

*Archbishop Arnolds Lūsis*

## **SAULAINÉ**

(Memories of Saulaine written in 1977 for Saulaine's 25th anniversary publication)

"A bright sun shines on Saulaine,  
Our beautiful sanctuary.  
And let the sun shine in our hearts -  
For us to ever grow for Latvia!"

That was the encouragement and promise for the little campers, which resounded very often at the bonfires, after the end of a day or on the weekend, in the early years at Saulaine. The campers from those days have already grown up. Some of them are already sending their own children to camp. Some of them still belong to our community, active members of the Congregation, and energetic participants in Latvian organizations. Some others have already crossed the threshold of assimilation and are lost to our community. But the work which we do today at Saulaine has the same purpose as was the purpose of the first children's and youths camps, which is, specifically, to raise our young people for God and tomorrow's Latvia.

In the history of the exile of the Latvian people, the name "Saulaine" will have a prominent place, because Saulaine is the first home in the countryside in the free world created especially for the purpose of Christian and Latvian upbringing of young people. The work accomplished with Saulaine in its first years was noted with great interest by Latvians in other countries and in other congregations. Many copied what we had already done. Today, the Latvian Lutheran congregations in the USA, in Canada and in Australia together own 12 country properties, mainly so that young people can obtain an education in a Christian and in a Latvian milieu.

In the first postwar years, such a property acquisition would not have required huge material sacrifices. Now it is impossible because of the high cost of living. Therefore, we can be glad and Thankful not only that we have Saulaine, but for each and every patch on the globe, where ever the Latvian red-white-red flag flutters in foreign exile, where children at morning reveille and in evening sunset can sing our hymn and prayer: God Bless Latvia!

The passing of years has not extinguished the first visit to Saulaine from my memory. That was in early spring of 1952. There was snow cover here and there, but in the valley below was the audible rush of the Nottawasaga River's high waters.

Along with a representative of the Knox Presbyterian Congregation, I examined Saulaine's buildings, which this Canadian congregation's members had used for several years for their get-togethers and weekend vacations. During the war years the buildings were not used, and were quite neglected; rooms were in disarray, the attic full of bats. But the large wall closets contained a good inventory of bed sheets and pillowcases. We went again down to the river.

"Are there any fish in the river?" I asked. It was very important to me.

Summer without waters and without fishing seemed like summer without sunshine.

"Just look!" my guide said, pointing out to an old mill's dike, and, by the concrete barrage edge, fighting against the flow, from time to time one could see the sparkled blue-grey backs of good-sized fishes.

They were suckers, now despised, but at that time, when we were not so fickle, the catch could make any fisherman happy.

Thus came the idea to acquire this piece of Nottawasaga land called Happy Valley Camp and for it to become a Latvian property by the name of Saulaine.

This suggestion found resonance at St. John's Congregation. The asking price for this property of 73 acres land and buildings was very insignificant for that time - if memory does not fail - 3600 dollars. We all contributed some, and the remainder was promised by the Missouri Synod. (Our congregation's budget at that time was not very large: 1950 annual income was only \$2,430.74).

The resolution for the purchase of Saulaine was accepted by the congregation's general meeting of March 9th, 1952.

Immediately, in collaboration with the Latvian Sports Association in Canada, we also completed preliminary work for a youth camp at Saulaine. This, the first camp at Saulaine, where the swimming area and the sports field are today, was officially opened on July 6th 1952 by Latvia's Consul-General in Canada, then Ray Neil Bryson, who has recently passed away. He deserves gratitude also for finding Saulaine for us.

Beginning with 1953, the youth camp was undertaken solely by the congregation. The Saulaine Committee has donated much effort to carry out this enterprise.

It must be noted, that Saulaine was a new kind of endeavour in terms of the kind of work that congregations did in the province of Ontario. As far as I know, no other Lutheran congregation in Ontario had thought of having a camp for young people away in the countryside, therefore Saulaine created interest in the ranks of other Canadians. For several years, when the Latvian children's camp had ended for the summer, other groups of Ontario Lutheran youths continued camping at Saulaine. Within 10 years, other Missouri synod congregations in Ontario followed our lead and had obtained their own campgrounds for youths.

In the first years of Saulaine's existence, all construction and building were accomplished by volunteers. Also, camp counselors worked primarily without any compensation. With the conditions at that time, when it was necessary to begin a new life in a new country, camping fees had to be kept to a bare minimum. However, the camp had outstanding counselors, educators and community workers - Arnolds and Gaida Balins, Tonija Kruka,

Modris Lorbergs. From the ranks of the youth came our beloved Dr. Arnis Freibergs, Inese Akmene, Janis Lulis, Mara Gugane, Vija Udenane, Karlis Jansons and others.

The former campers – now grown and mature in the Saulaine sun...

Writing these memories from a kaleidoscope of various events brings me smiles in remembering them.

The recitals at the bonfires were well prepared in the first years. Then, children did not have difficulty with the Latvian language. And the campers themselves took care not to use English. Then, at one bonfire evening, a prize of recognition for usage of Latvian was awarded to a boy named Bruce, to a boy whose parents never even tried to teach him Latvian.

In writing about the early years, one cannot forget little Reksis, one of the most faithful little campers. As soon as the camping began, Reksis moved down to the tenting area from the superintendent's house and participated in all activities, sometimes just interrupting with his loud barking and scurrying.

Usually, Reksis slept in a counselor's tent. But once the morning alarm clock sounded, Reksis ran barking around all the tents, waking up all the campers and ensuring that all came to the morning gymnastics.

Back then and most likely even today, Mondays were the least favourite day of the week, because campers often had upset stomachs. On the weekends, disregarding warnings, well-meaning parents were always bringing their children too many sweets and fruit.

The Children's Festival at Saulaine has always been an important yearly event. But often enough it is also raining the first weekend in August. Therefore, there have been plenty of "wet" Children's Festivals in this twenty five year period. But rainwater only soaks in skin deep on children and youths. There is plenty of happiness also on rainy days.

There have been plenty of changes at Saulaine in twenty five years. Campers no longer sleep in rented army tents. No more need to wash in the river. No longer is there a need to crawl into a sleeping bag to stay warm. No longer fear from storms and thunder. Prosperity has also given us various comforts.

May the Lord our God give us all the ability to realize what a blessing we have and be able to thank those who created a bit of Latvia across the ocean at Saulaine.

A.L.

