

Erzberger, Jakob H. (1843–1920)

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Jakob (James) Erzberger was a pioneer Seventh-day Adventist convert and worker in Europe and the first ordained European Seventh-day Adventist pastor.

Early Years

Jakob Erzberger¹ was born on March 31, 1843,² in Seltisberg near Liestal in Switzerland.³ As a result of the death of his father, young Jakob, from the age of three,⁴ grew up in poverty. His mother, Anna Erzberger (nee Nefzger), struggled to provide for her four young sons through fabric weaving. Because of the godly influence of his mother, Jakob decided to work for God at a young age.⁵ In 1859, Erzberger was confirmed by Father J. Widmann in Liestal and later found a job as a gatekeeper in the cantonal hospital.⁶

Education

In 1864, Erzberger attended the St. Chrischona Pilgrim Mission Seminary near Basel. This was a period of spiritual growth and maturity for the young Erzberger in spite of doubts and private struggles. “On his arrival one of the seminary students remarked that the devil did not dare to enter the seminary gate. Young Erzberger replied that the devil had managed to make it into the hallowed seminary grounds as Erzberger often confronted him ‘in his own heart.’”⁷ After the completion of his studies there, Erzberger served part of this time as a chaplain at the prison in Pruntrut as well as a missionary preacher.

Meeting Adventists

In 1867, while on a preaching tour for his seminary, Erzberger came across a group of Adventists that had been led by Michel Belina Czechowski in 1867 in Tramelan. How did Erzberger meet this group? Near Tramelan, Erzberger discovered his only pair of trousers had been torn. The tailor he found to repair his trousers introduced him to the Adventists and gave him a Bible study on the end of the world, the soon coming of Jesus, and the validity of the Sabbath commandment. “After reporting back to his seminary on his new biblical insights, Erzberger was forced to leave the seminary on account of his new found faith.”⁸

In 1868, the year he was baptized,⁹ Erzberger decided to minister to the small group of Adventists in Tramelan.¹⁰ The group had the impression that they were the only ones in the entire world holding to these beliefs until Albert Vuilleumier read a copy of the *Review and Herald* left by Czechowski and discovered that there was already an established Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, which Czechowski did not mention.¹¹

With this discovery, in 1869, Erzberger was sent to Battle Creek, Michigan, to establish contact with the Church. Although he arrived late, Erzberger became the first official delegate from overseas to a General Conference session. He was welcomed in the home of James and Ellen White, co-founders of Adventism. While John H. Kellogg tutored Erzberger in English, James White gave him Bible studies¹².



Jakob H. Erzberger
Photo courtesy of European Adventist Archives in Friedensau, Germany.

In 1870, Erzberger was ordained during a ceremony led by James White and J. N. Andrews at a camp meeting in South Lancaster, Massachusetts. At the same time, Erzberger was commissioned to go back to do mission work in Europe.

Back to Europe

In the next decades, Erzberger contributed significantly to the establishment of Adventism in Switzerland and Germany. In the winter of 1872 to 1873, Erzberger held evangelistic meetings in La Chaux-de-Fonds and in Le Locle in Switzerland. According to Karl Waber, that was the first time he had undertaken a public effort for evangelism. In La Chaux-de-Fonds, the auditorium was so crowded that many listeners had to stand. At the end, Erzberger baptized a number of people and founded a congregation in Le Locle with eighteen members.¹³

In 1874, when James N. Andrews, the first official Adventist missionary went to Switzerland, Erzberger initially worked closely with him. Erzberger proved to be dependable and acted as a guide in assisting Andrews.¹⁴ In 1875, after hearing of a Sabbath keeping group in Germany, Erzberger and Andrews travelled to the Elberfeld, Wuppertal, area where they met a group of Baptist Christians (Getaufte Christen-Gemeinde). This group had formed around a weaver, revivalist, and former minister of the Reformed Church, L. H. Lindermann.¹⁵ Their beliefs were similar to the Adventists even though they had existed independently. Andrews was not fluent in German, so he spent a few weeks in the Vohwinkel and the Wuppertal area before going back to Switzerland.

Erzberger stayed back and, after nurturing them spiritually, baptized eight people in a lake near Vohwinkel in January of 1876. The group became the first official Adventist church in Germany.¹⁶ Erzberger, however, did not only preach and baptize. He also produced the first German Adventist tracts (printed in Solingen, Germany) that members of the young church distributed.¹⁷

Discouragement and Marriage

Around 1878, Erzberger gave up his mission work as a result of the discouragement from church members. “These members—as can be deduced from a letter written to Ellen White in 1878—accused Erzberger of becoming ‘proud’ of his new ‘American knowledge’ that he was preaching about.”¹⁸ In 1882, Erzberger married Marie Yersin. The couple had two sons: Heinrich (born in 1884) and Jakob (born in 1886).

Back to Mission

Erzberger returned to the mission calling after a period of time. Heinz thinks Erzberger’s return was linked to the untimely death of James N. Andrews in 1883 which left the Adventist mission in Europe without a leader. Additionally, when Ludwig Conradi was sent back to Europe in 1886, Erzberger was inspired by Conradi’s evangelistic drive. Erzberger shared his dwelling with Conradi for a time and assisted in the first evangelistic efforts at Lausanne and Basel, Switzerland.¹⁹

Soon, Erzberger began holding prophecy seminars in various big cities in the German and French languages in Switzerland: Lausanne, Basel, Zürich, Bern, which led to the establishment of churches in those cities. E. E. Frauchiger, the former Methodist preacher and later Adventist pioneer, heard Erzberger in Lausanne for the first time and exclaimed that the whole city was taken by storm.²⁰ Erzberger also went with Conradi to Hamburg from where both carried out pioneer mission work. In Hamburg, Julius T. Böttcher, another pioneer worker, joined Erzberger and Conradi in organizing evangelistic series. They were successful. For instance, by November of 1899, Conradi reported of the “good interest” generated by the lectures held by Erzberger and Böttcher in the city of Barmen.²¹

Aside from his close association with Conradi, Erzberger was a motivated minister who often worked far beyond his capabilities. He did not let the death of his wife, Marie (at the age of 53), in 1903, cause him to falter. From 1904 onwards, Erzberger worked as a traveling evangelist throughout Germany. For example he preached 49 sermons and organized 28 Bible studies and 17 evangelistic in April 1906. In Osterode, he collapsed during an evangelistic meeting that same year.²² When Conradi moved to Germany and concentrated his efforts there, Erzberger was left as the only Adventist preacher to care for all the German-speaking churches in Switzerland for several years.

Later Years

From 1906, Erzberger lived in Switzerland again, first in Gelterkinden near Liestal, then in Sissach from 1909 on.²³ After some years, Erzberger’s eyesight began to fail. Still, he continued visiting churches.²⁴ Soon, in 1920, Erzberger was worn out by sickness. He was taken care of by his second wife, Marie Pauline Kaufmann (born in 1862), to whom he was remarried in 1905. She was from Lahr, Germany. Jakob H. Erzberger died in July 13, 1920, bringing the efforts of a European Adventist giant to rest. He had been living in Basel.

Contribution

Jakob H. Erzberger served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as evangelist, pastor, missionary and leader of a

burgeoning Adventist movement in Europe. During his 50 years of service, he left several legacies worthy of note. He was the first ordained Adventist minister in Europe. He was instrumental in establishing the first Adventist congregations in Switzerland and Germany by building on the work of Czechowski and of Lindermann. Moreover, Erzberger is known to have produced and published the first indigenous German Adventist tracts. Although he had no major organizational or leadership responsibilities, the sacrificial efforts of Erzberger played key roles in the grounding and establishing Adventism in its earliest years in Europe. In summary, Erzberger was one of the founding fathers of European Adventism.

The two sons of Erzberger, Heinrich Erzberger and Jakob Erzberger, inherited the mission and ministry legacy of their father. Heinrich Erzberger was a missionary to the Middle East (Syria, Turkey) and Bulgaria while Jakob Erzberger worked in the Adventist Sanitarium in Gland.

Memory Statements by Ludwig R. Conradi

“He [Jakob H Erzberger] served fifty years as an ordained minister in this denomination, and saw the cause develop from the very first few Sabbath keepers in Switzerland, to thousands in every part of Europe at the time of his death. He surely rests in peace from all his labors.”²⁵

“Without seeking his own honor he gave his utmost in seeking souls in the typical ‘Swiss way’—direct and to the point. Even as a senior worker, he was always willing to work under a younger man. He did not seek his own, he was no position seeker ... leading people to Jesus was for him the most important holy work.”²⁶

Praise of the Pioneer by Daniel Heinz

“In reality, Jacob Erzberger was a type of circuit preacher for all of Switzerland and Germany. A humble man, Erzberger was happy to stand in the shadow of Czechowski, Andrews, and Conradi, who came to be seen as the founding fathers of European Adventism. In a sense, Erzberger was the “first fruit” of Czechowski’s mission work in Europe. He often followed up on the evangelistic efforts of the other pioneers as a faithful pastor to the newly established churches and was the one to provide pastoral care and establish new believers in the faith after the other pioneers moved on to new challenging areas.”²⁷

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. In some English and French sources, either the spelling “Erzenberger” or “Ertzenberger” is used.?
2. Ludwig R. Conradi, “In Memory of J. H. Erzberger,” *ARH*, December 23, 1920, 20.?
3. Daniel Heinz, “Erzberger, Jakob,” *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 16 (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 1999), 465.?
4. Ibid.?
- 5.

- Daniel Heinz, "Jakob Erzberger: The Forgotten Pioneer," *Adventist World*, May 2010, 24.?
6. Heinz, "Erzberger, Jakob," 465.?
 7. Heinz, "Jakob Erzberger: The Forgotten Pioneer," 24.?
 8. *Ibid.*, 25.?
 9. Conradi, "In Memory of J. H. Erzberger," 20.?
 10. Heinz, "Erzberger, Jakob," *Biographisch*, 465.?
 11. See Karl Waber, *Streiflichter aus der Geschichte der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in der Schweiz 1865-1901* (Zürich: Advent-Verlag, 1995), 30-31.?
 12. *Ibid.*, 41-42.?
 13. *Ibid.*, 47.?
 14. Heinz, "Erzberger, Jakob," *Biographisch*, 465.?
 15. See the full story by H. Osterburg, "Der Vater Weise," *Adventbote*, October 15, 1958, 310-311; November 1, 1958, 326- 327; January 1, 1959, 8-9; January 15, 1959, 22-23.?
 16. See James Ertzenberger, "Report from Bro. Ertzenberger," *ARH*, March 2, 1876, 70.?
 17. See James Ertzenberger, "Solingen—Germany," *ARH*, January 27, 1876, 30; James N. Andrews, "Report from Switzerland," *ARH*, March 2, 1876, 70.?
 18. Heinz, "Jakob Erzberger: The Forgotten Pioneer," 25.?
 19. Conradi, "In Memory of J. H. Erzberger," 20.?
 20. Heinz, "Jakob Erzberger: The Forgotten Pioneer," 25.?
 21. Ludwig R. Conradi, "The Hamburg Mission," *The Signs of the Times*, December 16, 1889, 11.?
 22. "Erzberger, Jakob," *Biographisch*, 465.?
 23. *Ibid.*?
 24. Ludwig R. Conradi, "In the Central European Union," *ARH*, June 10, 1915, 11.?
 25. Conradi, "In Memory of J. H. Erzberger," 20.?
 26. Heinz, "Jakob Erzberger: The Forgotten Pioneer," 25?
 27. *Ibid.*?