

## IN MEMORY OF

## Chester M. Gretz, a 'gentle giant'

From a coal town in Pennsylvania to the Iron Curtain to the churches he pastored in East Bloomfield and Bristol Springs, the Rev. Chester M. Gretz was guided by his love of God.

By PHILIP ANSELMO

Messenger Post Staff

LIMA — Many Americans who graduated high school in 1942 came to know the brutality of war. One of those students turned servicemen, the Rev. Chester M. Gretz, learned it from the skies, in the cockpit of a B-25 bomber.

But the Rev. Gretz was not long for a life of belligerence. His place was with God's people, whether that be East Bloomfield, Lima, Romania or Korea. Rather than guns and bombs, he preferred to wield Bibles, oven mitts and school books.

The Rev. Gretz died Feb. 10 at his home in Lima. He was 83.

"He sold out his entire life for serving God in whatever God led him to do, which led him to some faraway places and adventures," said longtime friend David Spencer.

In 1924, in a Pennsylvania coal town, the Rev. Gretz was born to Polish immigrants. He was the youngest of 12 children and raised during the Depression. Often, the whole brood would pick berries in the hills to sell back in town. So, smeared in blackberry juice and grass stains, those dozen

kids learned sustenance.

"They were quite a little group," said Cheryl Spooner, the pastor's daughter. "His brothers and father were coal miners. But he was kind of designated by his mom to be a priest."

After he got out of the war, the Rev. Gretz entered the ministry. He joined with the Elim Bible Institute in Lima in 1949 and soon after took a job as a teacher to augment his income and provide for his two children.

His daughter remembers the drives with her father through Finger Lakes country. Often, on their way through East Bloomfield, they passed a pottery shop called the Roadside Craftsman that was once a church.

"It tugged on his heart that it should be a house of worship," she said.

And so it became. In 1959, the Rev. Gretz founded the Berean Gospel Church at the site, one of several churches that he served in western New York, including congregations in Bristol Springs and in Buffalo.

Ernestine Johnson, a church member who authored a brief history of it, wrote: "How fitting to be used ... as a place to finish and display the work of a 'potter's hands' — a place where common clay was formed, fired, and made fit for service, and offered to one and all."

Once his daughter was grown and off to college, the Rev. Gretz took his wife, Mary Ruth, and teenage son, Steven, to Germany in 1971 to be nearer his ancestral Poland.

"At the time it was called West Germany," said his



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Rev. Chester M. Gretz, left, pictured at a speaking engagement in Poland, died Feb. 10. He founded the Berean Gospel Church in East Bloomfield, now the site of New Hope Fellowship. Later, he ministered to churches throughout the Eastern Bloc in the days of the communist Iron Curtain.

daughter.

From the family perch in the town of Gelnhausen near Frankfurt, the Rev. Gretz took off in his Volkswagen van and puttered through the Iron Curtain — ministering in Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania. And though he preached in English, he was no less able with Polish and spoke the language with grace.

His son remembers the anxiety of being a Westerner in the closed Eastern Bloc. He returned to the U.S. after a few years, but his parents remained until 1988.

"Churches were allowed under communism, but then you couldn't get the goods and services to run them," said Spooner. "So, he would connect with people back in the U.S. to get the goods,

then he would drive them in."

He packed his van full of clothing, cookery, medicine, Bibles and food and brought the load to the churches.

"At the border crossings, they would really search the cars, tear them apart," said Spooner. "And he would be praying, 'Lord, Lord, Lord.'"

But he got through. He delivered.

One time, relates Spooner, the communists lifted a ban on Christian radio. But the parishioners did not have all the parts to assemble a radio and tune in. So the Rev. Gretz again got in touch with his U.S. contacts and acquired the resistors, transistors, tubes and capacitors. He put one part in each pocket of his coat, another in his pants, another inside his shirt pocket, climbed aboard a train and

made the delivery.

"He was not just a minister but he provided the resources that they needed at the churches," said Spooner. "It was the gospel at its best."

The Rev. Gretz and his wife returned to the U.S. and settled in Lima, though he kept up his frequent trips to Poland. Then, in 1995, Mary Ruth Gretz died. He pushed on.

"He stumbled on a fantastic way to be close with her after she died," said Spooner. "He went through her recipes in books and taught himself how to bake and became a master pie maker. So he would bake the pies, then call people to come eat them."

Some years later, he and his longtime friend David Spencer became neighbors. Spencer ate plenty of blueberry pie and apple kuchen

in the last years of his friend's life.

"I shared a section in the garden with him, so we spent some time in the garden together," said Spencer.

They saw each other almost every day.

"He was a gentle giant, a compassionate man and a friend," said the Rev. Alan Schrader, who became pastor of New Hope Fellowship — the church that the Rev. Gretz had founded decades earlier under the Berean name. (For a time before Schrader assumed the pastorate, it was called Crossroads Community Church.)

"We were very close," he added. "We went fishing together often and talked not so much about catching fish but about people. He was always concerned with people."

At the end of January, the Rev. Gretz asked his doctor how long before he was "going to get to heaven," said his daughter. Dryly, the doctor responded that it would be two to three weeks. The Rev. Gretz had already been on dialysis for a year at that time.

He was ready to say goodbye. Friends from all over called to come see him, until it got to be so much that his daughter had to set schedules.

"He was very, very weak, and for about four days in a row, every couple hours apart, people would come by and sit and listen to him," she said. "And he would just summon up the energy to talk to them. He said he had no regrets in life, said he was ready to see the Lord."

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## Names &amp; Faces

Messenger Post

## SUNY Geneseo releases honors list

The following students attending the SUNY College at Geneseo have been named to the president's list for the 2007 fall semester: **Emily Herman** and **Casey Rampe** of Victor, and **Bridget Saracino** of Phelps.

The following students have been named to the dean's list for the fall 2007 semester. From Victor: **David Bell**, **Courtney Coggins**, **Leo Fisher IV**, **David Peck** and **Kara Siciliano**. From Canandaigua: **Alexandra Brown**, **Hannah Burley**, **Catherine Delduca**, **Rebecca Desantis**, **Sarah Foster**, **Benjamin Gajewski**, **Elizabeth Gardner**, **Anita Green**, **Samantha Hass**, **Barbara Herman**, **Michael Klemens**, **Molly Peck**, **Sarah Rychlik** and **Brean-**

**na Villane**. From Farmington: **Will Bossard**, **Holly Colbert**, **Chantel Helbig**, **Tracy Nicholson** and **Chris Potter**.

Also, **Helen Brewer** and **Ryun Hasenauer** of Shortsville; **Terianne Brocius**, **Laura Clay**, **Elizabeth Harrington**, **Laura Parrish** and **Colette Trapasso**, all of Bloomfield; **Jennifer Maloney** and **Jennifer Rowlands** of Honeoye; **Michelle Marks** and **Kimberly Rowles** of Phelps; **Abigail Oaks** of Oaks Corners; **Emily Schroo** of Clifton Springs; **Anastasia Stumpf** of Springwater; and **Charise Whitt** of Rushville.

## Dean's list for Buck

**Jordon Buck** of Canandaigua has been named to the dean's list for the fall 2007-2008 semester at St. Bonaventure College. Buck is a freshman studying physical education.

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