



Original Adventist hospital building with 32 beds, c. 1966.

Photo courtesy of Cleo Johnson.

Benghazi Adventist Hospital

SVEN HAGEN JENSEN

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.

Benghazi Adventist Hospital was a general hospital owned and operated by the Nile Union Mission and the Middle East Division from 1956 to 1969 in Benghazi, Cyrenaica, Libya. It was administered by a medical director

and it included medical, surgical, and obstetrical departments, in addition to providing laboratory, x-ray, and pharmaceutical services.¹

A Hospital Is Opened

Plans for medical services in Libya were developed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church shortly after the country gained its independence in 1951. The Middle East Division was organized the same year and Libya was assigned to the Nile Union Mission of that division.² After an exploratory visit in early 1952, the representatives from the Church were granted permission to open medical work in 1953.³

Dr. Roy S. Cornell was called from the United States to be the medical director for the new hospital. He arrived with his family in Alexandria, Egypt, on February 2, 1955, and Egyptian pastor, Fakhry Naguib, was assigned by the union committee to help Dr. Cornell in this new enterprise.⁴ Elder Neal Wilson, president of the Nile Union Mission, reported a few months later that a lease for a building in Benghazi had been signed and plans were going ahead for the appropriate remodeling to suit the needs of a hospital. Recruitment for medical staff such as nurses and technicians also began.⁵

While waiting for the new Adventist Hospital to be made ready, the Minister of Health requested that Dr. Cornell be made the chief surgeon at the local government hospital, and during this short post he received considerable prestige for his valuable services.⁶ On May 21, 1956, and, after some delay, the Benghazi Adventist Hospital was formally opened as a 27-bed institution.⁷ A year later Dr. Cornell contracted acute paralytic poliomyelitis, which left him completely paralyzed and unable to continue directing the project that he pioneered.⁸

While waiting for a new medical director, Dr. Harry W. Miller of California arrived in Benghazi on June 18, 1957, to be the relief doctor for a few months. Dr. Miller was a veteran medical worker in the denomination, having spent many years in administration and medical work in China and the United States.⁹ About three months later, Dr. Jay P. Munsey arrived and took over as the acting medical director.¹⁰

The hospital was operated by the Nile Union Mission until it came under the direct control of the Middle East Division in 1958. Fakhry Naguib was the first business manager and Rafic Issa the business office assistant (joined in 1956). Others active in establishing the work in the hospital included the first nurses, Badiyah Issa (Rafic's wife who joined the team in 1955)¹¹ and Dallal Kotaira (later Mrs. Munir Masloub), Miriam Bruce, the first director of nurses (beginning September 1956) and Munir Masloub, the laboratory and x-ray technician.¹² More staff was needed and, when the well-reputed 85-bed Dar El Salaam Adventist Hospital in Baghdad, Iraq, was nationalized in 1959, it had to close. Several of their staff were reassigned to the Benghazi Adventist Hospital.¹³

During the first five years, Adventist physicians from other hospitals provided valuable short-term service.¹⁴ In October 1960, three student nurses from the Dar El Salaam Hospital were sent to Benghazi Adventist Hospital, among them was Elizabeth Atamian. She wrote: "We continued our classes and graduated in March 1962 while

working in all the departments due to the shortage of nurses."¹⁵ Reports in the *Middle East Messenger* told of the acute need for more nursing staff. The October 1, 1961, edition notes: "Because of a great shortage in nursing personnel the entire nursing staff are working very hard and are anxiously awaiting replacements for those who left the institution."¹⁶ Regular reports in the paper told of the turnover of medical staff, including replacements, when employees took their furloughs or moved to other responsibilities and places within the denomination.

Expansion and Relocation

Minor construction provided for an expanded laboratory and kitchen facilities and an increase in patient capacity from 27 to 32 beds.¹⁷ By late 1961 the need for additional medical services prompted a decision to relocate the hospital as soon as a suitable location could be found and sufficient funds were available. The old war-damaged hotel building on Benghazi's main avenue, in which the hospital had been established six years earlier, was far too small and inefficient to meet the demands of the city. Soon a fundraising campaign began.¹⁸

Early in 1963 the division treasurer, Elder V. A. Fenn, reported that the preliminary plans for the building had been approved and a large piece of choice land had been purchased. He wrote: "The land was purchased from Mr. Belqassim Senussi, the brother of the queen of Libya, who donated his personal share of the property (about one-third of the whole). Having been patients of the hospital, members of the royal family have been particularly interested in its success."^{19 20} Community support was also enlisted and oil companies operating in the area contributed US\$750,000.²¹ Plans for construction included a chapel for the Adventist personnel of the hospital.²²

The new piece of land in the residential suburb, Fueihat, measured 40,000 square meters and fronted Benghazi's important Ring Road.

On July 26, 1965, a contract was signed for the construction of the buildings, which began in January 1966.²³ The number of out-patients visiting physicians had quadrupled from 8,222 in 1961 to more than 35,000 in 1967. In 1967 there were also more than 1,000 in-patient admissions.

Eventually, on January 17, 1968, the new 60-bed hospital, valued at USD 1.4 million and with a staff of 105, was dedicated and opened to the public.²⁴ Attending the dedication were the hospital personnel, high government officials, military personnel and regional leaders, members of the diplomatic and consular staff of various nations, representatives from the oil companies, and a host of friends and well-wishers.²⁵ Elder H. I. Bland, a vice president of the General Conference and the official representative of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's headquarters in Washington, D.C., addressed the convocation. The principal speaker of the day, Kingdom of Libya's Minister of Health, Mr. Omar Giouda, also cut the ribbon and declared the hospital opened. The Italian marble cornerstone inscribed "To the Glory of God and the Service of Humanity" was unveiled by Middle East Division secretary, Ray L. Jacobs. The next day, January 18, patients began to visit the outpatient clinic.²⁶ The new

hospital was listed in Adventist periodicals as another 13th Sabbath project.²⁷

Life at the Hospital and Outreach to the Community

When operating at its peak, the expatriate staff consisted of 48 families and single workers from the United States, the Philippines, Korea, India, Australia, Indonesia, and several Arab countries of the Middle East. In addition, there were many Libyan helpers, including nurses' aides. The Libyans were a bit skeptical in the beginning, but over time came to highly respect the foreigners. The hospital was well appreciated by the community. Patients included Libyans as well as non-Libyans, among them some prominent persons.

In connection with the hospital, a charity clinic was run twice a week at which 50 to 100 patients were examined and given free medication. In order to also provide medical care for people living in towns some distance from Benghazi, a mobile clinic program was initiated. Accompanied by nurses and other personnel, an Adventist physician would examine the people of the town, offer free medicine when needed, and invite them to view the Arabic movie on better health which was always shown at the end of the program.

Oil company flights transported accident cases from the oil fields in the desert. With financial help from some of these companies, the hospital was able to purchase an ambulance which helped in transporting these accident cases from the airport to the hospital, in addition to providing transport for the local people. From the hospital, welfare work was promoted through the distribution of food and clothing and classes in healthful living were taught in the community. Many of the local people serving as nurses' aides were a product of these classes.

In 1960 a local church for the expatriate staff was organized and in 1964 a Book and Periodical House opened.²⁸ A chapel was built in connection with the new hospital, where regular Sabbath services and other worship services were held. The Adventists were not allowed to evangelize and proselytize the local population, but there were good relations with many of the Libyans, even in the royal family.²⁹

A memorable event took place on April 3, 1968, when the king included, as part of his tour of Libya, a visit to the hospital. The medical director, Dr. Ludington, expressed it this way: "We had the thrill of a lifetime as we greeted His Majesty Idris I, King of Libya, one of the wealthiest, kindest, most humble and thoughtful men on earth." The hospital administration had opportunity to thank the king in person for the Lib £10,000 he had donated for the construction of the new hospital. In turn he thanked them for operating a clean and modern facility for his people and stated that Benghazi Adventist Hospital was the "Number One" hospital in the country.³⁰

Closing Down

On September 1, 1969, Muammar Gaddafi unexpectedly staged a coup, taking over the government in Libya.³¹ His Revolutionary Command Council's policy required all medical services to be owned by the government, and Benghazi Adventist Hospital was nationalized on November 23, 1969.³² The expatriate staff had to leave and

were either sent to their homeland or relocated to other countries.³³ After more than 50 years a Google Earth search shows a children's hospital on the location of the former Benghazi Adventist Hospital.³⁴

Medical Directors

Roy S. Cornell (1956-1957); Jay P. Munsey (1957-1960); William Wagner (1960-1963); D. Clifford Ludington (1963-1968); G. N. Benson (1968-1969).

SOURCES

"Benghazi Hospital Personnel Re-locations." *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1970.

"Benghazi Hospital Purchases Land." *Middle East Messenger*, May-June 1963.

Dose, Hilal. "Sign Contract for New Hospital Building." *Middle East Messenger*, July-August 1965.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, First Quarter, 1959.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Second Quarter, 1959.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Third Quarter, 1959.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1961.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, First Quarter, 1962.

"From Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1962.

"Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Second Quarter, 1955.

"Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Third Quarter, 1955.

"Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1955.

"Here and There." *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1957.

Johnson, Cleo. "Financial Report for Benghazi Adventist Hospital." Report provided by Johnson at the Quadrennial Session of Benghazi Adventist Hospital, November 12, 1967.

Lamp, Herschel C. "It's Open." *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1968.

Ludington, D. C., Dr. "New Adventist Hospital Wins Friends in Libya." *ARH*, December 5, 1968.

Ludington, D. C., Dr. "The Day the King Came." *Middle East Messenger*, June 1968.

"Lybia." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, August 16, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lybia>.

"New Adventist Hospital Opens Tomorrow." *Libyan Times*, January 16, 1968. Copy of article provided by e-mail to author, August 13, 2021.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (SDAE). Second rev. ed. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Accessed September 12, 2021. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

"The New Benghazi Adventist Hospital." *Middle East Messenger*, November-December, 1967.

Webster, F. C. "Official Opens Libyan Hospital." *ARH*, March 14, 1968.

NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (SDAE), second rev. ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital."
2. "Nile Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 140.
3. SDAE, s.v. "Libya."
4. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Second Quarter, 1955, 8.
5. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Third Quarter, 1955, 10.
6. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1955, 10.
7. SDAE, s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital."
8. Ibid.
9. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Third Quarter, 1957, 8.
10. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1957, 8.
11. Badiyah Issa, SMS message to Farid Khoury, October 13, 2021.
12. SDAE, s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital."
13. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Third Quarter, 1959, 7.
14. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, First Quarter, 1959, 7; Second Quarter, 1959, 7; Third Quarter, 1960, 7.
15. Elizabeth Atamian, e-mail interview by author, July 20, 2021. Elizabeth was a former nurse at Benghazi Adventist Hospital.

16. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, Fourth Quarter, 1961, 7.
17. *SDAE*, s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital."
18. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, First Quarter, 1962, 7; 11, no. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1962, 7.
19. "Benghazi Hospital Purchases Land," *Middle East Messenger*, May-June 1963, 1.
20. Libyan law limited foreign organizations from owning property – only leases were allowed – but remarkably, the General Conference Corporation was allowed to buy this land for the new hospital, thus becoming the only foreign organization in all of Libya that held a title to property. D. C. Ludington, "New Adventist Hospital Wins Friends in Libya," *ARH*, December 5, 1968, 16. Copy provided by Cleo Johnson, former business manager, by e-mail on August 13, 2021.
21. Cleo Johnson, e-mail to author, August 13, 2021, copy of article provided to author, "New Adventist Hospital Opens Tomorrow," *Libyan Times* January 16, 1968; "Financial Report for Benghazi Adventist Hospital," November 12, 1967.
22. "Benghazi Hospital Purchases Land," *Middle East Messenger*, 1.
23. Hilal Dose, "Sign Contract for New Hospital Building," *Middle East Messenger*, July-August 1965, 1.
24. *SDAE*, s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital."
25. F. C. Webster, "Official Opens Libyan Hospital," *ARH*, March 14, 1968. Copy of the original article provided to the author by Cleo Johnson, August 13, 2021, with his personal reference to *Adventist Review*.
26. Herschel C. Lamp, "It's Open," *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1968, 1.
27. "The New Benghazi Adventist Hospital," *Middle East Messenger*, November-December 1967, 1.
28. *SDAE*, s.v. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital"; *SDAE*, s.v. "Libya." Elizabeth Atamian, e-mail interview; Cleo Johnson, "1965 Benghazi Adventist Hospital Report," e-mail sent to author, August 13, 2021.
29. The life of the Church is further described in the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* article about Libya [here](#).
30. D. Clifford Ludington, "The Day the King Came," *Middle East Messenger*, June 1968, 7-9.
31. "Libya," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, September 13, 2021, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libya>.
32. "Benghazi Adventist Hospital." *SDAE*, 881.

33. "Benghazi Hospital Personnel Re-locations," The *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1970, 8. The issue gives a full report of the relocation of personnel. One worker chose to remain at the hospital and serve in the employment of the government, and few had already requested permanent returns to their homelands or received calls to other fields. Efforts to relocate the remainder proved successful in many cases, and the personnel were relocated within the division territory or appointed to other divisions.
34. Cleo Johnson, e-mail to author, August 15, 2021, map showing location of Children's Hospital (former Benghazi Adventist Hospital), *Google Earth*, accessed September 1, 2021, [here](#).

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