

# Babienco, Theofil Theofilovich (1885–1980)

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Theofil Theofilovich Babienco served the Seventh-day Adventist Church from 1913 to about 1970 as pastor, missionary, administrator, educator, and translator in Canada, the United States, China, Mongolia, and Poland.

## Early Life and Conversion

Theofil Theofilovich Babienco was born on September 7, 1885, in the town of Tarashcha (Тарашча), near Kiev, into the Russian Orthodox family of Theofil Arsentievich and Ekaterina Stupka Babienko.<sup>1</sup> Theofil Theofilovich was a descendant of the Polish noble family Gordowski. When his father, Theofil A. Babienko, began to share his new “Adventist” faith (see Babienko, Theofil A.) with others, he was soon exiled to the North Caucasus in the city of Stavropol), where his son Theofil spent his early years. It was there that they met Adventists. The Babienko family confessed the same truth, which they found while studying the Holy Scriptures. In a short while, the whole family was baptized into the Adventist Church.

## Marriage

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in an attempt to avoid harassment by the state church, the family secretly moved to Europe, and then to Canada. There, in 1912, Theofil Theofilovich graduated from Clinton



Theofil T. Babienco

Photo courtesy of Andris Pešelis.

German Seminary (Missouri, USA), and in 1913 he was sent by the Adventist Church to Russia to improve his knowledge of the Russian language so that he could serve in the regions there.

Prior to his trip, Theofil flipped over a yearbook of the graduates from an Adventist college in Newbold, Great Britain. He caught sight of the photo of Anna Wilson, who incidentally was the sister of Yan Yanovich Wilson, a pastor and the author of several hymns from the *Psalms of Zion* collection.<sup>2</sup> “She will be my wife,” Theofil told his friends. After arriving in England and meeting Anna, he asked her to marry him after three weeks, and a week later they were married.

## Mission Work in Harbin

Between 1915 and 1919 Babienco worked as a pastor with the Saskatchewan Conference in Canada<sup>3</sup> before working with the Atlantic Union Conference in the United States.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of 1920 Babienco was sent by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to Harbin, China, in the Far Eastern Division, with a view of entering Siberia.<sup>5</sup> Babienco moved with his family from New Jersey to Harbin, a Russian-speaking city in China. It was one of the centers of Russian emigration. “Harbin was one of the central stations on the great Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), which connected the Russian and Chinese empires. By 1920 Harbin was flooded with Russian railway workers and Russian immigrants who had lost everything, including their hope for the future.”<sup>6</sup>

When Babienco arrived in Harbin, there were only about thirty members, who attended worship in their private homes.<sup>7</sup> Babienco began evangelistic series in Harbin’s theater. He got permission from the police department director, E. I. Opanasenko, who later became an Adventist and whose son-in-law, P. E. Kositzin, became a pastor of the Adventist Church.<sup>8</sup> As a result, an Adventist community of more than 700 people was established within a matter of months. Moreover, a church was built where an Adventist secondary school was also accommodated.

After two years a publishing house and a Bible seminary were opened. The school was to “prepare evangelists to work among the Russian population in Manchuria (the northeast region of China, which was controlled by Japan at that time) and China, as well as among the Mongols and Chinese.”<sup>9</sup> Chinese and Mongolian languages were the compulsory subjects in the seminary. Having mastered those languages, the graduates were sent to key stations in the regions around. More than thirty pastors graduated from the seminary. Among them were P. Rodionov, P. Mayevskiy, S. Oryol, P. Kositsyn, and others. Babienco “led these workers into northern Mongolia, about one hundred miles below Lake Baikal, then down into Chahar, Inner Mongolia; and Jehol.”<sup>10</sup>

During his ministry in Harbin, Babienco worked among Russian refugees in Manchuria.<sup>11</sup> He also served, until 1922, the churches in the Soviet Far East, which was then a part of the so-called Far Eastern Republic, controlled by the Bolsheviks.<sup>12</sup>

Babienco also succeeded in planting churches along the entire Chinese Eastern Railway, which was at that time maintained by the Russians. In addition, Babienco preached seven times a week in the most prestigious city

areas. His sermons were known far beyond Harbin, and people listened to him with pleasure. It was these sermons that underlay his famous book *The Sermon Series* ("Seriya propovedey"), first published in Harbin in 1923. In Harbin, Babienco also started publishing several magazines: *Family Friend* ("Semeynny drug") (1923–1927), *The Voice of Truth* ("Golos istiny") (1921–1922), *The Source of Life* ("Istochnik zhizni") (1923–1933), *The Friend of the Children* ("Drug detey") (1923–1926), and *Volunteer* ("Volonter") (1924–1925). In addition, the magazines *The Lighthouse* ("Mayak") (1934), *The Bright Calls* ("Svetlye zovy") (1935), *The Friend of Youth* ("Drug yunosti") (1929–1930), and *The Real Truth* ("Nastoyashchaya istina") (1928) were printed as well. Each of these magazines was intended for a specific audience, depending on the age and the attitude to religion. In Harbin, Babienco wrote some books: *The Catastrophe of the World* ("Katastrofa mira") (1923), about the history of spiritualism, and *The Atoning Sacrifice of Christ and His Ministry* ("Primiritelnaya zhertva Khrista i Ego sluzhenie") (1925). These were used as educational books by pastors for many decades.

Dissatisfied with the fact that hundreds of people had accepted Adventism thanks to Babienco's efforts, the ministers of the state church hired killers to deal with him, and a high price was set on his head. In later years one of those would-be killers became a church member. He recalled that together with his assistant he had waited for Babienco several times near his house at night. However, each time Theofil entered the house in such a way that they did not see him. Interestingly, Babienco, having heard this story, told that man that he saw both killers in each case, but did not realize that they were waiting to kill him. Nevertheless, having prayed to God, he passed by unnoticed. Angels really defended him.

## Administrator

In 1928 Babienco was elected president of the Baltic Union, which at that time comprised the Baltic states. In this position he conducted a large-scale missionary work. He became one of the founders of the Theological Seminary in the town of Suži, near Riga. In Riga, under the direction of Babienco, many of Ellen G. White's books and Bible concordances were translated into Russian and published.

In 1932 Babienco was elected the president of the Polish Union, which at that time comprised, in particular, the western regions of Belarus and Ukraine. In Poland, Babienco continued publishing Ellen G. White's books in Russian and started to publish the magazine *Tserkovnyy Vestnik* ("The Church Herald"). At the same time, he remained a very friendly and open person who was genuinely interested in the needs of the people, and this, of course, also contributed to the fact that he knew most of members.

In 1936 Babienco was elected the secretary of the North European Division, headquartered in London, where he served up to the beginning of World War II. During the war he handed over a map of Manchuria, which he had kept since his work in Harbin, to the U.S. government. This detailed map helped the Americans to plan their military operations against the Japanese, and Babienco received special praise from the U.S. government for his

contribution to the victory in World War II.

## Later Years

Babienco visited Poland several times with Adventist relief consignments. He served on a regular basis in the Russian-speaking congregations of the United States and Canada. Theofil Theofilovich Babienco died in 1980 at the age of 95, having a clear mind until the very last day.

## Contribution

Because of the efforts of Theofil T. Babienco, Russian-speaking Adventist communities in China were founded. His work among the Chinese and Mongolian people was unprecedented. He founded a seminary in China, where pastors studied, as well as a printing house and an Adventist school. While serving in China, Latvia, and Poland, Babienco organized publication of missionary literature, both in Russian and local languages. Being an excellent administrator, he organized the effective work of the Baltic and Polish unions, as well as the North European Division, thus contributing to the substantial growth of membership in these regions and to a successful pastoral service.

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## NOTES

1. In some documents the father's last name was spelled with "k" (Babienko), but the son's last name was spelled with "c" (Babienco). This is the same family name; two spellings are possible in Russian language. The son adopted the spelling Babienco when he moved to the United States (Galina Stele, email message to the editor, July 29, 2019).
2. In the 1930s this pastor fell victim to Stalin's repressions.
3. "Saskatchewan Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1917), 103.
4. Guy Dail, "Home Missionary Department," *ARH*, November 4, 1920, 14.
5. General Conference Committee, March 31, 1920, 665, General Conference Archives, accessed April 8, 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1920.pdf>.
6. Galina Stele and Aleksey Oparin, "The Chinese Railway and the Gospel," *Mission 360 6*, no. 4 (2018): 20.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Christ's Last Legion*, vol. 2 (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1949), 506; T. T. Babienco, "Our Work in Mongolia," *ARH*, January 6, 1927, 8, 9.
11. C. H. Watson, "Opening Address of the Conference," *Australasian Record*, October 18, 1926, 2.
12. One day, while on a trip, Theofil was detained by a commissar of sinister appearance with a huge golden tooth in the mouth, who confiscated all his books and the Bible. After some time Babienko unexpectedly met this very commissar in a prayer house in city of Vladivostok. This man said that he believed in God after reading the notes Babienko had made in the confiscated Bible. He especially remembered the words on the first page: "Every day you must live as if it were the last day in your life."

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