

# Nelson, Peter Gustav (1893–1952)

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## SVEN HAGEN JENSEN

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.

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Peter Gustav Nelson worked in many capacities in the church in Denmark and Norway, where he had a keen interest in education and youth. He is especially remembered for his 12 years as president of the West Nordic Union Conference, when he led the church through the difficult years of World War II.

## Early Life

Peter Gustav Nelson was born in Kristiania (Oslo), Norway on August 27, 1893,<sup>1</sup> to Nils Peder and Karoline Nelsen.<sup>2</sup> His father was an Adventist minister, and Peter Gustav went with him, from the age of eight, to his evangelistic meetings, helping with small jobs such as handing out hymnbooks,<sup>3</sup> distributing hand bills, and standing watch at the meeting tent in the summer.<sup>4</sup> He also assisted with song and music, together with his two younger siblings Lina and Milo.<sup>5</sup> At times he jumped out of bed in the middle of the night to go with his father down to the coast and sail with him to small towns, where the meetings would be held, to return again after the close of the meetings. In between, he often did his homework for the school in the home.<sup>6</sup> Nelson was 12 years old when he was baptized by his father, in November 1905.<sup>7</sup> In 1907 he received his first canvassing license, and started selling religious books and magazines to save money to attend the mission school in Skodsborg, Denmark.<sup>8</sup> He completed his course at the mission school in 1910, did his middle school examination in 1913, and was employed as a Bible worker the



Peter Gustav Nelson.

Photo courtesy of the Historic Archive of Seventh-day Adventists (HASDA).

same year.<sup>9</sup>

## Working for the Church

From 1914 to 1915 Nelson held his first evangelistic meeting series, in Stange, near Hamar, Norway.<sup>10</sup> He was called to teach at the mission school in Skodsborg in 1915, then worked as chaplain at the Skodsborg Sanitorium 1919-1920.<sup>11</sup> In 1920 he was sent to the United States to further his studies. He went attended Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Then followed a year at Hutchinson Theological Seminary, Minnesota, where he also worked as a teacher while studying.<sup>12</sup> In the United States he married Anna Skands from Denmark.<sup>13</sup> After completing his studies, the Nelsons returned to the Denmark Conference, where he worked as a teacher at the mission school, now in Nærum, from 1922 to 1923. This was followed by preaching for two years in Vendsyssel, in the northern part of the country, where he conducted evangelistic meetings in Frederikshavn and Hjørring.

In 1925 Nelson was ordained as a minister, and was called back to become a Bible teacher at Nærum Mission School from 1925 to 1928.<sup>14</sup> While there he conducted evangelistic meetings at Amager (part of Copenhagen) in the winter of 1926-1927. He also edited the youth paper *Ungdomsfaklen* (The Youth Torch).<sup>15</sup> Nelson served for a short term as a departmental director (Home Mission, Sabbath School, Education, and Youth) for the Scandinavian Union Conference,<sup>16</sup> before he was called, on March 1, 1929, to become the editor for the church papers for Denmark and Norway at the Norwegian Publishing House.<sup>17 18</sup>

In 1936 Nelson was called back to the Scandinavian Union Conference in Oslo, Norway, to be a departmental director (Home Missionary, Sabbath School, and Youth). A year later he was given a new assignment again, and started his career as a church administrator as president of the West Denmark Conference (1937-1939). After two years he was called, at age 46, to the heavy responsibility of president of the West Nordic Union Conference (1939-1951), just as World War II was beginning.<sup>19</sup> It was around this time he also changed his name from Nelsen to Nelson.<sup>20</sup>

## World War II

With the restrictions caused by the German occupation it was no longer possible for the West Nordic Union administration to keep the regular connection between Norway and Denmark. At the beginning of 1941 it was decided to move the union president, P.G. Nelson, and his union treasurer, A.C. Christensen, to Denmark, where they set up office at Skodsborg Sanatorium. The rest of the union workers remained in Oslo, and T. Tobiassen was appointed vice president for the Norwegian part of the Union. As circumstances allowed the two parts of the union committee tried to maintain as close a cooperation as possible.<sup>21</sup>

The war was especially hard on the church in central and northern Norway, where the bombings were heavy, four church buildings were destroyed and two damaged, and many of the members lost all their belongings.<sup>22</sup> Dr. A. Andersen, medical director of Skodsborg Sanitorium, noted that Pastor Nelson was the moving spirit in arranging for food shipments from Denmark to Norway during the hardest years of the occupation:<sup>23</sup> “We think it was the guidance of providence that led Brother Nelson to Denmark, because when the problems of food supply became difficult in Norway, Brother Nelson succeeded, thanks to his acquaintance with Admiral Hammerich and his wife, who stayed at Skodsborg Sanitorium, by their help to arrange for a food transportation to our sisters and brothers in Norway. It was not easy. It was not just a matter of buying the food and sending it. No, the difficulties lay in the fact that the provisions were for a specific group of people. But by the help of God and Brother Nelson’s excellent negotiations skills, the case was fixed and the church in Norway was allowed to distribute the food to its members.”<sup>24</sup> During his time as president, Nelson also carried the department of religious liberty, which he used to defend the rights and privileges of the church and its members.<sup>25</sup>

## Reorganization After the War

After the war ended the union needed to be reorganized. Nelson had the great task of gathering together and reconstructing that which had been broken up. It was a work that required patience, understanding, love, and Christian faith, and Nelson was blessed with these qualities. “He was respected by his brethren for his sincerity, his desire to do the will of God, and his sympathetic appreciation of the opinions of others. He never sought to dictate, but to lead.”<sup>26</sup>

## Final Service

In 1951 he was called to be the principal of Onsrud Mission School in Norway.<sup>27</sup> As he was settling into his new assignment and winning the affection and respect of the teachers and students, his life came to an unexpected end on March 4, 1952. He was loved, and his death made a deep and overwhelming impression on the school family, who felt the heavy loss of their beloved principal.<sup>28</sup>

## Legacy

With his death the work in Denmark and Norway “suffered a loss of a loving, godly, faithful leader who did much to press forward the work to which he devoted his entire life.”<sup>29</sup> A close friend and colleague wrote of him, “Pastor Nelson’s life and dealings pose a worthy role model for our youth to follow, yes, even for the elderly. His undivided observance of all sides of the light of truth, his faithfulness to the principles of heaven, his natural straightforwardness, his firmness of character, his freedom from unholy ambition, his consideration of others, at the same time he never hid his opinion when it came to principles, his ability to express his opinions in a dignified and appealing manner, his responsive ears to the worries of others and his willingness to possibly

come to their aid – everything in a natural and modest way: What a valuable and powerful clue does this not constitute for young aspiring people! What goal for them to pursue in a time, when other qualities seem to take over more and more!”<sup>30</sup>

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## SOURCES

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## NOTES

1. Karl Abrahamsen, “P.G. Nelson in memoriam,” *Missionsefterretninger*, April 4, 1952, 1.
2. Census 1900 for 0727 Hedrum Herred, Norway. <http://digitalarkivet.arkiverket.no/ft/person/pf01037151000722>. Peter Gustav was also registered with name ‘Nelsen’ like his parents and siblings, and carried it until he changed it to ‘Nelson’ in 1940.
3. “P.G. Nelson, Fra leg til alvor” (P.G. Nelson, From Play to Seriousness), *Advent Ungdom*, January 1946, 5.
4. “P.G. Nelsen,” Notes I, kept in the archives of HASDA, Denmark, 1992/105.
5. Erik Arnesen, “Mindeord om pastor P.G. Nelson,” (Commemorative Words about P.G. Nelson) *Missionsefterretninger*, April 4, 1952, 2.
6. “P.G. Nelson, Fra leg til alvor,” 5.

7. "Peter Gustav Nelsen," Notes II, kept in the archives HASDA, Denmark.
8. "P.G. Nelson, Fra leg til alvor," 5.
9. "Peter Gustav Nelsen," Notes II.
10. "Nelson, Peter Gustav (Obituary)," *ARH*, June 26, 1952, 22.
11. "Peter Gustav Nelsen," Notes II.
12. "P.G. Nelsen," Notes I.
13. "Nelson, Peter Gustav (Obituary)."
14. "P.G. Nelsen," Notes I.
15. "Peter Gustav Nelsen," Notes II.
16. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, 1929, 137.
17. "P.G. Nelsen," Notes I, and "In Memoriam."
18. The editor Erik Arnesen became sick, and what from the beginning looked like a short substitute job, turned out to extend for several years. "P.G. Nelson, Fra leg til alvor," 6.
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbooks*, 1938-1952.
20. The name Nelsen is replaced by Nelson from 1940 onward in the church papers and the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks*, both in the organizational section as well as in the Directory of Workers. No reasons given.
21. P.G. Nelson, "Den Vestnordiske Union" (The West Nordic Union), *Missionsefterretninger*, May 1941, 2-3.
22. "Rapport over Den Vestnordiske Unionskonferens' Generalforsamling paa Onsrud Missionsskole 1.-15. August 1946" (Report from the West Nordic Union Session August 1946), *Missionsefterretninger*, Konferensforhandling, Ekstranummer, December 1946, 2.
23. "Nelson, Peter Gustav (Obituary)."
24. Dr. A. Andersen, "In Memoriam," *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1952, 24.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks*, 1940-1949.

26. "Nelson, Peter Gustav (Obituary)."

27. Karl Abrahamsen, 1.

28. Erik Arnesen, "Mindeord om pastor P.G. Nelson" (Commemorative Words about P.G. Nelson), *Missionsefterretninger*, April 4, 1952, 3.

29. E.D. Dick, "Loss of a Faithful Leader in Northern Europe," *ARH*, March 20, 1952, 24.

30. Erik Arnesen, 3.

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