

## AZERBAIJAN

### The Greater Grace Church deprived of the use of the Lutheran Church in Baku

**By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l***

HRWF (08.12.2014) - The Protestant congregation "Greater Grace Church" will not be able any more to use the Lutheran Church of the Saviour in Baku for its religious services as the Ministry of Culture decided in October that only registered religious communities could rent it for worshipping activities. The building is currently rent in separate slots on Sunday from the Ministry of Culture by Baku's Lutheran Community and New Life Pentecostal Church, both of which have gained state registration.

#### ***The Greater Grace Protestant Church***

The Greater Grace Church gained registration from the Justice Ministry in 1993 but chose not to re-register once the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) was established and put in charge of registering religious communities. The State Committee lodged a liquidation suit in December 2011 for failing to gain re-registration with it on the basis of the 2009 new Law on Religion. In April 2012, Baku's Administrative Economic Court No. 1 upheld the State Committee's suit. The Appeal Court rejected the Church's appeal in July 2012. In January 2013, the church lost its final appeal against the stripping of legal status at the Supreme Court.

#### ***The Lutheran Church of the Saviour***

In 1885, the Baku city council issued a resolution to allot the Lutheran community a plot of land for building a church. The first general census of the population of the Russian Empire of 1897 revealed that there were 3430 Germans in the province of Baku, including 2460 in the city itself.

In 1920, Azerbaijan was occupied by the Soviet Army and became afterwards a Soviet republic. The new authorities started taking harsh measures. By 1937, the Lutheran churches in Baku and in the German settlements had all been closed. Pastors were accused of so-called anti-Soviet activities as well as having connections with and receiving help from Germany. According to the archives of the NKVD (1), seven Lutheran pastors were arrested for espionage during the 1936-1938 period. Before the start of WW II, all the Lutheran parishes had been left without any pastor. The church was separated from the state and from schools and religious classes were abolished in German schools. Anti-religious propaganda was carried out by numerous Soviet organizations. The Lutheran community in Baku ceased to exist in 1936 but the church was not destroyed. Parishioners think it was spared because of its beautiful organ and it could be used as a concert hall.

The German colonists had no other choice than to perform their religious rites and to provide religious education in their own homes.

In 1941, Germany started invading the Soviet Union and from 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> October, the German population of Azerbaijan was deported to Kazakhstan as part of a wider wave or "resettlement" of Germans living in the USSR. They were not rehabilitated until 1989. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Soviet Germans immigrated to Germany. Only a few families returned to Azerbaijan.

The church which was confiscated by the Soviet regime in the 1930s (2) remained state property after independence and is now a Philharmonic Center belonging to the Ministry of Culture (3).

In November 1994, an initiative by a German woman to teach languages in Baku led to the revival of the Lutheran community. There were then about 80 members. Four years later, their number rose to 160 (120 adults and 40 children). The attendance of Sunday's religious services is about 30-40 people, mainly women.

The building is rented to the Lutheran congregation (4) according to their needs for the duration of their religious activities. This small community could not afford to be the owner of this big historic building and to maintain it in good condition. In 2001, President Heydar Aliyev signed a decree allocating 1 million manats (1 million EUR) to the renovation of the church.

The Lutheran community in Baku has first been served by pastors from Germany staying for three to six weeks in the country. The last one left in 2008 after serving the community for ten months. Afterwards, Azerbaijani pastors took over. The congregation is affiliated to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Caucasus, the seat of which is in Tbilisi (Georgia).

The current pastor, Ismayilova Manzar, is from a Muslim family. She works as a social worker and has been a part-time religious minister paid by the community for three years. She became Christian while she was living in Moscow. She studied at the Lutheran Seminary of St Petersburg. Her change of religion did not pose any problem in her family, she told Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Baku was registered by the State in 2010 after a solution was found to harmonize the internal rules of the Church with the 2009 Law on Freedom of Religious Beliefs. The community is run by a council of five members, mainly women, elected every four years.

### ***History of the Lutheran Church in Azerbaijan***

The establishment of the Lutheran Church on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan is closely linked to the migration of German settlers invited to Russia by Catherine II at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 1800s, the Southern Caucasus, including Northern Azerbaijan, was conquered by the Russian Empire and German colonists continued to settle in this region throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1819, the tsarist authorities moved about a thousand of them to Helenendorf and Annenfeld (currently Khanlar and Shamkir). The colonists of the first migration wave were engaged in various agricultural activities: livestock breeding, crop farming, horticulture, wine-growing and viticulture and so on. At

the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the oil and industrial boom attracted many foreigners in Baku, including a second wave of German businessmen, industrialists, engineers, architects, physicians, scientists, teachers, etc.

The Lutheran community consisted primarily of German peasants living in eight rural colonies in the north, educated immigrants in Baku and other cities but also Swedes. Religion occupied an integral part of the colonists' life. All the German migrants who went to the Russian Empire were granted freedom of religion and the possibility to build churches. They were able to invite pastors and clergymen to serve their community. A prayer house was built in Helenendorf as early as the 1820s and a parsonage in 1834. The first stone of the church of Helenendorf was laid in 1854 and the consecration of the place of worship took place three years later. The Lutheran Church in Annenfeld was built in 1909. The colonists were rigorous in their religious observances, including regular church attendance. They had their own schools and religion was one of the mandatory subjects.

(1) NKVD: People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the police of the Communist Party.

(2) Some sources indicated that the church had been confiscated without mentioning when and by whom: it was under the Communist regime after the Bolchevik Revolution. After the independence of Azerbaijan, no law on the restitution of religious buildings was adopted and they remained state property. Something rather similar happened in France after the 1789 Revolution where the state is still the owner of the then confiscated religious property and takes care of the maintenance and repair work.

(3) See picture at

: <https://www.google.be/search?q=Picture+Lutheran+Church+in+Baku&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=FJHUuD4O43xhQev84CoCQ&ved=0CEQQsAQ&biw=1518&bih=748&dpr=1>

(4) 40 manats per religious service (40 EUR), female pastor Ismayilova Manzar told Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l in 2013.

### **Lutheran Church of the Saviour in Baku. Picture by HRWF Int'l**

