A Pilgrim at Rest
Pastor Henry Holmstroem
April 22, 1929-August 5, 2011
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In 1929, in the tiny Baltic country of Estonia, a boy was born. The first child of August and Marie Holmström, Heinart (renamed Henry when he immigrated to America) was warmly welcomed. As the son of a minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church Reform Movement, Henry was introduced to Jesus Christ at quite a young age. From his mother and father’s knees, young Henry eagerly absorbed the many beautiful Bible stories they taught him.

Up until the war years, Henry enjoyed a normal childhood. He climbed to the tops of birch trees and slid gleefully down on the outer ends of branches to the ground, only to climb back to the top and start all over again. He swam in the rivers. During the winters, Henry frolicked in the deep snow that blanketed Estonia.

As a minister, Henry’s father often traveled by bicycle on missionary trips throughout Estonia. Pastor August Holmström would also travel by boat north to Finland and by train south to Latvia. It was in Finland that he was privileged to share the gospel message with the parents of Timo Martinnen and Leila McTavish, who are now active workers in Canada. (Leila fondly remembers the raisins and nuts August would carry in his pocket as special treats for the children he met.) In Latvia, he baptized and performed the marriage ceremony for the parents of Pastor Henry Dering, now the General Conference Evangelism Department Leader.

Because August was gone so much, it was a special time when he came home. Henry would happily crawl into his parents’ bed in the mornings just to be close to his father. Little sister Ester, eighteen months younger than Henry, quietly crawled into bed with them too and snuggled down between father and son, much to her brother’s consternation.

In Estonia, grammar school was held six days a week—Monday through Saturday. Being Adventist meant that Henry and Ester could not attend school on Saturdays. Their mother would bravely request schoolwork for her children to complete on Sunday instead. After some time, the school officials noticed that neither Henry nor Ester were falling behind in their classes, even though they missed school every Saturday, and an exception was made. His mother’s example of staying faithful to the law of God really stuck with Henry.
In the 1940s, the peace in Europe, and Henry’s childhood, shattered. In 1940, the Soviet Union entered Estonia. Lists of names began to appear in public areas of Estonia. Those listed would be taken to forced-labor camps. One day the name of Henry’s father appeared on one of those dreaded lists. Wasting no time, along with another brother of the church August fled to the birch forests of Estonia for safety. There they hid for some time but were finally discovered, shot, and hastily buried. August’s grieving wife, Marie, later recalled that she had gone through the remainder of her life “like a bird with a broken wing” because of her loss. Henry was only twelve when his father died.

Shortly before the murder, Henry received a precious gift—his father’s very own Bible. The future of Estonia was uncertain. Their own future was uncertain. Henry’s father knew, however, that the promises written out in the Bible could be trusted and would, like a faithful roadmap, guide his precious son throughout this life and into the life to come. Henry read from this Bible often throughout the remainder of his life.

By 1941, the Nazis pushed back the Communists and took control of Estonia. In 1944, when Henry was fifteen, the political tide was again turning in Estonia. The Nazis were losing their stronghold there, and the Soviet Union planned its advance. Henry’s mother, not willing to fall under Communist control again, searched desperately for an escape route. Every opportunity seemed to fail. At last, just a few hours before the Soviet army marched in and seized Estonia in its iron grip, Henry and his family slipped away in the darkness of night. Riding in the back of a truck in a Nazi convoy returning to Germany, they traveled in silence, clutching only the few belongings they had managed to carry with them. At times the convoy came to a screeching halt. Then everyone leapt from the trucks and fled to the surrounding forests to hide from Soviet planes prowling overhead. It was during those times that Henry learned to pray with every breath he took.

In Germany the family members were separated but were almost always able to get together on Sabbath. Henry often remarked about how thankful he was for being able to keep the Sabbath all his life, no matter where he was.

In Germany, Henry worked on farms and then for The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugee Organization as a truck driver, a dispatcher, and a driver-mechanic. His letters of recommendation described him as a “good and solid worker,” “capable, trustworthy, with a clean record of attendance,” and “conscientious.”

In 1950, Henry and his family were sponsored by a doctor in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and emigrated to the United States. Henry’s mother and sister worked in the house while Henry rose at three or four in the morning to milk cows. Sometimes Henry was so tired from getting up in those early morning hours that he fell back to sleep while saying his morning prayers. Later he worked at the Quaker Oats Company and supplemented his income there with work at a restaurant, where he received free meals. By September 1950, he was delighted to have earned enough to buy his first car, a 1950 Dodge. The purchase price, $2,646.94, included extras: a radio, a heater, and seat covers!

Education was very important to Henry. When he could save up enough money, he would pay for one semester’s worth of college education. Often, by the end of that semester he would have to drop out so he could earn enough money again for another semester. He attended Iowa State University and later UCLA, but did not complete his degree until he graduated from the University of Phoenix in 1983.

Although Henry was born into a strong Christian family, he did not commit his life to Christ until he was 23. In 1952, at a church conference in Colorado, he was baptized by Elder E.J. Stabel. Henry’s widowed mother was overjoyed.

In 1956, Henry moved to California. He liked the weather better there than in Iowa. He took up flying lessons and met a young lady named Evelyn Post. On December 29, 1957, he married Evelyn in Lodi, California. A careful man who planned ahead, Henry chose not to have children for nine years—until after the couple had established a home in Richmond, California. Anne Marie was born in 1967. In 1971 the family lived in San Leandro, owning and managing 16
apartments, when Margie was born. Linda was born in 1973, shortly before the family moved to another 16-apartment complex, in Castro Valley. That was sold in 1975, when John was four months old, and the family moved to a two-story home in Hayward. Richard came into the family in 1978.

Henry worked hard, as a metallurgist and later as a logistics engineer, to support and educate all five of his children. But he was especially concerned about their spiritual growth. Church attendance was mandatory as long the children lived at home; the decision to be baptized, however, was never forced. Henry’s example of private Bible study and prayer, morning and evening worship with the family, high moral standards, dedication to church responsibilities, generous donations to missionary work, witnessing for Christ, and attendance at nearly every conference--local field and union as well as General Conference--held during his lifetime did not go unnoticed by his children. God was real to Henry, and he lived what he believed.

Raising a family in the San Francisco Bay Area meant a two-hour drive each way to attend church on Sabbath at the closest church, in Sacramento. After some years of commuting, Henry and Evelyn felt they should open a church in the area where they lived. On September 24, 1978, the San Francisco Bay Area Church began in their living room with three members--Henry, Evelyn, and Henry’s mother, Marie. Soon visitors began to come, membership grew, and Henry began to look for a building to rent. Over the years, membership has risen and fallen, but Henry never quit. Today, that church has 16 members, and its full-time worker is Sister Delmy Pleitez.

After the five children were grown, it wasn’t long before the grandchildren came along. Andrew, Andriana, Quinn, Mikey, Persia, Davey, Kaila, Megan, Nikki, Alyssa, Maya, Shiloh, and several others who claim him as Grandpa soon arrived. Whether they joined the family through birth or adoption made no difference to Henry. He loved, corrected, and prayed for each one the same.

Henry’s strong faith in God carried him through the difficulties he endured at the end. In April of this year he was informed that his prostate cancer, which he had lived with for nearly 17 years, had metastasized. His family was devastated. Henry remained calm. Whatever he felt about the diagnosis, he shared with God alone.

From that moment onward, Henry prayed that God would prepare him for whatever would come. He asked for forgiveness from his wife, his children, and his God for any hurts he might have caused. He continued to read his Bible daily and pray, mentioning each child and grandchild by name.

On July 14, Henry received the news that his cancer was terminal. Up until that time, although weak, he had been able to manage his own care. However, within one week, he could not get out of bed without assistance. It was too much for Evelyn to care for Henry by herself, so all five children came to assist him, including Linda, who flew in from Georgia. Whenever they asked if they could pray with him, his answer was always, “Yes, please.” At one point, Henry apologized for being so much trouble to everyone. No one felt troubled by caring for him. His family considered it their privilege!

But they also knew they couldn’t adequately meet Dad’s increasing physical needs. After much prayer and discussion, Henry agreed to go to an alternative cancer treatment center, Issels Treatment Center, in Tijuana, Mexico. There the doctors discovered he had pneumonia, which they began to treat immediately. However, Henry’s body was too weak and tired to fight anymore. As the sun was rising on a new day, Henry quietly breathed his last only nine days after he had arrived.

The last sermon he had preached, at the age of 81, was entitled “Memories.” In it he recounted his life’s journey and how God had carried him through. He pointed to the land of fadeless day as our eternal home.

Henry lived his life as a pilgrim in search of a better land. He fled his homeland to find freedom. He lived his life as a foreigner in America, working hard to make a home for his family here. He died in Mexico seeking relief from his physical suffering. Very soon, Jesus will split the eastern sky with a shout and the blast of a trumpet, and the dead in Christ will rise (I Thessalonians 4:16-17). Once again, Henry’s eyes will open, and he will see Jesus, the One whom he loved so much, face to face. At last, Henry Holmstroem will be a pilgrim no more. He will finally be home.
A Baby Is Born

The sweetness of a newborn baby is truly a gift from God. On the evening of August 4, 2011, God presented this sweetest of all gifts to Bladimir and Purita Lejuez. Her name is Shekinah Tabitha Faride Lejuez. She weighed only 4 pounds 13 ounces at birth and measured 17 inches, from the bottoms of her tiny feet to the top of her precious little head. Her parents’ hearts overflow with thankfulness to God that He carried them through the whole delivery, which included an unexpected emergency surgery. He has granted them the desires of their hearts in giving them the opportunity to raise her up for His honor and glory.

News from the Editor

If you have news to share, and we hope you do, please email it to the American Union Newsletter editor at the following new email address:

au_news@ymail.com

2012 Calendar

- January 17, 2012: Second Quarter of the Missionary Seminar begins
- April 13, 2012: Missionary Seminar Field Training begins
- June 2012: General Conference Session, South Africa (details coming soon)