



MUDDY'S RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH MAY SOON BE A MEMORY

BRIAN DENEAL

Ed Kertis recalls his first confession at St. Iosaph Russian Orthodox Church in Muddy as a confusing experience for both him - age 6 or 7 - and for the priest.

Kertis didn't know what a confession was. The priest spoke only Slovak.

"My mother told me, 'You are getting old enough to go to confession,'" Kertis said. "I said, 'What's confession?'"

"When the priest comes you tell him your sins."

"What's my sins?"

The church never had a permanent priest and at that time held services sporadically, on occasions when a traveling Russian Orthodox priest could stop in. There was no confessional booth. The parishioners waited for their turn outside.

"Everybody stood out there with the door closed. They came in one at a time and had vestments placed over their

heads, kneeling," Kertis said.

There was only one problem.

"I confessed in English and gave me absolution in Slovak. I don't know what he forgave and he didn't know either. But I guess God knew what was going on," Kertis said.

After serving as church caretakers for decades, the Kertis family is ready to relieve itself of the responsibility. Kertis and his sister, Madeline Kertesz Pisani, have invested at least \$40,000 in the roof and repair of the bell tower, but more is needed to ensure the structural integrity, Kertis says. They are ready to demolish the church or to sell.

"The bell tower is ready to start collapsing," Kertis said.

The church was built in 1913 for immigrant miners - mainly Slovaks - working the mine at Muddy. Many Eastern European immigrants first came to work in New York and when the coal mine industry began booming in southern Illinois, they moved here. The village of Muddy was named for the Harrisburg-based Big Muddy Coal Company that opened the mine in 1906 and that same year sold it to the O'Gara mining company. The mine was named O'Gara No. 12 and in 1923 the towering concrete tippie was built for loading coal onto train cars.

Kertis said funds for the church building and furnishings

were approved by Tsar Nicholas II himself, only five years before his execution in 1918 during the Bolshevik Revolution.

Kertis' grandfather, miner George Pulaski, native of Czechoslovakia, donated two lots for the church's construction. One lot was for the church and the other was for the rectory. Pulaski also owned the land on which the Southern Illinois Railway & Power Plant was built about the same time.

Barnes Lumber Co. provided the construction materials for the church.

"Old man Barnes provided the lumber. They delivered lumber out here by horse and wagon," Kertis said.

There was a church and a rectory, ready for a permanent priest to move in, but the church never had a permanent priest. By the 1930s, the church was losing members. By the time of Kertis' first confession in the 1940s the church was on its way to obscurity. Mines had opened at Franklin County and Russian Orthodox Churches were established at Royalton and Buckner.

Kertis believes the migration of the church parishioners had to do with the depth of the coal seam. He said the seam at Muddy was only four to five feet thick, meaning miners



Brian DeNeal photo

The St. Josaph Russian Orthodox Church iconostasis is a wall of images between the pews and sanctuary. The paintings tell the story of Christ for those who were unable to read. Most of the paintings will likely go to the parish of St. Basil Russian Orthodox Church in St. Louis.

had to stoop throughout their shift to dig coal. Franklin County's deeper mines were more appealing. The miners could work standing up.

The power plant and mine created a wealthy and bustling village for many years. The mine provided the bulk of the coal for the power plant and the power plant provided electricity for the interurban trolley line that traveled between Eldorado, Wasson, Muddy, Harrisburg, Ledford and Carrier Mills, taking miners to work in those towns.

The church also played a role in the power plant. As the church was the closest vacant building, the plant owners contracted with the church to use the basement for training seminars. Since they needed electricity for these evening seminars, the power company provided the electricity at no cost, but only to the basement. The plant shut down shortly afterward as a plant at Grand Tower took over as the main electrical provider for southern Illinois.

The interurban car provided transportation to the church's cemetery, a small portion of the Ledford Cemetery on the opposite side of Harrisburg.

Only four graves are evident in that portion of the cemetery today, those of Mike and Charley with no last name evident who both died Aug. 31, 1921, Mike Musko who died in 1950 and George Musko who died in 1950.

A large monument in the cemetery appears to translate from the Rusyn/Ruthenian language as "Cemetery of the Russian Orthodox Parish in Muddy, Ill. Donated by John Burkalo."

The interurban car ceased operation in 1933.

Though the exterior is in rough shape, the interior of the church has lost little of its splendor. Upon entering the eye is first drawn to the iconostasis - wall of icons - that separates the seating area - nave - from the sanctuary. The images covering the iconostasis tell the story of the Bible, since many during that time could not read. Featured prominently on a podium before the iconostasis is an icon of St. Iosaph for whom the church is named, though in naming the church the first "a" in the name is dropped.

On the back of the St. Iosaph icon is attached a manila envelope with typed page explaining the following:

"His eminence, the most Reverend Platon, Bishop of the

Aleutians and of North America, as a blessing for the new brotherhood of Bishop Iosaf of Belgorod, and as an unfading memorial: gives to the brotherhood of this servant of God, Iosaf of Belgorod, in Muddy, Illinois, this icon of Bishop Iosaf Wonderworker of Belgorod and all Russia, a newly manifest servant of God whose body lay in the earth 150 years and remained incorrupt, and gave many miracles and healing to all who resorted to it with faith, and his incorrupt and honorable body was glorified in 1911, 4/17 September. May the brotherhood flourish by the prayers of Bishop Iosaf.

May Bishop Iosaf be a faithful and kindly protector. To the brotherhood bearing his name and to his very own brothers according to his ancestors and according to the Holy Orthodox faith which this servant of God held firmly and received salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven. O Holy Bishop, Father Iosaf, pray God for us."

St. Iosaph, Wonderworker and Bishop of Belgorod, was born Joachim Andrelevich Gorlenko in 1705 in modern day Ukraine and died in 1754. He became a monk, a deacon and in 1748 was consecrated as Bishop of Belgorod. He was known for helping those in need of care before his death at 49 years of age.

Iosaph was known as a minister to the poor and sick, but was only glorified a saint Sept. 4, 1911, at the request of Tsar Nicholas II due to the spread of news his body had not decomposed in 150 years. During that time worshipers had been visiting his Holy Trinity Cathedral in Belgorod to receive his blessings.

Iosaph's relics and shrine at the cathedral received visitors seeking his blessings until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks removed Iosaph's remains from his shrine. Iosaph's remains are currently at the Cathedral of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Belgorod, Russia.

The Muddy church is the only church named for St. Iosaph in the United States.

St. Iosaph Russian Orthodox Church celebrated the 100th anniversary of the glorification of St. Iosaph of Belgorod. On Sept. 17, 2011, Bishop Peter of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Chicago and Mid-America; the Rev. Martin Swanson, rector of St. Basil the Great Orthodox Church in St. Louis, Mo.; the Rev. Christopher Stade of St. John



Brian DeNeal photo

This image of St. Iosaph, Wonderworker and Bishop of Belgorod, sits on a podium at St. Iosaph Russian Orthodox Church. The Muddy church altered the spelling of the saint's name.

Chrysostom Orthodox Church in House Springs, Mo.; the Rev. Achilles Karathanos of Sts. Constantine and Helen Green Orthodox Church in Swansea; the choir from St. Basil and others visited Muddy.

According to a story in the Sept. 18, 2011, *The Southern Illinoisan*, Anton Golovin and Violetta Yufereva drove 850 miles from Palm Coast, Fla., simply to pay tribute to the Bishop of Belgorod, as Yufereva's ancestor's lived in the Belgorod diocese.

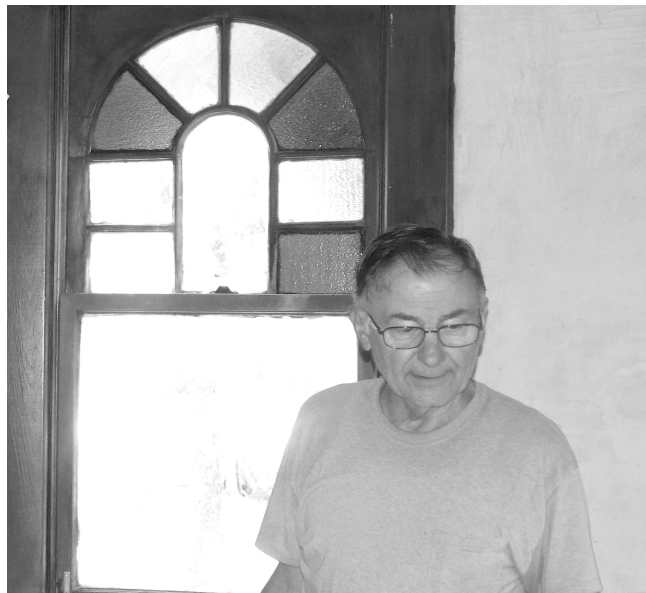
Though his sister remains a member of St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church in St. Louis, Kertis is now a practicing Roman Catholic. Still, St. Iosaph's remains an important part of his life.

"I probably mowed the grass around this thing my entire life with a push mower," Kertis said.

As a youngster he also had duties inside the church. The sanctuary with its altar is a sacred space where women are not permitted. But without a regular priest, someone had to prepare for upcoming services with visiting priests.

"Women were not allowed in the altar area, but my mother and I dressed the altar, did the cleaning and everything else and the priest would do a purification ritual," Kertis said.

Kertis remembers the cup used for communion well, and misses it. The cup was silver on the outside and gold on the inside with jewels all around it. He understands the cup was provided by the Tsar of Russia.



Brian DeNeal photo

Ed Kertis stands in the sanctuary of St. Iosaph Russian Orthodox Church.

"A so-called priest said the cup should be cleaned and he took the cup to clean it. It never made its way back," Kertis said.

Kertis and Pisani came to have sole responsibility for the church several years ago. As the church knew of no living parishioners and no representatives of the Chicago Russian Orthodox Diocese were able to regularly tend to maintenance, the diocese deeded the property back to the family. The brother and sister pay the taxes on the property and buildings. Kertis' family visits twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall.

Kertis says his family is interested in keeping the property for their vacations. The fact they are gone the majority of the year means anxiety. They know St. Iosaph's is a landmark and that visitors are in the yard, despite the "No Trespassing" signs. They also know the bell tower could topple in the next big wind. The structure needs work, but after having spent \$40,000 on it with no expectation the church will host another service, the expenditure seems futile.

"I'm not putting another dime in it," Kertis said.

Kertis said he and his family would like a few of the icons in the church and the rest and the two bells likely would go to the new St. Basil Russian Orthodox Church soon to be built in St. Louis.

"The bells are considered to be sacred instruments in the Orthodox Church. I think the bells are going to wind up in St. Louis," Kertis said.



Left is a marker at Ledford Cemetery reading "Cemetery of the Russian Orthodox Parish in Muddy, Ill. Donated by John Burkalo." It is likely engraved in Rusyn/Ruthenian.