

Nielsen, Niels Balle

(1899–1968)

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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.

Niels Balle Nielsen was a lifetime missionary, serving the Seventh-day Adventist church for 50 years, most of which were spent in the mission field overseas. He worked primarily as a secretary-treasurer at different levels and for a few years as a union president. He was known for his quiet but friendly and helpful character and faithfulness in service.

Early Years

Niels Balle Nielsen was born on July 23, 1899, in Galten, Aarhus County, Denmark. His parents, Anders and Kirsten Nielsen (née Jensen), were smallholder farmers. All three of their children became missionaries. Their two daughters, Karen and Thea, served as nurses, and their son, Niels Balle, as treasurer and secretary. Balle, as his friends called him, went to the Mission school at Nærum (1916-1918)¹ and was baptized around 1918.² On his graduation certificate, the principal, Louis Muderspach, wrote: "Can be recommended for employment in the Adventist Church."³ Balle also took business courses that prepared him for his future service in the church.⁴

Nielsen's first employment was at the Dansk Bogforlag (Danish Publishing House), where he worked for a short time until he was called to do his national service with the health troops. Following national service, Nielsen began working as an evangelist. At the constituency meeting in Odense in 1921, he was elected secretary-treasurer for the Denmark Conference. This position he held for four years. On January 2, 1925, he married Ziri Duvald from Copenhagen, who had joined the church in 1921, after which she had been employed in the Scandinavian Union.⁵ In April they both traveled to England for a short course.⁶



Niels Balle Nielsen

Photo courtesy of Sven Hagen Jensen.

Missionary for Better and for Worse

At the Autumn Council in 1924, the General Conference had already decided to send Balle Nielsen and Christian Jensen as missionaries to India.⁷ Balle and Ziri Nielsen traveled to India in 1925. The following was said of Nielsen's time of service:

Balle Nielsen has filled his position as treasurer and secretary with great faithfulness and conscientious competence. He never said much, but all who came close to him appreciated his quiet nature and faithful character. It is a heavy loss to lose two competent persons, but we are happy that they with their skills and experience can serve God's cause in a large and needy mission field like India, where they will perform a similar work to that which they had at home.⁸

For the first two years Balle Nielsen was business manager for the Oriental Watchman Press in Poona, India, in the Southern Asia Division.⁹ After this, five years as secretary-treasurer of the South India Union Mission followed.¹⁰ In 1932 Ziri became seriously ill with tuberculosis, and they had to travel home to Denmark. She was hospitalized at Vejle fjord Sanatorium and died a few months later, leaving Balle and their four-year-old daughter, Ella. Balle decided to remain in Denmark and soon was named treasurer in the newly established West Danish Conference with an office in Aarhus.¹¹

However, after only two years he went back to foreign mission service. This time to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in East Africa. He left his young daughter, Ella, with his sister Maria, who lived close to Vejle fjord Højskole at Daugaard Strand.¹² From 1934-1947 he served as treasurer in the Ethiopia Union Mission in Addis Ababa,¹³ and from 1948-1952 as president of the same union¹⁴. During these years the Ethiopia Union Mission was under the Northern European Division, then Southern European Division (at the time when Mussolini fought Ethiopia and subdued it), and after the war directly attached to the General Conference. These were difficult and challenging years, especially when the process of Ethiopian independence was interrupted by the Second Italo-Ethiopian war and Fascist Italy conquered the country and made it a colony (1936-1941). During the disturbances, when many other Europeans left, Nielsen remained at his post,¹⁵ and sought refuge in the British Embassy.¹⁶ *Aarhus Stiftstidende* (a Danish daily) provides the following report: "Is Missionary Balle Nielsen safe? It is told that he stays in the English Embassy... He has been in great danger during the war but has at least until recently managed well and done a good job, and hopefully he is in safety behind the walls of the English Embassy."¹⁷

Adventist Dr. George C. Bergman, the founder of Dessie Adventist Hospital, writes about the situation in Ethiopia in 1936 in the Danish church paper *Missionsefterretninger*: "As you know Dessie¹⁸ was bombed some time ago. At the beginning conflicting reports about our hospital was received, and we did not know what to believe. I wondered how much damage was added to the mission station and the hospital, where I and my wife had spent so many difficult hours. It was also with a hope that I could be of help that I considered making a trip to our former home. I therefore set off with Bro. Balle Nielsen, who was secretary-treasurer of the Ethiopian

Union, to reach the mountain town in our car. It was a drive of 428 kms through the heart of Africa.” He further said that they were stuck about 30 times. In the hospital none of the staff were killed, although they had to work under shelling and rifle fire. Shortly after the first great bombardment on December 6, 1935, the emperor visited the hospital several times during his stay in Dessie and spoke to the staff and the patients.¹⁹ During Balle Nielsen’s 18 years in Ethiopia, he could only visit his daughter and family in Denmark twice (1938 and 1946) for a short vacation.²⁰

West Africa

In 1952 Nielsen was called to West Africa to serve as the secretary-treasurer of the East Nigerian Mission in Aba, Nigeria.²¹ There, he met another missionary and teacher, Mae Matthews, whom he married on July 29, 1953.²² In 1954 they moved to Accra, Ghana, where he became secretary-treasurer of the West African Union.²³ The West African Union covered the territory of nine countries. Adventist mission work in the African new countries progressed steadily, the membership grew, and it became very difficult for Nielsen to oversee the secretariat and the treasury. In 1962 John Muderspach from Denmark became his assistant treasurer and then took over as treasurer,²⁴ while Nielsen continued as secretary of the union until his retirement in 1968.²⁵ As union secretary, he cared about the union staff, at the time 180 of them, and their challenges.²⁶ Nielsen was known in West Africa for his unique talent for writing letters. Everyone who wrote to him knew they would receive an encouraging letter in return.²⁷ The Niensens became renowned for their hospitality. On one occasion, they pleasantly surprised two visiting African ministers when they let them sleep in their bedroom.²⁸

Legacy

On June 2, 1968, Balle Nielsen retired and returned to his homeland, Denmark, after 50 years of faithful service to the Adventist Church. Sadly, he suddenly died only one week after his return. He was known in West Africa as the “Grand Old Man,” a person with a generous heart, friendly smile, and warm handshake. A few days after his death, Pastor Thorvald Kristensen, who had worked together with him for seven years as union president, received a letter from his wife, Mae:

This morning I found in his Bible this citation written on a scrap of paper: ‘The world is our field of missionary toil, and we are to go forth to labor surrounded with the atmosphere of Gethsemane and Calvary.’ (E.G. White, Testimonies vol. 7, p. 12). Will you bring these words of greeting back to our sisters and brothers in Africa and ask them to do their best to lead people to serve God.”²⁹

A lifelong Danish friend of Balle Nielsen, Manuel Sørensen, shared the following: “He was a friend of people and had special sympathy for the poor and underprivileged, and often opened his own purse to help someone in need.”³⁰ Pastor C. B. Mensah of Ghana, a departmental director and vice-president of the West African Union,

said: "He was one of the kindest persons I have ever met. You got the impression that he was ready to give his life for you. Even through his handshake you could feel a true missionary's love and care."¹

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Sustentation Fund Application, April 8, 1968. In custody of HASDA.

NOTES

1. Thorvald Kristensen, "Niels Balle Nielsen – livstidsmissionær," *Adventnyt*, June, 1994, 4.

2. Chr. Resen, "Indien kalder," *Nordisk Ungdom*, April, 1925, 53.

3. Kristensen, 4.
4. Kristian Hansen, *Lørdagsfolket på heden* (Odense, Denmark: Dansk Bogforlag, 1990), 93.
5. Kristensen, 4; "Denmark Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1922), 97.
6. Handwritten sheet with a record of Balle Nielsen's service, kept in HASDA, accessed October 28, 2022.
7. Resen, 53
8. Kristensen, 4.
9. "Publishing Houses," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1926), 260.
10. "South India Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1928), 209.
11. Kristensen, 4.
12. Ibid.
13. "Ethiopian Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1936), 165. And following *Yearbooks* until 1948.
14. "Ethiopian Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* (1949-1952).
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16. Kristensen, 4.
17. "Er Missionær Balle Nielsen i Sikkerhed?" Newspaper clipping with reference to Aarhus Stiftstidende (1935) in the files of HASDA.
18. Mountain town in north-central Ethiopia at an elevation between 2,470 and 2,550 m above sea level.
19. Hansen, 94.
20. Kristensen, 4.
21. Kristensen, 5; "East Nigerian Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1954), 157.
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23. "West African Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1956), 133.

24. "West African Union Mission," *Seventh-Day Adventist Yearbook* (1964), 177. "John Muderspach," *Light*, March 1990, 1.
25. Niels Balle Nielsen's service record, kept in HASDA, accessed November 2, 2022.
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28. Kristensen, 5.
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30. Ibid.
31. C. B. Mensah, "Nogle danske Missionærer som jeg mødte," in *Var det umagen værd? Danske syvende dags adventister i fremmedmissionen*, eds. Børge and Hans Jørgen Schantz (Nærum, Denmark: Dansk Bogforlag, 1999), 136.

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