

Uebersax-Nork, Otto (1916–2018)

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John Okpechi, B.A., studied theology at Babcock University, Nigeria. He worked for one year as a Greek and Hebrew teacher at the Federal College of Education, Pankshin, Jos, Nigeria. Later, he worked as pastor for three years. He is currently a graduate student at Friedensau Adventist University, Germany. There he also works as student research assistant for the ESDA project in the EUD.

Otto Uebersax served in the Seventh-day Adventist pastoral ministry in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Israel.

Early Life

Otto Uebersax-Nork was born August 29, 1916, in the Czech Republic (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). His father Johannes Uebersax was then a Swiss emigrant married to Sophie Steurer, an Austrian.¹ The Uebersax family roots

date back to the displaced Huguenots, who were driven from their French homeland during the Middle Ages and found refuge in Switzerland. When, on October 28, 1918, the Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed, the extended Uebersax family found themselves in a new state territory. A new path into an uncertain future began.²

Education, Marriage, and Early Sojourns

Johannes Uebersax accepted the Adventist faith in 1933 through Yuri Havrenko, and in April 1940, Otto Uebersax boarded the train to Berlin and Magdeburg in Bratislava to attend the same missionary seminar where Yuri Havrenko had been trained. By April 1942 Otto had finished his studies in Friedensau and started ministry as a Bible worker in Pomerania, Germany.³ His experiences during this trying period are chronicled in his book, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*.⁴



Otto Uebersax

Photo courtesy of Historical Archives of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe, Friedensau, Germany.

Uebersax began to admire a German girl, Elsbeth Nork, who worked as the mail deliverer at Friedensau while he studied. Uebersax was the letter carrier of the school, and so had auspicious time to cultivate a friendship with Elsbeth. In 1941, she was unexpectedly transferred to the East Prussian Association of Seventh-day Adventists in Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, as assistant treasurer. The couple married in December 1942.⁵ The union produced two children, Roswitha (born in 1944) and Lilianne (born in 1945).⁶

The Uebersax family experienced a miracle after the birth of Roswitha on January 26, 1944. Elsbeth had complications in the form of a severe breast infection (mastitis). The doctor wanted to amputate. Close to the time the operation was to take place, the congregation prayed. Then a miracle happened: the surgeon was called away to an emergency on the evening before the operation. An old, experienced doctor took over the case. He made a new diagnosis; instead of amputation, he made two small incisions below the clavicle, and attached rubber tubes. This allowed the pus to drain and the chest was saved. However, Elsbeth and Roswitha had to stay in hospital for three months.⁷

Uebersax's missionary sojourn in Pomerania could not continue because of the hostilities of the Second World War. Leaving Germany seemed the only safe and wise choice, and the family departed for Switzerland in early 1945. When Uebersax and his family arrived, they met with the leaders of the Southern European Division in Bern and informed them of the situation in Nazi Germany.⁸ Uebersax then proceeded with further education – a commercial apprenticeship and training course for preachers at Friedensau; a certificate in English at Newbold College, England; and, much later, the study of modern Hebrew at Haifa University in Israel.⁹

Work and Missionary Experience

As a child, Uebersax's class teacher encouraged him to learn the profession of an actor because of his talent. However, his mother's unexpected early death fundamentally changed the life of the whole family. From then on, he placed his life in the hands of God, confidently believing that God would fulfill his life dreams.¹⁰

When Otto first arrived in Switzerland, he worked as an auxiliary preacher in the French-speaking part before joining the German-Swiss Association of the denomination.¹¹ Uebersax was the secretary of the Sabbath School and Youth departments of the German-Swiss Conference from 1946 to 1950, when he began to co-edit, with Ferdinand Pieringer, a youth periodical *Jugendruf*, a paper for the German speaking young people in Austria and Switzerland.¹² In 1951, he was called to the Austrian Union Conference, where he served as the Union Sabbath School and Youth secretary (1951–1953), the Alpine Conference Youth secretary (1951), and the Danube Conference Sabbath School and Youth secretary (1951–1953).¹³

In 1953 he received a call to work once more in the Swiss Field. He served as president of the German-Swiss Conference (1953–1961); Temperance secretary, German-Swiss Conference (1960–1961); and secretary of the Home Missionary, Sabbath School, and Welfare departments of the German-Swiss Conference (1964–1965).¹⁴ Uebersax received a second missionary call back to the Austria Union Field in 1965. He started out as the Union

Lay Activities departmental leader, was elected president of the Alpine Conference in 1967, and then served as the union president from 1968 to 1979, leading several departments alongside his presidential duties.¹⁵

In 1979 Uebersax returned to his German-Swiss home conference, where he served as director of the Communication, Radio-TV, and Sabbath School Departments from 1980 to 1982.¹⁶ Retiring officially in 1982, he never tired of service. He moved to Jerusalem in 1982 to serve in the attached Israel Field.¹⁷ In 1987 he came out of retirement briefly to serve as an acting ministerial director of the German-Swiss Conference, though he seemed to have remained connected to Jerusalem until 1989, the year he meritoriously returned home.¹⁸

Uebersax served on the management boards of many church institutions. He chaired the boards of the Bogenhofen Seminary in Austria and the Austrian Publishing House for many years, and was a long-time member of the French Publishing House board in France.¹⁹

Later Life

After his return to Switzerland in 1989, he preached regularly in Adventist congregations in German-speaking Switzerland and continued to play an active role in community life. Uebersax spent his last years in the retirement and nursing home Oertlimatt, a Seventh-day Adventist institution, where he regularly held Friday evening devotions. He died October 30, 2018, at 103 years old.²⁰

Contribution

Uebersax was an evangelist, missionary, pastor, teacher, administrator, and mediator. With a gift for languages, it was reported that he could speak Czech, Russian, French, German, and English.²¹ Even after officially retiring in 1982, he still went to the University of Haifa in Israel to learn modern Hebrew.²² It was reported that his ministry in Israel added to membership through baptisms.²³

During the dark days of faith suppression in the Soviet Union, Uebersax was one of the few Adventist leaders who visited faithful Seventh-day Adventists whose connection with the rest of the world Church was severed. Uebersax had taken the risk of reestablishing contacts with them through personal visits in 1952 (Czech Republic) and 1954 (Soviet Union).²⁴ So it was easy to have a few representatives meet them at the airports as Uebersax and R. Gerber, who served as the Treasurer of the Southern European Division, visited in August 1955. It was a heartwarming but risky adventure, as they went on tourist visa status. The places they visited included Budapest in Hungary, Leningrad and Moscow in Russia, as well as Lwow and Kiev in the Ukraine.²⁵ There is no doubt that Uebersax's dexterity and fluency with languages was a major facilitator in this event.

Uebersax played an important role in the 1975 General Conference session in Vienna, Austria. He was then the Austrian Union president, and this was the first time the session was being held outside the United States of America. His leadership gave the Church a remarkable meeting. Uebersax, alongside C. L. Powers, president of

the Euro-Africa Division, was the first to welcome the large crowd of delegates when the meetings opened on Friday, July 10, 1975.²⁶

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NOTES

1. Otto Uebersax-Nork, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen* (Zurich: Advent-Verlag, 2004), 59.
2. *Ibid.*, 7-9. Around 1896, one of them (Johannes) decided to emigrate and became a Swiss citizen abroad. He and some of his contemporaries were recruited by a Hungarian county as cheesemakers. There in Hungary, he soon married an Austrian girl in 1898, and founded an extended family of ten children. Since both parents were fully occupied with their work, they left the management of the house to an old village woman. And because she could not speak German, her Slovakian language became the mother tongue of the children. As a result, they answered their parents, who addressed them in German, in Slovak.
3. *Ibid.*, 12, 13, and 21.
4. Written in German, the title is translated "Wonderfully Sheltered by Good Powers." It is a sixty-three-page book; the words of the title are taken from a well-known poem of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran martyr in Nazi Germany.
5. Uebersax-Nork, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*, 24, 25.

6. Ibid., 59. Lilianne, who was born when Otto had returned to Switzerland, later married Jacques Benjamin Doukhan, who became an outstanding Old Testament professor at Andrews University Theological Seminary. Lilianne Uebersax Doukhan, a professor of Music History and Literature, retired in 2016 as the chair of Andrews Music Department. See Lilianne Doukhan, "Biographies," Andrews University Music Department and Department of International Language Studies, Accessed January 1, 2020. <http://www.iamaonline.com/Bio/DOUKHAN.htm>.
7. Uebersax-Nork, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*, 46.
8. Ibid., 50.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. René Pieper, "Obituary Otto Uebersax (1916-2018)," Website of the Free Church of the Seventh-day Adventists in German-speaking Switzerland, November 06, 2018, accessed January 2, 2020, <https://www.adventisten.ch/news/artikel/go/2018-11-06/nachruf-otto-uebersax/>
11. Ibid.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, "Swiss Union Conference," "Periodicals," accessed January 1, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1950.pdf>.
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14. Ibid., "Swiss Union Conference," accessed January 1, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1961.pdf>; "Swiss Union Conference," accessed January 1, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1965,66.pdf>.
15. Ibid., "Austrian Union of Churches," accessed January 2, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1968.pdf>; <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1979.pdf>
16. Ibid., "Swiss Union Conference," accessed January 4, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1982.pdf>.
17. Uebersax-Nork, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*, 59.
18. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "Swiss Union Conference," accessed January 5, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1987.pdf>.
19. Ibid., "Educational Institutions," "Publishing Houses," accessed January 5, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1968.pdf>
20. René Pieper, "Obituary Otto Uebersax (1916-2018)."

21. "Otto Uebersax - former Adventist church leader died at 102," Adventistic Press Service APD, Switzerland, November 11, 2018 accessed January 8, 2020, <https://www.apd.media/news/archiv/12773.html>
22. Ibid.,
23. William Johnsson ed., "News Notes from World Divisions," *Adventist Review*, May 10, 1984, accessed January 8, 2020, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19840510-V161-19.pdf>.
24. Uebersax-Nork, *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*, 59.
25. "A Trip Through Russia," *ARH*, November 15, 1956, 16.
26. "Program of the General Conference Session," *ARH*, July 11, 1975, 16.

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