

Bahr, Ernst

"Earnest" Wilhelm (1897–1968) and Herta (Fortenbacher) (1902–1978)

MATTI NEUMANN

Matti Neumann, M.A. in theology (Friedensau Adventist University) serves as pastor in the Bodensee (Lake Constance) Region.

Ernst "Earnest" Wilhelm and Herta Bahr served as Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in Korea. Bahr himself was an administrator in Korea and later served as a pastor in the United States.



Ernst and Herta Bahr with their son Karl-Heinz dressed in Korean attire.

Photo courtesy of Karyl Krieger.

Early Life, Education and Marriage

Ernst Wilhelm Bahr¹ was born on April 17, 1897, in Groß Jestin near Kolberg.² His mother was Emilie Bahr, last (1945) living in Pomerania; nothing is known about his father.³ His sister Ida Bahr was head nurse at the Adventist Waldfriede Hospital from 1941.⁴

After working as a farmer, Bahr attended the Mission Seminary in Friedensau from 1919 to 1921.⁵ Before he began his missionary service, he first worked as a pastor in Naugard, Regenwalde, Stralsund, Prenzlau, Jagow, Fürstenwalde, and Rathenow in Germany.⁶ In 1925, Bahr married Herta Fortenbacher in Danzig.⁷

In the mission field a daughter and a son were born to them.⁸ Their daughter's name was Elfriede and she died of diphtheria on December 8, 1931, at the age of almost four and a half years.⁹ Their son Karl-Heinz Bahr was

born on April 18, 1930, in Soonana (Korea) and died in 2016 in the United States.¹⁰ Karl-Heinz was also active for many years in the Adventist Church as a church elder and treasurer in South America and the United States.¹¹

First Missionary Period

On June 3, 1925, the journey of the Bahr family to their mission service began, which was to last 27 years. In the first year, Bahr, like many other missionaries, had difficulties in learning the Korean language. The work in the mission field was not without obstacles as well. Bahr reported that the distribution of literature, at first his main activity, was made very difficult for all missionaries by the Japanese colonial authorities, who destroyed all literature with the slightest “political connotation.” Thorough house searching and body searches by the Japanese secret police were also commonplace.¹²

After learning the language, Bahr began preaching in Korean in various provincial towns of Korea and held public meetings. He also did pioneering work when he visited places where people had not yet been baptized.¹³ At the end of 1927, Bahr was transferred¹⁴ from Seoul to Seishin.¹⁵ From there he was able to reach new places, baptize people, hold tent meetings, plant churches, and build chapels.¹⁶ Also in Keizan (today's South Korea), where the Bahrs had been transferred at the end of 1929, Bahr reached many people by way of conducting large tent meetings.¹⁷ This is where the tragic death of little Elfriede occurred in 1931. Since moving there, Herta Bahr struggled with several diseases.¹⁸

From 1931 on, Bahr was the acting mission director. Later he held this office officially.¹⁹ As a publishing director,²⁰ Bahr, who did this service with enthusiasm, was able to achieve considerable success.²¹ Denominational leaders suggested that the Korean “Signs of the Times” was the magazine with the widest reach in Korea, with 38,000 to 40,000 copies per month.²²

Second Missionary Period

Around 1940 the Bahrs were forced to flee to the Philippines due to the warlike unrest in Korea. There they were able to continue their work and remained until 1945. Not much is known about this period; but evidently they were not spared the hardships of the Second World War while there. The Bahr family spent some time in internment under American occupation. However, after the Philippines were occupied by the Japanese, German citizens were released and enjoyed certain privileges under Japanese occupation. During this time Bahr used his freedom to travel and supported American Adventists who found themselves in Japanese internment. In doing so, he risked his life in the service of the church and his fellow man.²³

From 1949, Bahr served as president of the Korean Union Mission. After he had to flee with his family in June 1950 due to the onset of the Korean War, he returned only 4 months later to start rebuilding the church work in Korea.²⁴ During this time, he also served as Chairman of the Boards of the Korean Junior College in Seoul and of

the Seoul Sanitarium and Hospital.²⁵

After an extended home leave in the United States and Germany from 1951 to 1952, Bahr returned to the mission field without his wife.²⁶ After his return, however, he suffered a nervous breakdown²⁷ and had to travel back to the United States for further treatment. Unfortunately, his state of health ended his missionary activity and his office as president of the Chōsen Union Mission.

Later life

After the Bahr family took American citizenship in 1951, they spent their last years there. For three and a half years, Ernst Bahr served as a pastor in a German-speaking congregation in Detroit, Michigan. He died on February 5, 1968, in Angwin, California.²⁸ Herta Bahr died on January 11, 1978, at the age of 76, in Takoma Park, Maryland.²⁹

Contribution

During his time in Korea, Bahr was instrumental in reaching new areas in Northern Korea, pioneering in many places as a colporteur, but also as an evangelist through tent meetings. Through his work as a publishing director in the Korean Union Mission, *Signs of the Times* magazine became one of the most influential magazines in Korea, attracting many people to baptism.³⁰ In times of war, Bahr not only took his responsibility as president of the Chōsen Union Mission and cared for his territory in these difficult times, but he also risked his life for this service. Bahr's missionary service is representative of many of his generation who took on responsibilities both in church planting and through administrative responsibility in church leadership and institutions. Although the difficult period of the Korean War and his health conditions did not allow him to continue working beyond this particular period, as one of the early workers in the Korean field, he contributed to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church into an established organization beyond the first steps of development.

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NOTES

1. Ernst Bahr (E. Bahr) should not be confused with Ewald L. Bahr, who also appears as E. Bahr, or E. L. Bahr. Ewald L. Bahr was a German administrator who served the church for over 40 years. He held many offices, including secretary of the West German Conference (1908), president of the Prussian Conference (1910), president of the Lower Rhine Conference (from 1912), until 1918 president of the North German Conference, from 1918-1924 president of the Main-Neckar Conference (formerly Hessian Conference) and finally in 1934 president of the West Saxon Conference and in 1935 president of the Silesian Conference. See *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1908), 108; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1910), 103; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931), 123; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1918), 129; E. L. Bahr, "Frankfurt a. M. - Berlin," *Der Adventbote*, November 1924, 339; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1934), 82; *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*

(Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1935), 82.

2. J. H. Effenberg, "Missionar Ernst Bahr," *Der Adventbote*, May 1, 1968, 176.
3. In a letter to a brother Altman on October 17, 1945, Bahr mentions only his mother and sister as direct relatives in order to find their addresses for an upcoming visit. As brother-in-law Bahr he names Willi Ninow.
4. Ida Bahr, "Die Oberschwester hat das Wort," *Der Adventbote*, May 1, 1950, 135.
5. Historical Archive of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe, *Einwohnerverzeichnis Friedensau* (1899-1922). In 1937 Bahr retrospectively evaluates the time of training in the mission seminar in Friedensau as very valuable. Above all the practical field work was seen as a "school of life" and thus as a good preparation for the missionary service. See Ernst Bahr, "Colporteur Work in Korea," *ARH*, September 15, 1937, 5.
6. The manner in which he was active there is not clear from his report. See Ernst and Herta Bahr, "On the Road to Korea," *Der Adventbote*, May 15, 1925, 158. Effenberg notes in his obituary that he served as a preacher. Cf. Effenberg, "Missionar Ernst Bahr," 176. The probability is that he was ordained much later. Only in the *Yearbook* of 1931 is he listed as "Minister." Until then he was merely a licensed missionary. See "South Chosen Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Takoma Park, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1930, 1931), 165, 183.
7. Effenberg, "Missionar Ernst Bahr," 176.
8. This is the wording of the death announcement in the German magazine *Adventbote*. See *ibid.* In an obituary for his son Karl-Heinz, the responsible funeral home mentions Hans-Jürgen, another son of the Bahrs, who, like Elfriede, is said to have died in infancy ("Karl-Heinz Friedrich Bahr," Memorial page, *Alsip and Persons Funeral Chapel*, <https://www.alsippersons.com/tributes/Karl-Heinz-Bahr>). However, nothing else can be found of a Hans-Jürgen Bahr.
9. Pudewell described "Little Elfriedchen" as a happy and universally popular child among the missionary families. She loved to sing praises to the glory of God in Korean and asked her mother to pray even in her agony. Pudewell's moving report makes clear the willingness of missionary families to make sacrifices in the first half of the 20th century, as the Bahr family was by no means the only one who had to mourn the loss of their child in the mission field. See Walter Pudewell, "Another Children's Grave in South Korean Mission Field," *Der Adventbote*, April 1, 1931, 108-109. Already at this time Herta Bahr was the one who suffered most from the loss of her daughter, as already noted in the *China Division Reporter* ("Sad Word from Kaizan," *China Division Reporter*, January 1, 1931, 8). Later it became clear that Herta Bahr also had to struggle with many ailments and diseases from that time on and the death of her daughter seems to have triggered some of them.
10. Karl-Heinz was born on April 18, 1930 (Karyl Krieger, daughter of Karl-Heinz Bahr, email message to the ESDA main office, April 29, 2021). He died on January 13, 2016, in Meridian, Idaho. See *Gleaner (Northwest Adventists in Action)*, "Family at Rest," May 2016, 32.
11. Effenberg, "Missionar Ernst Bahr," 176; Karyl Krieger, daughter of Karl-Heinz Bahr, email message to the ESDA main office, April 29, 2021

12. Ernst and Herta Bahr, "News from Korea," *Der Adventbote*, October 1, 1926, 301-303.
13. Ernst and Herta Bahr, "From Korea," *Der Adventbote*, November 15, 1927, 346-347.
14. Today called Chongjin, a city on the east coast in the northernmost province of North Korea. At the time of Bahr, the Japanese army was based there and expanded the city.
15. Ernst Bahr, "Zum 13. Juni: Japan rechnet auf Euch am 13. Sabbat," *Der Adventbote*, June 15, 1928, 186.
16. Bahr, "Aus Nordkorea," *Der Adventbote*, January 1, 1929, 12.
17. Ernst Bahr, "Nachrichten aus Korea," *Der Adventbote*, April 1, 1930, 106-107. From 1910 onwards, Korea was fully incorporated into the Japanese Empire by annexation as a Japanese colony under the name Chōsen. Colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula officially ended with the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945, and the name of the Korean District of the Adventist Mission had also been Chōsen Union Mission since 1919.
18. Bahr mentioned this in an application for leave on June 20, 1932. His wife had suffered from hookworm treatment but had had a heart condition even before the beginning of the missionary service. Later on, anaemia was also diagnosed. In general, she was described as a sensitive person whose health and state of mind had to be taken care of well. This condition worsened with the death of her daughter. She herself admitted to being tired and burnt out as early as 1932.
19. He is listed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* as "Field Miss." Department Secretary from 1939. But he is already mentioned as such in Campbell's 1937 report. See G. A. Campbell, "On to Singapore," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, January 1937, 2.
20. In the 1937 *Yearbook* Campbell is erroneously mentioned. However, it is precisely this person that Bahr refers to in his report as publishing director. See G. A. Campbell, "Publishing Department, Far Eastern Division," *ARH*, June 17, 1937, 11.
21. See Campbell, "On to Singapore," 2.
22. Cf. Campbell, "Publishing Department, Far Eastern Division," 11; Ernst Bahr, "The Biennial Report - Chosen Union Mission Publishing Department," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, June 15, 1937, 7.
23. Mary Ogle, "Sabbath September 27: Some Pay More than Dollars," *Missions Quarterly*, 1947, 25.
24. After his return to Korea, Bahr was actively involved in the care of the refugees of the still ongoing Korean War. In particular, the conquests of Seoul in 1950 and 1951 triggered a large stream of refugees; Bahr played a significant role in supplying them with support. See R. C. Mills, "Isle of Refuge in Korea," *ARH*, March 1, 1951, 15-16.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1950), 269, 316.

26. His son Karl-Heinz married Betty McEachern on June 3, 1951. In the correspondence, it appears that Herta Bahr attended the wedding and then wanted to see her husband in Korea.
27. This is a report in the *Review and Herald*. See (1952). In a health report of August 22, 1952, it was stated that on his return to Japan "circumstances and associated anxiety" triggered a "depression reaction," and as a consequence he continued to suffer from memory impairment. His son Karl-Heinz wrote according to a document to W. P. Bradley on August 6, 1952, that he could not understand "why things have come the way they have." According to him, his father was "sent home for all that he had done" and he was now afraid of the General Conference that he would be "put out of business." In Ernst Bahr's further correspondence with administrators, however, there is no indication of what is supposed to have happened and why exactly his state of health developed in this way. In the run-up, Bahr was only informed about his risk of getting high blood pressure and his beginning overweight. But whether this resulted in a nervous breakdown is questionable.
28. "In Remembrance," *ARH*, April 4, 1968, 24.
29. "For the Record: Died," *ARH*, January 26, 1978, 24.
30. See as an example the testimony in Bahr, "Colporteur Work in Korea," 5-6.

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