

# Pifer, Robert Daniel (1935–2009)

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## YONA BALYAGE

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Robert Daniel Pifer was the third overseas missionary to serve as director of Rwenzori Mission Station, at Mitandi. His wife, Gerd, was a nurse and teacher at Mitandi Dispensary. They served the mission station under a very hostile social and political climate.

The Pifers annually invited families from the community with their children to celebrate his birthday. They hid, fed, and evacuated the mission workers from the enemy mob that wanted to kill them. He moved with them until he was sure they were safe. Robert Pifer served as a pastor, director, treasurer, president, reliable friend, diplomat, self-sacrificing and excellent planner. When he served as secretary/treasurer of the Uganda Field in Kampala, he raised money to assist pastors to buy motorcycles that sped up the spread of the gospel all over Uganda.

## Early Life

Robert Daniel Pifer was born to Earl Harrison Pifer and Dorothea Virginia Luckenbaugh in Pennsylvania, U.S.A., on April 13, 1935. He was the third child in a family of four. He had two brothers and one sister (Darlene Dorothy who was born in 1939). His father, Earl Harrison Pifer, was a construction tradesman and his mother, Dorothy Pifer, was a housewife. Robert spent his early childhood with his family in Upper Cumberland, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.



Robert Pifer, 1957.

Photo courtesy of Gerd Pifer.

## School, Ministerial Training, and Marriage

Robert Pifer received his primary and secondary school education in Pennsylvania. He graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in religion in 1957 from Columbia Union College, Maryland, U.S.A., and a master of arts in theology from Potomac University (later called Andrews University Seminary) in 1959.<sup>1</sup> He earned his school fees through canvassing.

Robert Pifer married Gerd Lind, daughter of Pastor Magdalon and Kezia Lind on December 23, 1956. Gerd was a registered nurse who obtained a bachelor of science degree in nursing in 1959 from Columbia Union College. The family was blessed with five children, four girls and one boy, namely: Linda Gerd, Randi Marie, Lisa, Shirley Keth, and Robert Leif.

## Ministry

Robert and Gerd Pifer started serving the Seventh-day Adventist Church at Ntusu Mission Station, Tanzania, where he was the director.<sup>2</sup> Some months later they were transferred to Ikizu Teacher Training School in 1960-1961 as teachers.<sup>3</sup>

From 1961<sup>4</sup> to 1965<sup>5</sup> Robert served as director of Rwenzori Mission Station at Mitandi, Uganda, near Fort Portal in Kabarole district (now Bunyangabu district). His wife Gerd served as a nurse at the same station. This was the mission and dispensary which Gerd's parents had established. Besides serving as director of the Rwenzori Mission Station, which covered the whole of western and northern Uganda from the Uganda-Rwanda border to the current Uganda-South Sudan border, he also served as pastor of the same. He personally maintained the mission station compound and fixed the water and electrical systems.<sup>6</sup> He did not hire a person to do the maintenance work, but did it himself. He wrote booklets on church doctrines and supplied them to church members.<sup>7</sup>

## Miraculous Escape from Mitandi

According to Gerd Pifer<sup>8</sup> and Mrs. Yuniya K. Mukirania,<sup>9</sup> the family left Rwenzori Mission Station at Mitandi on the evening of 64.<sup>10</sup> At that time, the Bakonzo and Batoro were fighting each other against social and political inequality and dominance. The war was commonly known as the Rwenzururu<sup>11</sup> Movement, which was ignited by the injustices the Bakonzo had suffered under the Toro Kingdom. This situation is well elaborated by Alneas who described it thus: "Tooro rule *had*<sup>12</sup> brought much suffering for the BaKonzo. The BaTooro officials treated their subjects with disdain, arrogance and direct cruelty. Already in the decade of Tooro overrule, Tooro chiefs exacted tribute and forced labor from the BaKonzo and BaAmba. Moreover, large tracts of land were declared the possession of the Tooro King, and Tooro chiefs who were placed in positions of power in the areas and used force to obtain the land from Konzo citizens."<sup>13</sup> All of this, according to Ssembeguya and others, resulted in the

Toro Kingdom referring to the Bakonzo and Bamba people as “apes, baboons, gorillas, insects, dogs, flies and pigs.”<sup>14</sup>

The war had started after failed negotiations with Toro Kingdom leadership and the outgoing colonial government in early 1962. It continued with the newly elected government of independent Uganda after October 9, 1962. It came to a climax between April and July 1964.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the beginning of 1964 was the climax of the Bakonzo and Bamba intolerance to injustice. During the months of March and April 1964, they put pressure on the infant Uganda government and the aged Toro Kingdom for equal treatment. In a quagmire, instead of solving the problem amicably, the central government supported the Toro Kingdom in hunting, torturing, and killing the Bakonzo until the national government cabinet “...minister of Animals, Game and Fisheries, Mr. J. K. Babiha, warned that the Bamba and Bakonzo faced extinction within 10 years...and there will be nothing but to declare the areas a national park.”<sup>16</sup>

Early in the second week of June 1964, a band of Batoro with spears came and surrounded the Pifer family at their Mitandi residence and threatened to kill them if they did not leave the mission within four days and stop “helping the Bakonzo” (with their store of flour, provisions, etc. for the poor Bakonzo who needed it<sup>17</sup>). Pastor Pifer’s family had helped many Bakonzo to escape the war across the mountains to Bundibugyo.<sup>18</sup> This time they were hiding three Bakonzo families in three different houses in the compound.<sup>19</sup> These families were those of Yowasi K. Mukirania, the headmaster of Mitandi Junior Secondary; Ibrahim Balihabuka, a church member; and Yowasi Isingoma-Nguru Obote from Bunyangabu village, who was working on the compound with Pastor Pifer. It looked like the information had leaked to the Toro Kingdom intelligence network that the Pifers were hiding and feeding people.<sup>20</sup>

As agreed, on the fourth day, which fell on June 11, 1964, Pastor Pifer chartered heavy commercial vehicles owned by a Ugandan-Asian businessman by the name of Mr. Bhimji under the network of Pastor Stanley Kyambadde, a Muganda man serving as the pastor of Kihembo Adventist Church in the suburbs of Fort Portal town. Pastor Kyambadde networked with Felix Rwambarali Akiki, the secretary-general of Toro District Administration. The vehicles first loaded Pastor Pifer’s belongings beginning at 5:00 p.m., after which they loaded those of Mr. Mukirania, and those of Mr. Balihabuka and Mr. Insingoma-Nguru Obote’s families. At around 9:00 p.m., 20 minutes after leaving Mitandi campus on muddy and slippery roads, the convoy of trucks met and began passing by the mobs of organized warriors who were headed to Mitandi to carry out the executions. Fortunately, the mob, fully armed with *pangas* (machetes), knives, arrows, and spears, and singing war songs, did not know that the people inside the trucks were Bakonzo being taken to places where they would be safe from the BaToro.

The vigilantes did not detect that the people in the trucks were Bakonzo because the drivers were half Indian, Banyoro and Baganda, with cover letters written and sealed by Pastor Pifer indicating that these were mission workers on transfer.<sup>21</sup> Pastor Robert Pifer’s truck drove behind all of them (so that he could watch over what was

happening). Gerd Pifer and their three children rode in a private car which she drove.

Pastor Pifer had made arrangements with Mr. Rwambarali so that as they arrived in Fort Portal town, Mr. Balihabuka's and Mr. Isingoma-Nguru Obote's families could be escorted by central government armed police men to Kahunge refugee camp. The Mukirania family with three children (Emmanuel Mberemu, Zipporah Muhindo, and Dinah Biira) proceeded at night without any human protection to Ikoba Adventist Church near Masindi, in Bunyoro Kingdom, under the guidance of Isaac Lubega, a Munyoro man who was working in the office of Pastor Pifer at Mitandi. The Mukirania family arrived at Ikoba at 6:30 a.m. on June 12, 1964. The Pifer family moved to a government owned house in Fort Portal, under the orders of Mr. Rwambarali, where they stayed for one year until their furlough to Norway and the United States in 1965.<sup>22</sup>

When the Pifer family returned from furlough in 1966, they were called to the Uganda Field headquarters at Kireka where Robert Pifer served as secretary/treasurer<sup>23</sup> and Gerd as a nurse. Pastor Thorkild Pedersen from Denmark had replaced them as director of the Rwenzori Mission Station in August 1964 and was stationed at Nyakasura High School. With the evacuation, Mitandi ceased to serve as the headquarters of the Rwenzori Mission Station.<sup>24</sup> Yowasi Mukirania served as a pastor for almost two years before he was sent to Bugema Missionary College for ministerial training.

## Worldwide Ministry

From 1966 to 1971, Pastor Pifer served as secretary/treasurer of Uganda Field where Pastor D. K. Bazarra served as the president.<sup>25</sup> Gerd Pifer served as a nurse at Kireka Mission dispensary. This field covered the entire Republic of Uganda. In 1970, Pastor R. D. Pifer was president<sup>26</sup> of Uganda Field before he left for the Middle East. At this time the East African Union was an attached territory to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>27</sup>

From 1971 to 1974, Pastor Pifer served as president of the East Mediterranean Field<sup>28</sup> of Seventh-day Adventists, with headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon, while Gerd served as a nurse at the mission headquarters.

From 1974 to 1981, Pastor Pifer worked as stewardship secretary for the Pennsylvania Conference.

From December 1981 to August 1990, Pastor Pifer served as the head of the Adventist Christian Record Braille Foundation in Clearbrook, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. Beginning in September 1990, he served as a pastor of the Coquitlam and North Shore Adventist Churches in British Columbia, Canada. He retired in 2001 and died on August 16, 2009, in Surrey, at the age of 74. He was buried in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.

## Legacy

The exemplary life of faith in action as demonstrated by Pastor Robert and Gerd Pifer, which classify them as Good Samaritans, is vividly remembered by Seventh-day Adventist church members on Mount Rwenzori. Their

actions are expressed in the way they lived and served the community as friends, medical workers, pastors, and diplomats.

#### Teacher and Nurse

Gerd Pifer, the wife of Robert Pifer, whose nickname was *Musoki* (meaning the first-born girl), served as an exemplary nurse at Mitandi Dispensary in a hostile environment. Beginning in January 1962, she had a lot of cases that were a result of the civil war between the two tribes under which she served. She sometimes had to be driven by her husband at night for more than 20 kilometers to take war victims to a hospital with better facilities. Before the war, she attended to diseases of all types, both day and night, from several communities. People had a lot of confidence in her as the best medical person because she treated them with love and kindness.<sup>29</sup> The medicine she gave to patients served well.<sup>30</sup> Besides treating the sick, she took time to teach patients on a daily basis on ways to take care of themselves and their families. She took time to induct Anne Mette Pedersen, who replaced her, into the new environment and culture in which she was to serve.

#### Enthusiastic Preacher of the Gospel

Pastor Pifer was a dynamic and enthusiastic preacher of the gospel. His sermons centered around the Ten Commandments and how they relate to salvation and Christian living. Besides his usual sermons, he wrote and supplied booklets on church doctrines to church members and the community wherever he went to preach.

#### Model for Hard Work

Pastor Peifer served as a model for hard work to the young people who lived and studied at Mitandi Junior Secondary School. He personally worked hard to maintain a big campus besides his role as mission director.<sup>31</sup> He appealed to young people to work hard in order to face the challenges of life. He took time to play soccer with the students and faculty once a fortnight. It was during his time that several young people around the Mitandi and Bunyangabu areas joined the church, because he was “down to earth” and met them on their ground.

#### Providing Means of Transport for Pastors

When Pastor Pifer became the secretary/treasurer of the Uganda field, he solicited money to assist pastors throughout the field in buying motorcycles. Those on lower parts of Mount Rwenzori who benefited from this initiative were Pastor Charles Sibanza Murwahali, Erick Mbusa, Benezere Thembo Bageni, and Yowasi Kalani Mukirania. This development empowered them to pay more frequent visits to church members and Sabbath School branches under their jurisdiction. The Sabbath School branches and church companies were many and far apart. It was therefore quite tiresome and stressful for the pastor to walk around or use a bicycle.

#### Generosity

The Pifers' were highly generous and friendly. On an annual basis they invited families around the mission headquarters and their children to celebrate their birthdays with them. They served a lot of food, juices of different types, and birthday cake, which the community had never eaten before. Besides inviting them for birthday parties, they also supplied food to the needy and poor in the community. Their store was always full of food stuff meant for the poor throughout the year. They had a mechanism to identify families who needed food and assisted them regardless of their creed, language, or background.

#### Exceptional Faith, Courage, and Self-Sacrifice

During the Rwenzururu War of 1964, Robert and Gerd Pifer exhibited exceptional faith, courage, and self-sacrifice by hiding, feeding, and protecting three families from those who wanted to kill them. They risked their own lives and the lives of their young children, driving in the same convoy at night, behind everyone else, past the warring groups who were seeking to kill them. This was exceptional and unheard of. We thank God for the protection He provided in performing a miracle of faith to save the families of Yowasi Mukirania, Ibrahim Bahabuka, Yowasi Isingoma-Nguru Obote, and the Pifers too. Yowasi Mukirania later became a pastor and field president. His daughter served as business manager and lecturer at Bugema College, now university. Other children have served as teachers in the ministries of education and health of the Republic of Uganda and as elders in the church.

It is no wonder that Robert Daniel Pifer and Gerd Pifer are best described as Good Samaritans. Church members on the Rwenzori Mountains, who are now scattered all over Uganda and the world at large, serving the church in public and private sectors, are eagerly waiting for the day they will be reunited on the resurrection morning.

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#### SOURCES

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Stanley, Henry M. *In Darkest Africa. vol. II*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, Copyright, 1890.

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#### NOTES

1. Family file, ancestry, May 5, 2020.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1960), 176.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1961), 246.
4. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), 183.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1963), 203.
6. Family file, ancestry, May 5, 2020.
7. Ibid.
8. Leif Lind, brother of Gerd Pifer, interview with the author June 1, 2020.
9. Yuniya K. Mukirania, interview with the author, Kyanya village, Kasese Uganda, June 3, 2020. Yunia was the wife of Yowasi K. Mukirania who was a headmaster of Mitandi Junior Secondary School.
10. Ibid.
11. Originally the Bakonzo people called the Rwenzori Mountains *Rwenzururu*, meaning "land covered with snow." According to the explorer Henry Stanley, just as he came near to the mountains on January 11, 1889, "Rwenzori, called already Bugombowa, Avirika, and Viruka, by the forest tribes, came now to be known as Rwenzu-ru-ru or Rwenjura..." (Henry M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa. vol. II* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, Copyright, 1890], 284.)
12. The word "had" inserted to have the sentence sound better and fall within the context.
13. Kirsten Alneas, "The Snow as the Centre of the Konzo Universe: The historical context of locality, cosmology and politics among the BaKonzo of Western Uganda," in Henry Osmaston, Joy Tukahirwa, Charles Basalirwa, and Jockey Nyakaana, *The Rwenzori National Park, Uganda* (Kampala: Department of Geography, Makerere University, 1996), 291.
14. F. C. Ssembeguya, G. O. B. Oda, and J. M. Okae, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Recent Disturbances amongst the Bamba and Bakonjo People of Toro* (Entebbe: Government House, October 10, 1962), 10.
15. Yuniya K. Mukirania, interview with the author, Kyanya village, Kasese Uganda, June 3, 2020.
16. Uganda Argus, March 11, 1964.
17. Leif Lind, brother of Gerd Pifer, interview with the author June 1, 2020.

18. Violet Thembo, interview by the author, June 7, 2020.
19. Yuniya K. Mukirania, interview with the author, Kyanya village, Kasese Uganda, June 3, 2020.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Leif Lind, brother of Gerd Pifer, interview with the author June 1, 2020.
23. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 258.
24. Yuniya K. Mukirania, interview with the author, Kyanya village, Kasese Uganda, June 3, 2020.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 258.
26. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 292.
27. Ibid., 290.
28. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1973/1974), 97-98.
29. Violet Thembo, interview by the author, June 27, 2020.
30. Stories told by my father Yowasi Kule Mwendeghetsyo when we were young, in the family record of 1983.
31. Yoweri Musana, evangelist and eyewitness to Pifer's hardworking spirit, interview by the author on June 1, 2020.

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