



A friendly chat with a patient at Songa Hospital.

Photo courtesy of ASTR Archives (folder: ASTR Photo Collection, folder: Africa Medical and Indigenous).

## Songa Hospital

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### NGILI MULOKO MUTOMBE

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Songa Adventist Hospital (Hospital de Songa et Leproserie) was founded in 1927. The hospital is owned and governed by the East Congo Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. Today the hospital has 95 patient beds.

## Development History

The mission work among the Baluba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was established in 1921 on a 500-acre (200 hectares) plot at Songa. W. H. Branson, who was the president of the Southern Africa Division, and Dr. John Reith from the South African sanitarium had visited Belgian Congo and found that the country presented many opportunities for health evangelism. The medical work began June 8, 1927, with the arrival of Dr. J. Hubert Sturges and his wife, Violet. They first treated patients on the veranda of their thatch-roofed house. Because of fear and superstition, few patients came, and many village people even fled from their homes.<sup>1</sup> Despite these early challenges, Sturges' aim was to attract the sick to Jesus Christ, the Great Physician and the Savior of their souls. The medical work gradually progressed so well that only after about three years, in 1930, J. I. Robison was able to report for *The African Division Outlook*: "The medical work has placed the mission on vantage ground, both with the government and with the natives, and we have a good growing work here in the south-central Congo."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Sturges, speaking of the medical work in Songa, pointed out that, very early in the morning, the sick came to listen to the good news from the mouth of an indigenous evangelist translator. Some patients cared little for the Word of God, but the great majority found it a pleasure. One day, while examining a young married woman of sixteen years, Dr. Sturges discovered she was suffering from cancer. He intensely prayed and called on the patient's faith in Jesus' power to heal any illness. The Lord granted this prayer. After some care, the young woman was healed.<sup>3</sup> The native people's fear of surgery and injections disappeared as a result of the excellent medical care and the testimonies of patients who recovered their health.

Before the hospital was formally founded, the spouses of the first missionaries served as nurses (for example, Violet Sturges, wife of J. Hubert Sturges, and Tersha Robinson, wife of Christopher Robinson). They practiced care and taught prevention of some diseases in the surrounding villages where their husbands traversed, spreading the Word. These facts favored the creation of the hospital. Thus, the project received support from all over the world church and throughout the region. The building and the services provided were also supported by some companies working in Elisabethville, including UMHK, Sabena, Solbena, Bunge Society, Central Garage, and Huilco.<sup>4</sup>

In 1928 Lee Ferguson erected a four-room structure, which remained in use for thirty years, until 1958. The first nurses to work at Songa were Sybil de Gourville and Lydia Delhove. Sheshetta Monga also worked for more than 30 years as a nurse's aide. In 1931 a leper dispensary was built, and a leper colony was opened in 1932. Sombe Ndala was the first woman who came to seek treatment for her leprosy. She was soon joined by others, including Kongolo's Mafuta Mbumbu. After several years, a company was organized and became an established church.<sup>5</sup> In 1933 hospital wards and a dispensary built by H. G. S. Pratt were opened, and a maternity unit was created in 1940. In 1948, Dr. E. Olavi Rouhe began a one-year training course for African nurse's aides, which was increased to a two-year course in 1960.<sup>6</sup>

After Dr. Sturges, Songa Hospital received another doctor, Elton Morel, who worked from 1933 to 1937. During this period the South Congo Field was under the control of the Zambezi Union. It should be pointed out that Songa became a place where all those who suffered from leprosy found refuge there. Elie Delhove insisted that the surgical operations taking place in Songa and the treatment of leprosy had considerably increased the reputation of this hospital and contributed to Songa's fame.<sup>7</sup> After twelve years in existence, the Songa Hospital had several new services. The dispensary was erected and received, according to J. G. Siepman, more than 2,400 outpatients, including some who had traveled great distances. The maternity service, which for a long time did not exist, delivered 90 babies a year. In view of its results and thanks to the health of those babies, many women preferred to deliver in this maternity ward. For that reason an additional hall was erected specifically for this cause.<sup>8</sup>

From 1938 to 1950, O. Rouhe made Songa his field of action, and his service there was an unforgettable one. He and his wife even built a house nearby. After their departure and for a period of more than ten years, Songa Hospital did not have a doctor. Several missionaries led Songa Mission who were not doctors. During that period, it was run by visiting doctors. Forty years after the entry of the Church into Congo, waves of independence swept the country, and the work continued to grow. There were ten stations, and each had a school and a dispensary. These clinics functioned after the departure of the missionaries. Some continued to receive the help they needed. Some examples of these included Miss Delhove and Julia Haol, who did not forget the staff who was with them until the government began to intervene through the center system or Health Zones.<sup>9</sup>

The health work underwent a great reform with the merger of Congo, Ruanda and Urundi. This merged union included great health missionaries. There were times when the Division president made visits to the Congo with a doctor. Missionaries like Marsa, Rouhe, Schaffner, Ross, and Richili worked until Songa Hospital was headed by Dr. Nsungula Mwambayi, a national Congolese. In 1988, Dr. Elmer Delgado, an Argentine national, joined and, through the contacts he made with the Association of Free Adventist Doctors of France, the services offered were enhanced. Moreover, several young Congolese were sent to Rwanda and Malawi to receive nursing education. It was during this time that the great health reform in the Congo Union took place (1988), with the arrival of Dr. Elmer Delgado in Songa. This man specialized in several fields, including surgery, gynecology, and orthopedics according to the needs of the hospital in which he worked. Thanks also to the involvement of French Adventist Doctors Free Association, the further development of Songa Hospital was possible. After Elmer Delgado, Nyembo Lwamba, Moma, Ngoloson, Kazembe and many others also came to this site as medical doctors.

## Infrastructural Development

In 1956, Dr. M. H. Schaffner built the administration block containing offices, surgeries, wards, pharmacy, and classrooms. Re-surveyed in 1956, the mission was granted an increase of about 900 acres (365 hectares). A hydraulic ram installed in 1957 furnished abundant water for the hospital and mission, ending many years of water carrying by porters. In 1958, new wards and a maternity block were begun. The leper dispensary was built in 1931, and a leper colony was opened in 1932. This work grew until more than 500 were being treated. A church for the lepers, built by Dr. C. J. Birkenstock, was finished in 1954, but was later destroyed during a storm. In the last year of normal operations before 1959, the staff included two doctors, two overseas nurses, and 40 other employees. There were 792 major and 694 minor operations, 2,747 admissions, 98,950 outpatients, and 383 lepers receiving treatment. Because of political unrest in the area, the hospital was closed in December 1961 (except for the dispensary), but was reopened in September 1963. Although the hospital was reactivated, unrest still prevailed in large areas in the northern region of the country, preventing the movement of patients from the interior to Songa. A Union Cessna 180 was used occasionally to facilitate medical visits to Bigobo dispensary but, on one occasion, medical supplies had to be dropped from this airplane. By 1970, the bed capacity was increased to 100. Newly arrived X-ray equipment has strengthened the medical services. A two-year nurse's assistant course was offered. Because of continuing crises and interruptions of service, the General Conference once considered closing the hospital. But in 1985, a Zairian, Dr. Nsugula Nwambayi, was called on to reorganize medical service until Dr. E. Wilfredo Delgado arrived in October of 1988. Since then, work has been going on, though not without challenges.<sup>10</sup>

The hospital has been gradually reactivated and has gained recognition as a surgical unit in Shaba Province. A new clinic building has been constructed that includes two surgery rooms. New diagnostic and surgical equipment has been acquired, and a solar energy system has been provided by generous donors that now provides electricity for the hospital. In 1987, the nursing school was granted authorization by the state to extend its program to provide a four-year course. In 1991, the first 22 nurses graduated from this program. In 1993, 110 students were in training.

## Medical Directors

J. H. Sturges (1927-1932); Elton L. Morel (1933-1937); Olavi Rouhe (1938-1944); H. J. Weber (1945-1946); Olavi Rouhe (1948-1951); W. R. Grant (1953); C. J. Birkenstock, acting director (1954); M. H. Schaffner (1955-1962); N. W. Mueller (1964-1968); Olavi Rouhe (1969-1970); D. M. Ross (1971-1972); Floyd Anderson, acting director (1973-1974); Olavi Rouhe (1975-1976); D. Neumann (1977-1978); S. Vieilledent, acting director (1979); W. Richli (1980-1983); none (1983-1986); Nsugula Mwambayi (1986-1988); Elmer Delgado (1988-1997); Umba (1997); Lwamba Nyembo (1998-2000); Moma Mukunda (2002); André Kabulo (2003); Kasongo Ngoloso (2006-2009); Christian Ngoy Kazembe (2010-2014); Kasongo Ngoloso (2015-).<sup>11</sup>

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## NOTES

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2. J. I. Robinson, "Progress in Angola and the Congo," *The African Division Outlook*, November 29, 1930, 3.
3. J. Sturges, "Treating the Sick at Songa Mission," *The African Division Outlook*, July 11, 1929, 13, 14.
4. Robert Muhune, interview by Ngilu Muloke Mutombe, Lubumbashi, November 20, 2019.
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8. J. P. Siepman, "Medical work at Songa Mission," *The African Division Outlook*, March 1939, 3, 4.
9. Ngilu Muloke Mutombe, interview by the author, Lubumbashi, DRC, 2019.
10. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised edition (1996), s.v. "Songa Hospital."
11. This information comes from the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

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