



Mongolian group in front of temporary Rodionoff home in Durbut, 1933. Rodionoff family on the right.

Photo courtesy of Nina (Rodionoff) Tudor.

Mongolian Mission, 1930–1939

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The Mongolian Mission was an entity that existed in the 1930s as a subdivision of the North China Union Conference in the China Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Geographically, the territory of the Mongolian Mission is often referred to as “Inner Mongolia,” which is part of China. This article deals exclusively with the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Inner Mongolia.¹

Introduction

Mongolia is a very challenging country to evangelize with the gospel of Christ. Its climate is windy and frigid for most of the year. The people are nomadic and tied to Shamanism, a form of Buddhism that places faith in local gurus who claim to channel spiritual energies for healing and wisdom. Superstitious charms and incantations are the norm in their society. They have no educational system; therefore, the vast majority at the time are illiterate and cannot be influenced by reading literature. Furthermore, their leaders have historically rejected any Christian intrusion. However, these difficulties have not deterred some missionary efforts.

Preliminary Steps

The first contact that Seventh-day Adventists had with the Mongolians was when missionaries were stationed in Manchuria. Some Mongolians had emigrated east and settled near Mukden (now Shenyang). It was there, in 1926, that Elder Bernard Petersen baptized the first Mongolian convert.² Encouraged by this breakthrough, two Russian missionaries, Max Popow (or Popov) and J. Maltsev, were assigned to cultivate the interest.³ The results proved to be minimal with one more baptism reported in 1929.⁴ The decision had been made in 1926 to establish a station just across the border in Mongolia itself. A mission hut was built in the style of a Mongolian yurt on the bleak Mongolian plains, but this attempt had to be abandoned in 1929 when Russian civil authorities objected to their presence.⁵ Perhaps the flying of the American flag at the door of the yurt was offensive in the minds of the Russians. However, Russian influence in the territory waned.

Formation of the Mongolian Mission

Under the leadership of George Appel, superintendent of the North China Union Conference, the Mongolian Mission was founded in 1930 and Kalgan was selected as the headquarters for the enterprise.⁶ Kalgan was situated in the Chinese province of Chahar. Being close to the Mongolian border, it served as a convenient source of supplies for the new mission. In 1931 Maltsev and his family moved out from Kalgan and deeper into Mongolia, living first in an adobe hut until better living quarters were built.⁷ The site became known as the Dolor Hodok Station.⁸ Maltsev rode a Bactrian camel to visit the Mongolians scattered in all directions of the compass.⁹

Early in 1931 Elder Otto Christensen arrived from the Minnesota Conference and settled at Kalgan to study the Mongolian language and direct mission advances.¹⁰ He baptized two Mongolian women in Kalgan that year. During the summer Appel and Christensen made two car trips out onto the Mongolian plains to explore possibilities for more mission stations. They found the people were “very kind and hospitable.”¹¹ Back in Kalgan, Christensen, having grasped some of the language, conducted a small school for Mongolian children, teaching arithmetic and geography.¹² He also established a rudimentary printing press at Kalgan, first obtaining a complete set of Mongolian type matrices and having them cast in Shanghai. He printed a page containing a translation of a song titled “Tell It Again.” There was only one other piece of Mongolian literature available for mission purposes, a tract that a Chinese lay member named Li Hsaio-ming had arranged to be translated and

printed at Yulin in the southern Guangxi Province.¹³

Permission from a Mongolian ruler was obtained for a second station to be established on the plains, one further inland at Durbut. In Kalgan Paul Rodionoff had applied himself to learning the Mongolian language and doing some elementary medical studies in preparation for moving to this new station.¹⁴ He and Christensen spent the early months of 1934 building a walled mission compound with living quarters, stables, and a dispensary. Bricks and timbers were used from an abandoned temple nearby.¹⁵ The completed station was dedicated on September 18, 1934.¹⁶

Christensen's wife, Dorothy, accepted the role of Sabbath School leader for the Mongolian Mission. She reported in 1935 that three groups met regularly, each having no more than eight attendees. It was difficult to maintain order because the children were not accustomed to classroom discipline, and singing was not part of their culture.¹⁷ The day school in Kalgan continued to function. Christensen endeavored to manage it as an industrial school by purchasing a wool comber and other machinery for the students to make padded quilts for sale.¹⁸

By the mid-1930s Christensen had translated and printed a portfolio of Mongolian literature, including four tracts, five songs, the book of Daniel, and a book titled "The Way of Life."¹⁹ Among a largely illiterate society, these would have limited use, but he reported in 1935 that 75 copies of "The Way of Life" had sold to Mongolian leaders, most of them during his summer trips into the hinterland.²⁰ He never reported the sale of any copies of the book of Daniel, a tome that was arguably beyond the comprehension of the average Mongolian. In the summer of 1939, Christensen conducted the first tent crusade among the Mongolians. It was a unique experience because the day-time winds across the plains forced him to dismantle his tent after every evening meeting.²¹

Reflecting on the 1930s, Elder William Harris, superintendent of the North China Union Mission, wrote in 1941, "Mongolia is one of the most interesting, the most difficult, and the most discouraging of fields."²² Statistics supported his view. During the life of the Mongolian Mission there were only six Mongolians baptized. The average membership throughout the 1930s was eleven, including the missionaries.²³ The Maltsev family and Rodionoff family endured years of isolation and privations, making a gallant effort to evangelize a people who were keen for the medical services but indifferent to the Christian message. The Rodionoff family, located furthest from headquarters, went without a salary for approximately six years. They received a lump sum from the General Conference a decade later.²⁴

Mission Closure

Poor results were exacerbated by the hostilities of the Japanese invasion into the territory, these circumstances becoming dire by 1936.²⁵ Mission supply lines were cut and eventually stations were abandoned.²⁶ The last year that the Mongolian Mission was listed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* was 1939, when it was listed as part

of the Sao-pei Mission.²⁷ The years of the Second World War only prolonged the difficulties and, soon after, the conquests of the Chinese Communist armies made it impossible to reclaim the mission territory and properties.

Mission Officers²⁸

Director: G. J. Appel (1930); Otto Christensen (1931-1939).

Secretary-Treasurer: H. N. Brodersen (1930); Otto Christensen (1931-1939).

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NOTES

1. The geographically separate "Outer Mongolia" (or sometimes simply called "Mongolia") became a separate country from China since the collapse of Qing in 1911 and achieved full independence in 1924 when the Mongolian People's Republic was formed. In 1992, it underwent a peaceful democratic revolution to become the modern Mongolia of today. For the story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in modern Mongolia, see the article on "Mongolia Mission" (NB: without the "n").
2. Bernard Petersen, "Our First Mongolian Convert," *ARH*, June 6, 1926, 9.
3. Clarence C. Crisler, "Russian and Mongolian Stations in Manchuria," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, January 1929, 5.
4. Max Popow, "Sungari-Mongolia," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, July 1929, 9.
5. "Workers for Mongolians," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, October 1929, 10.
6. "In the Northern Union," *China Division Reporter*, February 1931, 8.
7. "Among the Mongols," *China Division Reporter*, April 1934, 2.
8. William H. Branson, "A Visit to Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, July 15, 1939, 1.
9. Otto Christensen, "The Mongolian Mission of S.D.A.-1931-1934," *China Division Reporter*, May 1935, 18-19.
10. "Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, March 1931, 2.
11. George J. Appel, "Opening the Kalgan Hospital," *ARH*, December 31, 1931, 8-9.
12. George J. Appel, "The North China Union," *China Division Reporter*, February 1933, 8.

13. "Gospel Songs in Mongolian," *China Division Reporter*, September 1933, 4; John Oss, "Pioneer Mission Sketches," *China Division Reporter*, June 15, 1940, 3-4. In *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Otto Christensen wrote, "the first thing to come off our new press was a song I had translated, 'Tell It Again.' I tried that as an experiment while the boy was setting up the type for the tract; but as I thought of it later, it seemed quite providential. A new language now being printed, and the first sheet off the press was, 'Tell It Again'" ("The Seventh-day Adventist Missionaries' Special," *ARH*, December 21, 1933; this quote was provided to the ESDA editors by Kathy Parke).
14. Otto Christensen, "The Mongolian Mission of S.D.A.-1931-1934," *China Division Reporter*, May 1935, 18-19.
15. "Building on the Borders of Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, June 1934, 21-22.
16. "From Pastor Geo. J. Appel," *China Division Reporter*, December 1934, 2.
17. "Symposium in Behalf of the Mongolian Mission, S.D.A., Peiping, April 11, 1935," *China Division Reporter*, July 1935, Extra page.
18. Otto Christensen, "Progress in Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, December 1936, 3.
19. Otto Christensen, "The Mongolian Mission of S.D.A.-1931-1934," *China Division Reporter*, May 1935, 18-19.
20. Otto Christensen, "Another Trip Into Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, September/October 1935, 5.
21. William J. Harris, "Evangelism in the North China Union," *China Division Reporter*, November 1, 1939, 4.
22. William J. Harris, "The North China Union," *China Division Reporter*, February 1941, 6.
23. E.g., "Mongolian Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938), 111.
24. Nina Rodionoff Tudor, interview with author, Wahroonga, New South Wales, July 22, 2021.
25. Otto Christensen, "Progress in Mongolia," *China Division Reporter*, December 1936, 3.
26. William J. Harris, "North China Union Report," *China Division Reporter*, February 1, 1938, 5-6.
27. "Mongolian Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1939), 113.
28. "Mongolian Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1931-1938), 111 (for the year 1938).

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