

# Zurcher, Jean R.

## (1918–2003)

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### RICHARD P. LEHMANN

Richard P. Lehmann, Ph.D. (University of Strasbourg, France), served as a missionary in Cameroon, Africa. He was academic dean of the theology school at the Adventist University of France and later president of the same institution. He was also president of the Franco-Belgian Union. Lehmann published numerous books, articles, and contributed to Bibles editions. He also contributed to the *Handbook of the Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, *The Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary*, and other major publications of the Biblical Research Institute.

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Jean Zurcher served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as pastor, teacher and educator, theologian, missionary, and administrator. As an educator in the mission field, Zurcher was instrumental in the establishment of Adventist education, especially in Madagascar. Zurcher taught at Atlantic Union College in Massachusetts, United States, and led the seminary at Collonges-sous-Salève (now Adventist University of France). Zurcher served as secretary of the Euro-Africa Division and director of the Biblical Research Committee of the Euro-Africa Division.

## Early Years and Education

Jean Rudolf Zurcher was born September 30, 1918, in Cerlier, a village in the canton of Bern, Switzerland. He was the eighth in a family of nine children. His father was a farmer and his mother ran a small grain business. Shortly after Jean's birth, his father's health declined and the family moved to the outskirts of Villars in the Waldensian Alps.

Jean received a Protestant education and regularly attended the church of Villars. In 1934 Jean decided to be a printer. He visited the home of a Seventh-day Adventist during the annual Ingathering. The visit propelled him to go to the Adventist Seminary in Collonges-sous-Salève, France. There he was able to learn a profession in the



Jean R. Zurcher.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

institution's printing house and to pursue higher education. The same year he was baptized. In 1940 he obtained the French baccalaureate from Collonges<sup>1</sup> and the following year a diploma as an evangelist. During that same year, 1941, he married Anna Steveny, a young Belgian woman he had met four years earlier.

## World War II

At the outbreak of World War II, Zurcher began teaching at the French Adventist Seminary.<sup>2</sup> He also continued his studies at the University of Geneva. Zurcher and Anna worked with Jean Weidner's Dutch-Paris network to help refugees flee to Switzerland. Anna received the Jewish families at home and during the night Zurcher helped them pass under the barbed wire that separated France from Switzerland. Zurcher also carried confidential mail to and from Switzerland when he traveled for his studies. For these actions, in 1948 he received from the Dutch Embassy the Medal of Recognition for services rendered during World War II, and he was made second lieutenant of the French fighting forces by the French government.

Zurcher was awarded the Prize of Philosophy at the University of Geneva in 1943. He also obtained his Bachelor of History and Philosophy in 1944 and received the Jean-Louis Claparède Prize in 1945 for his study on "Education for Peace."

## Mission Work in Madagascar

In 1946 Jean and Anna were sent as missionaries to Madagascar to lead the Adventist Seminary located in Soamanandrany, near Tananarive.<sup>3</sup> To get there they had to travel with their two children, Frederic and Tania, around Africa on a six-month trip. They barely arrived when the rebellion in Madagascar began. Putting their trust in God, they remained at the mission station despite the authorities' recommendation to take refuge in the city. In 1948 the family was blessed with a third child, Donald.

For 12 years, Jean and Anna spared no effort to develop the school.<sup>4</sup> Following the educational principles inspired by Ellen White, they ensured that the students received both manual and intellectual training. A farm, a vegetable garden, a printing house, and a carpentry shop offered work to young men. Anna created an embroidery workshop to give work to the young women.<sup>5</sup> They produced tablecloths for the high society of Tananarive. In addition to the school management, Zurcher also strove to develop the educational work throughout the Indian Ocean Union, including Madagascar, La Reunion, Mauritius, and the Seychelles Islands, by training teacher-evangelists. He presented educational and biblical programs on the radio, which led to the development of Bible studies by correspondence.

During a nine-month leave between two stays in Madagascar, Zurcher wrote and defended his doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Geneva in 1953.<sup>6</sup> His study on "Man, his Nature and His Destiny," represents an important step in the understanding of anthropology both on philosophical and biblical levels. The following

year, in 1954, Jean obtained the first prize in philosophy from the University of Geneva on “The Philosophy of Louis Lavelle.”

## Other Teaching and Administrative Positions

From 1958 to 1960, Zurcher taught French and philosophy at Atlantic Union College in Massachusetts, United States, as an exchange teacher. In 1960 he was called to lead the seminary at Collonges-sous-Salève (now Adventist University of France).<sup>7</sup> Ten years later, Zurcher was elected secretary of the Euro-Africa Division,<sup>8</sup> where he worked until 1985. During his service, aside from his major work in 1969,<sup>9</sup> Zurcher published numerous articles for the Ellen G. White Estate and for the Biblical Research Committee of the Euro-Africa Division, which he led from the beginning. For his contributions he received, in 1979, the Andrews University Medal of Merit and, in 1987, the Medal of Distinction from the Department of Education of the General Conference.

## Later Life and Contribution

In 1985 Jean and Anna retired in Gland, Switzerland. Zurcher continued to teach Christology and Anthropology at the Adventist Faculty of Theology in Collonges-sous-Salève until 2000. Jean Zurcher died January 28, 2003, and is buried in the cemetery of Gland, canton of Vaud, Switzerland.

As an educator in the mission field, Zurcher was instrumental in the establishment of Adventist education, especially in Madagascar. For his contribution to the education of youth, the city of Tananarive awarded him with the Medal of Labour in 1958. In recognition of his educational work, the General Conference of the Adventist Church decided in 1987 to call the new French-speaking university in Madagascar “Adventist University Zurcher.” As a theologian, Zurcher contributed to an academic grounding of the doctrine of man, the state of the dead, and the person of Christ. As an administrator, he was instrumental in collating the efforts of missionaries to the vast mission territory under the then Euro-Africa Division. He also was the author of the *Sabbath School Quarterly* for April-June, 1980, titled “The Witness of Jesus.”

His major publications include: *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Essay on the Problem of the Union of the Soul and the Body in Relation to the Christians Views of Man* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1969); *Touched with Our Feelings: A Historical Survey of Adventist Thought on the Human Nature of Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1999); *What Inspiration Has to Say about Christian Perfection* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002). For a complete bibliography see: *De l’anthropologie à la christologie. Mélanges offerts à Jean Zurcher* (Collonges-sous-Salève, Faculté adventiste de théologie, 1998).

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Lee, Donald. "Study in Europe," *Pacific Union Recorder*, October 28, 1963.

"Schools in Madagascar Show Progress." *ARH*, July 7, 1955.

Zürcher, Jean. "Collonges Calling." *Missions Quarterly*, July 17, 1965.

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## NOTES

1. Jean Zürcher, "Collonges Calling," *Missions Quarterly*, July 17, 1965, 5.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Schools in Madagascar Show Progress," *ARH*, July 7, 1955, 32,
5. See Walter Raymond Beach, "Itinerating in the Indian Ocean Union," *ARH*, November 17, 1949, 13.
6. Zürcher; "Collonges Calling," 5.
7. See Donald Lee, "Study in Europe," *Pacific Union Recorder*, October 28, 1963, 8.
8. General Conference Committee Minutes, June 6, 1957, 898, General Conference Archives, accessed July 3, 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1957-06.pdf>.
9. *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Library Press, 1969).

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