



Johannes and Ruth Gronert with Solvej and Evelyn.

Photo courtesy of Gordon Gronert.

---

## Gronert, Johannes Heinrich (1899–1970)

---

### SVEN HAGEN JENSEN, AND BERYL NYAMWANGE

Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

Beryl Nyamwange

---

Johannes Heinrich Gronert was a missionary to Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa.

### Early Life

Johannes Heinrich Gronert was born September 22, 1899, to Johann and Emilie (née Utzat) Gronert. They lived in Haderslev, then a part of Germany, and Johann made a living as a shoemaker. They were Seventh-day Adventists. Johann and his wife had a number of children, but tragedy struck when Emilie died when Johannes was only three years old. Johann had difficulty managing all children on his own, so Andrea and Hans Skov, his sister and brother-in-law, adopted Johannes.<sup>1</sup>

The Skov family had a small farm in Gøttrup, not far from Toftlund in Denmark. As a new child in the Skov's warm, Adventist home, Johannes was brought up in love and godliness. The Skovs also had a daughter, Dorothea. She later married Jacob Jørgensen, with whom she had four children, Hans, Kristian, Marie and Arthur. These all became well-known Seventh-day Adventist families. Johannes' upbringing undoubtedly contributed to his early decision to work for the church.

Gronert started his education at Tierslund school in 1906, where he studied until 1912. This choice of school proved advantageous for his language skills. At Tierslund, the teachers taught exclusively in German, while at home, the Skov family spoke Danish.

In 1913 Gronert was baptized by P. Christensen.<sup>2</sup> Two years later he moved to the mission school at Skodsborg in Denmark. He took his college education in Nærum, then worked for a time at Frydenstrand Sanatorium in Frederikshavn, where he studied nursing. He then entered denominational service and served as a Bible worker for Pastor Kirkelykke in evangelistic campaigns in Haderslev and Christiansfeld.

After the reunion of North Schleswig with Denmark in 1920<sup>3</sup> Gronert worked for a time in the union office, Margrethevej 5, Copenhagen, where he did some translation work for the president of the Scandinavian Union, Jacob C. Raft. Pastor Raft and the president of the Danish Conference, Christian Resen, who also worked in the same building,<sup>4</sup> counseled him to take the nursing course at Skodsborg Sanatorium if he wanted to enter foreign mission service. He needed to give Raft an answer before Raft left for a week or so later. Gronert wrote to his adoptive parents:

I have had a lot to think about as far as my future is concerned. There are opportunities for service, but I am missing one thing - nursing education at Skodsborg Sanatorium. As a rule, they do not accept men for special positions in the foreign mission without having received training at one of the denominational institutions, and in Denmark, Skodsborg is the only such institution. As you probably know, I have always wanted to serve in foreign missions, but I had no idea that my current education was useless. Brother Raft suggested that I go to Skodsborg and take a course there.

Gronert struggled with doubts regarding how to prepare for mission service. He considered other places for study, among them the sanatorium in Berlin, Germany, mostly because the Skodsborg education would take three years before he could move forward with his mission plans. A few days after contemplating what God's plans could be, he aired his concerns and wrote, "Where is the best place to be? Of course, I have presented the

matter to the Lord, and after the answer He gave me last night I can actually be quite calm. I got a response from Psalm 55:23 (I will trust in Thee).”

Finally, Gronert made his decision and was ready to start at Skodsborg in the summer of 1922.

## Meeting Ruth and Training for Mission Service

While at Skodsborg Gronert met Ruth Anderson,<sup>5</sup> from Gothenburg, Sweden. Having become an Adventist three years before, she began the nursing course at the same time as Gronert. A friendship developed between the two, and after a while they were engaged to be married.

Mission service was still high in Johannes’ thoughts. He looked forward to working with patients in the treatment department at Skodsborg, stating in a March 24, 1923 letter, that “this is just a springboard to move forward with the actual plan of working in the mission field.”

Both Johannes and Ruth passed their examinations and received their diplomas on May 27, 1925, which stated, “Must be considered fit to practice nursing and provide physical therapy.”

After graduating from Skodsborg, Johannes was sent to Tønder for the summer to start a series of evangelistic meetings. Ruth stayed at Skodsborg and worked in the treatment department. These opportunities were regarded as further training for ministry. Johannes and Ruth agreed that their common objective was to travel to the mission field abroad if the call should come. During this period, they wrote letters to each other daily, sharing deep spiritual conversations. The separation that they endured was often difficult for the young, mission-minded couple, with only a few travel opportunities to see each other.

In the spring of 1926 Johannes held meetings almost daily in Løgumkloster, Højer, and Møgeltønder, while plans were underway for their marriage. Wedding papers had to be obtained from Sweden for Ruth and from Haderslev in Denmark for Johannes. For the wedding Johannes had to leave his work in Southern Jutland and travel to meet Ruth in Skodsborg. The required papers arrived just in time. After four years of engagement, on May 26, 1926, Ruth and Johannes were married by the civil authority in Søllerød.

Even before their marriage a new opportunity had opened. In Hultafors, Sweden, a new sanitarium was to open, and a request came for Johannes to work there in the summer. Johannes accepted on the condition that there would be a position for Ruth as well. The couple enjoyed a honeymoon in Jutland, then went to Gothenburg and travelled to Hultafors Sanatorium, where they established their first home. At the end of the summer’s work they returned to Denmark and had to separate once again. Ruth returned to Skodsborg, while Johannes went back to Tønder.

## Call to West Africa

Early in the spring of 1927, a call came for the couple to travel to Sierra Leone, where Johannes had been appointed leader of the Sierra Leone Mission. Many preparations were undertaken before the long journey.

On June 1, 1927, the Gronerts started their journey from Hamburg, Germany, onboard the steamer *Wahehe*. It stopped at Rotterdam, Netherlands, where they visited the city and took a train to the Hague to see the Peace Palace. On June 4, back aboard the steamer, they left Rotterdam for Southampton. The crossing was stormy, and Ruth became seasick and had to lie in the bunk most of the time. Meanwhile, Johannes took time to write some letters in the saloon of the steamer. Even though the weather improved, much rain continued around the British Isles. The couple had a few hours stay in Southampton, then sailed for Las Palmas in the Canary Islands and on to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

## Arrival in Freetown, Sierra Leone

In Freetown, the Gronerts were received by the Øster and Berglund families, who took good care of them and guided them in their new surroundings. Together they all travelled to the mission headquarters office in Waterloo. The Gronerts moved into a small house and began to prepare for the work ahead. A few months after arrival, the tropical temperatures began to take their toll and Ruth was struck with malaria. They were to work in the part of Africa known as "The white man's grave."<sup>6</sup> On August 16, 1927, Johannes and Ruth travelled back to Freetown, the capital city, where Ruth would stay for a week. It was common then for missionary women to visit the coast. Ruth stayed with the Østers at their home by the sea.

Gronert determined that as soon as the rains stopped, he would leave for some smaller trips to places where his work was needed. He had been asked to open three new stations. He wrote in his diary, "Unfortunately, I have to hold back all the time. If we had money we could open new stations in many places, but we have to be careful to make the money work."

Sierra Leone shared a border with the territory of French West Africa (Guinea and beyond). The territory lay to the north and east towards the interior, where traditional African religions still dominated. At that time no Adventist had set foot there. The Adventist Mission had been asked to conduct evangelism meetings there, and Gronert felt that he needed to get there as soon as possible. He knew that the journey would be long and slow. Going far inland the means of transportation would be scarce, if even safe, and he could not afford to be away from the head office for too long.

While looking after the work of the mission, the mission compound residents also built a new poultry run and began systematically planting trees, palm trees, and rubber trees. E. Berglund oversaw these projects while Gronert traveled.

## Leadership and Mission Trips

Despite the hard living conditions in their new mission station, Johannes Gronert remained occupied with traveling and making plans for the work across the mission. On November 21, 1927, he arrived in Bo, a town 130 miles (210 kilometers) from Waterloo, a journey of nearly three hours by road. While in Bo, he lived at the Government Rest-house. With him he had his bicycle, so he could visit the nearby villages. "In this part of the country the roads are not so bad. It is cheaper and I save both time and money for carrying." He focused on learning the customs and way of living of the locals in order to get closer to the people. He observed how the locals made their clothes and what they ate. After a successful nine days in the city of Bo, he travelled back to Waterloo on November 30, 1927. He wouldn't stay home long and confessed that he was getting used to more and more traveling.

It was later decided that Gronert, as superintendent of the mission, would be granted a motorbike, to be bought for £100 (approx. US \$120 at the time), so that it would be easier for him to move around the mission district. Ruth was not happy with the idea of him traveling on a motorbike. During a visit to Freetown Gronert found a two-seater car that he could buy for the same price as the motorbike. This turned out to be a good trade and became the first car for the family.<sup>7</sup>

Although the work seemed to progress slowly, it still progressed, and they hoped for many more people to be converted. God sent encouragement in various ways. On January 20, 1928, the Østers brought six Danish officers, from a Danish ship that docked at Freetown, to see the Gronerts, and they brought some Danish rye bread! A few days later, on January 29, Gronert was ordained to the gospel ministry.<sup>8</sup> A few weeks after that the Gronert's first child, a girl they named Solvej, was born.

In his detailed diary Gronert describes some of the issues he faced. He got along well with the workers in the mission, but he also saw the effects of the white man's dominance in Africa, and traces of racism in the society and the uprising of some of the tribes. As a very young leader, he sometimes felt that his position was envied. At times he felt burdened by the heavy responsibility, alone making difficult decisions and responsible for the properties of the conference. He was always encouraged when division leaders visited and they could meet for counseling. He was aware of the risk of living away from nearby health services if an acute situation should develop. He mentioned the untimely death of Sister Øster. On the positive side he wrote about baptisms performed, weddings conducted, new stations opened, and progress in the work.

The Gronerts had a four-month furlough in Scandinavia at the end of 1928 and the beginning of 1929. They travelled around and talked about their mission service.<sup>9</sup> In 1929, a second daughter, Evelyn, was born. The letters to the family in Denmark stop at this time and there is only little information from the period 1929-1935.

In 1929 the Sierra Leone Training School opened in Waterloo, with T. Tranborg as the principal.<sup>10</sup>

Gronert served as director of the Sierra Leone Mission, first in the West African Union of the European Division, and beginning in 1928 as a detached mission in the Northern European Division. In 1933 the mission territory

reorganized and Gronert became the president of the Sierra Leone Union Mission, which included the Liberia Mission. During his three years as president of the new union mission the number of organized churches grew from four to ten, with nine of them in Sierra Leone. The recorded membership from 282 to 478, with 469 in Sierra Leone.<sup>11</sup>

## Time After Africa

After eight years of mission service the family of five returned to Denmark. Their third child, John, had been born in 1932, with sons Gordon (1935) and David (1937) following. Apparently, there was no employment to find within the church, and times proved difficult for the returning family. Work was hard to come by in Denmark. In the end, a clinic was bought in Aabyhøj near Aarhus. The work here did not go as hoped, and difficult years followed with many relocations. Because of his versatile education, Gronert was able to hold various positions. He served as a representative of various companies, a physiotherapist, and an office manager, and he finally set up his own clinic in Ystad, Sweden.

During all these years Ruth Gronert worked diligently for the family's well-being, mostly as a physiotherapist. Ruth also loved sewing and she was incredibly diligent and creative. The clinic in Ystad should have been their work retreat, after many eventful and sometimes difficult years in missions, but unfortunately, Ruth died of liver cancer at 60 years old.<sup>12</sup>

Johannes ran the clinic for seven more years with the help of his daughter Evelyn. Eventually, as his health failed, he retired, moving and settling in Randers. Here Jacob Øster had a medical practice and became Johannes's doctor, and so the two missionary friends met again. After a few years, Johannes moved to Silkeborg, where he died on May 30, 1970, at seventy years of age.

## Legacy

It was the dream of Johannes Gronert to serve in the foreign mission field. Although he felt unworthy of taking up the challenge, when the opportunity came, he believed that the Lord who called him would help him as he did his best. He helped build a strong foundation in the territory known as "the white man's grave," and served as a dedicated leader in Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa.<sup>13</sup> His youngest son, David, followed in his parents' footsteps and together with his wife, Ragnhild, went to Sierra Leone to help build Masanga Leprosy Hospital. They were at Masanga for a total of 12 years, from 1964-1977.

---

### SOURCES

Berglund, Carl. "Ruth Gronert Obituary." *Adventnyt*, March 1955.

Gronert, Gordon, *Beretning i sammendrag om Mammans og Pappas ungdom, uddannelse og kald til missionen i Afrika* (Summary account of Mama and Papa's youth, education and call to mission in Africa). unpublished manuscript.

Hansen, Werner. "Hvordan er det gået dem, der rejste ud?" (How have those who left, fared?). *Ungdomsfaklen*, 1929-1930.

Muderspach, H. "Vore hensovede" (Obituary). *Adventnyt*, August 1970.

*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1921, 1928-1936.

---

## NOTES

1. Gordon Gronert, *Beretning i sammendrag om Mammans og Pappas ungdom, uddannelse og kald til missionen i Afrika* (Summary account of Mama and Papa's youth, education and call to mission in Africa). Unpublished manuscript, 15 pages. It is a family chronicle where most of the information is from letters between Johannes and Ruth and their families, and is still in their custody. A copy of this summary is kept in The Historic Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Denmark (HASDA). Accessed and translated by Beryl Nyamwange in 2021 and accessed by Sven Hagen Jensen October 3-14, 2022. The information in this article is from this summary if no other sources are given.
2. H. Muderspach, "Vore hensovede" (Obituary), *Adventnyt*, August, 1970.
3. "Genforeningen 1920" (The Reunion 1920), *Danmarkshistoriendk*, University of Aarhus, Institute for Culture and Society, Aarhus.  
<https://danmarkshistorien.dk/vis/materiale/genforeningen-1920>.
4. "Scandinavian Union Conference." *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1921), 94-95.
5. Ruth Ester Stefania Anderson, born December 1895 in Sjögerstad, Skuldtorp, Sweden. Father: Anders Anderson, blacksmith. Mother: Mathilda Anderson, b. Petterson.
6. Werner Hansen, "Hvordan er det gået dem, der rejste ud?", *Ungdomsfaklen*, 1929-1930.
7. Gordon Gronert in email message to Sven H. Jensen, October 12, 2022.
8. See also "Sierra Leone Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1929), 144, where his credentials has been changed from Licentiate to Minister.
9. Werner Hansen, 1929-1930.
10. "Sierra Lone Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1930), 225.

11. Ibid., 1928-1936.

12. Carl Berglund, "Ruth Gronert Obituary," *Adventnyt*, March 1955.

13. This territory is now known as the West African Union Mission with 144 organized churches and a membership of 43,580 (June 30, 2021).

<https://www.adventistyearbook.org/entity?EntityID=13555>

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000