



The Riffel Family. George Riffel on far right.

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Riffel, Geörg (George) Heinrich (1850-1917)

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Geörg [George] Heinrich Riffel was the first self-supporting Adventist missionary in Argentina and who made the first converts in the country. He formed the original nucleus of the first organized church in the current South American Division territory.¹

George Riffel's ancestors came from the canton of Valais, in the Upper Rhone Valley, southwestern Switzerland. Their adherence to Protestantism led them to northern Switzerland and from there to southern Germany. Together with thousands of other German immigrants, they, encouraged by the Empress Catherine the Great (1762-1796), migrated to the banks of the Volga River in Russia during the 1770s.² The Riffels settled in a Protestant colony called Deutsch Scherbakovka, west of the Volga (the Bergseite) and southwest of Saratov. A century later (in November 1876), George Riffel, his wife María L. Ziegler and their son, David, departed for South America.

Beginnings

Geörg [George] Heinrich Riffel, the third son of Petter Riffel and Susana Kraft, was born in Saratov, Russia, January 1850. His wife, María L. Ziegler, was born in Russia in 1852 and died in Argentina on April 5, 1910. His only son, David Riffel (1873-1937), was 4 years old when they left Russia.³ They settled for a while in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In 1880 they moved to Crespo, Entre Ríos, Argentina. Frederick Riffel (1845-1921), George's older brother, his wife Christina, and four children emigrated to Kansas, United States.

Many Russian-German farmers had formed rural colonies in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Entre Ríos. The land was good, but often the crops failed because of drought or frequent locust invasions. By 1885 George Riffel decided to leave Entre Ríos to join his brother Frederick in Tampa, Marion County, Kansas, United States. There they prospered materially and learned about Adventist doctrines through German evangelistic meetings conducted by Louis (Luis) Richard Conradi (1856-1939).⁴ Pastor Conradi, 29, helped by S. S. Shrock, held meetings in Hillsboro and Lehigh, resulting in the organization of two churches with a total of 252 members. H. H. Schulz baptized George, Maria, and David Riffel as well as Frederick Riffel and his family in 1888. Apparently, Frederick and his wife, Christina, had bought books from a German literature evangelist and had already read them before the arrival of Conradi. Jacob, Frederick's oldest son, in time became an Adventist pastor.

At the end of the following year, George decided to return to Argentina as a missionary. The reading of an article that presented the need to preach the gospel in neglected lands had greatly impressed him. In addition, he knew of people interested in Adventism, such as his friend Reinhardt Hetze (1851-1939).⁵ To these acquaintances in Argentina he began to send letters and religious publications. Three other German families joined his efforts: Osvaldo and Eva Frick, Augusto and Cristina Yanke, and Adam and Eva Zimmermann, with their daughters Lidia and Maria. Osvaldo Frick (1853-1945), born in Russia, joined the Adventist Church in Kansas in 1886. His wife, Eva L. de Frick (died 1942), accompanied him to Argentina. Augusto Yanke (1864-1943), also born in Russia, emigrated to the United States in 1883 and was converted to Adventism two years later. He was 26 years old when he left for Argentina. Augusto and his wife Cristina (died 1950) first settled in Crespo and soon afterward in Ramírez, Entre Ríos, Argentina, remaining there the rest of their lives. The Zimmermanns eventually returned to the United States, leaving their two daughters behind.

Missionary Service in Argentina and Legacy (1890-1917)

Reinhardt Hetze met George H. Riffel and his family at the port of Diamante, Province of Entre Ríos, Argentina, in 1890. For Adventism, South America back then was a "neglected continent." At the home of Reinhardt Hetze and his wife, María Gerlach, near Protestant Village, Entre Ríos. Deciding to evangelize the rural area of Crespo, Entre Ríos, George Riffel settled in a place later known as Jacobi Village. He formed there the first core of Adventist believers, many of them whom he himself baptized. In 1894 the General Conference sent the first pastor, Frank Henry Westphal (1858-1944), to help organize with Riffel the first church in South American Division territory, on September 9, 1894, with 36 members.⁶ F. H. Westphal regarded Riffel and Hetze as true apostles of Adventism in South America.⁷

Describing the beginnings of Adventism in the region of River Plate, Joseph W. Westphal wrote: "In three different ways, independent of each other, and almost at the same time, the truth came to Argentina and began its work among people of three different nationalities."⁸ F. H. Westphal said that on his arrival at Crespo the believers received him kindly, and he lodged at the home of George Riffel who was elected elder. Together with Reinhardt Hetze George was for many years a pillar of the congregation. Between 1895 and 1906 they probably met in a humble chapel. That first church grew quickly. It produced no less than 80 missionaries, including about 15 pastors. Dozens of descendants of those first families took the gospel to different parts of South America and the world.

David Riffel, son of George, married Juliana María Weiss (1880-1963).⁹ Born in Poland, as a child Juliana emigrated to Brazil with her parents, Valentín Weiss and Ana Carlota Hammer. From there they moved back to Argentina. She married David Riffel July 22, 1896. In the following 24 years they had 16 children (13 boys and 3 girls): Santiago (1897-1964), David (1898-1972), Daniel (1901-1972), María Luisa (1903-1963), Samuel (1904-1975), Enrique (1905-1994), Juan (1907-1987), Jonatán (1908-1996), Jorge (1910-1994), José (1911-2006), Andrés Hipólito (1912-1997), Benjamín (1914-1998), Rosita Elisa (1918-1994), Ana (1920-2001).¹⁰ All received Adventist educations, and they became farmers, merchants, nurses, a provincial deputy, a head of municipal government, a godson of the president of the republic and five as pastors (Juan, Jorge, José, Andrés and Benjamín).¹¹

George Riffel was devoted to the church, its organization, and its institutions. He was a member of the South American Union Conference board of directors, organized in 1906. The next year church leaders granted him a ministerial license. In 1908 Riffel became a member of the commission responsible for developing River Plate Sanitarium and subsequently joined its board of directors. Riffel made extensive trips by car throughout the province of Entre Ríos to conduct meetings while continuing to farm. When George Kimmel, from the church at Colonia Centenario, Entre Ríos, asked him why he had left the fertile lands of Kansas to return to South America, George replied, "I came because I knew you needed to know the truth." Kimmel added: "I became an Adventist thanks to him, and he was the one who baptized me along with my wife." In his opinion, Riffel was a great man, "for he loved souls and did his best for them to accept Christ."¹² George Riffel died in Aldea Jacobi, Entre Ríos,

Argentina, January 19, 1917.¹³

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NOTES

1. Daniel Oscar Plenc, *Misioneros en Sudamérica: Pioneros del Adventismo en Latinoamérica* [Missionaries in South America: Pioneers of Adventism in Latin America], 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: South America Spanish Publishing House, 2008), 14-24. Juan Riffel, "Diamantes para Dios" [Diamonds for God], in *Outward Bound* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1964), 241-246. Plenc, "Diamantes para Dios" [Diamonds for God], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], February 2016, 9. Plenc, "Diamantes para Dios (parte II) [Diamonds for God (part 2)]," *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], March 2016, 9. Sergio E. Becerra, "Geörg (George) Heinrich Riffel", in *Misioneros fundacionales del adventismo sudamericano* [Pioneer missionaries of South American Adventism], Daniel Oscar Plenc, Silvia Scholtus, Eugenio Di Dionisio, Sergio Becerra, 3rd ed. (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos: Editorial River Plate Adventist University, 2012), 11-21. Plenc, "Un espacio para la memoria" [A space for memory], *Misioneros fundacionales del adventismo sudamericano* [Pioneer missionaries of South American Adventism], 4-21. Plenc, "El todo y la nada: un espacio para la memoria" [Everything and nothing: a space for memory], *Enfoques* [Approaches], review of River Plate Adventist University, Spring 2011, 105-109. Héctor J. Peverini, *En las huellas de la providencia* [In the Footsteps of Providence] (Buenos Aires: South America Spanish Publishing House, 1988), 37-38. Robert G. Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina" [Centenary of the Adventist church in Argentina], *Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], September 1994. Wearner, "The Riffels: Planting Adventism in Argentina," *ARH*, September 13, 1984, 4-6. Joseph W. Westphal, "The Beginnings of the Work in Argentina," *ARH*, August 12, 1920. Frank H. Westphal, *Pionero en Sudamérica* [Pioneer in South America], Transl. Silvia Scholtus de Roscher (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos: White Center Research, 1997). This work is translation of F. H. Westphal, *Pioneering in the Neglected Continent* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association, 1927).
2. E. H. Meyers, *Reseña de los comienzos de la obra en Sudamérica* [Overview of the beginnings of the work in South America] (Buenos Aires: South America Spanish Publishing House, 1940), 7.
3. About David Riffel, see: Plenc, *25 Historias de misioneros* [25 Stories of Missionaries] (Buenos Aires: South America Spanish Publishing House, 2013), 34-39.
4. R. Conradi, "Kansas: Leehigh and Hillsboro, May 14," *ARH*, May 27, 1884, 13; J. W. Bagby, "Work among the Germans in Kansas," *ARH*, April 10, 1888, 13; H. Shultz, "The Work Among the Germans," *ARH*, March 25, 1890, 12.
5. Reinhardt Hetze, "Cómo empezó la obra en Entre Ríos" [How the work began in Entre Ríos], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], January 1933, 16.
6. "Foreign Mission Board Appointments," *ARH*, June 12, 1894, 11; "South America," *ARH*, July 10, 1894, 5. Peverini, 56.
7. F. H. Westphal, *Pionero en Sudamérica* [Pioneer in South America], Transl. Silvia Scholtus de Roscher (Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos: White Center Research, 1997), vii.
8. E. H. Meyers, *Reseña de los comienzos de la obra en Sudamérica* [Overview of the beginnings of the work in South America] (Buenos Aires: South America Spanish Publishing House, 1940), 7.

9. Godofredo Block, "Necrología" [Obituary], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], September 1963, 20.
 10. Two children died in their childhood (Daniel in 1901 and Alejandro in 1916).
 11. Juan was a director of department in Austral Union Conference and South American Division. Daniel became a provincial deputy. George was pastor in Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina. José was pastor in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. Andrés worked as a pastor in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Cuba, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and the United States, and served in educational institutions, as a department director and in management in the South American Division and the Inter-American Division. Benjamín was director of publishing and other departments in the Austral Union Conference (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) and in Peru, and marketing director at Pacific Press in California, United States. On the family history of Riffel, see the document: "Descendientes de Juliana María Weiss y David Riffel" [Descendants of Juliana María Weiss and David Riffel], in the White Research Center, River Plate Adventist University, Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, DF 3023-e.
 12. See: Benjamín Riffel, *Providencias de Dios en métodos de superación que mejoran la personalidad* [God's Providences in methods that improve personality], (Coral Gables, Florida: South America Spanish Publishing House, 1983), 195, 196.
 13. Carlos Becker, "Necrología: Riffel" [Obituary: Riffel], *La Revista Adventista* [Adventist Review], June 21, 1937, 15.
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