

Svetlana VOJNIČOVÁ-FELDYOVÁ
(2011)

**THE SLOVAK EVANGELICAL CHURCH
OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION IN SERBIA
IN WORDS AND PICTURES**

*Nový Sad: The Slovak Evangelical Church
of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia, 319 pp*

The finding that in faith and the associated church establishment played a significant role in the lives of expatriates, especially in the life of their larger communities, is one of the results of migration studies. This is also confirmed by the recently published book “The Slovak Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Serbia in Words and Pictures” (Nový Sad 2017), which provides a picture of the confessional roots of the spiritual and social life of the Slovak enclave in the Serbian Vojvodina region. The fact that the publication has focused on the evangelical church derives from the fact that over 90% of Vojvodina Slovaks are of the Lutheran faith. The reason for this is that some of the main causes of their mass exile were the harsh counter-Reformation and re-Catholicization sanctions.

The very title of this newly published book gives away the fact that it is a continuation of the older church schematization by Adam Vereš which was published under the similar heading of “The Slovak Evangelical Christian Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Words and Pictures” (Báčsky Petrovec 1930). The aim of Svetlana Vojničová-Feldyová, the editor of this more recent publication, was to process and make accessible the historical development of the Slovak Evangelical Church in Serbia, which took place from 1930 until the present day. The editorial link to the publication by Adam Vereš in this current volume was also taken into account in its content, in addition to its title, since the main attention is focused on the characteristics of church congregations and their seniorates.

It is certainly no coincidence that the analytical units of the work under review are church congregations. This takes into account the fact that within the Evangelical Church, church congregations became a tool to prevent the spiritual and organisational work of the church community resting solely on the shoulders of the pastor, but to ensure that these tasks were borne by everyone equally. Through the church congregations, the Evangelical Church brought the principles of democratization into the life of the body of believers. The congregation's governing body is the church general assembly and its executive body is the board of the congregation consisting of the pastor and elders, elected from among respected and trustworthy churchgoers, numbering several dozen.

Slovak colonists in the Vojvodina established church congregations immediately on arriving in the newly-settled villages. Their task was to build an infrastructure to meet religious and ecclesiastical needs: a church, bell-tower, pastor, school, cemetery. These were buildings which united churchgoers and formed a framework for their spiritual and community fellowship.

One of the main tasks of the parish pastor, alongside conducting services and pastoral activities, was administration. Immediately after the establishment of church congregations, pastors introduced records of baptisms, weddings, deaths and confirmations of members of the congregation. Pastors with more initiative, who were more perceptive observers of what was happening in the congregation, recorded more noteworthy facts in other documents. Some of the most valuable include lists of the families which gathered together in the given settlement, which included the origin of the colonists. Several chronicles of congregations were produced. We can mention at least the most significant such as the Jesenský chronicle 1807 – 1825 about Stary Pazov, the Stehl chronicle 1818 – 1862 about Báčsky Petrovec, Kutlík's chronicle 1876 – 1890 about Kulpín, after which several more were written. With these written documents, Evangelical pastors laid the founding stones for the historical and cultural memory of expatriates. They became an irreplaceable support for the creation of their individual and collective identities, and the self-image of their enclave.

This publication on the Slovak Evangelical Church in Serbia is a collective work by 33 authors who worked on forty congregations, using the concept of the method of encyclopaedic-lexicographical articles. The synopsis of their content is the characterisation of the social and economic conditions of the given settlement, of the Slovak community within it, the history of the congregation, the activities of the congregation, the pastors serving there, a description of the church and the property owned by the congregation.

The publication's wealth of documentary material and information provides us with a rich visualisation of church monuments, Evangelical pastors and their activities, as well as the rich evidence of crowds of Vojvodina Slovaks from all church congregations and their branches.

This publication on the Evangelical church in Serbia is a praiseworthy editorial feat, since it has made accessible information on the activities of this church in the period after 1930, which has long been neglected. Pastors from the local congregations, who are the authors of the relevant articles, are responsible for this factographic contribution. It has to be understood that the authors of the publication had in mind not only the empirical side of the Evangelical church of the Vojvodina Slovaks, that is the precise documentation of their history, their church structure and their religious activities. As Adam Vereš already pointed out in his opening article, the role of the Evangelical church in the Vojvodina region was not only to maintain the faith of its members in God and their closeness to the church; its mission was also to raise these people up, in order to make them examples of morality, education and happiness among the varied ethnic and religious mosaic of the Vojvodina region.

Not only representatives of the church, but also other scholars among Vojvodina Slovaks, expressed themselves on the role and mission of the Slovak Evangelical church in Vojvodina. Professor Mária Myjavcová pointed out that the Evangelical church was largely responsible for the fact that the Slovak language remains even today a present, living and multi-functional means of communications. It was the Evangelical church in particular which brought together Slovak settlers, which organised Slovak schooling and maintained long-term contact with Slovakia. It was mainly Evangelical pastors and Evangelical teachers who focused the continuity of cultural life, not only in individual Slovak settlements, but also in the whole enclave community.

There was a kind of symbiosis of ethnic and faith common to the activities of the Slovak Evangelical church in the Serbian Vojvodina region, in the form of a mutual interaction between religion and ethnicity. As a result, as the author of the historiographical article Ondrej Peťkovský stated, Slovak Evangelicals in the Vojvodina region did not disappear as a nation, despite the harsh circumstances of their over 280 years of existence, and the Evangelical church resisted, too.

In conclusion, we can state that a well organised, and therefore useful, publication has been produced. Without taking into account the role played by the Evangelical church in the life of the Vojvodina Slovaks, the image of this enclave society would not be complete – or convincing.

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