



Alfred Matter on the left.

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

## Matter, Alfred (1886–1967) and Elizabeth (1882–1968)

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Alfred and Elizabeth Matter were pioneer Adventist missionaries in Kenya, Rwanda, and the Belgian Congo.

## Early Life

Alfred Matter was born in the German town of Göttingen May 19, 1886,<sup>1</sup> to a Swiss father and a German mother. He had five sisters. After his basic schooling, Alfred went to Switzerland where he worked for a while in a Neuenburg hotel.<sup>2</sup> His fascination for cars led him to become an auto-mechanic early in his life, pursuing this profession in England. A little later, he was hired as a driver by a doctor who with his family was on the way to New Zealand. There Alfred served as a driver and mechanic for three years.<sup>3</sup>

## Conversion

While Alfred was abroad, his mother in Germany heard about the Adventist message, and joined the church. This left Alfred, a convinced Catholic, much distressed. Consequently, he returned home, but did not succeed in persuading his mother to change her mind. Besides Alfred also found that while two of his sisters remained Catholic,<sup>4</sup> three other sisters were enthusiastic about their mother's newfound faith.<sup>5</sup> The Adventists in the family tried so hard to convince Alfred about their new belief, possibly contributing to Alfred's leaving the home. Eventually, he moved back to London hoping to continue his former job at the car factory.<sup>6</sup>

However, God did not give up on Alfred. About that time an Adventist preacher named Homer Russell Salisbury held a series of Adventist lectures in London. Alfred's mother sent his address to Pastor Salisbury asking him to do whatever he could for her son.<sup>7</sup> Alfred saw this as harassment. Yet he thought he could use the opportunity to find and refute what Adventists believed. To help him in his cause, he approached a Roman Catholic priest of German origin. He pleaded with this priest to help him prove his mother and relatives wrong. He wanted the priest to help him develop counter arguments for each point the Adventists came up with. But the priest was not so pleased with the idea. The priest advised him to be a good Catholic and break all connection with the "heretics."

But Alfred wanted to use reason and logic to refute Salisbury and his Adventist teachings. However, after several meetings with Salisbury and with the priest, Alfred became convinced that Adventists were right in their faith and doctrine.<sup>8</sup> In 1910, Alfred decided to go to study at Friedensau Seminary, Germany, to prepare for ministry. There he got baptized in 1912.<sup>9</sup>

## Missionary to Kenya and Rwanda

While at Friedensau, Alfred met Elizabeth Nawrotzky, a nurse in Friedensau Sanatorium. Two years later, in 1914, they got married.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after, before the outbreak of World War I, the Matters were sent as missionaries to Kenya, their first mission station being Kanyandoto, South Nyanza.<sup>11</sup> During World War I, the Matters along with other missionaries were interned for two years.

In 1921, Matter with Henry Monnier founded the Rwankeri mission station in Ruhengeri in northern Rwanda. The mission station was located close to the volcanic Mount Karisimbi and housed a flourishing mission with outdoor stations, schools, and hand-craft workshops, including weaving.

In April 1923, after their furlough, Alfred and Elizabeth Matter with their son returned to Rwanda. In their company was Alfred's sister Maria Matter<sup>12</sup> from Luzern. That same year the brother-sister team opened a dispensary in Rwankeri,<sup>13</sup> with Alfred's wife Elizabeth serving as a midwife. In addition, Matter opened a mission school where over 100 young people enrolled. The Matters remained in Rwankeri until 1929 when they moved to Gitwe mission station.

In 1931, after serving for a year in Gitwe, Matter and a colleague, Dr. J. H. Sturges founded a mission station and a hospital in Ngoma (today Mugonero), South of Kibuye on the shores of Lake Kivu.<sup>14</sup> Three years later Matter built a large stone church that still reminds Adventists of his pioneering mission work in that region. These three stations—Rwankeri, Gitwe, and Ngoma-- developed further and became the Adventist missionary centers of Rwanda where Adventists stand as one of the largest Protestant churches today.

## Mission in Congo

In 1943 Matter moved to the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and founded the Rweze station in Lubero. He also worked as the architect/ "chief builder" of other mission stations at Songa Kamina and Nebassabei poko. Still, Matter made it a point to return to Ngoma, where he did most of his ministry. During Congo's war of independence in 1960, Matter remained the only Adventist missionary in Nebasa, Congo. When threatened by rebels, "He invited them into his house; hosted and subdued them with his kindness."<sup>15</sup>

In Bigobo near Kongolo, Matter worked among the Bambuti Pygmies of eastern Congo (Kinshasa).<sup>16</sup> The only Adventist family in Bigobo, the Matters found life somewhat lonesome, and work among the pygmies formidable, as the pygmies were treated as outcasts by the rest of society. In fact, the colonial system classified the Congolese into three groups: the *évolués* (civilized), the *indigènes* (uncivilized), and the "non-classified."<sup>17</sup> The pygmies "were counted among this last group of disabled and useless persons for the economic purposes of the colony."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Matter broke away from such unacceptable and unchristian prejudice in order to bring the Adventist message to the pygmies of Congo.

## Later Life and Legacy

Matter wanted to spend his life in Rwanda (Muyange at Ngoma), but his failing health made him return to Europe in 1964. Nevertheless, he and Elizabeth left a missionary legacy that was carried on by their family. Their son Alfred A. Matter, Jr. (1916-1995) served as a missionary in Rwanda and the Belgian Congo (Zaire) from 1941 to 1966. From 1976 to 1978, Matter, Jr. also helped in the implementation of the “Kasai-project,” the largest single evangelistic program in Adventist mission history. Their other son, Gerhardt L., lived in Rwanda. Their daughter, Tabea E. Matter, spent 20 years as a missionary in Rwanda. Alfred Matter died September 17, 1967, in Neanderthal near Mettmann, Germany.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Matter died in 1968.<sup>20</sup>

## Contribution

Alfred and Elizabeth Matter worked for 50 years as missionaries. The Matters were pioneer missionaries in the east African countries of Kenya, Rwanda and Congo. As pioneers of Adventism Matters in collaboration with other Adventist missionaries were instrumental in grounding Adventism firmly in those countries through effective evangelism and pastoral ministry, and by establishing many schools and hospitals that bore strong witness to the educational and healing ministries of the church. While Matter’s creativity led him to work chiefly in building projects that stand as monuments of faith and hard work all over Kenya, Rwanda and Congo, the medical missionary work of Elizabeth Matter contributed to the development of building strong and healthy families with a commitment to Adventist health ministry.

Finally, Matter was undaunted by the popular narrative of his time that did not see much of any worth in the pygmies. Matter believed that all, including pygmies, are God’s children, in need of the gospel. Hence, he labored to bring the Adventist message to the Bambuti pygmies in eastern Congo, becoming the first Adventist missionary to the Bambuti Pygmies.

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## NOTES

1. "Matter, Alfred," Obituaries, *ARH*, February 1, 1968, p. 27, accessed May 28, 2019, [https://www.adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-354686/review-and-herald-february-1-1968?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=0f651d0045fa48b1aea3&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=0](https://www.adventistdigitallibrary.org/adl-354686/review-and-herald-february-1-1968?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=0f651d0045fa48b1aea3&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=0).
2. Karl Waber, *Streiflichter aus der Geschichte der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Der Schweiz 1901-1929* (Zürich: Advent-Verlag, 1999), 88.
3. Ibid.
4. One of them, Hedwig, even became a nun of a monastery
5. Karl Waber, 89.
6. Fritz Martinsen, "Dawn at Night," *The Youth Instructor*, December 29, 1959, 13. C.f. a written record of Alfred A. Matter (Jr.), May 10, 1990. Quoted in *ibid*.
7. Martinsen, "Dawn at Night," 13.
8. Martinsen notes the following: "Alfred said to the priest: "You must give me some conclusive proof tonight that the Church teaches *the* truth." The priest started, "My dear Alfred, you have come here with many questions," "and I have proved each one to your satisfaction. Now all of a sudden you want some 'conclusive proof' as you call it. I doubt you know what you want. I have given you proofs all along." To this Alfred responded, "Maybe I do not know what I want, but there must be some way of silencing these Adventists, heretics as they held to be." The

priest would finally conclude: "What this man has taught you is truth, and there is but one thing for you to do – accept them and follow it! But I am a lost man. I should never have consented to let you come here to discuss these things. I am a lost man! Now, please go! Go! Do not come back, Alfred. Good-by!" See *Ibid.*, 14

9. R. Kaufmann, "Alfred Matter, Missionar in Rente," *Advent Bote*, December 1, 1967, 458.
10. Kaufmann, "Alfred Matter, Missionar in Rente," 458
11. *Ibid*; Waber, 91.
12. She worked as a medical missionary in Africa until 1935. C.F. Waber, *Streiflichter aus der Geschichte der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Der Schweiz*, 181.
13. "Rwanda," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996 second revised edition), 486; Gary Land, "Rwanda," *The A to Z of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 286.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "Missionary Alfred Matter zu Ehren," *Advent Echo*, December 1967, 15.
16. Ralph Watts, "First Work among the Pygmies of Africa," *ARH*, June 9, 1955, 1.
17. See M. D. Markowitz, *Cross and Sword. The Political Role of Christian Missions in the Belgian Congo, 1908-1960* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1973). According to Paul Kamuha Musolo W'Isuka, "The *évolués* were a tiny minority of Black Congolese who would approach the Whites (the Colonists), as they were able to speak a few French words and eat by using forks and spoons. These people were treated with some regard, as they were utilised as facilitators of the Colonisers. The *indigènes* were all the rest who should undergo the pitiless cruelty of the colonial system. See Musolo W'Isuka, "Encountering Pygmy Peoples as a Challenge to Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," (D. Th. Thesis, University of South Africa, 2013), 147.
18. *Ibid.*
19. "Matter, Alfred," Obituaries, *ARH*, February 1, 1968, p. 27.
20. "Matter, Elizabeth," Obituaries, *Trans-Africa Division Outlook*, February 15, 1969, p. 10, accessed May 28, 2019, [https://www.adventistdigitalibrary.org/adl-393535/trans-africa-division-outlook-february-15-1969?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=e17013979a7d5415f5b0&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=7](https://www.adventistdigitalibrary.org/adl-393535/trans-africa-division-outlook-february-15-1969?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=e17013979a7d5415f5b0&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=7).

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