

Skadsheim, Petra (Tunheim) (1871–1923)

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Petra (Tunheim) Skadsheim was a pioneer missionary in Southeast Asia. Ultimately she gave her life in service in the mission field to which she committed her life.

Early Years

Petra Tunheim was born at Hatteland, Klepp, Rogaland, in south-west Norway, on February 18, 1871. She was the youngest of Tollef and Anna Tunheim's ten children.¹

As a child she helped to tend the sheep on their farm. When she was seventeen she migrated to America, following four older siblings who had settled in Minnesota.² She was baptized in May 1891 by Elder Ole Andrew Johnson, a fellow Norwegian, at College View, Lincoln, Nebraska.³ She taught church school for a brief period.⁴ On November 13, 1897, Petra married Laurits Skadsheim in Warren, Minnesota. It was a double wedding with her brother Tollef Tunheim and spouse, performed by Rev. L. M. Skunes of the Norwegian Lutheran Church.⁵ Laurits, better known as Louis, worked as a farm laborer at Brightwood in Richland County, North Dakota.⁶ After two years he and Petra relocated to Little Red Deer, Alberta, Canada.⁷ Their marriage did not last. They had no children and went their separate ways. She rarely dwelt on her past. She took up canvassing and resumed an earlier desire to be an overseas missionary, seriously beginning to explore the possibilities about 1902. She read in a 1903 *General Conference Bulletin* of a need for missionaries to go to Australia. She offered her services and sailed with a group of conference delegates returning to their Australian homeland.⁸

In Australia

Arriving in Sydney about September 1903, she was paid a retainer to sell *Signs of the Times* and *Good Health* on the city streets and in business houses.⁹ She had carried in her luggage a thousand copies of *The Life Boat*, a religious digest published by the Chicago Medical Mission. At five cents each she sold out within a month and kept on ordering more from America. Later she trained others to do the same work, especially on Saturday evenings when the city streets were filled with crowds in a casual mood.¹⁰ She had remarkable success, in her first year selling over twelve thousand *Signs of the Times* and many annual subscriptions to *Good Health* and *The Life Boat*.¹¹ Late in 1904 she was appointed to do similar work in Bathurst and assist with a tent crusade in the rural town.¹² She labored in this manner until she was appointed to join a mission spearhead in Java.¹³



Petra (Tunheim) Skadsheim
Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

The Java Mission

Early November 1906 Petra sailed via Brisbane to Surabaya, Java.¹⁴ Surabaya was an unsanitary and disease-ridden city. Petra and another couple of missionaries hired quarters in a better part of the town, started to pick up Dutch, Javanese, Malay and Chinese words, and sold church magazines and tracts from door to door. Soon after her arrival Petra chose to revert to her maiden name because it was the local custom for a woman to do so in her circumstances.¹⁵

It was not long before a Dutch Sabbathkeeper operating a mission on the relatively cool slopes of Mount Muria, east of Semarang, heard of their coming and invited Petra to visit her. Petra stayed with her for a few months, improving her own Dutch and giving Bible studies.¹⁶ The lady did not become a Seventh-day Adventist but eventually gave control of the station to the Adventist mission and Petra administered the group of believers and conducted services for them.¹⁷

Prior to assuming control of the mission station Petra returned to the oppressive humidity of Surabaya at the same time as a potent strain of malaria took hold. Believing that drugs should not be used under any circumstances the little community of Seventh-day Adventists had not taken the precaution of quinine treatment. They were hit hard by the epidemic, losing three of their number including the child of a missionary family. Petra herself was at death's door, her skin turning purple.¹⁸ She made a recovery but, of course, the disease continued to lurk in her body. This calamity forced a search for a cooler site similar to the property near Semarang. They found one in the mountains behind Surabaya and named it "Soember Wekas," meaning "Well of Blessing."¹⁹

Petra continued her canvassing and Bible readings, all the time becoming more proficient in the four main languages.²⁰ Back in Australia the youth in the Victorian Conference collected over one hundred pounds in 1908 in order to pay her wages and purchase a saddle and a typewriter for her use.²¹ She made a return visit to Australia as the representative of the Java Mission at the Australasian Union Conference Session held at Warburton, Victoria, October 1910, and spoke at youth meetings.²² Apart from some health clinic work done by three nurses, Petra was virtually alone in her evangelism when she returned to Surabaya.²³

At the beginning of 1912, the East Indies field was transferred from Australia's responsibility to the Asiatic Division. Petra was relocated to Batavia, western Java. She followed her customary method of evangelism by distributing literature, once again with some success. Every Saturday she would hold a Sabbath School in the morning for the Dutch and another in the afternoon for the Malays, Javanese and Chinese.²⁴ She was elected the director and treasurer of the Batavia region in 1913.²⁵ Malarial fevers continued to dog her most of the time.²⁶ Some other missionaries had fled back to their homelands because of the debilitating disease. In 1915 Petra decided to spend her furlough out of the tropics and in the cooler regions of America, sailing to San Francisco via the Philippine Islands, Hong Kong, Japan and Hawaii.²⁷ She stayed in California as a guest speaker at camp meetings²⁸ and then proceeded to enjoy some time with her relatives in Minnesota. She continued to keep in touch with them by letter.²⁹ Returning to her mission post refreshed in 1916, she made forays on foot into the mountains behind Batavia, distributing literature.³⁰ She gave another two years before fevers returned with a vengeance. Poor in health, she was forced again to board a ship for America via China in late 1919.³¹

In Shanghai

Petra broke her journey in Shanghai and sought medical help at the Adventist Sanitarium. She quickly recovered and joined the staff of the hospital as preceptress of the nurses and teacher of a baptismal class. She also took Chinese language studies at the same time, passing the second-year university examinations in anticipation of returning to Java.³² Petra discovered a group of students from Java at a nearby college and conducted a Sabbath School for them in their own language. In mid-1923 she wrote, "The Lord knows how I have yearned to return to Java."³³ Weeks later she boarded the SS Khiva bound for Java, only to perish with pneumonia on September 13 just as the ship was steaming into Singapore. She was laid to rest in the cemetery opposite the mission offices.³⁴

Legacy

Though small in stature Petra Tunheim stands tall as a plucky pioneer with Adventist literature. She had a gift for languages, being able to converse in Norwegian, Dutch, English, Chinese, Malay and Javanese. In 1912 church headquarters credited her with raising up the first churches in Java, i.e., the Batavia³⁵ and Surabaya congregations.³⁶ As the elected head of mission in the Batavia District she was, perhaps, the first female to hold such a position in the foreign Adventist mission field. Today, in Jakarta, Indonesia, the Petra Tunheim Memorial Seventh-day Adventist Church stands as a testimony to her pioneering mission work.³⁷

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