

Koch, Alfred Curt

(1898–1980)

MATTI NEUMANN

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

Alfred C. Koch served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as editor and missionary in Germany and Japan.

Early Life

Alfred C. Koch was born January 5, 1898, in the Thuringian city of Gera, Germany. The names of his parents are not known.¹ Alfred had two sisters and a brother named Willy Koch.² Willy Koch was a pastor in Germany and became leader of the denomination's West German Union Conference.³

At the age of 15 Koch finished his schooling and began working as a proofreader in the Adventist publishing house in Hamburg. During this time, he came to know his future wife Anna-Margarethe Saul, born May 28, 1900.⁴ During the First World War, Koch was conscripted into military service where he refused to carry arms. He later returned to Hamburg at the end of his service.⁵

Before Koch became a missionary, he worked as editor of the German Adventist magazine *Der Adventbote* from 1922 to 1923.⁶ It was during this time that he received experience in the publishing work that he would use later in his ministry.⁷

Marriage

It soon became apparent that Koch had a desire to become a missionary. He gave Bible studies to Anna-Margarethe and her mother, who later joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁸ Anna-Margarethe and Koch were married on February 9, 1924.⁹ Their marriage was blessed with a son and two daughters in Japan: Günter



Alfred Koch (far right) in front of the chapel in Tokyo.

Photo courtesy of the Historical Archives of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe, Friedensau, Germany.

Koch was born November 25, 1924, and died in 2017 in the United States.¹⁰ Gudrun was born in Tokyo on December 31, 1927 (died 1961), and Hildegard was born April 10, 1935, in Sapporo.¹¹

First Mission Service in Japan

On February 21, 1924, the Kochs began their missionary trip from Marseilles to Japan.¹² Until 1930 they worked primarily in Tokyo,¹³ where they learned the Japanese language, and in the Kanto district.

Koch's interest in people and his love for other cultures was soon evident in the mission field. Through personal contacts, Koch won the trust of the Japanese and many of them attended his Bible study.¹⁴ Not only did Koch meet in the homes of people who were interested in the Adventist message,¹⁵ he also attached great importance to the distribution of Bibles. Koch understood quickly that Japan had many literate people; hence he saw colporteur work as the best avenue for doing mission work.¹⁶

As early as 1927 he was appointed mission secretary of the Kanto district.¹⁷ The next year he became acting mission secretary for all of Japan.¹⁸ During his tenure as mission secretary (1928-1930), the whole country was Koch's area of influence. Due to his extensive travel he became acquainted with the remotest places in Japan where the Seventh-day Adventist Church acted and propagated the Adventist message.¹⁹

During that time, Koch continued to look for opportunities to do colporteur work,²⁰ and it was in that period that the revenue generated by the publishing department tripled.²¹ Koch saw the need to modernize the available literature and to increase the supply.²² He also conducted large evening meetings which were attended by several hundred people, which was a significant number for a country where the religious culture is mostly Shinto and Buddhist, but where most of the population does not claim to be religious.²³

With the return of the actual mission secretary, the Koch family was transferred in 1930 to Kyushu, the southernmost of the four main Japanese islands, where they operated until 1932.²⁴

Mission Service in Hokkaido

After their furlough, in 1932 the Kochs moved to Hokkaido, the northernmost area of the Far Eastern Division, where Koch became mission director of the Hokkaido district.²⁵ Koch managed to reach every area of the Hokkaido district in his time there. The circumstances were far less favorable than in other parts of the Far Eastern Division. Not only did the frequent natural disasters such as earthquakes, city fires, and floods plague the Hokkaido district (as well as the rest of Japan), but the weather was colder than the rest of the division.²⁶ However, Koch managed to build sustainable communities in his district.²⁷ In the period of 1933-1936, the number of church members in the Hokkaido area doubled²⁸ and it steadily grew thereafter.²⁹ His eagerness to inspire the people around him for Christ included the children, and he cared for them by holding a Sunday school to teach them the truth.³⁰

Later Life

After the Kochs emigrated to the United States in 1941, Koch no longer worked for the church. He provided for his family by renting parts of his premises. After 1954, Alfred Koch began working for the Patent Office of the government as a translator. In 1972 he retired.³¹ At the age of 82, Alfred Koch died on June 9, 1980, in Washington D.C.³² His wife Anna-Margarethe lived another seven years and died on August 5, 1987 in Watsonville, California.³³

Attitude Towards the People of Japan and Their culture

Koch was attracted to the people of Japan and their culture, although he could not endorse the pagan elements in the culture. He saw the “moral quality” of the Japanese as superior to the “religious West.”³⁴ As much as he was passionate about this culture, he noted that their religious customs were incompatible with the modern urban culture that already shaped Japan at the time. He considered the Shinto and Buddhist tradition in Japan as not meeting the needs of the people, and he regarded the Japanese as being in need of Christian mission.³⁵ His mission, however, was totally individual-oriented. True to his approach to personal evangelism, he tried to “open up their hearts,” as much as possible by becoming like them.³⁶

Contribution

Having served as editor and missionary in Germany and Japan, Alfred Koch’s devotion to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its gospel mission was exemplary. Koch’s vision of reaching the whole of Japan³⁷ was particularly notable. He lived out the vocation with the passion of a missionary.³⁸ In doing so, he managed to motivate his staff, especially in literature evangelism, and to demonstrate in practice that seemingly insurmountable hurdles can be mastered with trust in God. He also changed the conditions for the colporteurs in his short time as the mission secretary for Japan by modernizing the quantity and the presentation of literature. During his time as director in the Hokkaido district, he contributed to the expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a measurable way.

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NOTES

1. Even the last of his children, Hildegard Fellow Landschoot does not remember their names. The only thing that is remembered is that Alfred Koch's father lost all his money when Alfred was about five years old. The circumstances seemed so difficult that his father was going to take his own life at that time. However, the visit of a colporteur caused him to discover the faith that gave him courage. Thus, Alfred grew up as an Adventist and it was understandable that he himself became a missionary with outstanding literature evangelism competency. This information was received from Alfred Koch's daughter Hildegard Fellow Landschoot, interviewed by Matti Neumann, June 5, 2019, Idaho, USA/Friedensau, Germany.
2. Ibid.
3. "West German Union Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931), 155.
4. "Deaths," *ARH*, October 29, 1987, 21.
5. Hildegard Fellow Landschoot, interview by Matti Neumann, November 11, 2019, Nevada, U.S.A./Friedensau, Germany.
6. W. K. Ising, "Missionary Sailings," *Quarterly Review of the European Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Statistical Report of Conferences and Mission Fields for the Fourth Quarter and the Year 1923*, 18.
7. It must be mentioned that Koch did not have any formal theological education; he went to Friedensau only for a medical check-up in the years 1923-1924 due to his upcoming missionary service in Japan.
8. Hildegard Fellow Landschoot, interview by Matti Neumann.
9. Ibid.
10. See details of Günter Koch's life in "Life Stories," *Focus. The Andrews University Magazine*, Summer 2017, 32.
11. At the time of preparing this article, Hildegard Fellow Landshoot was living in California and contributed significantly to the content of this article.
12. Ising, "Missionary Sailings" in *Quarterly Review of the European Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 18.
13. Alfred & A. Koch, "Aus der Evangeliumsarbeit in Japan," *Der Adventbote*, September 15, 1926, 284-285.
14. At the same time, Koch noticed (a translation from the original): "Brother Strahle, it is personal evangelism that does this work for us. And I am so very thankful for our literature that enables me to get into the homes of the people and gain their friendship." See J. J. Strahle, "Why Aren't We Wining More Souls?" *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, December 1925, 9. This is an example of the cornerstones of Koch's work. On one side, it was not just Bible study, but also time for the individual and the relationship with him that made for successful missionary work, as well as working with the scriptures, to which Koch attached great importance and showed outstanding skill. The experience reports of Koch

include many testimonies of individuals with whom the Kochs worked intensively and who found their way to faith, and the work of the distribution of written materials.

15. Alfred Koch, "Erfruehliches aus der großen Missionswoche in Japan," *Adventbote*, August 15, 1927, 244.
16. Alfred Koch, "Working with Our Literature in Japan," *ARH*, March 25, 1926, 10.
17. Alfred Koch, "Erntedank-Freuden in Japan," *Adventbote*, February 15, 1927, 61.
18. Alfred Koch, "Aus der Schriftenverbreitung in Japan," *Adventbote*, March 15, 1929, 88; Koch, "Auf Reisen in Japan," 347-350.
19. Alfred Koch, "Auf Reisen in Japan," *Der Adventbote*, November 15, 1928, 347-50.
20. Ibid.
21. Alfred Koch, "Good Progress of the Literature Ministry in Japan," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, July 1928, 7.
22. Alfred Koch, "Von Tokio nach Fukuoka auf Kiuschu," *Der Adventbote*, April 1, 1930, 107. Koch labored for a new stock of literature because at his time he realized how insufficient the supply and the general quality of the literature was. See Alfred Koch, "Erntedank-Erfahrungen in Japan," *Der Adventbote*, March 15, 1930, 93-94.
23. Koch spoke to a minimum of 400 participants, which was a "strange thing" according to his statement in Japan. Compare Alfred Koch, "From Brother A. Koch," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, July 1929, 5. A common method was to draw attention to themselves through street sermons and to invite people to the evening lectures, which were often accompanied by photographs and thus aroused great interest in the audience at that time. See Koch, "Erntedank-Erfahrungen in Japan," 93-94. Although Koch did not necessarily consider himself as having an outstanding language talent, circumstances often encouraged him to appear as a spontaneous public speaker. An example was the sudden denial of a speaker in a school where Koch was present and also asked to be represented in Japan because of his good Japanese language skills. See Alfred Koch, "Einzelbilder aus der Mission in Japan," *Adventbote*, September 15, 1929, 284. Each time, Koch took the opportunity to "point out the Savior of the world, who carried the sins of all the believers, as the Lamb of God on the cross and eradicated them there." Ibid.
24. Koch, "Von Tokio nach Fukuoka auf Kiuschu," 107.
25. V. T. Armstrong, "News Notes from Japan," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, May 1932, 8.
26. Funds raised had to be used to rebuild destroyed churches instead of being devoted to the raising of new congregations. V. T. Armstrong, "A Year of Advance in Japan," *ARH*, May 16, 1935, 11.
27. Alfred Koch, "Progress in Hokkaido and Karafuto (Sakhalin), Japan," *ARH*, April 11, 1935, 11-12.

28. W. P. Bradley, "News Notes," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, January 1936, 8.
29. It had taken 15 years in Hokkaido since the beginning of the mission to reach 42 people. If one compares the numbers with the report of Bradley in 1936, it must be noted that since his service as director of the Hokkaido district in 1933, the number of members had increased to 102 by 1937. See Alfred Koch, "Progress in Hokkaido," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, October 1, 1937, 4; and, Bradley, "News Notes," 8.
30. "Interesting German Juniors," *ARH*, October 5, 1922, 18.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. "Deaths," 21.
34. Koch, "Auf Reisen in Japan," 348.
35. Alfred Koch, "Aus Japan," *Adventbote*, January 15, 1925, 28-30. Koch did not miss the time for cultural education on his travels. In general, Koch was a person who was personally developed in all areas. Hildegard Fellow Landschoot, interview by Matti Neumann. As already mentioned, his missionary skills were not acquired by theological training. Koch visited almost every temple worth seeing in Japan, as well as other attractions, and he was constantly looking for ways to learn more about the island kingdom of Japan and its people. C.f. Alfred Koch, "Auf Reisen in Japan," *Adventbote*, January 1, 1929, 10-11.
36. Alfred Koch, "Evangelisation im Innern Japans: I. Vorträge in Mito," *Adventbote*, October 15, 1926, 310-311. Alfred & A. Koch, "Aus Japan," *Adventbote*, February 15, 1928, 60.
37. Alfred Koch, "Evangelisation im Innern Japans: II. Besuch der Kujigawa-Gemeinde," *Adventbote*, November 1, 1926, 327.
38. In 1940 he stated his activities as missionary and colporteur (a translation from the original quote): "With courage and confidence in God's help we take up our work in Japan to win souls for Christ. We believe that this is the most important and the most precious work entrusted to man." See Alfred Koch, "Back in Japan Again," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, September 1940, 4.

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