

Babienko, Theofil Arsentievich (1850–1942)

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Theofil Arsentievich Babienko served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a pastor, pioneer native worker, and missionary in czarist Russia, Romania, and Canada.

Early Years

Theofil Arsentievich Babienko was born near Kiev in the town of Tarashcha (Тарашча) in 1850. His father, Gordowski, was a Polish general who owned large estates in Ukraine. When General Gordowski was killed in one of the wars, his wife, who feared retaliation from the local Ukrainian population, quickly married the manager of her estate, Babienko.¹ By the time of her marriage, she already had a 12-year-old son, Theofil, from her first husband, General Gordowski. The boy Theofil was a good artist and liked to paint pictures and icons, which were in good demand. In his passport there was mentioned a double surname, Gordowski-Babienko, but in the estate's papers he was listed as Gordowski. Theofil's young years were marred by the confiscating of his family's estate by Polish magnates. As a result the boy was in great need and began to earn money by painting icons. By that time the noble surname Gordowski disappeared, together with the estate, and the common Ukrainian surname Babienko remained.

Marriage and Conversion

Apart from his artistic talents, Theofil had a musical interest. After a while he became a choir director in the Orthodox church of Tarashcha, where he married Ekaterina Stupka. Their union produced seven daughters and



Theofil A. Babienko and family.

Photo courtesy of ASTR Archives (folder: ASTR Photo Collection, folder: People, folder: B, folder: Babienko).

two sons.

Theofil was also an avid reader. Therefore, the priest asked him to read the Psalms on Sunday services. After the services, Theofil asked the priest for permission to take the Bible home. Having heard that the church's choir director had the Bible at home, some neighbors began to come to him in order to listen to the words from the Book. While reading, he discovered that many of the teachings of the Orthodox Church were in contradiction with the Bible. When he came with his doubts to the priest, the priest responded harshly and made Theofil return the Bible. Babienko then purchased his own Bible from Kiev and continued reading.

In 1877 Babienko organized a Bible study group, Community of Brothers Who Study the Word of God, and broke away from Orthodoxy.² This group started preaching in the surrounding villages in Ukraine about the holiness of the Sabbath, the inadmissibility of the worship of the saints, the non-immortality of soul, and the soon coming of Christ. Babienko became a minister with "Adventist" inclinations even before meeting any Adventist.³ In 1883, when the "brethren" of Tarashcha "decided to erect a church building, they sent their leader, Babienko, to the governor in Kiev to obtain the necessary permission. Babienko never returned; he was arrested and exiled to Stavropol, in the northern Caucasus. Here, while in exile, he secured a Bible and (according to his son's account) after two years of study began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath and to expect the second coming of Jesus Christ to this earth. As yet he had not heard of Seventh-day Adventists. He wrote to those in Tarashcha about his new faith, and as a result some of them also believed in Christ's soon coming and began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath."⁴

Pioneer Mission Work

Late in 1887 Babienko was employed by a German, where he got acquainted with Adventist pastor Conrad Laubhan, a Volga German who had migrated to the United States several years ago. Supervised by this pastor, Babienko began to study the Bible, and very soon noticed that Conrad Laubhan fully shared the conclusions that Babienko himself came to. At the same time, the family of Babienko was granted permission to reunite with him.

Laubhan informed Babienko that there was an Adventist church 60 kilometers (37 miles) away from Stavropol. Babienko began to attend worship services in that church. Soon he and five other exiles were baptized by Laubhan. Soon, in 1888, through the work of Babienko, another eight were baptized, and the first Adventist congregation was organized in Stavropol in 1888 while groups of believers were forming in two nearby villages, Mikhailovka and Pelageevka.⁵

Ordination

Babienko was ordained and then elected as church elder. In 1890, in the village of Eigenheim, during one of the first Adventist conferences in Russia, Babienko was ordained as a church elder. In a short time Adventist

companies were organized near Stavropol, in the villages of Mikhailovka and Pelageevka. Having learned of it, the police department filed a lawsuit against Babienko. As a result, Babienko and seven others were exiled to Gerusy in Armenia.⁶ There he continued to preach, and soon afterward there were more than two hundred people observing the Sabbath in the surrounding villages.

At that time Babienko met a wealthy German businessman named Bädcker, who was a deeply religious person. Bädcker understood that Babienko might face a new sentence, and suggested that he flee from Russia to Romania. Babienko consented to this advice, but preferred to flee to Bulgaria, where Protestants were enjoying more freedom. However, he later moved in 1896⁷ to the city of Constanța, in Romania,⁸ because of the illness of his eldest son. The Babienko family stayed in Romania until 1903, when they decided to move to Canada after receiving an invitation from their Adventist friends, the Peterson family.

Later Years

Once in Canada, Babienko acquired a small estate and settled down there with his family members. He also engaged in evangelistic activities, especially among Russian settlers.⁹ He helped in the establishment of a church of about 19 members among Russian settlers in Lonesome Butte.¹⁰ Babienko also organized the first Ruthenian Adventist church in Canada after he baptized 34 Ruthenians.¹¹

Both of his sons attended the mission school and in 1910 were admitted to the Clinton German Seminary (Missouri, U.S.A.). Theofil Babienko gladly observed the spiritual formation of his sons, and especially the eldest, Theofil, who became an outstanding minister. Theofil A. Babienko died in the United States in 1942.

Contribution

Theofil A. Babienko played a major role in the formation and establishment of Adventism in Ukraine and the North Caucasus region. His mission work among Europeans, especially Russian settlers in Canada, is an example of an untiring witness of the gospel despite his advanced age.

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NOTES

1. The full name remains unknown.
2. V. V. Teppone, *Iz Istorii Tzerkvi* ["History of the Church"] (Kaliningrad: Yantarnij Skaz, 1993), 8, 10, 11.
3. *S dobroj vestiu k svojim sootechestvennikam* ["With Good News to Our Fellow Countrymen"] (Zaoksky: Source of Life, 1996), 8.
4. See "Russia" in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, second revised edition* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), 11:476–485; Eugene Zaitsev, *Istoriya Tzerkvi Adventistov Sedmogo Dnya v Rossii*.

[*"History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia"*] (Zaoksky: Source of Life, 2008), 143.

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See A. C. Gilbert, "Foreign Work at Home," *Western Canadian Tidings*, June 21, 1917, 5.

See William M. Ruminson, "Lonesome Butte," *Western Canadian Tidings*, July 5, 1917, 6.

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