

Priest remembers the Soviet army

By Yvonne Runion
The Grand Rapids Press

The scenes of World War II are still vivid in the mind of the Rev. Edward Statkus.

The 80-year-old priest recalls hearing the trains at 2 a.m. on June 14, 1941, when the Soviet army occupying his native country of Lithuania withdrew from Pikeliai, the small burg where he lived.

But there was no time for rest and peace. The trains woke up the village people again at 3 a.m. The Nazis had come and were shouting for everyone to get up.

Last month, Statkus celebrated his 50th anniversary as a Roman Catholic priest, most of that time in the Grand Rapids area.

But he remembers vividly his days as a young cleric when the Communists came to Lithuania in 1939 and closed churches. Many older clergy who were leaders in the church were deported to Siberia.

Statkus lived in fear of persecution. But as a young priest, he wasn't considered dangerous and escaped deportation.

After the Nazis came that unforgettable night in 1941, they reopened his church for the rest of the war. But Statkus said their true motive was to take prisoner the boys who came to mass and conscript them into the army.

"Hitler was smart. He want sympathy from people. He open the churches. And after time, he go fishing," Statkus said.

But this did not stop the people from coming to church. The boys would hide under the pews, and the women would cover them with their long skirts.

After the war ended in 1945 and the Soviet Union again took control of the country, the churches were again closed, one by one.

Statkus — feeling like "a mouse under the table" that was trapped by a cat — fled to Germany as one of millions of displaced persons from Eastern Europe fleeing Communist rule.

Today, Statkus recalls the nation he fled with bittersweet feelings.

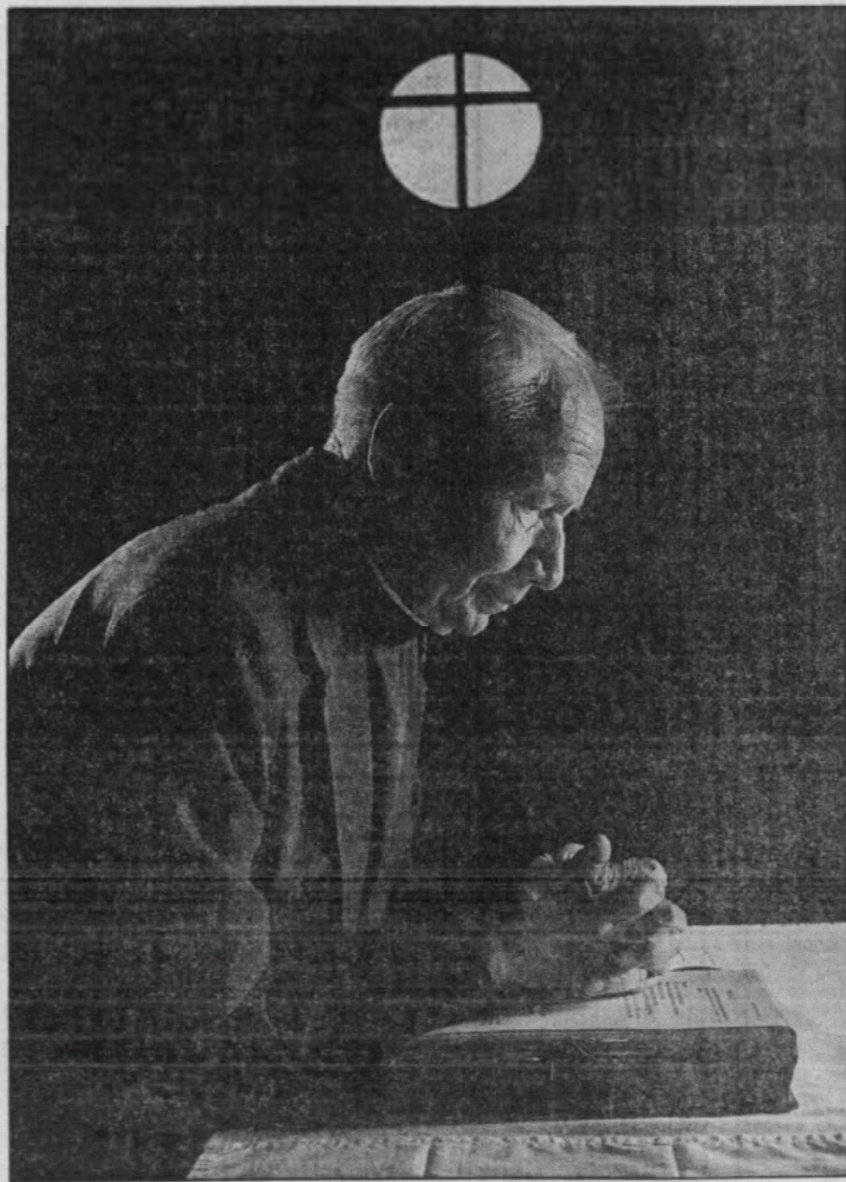
"We got nice, quiet country, but a small nation. The big shots put feet on the mouse, and the mouse is gone," Statkus said in broken English.

In 1950, he came to the United States to live with a brother in Cleveland and thanks God he survived the terror and could remain a priest.

"God save me, no make cripple," Statkus said in broken English. "What can a crippled priest do? I am here in good country. I am no cripple. God take care of me."

Statkus became a priest in Lithuania on April 16, 1938, the day before Easter. He calls himself one of "God's birds."

While he was living with his brother, the Catholic Diocese of



PRESS PHOTO/REX D. LARSEN

The Rev. Edward Statkus, a priest for 50 years, was in Lithuania during World War II.

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Grand Rapids asked for help from the Cleveland diocese in obtaining more priests. Statkus met with Bishop Francis J. Haas of Grand Rapids, who asked Statkus if he could speak English.

"I can talk perfect. I say good morning, good evening and bye-bye," Statkus said he replied.

Haas told him not to worry because the mass was in Latin. He

has been in the Grand Rapids diocese since.

Statkus has served as assistant pastor at St. Philomena's in Beal City, St. Mary's Parish in Carson City, St. Patrick's in Grand Haven, St. Michael's in Roscommon, Sacred Heart in Muskegon Heights, Sacred Heart in Grand Rapids, and Blessed Sacrament in Grand Rapids.

He had a difficult time as a priest in the United States because Americans have a strong identity

of being free. They don't want to obey if they want to do something else, Statkus said.

"Here is free country. You can help, but nobody listen," he said. "Children no listen to dad. They say, 'You are old-fashioned.'"

Statkus is now retired at Blessed Sacrament Rectory, 2275 Diamond St. NE. He gives mass in Latvian every Sunday at Our Lady of Aglona, at 507 Broadway St. NW., a church of mainly Latvian-speaking members.