

Rev. Dr. Richard Gustavovich Reusch (1891-1975)

Daniel H. Johnson

[NOTE: This Presentation is in Three Parts.]

I. Comments

Volga German, Imperial Russian Cavalry Officer, Lutheran Pastor, Anti-Bolshevik, East African Leipzig and Augustana Missionary, Mountaineer, Ethnographer, Builder, British Spy, Linguist, Historian, Honorary Masai, College Professor, LCA Pastor

"A man who was involved in one of the most awesome revolutions in history, he walked with African natives, American college students and Minnesota farmers. His life reads like some sprawling Russian novel." — *Chisago County Press* (1975)

"An adventurer who spreads Christianity, Theology Professor Reusch was a Cossack officer, speaks 24 languages, rides like the devil, and was awarded the Kilimanjaro medal with diamonds." — *Nürnberg 8 Uhr-Blatt* (1954)

"I will say nothing for or against the Soviet rule, but I will tell you of my experiences in the years 1917, 1918 and 1919 and let you judge for yourself." — Richard Reusch, *East Chicago Times* (1930)

[In 1929 Reusch traveled disguised as a Circassian dervish from Khartoum to San'a in search of an earthly agent of Shi'a Islam's Hidden Imam. *Der Islam in Ost-Afrika* was published two years later:] "We should be pleased that there is a missionary who has actually tried to understand Islam and describe the reasons for its enormous appeal." — *Journal of the International African Institute* (1934)

"Courage and strength of a veteran East African mountaineer — Dr. Richard Reusch — saved the lives of his [Italian] party from being dragged down to certain death when climbing the difficult peak of Margherita [in Uganda]." — *East African Standard* (1938)

"A miracle has taken place during the war years in the Lutheran Church of Tanganyika, much of it due to the way God has used His servant, Dr. Richard Reusch, superintendent of the Northern Area, and one of God's missionary statesmen." — Rev. Elmer R. Danielson, *The Lutheran Companion* (1947)

"He is a very small man in stature, but when Dr. Reusch stood up to give an informal greeting to the synodical convention in Kansas City, the delegates realized they were listening to a spiritual and intellectual giant." — E. E. Ryden, editor, *The Lutheran Companion* (1947)

"He is a short, slight Lutheran missionary who works among one of the fiercest tribes in Africa, the blood-drinking spear-wielding Masai." — *Time* (1950)

"A few [Masai] tribesmen approached Dr. R. Reusch with some trepidation to confess that they had thrashed some proselytizers from the Mau Mau movement. He added that for once 'I was able to assure my violent parishioners that they had acted rightly.'" — *London Daily Telegraph* (1953)

"The Tanganyika Government has named Kibo's inner crater for Dr. Richard Reusch. He was presented with a gold medal on his 25th ascent, and it was decided that a diamond medal be made to commemorate his 50 climbs and long service to the Mountain Club of East Africa." — *Tanganyika Standard* (1954)

"In the thirty years or so that Dr. Reusch has been in Tanganyika he has gained for himself the position of being one of the outstanding personalities of the territory. He still has the élan of a former Cavalry Officer of the Imperial Russian Cossacks, but underneath is the Lutheran Missionary with a blend of sincerity and robust common sense." — Sir Edward Twining, Governor of Tanganyika Territory (1954)

"His life sounds like something out of Richard Harding Davis, and maybe it is, although his Lutheran colleagues vouch for him from Cossacks to Kilimanjaro." — *Los Angeles Times* (1954)

"One of Lutheranism's most fabulous missionaries, lion-shooting, mountain-climbing Richard Reusch is back in Minnesota, supposedly to retire." — *Minneapolis Star* (1954)

Dr. Reusch, "the most colorful and influential Lutheran in the state of Minnesota."

— Rev. Melvin Hammarberg, Synod President (1967)

"His exploits read like adventure stories out of the past: Beau Gest, Kipling, Lawrence of Arabia. The Crusades." — St. Paul *Pioneer Press* (1975)

"Either he was the world's best storyteller or the most unusual man alive in the world."

— Rev. Arland Fiske (1996)

LOYALTY: A Biography of Richard Gustavovich Reusch

by Daniel H. Johnson (\$25, 358 pages)

Available at the Gustavus Book Mark (1-800-847-9307)

II. A Reusch Chronology

1891 Born in a Volga River German colony on the anniversary of the Reformation, October 31. The father, Gustav Ivanovich, a Lutheran schoolteacher and deacon, names his first-born for King Richard I, Coeur-de-Lion.

1897 The family moves to Pyatigorsk, in the Northern Caucasus, and Richard is sent to live with Terek Cossacks.

1904 When the family moves to Vladikavkaz the boy is sent to live at the Imperial Cadet Corps and is enrolled in a military high school. The region is home to almost as many Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as Orthodox Russians.

1911 The cadet becomes a mountaineer, graduates first in his class, pledges allegiance to Tsar Nicholas II, is commissioned a 2nd lieutenant, and serves with his regiment on the Persian border. But his father orders him to quit the military and enroll at the one seminary at Tartu University (Estonia), which served some two million German, Swedish, Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Polish Lutherans living in Imperial Russia.

1916 He graduates with a theology degree; is appointed to teach Arabic; serves a probationary year at St. Johannes; and is ordained on Easter Sunday 1917, seven months before the Bolsheviks take power in Russia.

1918 The Reds take Tartu in the civil war, and Pastor Reusch joins guerilla forces to fight against the Bolsheviks, who are driven from Estonia and Latvia. He briefly assists at St. Mary's Lutheran Cathedral and Holy Ghost parish in Rostock, Germany, before seeking refuge at the von Liphart estate in Denmark.

1921 Reusch completes his magister degree at Tartu. After World War I Germany loses its colonies, including German East Africa, and the Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission is forced to leave its work in the Kilimanjaro region. Reusch, a stateless Russian, is acceptable to the British for mission service in what has become Tanganyika Territory.

1923 He arrives in Arusha, Tanganyika, where he joins three other Leipzig missionaries with non-German passports. The Augustana Synod has taken responsibility for the orphaned Leipzig missions, and Reusch meets the first Augustana missionaries already on site, the Ralph Hult and John Steimer families.

1926 Reusch climbs Kilimanjaro's Kibo Peak where he plants the Christian flag, the 7th white man to sign the register left on the summit by Hans Meyer in 1889; founds the East African Mountain Club, and trains the first mountain guides. The Masai begin calling him the "Son of Kibo." Leipzig returns, and after a squabble over territory, Augustana agrees to give Kilimanjaro back to Leipzig and begin mission work on the

Iramba Plateau.

1927 Rejoining his Leipzig colleagues, Reusch becomes headmaster of their Native Training School at Marangu, and marries Elveda Bonander, an Augustana missionary nurse.

1929 Disguised as a Circassian dervish from the Caucasus, Reusch travels through Sudan, Egypt and Arabian Peninsula in search of an agent of the Hidden Imam, who he finds in San'a, Yemen.

1931 On furlough in the Chicago area, he gains acclaim as a dynamic advocate for African missions among Augustana congregations, and his dramatic anti-communist speeches to civic groups make headlines. His manuscript, *Der Islam in Ost Afrika*, is published in Germany, and Tartu University awards him a doctorate degree. He returns to Marangu to begin a second term.

1934 The Nazi regime forbids German churches to continue supporting foreign missions. To help finance Leipzig's mission work Reusch sells butterfly collections and guides Europeans on climbing expeditions.

1937 Leipzig releases Reusch to open and run Augustana's new training school for teachers and evangelists at Kinampanda. Another world war is imminent, and Leipzig again prepares for the worst.

1938 Reusch saves an Italian party he is guiding from death while climbing Margherita Peak in Uganda. He travels to Minneapolis to negotiate a transfer of Leipzig's missions to Augustana's care, and is accepted into the Augustana ministerium.

1940 The Germans must again abandon their work, and Reusch leaves Kinampanda for Kilimanjaro. For the duration of the war he serves as Augustana's superintendent of the far-flung orphaned Lutheran congregations and missions in the Northern Area. He is elected president of the Mission Churches Federation (MCF). Comprising Augustana, Leipzig, Berlin, Bethel, Moravian, Fosterland and Neukirchen Missions, the MCF is intended to promote a unified indigenous African Church. Because his duties take him throughout the region, the British ask him to report on South African farmers and others in the region with Nazi sympathies. He singlehandedly opens the first Lutheran seminary at Machame, and ordains 23 clergy three years later.

1947 Reusch teaches at Gustavus Adolphus College during a well-earned furlough, and embarks on a whirlwind schedule of speaking, fundraising and recruiting. Augustana Theological Seminary awards him an honorary doctorate. The stateless Russian is granted U.S. citizenship before returning for his fourth and final term, working primarily among the Masai whose cause he has always championed.

1948 Under his leadership the MCF introduces a common Lutheran liturgy, publishes a Bible and hymnal in Swahili, establishes a common church discipline, and publishes a church newspaper on its own press. Colonial officials often seek his advice, and Reusch serves on government's Masai Advisory Council.

1951 The British remove 3,000 Meru people from their land, which is given to 13 white farmers "for the good of all." Loyal to the oath required by the British for a visa, Reusch supports the British in the Meru Land Case; however, Elveda, the Augustana Mission and Synod, and the National Lutheran Council all support the Meru.

1953 Augustana's Board of Foreign Missions does not support Reusch's argument for

an independent Masai mission, and he announces his retirement. British Governor Twining names Kilimanjaro's Kibo crater in Reusch's honor and a nearby point for Elveda, a remarkable tribute to the Augustana missionary couple.

1954 Reusch leaves Tanganyika never to return. *A Short History of East Africa* is published in Germany, and later in the U.S. He returns to teach at Gustavus, and continues to agitate and fundraise on behalf of the Masai.

1961 Compelled to retire at age 70, the professor applies for promotion to full professor, refuses peer review, and his application is denied. The emeritus associate professor continues to teach part-time.

1967 St. John's, in Stacy, Minnesota, issues a call, and at age 75 Reusch revitalizes a dying congregation.

1971 The village pastor makes a final journey to Israel, and at age 79 climbs Mt. Sinai for a second time.

1975 Stricken with cancer, the village pastor types his farewell sermon. However, he dies a few days later. A 15-year-old boy reads his final words on Youth Sunday to a weeping congregation. Africans, synod officials, district clergy, and others join his three daughters and their families and grieving congregation for his funeral. Richard Gustavovich is laid to rest in the Stacy cemetery. Elveda follows two years later. Their's is the only tombstone in the Stacy cemetery that bears an outline of the African continent, and their names remain on maps of Mount Kilimanjaro's Kibo Peak.

III. EPILOGUE

One beautiful January morning in 1996, Bishop and Mrs. Kweka invited the author to join them at the Uhuru Deaconess campus near Moshi for Sunday worship. Dr. Reusch, the Masai Missionary, served in Northern Tanganyika for thirty-one years, from 1923 to 1954. Fifty-two years after he left Africa, never to return, I wondered how Chagga and Meru Africans regarded him.

Bishop Kweka saw Reusch for the first time in 1940. "He visited a nearby village, and in those days it was a real honor to have a white man visit. So I went to see him. Well, from 1942 until 1946 Reusch was my pastor. He was a wonderful storyteller, and all the children adored him."

Was it true that Reusch lived as a Masai when he visited their *bomas*?

"Perhaps, but that does not make him an African," cautioned a younger pastor, "because Reusch did whatever was necessary to gain the respect of the Masai so they would come to his church."

"No white man," interjected the bishop, "can *be* an African. Not even Reusch."

Said his younger colleague, "That's why Reusch had trouble with other missionaries and other tribes, because he was known to be clever, and although he was well-intentioned he was not beyond using others for his own purposes."

A retired pastor in the Meru Diocese at Usa River brought along his worn copy of Reusch's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. He sadly recalled that "our pastors blamed Dr. Reusch for the loss of our land and churches. 'This is *your* will, not the will

of *God*,' they told him. And so he left this region and went to Masailand.”

Israel Lema heard I was interested in learning about Reusch's ministry. “Oh yes,” said the elderly man, “Reusch sided with the British. They liked him, and he served them well.”

Rev. Thomas Laiser, Bishop of the Arusha Diocese, was nine years old when Dr. Reusch baptized him in 1952. He explained that his desire to become a Christian grew over time while attending the mission school. How would he characterize Reusch? “I would use the word ‘energetic’ to describe him,” he replied. Isaac Sierra, assistant to Bishop Laiser, did not meet Reusch but had heard him described as “a man of action, hard-working, dedicated, strong and someone who did good work for the people.”

Dr. Reusch ordained Rev. Tomito in 1943. The African pastor remembered Reusch as “a man of the people who even carried stones to a building site. I remember him joining us to pick coffee beans. He was more like the Americans and Swedes than the Germans. He was a good listener. He was generous.”

Reusch baptized Rev. Amos Mungure and his parents on December 22, 1944. How would the Meru pastor describe Reusch’s legacy? Like Rev. Tomito, Mungure remembered Reusch as an excellent teacher and unusually successful in motivating parishes. His preaching style drew listeners from far and wide, and people could remember what he said because he cited stories and examples from history in his sermons to help people understand the Gospel.

“I see him as the most powerful missionary,” said Simon Pa-la-jo, a Meru elder. In his nineties, Mr. Palajo saw Reusch for the first time shortly after the missionary arrived in 1923. “He was very busy here and there, making many deals and meeting with the Christian communities in this area. I was a young man when he came here, but people everywhere knew him. He was a famous man. Every time there was a village celebration or ceremony Dr. Reusch was invited to be with them.”

John Kipokola was buying gasoline at the station in Marangu. Yes, he remembered Reusch because he was born in the Ashira parish. All the children loved the missionary, he said. The service was held outside under the trees when Reusch came to preach because so many people wanted to hear him.

Nathaniel Mrenga walked across the road to the gas station and overheard Mr. Kip-o-kola say, “I remember once during a drought that Reusch prayed for rain — and it rained before he finished praying.”

“Yes,” said the man pumping gas into Kipokola’s truck, “it is true — I was there, and it happened just like he said.”

“I also saw him pray for rain at Ashira,” Mrenga testified. “He prayed until the sweat came. And it rained. Oh yes, I saw it.”

Said Kipokola, “You should talk to this man, Nathaniel, because he knew Reusch better than I. You can use my office over there,” he said, pointing to the building across the road that housed the Marangu Community Development Association.

Even though Reusch trained the first mountain guides and Kibo’s crater is named for Reusch, Ludovik Gtilya, a young mountain guide, had never heard of Reusch. He sat at the table in Kipokola’s office, listening to Mrenga’s every word: “He walked all over the Kilimanjaro region, preaching and teaching. Masai loved him. We could understand

Jesus through him. He made wonderful prayers. Yes, and people came to him with their problems. And after teaching all day at the Teachers College, at night he was the watchman and walked the grounds with a gun because of leopards. He knew fifteen African languages, and carried big rocks no one else could carry — or lift.”

“Did you know Reusch was a prophet?” Mren-ga asked. “Oh yes, he could foresee what would happen. Once when a man’s wife was dying he knelt at her side and prayed. She got well.”

Mrenga’s stories followed one upon the other: “Two students at the school were very sick. Reusch prayed over them and then said to the matron, ‘One will live, but the other will die. He sighed and said, ‘Make the coffin.’ And that is what happened.

“Here is another miracle. We were on the road to Parre, but a bridge had been carried away in a flood. Reusch told us to lay branches over the empty place. We did as he said. Then Reusch told the driver to start the truck and pass over. Of course, the driver didn’t want to. But one always did what Reusch said — and the driver and truck passed over safely.

“Once Reusch came to preach at a church, but the door was locked. ‘Find the person who has the keys,’ he said. But when they came back with the key he was already inside, ready to preach. The door was still locked.”

Sent to Africa by the Leipzig Mission, Reusch served with the Germans for fifteen years. When asked if he thought of Reusch as a German or a Russian, Pastor Tomito said with a smile, “Dr. Reusch told us all about the problems Lenin caused, and the Bolsheviks, and also about the Tsar.” Rev. Mun-gure stated, “A Russian, of course. He was always obedient to his ‘emperor,’ whether the one on earth or in heaven.”

“Yes, there are now many legends about Dr. Reusch,” said Bishop Laiser, “including his mountain climbing and the like. According to one such story, he once fell into a deep crevasse on the glacier. Others who suffered that fate were never seen again. Except for Reusch, of course, who climbed back out — as it is said, ‘*after three days.*’”

Like others of his kind, Dr. Reusch believed the scientific method was but one way of knowing and judging. Vocabulary, grammar and imagination also define and create unique perceptions of the world. Reusch understood that a worldview is in part created and shaped through language and speech. Few politicians have the gift to use language in a way that translates thought into a shared vision that ignites the public will to make things happen. Reusch had that gift. Through language, metaphor, humor, self-deprecation, dramatic timing, and telling stories in the Oriental tradition, Reusch altered the perceptions of the world for himself and others. During an especially contentious annual mission conference, one of the Augustana men questioned the veracity of Reusch’s membership statistics. Rev. George Anderson intervened before the matter got out of hand. “Let it alone,” he sagely advised. “After all, Missions are a romantic business.”

Bishop Erasto and Mrs. Kweka of the Northern Tanzanian Diocese visited Dr. and Mrs. Reusch in Stacy, Minnesota just before the eighty-year-old village pastor left on his last trip to Israel. “Do you know what Reusch said to me?” the Bishop asked with a twinkle. “He said he’d been asked to come and read the inscription on a stone which no one else could translate. *No one else?* [Appreciative laughter.] Do you see what kind of man he was!”

So how does one explain Richard Reusch? Donald Flatt, the British education specialist-turned-missionary and Lutheran pastor, characterized his friend as a short man

who perhaps compensated for his size by intensive bodybuilding and was courageous to the point of recklessness. A lonely man, Reusch needed the approbation of others and therefore was prone to exaggeration; a man with no close friends to whom he disclosed his personal struggles and disappointments.

In the heyday of foreign missions, said Dr. George Hall, some of those who felt called to serve in far-off lands could accurately be described as idiosyncratic and zealous loners who sometimes spent their careers fighting to advance their own causes. Some eventually became institutions in and of themselves, and while championing their own agendas lost sight of the Mission's larger objectives.

Dr. Reusch did not "reinvent" himself as a different character on four continents, but he did possess a remarkable ability to adapt and thrive in radically diverse cultures. His persona was firmly established in his youth, that of a loyal Imperial Russian military officer. Once you give your word, he said, there can be no further discussion. "'Be ye loyal unto death' said the Savior, 'and I will give you a crown of life.' European empires collapsed with the First World War, but Reusch never relinquished the imperial code of behavior. That trait alone should have rendered him a mere anachronism, like dispossessed royals, colorful but irrelevant.

And yet his influence was epic in nature and scope. What accounts for the dramatic impact he made? His sermons, from his ordination confession in 1917 until his last in 1975, reflected his abiding conviction that God is Love. Certainly that belief was central to understanding his character and allowed him to cross cultures and historical epochs with imperial élan.