

Tilstra, Klaas

(1897–1985), SSD

DESMOND SIRAMI

Desmond Sirami, M.A. in education (Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines), is the director of the Sabbath school and personal ministry departments of Papua Mission, Indonesia. He was a member of 1000 Missionary Movement and served as a missionary in the Philippines. He was an English and Bible teacher at Doyo Baru Academy, Papua, Indonesia, and director of Papua Adventist Academy and Papua Adventist School of Theology. He is married to Elihama Villanueva Okan and has three children.

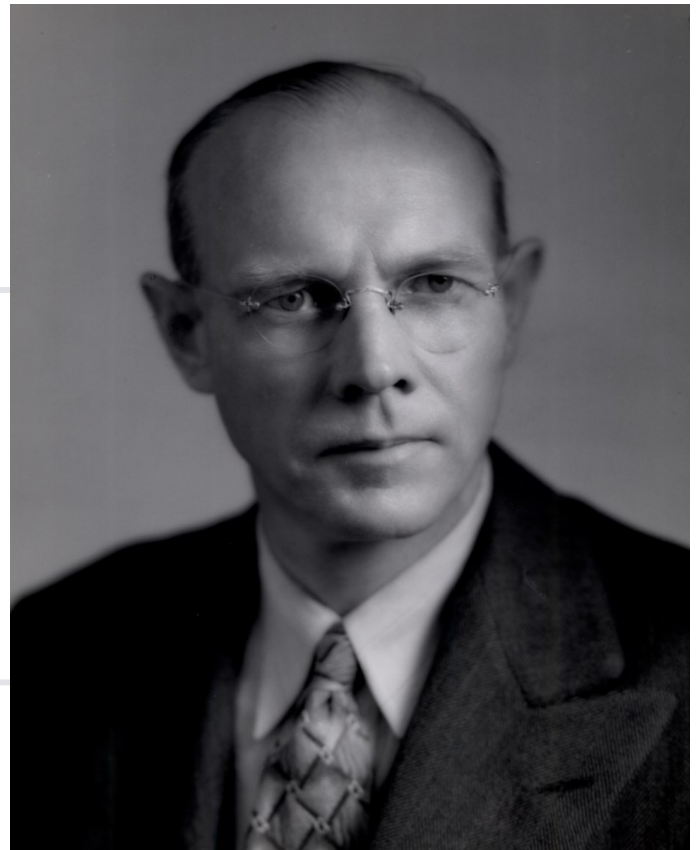
Klaas Tilstra served as pastor, evangelist, and conference and union president in Indonesia, as union president in the Netherlands, and as educator and builder in New Guinea.

Early Life

Klaas Tilstra was born March 7, 1897, in Winsum, Friesland, Netherlands, to Klaas Tilstra and Eke Tilma.¹ Born to a humble and God-fearing farmer family, Klaas's father always searched for greener pastures from which to feed his growing flock of eight children: Tilma, Folkert, Sjoerd, Martha, Jan, Jitske, Antje, and Klaas, the fourth son.²

The Tilstras had moved to the town of Usinghausen, Germany, several years before the children first attended school. In 1908, Klaas and his younger sister Ann (Antje) attended a Catholic school, and there they were taunted by the other pupils as being "heathen" and were scorned for their wooden shoes. Klaas knew that he and his sister did not wear shoes like the other children because there was not enough money to buy them, yet he showed the other boys that he could sprint with his feet inside the upright shoes with toes facing backward. After that, they were not mocked anymore about their Dutchmen's wooden shoes.

During their stay in Germany, Klaas and his siblings spoke German in school and their native language at home. Three years later the family returned to Holland. Klaas joined the family and one day he received a letter from his brother, George (Sjoerd) telling of his conversion to the Seventh-day Adventist faith and that he was doing Christian colporteur work with a young man from the Hague.³



Klaas Tilstra

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

During the next few years, Klaas spent a considerable amount of time in Germany, working with his brother George; then he would go back to Holland to help out on the farm when things were not going too well. In 1915, Klaas and his brother George found work in East Prussia harvesting grain. After the harvest ended, Klaas found a factory job in Cologne where he lived happily with his sister Martha and her husband. After a few weeks of work on the farm, Klaas came down with pneumonia. His sickness got worse, so he was confined to a Catholic hospital for several weeks. When he recovered, the superior of the hospital asked him to stay and be a priest, but Klaas thanked him and declined the offer; for indeed, God had another plan for Klaas. He then returned to Holland.

In 1917, Klaas was drafted into the Dutch Army and served for two years. He received an honorable discharge from the army in 1919, and with his savings started his own cutlery business. He dreamed of becoming a rich businessman and then he would pursue his education.⁴

While he was in Germany, Klaas' brother George invited him to attend a prayer meeting. The prophecy of Daniel 2 was the subject that night, and it interested Klaas. When the little congregation knelt in prayer, Klaas heard an elderly woman pray: "... and, dear Lord, touch the heart of the young stranger who is with us tonight, that he may give his heart to Thee." The prayer grabbed his heart and the next day, Sabbath, he was ready to go to church with his brother's family and he never missed the following Sabbaths.

From that time on, life became totally different for Klaas. Making money was no longer important. Much of his time was spent studying the Bible and thinking of future plans that included God. In December 1919, Klaas Tilstra was baptized at Essen, Germany, by Elder H. Kaltenhauser.⁵

Education and Marriage

Klaas attended public school for two years in the Netherlands and two years in missionary school in Neandethal, Germany. He attended college from 1924 to 1927 at Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) and took nursing.⁶

Klaas Tilstra married Marie M. Klingbeil on June 13, 1927, at Holland, Michigan. They had three children. Reinhold Klaas was born May 14, 1928, John Louis was born January 7, 1930, and Albert Cornelius was born July 25, 1938. Marie died during internment by the Japanese in Jakarta, Indonesia, on June 1, 1945. On June 23, 1947, Klaas married Albertine Klingbeil (sister of his first wife, Marie).⁷

Ministry

It took great courage for Klaas to enter denominational work through the colporteur ministry in April 1920, just a few months after his baptism. He soon started to canvass with zeal and enthusiasm, along with his friend Ari Ringelberg, in their assigned territory in the town of Steenwijk, Germany. They also canvassed in southern

Holland where they came in contact with the Klingbeil family who offered to let them stay in their home while canvassing. It was during his stay with the Klingbeil family that Klaas was attracted to the talented Marie, the eldest daughter of Elder R. G. Klingbeil and Mrs. Cornelia Klingbeil.

Klaas carefully saved every German mark he received to help him attend the Adventist Seminary in Neandertal, Germany, for two years. He desired to go to medical school, and took this request to the Lord. He went in faith to Emmanuel Missionary College. Through diligent study, untiring work on the farm, and canvassing every summer, he earned a degree in nursing.⁸

After his marriage to Marie, they were sent to their first foreign mission field in the East Indies (now Indonesia), arriving there on September 23, 1927, as missionaries in Surabaya. He pastored a large Dutch-Eurasian church and was also Publishing and Educational secretary of the Netherlands East Indies Union Mission. He was next assigned to Ambon where he was ordained as a pastor by Elder Ohme and A. H. Zimmermanker. Shortly after that, he was privileged to baptize 41 souls. There was no lack of work for Pastor Klaas Tiltra. Often he was on his bicycle crisscrossing the city over the hot, sticky blacktop, crossing rivers by rowboat, and walking for hours, sometimes with lack of good food and much opposition from the government. Despite the challenges, he spread the gospel with eagerness and thus increased the membership in the NEI Union until he left on furlough in 1933.⁹

After their return from the first furlough, Klaas was moved to South Sumatra, Netherlands, East Indies Union, as mission president, arriving first at Palembang. He traveled a lot, mostly on crowded buses from 1933 to 1935. He then led out in the North Batakland field (North Sumatra Mission) from 1935 to 1940 and settled in Pematangsiantar. Here the membership of the mission doubled in three years, and West Sumatra was added to Klaas's territory. Klaas and his wife, who was an excellent solicitor, traveled from plantation to plantation doing Ingathering and raised nearly five times the mission goal. With the extra Ingathering funds, Klaas established a home and school for blind Bataks. Their cleverly done handiwork made the institution almost self-supporting.¹⁰

During their second furlough in 1939, news came regarding the invasion of Holland. All German nationals in the Dutch East Indies were interned. Klaas was concerned that only three Dutch workers were left to carry on God's work in the East Indies. He decided to return to the field immediately in 1940, with permission from the General Conference, this time as president of the East Java Mission, since all the German missionaries in the entire union had been interned.

In January 1941, Klaas filled in as president of the NEI Union in Bandung. Both he and Marie had heavy responsibilities in the office. Since war conditions prevented Dutch literature coming from Holland, Marie translated some small books from English and began editing a small magazine. The church work involved much travel for Klaas.

In December 1941, when the United States entered the war with Japan, Klaas was drafted into the Dutch army. In spite of being in the army, Klaas managed to carry on the mission work, mostly consisting of editing the local

magazine. On March 7 he was given notice by military authorities to present himself for service. Klaas asked for noncombatancy, and he was enrolled in a course for military administration. Fortunately, after classes that occupied the morning, he was allowed to go home. Since he was also president of the entire West Java Union, he and Marie were kept more than busy in the afternoons and evenings. Klaas was carrying on a "secret mission" to do the Lord's work as long as he possibly could. In February 1942, the division mission officers came to Java to counsel with the union brethren.

Plans were made to carry on with the mission work in Java. When the Dutch Army surrendered and the Japanese took over in 1942, the situation for Klaas quickly worsened. As a prisoner of war, he explained to the Dutch officer in charge that he must have Sabbaths off. The Lord had opened the way for him to keep the Sabbath and also to minister to the physically and spiritually sick when the hospital sergeant in charge asked him to help him care for the patients every Saturday. Klaas and the other prisoners were moved to several places. On one of the moves, the prisoners marched to the harbor and all 2,000 of them were crowded into the hold of a coal boat that normally could transport perhaps 500 people. Klaas was pushed against the steel wall of the hull, where he sat with his knees drawn up to his chest. The air became more foul by the moment. The wretched men wondered how they could survive until morning. Klaas breathed a simple prayer heavenward: "God, hold me fast and give me strength to live through this night." Behind him he caught a faint but welcome whiff of air. He wiggled around and placed his nose over the small crack, through which, literally, came the breath of life.

Klaas continued to work helping the doctor in the "hospital" ward with many seriously ill patients from 14 to 18 hours a day for many months. After three full shifts, he was given time off and he had time to rest and read the Bible with some of the patients. Since Klaas was the only clergyman in the camp, he also had to perform funeral services almost every day. On one of his days off he tried his hand at sewing simple shorts with a drawstring. With the little money he earned during his day off, he could buy a banana or a handful of peanuts smuggled into camp.

Tilstra's two midteen boys had been taken to a concentration camp while Marie Tilstra and Albert were kept in a segregated section in the city of Bandung, behind Japanese-made bamboo fences with many women and children crowded into a one-family house. Marie, seeing the need of the many roaming school-age children and desperate mothers separated from their husbands, took the opportunity to spread the message and comfort the frightened, tired, and forlorn who had no hope for this life nor for the life to come, by telling Bible stories to the children and giving Bible studies to the women.

During the internment, Marie became sick and passed away. During her final hours of life on this earth, Marie, who had done so much for others, was alone, but not really. Surely her guardian angel held her close, and she was secure in the knowledge that she had done what she could and would be reunited with her loved ones. She died June 2, 1945, just a few weeks before liberation.¹¹

During the liberation on Christmas of 1945, Klaas and his three sons were reunited. Klaas was then invited to attend the General Conference Session in Washington, D.C. After the session, he had to return to Indonesia, but he first went to Holland to recruit new workers.

On June 23, 1947, Klaas married Albertine Klingbeil, Marie's younger sister, a registered nurse at the White Memorial Hospital, who had shown love to his sons.

In the fall of 1948, Klaas was called to the Northern European Division as president. There he took responsibility for the training school, visited many churches, and attended many committee meetings of the union and school board until 1953.

In August 1953 Klaas sailed back to his first love, the mission field. This time he went to the Far Eastern Division where he would establish pioneer work in West New Guinea. New Guinea was a detached mission under the Far Eastern Division. There were a few believers in Sorong who were Indonesian and a handful of Dutch-Eurasians on the island of Manokwari who gathered in groups and met in one of the elder's or member's homes for worship, since there was no church building. Hollandia was the principal city in Netherlands New Guinea and where the headquarters of the West New Guinea Mission would be located. Pastor E. H. Vijsma and family welcomed Klaas and his family to where 30 or so Dutch-Indonesian members met for worship on Sabbath mornings in their home at Bergen Dal, Hollandia (Argapura).¹²

Klaas lost no time in obtaining a piece of land on which to build the mission church and workers' home. One day as Klaas and his helpers were sawing and hammering in the church, six eager young Papuans came asking to study in the school. Soon, the Vjismas and Klaas and his wife Albertine (Tina) started the school, using the church as the classroom while the boys used the hall of the back room as their sleeping quarters. The eager students built themselves a shelter from palm leaves for their kitchen. Klaas and Pastor Vijsma taught Bible and related subjects. Mrs. Vijsma taught language and arithmetic while Mrs. Tina Tilstra taught first aid, elementary hydrotherapy, and nutrition. A happier group of students could scarcely be found anywhere. They were eager to learn, they studied hard, and they painstakingly copied the lessons from the blackboard.

After eight months of intense study, six boys graduated from the course on May 28, 1956. Church members were invited to the unique graduation program.¹³ These six young men (Habel Sirami, Albert Waramory, Corneles Windesi, Matius Manisru, Lukas Yandeday, and John Uyai) formed the core of the national work force in West New Guinea.¹⁴

After several months these young men were sent as missionaries to Manokwari, Sorong, and Serui. Equipped with supplies, medicines, and books, they set out on the long, tedious, and dangerous journey across the jungle and up the mountains, reaching the native Papuans, teaching them how to read and count, and telling them of our great God's love and power to heal the sick, and His return to earth to take those who love Him. These missionaries came back full of zeal and wonderful stories of God's leading and miracles. Who can tell the results of the work of these missionaries? There are still hundreds of villages that have never seen a teacher and who

are longing for deliverance from sin and superstition. When the mission home was built, village schools were established through the help of these missionaries.

A small beginning had been made with the medical work at a village outside Hollandia. Once a week Klaas and Tina made a trip into the jungle with Jacobus Bindosano, one of the Papuan workers, taking care of the patients and bringing comfort and relief to those in need.

After the training school was built in Dajo Baru, 30 miles from town, a small shedlike building was assigned to Tina for her weekly clinic. After a morning of treating the patients, Klaas and Tina often joined the Keizers for dinner. Leslie Keizer was the efficient principal of the school. Klaas Tilstra and Gottfried Oosterwal ventured into the interior to visit the nationals working in the villages and improving their way of life.

Later Life

The day came in 1963 when the Tilstras had to say farewell to friends in Hollandia and to the national workers who seemed to them like their own children.

Klaas and Tina settled in Loma Linda, where Tina worked for seven years in the Linda Valley Convalescent Hospital as nursing supervisor and Klaas was chaplain in two convalescent homes in the same town.

At the 1970 General Conference Session, Klaas was approached by some of the delegates from Surinam and asked to help them for a year or two. Almost two years of profitable time were spent there. Klaas pastored a church of 100 members. These dear people were worshiping in a delapidated old garage, also used as a grade school. With financial help from relatives and many friends, a substantial church was built, with a seating capacity of 250. Klaas started a lay activities movement in the group. Tina reorganized the Dorcas Society and taught several classes in health and nutrition to the ladies of the church.

In 1972 the Tilstras chose Paradise, California, for their retirement retreat. On February 6, 1985, at age 88, Klaas died and was buried at Paradise, California.¹⁵

Klaas Tilstra planted the love of mission work in the hearts of his family. There were sacrifices and heartaches, but unanimously the Tilstra family would declare it the best life possible. No sooner did one generation move off the scene before another emerged to carry the torch borne by those who had gone before!¹⁶

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NOTES

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7. Tilstra, 8.
8. *Ibid.*, 21-33.
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12. *Ibid.*, 75-96.
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14. Habel Sirami, interview by author, October 19, 2017. One of the six graduates who is still living in Jayapura, Papua.
15. Tilstra, 103-126.
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