

# Scharffenberg, Mimi (1883–1919)

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Mimi Scharffenberg was a Bible instructor, translator, editor, and pioneer missionary, the first single female Adventist missionary to Korea.

## Early Life and Conversion

Mimi Scharffenberg was born into a Lutheran family in Missouri, U.S.A., on November 7, 1883.<sup>1</sup> She was the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. At the age of 14, she was confirmed in the Lutheran Church.

Around 1900, young Mimi Scharffenberg joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church before her 18th birthday<sup>2</sup> when two ministers “opened a series of Bible lectures close to her home in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Mimi and her mother attended the meetings, and within three months they were baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”<sup>3</sup>

After spending some time at Battle Creek College in Michigan, Scharffenberg began working as a colporteur in her home city.<sup>4</sup> Then, she worked as a Bible instructor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for four years.<sup>5</sup> During this time, she was engaged to a non-Adventist man and planned to be married. However, the wedding did not take place since the man was not an Adventist.<sup>6</sup>

## Pioneer Missionary in Korea

Around the end of 1906, Scharffenberg received an invitation from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to serve as a missionary in Korea. On December 5 of that year, she sailed there together with W. W. Prescott, who was on his way to East Asia, and a missionary nurse (Ms. Harriman) going to Japan.<sup>7</sup> According to Scharffenberg, the call to Korea was providential. “A few nights before the call came, she had an impressive dream. She saw many strange-looking women calling to her and beckoning her to come to them. Their earnest faces showed their anxiety for her to come. The call to Korea a few days later led her to most earnest prayer, and then she saw the connection between the dream and the call.”<sup>8</sup>

When Ms. Scharffenberg arrived at Sunan, Korea, she shared the home of William R. Smith and his family. Later, she bought a Korean compound containing two houses. One of those was used as a dormitory for the boys’ school<sup>9</sup> she organized and opened together with William R. Smith.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Ms. Scharffenberg began a worker’s training course for Korean believers.<sup>11</sup> In 1909, Scharffenberg supervised the opening of a girls’ school in Chinnampo.<sup>12</sup>

In September that same year, Scharffenberg and C. L. Butterfield moved to Seoul to commence mission work there. Before moving, she sold her compound to the mission in Sunan. In Seoul, Scharffenberg began serving as the superintendent of their Sabbath School. In addition, she performed publishing work.<sup>13</sup>



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

Scharffenberg also learned the Korean language. Through her, “Books on Daniel and the Revelation and a small book of Bible readings were published. Her last work consisted of translating Ellen G. White’s *Patriarchs and Prophets*”<sup>14</sup> and “The Story of Ancient Times.”<sup>15</sup> Aside from translating Adventist literature into Korean, she served as editor for *Si Jo/ Seijo Walbo* (Korean *Signs of the Times*) from 1909 to 1912 and from 1916 to 1918, *Kyohoi Chinam/Kyo Hae Chin-Nam* (*Church Compass*) from 1916 to 1918.<sup>16</sup>

Due to her knowledge of Korean, she became the interpreter for General Conference officials when they visited. She also focused on training and educating women by organizing Bible Institutes for women in the local Korean language, and she came to be known as Lady So.<sup>17</sup>

In 1917, Mimi Scharffenberg became ill.<sup>18</sup> The next year, she left Korea for the United States to seek medical assistance. However, at the age of 35, on December 19, 1919, she died<sup>19</sup> and was buried at the Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D. C.<sup>20</sup>

## Contribution

In spite of her tragic and early death, Mimi Scharffenberg left a formidable legacy. She was the first single woman missionary to Korea. Her life and 12 years of missionary efforts became an example for other Adventist women. She also played a key role in establishing Adventism in its earliest years in Korea. Her translation and editorial work helped spread the Adventist message in the Korean language and reached Koreans in their own context. Scharffenberg’s passion for women emancipation led her to focus on the training of Korean women.

Her missionary courage and zeal are revealed in a report written by her sister, Theodora Wangerin: “Although quite ill when returning to America, she found a woman on board ship who was interested in the Bible. As a result of the studies she gave this chance acquaintance, this woman accepted the Advent message and later became a Bible instructor herself.”<sup>21</sup>

## Memory Statements

“In those times few missionaries had been sent overseas. There was no provision made for an ‘outfitting allowance’; no homes had been built for them in their new location; no definite plans had been laid for language study; nor had furlough policies been established. And there were no experienced missionaries to befriend the new recruit upon her arrival in a strange land. Today the General Conference would hesitate to send a young girl of only twenty-three to an outpost mission station. And who can know the hours of loneliness, the difficulties of language study and of becoming acclimated to the strange surroundings that Mimi experienced?”<sup>22</sup>

“Sister Scharffenberg has done much for the work in Chosen, and in her death we have lost a loyal and unselfish worker, and the Korean people have lost a kind friend and helper. The news of her death brought sadness to our midst, but with that sadness was a determination, to press forward and quickly finish the work she so dearly loved.”<sup>23</sup>

## SOURCES

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## NOTES

- See C. L. Butterfield, "The Death of Sister Scharffenberg," *Asiatic Division Outlook*, March 1-15, 1920, 11.?
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised edition (1996), s.v. "Scharffenberg, Mimi."?
  3. Theodora Wangerin, "Loyalty in Action," *The Youth Instructor*, June 15, 1948, 9.?
  4. *Ibid.*?
  5. *Ibid.*; Butterfield, "The Death of Sister Scharffenberg," 11; "Wisconsin Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1904), 36.?
  6. Wangerin, "Loyalty in Action," 9.?
  7. *Ibid.* See also the report by Prescott in "Jottings from the Editor's Note-Book on a Trip Around the World," *ARH*, March 14, 1907, 3-4.?
  8. William A. Spicer, "As in Apostolic Times," *ARH*, March 21, 1946, 4.?
  9. Wangerin, "Loyalty in Action," 9.?
  10. See "Korea," in *Historical Dictionary of Seventh-day Adventists*, ed. Gary Land (Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 163.?
  11. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Korea."?
  12. She actually used the money from her former property to make a table on which she prepared publication material. See *Ibid.*?
  13. Wangerin, "Loyalty in Action," 9.?
  14. *Ibid.*, 10.?
  15. Butterfield, "The Death of Sister Scharffenberg," 11.?
  16. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Si Jo"; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Church Compass."?
  17. Wangerin, "Loyalty in Action," 10; See also her plea for women teachers in Mimi Scharffenberg, "Itinerating Among the Women of Korea," *Asiatic Division Mission News* (February 1, 1915): 4; C. L. Butterfield, "Experiences in Korea," *The General Conference Bulletin* (May 26, 1913): 138-139.?
  18. No records have been specific of what kind of disease it was. Her sister mentioned that Ms. Schaffenberg suffered from "Oriental sprue and amoebic dysentery." See Theodora Wangerin, "Forty Years to Korea," *Youth Instructor*, September 7, 1965, 9.?
  19. Butterfield, "The Death of Sister Scharffenberg," 11.?
  20. *Ibid.*, 22.?
  21. *Ibid.*?
  22. *Ibid.*, 9.?
  23. C. L. Butterfield, "The Work in Chosen," *Asiatic Division Outlook*, February 1-15, 1920, 1-2.?