



From One of Our Own: The Victory of Gertrude Detzel

By Anthony Corcoran

This story won third place at the 2022 AHSGR annual convention.

Gertrude Detzel was born on November 8, 1904, into a modest family of Russian-German colonialists living in the village of Rozhdestenskoe within the Northwest Kavkaz Region of the Russian Empire. Although born at the threshold of a century that would offer previously unimaginable possibilities to much of humanity, Gertrude was destined to endure the darker side of the twentieth century: the rise and consolidation of inhumane forces unleashed by the hubris of ideologies bent on dominating every aspect of society. Much of her life reflected the harsh fate of those subject to the effect of prejudice and the fearful panic that flames this violence.

Her childhood was not, however, lacking in joy-filled interaction with others, shared mostly among her local community of ethnic Germans. These were people recognized as being especially industrious and resilient. Gertrude studied very well at school, knew German, French and even Latin. Like the majority of her people, she was raised in a devoutly Christian environment. With the onset of World War II, Gertrude's life changed dramatically. She was part of the massive relocation of her people enforced by a frantically paranoid Joseph Stalin. She was sent to Southern Kazakhstan, to the town of Pakhta Aral with other women from her area, to pick cotton. In 1943, many of these women, including Gertrude, were transferred by freight train to the "labor army" in the Gurevskii State of the Kazakh Socialist Republic to toil at an oil production facility. During this time, Gertrude tirelessly strove to encourage her companions who were forced to live in deplorable conditions. She is remembered for her kind and timely support at critical moments in the lives of those who found themselves prone to despair amidst the relentlessly ferocious environment to which they had been consigned. She brought people of different faiths together for prayer - urging them to do so on their daily walk to and back from work and, of course, on Sundays.

"Take her away, take her back, she bewitched me, I already begin to believe"¹ claimed a camp official one night after Gertrude had been brought to him for questioning.

As might be expected in a closed environment emerging from and plagued by cynicism, official complaints were lodged against her, resulting in her arrest in September of 1949. She received a ten-year sentence of forced labor for the crime of "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." While serving her term she sought out vulnerable and despairing fellow inmates, assuring those who were especially despondent, mostly by reminding them *who they were* - and by repeatedly

pointing out the temporary nature of all human experiences, including that which they were now forced to endure.

Her reputation as being steadfast in courage and here persistence was known to all with whom she lived. She was both feared and (sometimes even secretly) respected by several of the guards and officials at the prison. She was simultaneously despised for refusing to surrender her hope and deep faith (an unpardonable challenge to the enervating materialism of Soviet atheistic communism), and for her ability to inspire. Certainly, her consoling presence was cherished by many who labored alongside her in the work camp and who served time with her in prison

After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the Soviet authorities began to permit the release of prisoners deemed not excessively dangerous or harmful. The head of the prison where Gertrude was interned used the opportunity of the armistice of 1954 to push for her early release, stating, "This German woman must be released as soon as possible, or everyone else here, by looking at her, will take to prayer." Upon her liberation from prison, Gertrude moved to the city of Karaganda, Kazakhstan, where many ethnic Germans had been exiled in the fall of 1941. She assisted in the still largely underground community of German Christians. Many remember her diligence and kindness as she everywhere taught and encouraged during those dishearteningly bleak years. She was dogged in her belief that things would one day change. Gertrude Detzel died on the 16th of August 1971, more than twenty years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. She was buried in the cemetery in the *Maikuduk* section of Karaganda. People continue to visit her humble gravesite as pilgrims.

Speaking with people who spent time with Gertrude Detzel continues to be a fascinating and inspiring undertaking. For the first decades of my service to, among others, the remnant of Volga, Caucus, and Odessa Germans living in Siberia and Central Asia, I heard often about this impressive woman. Although early appreciating the remarkableness of her enduring faith, it was only with time that I began to perceive more acutely the relevancy of her witness to people of our own generation and from different parts of the world. Of course, she was a woman from a different era. It is not possible for us to comprehend the challenges which she and her community confronted on a daily basis. Nor do we have access to her own interior struggles and concerns as she confronted these challenges. More significant, however, are the concrete lessons from her approach to living which can still provide a source of hope and of motivation:

First, and most importantly, Gertrude was a woman who understood her time most fundamentally as *opportunity*. She certainly did not choose to live during this heinous period of humiliation and persecution. She nonetheless refused to become like those who despised her for her ethnicity and her faith. She neither allowed herself to be overwhelmed by hatred nor submerged in (what would perhaps be an understandable) self-pity. She freely and consciously chose to live according to her *convictions* - which were not always immediately vindicated, and which might often have been dismissed as unrealistic. She diligently endeavored to keep herself and those around her from collapsing into the very cynicism of the system which viciously demanded the sacrifice of all that is personal, transcendent, and sacred. In effect, she dared to perceive the events of her life - both those that were positive as well as the many that were potentially devastating - as offering unique possibility or, better said, providing countless, daily *opportunities* to affirm the dignity and resilience of herself and others.

Secondly, she chose to see beyond what were often perceived, at least in her time, to be insurmountable divisions between her own people and others in order to focus on that which inextricably and irresistibly *unites*. Not only did she *refuse to* disdain people of other ethnic or religious groups but, rather, she managed to articulate a compassionate objectivity in viewing humanity's shared condition. She was outstanding in her desire to gather people together for prayer - both Lutherans and Catholics. Those who know the history of religious affiliations of the Germans in Russia during that era might appreciate the exceptionality of such an activity during her generation. Rather than designate groups as consisting of "us and them," she saw humans as intimately connected in each person's thirst for meaning.

Gertrude was a person who exuded a passion that cannot be fabricated or self-imposed. Those who knew her almost always point to this trait as most characteristic of her interaction with others and one that was particularly attractive, especially considering the conditions in which people denounced as "enemies" of the Soviet state were forced to live for such an extended period of time. Of course, we should not romanticize her outlook. Indeed, there are those who remember - although usually with a discernable fondness - the sober firmness with which Gertrude upheld certain moral and religious principles and practices. No one, however, who knew this woman fails to mention the unique sense of passion that emanated from her words, her convictions, and from the concrete care that she showed for those around her. Distinct from a merely optimistic outlook, it was precisely this heartening passion that fueled her service for those in need and, by extension, motivated others to do so as well

The plethora of choices that she consciously made to continuously utilize that which was within her power - that is, the choice to determine *for what* and *how* to live each day - provide a salient challenge to all of us: Do *we* have the courage to view the particular events and time in which *we* find ourselves as essentially a series of opportunities? Gertrude, destitute by most standards, managed to find not only that source of strength from which to carry on, but was able with no apparent personal advantages, to disseminate among her own people and among others the most valuable of resources...unwavering hope and the profound awareness of the inherent dignity of each individual - as well as to the ultimate invincibility of a community that lives and acts according to these convictions.



My name is Anthony Corcoran. Originally from Arizona and Texas, I have spent the past twenty-five years serving as a Jesuit priest in the former Soviet Union. Over these decades, I have come to know Germans from Russia, who constituted a large portion of our communities. My first years of service in Siberia were to some of the people born in the Volga, Odessa, and other regions where German Russians lived. In recent years, the children and grandchildren of these

people have mostly emigrated to Germany. For the past five years, I have served in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia. Some of our parishioners today are the descendants of this great people. I write of Gertrude Detzel because she is not only an example of the integrity and courage of her people, but her life and zeal continue to inspire many of us. I am convinced that more people should know about her.

¹*What her niece, Nella Iosifina Silivirova, recounts about Gertrude Detzel.*
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