



Oscar Olsen, sixth from the left. From *Lake Union Herald*, June 12, 1962.

## Olsen (or Olson), Oscar (1889–1983)

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### 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.

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Oscar Olsen (or Olson) served as a missionary, first in Sweden as a publishing director and later in Persia as an education, publishing, and youth director.

Olsen was born on September 19, 1889.<sup>1</sup> He married in 1913 and lived in Calmar, Iowa, where he and his wife were active in church work.<sup>2</sup> The couple had two sons, Lennart and Ellis Olsen, and two daughters, Bette DeLeon and Elise Olsen. Olsen earned a scholarship by selling literature to attend the Swedish Seminary in 1915.<sup>3</sup> In 1916, he worked in the summer as a colporteur in Northern Illinois.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 1917, he assisted Pastor Meleen with his tent meetings in Worchester, Massachusetts. Together, with other seminary students, they visited the large Swedish community there.<sup>5</sup> The following summer, in July and August, he assisted at the tent meetings in Jamestown in the Western New York Conference. Once again, Olsen ministered to the Swedes in the

community.<sup>6</sup> In early 1921, he participated in a ten-day colporteur training Institute in Schenectady held by the Eastern New York Conference. Each morning, he led out in the devotional services. Around that time, Olsen received a call from the General Conference to move with his family to Sweden and take charge of the literature work there.<sup>7</sup>

The Olsens moved in the latter part of 1921. Olsen became departmental director and was in charge of what was called the “field mission” for the Swedish Conference.<sup>8</sup> He served in this position for five years. During that time, he held ministerial license and training seminars for the colporteurs, teaching them how to sell the literature that was produced by Skandinaviska Förlagsexpeditionen, also known as the Stockholm Publishing House.<sup>9</sup>

In 1926, at the end of his term in Sweden, he was ordained to the ministry in Stockholm and assigned to a new missionary post in Persia. A beautiful parting service was held to send him off to serve in a foreign country he had not yet seen.<sup>10</sup> Olsen moved with his family to the Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Tabriz, northern Persia, and took charge of the rapidly growing educational work. Frank F. Oster, a pioneer missionary to Persia, was the mission president. By then Olsen had been ordained, which made him and Oster the only two ordained Adventist ministers in all of Persia.<sup>11</sup> There were seven church schools in the country, including one for the Assyrians and one for the Armenians. The school in Tabriz had about 120 students. The combined enrollment in all the schools had increased to about 500, mostly orphans and children of the refugees.<sup>12</sup>

In the fall of 1929, Olsen reported that fourteen prominent men of Sultanabad, all Muslims, requested the Adventist missionaries to open a school in their city. The government granted its permission, and soon, on December 3, 1929, Olsen announced that students could register. A week later, the school was opened with 35 students. By 1931, enrolment increased to 126 (25 Armenians and the rest Muslims). The city’s prominent men and several Muslim religious leaders visited the school to express their support.<sup>13</sup> Olsen was impressed that this “seemed to be the leading of God.” He prayed that more freedom to teach the Bible was given in the future and was grateful that “[m]any of the boys are asking about the truth, and some buy Bibles and read them for themselves.”<sup>14</sup> “The schools in Iran had served the double role of educating the young people and of creating a reservoir of teachers who could be called upon as national evangelists.”<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, when the educational laws of the country were changed in the 1930s, the mission schools had to close.

In addition to leading the educational work, Olsen carried the publishing and youth departments for the Mission.<sup>16</sup> At the time, there was a great need for publications in the national languages. There were no publications in the primary language, Farsi, and only a few tracts in Assyrian. Ellen G. White’s *Steps to Christ*, a collection of Bible readings, and a few tracts were the only available Adventist literature in Armenian. It was not until later, when books were produced in Farsi that the canvassing work picked up speed. The Young People’s Missionary Volunteer Society also had an increasing number of members. The combination of educational and youth work functioned well together.<sup>17</sup>

In 1930, the Persian Mission office moved from Tabriz to the capital Tehran, and the Olsens moved with it. A new young minister, K. Tulaszewski, was put in charge of the Youth department. In 1932, the Persian Mission was divided into the East Persian Mission, with its office in Tehran, and the West Persian Mission, with its office in Tabriz. Olsen and his family remained in Tehran and served the church in Persia for another three years as a departmental director and the final year as a pastor. Altogether, their time in Persia amounted to about nine years.<sup>18</sup>

From that time on the information about Olsen is scarce. He kept his ministerial credentials for the rest of his life with his address in Berrien Springs, Michigan.<sup>19</sup> In 1936, he lectured with F. D. Nichol and some others at a summer course in Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. He was also one of the speakers at the Fourth of July celebrations the same year.<sup>20</sup> In 1962, he appears in a picture in front of the Swedish church in Chicago, Illinois, for the Scandinavian Day celebration with the texts: "Elder Oscar Olson, former missionary to Persia, gave the touch of the pioneers by his very attendance."<sup>21</sup>

Oscar Olsen died in Loma Linda, California, on May 19, 1983.<sup>22</sup> His legacy remains his pioneering work in Persia.

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