

# Persson, Julius (1883–1953)

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Julius Persson was one of the first Swedish missionaries to East Africa. His was a life with different commitments: colporteur, evangelist in Sweden, a multi-task missionary in East Africa, and health worker in Brazil and Germany.

## Early Swedish Missionary to East Africa

Julius' parents were among the very first Seventh-day Adventists in Sweden, his mother being one of the 11 charter members of the small church established in 1882 at Långbanshyttan in Värmland province. In 1902, as a nineteen-year-old, Julius started his education at Nyhyttan Mission School, which had been established just a few years before (1898).<sup>1</sup> After the three-year ministerial course, Julius entered pioneer work, both in the remote north of Sweden and in the southern landscapes. In the beginning, he did so under the auspices of an experienced pastor, but very soon, he worked responsibly on his own.<sup>2</sup>

During the summer of 1907, the Scandinavian Union was encouraged by Pastor L. R. Conradi, the leader of the European Division, to launch a decisive step to start up a mission in Ethiopia. Along with Guy Dail, the secretary of the Division, and William Prescott, vice president of the General Conference, he was present at a conference held in Södertälje, Sweden, in June 1907. It was likely while here that Julius received an unexpected call. He had possibly attended Fridensau Mission School in Germany at some time, and it is probable that Conradi knew him from that time.

So it was that, later in 1907, the Scandinavian Union sent out its first two Swedish missionaries. They left via Hamburg, Germany, then the headquarters base of the European Division, the foreign mission headquarters for Europe. The two, single, young men were Julius Persson, 24, a trained and experienced minister, and Per Lindegren, 30, who had attended Skodsborg School of Physiotherapy. Their commission was originally to take up work in Abyssinia (Ethiopia). However, they could not enter Ethiopia since, at that time, foreign missionaries were prohibited to work in the country. Thus, they set off for Asmara, capital of Eritrea, then an Italian colony bordering Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

Julius was a diligent writer reporting to Swedish Adventists via *Missionären* on this newly established mission enterprise. He often wrote about his own experiences. These happenings took him on a long unforeseen journey, encompassing not only East Africa before the Great War, but later Brazil and Germany as well. Considering his humble origin in rural 19<sup>th</sup> century Sweden, with only small opportunities for changes in life circumstances, his was a remarkable life journey.<sup>4</sup>

## Approaching Africa

Julius painted, in words, detailed pictures of all the experiences of the two Swedes as they traveled into a gradually hotter climate. The heat peak met the two Scandinavians in Massawa, one of the world's hottest spots, and the port for accessing Eritrea from the Red Sea. They traveled inland from the port up to the high plateau, 2350 meters above sea level, and thus a cooler climate. Their first task was to find a suitable place for a mission station. There were already mission stations from a number of religious organizations active in Asmara<sup>5</sup>

The Swedes' plan was to start with a school. Therefore, the first thing necessary was to study the languages--Tigrinja, the local vernacular, as well as Italian, the official language. The two missionaries had the firm conviction that language was the door to the hearts of people. As an Italian colony, Eritrea had Italian laws, which meant full religious liberty. Nobody could prevent the building of a school or a church.<sup>6</sup>

## Abyssinia-Ethiopia

Julius had married Frieda Rhode, a German nurse, who had come out to work in German East Africa. The church organization had made provision for this as was recorded: "At the 300<sup>th</sup> meeting of the General Conference, September 12, 1908, it was voted a mission fund to provide the transportation of Sisters /Sofie/Larsen of Scandinavia and /Frieda/ Rohde of Germany en route to the Abyssinian mission. It being understood that they will remain there as faithful workers after their marriage to Brethren Lindgren and Persson."<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 1910, Julius accompanied Dr. Valter Wasenius (from Finland) on an exploration trip into Abyssinia. The purpose was to find possible places for new mission stations. The Persson's first child, a daughter, was born in August 1910, probably while Julius was away.

In April 1911, with just three days' notice, the young family was asked to take up work in Nyanza in the vicinity of the huge Lake Victoria, where David Livingstone had once worked (now part of Tanzania, south-east shore of Lake Victoria). By that time, Asmara was a successfully developed mission, and it was felt that new places needed outreach with the Adventist message.<sup>8</sup>

## Life in Busegwe at Lake Victoria Nyanza

Julius wrote, quite modestly, about the change in orders: "It was not an easy task with a wife and a nine-month baby to make such a journey. We said farewell to old Ethiopia and travelled down to Massawa, where there is always a great availability of free sweating baths, as this is one of the hottest places on earth. We were saddened to see our baby-girl Esther lying in sweat the whole night. On the Red Sea, it was also very hot."<sup>9</sup> On their way from Mombasa, a telegram urged them to hurry on to the Busegwe station, as Brother Rässler had died of Blackwater Fever. Not the most positive circumstances to welcome the new missionary family!

After reaching Niabangi, a landing place on Lake Victoria Nyanza, the rest of the journey was on foot: a five-hour march.<sup>10</sup>

In July 1911, Julius wrote a thorough report for his Swedish readers from their new location. He described the locale, the indigenous people and their customs, and the development of the mission station. He was a very diligent worker despite difficult circumstances. His once so-humble, poor, rural background in the remote Swedish forest areas may have been a helpful background for him.

Busegwe was a newly established mission. In one year, four huts for students, a chapel seating 300, and a big storage house were built, and another kitchen was added to the partly finished missionaries' house. Road improvements were made and, among others, 400 banana plants, 150 pineapple plants, and 25 lemon and orange trees were planted, and five acres of land were cleared. Julius reported, "now we have the joy to see cotton where only weeds and bushes grew before."<sup>11</sup>

Difficulties in finding skilled workers among the Africans meant that the missionaries first had to learn how to build; tiles had to be made, and trees felled then sewn into planks. Usually, a mission started with a school, though here there was a problem--how to find local teachers. The language was foreign, so the missionaries had to teach themselves the vernacular and teach the students at the same time! Julius taught in the mornings and worked on the site in the afternoons along with students and other workers.

The Adventist work in the then German East Africa was in its very beginning. There were no nets to protect against malaria. Of the 35 foreign missionaries sent to this part of Africa, half of them died during the course of two years after their arrival.<sup>12</sup>

## Education and Translation

After a little more than a year, Julius was capable of preaching and teaching in the local language. In the summer of 1913, he wrote: "We hold school for 2-4 hours per day, and every Sabbath preaching the eternal gospel in their own language."<sup>13</sup> Julius always gave the Lord glory, referring to himself as a simple instrument. Again and again, he stressed that you cannot preach unless you learn the language of the people. Having taught himself the language, he was able to do translation work. In addition to preaching the word, he also shared the gospel through health treatments and visitation.

Even though Julius Persson had been a pastor for a number of years, it was not until December 1911 that he was ordained, or as it was referred to: "blessed." His ordination took place at a missionary council in Shirati (at Lake Victoria) with L. R. Conradi and Guy Dail, from the European Division in Hamburg, officiating.<sup>14</sup>

## Hope of the Mission

Through zeal and tireless service, Julius followed in the footsteps of that great missionary, the Apostle Paul. His predecessor, Pastor Rässler, had gathered 100 children in his school, but attendance had waned as his illness worsened. Only 13 were left when the Perssons family arrived, but Julius started with them teaching them reading and writing as a beginning. He learned their language as he was teaching. "By the end of 1912, I had around 180 children in my school, sixty of them being girls. Since then, some of them have died, others moved away, and some attend only irregularly, but we still have 150 children receiving education."<sup>15</sup>

For Julius Persson, the hope of the mission were the children, the young--those who would carry the gospel to their neighboring people. It is quite impressive to see the number of schools and branch schools staffed by teachers' assistants trained at Busegwe. In the same letter from 1913, Julius makes an important remark: "The Lord has richly blessed my language studies; thus I have already been able to translate 22 songs, the law of God, part of Old Testament history, and have begun a translation of the Gospel of Matthew."<sup>16</sup>

At the end of 1913, what was to be Julius' last Africa letter reached Sweden. Things had changed during the few years spent at the Busegwe station. Julius reported that there were 15 missionaries, 20 local teachers. 24 schools, 1,936 boys, 398 girls, three churches, and 52 indigenous members. Eleven stations had been started with seven already completed; the rest were planned to be finished the next year (1914). There was an intense translation work going on. Julius quotes Paul: "Our work is not in vain."<sup>17</sup>

## Unforeseen Changes

Despite Julius' optimistic tone in his letters home, there was a time in 1913 where he and his family went through the school of suffering, with much sickness, presumably serious malaria. He wrote, "Suffering, ordeals, and deprivation purge the character. Gethsemane is the college of life."<sup>18</sup> On June 7, 1914, the Persson family left on furlough after having spent six years in German East Africa.<sup>19</sup> They were not to return. They were not even to return to their newly assigned field in Congo.

However, they were fortunate to return to Europe on the eve of the outbreak of World War I. During that war, total devastation hit the mission work, stations were closed, missionaries from Germany became prisoners of war, the men sent to prison camp in India, and women and children returned to Europe. Julius was not to return to mission service in Africa again.

On arrival in neutral Sweden, he assisted in evangelistic campaigns telling his story of African mission work, which engendered a growing interest in foreign mission.<sup>20</sup> Julius spoke of his reasons for mission endeavor:

I aim for two kinds of results. First: to awaken a heartfelt gratitude to God in our hearts for the truth we ourselves have received as well as gratitude for the good result of the work of our people have reached in different parts of the world. Secondly: to ignite in our hearts zeal and enthusiasm for that which we still have to do, e.g. to inspire to a greater spirit of sacrifice, to greater efforts to complete the work of the Lord<sup>21</sup>

In these aims, he did succeed. Interest in foreign missions and commitment to it bloomed in the 1920's when the Scandinavian Union sent many young couples, as well as single missionaries, to various parts of Africa and some to Asia. This was a lasting legacy of Julius Persson's commitment to mission, which remained strong in Sweden for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

Sometime during World War I, Julius reunited with his family in Pforzheim, Germany. In August 1918, a fourth daughter, Edith Anna, was born at Friedensau, Germany.<sup>23</sup> In 1921, Frieda and the two youngest children left for Brazil, where her brother was director of the publishing house. Julius and the two older daughters travelled to Brazil in 1922 where, in Sao Paolo, he started a health clinic. Unfortunately, Julius' and Frieda's marriage ended during this time, and in 1928, Julius returned to Germany. Returning to Pforzheim, Julius married Anna Blank from Stuttgart. They were to have two daughters--Sigrid and Ellen. In the early 1930's, they lived in Brazil, close to Julius' first family, but the years of World War II they spent in Germany. The family was to survive the tragic destructions of life and properties that took place in Hamburg in 1943.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the resilience he once showed during his young years in East Africa did not disappear. He kept on treating numerous people seeking aid during the difficult postwar years in Germany. He died on September 9, 1953, in Enzigen, Germany, at the age of 70 after a life lived in faithfulness to his Adventist beliefs, and in spite of many unforeseen changes and more than one Gethsemane experience. Frieda Rohde Persson died in 1972 in Sao Paolo, Brazil.<sup>25</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Gösta Wiklander, *Julius Persson- Svensk predikant och den förste svenske missionären till ett land utanför Europa*. (Rimbo, Sweden: Adventist Media, 2007), 7.
2. Ibid., 8-10; Julius Persson, *Autobiographie, des "Alten Schweden,"* xv-xx.
3. Gösta Wiklander, *Julius Persson*, 7; L. R. Conradi, "Mission Notes – Beginning a new Mission," *The Missionary Worker*, October 30, 1907, 164, 165.
4. Julius Persson, *Autobiographie, des "Alten Schweden,"* i.-vii.
5. Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Muslims, Jews, Ethiopian Coptic church and the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church (EFS); Gösta Wiklander, *Julius Persson*, 14.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Rainier Goldenstern email to author, July 2023.
8. J. Persson, "Från Ostafrika," *Missionären*, September 1, 1913, 134-135.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Gösta Wiklander, 24.
13. J. Persson, "Från Ostafrika," 134-135.
14. L. R. Conradi (ed.), *Freud und Leid, der Missionaren des S.T.A. Missionsgebietes am Wiktoriassee* (Hamburg, Germany: Internationale Traktatgesellschaft, 1918), 15-18.

15. J. Persson, "Från Ostafrika," 135-136.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Persson, "Från tyska Ostafrika," *Missionären*, January 1, 1914, 5-6.
18. Ibid.
19. L. R. Conradi, "The European Division Conference – 18. The German Victoria Nyanza Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1916): 251.
20. J. Persson, "Vår hednamission," *Missionären*, January 15, 1915, 1.
21. Ibid.
22. Y. Johansson Öster, "Julius Persson," *Till jordens yttersta gräns* (Stockholm, Sweden: Skandinaviska Bokförlaget, 2018). More than 100 missionaries left during this time from a country with just 3,000 members.
23. Friedensau, today a university, was the mission school of Germany as well as a sanitarium.
24. Rainier Goldenstern email to author, July 2023.
25. Gösta Wiklander, *Julius Persson*, 31-32.

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