

Toppenberg, Aksel Valdemar Emil (1884–1957)

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Pioneer Seventh-day Adventist missionary V. E. Toppenberg worked 43 years in the countries of Tanganyika, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Eritrea. *Africa Has My Heart*⁴ is an autobiographical account of his dedicated and unassuming life in service for his God and his church.

Early life and Education

Born in Aalborg, Denmark, on February 29, 1884, Aksel Valdemar Emil Toppenberg (later known as V.E. Toppenberg) spent his childhood and early years of youth there.² His parents were Peder Christian Toppenberg³ and Marie Kirstine Kjær.⁴ Confirmed in the Lutheran State Church at the age of 14, he received a little book about Africa. The book *Præsten i Hoima* (The Vicar in Hoima) contained a few lines in Swahili, a language he would later be able to master.⁵

Toppenberg trained as a machinist with the intention to further his education as a technical engineer. But he never carried through his plan. An elder brother, who had emigrated to the USA, returned home for a visit. Having become a Seventh-day Adventist, he persuaded V.E. Toppenberg to follow him back across the Atlantic. After a short period working in a railway workshop, during which he got better acquainted with the Adventist Church, Toppenberg decided to enroll at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska to further his academic education.⁶



Aksel Valdemar Emil Toppenberg

Photo courtesy of the Historic Archive of Seventh-day Adventists (HASDA) in Denmark.

While at Union College he was baptized and joined the Adventist Church. When he had completed his education, he signed a missionary volunteer card in which he pledged to give his life in service for God and go wherever He would lead him. That same year, 1909, he received a call from the Mission Board for an overseas appointment in the Italian colony of Eritrea in Africa.⁷ He set off, leaving his fiancée, Minnie Hansen,⁸ behind. She would join him four years later. After visiting his parents back in Aalborg, he travelled aboard a German steamer from Hamburg, Germany, on a third-class ticket. Although the long journey was anything but pleasant, his high expectations for Africa and the work there kept up his spirits.⁹

Working in Africa

His time in Eritrea was fairly short. About a year later he transferred deeper into the heart of the dark continent. In Tanganyika (later Tanzania) he experienced all the difficulties and dangers of a pioneer's life at a time when people knew little about how to protect themselves from tropical diseases such as malaria and black water fever. Of 35 missionaries, no less than one third died within two years of his arrival.¹⁰ As the "handy man," it fell to his lot to make the coffins. He felt miserable and sick, and wondered who was going to make one for himself. All he could do was trust he was under God's protection.¹¹

In 1913 he and Minnie were married by another missionary, A. A. Carscallan, a pioneer in Kenya, at the Gendia Mission's church.¹² The couple's service in Tanganyika continued under the supervision of the German Union Conference. A strong program developed during those years, with 12 mission stations manned by Europeans, as well as many schools.¹³

During World War I, when other missionaries were interned or sent home, Toppenberg, as a Dane, remained in western Tanganyika. For two dangerous years he cared for the work and staff. Most of that time the war raged across East Africa, cutting the family entirely off from the outside world. The German authorities appreciated and respected him, not least for the tireless medical help he gave to wounded soldiers.¹⁴

Food was difficult to obtain, and the Toppenbergs found themselves forced to make clothing from animal skins. As the situation gradually became more critical, and as thousands of native tribespeople roamed about robbing, looting, and killing, Toppenberg took his family in the dead of night and fled. Amid peril and confusion, they made their way to the advancing British lines where they were kindly received. Health conditions made it imperative for them to leave the tropics, and sadly they departed in 1917.¹⁵

After the war, they spent their furlough in the United States. The family¹⁶ remained there for a couple years during which time Toppenberg worked in private business until one of the mission leaders, Elder L. H. Christian, "found" him again. As a result, in 1921, the Toppenbergs travelled to start pioneer work in Ethiopia. They gained a foothold in the old Ethiopian empire. He developed a friendly relationship with His Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie, one that lasted for many years and meant much for the development of the Adventism in Ethiopia. Toppenberg established the church's headquarters in Addis Abeba and became the first president of the

Ethiopian Union.

After many years of service in Ethiopia, the Toppenbergs received a request to move to the newly entered Uganda mission field. When the Upper Nile Union Mission (Uganda and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan) organized in 1933, V. E. Toppenberg became its president. It was under his guidance that the church in Uganda got off to a good start.¹⁷ Sadly, in Uganda Minnie caught the dreaded sleeping sickness, and they returned to Denmark in 1936, where she died. The next year Toppenberg married Mary Hendrickson Oswald¹⁸ and in 1938 they sailed back to East Africa and continued working in Uganda.¹⁹

In 1943 the church reorganized its activities in East Africa, and because of his knowledge of the language, the country, and the people, as well as his friendship with the emperor, leadership asked Toppenberg to return to Ethiopia. Here he would spend his last 10 years of active service in Eritrea and Ethiopia. He acquired the Kuyera estate in the southern part of Ethiopia, where the church's seminary would be located. His many years of work eventually cost him his health and almost caused him a breakdown after he had completed building the seminary. In 1952 he departed Africa for the United States, 43 years after first arriving there.²⁰

His Life as a Missionary

Esther Hange,²¹ who served with him in Uganda, long remembered him telling the other missionaries about his pioneer days. "Missionary Toppenberg has over the years been through many adventures and lived a life rich in experiences. His life was occupied with teaching in schools in the language of the natives, an excellent way to learn a foreign language. He would lead out in the work at a mission station, preach the gospel to wondering and listening crowds, organize churches of believers, that waited for the soon coming of the Lord, write and translate, start colporteurs in their sales work, travel, build houses and much more. Travel in the beginning was by foot on the natives' narrow and winding tracks, by boat across the Victoria Lake in Tanganyika to collect provisions. Later the travels were partly by car, which made it much easier and faster ... As leader of the Uganda Mission Toppenberg would often bring along everything for five weeks' spending (in his autobiography you find a list of the items he needed for such a 'safari'). After a trip like this to the schools, the churches, and small groups of believers, the vehicle needed a thorough inspection before the next tour. Toppenberg had the advantage of being able to service his own car. I have seen his red Morris taken apart outside 'Kireka,' the main mission station at the time. When you watched you would wonder if all the different parts would find their way back to their right places and the car be ready for driving."²²

When he left Africa, at the age of 68, he had had a furlough only four times in his 43 years of service.²³ "This missionary had performed a lifelong work by preaching in different languages ... Plans were also laid that he should go out there again, even after he had retired, because he felt that he belonged there and thrived better there. Unfortunately, on March 27, 1957, at the age of 73, death caught up with him. At the time he was living in

California and in the process of writing *Africa Has My Heart* about the progress of God's work in Africa and his own life among the Africans."²⁴

Legacy

V. E. Toppenberg laid the foundation for the growing Adventist program in Ethiopia and Uganda. Known as a good friend to younger missionaries and a dedicated Christian, his unselfish lifework was an inspiring example for others to follow. Africa had indeed captured his heart.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Published January 1, 1958, by Pacific Press Publishing Association, Mountain View, California, U.S.A. The book is available from Adventist Book Centers and from Amazon as a 150 -age hardback or on the Kindle platform.
2. Emanuel W. Pedersen, "Missionær V.E. Toppenberg in memoriam" (Obituary), *Adventnyt*, no. 6, 1957, 5.
3. 1843-1914, HASDA Archives, Denmark.
4. 1845-1912, HASDA Archives, Denmark.
5. Pedersen, 5.
6. Esther Hange, "Mit hjerte er i Afrika" (Africa Has My Heart), *Tidernes Tegn*, February 1960, 14, 15.
7. Pedersen, 5. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Toppenberg, Aksel Valdemar Emil."

8. Marie Kathrine (Minnie) Hansen was born in Slesvig, Germany, in 1886. When 17 years old, she travelled with her mother and siblings to the United States. Converted to Seventh-day Adventism, she joined the Portland, Maine, Adventist Church. Educated at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, she later learned nursing at the Washington Sanitorium. She was 27 when she married Toppenberg and served with him for 23 years before she died at the age of 49 in 1936 (*Missionsefterretninger*, April 1936, 7).
9. Hange, 14.
10. Pedersen, 5.
11. Hange, 15.
12. Ibid.
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Toppenberg, Aksel Valdemar Emil."
14. Pedersen, 5.
15. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Toppenberg, Aksel Valdemar Emil."
16. They had one daughter at the time, Ingrid Marie, born in 1915. Their son, Robert Iverson, was born later in 1923.
17. Emanuel W. Pedersen, 5.
18. Birthday is unknown, died November 6, 1978. HASDA Archives "Toppenberg, Valdemar Emil".
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Toppenberg, Aksel Valdemar Emil."
20. Pedersen, 5.
21. Served as a teacher in Uganda 1931-1934.
22. Hange, 15.
23. Pedersen, 5.
24. Hange, 15.

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