

# Bergström (Bergstrom), Hanna Elisabeth (Persson) (1900–1953)



---

## YVONNE JOHANSSON ÖSTER

Yvonne Johansson Öster, M.Phil. (University of Lund, Sweden), M.A. in religion (Andrews University), is a retired college teacher and pastor. Her numerous articles on Adventist history include a biography of pioneer missionary Hanna Bergström (Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2013) and an anthology of Swedish missionaries (Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2019). Johansson Öster also contributed an article about the Adventist church in the *Encyclopedia of Swedish Free Churches* (Sveriges Frikyrkosamråd och Bokförlaget Atlantis AB, 2014). Currently, she is writing a complete history of the Swedish Adventist church.

---

Missionary, physiotherapist, and nurse, Hanna

Bergström served in Dogba and Koza, Northern Cameroon, between 1931 and 1953, together with her husband Ruben Bergström.<sup>1</sup>

## Early Life and Education

Hanna Persson was born on April 29, 1900, in Helsingborg, Sweden, to Per and Elise Persson. When she was 10 years old, Hanna's mother, Elise, became a Seventh-day Adventist, a founding member of the Adventist church in Helsingborg organized by J. C. Raft in 1910. Hanna's home was a stable middleclass family, her father was employed in the city council in a middle management position. All six children received a good education, five of them sat for university entrance exams.<sup>2</sup> Elsa, one of Hanna's sisters, also became an Adventist and she served in the Swedish Union as a secretary for many years.<sup>3</sup> Hanna attended Nyhyttan Mission School, probably between 1915 and 1918. At age 16, she was baptized by her Bible teacher, Johannes Wallenkampf, in April's cold water of the Rastälven River near the school campus.<sup>4</sup>

Following school, Hanna, like many Scandinavian young people, went to Skodsborg School of Physiotherapy in Denmark and graduated in 1923.<sup>5</sup> She returned to Sweden where she worked part time at both the *Stockholms fysikaliska* (physiotherapy institution in the city of Stockholm), run by the Adventist church, and the Nyhyttan Mission School, which was transformed into a “bath” sanitarium during the summer months.<sup>6</sup> It was here that she met Ruben Bergström, her future husband. He was born in Nyhyttan and worked at the institution during the summers. In addition to training as a pastor, Ruben had also taken courses in massage in Stockholm.<sup>7</sup>

## An Unexpected “Call”

Around the turn of the year 1928-29 Pastor Lewis H. Christian<sup>8</sup> met the newly engaged couple in Helsingborg with a call from the European Division to start up a mission in Northern Cameroon, along with a Norwegian couple, Bjarne and Gudrun Röst, who were physiotherapists. It was an unexpected call. This part of Cameroon was a vast district with scanty communication. There were no indigenous Christians; instead, their new “district” was comprised of animist mountain peoples and a large Muslim population in the borderland with the Sahara Desert.<sup>9</sup>

As Northern Cameroon was part of French Equatorial Africa, Ruben was sent to Paris to study French. Hanna was not included for some unknown reason. Instead, she took a course in midwifery, believing that this would be useful in Northern Cameroon where the distance to hospitals was unimaginable. Her anticipation proved correct.

In October 1930, Hanna left for Paris where she married Ruben at the Swedish Embassy on October 30. Later, they had a wedding celebration, which doubled as a farewell party, at Nyhyttan, before leaving for Cameroon in December 1930.<sup>10</sup>

## Mission Service in Dogba

The Bergströms arrived in Cameroon in January 1931 in the company of the Norwegian couple Bjarne and Gudrun Röst. Walter Read, executive secretary from the Northern European Division, accompanied the new missionaries by boat to Lagos where they boarded a train to Jos in Nigeria and finished the journey by automobile into French Cameroon. According to Read, no fixed place for a mission had been chosen before they arrived.<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that Hanna’s skills as a physiotherapist and nurse had been considered when the call went to the couple. Hanna was a committed Christian and a very practical, hard working person. She made the Dogba station a hospitable home. The Bergströms’ garden provided food for themselves and for students, in addition to a learning space for how to care for the soil and harvest better crops. Lessons learned in it influenced the whole area and helped to improve nutrition and reduce hunger in the region.<sup>12</sup>

The nearest Adventist mission was in Jos, Nigeria, staffed by Pastor John J. Hyde and his wife, Louise, who was also a nurse. Although 800 kilometers to the west, the Hydys provided the Bergströms with invaluable contact in various ways.<sup>13</sup> Two years into their stay, Hanna lost a child in a premature miscarriage. She was to suffer repeatedly with malaria and never managed to have a child.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, Hanna cared for all the children that were brought to the clinic as well as their mothers. Her clinic was instrumental in breaking down the prejudice of the people in the region around Dogba, and made them less suspicious of the mission. Hanna's work helped paved the way for preaching the gospel and was essentially the "practical" gospel. The Dogba region was an old slave hunting district, and people were rightfully wary of strangers. Hanna's care helped them to trust the Adventists at the mission.

In the beginning Hanna ran her clinic outdoors, but eventually a house was built, and the clinic was able to move indoors. Coming from a country with no colonial past in Africa was helpful as she met people very much where they were. This was evident in training the boys who came to ask for jobs in her house in order to earn school money. One of them, Mongo, continued to serve as an adult, all the years they stayed in Dogba, a truly skilled and trusted support to Hanna in her often heavy household duties.<sup>15</sup>

As Ruben was often away from home, travelling by horse around the district or occupied with building projects, it was left to Hanna to run the station, which she did with skill and determination. However, she missed her family at home in Sweden. Letters to her sister Elsa often contained a list of articles to be sent out to Africa.<sup>16</sup> Hanna's household skills were evident; during furlough in Sweden berry picking was a must, so blueberries were dried, packed, and shipped in order to be a vital supply of vitamins in Equatorial Africa.<sup>17</sup>

## Mission Service in Koza

In the late 1940s, the Bergströms were asked to start a new mission, from scratch, in Koza. Their arrival in Koza in 1948 was both a welcome change and a challenge as they were no longer in their thirties, but rather nearing their fifties. In Koza, a house, church, and clinic were all eventually built. Hanna started with her healing work outdoors again, just as she had twenty years before.

The Bergströms had been forced to remain in Africa during World War II which took a heavy toll on Hanna's health. Finally, Hanna's health broke down completely and in early 1953 she and Ruben returned to Denmark for Hanna to receive treatment at Skodsborg. Arriving at Skodsborg Sanitarium severely ill, Hanna died only weeks later on February 27, 1953, in Skodsborg. She was buried on March 4 in Helsingborg, Sweden, just twenty-eight years after she and Ruben had accepted the call to become missionaries.<sup>18</sup>

## Legacy

Hanna Bergström's legacy was the health work that helped so many and changed lives in the regions of Dogba and Koza. Hanna not only provided healing, but also training and education on how to live a healthier life for those who came to her clinics. A few years after her death in 1953, a hospital replaced her humble clinic in Koza. Her faith in God remained in spite of unresolved problems, sickness, and loss. In later life, her husband Ruben was to receive much acclaim, but Hanna's labor never received equal recognition. In that sense, she was a typical missionary wife, although her own professional and personal efforts significantly contributed to the success of the mission.

---

## SOURCES

Bergström, Hanna to and from Jenny Thorell and Elsa Pärpe (Hanna's sisters). Private letters. Personal collection of Ingrid Ekstrand-Thorell, Ängelholm, Sweden.

Bergström, Hanna to Johanna Bergström (her mother-in-law). Private letters. 1932. HASDA Archive, Sweden. (Not registered).

Eastcott, Ella. "North Cameroons Mission." *Advent Survey*, January 1931.

Johansson Öster, Yvonne. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström? Onämnd, oavlönad och glömd Missionär, sjuksköterska och kvinna i skuggan av Afrikapionjär Ruben Bergström*[What about Mrs. Bergström? Unnamed, Unpaid, and Forgotten: Missionary, Nurse, and Woman in the Shadow of Africa Pioneer Ruben Bergström]. Stockholm: Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2013.

Johansson Öster, Yvonne. *Till jordens yttersta gräns: Svenska adventistmissionärers liv och verksamhet*[To the Earth's Ultimate Borders: Life and Work of Swedish Adventist Missionaries]. Stockholm: Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2018.

Read, Walter E. "With Our Missionaries." *Advent Survey*, May 1931.

Wiklander, Gösta. *De kallade honom Baba Duniyary, "Landsfader:" Missionären och bergslagssonen Ruben Bergströms pionjärverksamhet i norra Kamerun 1930-1965*[They Called Him *Baba Duniyari*: "Father of the land:" The pioneer work in Northern Cameroon of Ruben Bergström, Missionary and Son of Bergslagen]. Stockholm: SDA Media, 2006.

---

## NOTES

1. This article is written from the personal knowledge and previous research of the author, whose biography, *Hur blev det med fru Bergström? Onämnd, oavlönad och glömd: Missionär, sjuksköterska och kvinna i skuggan av Afrikapionjär Ruben Bergström*, [What About Mrs. Bergström? Unnamed, Unpaid, and Forgotten: Missionary, Nurse, and Woman in the Shadow of Africa Pioneer Ruben Bergström] (Stockholm:

Sandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2013), and book, *Till jordens yttersta gräns: Svenska adventistmissionärers liv och verksamhet* [To the Earth's Ultimate Borders: Life and Work of Swedish Adventist Missionaries] (Stockholm: Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2018), provided the material condensed in this article.

2. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, 15-16.
3. *Ibid.*, 102-103, 129-136.
4. *Ibid.*, 32.
5. *Ibid.*, 21.
6. *Ibid.*, 25-26.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. In 1928, Christian was president of the European Division and in 1929 he became the first Northern European Division president.
9. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, 35-39, 51; *Ungdomens Budbärare*, December 1930.
10. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, p.30
11. Ella Eastcott, "North Cameroons Mission," *Advent Survey*, January 1931, 5-6; Walter E. Read, "With Our Missionaries," *Advent Survey*, May 1931, 7.
12. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, 59-66.
13. *Ibid.*, 77-81.
14. Hanna Bergström to Johanna Bergström (her mother-in-law), private letters, 1932, HASDA Archive, Sweden (not registered).
15. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, 104-106.
16. Hanna Bergström to Elsa Pärpe (Hanna's sister), private letters, personal collection of Ingrid Ekstrand-Thorell, Ängelholm, Sweden.
17. *Hur blev det med fru Bergström*, 137-146.
18. *Ibid.*, 174-181.

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000