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Ehlers, Johannes (born c.1873)

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Johannes Ehlers was one of the two first pioneer Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in Tanzania (the then German East Africa).

Early Life and Marriage

Johannes (Johann)¹ Ehlers was born around 1873-1876 in Germany.² Ehlers was a successful gardener in Germany. He spent one year in mission training at the Adventist Mission School in Friedensau.³ In 1902, Ehlers was married to Rosa.⁴

Pioneer Mission Work

On July 9-19, 1903, when the first German Camp Meeting of the German Union Conference was held in Friedensau, a decision was made to enter German East Africa as a mission field. Ehlers was appointed pioneer missionary for this purpose. Ehlers, who was about thirty years of age at that time, was ordained as a church elder for this purpose.⁵ Ehlers was joined by Abraham C. Enns. They formed a team and were instructed to act as scouts to “spy out the land and ascertain the missionary openings it offers.”⁶

On October 22, 1903, Ehlers and Enns, a trained nurse, boarded a steambound for East Africa, arriving at Dar-es-Salaam, south of Zanzibar island, on November 12, 1903.⁷ Ehlers had left his wife, Rosa, behind while Enns left his fiancée.⁸ On arrival, the Governor of Tanganyika received and invited Ehlers and Enns for an evening dinner. After the meal they discussed their mission with the Governor.⁹ After several discussions with the Governor,¹⁰ the missionaries started their mission in northwestern Tanganyika (North Pare located in Same-Kilimanjaro).¹¹ The governor also gave them a letter of introduction to all the military stations authorizing that the missionaries be “granted whatever assistance they might need, either by way of counsel in selecting a station, or with guides and carriers, or with soldiers to protect them in case of necessity.”¹²

By the end of the month a mission site had been secured among the people in the Pare Mountains. Buildings were erected, and the mission station received the name Friedenstal (vale of peace).¹³

Between February and March 1904, Rosa Ehlers, who was determined to join her husband to further the missionary work, travelled in the company of four other missionaries: Ludwig R. Conradi, Christoph Wunderlich, August Langhof and his wife Frieda Breitling from Hamburg, Germany to Tanganyika. Conradi, then leader of the Adventists in Europe, wanted to see things for himself.¹⁴ Conradi’s visit must have facilitated the plans towards the building of a school¹⁵ and the purchase of two donkeys to support the missionaries and enhance movements within the Pare community.¹⁶

In Tanganyika, the Ehlers family was blessed with two children.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Ehlers himself had learned the Kishambaa and Kipare languages to aid him to reach the Pare people. He engaged in public lectures, literature evangelism and home Bible studies to spread the gospel.¹⁸ In February 1906, Ehlers took ill in the mission field. Later that year, the Ehlers family returned to Germany on account of Johannes’ ill health.¹⁹ They settled at Ellerau near Hamburg, where Rosa, his wife took care of him. However, before their return, it seemed that Rosa had contracted malaria. After a cold, Rosa Ehlers became ill with malaria. She died on February 13, 1907,²⁰ leaving behind her weak husband and two little children.²¹

Not much is found on Ehlers after his wife died. While the documentary record appears to be silent about Ehlers’ overall fate, he could have perished during World War I, died of influenza, or emigrated to another country.

Contribution

The legacy of Johannes Ehlers is closely tied to the entrance of Seventh-day Adventism into the then German East Africa. Ehlers’ efforts as pioneer missionary was instrumental in laying the foundation that catalyzed the growth of the SDA Church in a country which boasts hundreds of thousands of Adventist believers – today’s Tanzania.

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NOTES

1. In the German sources, Ehlers is mostly called "Johann", so it is likely that this was his real name. However, English sources carry "Johannes", which is why this name has been used in this article.?
2. Because of lack of records, it is difficult to say with certainty when Ehlers was born. In 1904, Conradi reported that when Ehlers was commissioned as a missionary in 1903, he was about thirty years of age. See Ludwig R. Conradi, "A New and Needy Field," *ARH*, January 14, 1904, 14.?
3. Ibid.?
4. Ludwig R. Conradi, "Faithful Laborers at Rest," *ARH*, April 4, 1907, 20.?
5. Conradi, "A New and Needy Field," *ARH*, January 14, 1904, 14.?
6. See Guy Dail, "The German Union Conference," *ARH*, October 22, 1903, 15.?
7. See M. Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (Takoma Park, Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1926, second edition), 511.?
8. Geoffrey Mbwana, "Like a Mustard Seed: Adventism in the East-Central Africa," *Adventist World*, April 2014, 24-25.?
9. Kangalu Elineema, phone interview by author on March 18, 2020.?
10. For a detailed discussion on this, see Stefan Höschele, *Christian Remnant – African Folk Church: Seventh-Day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980*, Studies in Christian Mission 34 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007), 52ff.?
11. Mbwana, "Like a Mustard Seed: Adventism in the East-Central Africa," 25.?
12. L. Flora Plummer, "Our Field—The World: Africa—XI," *The Youth Instructor*, July 30, 1907, 4.?
13. Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists*, 511.?
14. See Höschele, *Christian Remnant*, 54.?
15. Plummer, "Our Field—The World: Africa—XI," 4.?
16. Kangalu Elineema, *Historia ya Waadventista Wasabato Nchini Tanzania 1903-1914* (Dar es Salaam: by the author, 1993), 10.?
17. William A. Spicer, "Their Work Closed," *ARH*, March 14, 1907, 5. The report mistakenly calls the language "Ri-Chambaa." The Shambaa (or Shambala) were the immediate neighbors of the Pare people.?
18. See a report based on Ehlers' letter by J. J. Nethery, "The Spirit of God at Work," *ARH*, January 10, 1907, 19.?
19. See April 27, 1912?
20. Conradi, "Faithful Laborers at Rest," 20; Elineema, *Historia ya Waadventista Wasabato Nchini Tanzania*, 10, 14.?
21. Spicer, "Their Work Closed," 5.?