Churches with an opportunity to exploit these contacts for their own ends. Every year, Soviet Church leaders attended numerous conferences and meetings in the West and received foreign visitors. Since a relatively small number of Pastors, mostly the leading ones, were involved in overseas contacts, international activities took up a lot of their time and diverted them from the internal affairs of their Church. This was regarded positively by the communist authorities, which sought to engage Church leaders even more firmly in activities that were supplementary to their primary responsibilities.

Yet contacts with other Churches were important for the Latvian Lutheran Church, too. The experience of belonging to a universal family has always been important for Christians who could otherwise come to feel themselves part of a sect. For a Lutheran Church, it was especially important to stay in touch with the Western Christian and Reformation tradition. At conferences in the West, Latvian Pastors could acquaint themselves with the latest theological research, trends, and thoughts. The situation in the Latvian Lutheran Church following the break-up of the

Soviet Union suggests that they did not learn a great deal from these discussions, or at least were not able to communicate perceived thoughts and information to their colleagues at home. The reason for this is also to be found in the state policy, which tended to send less talented Pastors abroad. Nevertheless, contacts with Western churches and organizations meant that lecturers from the theological seminary and some other Pastors regularly received theological literature, which was essential to their work.

Relationships with Churches in Scandinavia and Germany assumed a special character and importance, and in this regard the Lutheran Church in Soviet Latvia displayed some degree of continuity with its interwar predecessor. It was therefore of the utmost importance that Archbishops Matulis and Mesters were consecrated by Swedish Bishops, just as the first Bishop of the Latvian Lutheran Church had been. Close relationships with Baltic Germans also served in some way as a reminder of a common history before World War II. Many Pastors who now were divided into camps of "East" and "West" were in fact former neighbors, university fellows, and colleagues who used the new Soviet policy in order to meet or hear from each other again.

Through these contacts a kind of Lutheran network was created, which often helped to solve practical issues. Although the Latvian and Estonian Churches were amongst the most isolated in Eastern Europe, the situation of the Lithuanian Church, and above all, the German and Finnish congregations in the Soviet Union was even worse. For a long time visitors from abroad were only allowed to travel to Latvia and Estonia. All assistance to Lutheran congregations in other parts of the Soviet Union therefore had to be channelled through and accomplished by Latvian and Estonian clergy. With spiritual and financial support from the West, Latvian and Estonian Pastors helped German and Finnish speaking congregations to organize their parish life and restore broken communication among congregations in different parts of the Soviet Union. These efforts made it possible to create a structure for the German congregations, which later obtained Church status during 1988-89.

At the same time, all contacts during the Soviet era created a basis for the further development of the Churches. Representatives of Western organizations were informed about the situation in Eastern Europe, and were able to arrange the necessary help as soon as it became possible to provide this. European Church leaders had already known each other for years already, so it was quite easy to continue their joint work in new circumstances. After independence was regained in 1991, Latvian society had to build up new structures and introduce new values, and the Latvian Lutheran Church made a substantial contribution to this process. In a certain respect, it was only able to do this thanks to its overseas contacts

and the ideas, skills and experience that had been gained through cooperation with Western colleagues. The limited and controversial relationships between Churches in the East and West thus made their own particular contribution to Christian life in Europe, opening up space for encounters, information exchange and mutual understanding which in turn created a background for new levels of cooperation following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

### Notes

1. Use of this expression should not be taken to imply a negative or judgemental attitude towards missionary organizations, whose activities are not the subject of this article. "Smuggling" was the word frequently used by organization members themselves, since it characterised their working methods. They also used to call themselves "Bible smugglers" and "God's smugglers." On the activities of Eastern missionary organizations see for instance: Hansen, Churches 9-12; Østtveit.
2. Tūrs (Turs), Gustavs (1890-1973), Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia 1948-1968. About his life and work see: "Nekrologs"; Zariņš 89-93; Mankusa 10-106; Mesters, Latvijas evaņģēliski 19-48; Talonen 98ff; Zikmane 131-4.
3. The Office of the Representative of Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was established in 1944 in order to implement Soviet laws concerning separation of state and Church, and school and Church. In every Soviet republic, there was a representative who was responsible for relationships between state and religious organizations. (The only exception was the Russian Orthodox Church, which was the responsibility of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Representatives. In 1966, however both Councils were integrated into one, named the Council for Religious Affairs.) The Representative was directly responsible to the Council, and was not dependent on the republican authorities. Practical and ideological issues concerning religion were in his competence, and every activity by any religious organization had to be approved by him (Проект Положения 18-20).
4. Matulis, Jānis (1911-1985), Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia 1969-1985. See: Ķiploks and Vasks; Lūsis; Mesters, Latvijas evaņģēliski 178-94; Zikmane 131-64.
5. Mesters, Ēriks (born 1926) Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia 1986-1989. See: Mesters, Latvijas evaņģēliski 195-204.
6. The Estonian Lutheran Church played a similar role assisting Finnish-speaking congregations in northern Russia. See: Hansen, Kirchliche 3; Паас.

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