

BORN IN THE FIRE

The story of William Fetler alias Basil Malof
(1883-1957)

Church-planting Evangelist in Russia and Latvia



The Salvation Temple, Riga, in the 70's

JOHN WOOD

Evangelist Extraordinary

Thomas Spurgeon, son and successor of the famous Charles Haddon, once said that 'if the college had done nothing else since his great father's death than train a man like Pastor Fetler, it had been worth while to continue its existence'.

Yet when one very able present day graduate of Spurgeon's College read the paragraph or two I'd written about Fetler, he expressed astonishment. 'Who was this man? I've certainly never heard about him'.

On the other hand, a friend from Cardiff rang to say 'I'm eager to see what you hope to write about William Fetler. As a young Christian I was encouraged to pray for him'.

This booklet is just the first instalment of the Fetler story. All it can do is to give the barest outline of an outstanding church planting evangelist who carried the flame of revival with him wherever he went.

In 1907 this fine young Latvian preacher graduated from Pastors' College London, and went out to Eastern Europe under the auspices of The Pioneer Mission, founding large

churches in St Petersburg and Riga, as well as pioneering what is now the Baptist Church in Moscow.

His brother Robert, who also studied at Spurgeons, was a Pastor in Riga, and Pincipal of the Bible College his brother had founded there. When Communism took over in Russia, William found himself exiled to America yet again; while Robert met a brutal death in concentration camp.

William's work among Russian POWs during the First World War resulted in the founding of very many Baptist Churches in Russia when the men returned to their homes in 1918.

Meanwhile William founded the Russian Bible College in Philadelphia, and later led a number of his students on to the field. Until the great Depression and the Second World War brought an end to this particular ministry, Fetler's Russian Missionary Society maintained an army of workers. He has been called the Luther of Russia and the Wesley of Latvia.

Once he became a naturalised American citizen, he took the name 'Basil Malof'. His Russian Bible Society still exists to serve his former compatriots.

In Good Old London Town

The son of a Baptist pioneer preacher in Latvia, William Fetler had been converted at the age of 15. But because there was considerable opposition to Baptists from the mainly Lutheran population, he was baptised at night in a river outside the town of Tukum.

Although he had been discouraged from any attempt to preach at first, William's call could not be gainsayed; and when Rev John Inkis of Zion Church Riga sent him to Daugavgriva to take an evening service one Sunday, that call was confirmed.

The law required every schoolboy to learn Russian as well as Latvian. So once he had graduated from High School, William was ideally placed to serve as an Interpreter to the Justice of the Peace in Riga. There he honed his skills both in Russian and the law: skills which were to prove invaluable in later life.

As preaching began to take over his life, he exchanged the Law Office for life as a clerk in Leutner's bicycle factory, before becoming Office Manager at Feil's Iron and Machine Factory in Riga.

His knowledge of English was minimal. But he had heard of C.H. Spurgeon, and longed to study at his College. So with the aid of a Russian-English dictionary, he composed a letter of application to the Principal.

After a very long journey across Europe by train, William arrived in London during the summer of 1903.

The contrast between the the wooden houses of his home village in Latvia, and the imposing buildings of Edwardian London, could not have been greater. But for a 19 year old student it was all a great adventure. And Archibald McCaig, the Principal of Pastors' College, which was then situated in Temple Street behind the newly rebuilt Metropolitan Tabernacle (the original had been burned down), was swift to befriend this eager young man, who was in fact the College's first student from Eastern Europe.

Within six months William was speaking English fluently, and preaching with much acceptance. But he never forgot his roots. So, much of his spare time was taken up visiting the Russian ships moored in the London docks, and witnessing to the seamen.

At the same time he proved a first class student. When the first Baptist World Congress was held in London in 1905, he served as Official Interpreter for the Russian delegation.

In 1904, the Welsh revival had broken out, and along with staff and students from the College, William visited the scenes of awakening. It was there that his faith caught fire. Critics of the revival have often said that it was very short-lived so far as the Principality was concerned, and appeared to have had little impact on England. But a mission at Spurgeon's Tabernacle led by 6 Welsh students, from March 13 to mid April 1905, proved an exception. Midnight meetings were held, down-and-outs were reached, hundreds attended the meetings, and more than 700 names were registered of those who had confessed Christ. Dr McCaig had no hesitation in calling it a revival.

In a letter written on March 25th Thomas Spurgeon described a typical midnight meeting:

At eleven we formed up in the space between Tabernacle and railings, and marched forth about 11.30. We were four deep, I

know not how long. Mrs S Dr McCaig and his wife marched with me, just behind the musicians. We sang and shouted out the news of the meeting all the way. What a sight when we got back to the Tabernacle steps - drunkards, harlots, all sorts of refuse, many in drink, but all singing 'There is a fountain filled with blood'. The meeting lasted till three O'Clock! Solemn, subdueing, wonderful...

Fetler's involvement in the revival movement was total. He became a personal friend of Evan Roberts; and in later years he sometimes returned to the Valleys of South Wales to preach at the Rhondda Monthly Bible Conferences, organised by R.B.Jones.

Meanwhile, during Fetler's student years, the China Inland Mission, and the faith principles which Hudson Taylor taught, had captured the imagination of a whole generation of young people; and there were some from the Tabernacle who went into the work. For a time, William Fetler also wondered whether his own future was to lie in China. But as time went by, he was moved to consider the plight of Russian refugees in Canada. In the event, Czar Nicholas II's 'Edict of Toleration' in 1907 made it

possible for Fetler to return to his homeland as an evangelist; and as Rev E.A. Carter of the Pioneer Mission had long dreamed of opening up a work in Eastern Europe, Fetler was approached and asked to head up this work.

In June 1907 *The Sword and the Trowel* announced the valedictory of 'Mr W. Fetler'. Then in December it reported that having seen conversions under his ministry in Riga, Mitau and elsewhere, he had arrived at St Petersburg in October. There he'd held meetings every evening. A Christian Princess had also opened her Palace for some meetings. In fact the ballroom of Princess de Lieven's Palace became the venue for St Petersburg's very first Sunday School. The report went on to say that in one fortnight during his travels, 182 people had professed conversion. In all he saw 1400 professions of faith in 183 meetings during that four month period.

William Fetler was a man of prodigious energy. Within two years he had founded 12 mission halls around St Petersburg. While his work among students grew so swiftly, that two large

theatres were hired to hold the crowds. Later he used two Concert Halls as well. In addition, he trained 35 lay preachers to carry the good news to surrounding districts.

Many among the aristocracy welcomed his work, and supported a literature ministry which included the publication of books and Bibles, plus a magazine called 'Vera' (faith).

As the numbers of converts grew, it was decided to build a large 'Tabernacle'. But in the meantime, he was impelled to set out for a mission in Moscow.

12 Pokrovskaya Street

1909 saw Fetler renting a hall in Moscow to which he invited all and sundry. The local press was outraged that this Western-trained evangelist should be preaching in 'Holy Russia'. So the local clergy mounted a campaign against him. A black-edged news sheet warned the people of Moscow to avoid this devil incarnate. But the sensationalism of their attacks was such that many people couldn't resist finding out what Fetler looked like! Did he really have horns and tail? But

once in his meetings, the gospel singing and passionate preaching wove their own spell, and some 60 people responded to his preaching on the very first night of the mission. For a time, the Authorities closed down his hall at number 12. But the work had clearly taken root.

It is sad that in his book *Out of Great Tribulation*, Ernest Payne made no mention of the fact that the Baptist Church in Moscow, about which he wrote so much, owed its origins to Fetler's ministry. It is also regrettable that elsewhere in his book, he took every opportunity to criticise, and even scorn, William Fetler.

Dom Evangelia

In 1910 Fetler and his former Principal attended the great Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. He then travelled round the country raising funds for the new Church he wanted to build in St Petersburg.

On June 29th Fetler and McCaig met up again, and set off from Charing Cross station for their 58 hour train journey to Russia.

Once in St Petersburg, they were given hospitality

by Madame Chertkov, whose English home near Bournemouth, Fetler was to buy in later years. It is now the Slavanka Christian Conference Centre.

McCaig felt himself back in the atmosphere of the Welsh revival as the two men travelled from centre to centre in and around St Petersburg. He was also intrigued to meet a Russian Orthodox Bishop who had translated Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, and who preached the gospel to crowded congregations. On getting back to England, McCaig sent him a complete set of Spurgeon's works.

How McCaig revelled in the wide streets, fine shops, handsome buildings, eastern bazaars, and old cathedrals of St Petersburg, later to be known as Leningrad!

The following year, 1911, William Fetler paid a visit to Philadelphia where he raised more funds for the Church building. Then on Christmas Sunday 1911, McCaig was present with 1800 others, including city dignitaries, for the opening of 'Dom Evangelia' in St Petersburg. Luther's great hymn *Ein feste burg* thundered out. McCaig and others brought greetings. The choir sang fit

to burst. Fetler preached. Prayer was offered. The hours sped by. With only a brief break part way through, the service, which had begun at 4 pm, ended at 10 pm. It only finished then because the snow was so deep all public transport had to stop!

Three years later, Fetler's huge building also housed a Red Cross hospital for those wounded in the Great World War.

A Prophet in Exile

Meanwhile, in May 1913, Fetler was back home in Latvia conducting yet another mission in the Capital.

As he put it himself, Fetler had to be Sankey as well as Moody! He trained the choir, and sometimes wrote the hymns! As always he preached with passion.

Every minute of the day was spent in relentless activity. If he wasn't counselling enquirers, discussing projects, writing articles, translating books, lobbying local government officers, overseeing building work, or answering letters, he was travelling to the next venue, planning new openings, and witnessing to individuals. Count Tolstoy locked horns

with him on more than one occasion.

His train journeys were spent deep in prayer as he soaked himself in Scripture. Every meeting was an event. Conversions were the order of the day. He couldn't abide staid and stodgy services. Like Billy Bray, the Cornish Methodist, he was born in the fire and couldn't live in the smoke!

The Revival House in Riga which he opened was soon too small. So he borrowed other buildings. Eventually he acquired a large Greek military Church, adapting it to his needs. His brother Robert eventually pastored 'Golgotha', as it was called. (There is a Church at Porth in South Wales that is modelled on it.)

On July 13 1913 he found time to get married to one of his converts! Barbara Kovalevsky had spent time in London studying at the China Inland Mission Training Home. But the ties of natural affection had drawn William and Barbara together. In all, some 2000 people gathered for what was more of an evangelistic service than a wedding!

But soon he was back in St Petersburg, preaching at Dom Evangelia, and serving

on the Government's Committee for Religious Affairs as representative for the Free Churches.

But his outspoken ways did not always please the Orthodox Church. The Czar therefore did all that he could to discourage Fetler's work. If threats did not work, perhaps bribes might! So on one notable occasion Fetler was offered a bishopric. But he said he'd only consider the offer if it was as Pope rather than as Bishop!

On November 22 1914 while in a prayer meeting at Dom Evangelia, the police arrived, and he was given just 10 minutes to get ready for exile to Siberia. Two days later, a disconsolate Church member scarcely recognised his Pastor as Fetler walked towards him a free man! The Church had prayed, and the Czar had relented. He was now offered deportation to a country of his choice. The ten days he was given to put all his affairs in order, were spent conducting evangelistic services, at which some 500 professed conversion.

After spending some time in Sweden, where he was the guest of Prince Bernadotte, the king's brother, Fetler

eventually headed for the United States, along with his wife and their son Daniel, arriving in April 1915.

The Land of the Free

Fetler's stay in Scandinavia enabled him to conduct evangelistic meetings among Swedes, Norwegians and Laplanders.

Like every other exile, Fetler felt the pain of rejection and isolation. But once he reached America, his outlook changed dramatically. The fact that there were 2 million Russian POWs in German camps, meant that, while he could not go back to Russia, he could still minister to the Russian people.

Articles published in *The Christian Herald* evoked a warm response from leading evangelicals in the States; and soon many thousands of dollars were being contributed to the relief of these Russian prisoners. Books and tracts, translated by his wife Barbara, were printed in abundance, and taken to Germany by a team of colporteurs and evangelists.

Within 6 months, news reached Fetler, that in a camp of 5,000 POWs, some 872 men had been converted

and baptised. They formed the first Baptist Church ever set up in a prison camp! It is estimated that some 30,000 war prisoners were converted through this ministry. A letter sent to Fetler from the south of Russia, told him that over 800 new churches had been established in that particular Province through the witness of returning prisoners.

Meanwhile, Fetler was also involved in work among Slavic people in the United States. But when he became Dean of a Bible College for them in New York, he soon became aware that the Northern Baptists did not share his outlook on the Scriptures. In no time at all, controversy broke out, and Fetler withdrew from the College. From that point onward, his relationships with the wider Baptist world began to cool. In 1911 he had been honoured by Baptist leaders at the Baptist World Congress. But now his outspoken opposition to the down-grading of Scripture, changed the situation.

Fetler was never one to hang fire, or to 'wait and see'. If he went into print in his opposition to evolution, for example, it was because he saw that 'the doctrine of

inevitable progress', which some theologians were promoting, runs counter to the Biblical doctrine of The Fall. Either man is emerging from his animal origins; or he is departing from his divine destiny. The two mindsets are plainly at variance.

The fact that mankind is conscious of 'imperfection' indicates that it has an inbuilt criterion of 'perfection'. And the realisation of our human 'finite-ness', implies that we have an awesome awareness of 'The Infinite'. In other words, we are not struggling up towards a perfection of which we have no prior knowledge. We are wrestling with the dichotomy of our own existence. On the one hand, we were made in the image of God. But now, because all have sinned, everyone falls short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).

Fetler left New York with the princely sum of \$5. But his was now a household name among evangelicals in America. And soon he had acquired premises in Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, where in June 1917 he opened his own Russian Bible School. Until Christmas that year, Jakob

Jacobitch Wiens (Vins), grandfather of Georgi Vins, taught Theology and music there.

Next year (1918), Fetler helped organise a huge 'Conference for the Evangelization of Russia', which was held at Moody Tabernacle in Chicago June 24-28, with some 5,000 attending. Fifty of Fetler's 110 students, camped in the basement, and sang in the meetings. Fetler himself preached several times. Money was raised towards the founding of a 'Russian Missionary Society', one of 8 evangelistic agencies which Fetler initiated throughout his career, and widespread enthusiasm was engendered.

Two years later, Fetler left America with some 23 Russian graduates from his School. The tussle between various factions inside Russia, had given Christians an opportunity to evangelise, and Fetler's team was on hand to meet the need. Eventually there were up to 200 workers ministering in the Soviet Union.

September 1921 saw Fetler back in England, raising money to buy Slavanka, Madame Chertkov's home. The Revolution had left her impoverished, so Fetler

petitioned Christian people to buy the house. This would not only provide them with a splendid Conference centre, it would also enable Madame Chertkov to live in comfort for her remaining days. He also took part with Mrs Jessie Penn-Lewis and others in a *Victorious Life Conference* at Slavanka that month.

It is almost impossible to keep track of all Fetler's movements in 1920-1 as he set up bases for the Russian Missionary Society in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania etc, as well as in Western Europe. But late 1921 saw him back home in Riga, pioneering yet another large congregation.

Salvation Temple, Riga

Fetler was described by a contemporary as 'a tall, restless pioneer evangelist'. His friend R.B.Jones said that he was 'a man of stern moral character, deep religious convictions, and of uncompromising fidelity to the Word of God; a mighty preacher, wholly dedicated to the Gospel'.

Together with his helpers, Fetler founded another 40 or more congregations in strategic areas throughout

Latvia. At Daugaplis in Latgalia, for example, an area where Oswald Blumit, yet another Spurgeon's student was to serve so effectively, Fetler built a beautiful Church that could accommodate 1,000 people. While back in Riga, his evangelistic work resulted in yet another large congregation being formed.

So, on July 12 1925, the foundation stone was laid for The Salvation Temple. In January 1927, the lower hall was opened for use, and in August, the whole building, seating 1700 people, and costing \$100,000, was opened free of debt amid great rejoicing.

Beside providing a worship centre for the Latvian, Russian and German congregations, the complex included accommodation for evangelists, a Bible School with some 50 students, (where Dr McCaig, Fetler's old Principal, taught for several months), and some administrative offices, plus kitchens and dining rooms. All was dominated by a very distinctive Prayer Tower.

Fetler's Co-labourers

As the work developed, William was glad that his

brother Robert was on hand to help.

Robert had studied at Spurgeon's College on two separate occasions, and had spent some time in the Russian army. He had also shown himself to be an able Pastor at 'Golgotha' in Riga. But now William was able to entrust the work of the Bible College to Robert, while he oversaw the work as a whole.

His magazines 'Faith' and GOST, 'The Guest', took up much of his time. And he was always in demand as a preacher.

Like John Wesley, he was something of an autocrat. So it was not at all surprising that he sometimes crossed swords with his choir! At one point, they had somehow reached the conclusion that the crowds were coming because of their singing! So Fetler promptly sacked them all. But the crowds still came!

In 1924 Oswald J. Smith of Toronto paid the first of several visits to Russia. He and Fetler were kindred spirits. In fact William wanted him to become his co-worker. But it was not to be. Oswald went on to become Founder and Pastor of The Peoples Church in

Toronto. But that great missionary church, led first by Oswald, then by his son Paul, and now by Dr John Hull, has invested hugely in the work Fetler founded.

As time went by, William Fetler became involved in prison evangelism. So he formed a society with that specific end in view. When the British evangelist James Alexander Stewart came on the scene in the 30s, the two men delighted in visiting Latvia's jails, and preaching the gospel.

Stewart himself had first turned up on Robert's doorstep in the winter of 1934, totally exhausted after a wintry train journey across the continent, and knowing not a word of the local language. As he was a total stranger, his welcome was hardly ecstatic. But after hearing him give his testimony one evening, William warmed to him. Thereafter, Stewart became William's 'Timothy'.

Stewart himself never forgot the first meeting he ever attended in the Salvation Temple at Riga. The great sanctuary was crowded with many hundreds of worshippers, weeping, singing, praying and testifying, long before the service

began at 3 o'clock that Sunday afternoon..

Then the tall, muscular, dark-haired Pastor, with deep-set penetrating eyes, came on to the platform, accompanied by a dozen or so associate preachers.

He knelt to pray, then sat sensing the atmosphere, before announcing the opening hymn (which he had composed). When he prayed, murmers of united praying rose from every part of the building. Then a choir of 100 voices sang the gospel with soul-stirring beauty. A converted opera singer sang 'The Old Rugged Cross'. And Fetler began to preach. It was 9 o'clock before the service ended.

Soon Stewart was involved in evangelism throughout the whole area. Some of the scenes he witnessed were akin to revival. Later he was to visit Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary. And even after the Second World War, which dislocated Christian work dramatically, Stewart kept meeting people whose lives had been revolutionised by those pre-war evangelistic forays. He acknowledged that he owed such widespread awakening in eastern Europe under his ministry,

to the touch of revival he experienced through the ministry of William Fetler.

All in all, Fetler's stay at Riga from 1921 to 1939, represented the longest spell of sustained ministry he had ever exercised in any one place up to then. Even so, this monumental work was to be cruelly cut short by the outbreak of war in 1939.

At the time, Fetler was in America, attending the Baptist World Alliance meetings in Atlanta. As Soviet tanks rolled into Lithuania, in reprisal for an alleged conspiracy against Stalin by the Baltic States, Fetler knew he could not return. And when Latvia 'voted' to become part of the USSR in 1940, the die was cast.

Ernest Payne accused Fetler of mounting an anti-communist campaign from this point onward. But quite apart from the fact that Payne himself bent over backward to exonerate the Soviet régime of any wrong-doing against Christians (he blamed over-zealous local officials for any problems Christians encountered) Fetler saw the anti-God philosophy of Communism as a *spiritual*, rather than a political issue.

In 1940 he wrote:

'The present system in Russia is in its essence a world-system. They have started out, like Mohammed of old, to conquer the whole world to its doctrines, and so far as they would do it even by fire and sword. We, as Christian people, are not so much interested in the political aspect of the problem. To us it is clear that the Russian problem has a spiritual background. Ephesians 6:12 is of great meaning to us.'

In an article he wrote on February 16 1926, Fetler even predicted the ultimate demise of communism.

'But the Gospel will triumph over the Soviets...The spiritual "Chinese Wall" around Russia will become a smooth, level and wide highway, along which there will move from Germany, England, Australia and other evangelical lands, caravans carrying Bibles and Gospels and other spiritual books'.

In Fetler's enforced absence, the Bible School at Riga was closed down. Then in June 1941 the Salvation Temple was confiscated by the Soviets and turned, first into army barracks, then into a theatre, finally into a Sports Hall for Moscow University. However, it is now back in Christian hands and being used once more as a place of worship. Christian literature is entering Russia

and Latvia again, as Fetler had said it would. And the communist empire lies in ruins. But all that seemed quite impossible in 1940, and for long afterward.

A Small Man?

After a brief stay in Holland, where he translated books by F.B.Meyer, Andrew Murray and R.A.Torrey into Dutch, and started a Dutch magazine, William, Barbara and their family settled in America, where he eventually took out citizenship.

From that point onward he was known by his Russian name Basil Malof, a name he had already been using for some of his writings. The name means 'small', and was deliberately chosen to emphasise his sense of personal unworthiness. But he was certainly not small in drive and vision, gifts and achievements. His critics abounded. But he dwarfed them all.

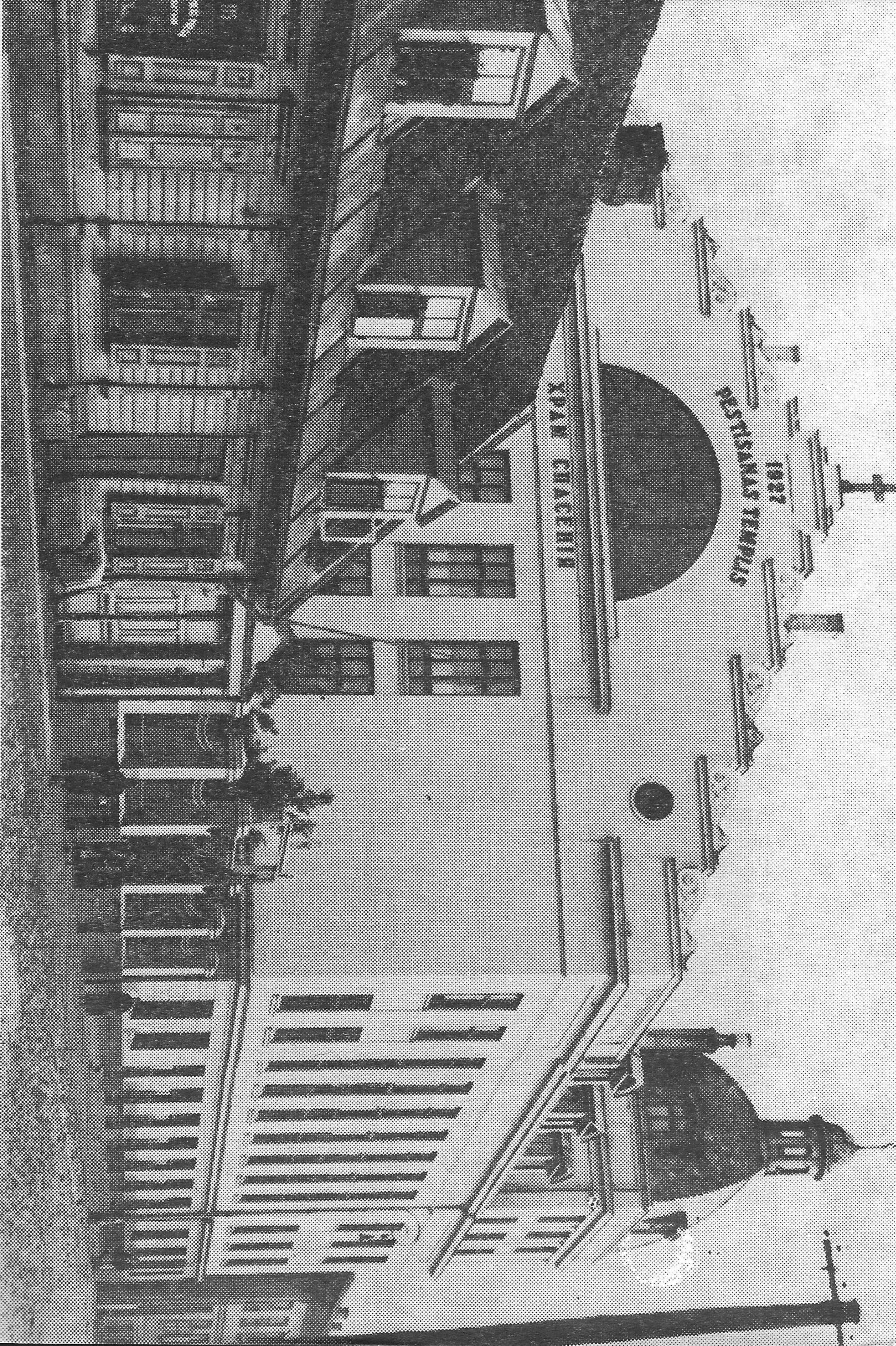
No sooner was he aware of the huge refugee problem in Western Europe, as many east Europeans fled westward during the war, than he petitioned the American government to provide a home for them. He himself

set up a Society for the welfare of those too old or infirmed to travel to America, sending monthly allowances of \$25 to many.

He then founded the Russian Bible Society, his wife Barbara writing a 200 page 'Guide' to go with each Bible. This 'Guide' included an outline of every book of the Bible, and summaries of the great doctrines of our faith, as well as an account of how the Russians got their Bible. A small collection of 75 hymns was also added. So the Russian Bibles being produced by Fetler, were ideal for winning converts, teaching the faith, and enriching worship.

When Fetler died in August 1957, James Stewart continued the work of the Russian Bible Society. Just now, Stewart's daughter and son-in-law head up this work, as well as running James Stewart's own 'Revival Literature' ministry.

Each of the Fetler family has prospered in the land of their adoption. At one stage the whole family formed 'The Rainbow Orchestra' which richly enhanced and augmented William Fetler's preaching and deputation ministry in Europe and America.



The Pestisaniis Templis (Salvation Temple) in Riga.

Fetler had his achilles' heel. Like most pioneers, he was better at establishing new work, than in maintaining it. And at one point, many workers in his Russian Missionary Society lived in serious poverty.

Yet it would be churlish to forget the many tens of thousands of US dollars he raised for Christian work by his own advocacy. It has to be said too, that some Christians found it easier to criticize Fetler than to help him feed the multitude.

William Fetler had a passion for the Holy Spirit. He once said that if he had a month free from all other commitments, he would spend the time studying everything the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit. As it was, The Acts of the Apostles was a happy hunting ground for many of Fetler's messages. And his own dynamic ministry afforded many exciting parallels to the wonders which occurred in Apostolic times.

Not a few people experienced healing through his ministry. But when it came to spiritual gifts, Fetler never majored on minor matters. Nor would he allow anything to obscure the

primacy of the Gospel. He was first and foremost a Spirit-filled evangelist.

The evangelical world as a whole may have forgotten this former hero, along with much else. But the desperate needs of many countries, formerly under communist control, challenge us to match William Fetler's faith, vision, and dynamism, if the people of these lands are to know the blessings which only the good news of Jesus can bestow.

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Valdis points out that Fetler's 'Society of the Brotherhood of the Acts of the Apostles', anticipated the modern Renewal movement. It resulted in a split among Baptists in Latvia. But in 1934, the Latvian Baptists and Fetler's Revival Baptist Churches were reunited.