



Edgar and Gioconda Villeneuve.

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Villeneuve, Edgar (Albert) (1912–1986)

RENÉ VILLENEUVE

René Villeneuve was born in Madagascar. He holds a theology diploma from the Adventist Seminary in France, two B.A. degrees in philosophy from the University of Geneva in Switzerland and the University of Grenoble in France. Now retired, he worked for thirty-nine years as teacher and director in Adventist schools in Collonges-sous-Salève, France, Switzerland, and Madagascar.

Edgar (Albert) Villeneuve was a missionary, evangelist, and church administrator from Switzerland:

Early Life

Edgar (Albert) Villeneuve was born October 24, 1912 in Gland, Switzerland. He was the fifth child of Ernest and Suzanne Villeneuve-Weidmann. Ernest was an employee of PHAG, a food-product manufacturer at the “Sanatorium du Léman” in Gland.²

In 1929, Edgar enrolled in the Adventist Seminary of Collonges-sous-Salève in France, and worked as a literature evangelist every summer to support himself. Two years later he obtained his Certificate of Competency in elementary education from the Rector of the Academy of Grenoble as well as a “Brevet élémentaire.” As a member of the 1933–1934 graduating class, he obtained a Diploma in Evangelism.³

While at the seminary Edgar met Gioconda (Ernesta Maddalena) Bossero, his future spouse. Gioconda was born on April 20, 1917 in Buenos Aires. Her parents were Italian immigrants in Argentina and returned in 1928 to Boissano, their home village near Loana in Liguria, Italy. A literature evangelist contact with the Bossero family led to the baptism of Gioconda in 1932, and she joined the seminary at Collonges⁴ where she met Edgar. Having received a call to serve in the mission field, the couple got married in Begnins (Gland, Switzerland), on March 2, 1935.⁵

Missionary Work in Madagascar

Five weeks later, on April 11, 1935, the couple left Marseille for Madagascar⁶ and landed on the shores of Tamatave on May 8. Soon they started language study as they intended to engage in ministry among the Malagasy. The language was not easy to learn but Edgar found a motivator in A.V. Olson. Soon Edgar became fluent in Malagasy and eventually mastered the language.⁷

Meanwhile Gioconda as part of her witnessing built a circle of friends within the church and the community. Her ministry included visiting the sick, the lonely, and church members who were in need of encouragement. For 20 years she was active in humanitarian services that included distribution of medicine and case management of young children. For such services, she was honored in Tananarive in 1957 and awarded the Silver Cross and a certificate from the Malagasy delegation of the French Red Cross.⁸

After a year of language study in Tananarive (May 1935 to August 1936) Villeneuve was ordained as an elder and appointed as an “evangelist apprentice” and placed by the local Madagascar Mission to be in charge of the Antsirabé and Betafo churches, 22 km apart, in the South of Tananarive.⁹ Soon the young evangelist, with access to a motorcycle, moved around the interiors of the island and began to hold public evangelistic campaigns.¹⁰

Mission Director

Having seen the evangelistic and church growth in the area, Villeneuve soon launched into a new field of labor. In the Tsimihety region, he built two schools at Port-Bergé and Antsohihy.¹¹ When Henry Pichot, the president of the Indian Ocean Union, visited the enterprising educator and pastor, he was impressed by the work of the young missionary couple. Soon at Villeneuve's request, the Union committee voted in 1951 to open at Befandriana-Nord the first real missionary station in the interiors, and to establish a secondary school as well as a medical station. A little later in February 1952, Villeneuve placed before the Division the necessity to train local Malagasy workers for Sakalava and Tsimihety tribes and argued for the establishment of the Befandriana-Avaratra training centre, in the Tsimihety region.¹²

From 1952 to 1955, the school in the Ankazambo village, near Befandriana-Nord, opened as planned: first, a primary school followed by a middle school for students who came from all parts of Northern Madagascar. There were two boarding schools: one for boys and another for girls, and in addition a hospital.

In 1958 Villeneuve succeeded Paul Girard as director of the Tananarive mission, with 42 churches and companies.¹³ The first act of the new director of the mission was to ask the Union Committee for a legal framework for the establishment and operation of the Mission, and to set up a policy framework that will normalize the operation of the church, such as appointment of workers, ordination of pastors, and other regularization of operational procedures.

In addition, Villeneuve prepared a draft project to maximize the utilization of the newly acquired Caruso property as the new center of the Antananarivo Mission: a chapel of 500 seats, mission offices, a bookstore and housing for missionaries.¹⁴ Due to the new political situation and the recent independence of Madagascar, the Union committee decided that a European missionary would not head the mission anymore and Villeneuve was officially relieved in 1959 from his role as president of the Tananarive mission. The administrative baton was passed on to Malagasy ministers: Ramamonjisoa and later Rajoelison were appointed as presidents of the mission.¹⁵

Later Years (1959-1973)¹⁶

From 1959 to 1973 Villeneuve was responsible for the Home Missionary/Lay Activities and Sabbath School departments of the Mission. During this period, he concentrated mostly on the ongoing training of church members to be active lay preachers and to be strong leaders in local churches throughout the Indian Ocean Union. He also served as the Field Secretary¹⁷ and as a regular translator for visiting colleagues from Southern European Division.

In addition, Villeneuve was able to utilize his extensive contacts in his native Switzerland to promote much needed construction projects throughout the island.

At the beginning of September 1973, Edgar and Gioconda Villeneuve concluded their missionary career by moving back to Switzerland, where Edgar continued to serve as a pastor of the church in Lausanne from 1973 to 1977 and then in Yverdon until 1980. Edgar Villeneuve died in 1986.

Contribution

Edgar and Gioconda Villeneuve were fully committed to the preaching of the soon return of Christ. As a missionary couple to Madagascar, they contributed to solidifying the church during the founding years of Adventism in that island-nation. Villeneuve quickly mastered the Malagasy language in order to be as close as possible to the people. As an administrator, his goal centered on the establishment of churches, schools and clinics in the regions where there were no evangelists of the Adventist message. In addition, when the Villeneuves retired to their native Switzerland, they were active in God's work. Gioconda who served as a missionary wife alongside Villeneuve was influential in her active humanitarian work and practiced medical mission as the right hand of the gospel. The ministry of the Villeneuves was a holistic endeavor that positively impacted the work of the church in Malagasy.

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NOTES

1. Ronald and Hélène Horvath-Villeneuve did English translation from the French version.
2. Dr. P. A. De Forest managed La Lignière at that time. See Robert Gerber "Nécrologie of Ernest Villeneuve," *Revue Adventiste*, October 1, 1938, 16.
3. "Inventory of the Collection of Edgar Villeneuve," Box 13 CP 3, File 575 – Diploma and Certificate of Edgar Villeneuve, accessed July 20, 2018, <http://www.archivesadventistes.org/blog/2007/09/inventaire-de-l.html>.
4. Oral Testimony of Villeneuve Gioconda, 2004.
5. Edgar Villeneuve to his family in Switzerland, April 10, 1935, unnumbered letter, private archives of René Villeneuve.

6. The ship they travelled on was *Chantilly*. See Ibid.
7. Jean Zurcher, former missionary in Madagascar and Secretary of the Division writes in 1986 in his obituary message regarding his colleague Edgar: "Thanks to his knowledge of the Malagasy language, brother Villeneuve had a significant influence like no other was able to establish. This is also why the Malagasy were attached to him like no other." Jean, Zurcher, "Edgar Villeneuve, October 22, 1912 – October 1, 1986." *Revue Adventiste*, December 1986.
8. Red Cross to Gioconda Villeneuve, December 24, 1955, unnumbered letter, 1955, private archives of René Villeneuve.
9. Edgar Villeneuve to "*Mes bien chers*," Tananarive, May 15, 1935, letter 16, 1935, private archives of René Villeneuve; Edgar Villeneuve to Nelly Ruf, August 31, 1936, letter 27, 1936, Private Archives of René Villeneuve; Edgar Villeneuve to Nelly Ruf, June 23, 1937, letter 34, 1937, private archives of René Villeneuve.
10. During this time, Élisée Bénézech (the new director of the Mission) was the one who travelled to perform all baptisms, since he was an ordained minister while Villeneuve was not yet ordained.
11. Edgar Villeneuve to Nelly Ruf, September 25, 1950, letter 142, 1950, private archives of René Villeneuve.
12. "Schulen in Africa"1937–1972," Friedensau Historical Archives, Germany.
13. Edgar Villeneuve to Nelly Ruf, March 20, 1958, letter 163, 1958, private archives of René Villeneuve.
14. Edgar Villeneuve to René Villeneuve, Jr. January 1, 1960, letter 202, 1960, private archives of René Villeneuve.
15. Edgar Villeneuve to René Villeneuve, Jr., November 10, 1960, letter 11, 1960, private archives of René Villeneuve.
16. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1959-1973);
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17. Edgar Villeneuve to Werner and Nelly Ruf, February 7, 1961, letter 217, 1961, private archives of René Villeneuve.

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