

Zierath (Zirat), Gustav Ivanovich (b. 1870)

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Dmitry O. Yunak graduated in Finance and Economics from a Soviet secular educational institution and completed a six-year course of Theology at an underground SDA Theological Institute (Moldova, USSR). In the Soviet times, he served as a pastor, administrator, and bible/history professor in the underground Theological Institute. In 1990, he was appointed as Treasurer and Publishing Ministries Director for the USSR Division. After the Euro-Asia Division was organized in 1991, Dmitry O. Yunak served as ESD auditor and under treasurer. He was the author of a dozen of SDA history books and scores of other publications. He owns a major SDA history archive.



Gustav Zierath, 1923.

Photo courtesy of D.O. Yunak.

Gustav Ivanovich Zierath was an Adventist pastor, evangelist, and church administrator in Russia.

Early Years

Gustav Ivanovich Zierath was born in 1870 into a German-speaking Lutheran family living in near Rovensk, Volhynia, Russia (today Ukraine). He first came in contact with Adventists in 1890, but he wasn't baptized until nine years later in 1899. Thereafter, Zierath worked several years as an Adventist book evangelist/colporteur. During this time, he managed and led a group of Russian Molokans, who in 1895, in Kars, East Anatolia (now Turkey) had come to know about Adventist teachings through a tract.¹

Ministry

In 1906 he worked in Tbilisi,² and because of his efforts, “seven Russian brethren in Sochi began keeping the Sabbath. In the city of Sukhum-Kale (Sukhumi), there were six other German Sabbath-keepers.³ After the death of his first wife and remarriage to Lina Petrovna (an Estonian), Zierath lived in the German colonial settlement of Neudorf, near Sukhumi, where his son Daniel was born in 1909. At this time, he became a full-time Adventist pastor and helped to found small Adventist communities in Sukhumi and Sochi.

In 1910 Zierath, with the support of J. Schaak, held evangelistic meetings in Vladikavkaz, North Caucasus region. A year later he worked again in Tbilisi, where a foundation was laid for a new church planting program. In addition, he visited the German settlements of Helenendorf, Annenfeld, Katherinenfeld, and Elisabethtal, where he shared tracts. Although the German population was friendly to Zierath in Katherinenfeld and Elisabethtal, two Lutheran pastors (Hanselmann and Widner),⁴ got angry and with physical force wanted to drive him out.

Administrator

In 1911 he was sent to serve in Transcaucasia in the city of Tbilisi.⁵ In the spring of 1912, Zierath was transferred from Tbilisi to Central Asia and Western Siberia (Konstantinovka, Tobolino near Tashkent). Initially he served in city of Akmolinsk. Then he settled in the city of Samarkand where he remained until 1924.⁶ There his ministry was fraught with difficulties.

As the leader of this vast territory, he often spent months traveling by train, ship, on horseback, and on foot, to scattered church members, many of them of German origin. He visited the remote forest and mountain areas of Karkaralinsk (southeast of today's Karaganda, Kazakhstan), where a German-speaking Adventist community had lived in exile since 1912 as a result of their religious activities. This community consisted of about 100 members, all peasants who were originally from the Tver area. They immigrated in 1909 and relocated to the territory of the Central Asian Semipalatinsk city (now Semey city).

After the outbreak of the First World War, Zierath had to flee from the tsarist authorities: “I sought refuge on the border of the hungry steppe (west of the lake of Balchach in Central Kazakhstan), where I spent eight months on the river Sarysu. In this way I escaped exile to the High North.”⁷

Beginning in 1920, Zierath was superintendent of the Western Siberian Association of Seventh-day Adventists. From 1923 to 1924 he took over the leadership of the entire Siberian Union. After a church reorganization, Zierath worked as president of the Eastern Union Conference in Samara.

He was responsible for several Adventist communities from Kazan to the Caspian Sea, and from Tambov to the Persian and Chinese borders in Central Asia. In 1925 Zierath organized an “association” (conference) of the Adventist churches in the German Volga Republic. This newly founded association with headquarters in Pokrovsk (Engels) was comprised of about 27 municipalities with 626 mainly German-speaking members. The work as a leader was difficult because pastors were no longer allowed to travel beyond their district and the

widely scattered local communities had to be re-registered. During this period of increasing Soviet repression, Zierath was called to Kiev as the president of the union (1928).

Detention and Arrest

After the dissolution of the Adventist All-Union Council in 1934, Zierath moved to Rostov-on-Don, where he continued to work underground. Following the dissolution of the unions and conferences, the congregations had to be fully autonomous and report directly to the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, which, beginning April 1934, consisted of only one administrator, G. A. Grigoriev. After a few months, Zierath was detained in Pyatigorsk and spent nine days in a humid, underground dark cell before being presented to the magistrate. The magistrate said to him: "Nobody knows about your arrest ... no rooster will crow after them when we shoot them." After further detention in Rostov, Zierath was now monitored by the police.

Zierath was arrested again on March 23, 1934 at the decision of the *Kropotkinsky* Unified State Political Department (OGPU). On April 16, 1934, the Special *Troika* of the OGPU Regional Office for Azov-Black Sea Territory charged Zierath with political insubordination under Article 58, par. 10-11 of the Criminal Code of RSFSR and sentenced him to exile in the northern regions for a five-year period. After many violent interrogations, Zierath, by some accounts, got sick and was allowed to return to his home where in a short time he died from a heart attack.⁸

Death

There are contradictory accounts of his death. One is that he died of a heart attack in 1936, in Rostov, in his apartment, weakened by constant interrogation and ill-treatment by the secret police. Another is that Zierath faked his own death. His grandson, Artur D. Zirat (born 1929), remembers that he lived in Majkop in 1938 and was deported to the Semipalatinsk region after the outbreak of World War II. After that he was considered missing or lost without a trace. It is certain that Zierath's son, Daniel G. Zierath (1909-1938), who was also an Adventist pastor, was sentenced to death in Taganrog and shot there on January 13, 1938. Father and son sacrificed their lives in the service of the gospel proclamation.

SOURCES

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_____. "Aus Samarkand." *Zions-Wächter*. April 8, 1913.

NOTES

1. Gustav Zierath, "Aus dem Kaukasus," *Zions-Wächter*, February 20, 1911, 89.
2. Gustav Zierath, "Aus dem Kaukasus," *Zions-Wächter*, October 16, 1911, 416.
3. G. I. Löbsack, *Velikoye Adventistskoye dvizheniye i Adventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii* (Rostov-na-Donu: Altair, 2006), 227-228.
4. *AdventBote*, Russian edition, January 1926, 19ff.
5. In his later years Gustav Zierath recounted his experiences as recorded in *Golos Istiny* Magazine.
6. Gustav Zierath, "Aus Samarkand," *Zions-Wächter*, April 8, 1913, 375-376.
7. *AdventBote*, Russian edition, April 1926, 21ff.
8. However, his grandson Arthur Zierath remembers that grandfather was actually arrested in the city of Maikop in August 1938 and shortly after, due to his illness, was allowed to return home.

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