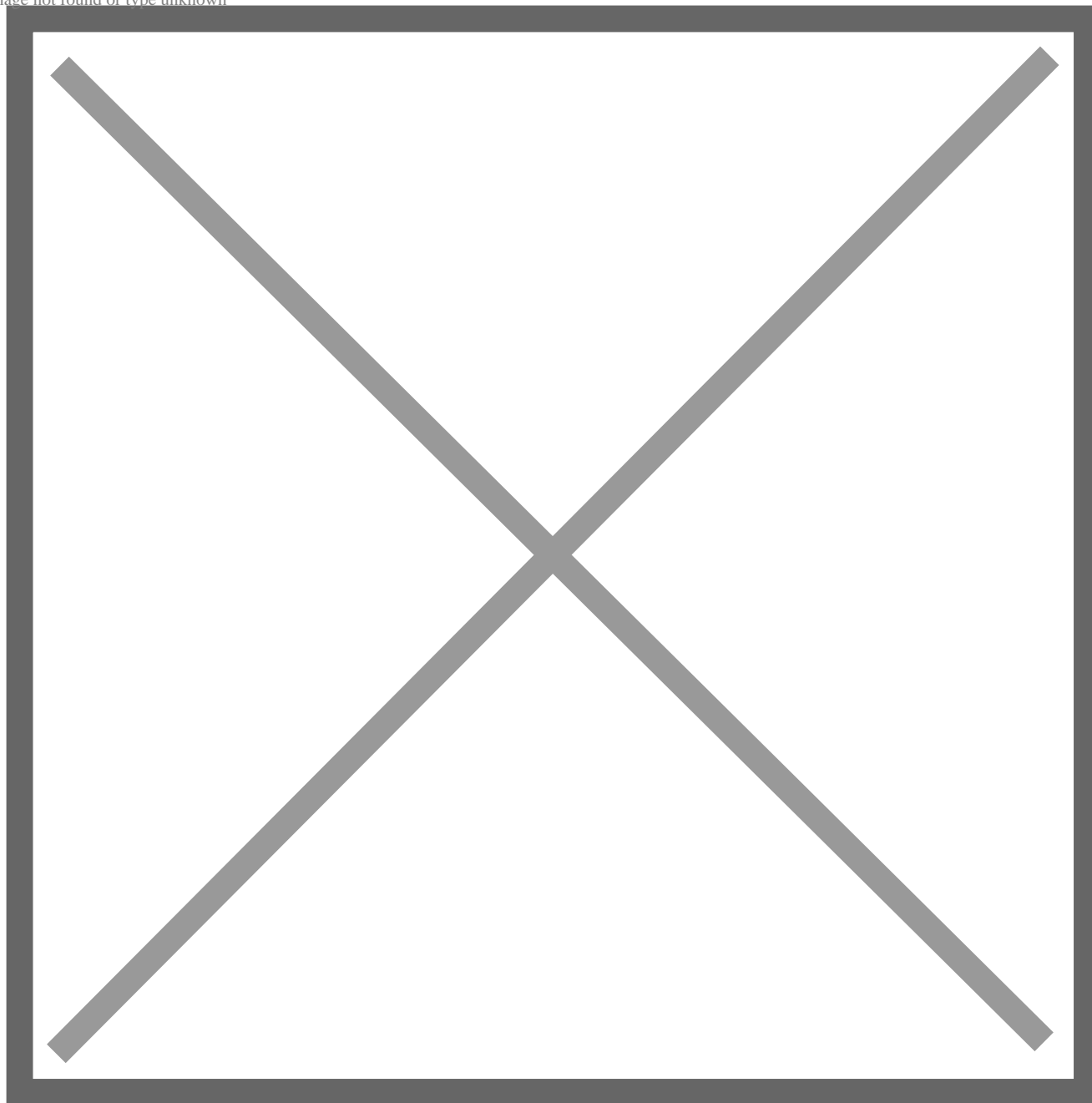


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Penner, Jacob Bernard (1894–1985)

DENIS KAISER

Denis Kaiser, Ph.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan). Kaiser is an assistant professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He has published numerous articles and book chapters. He was the annotation project editor of *The Ellen G. White Letters and Manuscripts with Annotations*, volume 2 (1860-1863), and is a co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Seventh-day Adventism* and of the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventism's* history of theology and ethics section.

Jacob Bernard (also spelled Jakob Bernhard) Penner was an Adventist pastor, evangelist, teacher, and editor from

Russia.

Early Years

Jacob Bernard was born March 25, 1894, at Alexandrodar (also called Alexanderfeld), in the Mennonite colony of Wohldemfürst-Alexanderfeld in the Kuban River district (North Caucasus), Russia. After his father, Bernhard B. Penner (1838-1909), lost his first wife, Agatha Neufeld, after nearly 25 years of marriage, he married Katharina Isaak (1864-1901) in 1892. Jacob was their first child,¹ and he had two younger sisters, Katharina (1896-?) and Sarah Fast (1898-1988).²

Early in his life, Bernhard Penner was dissatisfied with the forms and practices of the old Mennonite Church and, as a result, joined the Mennonite Brethren Church, a group that organized in 1860. Through personal Bible study, he discovered and embraced the seventh-day Sabbath about 1880. He shared his discoveries with fellow Mennonite believers and soon others began to keep the Sabbath. Meanwhile, several former residents of the settlement, who had immigrated to the United States and become Seventh-day Adventists, sent tracts in German to their relatives and friends at Alexandrodar. Encouraged by these tracts about the Sabbath message and other Adventist beliefs, Bernhard and other Mennonites intensified their efforts to proclaim the Sabbath.³

After hearing about Sabbath-keepers in Russia, the General Conference sent Ludwig Richard Conradi for a tour to visit these scattered Sabbath-keepers in the summer of 1886. Conradi held a series of meetings at Alexandrodar and there organized the second Seventh-day Adventist church in Russia. Jacob was thus born into a Seventh-day Adventist family. Unfortunately, he became an orphan at a young age. His mother passed away when Jacob was seven and his father when he was 13.⁴ The sermons of Adventist ministers such as Heinrich, J. Löbsack, Conradi, and John G. Jacques (also spelled Schaak) nevertheless helped to focus his eyes on Jesus. Despite the fact that he was not yet baptized, Jacob encouraged his young friends in the church to decide to follow Christ in baptism. On September 10, 1910, he was baptized together with them in the Kuban River.⁵

Education

Jacob was actively involved in his local church, helped organize the first Young Peoples' Society, and was elected Sabbath School teacher and secretary.⁶ In 1911 Julius Theodor Boettcher and others urged Jacob to attend Friedensau Missionary Seminary in the Prussian Province of Saxony, Germany, and prepare for the ministry.⁷ He eventually traveled to Germany and began his studies in February 1912.⁸ The outbreak of World War I in late July 1914 brought his studies to a halt.⁹ The students from Russia were arrested and taken to the prisoner of war camp at Altengrabow. As devout Christians who kept the seventh-day Sabbath and ate no pork, they became known in the camp as a "peculiar group."¹⁰ Initially they had to endure repressions for their unwillingness to work on Sabbath, but the commanding general changed his mind when he received a petition from them written "in plain German and in the spirit of Christian loyalty and steadfastness." After a couple months, the authorities realized that these students did not constitute a threat, and thus they released them with the understanding that the school would take responsibility for them.¹¹ As the Russian Department had lost its teacher, the school board selected Jacob as the new Russian teacher. The school was closed for the remainder of the war and turned into a military hospital, and he was inducted as head male nurse for the men's bath and treatment rooms of Friedensau Sanitarium.¹²

Marriage

During his studies at Friedensau, Jacob had met Martha Anna Augusta Wuttke, who attended the nurses' training course. Martha was born at Schmolz near Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) on January 24, 1888. She spent her early childhood and youth with her Lutheran grandparents. Later the Lutheran pastor took her into his home to take care of his aging mother. She became acquainted with an Adventist woman who served in the home as domestic help. After joining the Adventist church, Martha learned about the principles of health reform and vegetarian cooking. In January 1914 she enrolled in the nursing course at Friedensau. On March 4, 1918, one day after Germany and Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Martha married Jacob Penner.¹³

Jacob and Martha Penner had two sons: Bernard Jacob (also spelled Bernhard Jakob) (1919-2012) and Jonathan Gunther (1922-2013). Bernard graduated from Washington Missionary College and served the General Conference as an accountant, treasurer, and auditor for almost 50 years. Dr. Jonathan Penner worked as a pastor in the United States, as a missionary in northern Brazil, and as a teacher at Walla Walla College and Southern Missionary College.¹⁴

Work and Ministry

As the army had drafted many ministers and there was a need for church workers, the East German Union Conference called Jacob in November 1916 to become the secretary of the Oder Conference, based in Eberswalde near Berlin. The police restricted his movements in various ways because he was an alien. When they became more acquainted with him, he asked for more freedom and they granted his request. He no longer had to report to the police every day and could return to his apartment a little bit later in the evenings. Although officially he was prohibited from leaving Eberswalde, they told him they would look away if he were to travel to other places. In February 1919 he became the pastor of the church in Greifswald, Pomerania. In the fall of the following year he

accepted an emergency request to take up the work left by the sudden illness of the minister of one of the two churches in Stettin, Pomerania (now Szczecin, Poland).¹⁵

Jacob's sisters migrated to the United States when he left for Friedensau in 1913.¹⁶ As a return to Russia was impossible due to the political changes, he considered joining his sisters. J. T. Boettcher, secretary of the German Department of the General Conference, told Jacob that there would be work for him on the American continent. Thus, on September 17, 1921, Jacob and Martha arrived with their son Bernard at New York City.¹⁷ For a few months they stayed with their relatives at Fairview, Oklahoma, where he worked among the Mennonites in the area. At the General Conference session in San Francisco, California, in May 1922, he was appointed chair of the German Department at Clinton Theological Seminary in Clinton, Missouri.¹⁸ When the seminary was merged with Broadview College at La Grange, Illinois, in 1925, he and his family initially moved to Broadview, too, where Jacob spent seven or eight months taking college level classes.¹⁹

In March 1926 the Greater New York Conference called him to work as a pastor and evangelist in Manhattan and the Bronx.²⁰ On June 12, 1926, during the General Conference session at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Jacob was ordained to the gospel ministry. The officiating ministers were A. G. Daniells, W. A. Spicer, I. H. Evans, Carlyle B. Haynes, O. Montgomery, and Cecil K. Meyers.²¹ Six and a half years later, he transitioned to the New Jersey Conference, where he pastored German churches in Jersey City, Paterson, and Newark until 1938.²²

Meanwhile, from 1932 to 1933, a terrible famine broke out in the major grain-producing regions of the Soviet Union, killing between 5.5 and 8.5 million people.²³ Jacob and his wife Martha were actively involved in relief work for several years. They maintained extensive correspondence with relatives, church members, and church workers who were in need of food and clothing.²⁴

Then, in 1938, Jacob was called to the international branch of the Pacific Press Publishing Association in Brookfield, Illinois.²⁵ For the next 23 years, Jacob Penner was the editor of several German-language periodicals: *Zeichen der Zeit* (1939-1961), an eight-page weekly missionary periodical, and the *Deutscher Botschafter* (1939), an eight-page semi-monthly church periodical. The periodicals reached German-speaking people in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Australia. Besides his editorial responsibilities, Jacob also pastored for some time a German church in Southside Chicago.²⁶

After the end of World War II, Jacob received many requests for help and relief. He asked German church members in the United States to donate German books. Many had stored such in their attics because they did not use them anymore. Besides hundreds of packages of *Zeichen der Zeit*, Jacob sent about 200 packages of books. As neighbors and friends learned about the relief work through the post office personnel, they brought clothing and money for postage. Martha sewed up the clothes and food in bundles and sometimes sent six packages of clothing per week, about 600 packages in total. Jacob said about her, "My good wife did most of the work because she loved to work for needy people. Her whole life was filled with love and care for others; remember, her name was Martha."²⁷ Further, Jacob corresponded with and evangelized German prisoners of war in the United States.²⁸

Later Years

Jacob and Martha spent their later years in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where they were members of the Pioneer Memorial Church. They moved to Berrien Springs in December 1959, and for two more years Jacob continued his editorial work by correspondence.²⁹ In his retirement, Jacob taught Russian at Andrews University from 1960 to 1964, and tutored students in Russian and German as needed.³⁰ On February 20, 1975, Martha fell and broke her right hip. She died March 13, 1975.³¹ Jacob died December 5, 1985, in Clackamas, Oregon.³² Both are buried at Rose Hill Cemetery in Berrien Springs.³³

Contribution

Jacob Bernard Penner served the denomination for 45 years as a pastor, evangelist, teacher, and editor in both Germany and the United States of America. Besides strengthening the work among German-speaking Adventists in America from the 1920s to the 1960s, he and his wife Martha were actively involved in relief work during the famine in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, for prisoners of war in the United States during World War II, and for people in Germany after the war.

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