

# Arnesen, Erik

## (1868–1960)

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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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Norwegian Erik Arnesen played an important role in the Church as a Bible teacher, administrator, editor, translator, author, hymn writer, and chaplain in both in Norway and Denmark. His influence on future preachers as well as the literature he produced or translated have had a lasting impact on the Church. He was blessed with a long and active life.

## Early Years

Erik Arnesen was born in Øyer in Gudbrandsdalen, Norway, on August 15, 1868, the first child of Arne Eriksen Sveajordet and his wife, Sigrid. He was to have three younger siblings. As was the practice of the time, he took the surname “Arnesen” (Arne’s son). Even though the family had modest means, they never missed anything that was necessary because of their parents’ striving and hard work. Early in life, Arnesen had an interest in religious ideas and would, on rare occasions, attend revival meetings. Surrounded by his childhood home and stunning Norwegian nature, he would often spend winter evenings gazing at the shining stars. Thoughts about the Creator who was the origin of all filled him with awe.<sup>1</sup>

Like so many others at the time, he was gripped by the American “dream.” The family at Øyer did not have the means for him to travel, so there were negotiations with a relative in Minnesota to send him a ticket for the journey. Early on a spring morning in 1888, Erik, at the age of 20, left Norway for America. After his arrival in Minnesota, he worked on the farms of his relatives until the fall of 1889. Then he moved to work at Iver Hilde’s farm. Both Iver and his brother, Lars, were Seventh-day Adventists, and Arnesen began to attend church and



Erik Arnesen

Photo courtesy of the Historic Archive of Seventh-day Adventists (HASDA) in Denmark.

read Adventist books and magazines. The Hildes belonged to the Gilchrist Seventh-day Adventist Church as did the Norderhus family. Ole Norderhus was a pastor and began a series of public Bible lectures in the school building, which Erik attended.<sup>2</sup> He was amazed by the preacher's Bible knowledge and learning, and he became convinced of the Adventist teaching, but he struggled with the decision to make a commitment. He recounts the following about his conversion: "The enemy of the soul did all to keep me away from making the final decision. There were plenty of excuses. He reeled off to me, how awful it would be to take such a step. It would separate me from my loved ones, my parents and siblings at home in Norway, my relatives in America, and spoil my future. The situation was difficult, because I was young and inexperienced, only 22 years of age. No one to counsel with. I was in this crisis alone. With God's help I got through it. One day on a walk in the field I made my decision. The many difficulties that had arisen turned out to be nothing." At a camp meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in June 1891, Erik was baptized by J. M. Erikson, a Swedish pastor.<sup>3</sup>

From 1891-1893, he studied at Union College, Nebraska, which had just opened a department for Scandinavian students. The teaching was in Norwegian-Danish and Swedish.<sup>4</sup> Among others, he met J. C. Raft and A. G. Christiansen from Denmark.<sup>5</sup> For part of the first summer, he canvassed but was not able to cope with the heat and had to take work as a farmer. Back in school, he had insufficient money to pay all the fees, but he found work in the kitchen, where he started at four o'clock in the morning, and after classes later in the day, he helped get ice to the kitchen refrigerator. This school year, J. G. Matteson taught at Union College alongside his other responsibilities as editor and translator. Erik Arnesen developed a strong desire to be an assistant to Matteson and help him with his writing. His teachers had already discovered that he had a gift for writing, and he did his utmost with his essays due for Matteson's classes every week.<sup>6</sup>

During the summer of 1893, he worked again on a farm, and one Friday in August, he decided to spend the Sabbath with Lars Hilde and his family. Two letters were waiting for him. One was from Zach. Sherring, a publishing director whom he knew well. Inside his letter was a card from Br. Matteson, who asked for the address of the young man who had worked in the kitchen at Union College last school year. The invitation was for him to immediately travel to Matteson in Boulder, Colorado. He needed a secretary because his son Alexander was leaving. The result of receiving this invitation was that Arnesen became secretary for Matteson 1893-1895.<sup>7 8</sup> Matteson was very musical and had a good singing voice, and he formed a Scandinavian men's quartet of which Arnesen became part.<sup>9</sup> In the school year 1895/1896, Matteson requested that Arnesen take his place and teach at Union College. At the end of March 1896, Matteson died in California, and Arnesen completed his teaching that school year.<sup>10</sup>

## From America Back to Service in Scandinavia

After the summer of 1896, O. A. Olsen, who for many years served as the General Conference president (1888-1897), called Arnesen to the headquarters in Battle Creek to be his secretary and stenographer. While there, he

met the young Dr. Carl Ottesen from Denmark, who was visiting. He encouraged Arnesen to return to Scandinavia and, after working a short time with Olsen (1896-1897), Arnesen followed Ottesen and his wife back to Skodsborg, Denmark, to assist with the literary work.

A beachfront property had been bought which was to be converted into a sanitarium. The Skodsborg Sanatorium (SB) was officially opened in 1898. Arnesen was part of the first group that was trained in nursing at SB and continued for many years to serve occasionally as a nurse together with his work as secretary for Dr. Ottesen. For a longer period, he also functioned as the leader of the laboratory, a discipline in which the medical director had trained him. He served at SB as secretary to Dr. Ottesen for over 11 years (1897-1908).<sup>11</sup> Arnesen loved singing and, for a time, he directed the choir in the singing association "Duro" at SB.<sup>12</sup>

The mission school for the Scandinavian Union (organized in 1901) had been operating in different locations-- Frederikshavn, Høgholt in northern Jutland, Denmark, and at Nyhyttan in Sweden. In 1908, it was decided to move it to Skodsborg. The new Union committee voted that Arnesen should be the principal, a position he accepted reluctantly.<sup>13</sup> The following year, it was decided that he should also serve as Bible teacher.<sup>14</sup> He held these positions until 1917.<sup>15</sup> In an article in *Adventist Review*, he wrote about the school:

We have four regular teachers, but all have other work besides. The writer, who has charge of the school, is also carrying editorial work and a considerable amount of secretarial work... Our chief studies are Bible history (ancient and modern), language (Danish, Norwegian, English, and German), arithmetic, geography, physics, botany, zoology, general health principles, etc., all based on a three years' course of study... Nearly all students intend to enter the work sooner or later.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the school responsibilities, in 1908, he was asked to be the secretary for the Scandinavian Union, a position he held for 24 years until 1932 when the Scandinavian Union was divided into the East Nordic Union (Sweden and Finland) and the West Nordic Union (Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands).<sup>17</sup> He also served as editor for *Evangeliets Sendebud* (later to be known as *Tidens Tale* [*Signs of the Times*]), editorial secretary for the health magazine *Sunnhetsbladet*, and as editor for *Missionsefterretninger*. In addition to this, he carried out much translation work.<sup>18</sup>

In 1907, he had married Amanda Lovise Hansen, who died from cancer a few years later in 1910.<sup>19</sup> Their little daughter, Borghild, was only one and a half years old and came into the care of her aunt, Bertha Nelson, who became a mother for her early years.<sup>20</sup> In 1914, Arnesen married Else Rask, who passed in 1933.<sup>21</sup>

In the spring of 1909, Arnesen travelled to the United States to participate in the General Conference meetings in Takoma Park, Maryland. During these meetings, he had the opportunity to meet Ellen G. White personally. At that time, she was at the age of 82 and spoke to the delegates a few times.<sup>22</sup> In 1911, he participated in the Biennial Church Council in Europe together with leaders and missionaries from other parts of the world.<sup>23</sup> In 1913, the General Conference Committee in the councils following the GC Session voted Arnesen to be a

member of the committees working with youth and educational issues.<sup>24</sup> The educational work at Skodsborg was going well. A report in the *Adventist Review* states, "The School at Skodsborg, in the charge of Brother Erik Arnesen, is also rendering splendid service in preparing workers for the cause. There are at present more than fifty young persons engaged in the work who have come from that school."<sup>25</sup>

In 1917, it was decided that Arnesen should be relieved of the schoolwork and move to Kristiania (Oslo) in Norway and devote himself to the literary work while serving as manager for the Skandinavisk Bogforlag (Scandinavian Publishing House).<sup>26</sup> In 1919, Arnesen reported remarkable progress in the colporteur and literature work in all the Scandinavian countries.<sup>27</sup>

In September 1920, he was asked to return to Denmark and work as principal for the mission school in Nærum (1920-1925). Arnesen remembered this time as especially rewarding to him.

The time in the school in Nærum I will always look back at as a bright memory. We had many extremely talented students, and many of them are skilled workers in the Lord's vineyard. Not a few of my highly valued students from both Skodsborg and Nærum are now serving in foreign lands or are part of the working force at home.... I am happy for the small service I was given in the school for the fourteen years down here in Denmark.<sup>28</sup>

In 1925, he was called back to Skandinavisk Bogforlag in Norway, where he served another five years as editor, translator of articles and books, and author of books and tracts.

In February 1929, he became suddenly sick with a serious attack of pneumonia. The doctor had given up hope of his survival (penicillin had not yet been invented),<sup>29</sup> and without his knowledge, his "superiors" immediately put him on retirement.<sup>30</sup> However, after three or four months of constant fever, he recovered and was able to move about again. From 1930-1931, he served as Bible teacher at Onsrud Mission School in Norway while also working as union secretary.

In his retirement, he served as chaplain for Skogli Badesanatorium 1931-1960.<sup>31</sup> In 1937, he married Hjørdis Kristoffersen.<sup>32</sup> In 1946, L. H. Christian wrote from his travel through Northern Europe: "They also plan to print some more of Mrs. E. G. White's books, and their veteran editor, Erik Arnesen, who has done so great a work for over forty years, is still helping in a strong way."<sup>33</sup> Francis D. Nichol, wrote about Arnesen after he visited Norway in 1947,

At this sanitarium (Skogli Badesanatorium) I met Erik Arnesen, one of our veteran ministers in Scandinavia. It's hardly correct to describe him as retired. He is serving as chaplain and also translating certain of Sister White's works. In his early years he was secretary to Elder Matteson. As we talked together, I felt I was being linked to the early years of the Advent movement in Scandinavia.<sup>34</sup>

On November 3, 1960, his wife found him lying dead in his bed with his glasses in one hand and E. G. White's devotional book, *Sons and Daughters of God*, in the other with a peaceful look on his face.<sup>35</sup>

## Literary Contribution

In addition to his many articles in *Evangeliets Sendebud* and *Missionsefterretninger*, he wrote a number of tracts, among them *Dekalogen og hviledagen* (*The Decalogue and the Day of Rest*), 1923, *Søndagen, dens forhold til Bibelen og historien* (*Sunday, Its Relation to the Bible and History*), 1929, *Forsoningen i billeder og virkelighed* (*The Atonement in Pictures and Reality*), 1936, and the brochure *Reformation og Splittelse* (*Reformation and Division*), 1936.<sup>36</sup> As the prolific writer he was, he wrote the following books, some of which were used by the colporteurs: *Fra Reformationens Dage* (*From the Days of the Reformation*) 1908, *Et Blik på Vor Tid* (*A Look at our Times*) 1913, republished 1915, 1917, 1918, and 1919, and translated into Swedish and Finnish, *For Hjemmet og Ungdommen* (*For the Home and the Youth*) 1916, *Til Gavn og Glæde* (*For Your Benefit and Happiness*) 1924, *For Hjem og Ungdom* (*For Home and Youth*) 1924, *Det evige Liv* (*Life Eternal*) 1942, and after his death *Den flygtende Jøde* (*The Fleeing Jew*) 1956.<sup>37</sup> Also, he was the author of the Danish-Norwegian hymnbook *Salmer og Lovsange* (*Hymns and Song of Praise*) with 200 of his hymns and songs, of which 40 were translated from English. In addition, he translated ten of Ellen G. Whites major books into Danish-Norwegian, which was the common language at the time. From 1930 and for about 20 years he translated the Week of Prayer readings and the Sabbath School Bible Studies into Norwegian. The last major work that Arnesen did was to translate *The Desire of Ages* into Norwegian with the title *Slektenes Håb*. He completed this work when he was 87.<sup>38</sup>

## Legacy

For more than 60 years, Erik Arnesen worked in Scandinavia and set his distinct mark on the work and the workers. One of his students, who later became a division president and general field secretary of the General Conference, wrote the following appreciation: "Erik Arnesen was not only an eminent educator. He set a pattern. His influence permeated Scandinavia and pushed beyond to large parts of the globe, for he is multiplied through the disciples who sat at his feet and enjoyed the fruits of the tree of knowledge of only good things those years it was planted on the banks of Øresund in Skodsborg and Nærum, our church's then highest educational institution in the Nordic countries."<sup>39</sup> He had a wonderful ability to concentrate and was considered the best translator, from English into Norwegian and Danish, in our Church.<sup>40</sup> His articles, books, and translations were read by church members and others for years, and his hymns are still popular with many members.

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## NOTES

1. Jakob R. Arnesen, "Erik Arnesen in memoriam," *Evangeliets Sendebud*, no. 12 (1960): 1.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. Hans Jørgen Schantz, *I troens bakspejl* (Odense, Denmark: Dansk Bogforlag, 1998): 62-63.
4. Arnesen, 13.
5. Important church leaders from Denmark.
6. Arnesen, 13.

7. Ibid.
8. "Workers' Directory," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1894), 5. Registered as teacher.
9. Jakob Rask Andersen, "Våre pionerer," *Aktiv Pensionstid* no. 4 (2000): 10.
10. Jakob R. Arnesen, 13.
11. Ibid.
12. A. Andersen, "Erik Arnesen," *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1960, 47.
13. In his autobiography *Thy Will be Done* he tells how the brethren didn't listen to his objections and how inadequate he felt for the new responsibilities. "The feeling that the task was beyond my powers and possibilities made the burden doubly heavy."
14. "Educational Institutions, Scandinavian Union Mission School," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* 1909, 154. See also the following years.
15. Jakob R. Arnesen, "Erik Arnesen in memoriam," *Evangelists Sendebud*, no. 12 (1960): 13.
16. Erik Arnesen, "Skodsborg (Denmark) School," *ARH*, April 1, 1909, 29. See also, Erik Arnesen, "Scandinavian Union Mission School," *ARH*, April 21, 1910, 18.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1909-1932).
18. "Foreign Periodicals, Danish-Norwegian," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1909), 171. See also the following years.
19. Jakob R. Arnesen, 13; Schantz, 61.
20. Erik Arnesen, "Biographical Information," sent in a letter to L. Muderspach, December 28, 1928. Kept in the files of HASDA.
21. Schantz, 61.
22. Jakob R. Arnesen, 13.
23. W. A. Spicer, "The Biennial Council in Europe," *ARH*, July 27, 1911, 9.
24. W. A. Spicer, "General Conference Actions," *ARH*, July 3, 1913, 10.
25. N. Z. Town, "Scandinavia," *ARH*, September 17, 1914, 12.



26. Jakob R. Arnesen, 13.
27. N. Z. Town, "Remarkable Progress in Scandinavia," *ARH*, August 28, 1919, 32.
28. Jakob R. Arnesen, 14.
29. Ibid.
30. Jacob Rask Arnesen, 12.
31. Jakob R. Arnesen, 14.
32. Schantz, 61.
33. L. H. Christian, "Seen and Heard in Northern Europe - V," *ARH*, March 21, 1946, 12.
34. Francis D. Nichols, "With Our Norwegian and Danish Believers," *ARH*, July 31, 1947, 4.
35. Jakob R. Arnesen, "Vore hensovede," Obituary of Erik Arnesen, *Adventnyt* 1961, 14.
36. Jakob Rask Arnesen, 12.
37. Schantz, 64.
38. Jakob R. Arnesen, 14.
39. Emanuel Pedersen, "kolemanden par excellence," *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1958, 43.
40. A. Andersen, 47-48.

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