

# Erich, Otis George, Sr. (1903–1982)

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## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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Otis Erich was a medical missionary and treasurer who served in China during the troubled era of World War II and the Communist revolution.

## Early Years

Otis was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on March 18, 1903, to George Bessler Erich and his wife, Ida (Thompson). According to the 1910 United States Census his father was of railroad laborer of German heritage. Otis trained as a nurse at the Washington Sanitarium and Hospital in the early 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

It was there that he met Julia Anne Cunningham who completed her nursing course about the same time. They married and continued working at the institution until leaving in August 1925 for mission service in China.<sup>2</sup>

## Medical and Administrative Work in the Orient

The Erichs began learning the language and working as nurses in the Shanghai Sanitarium. Otis had some training in x-ray work and found himself increasingly involved in that speciality at the institution in addition to his supervision of the men's hydrotherapy department.<sup>3</sup>

While back in the United States on furlough in mid-1931, Erich, thinking he would resume work in his speciality when he returned to China, spent much of the respite time learning the latest x-ray techniques by visiting



Otis G. Erich, Sr.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

institutions in California, Massachusetts and Maryland.<sup>4</sup> After first informing Erich that, due to the Depression, they no longer had a position for him, church officials in China suddenly reversed their decision and offered him a position at the new Shenyang Sanitarium north of Shanghai if he was willing to cut short his furlough and make haste.<sup>5</sup>

Their furlough shortened by three months, the Erichs returned to China in May 1932 for their second term of service.<sup>6</sup> As there was little call for x-ray services at Shenyang, Erich took an administrative role as business manager until mid-1938. He then transferred south to become secretary-treasurer of the Honan Mission at Yancheng until mid-1939.<sup>7</sup>

All the church's workers in China had sacrificially accepted reduced wages due to the depletion of mission funds caused by the Depression. That, along with medical bills, caused the Erich family financial stress after returning to the United States on furlough in 1939.<sup>8</sup> At the same time Otis was trying to complete an accounting degree at La Salle Extension University in order to better his qualifications and work prospects.<sup>9</sup> His troubles were compounded by the Sino-Japanese conflict in China, making it increasingly difficult for him to return to his mission field. He tried hard without success to find temporary employment in various sanitariums. Finally, church leaders agreed to return him to the safer southwestern regions of China while Julia stayed behind in California in the interests of the education of their two sons, Otis, Jr. (b. 1928), Louis (b. 1929), and their daughter Verle (b. 1934).<sup>10</sup>

With World War II underway, the means of getting to China were circuitous and dangerous. About September 1941 Erich sailed to Manilla in the Philippines and by mid-December he had managed to reach Burma (now Myanmar) in an effort to get into China by the back route.<sup>11</sup> He then joined a convoy of supply trucks to arrive in southwestern China via the Burma Road about March 1942.<sup>12</sup> He remained in Chung King (now Chongqing),<sup>13</sup> the capital of General Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, often finding a safe haven in underground shelters during Japanese bombing raids.

General Conference officers had originally arranged for Erich to fill an urgent role in the treasury of the Central China Union Mission for a twelve-month term. With more than a year gone by, Julia pleaded with church officials to arrange for her husband's speedy return to America.<sup>14</sup> But passage back to America in 1942 remained perilous. Otis left by plane from Chung King on September 16, bound for India.<sup>15</sup> He boarded a steamer from India and travelled to South America via South Africa<sup>16</sup> and thence to the United States, arriving sometime late 1942 or early 1943. For the remainder of the Second World War, Erich found employment as supervisor of the men's hydrotherapy department at St. Helena Sanitarium in California<sup>17</sup> and later in the business office of Pacific Union College.<sup>18</sup>

## Renewed Service Amidst Civil War

With the end of the war came a renewed opportunity to serve in China. While their sons remained in America to further their education, Otis, Julia, and their daughter Verle sailed from San Francisco on September 29, 1946 on the "Marine Lynx," along with 400 other Protestant missionaries entering the Far East.<sup>19</sup> Erich took up his role as secretary-treasurer and auditor for the Central China Union Mission. He was ordained to the gospel ministry while working in this capacity.<sup>20</sup>

After the defeat of Japan ended World War II, bitter civil war resumed between the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists led by Mao Zedong. When forces loyal to Mao entered Hubei Province in 1947, they destroyed the Adventist mission's Yencheng Hospital. Erich and four other mission staff were captured during the northern winter of 1947-1948. They were sentenced to death as spies but during a counterattack by Nationalist armies they escaped.<sup>21</sup>

In late 1948 church leaders thought it advisable to move from the inland region to Guangdong Province on the coast near Hong Kong. In that safer environment, Erich began 1949 as manager of the Canton Sanitarium.<sup>22</sup> These contingencies did not last more than a few months, though. The arrival of Communist armies forced a mass evacuation of missionaries. By mid-1949 Otis Erich and his family were once more on their way back to the United States.<sup>23</sup>

## Final Years

At Glendale Sanitarium in southern California, Otis found employment as a registered nurse and Julia supervised the physical therapy department.<sup>24</sup> In 1953, Erich was again called to China to meet an urgent need for a treasurer who knew the language. But he was hesitant to rush off immediately so the appointment lapsed.<sup>25</sup>

In 1956, Erich was appointed as auditor for the Southern California Conference. He held this position until mid-1965 when he began serving as pastor of the Sunland-Tujunga church, a little north of Glendale. He officially retired in 1968 but accepted the role of pastoring the Los Angeles Russian church until 1973.<sup>26</sup>

Otis Erich was blessed with another decade of health until passing away on February 7, 1982. He was laid to rest in the Mountain Shadow Cemetery at Sonora, California.<sup>27</sup> Julia Cunningham Erich survived him by exactly one decade, passing away on February 7, 1992.<sup>28</sup>

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