

Schaeffler, Wilhelm (1900–1980) and Olga Margaret (Ulm) (1902–1989)

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Wilhelm and Olga Schaeffler worked as missionaries for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and the United States.

Early Life, Marriage, and Family

Wilhelm Schaeffler was born in Bavaria, Germany, on May 1, 1900, to Leonard and Creszenz Schaeffler. After training at the mission seminary in Friedensau by 1924, he immigrated to the United States! He was a preacher for a German-speaking congregation in New York until 1926.²

Olga Margaret Ulm was born in New York, U.S.A., on February 27, 1902, the daughter of German parents. She later became a registered nurse.³ In 1926, Schaeffler married her in New York.⁴ They were blessed with three children, who were both born in Peru: Graciela (born April 9, 1928, in Iquitos),⁵ Willhelm Leonhart (born August 11, 1935), and a son, whose name is not mentioned in any reports (died of pneumonia at the beginning of 1931 at 11 months of age).⁶

In Peru

When the Schaefflers arrived in Brazil on April 9, 1926, they were to face 20 years of adventurous and successful missionary work in South America. The Schaefflers spent most of their missionary time in Peru among the natives in the rainforest.

After serving a brief time in Brazil as superintendent of the Pernambuco mission,⁷ Wilhelm responded to a call to Peru, where they first worked in the mission founded by Ferdinand Stahl in the small town of Iquitos, on the upper Amazon in Peru.⁸ However, Schaeffler's desire was to leave the city and do missionary work in the rainforest among the natives.⁹ After stabilizing at Iquitos in 1928, the well-known missionary Ferdinand Stahl and the Schaefflers headed up the Tambo River to begin their work among the jungle peoples.¹⁰

On the edge of the Gran Pajonal, in the Campas region, on the Ucayali river, Schaeffler and Stahl were able to build the Santaniari mission station with and for the Campa people. Here the Campa Indians got to know the

Christian message and began to pray to God and to keep the Sabbath. The members among the Campa could soon carry the message as missionaries to the dangerous areas of the Gran Pajonal deep in the jungle.¹¹ After the Schaefflers had worked on the Metrao mission founded by Stahl, they left the Amazon and, at the request and pressure of the Campas, they founded the Sutchique Station, which lay at the confluence of the Sutchique and Perené rivers. Here the Schaefflers worked among the Campas and other tribes on the Perené River¹² from November 1930¹³ to 1936, establishing a sustainable work that was characterized by many adventures and deadly threats right from the start.¹⁴

Through their service, the Schaefflers managed to ensure that the inhabitants of the mission village lived according to the Adventist lifestyle while at the same time maintaining their traditional way of life.¹⁵ The Schaefflers were pioneers in the Perené area, where they were the only white people,¹⁶ running a successful and sustainable mission there. By perceiving the needs of the people, by constantly doing the medical work necessary for the indigenous population, and by living in close friendship with them, the Schaefflers won the hearts of the people. Soon, about 400 people who lived in the jungle village were enjoying the advantages of a Christian and Adventist way of life for body and mind.¹⁷ More than 250 of the 400 inhabitants of the village were baptized members of the congregation.¹⁸

Schaeffler was also known as the “pastor with wings.”¹⁹ Due to a lucky coincidence, Schaeffler was frequently able to accompany expedition flights. A small plane came to be known as the “flying monster” with which missionaries were sent out to visit the Indians in the interior. Thus, the Sutchique village was probably the first mission with air traffic and its own airfield in Adventist mission history.²⁰ Because of this unique method, around 1933, more than 40 people from the vast rainforest came to the station and prepared themselves for baptism.²¹

Olga Schaeffler fell ill with malaria in 1933,²² and the Schaeffler family was hit again in 1934 with this disease. At the same time, a measles epidemic spread in the village and caused many deaths among the villagers.²³ Because of this condition, they were forced to end their work in the mission village of Sutchique and to seek a more bearable climate in the coastal town of Pacasmayo, where they served until 1936.²⁴

Meeting with the Natives of Peru: Culture and Mission

The mission theology that Wilhelm Schaeffler developed through years of living with the inhabitants of the rainforest and reflecting on the history of the mission was fundamental for his success and is worthy of recognition. At that time, Christian mission among indigenous peoples came under the criticism that it manifested religious colonialism. The encounters of Europeans and indigenous peoples had indeed led to many problems: slavery, exploitation, destruction of habitat and the indigenous way of life, conflicts, and the introduction of diseases such as measles, against which the immune systems of the rainforest inhabitants had no protection, which led to the destruction of entire peoples. However, Schaeffler strictly dissociated himself from these negative influences of the “white man” and emphasized the necessity of a true Christian mission.²⁵

Schaeffler basically distinguished two kinds of “dangerous savages.” Those who, according to their custom, were made mortal enemies of the whites by misdemeanors of the whites and those who, because of their superstition, became murderers of whites as well as of their own fellow tribesmen.²⁶ Schaeffler saw the numerous tropical diseases that the indigenous peoples could not cope with. He also tried to fight with superstition, which partly led to the destruction of whole tribes. From a Western point of view, the immoral ways of life of the individual tribes were seen as a problem to be treated. In contrast to the Indian tribes that, because of their “fear of ghosts, cannibalism, headhunting, idolatry, blood revenge, human sacrifice, sorcery, the belief in medicine, the miserable fate of women, the marriage of children, tribal feuds and slavery,”²⁷ according to Schaeffler “did not contribute to make the existence of the savages more beautiful or happy,” he viewed it as his Christian duty to improve their lives in this world through practical help and the gospel and to prepare them for eternity.

Schaeffler also stated that the influence of the (European) missionaries would not necessarily complicate the lives of the forest dwellers, as was the case with the introduction of European ways of life, because Schaeffler’s approach was consistently oriented toward the observance of the traditional way of life. The introduction of religious formalities also did not contribute to a complication because the customs in the daily life of the Indian tribes were more closely connected with religious ideas than was the case with the Europeans. Likewise, he did not see his task as impressing the indigenous peoples with an artificial sense of guilt because this was already present in their psyche. Much more pronounced among them was that they had always had a need for reconciliation. Thus Schaeffler stated: “The purpose of mission among the heathen is not to cause or exploit guilt but to clear it away through the word of salvation and reconciliation.”²⁸ Schaeffler was convinced that what he was doing was in every way good for the natives, and his view was confirmed by the testimonies and fruit of his work.²⁹

Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and the United States

After the Schaefflers ended their service in Peru, they continued to work in Bolivia until 1939, where they also carried out an adventurous and successful mission among the indigenous peoples. That year, after a short furlough in their home country, they moved on to Ecuador.³⁰ Here again, the Schaefflers planned to work among the natives.³¹ During this time the Schaefflers worked in Quito.³² Attracted again by the depth of the jungle and the desire to pursue a mission among indigenous peoples far away from Western civilization, the Schaefflers founded the Tasto Station in 1940, the first Adventist mission among the Indians in Ecuador.³³

In 1942, they were transferred to Argentina.³⁴ It is not known what the Schaefflers did there during their stay of about four years. Their 20 years in South America came to an end in 1946 when they moved to the United States. In the 5 years of service for the German-speaking church in Chicago, Illinois,³⁵ and the following 15 years in the German-speaking church in Los Angeles, California, the work of the Schaefflers was consistently

evangelistic and provided for growing and healthy churches.³⁶

Later Life

After several years of mission and pastoral service, the Schaefflers retired to Hawaii in 1965.³⁷ They were not idle during this time. On the Kona coast of the island of Hawaii in Kona-Kohala District, they continued to work pastorally and through interdenominational relationships for the Adventist congregation during their retirement. Schaeffler spent his last years in Bellflower, California,³⁸ and died on August 10, 1980, in Los Angeles, California.³⁹ Olga Schaeffler died on October 31, 1989, in Moberly, Randolph County, Missouri.⁴⁰

Contribution

The Schaefflers' contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church was not achieved by a leadership office in an urban region, which is often the main focus of attention and in which case results can be easily quantified. Rather, their contribution was marked by an unprecedented commitment to reaching those ethnic groups that no European or Christian missionary had previously reached. It was the dedication and the missionary methods of the Schaefflers that, in the regions traditionally ruled by Catholic mission, led a priest to assert that "the Adventists achieved more in 4 months than we did in 400 years."⁴¹ It is known that the Campas and other Indian peoples who lived with the Schaefflers in the Sutchique Mission, which was later supervised by J. C. Ruskier (later growing in number to over 500 believers), left it to build a new station in another place and to continue the work begun by the Schaefflers.

Schaeffler and his wife may be considered some of the most important missionaries who ensured that the Adventist Church would ultimately grow tremendously in South America. The service of charity that the Schaefflers practiced for the native inhabitants of South America did not have the public significance and the visible effects as an administrative task, but Wilhelm Schaeffler was so close to the people that the model of Christ unfolded in their work, so their history must not be forgotten. Their work can serve as a textbook for successful Adventist mission in the present and in the future.

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NOTES

1. He most probably attended the defunct mission seminary at Neanderteal since his name is not in the student lists in Friedensau from 1899 to 1943. See the List of Students in Friedensau, 1899–1943, in Historical Archives of the Seventh-day Adventists in Europe.
2. "Greater New York: News Items," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, March 3, 1926, 3.
3. Social Security Death Index, 1951, 327-28-4548, Ancestry.com. The obituary of her mother also confirms that she was born in the Ulm family from Germany. See O. F. Schwedrat, "Emma Ulm obituary," *Lake Union Herald*, June 24, 1941, 6.
4. Carlyle B. Haynes, "Pioneering in the Jungles," *Life Boat Magazine* 33, no. 8 (1930): 232–234.
5. See Wilhelm Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle* (Zürich: Advent-Verlag, 1938), 63.
6. Birth certificate of Wilhelm Leonhart Schaeffler, in the private collection of Eve Link, the family genealogist; N. P. Neilsen, "The Little Grave in the Jungle," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, July 6, 1932, 1–2.
7. He was superintendent until the beginning of 1927. See Carlyle B. Haynes, "Union Session in Brazil," *South American Bulletin*, March 1927, 1.
8. It should be noted that apart from Catholic missionaries who wanted to keep the upper hand in this area, the Adventist Mission was the only Protestant effort in the area, attracting the attention of Catholic priests, who were driven by public campaigns and sabotage. Actions to suppress this work were sought. However, this aroused a public appeal, and as a result, the interest in the population for the Adventist missionaries and their message was really awakened. Schaeffler's efforts increased the number of visitors from 40 to more than 200 through public lectures, so new meeting locations had to be procured. Therefore, before missionaries Stahl and Westphal reached that area, Schaeffler paved the way with public meetings and dedicated missionary work, which resulted in a highly successful work of overwhelming public approval. See Wilhelm Schaeffler, "Die Mission am oberen Amazonas," *Adventbote*, March 15, 1928, 91; Carlyle B. Haynes, "The Amazon Opened No. 4," *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, August 29, 1928, 2–3.
9. Haynes, "Pioneering in the Jungles," 234.
10. Carlyle B. Haynes, "The Inca Union Meeting," *ARH*, June 14, 1928, 11.
11. In many cases caucasian people were killed and fell victim to cannibalism, whereby the Indians hoped to gain the abilities of their victim. In general, intruders were reluctant; the individual Indian tribes fought each other in the most brutal way, and their horror against whites was at least as great. See Wilhelm Schaeffler, "Das Wort vom Kreuz unter den wilden Campas," *Der Adventbote*, June 15, 1929, 186.

12. Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle*, 61–62.
13. Edna Walker Colburn, "The Sutchique Mission," *Home and School: A Journal of Christian Education* 26, no. 1 (1933): 19, 28.
14. So it was the wish of the Campa Indians, but not of the Amuesha tribe, that a missionary should settle there. However, the robbery and murder plans were passed on to an Indian of the Campa tribe, who immediately passed this message on to Schaeffler and the rest of the Campa tribe. This enabled Schaeffler, at the inauguration of the mission, at which the Amueshas were present, to publicly expose the plan to their shame and in a clear under-number compared to the Campas. When 9 of the 10 Amueshas took flight after they were granted mercy and thus practical doctrine—contrary to the usual procedure of the revenge-oriented Indians—the chief Santos—overwhelmed by the mercy—returned to his promise with his family to live afterward in the mission and to be baptized two years later. See Schaeffler, "Vom Kriegspfad zur Taufklasse," 92–93. Beside the other dangers of the jungle, like poisonous reptiles, predators, disease-transmitting insects like the malaria mosquito, deadly diseases like the swamp fever or measles epidemics leading to death in the jungle and other unknown diseases, and fire ants, the "wild tribes" of the jungle and "opponents" of the mission often kidnapped missionaries. Also, the topic of slavery was not yet finished in this practically lawless zone of the jungle at the time of the Schaefflers. These reports, many in number, would, however, go beyond the scope here. For some of Schaeffler's experiences see the work published by the German Advent-Verlag: Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle*.
15. An engineer who visited the mission was amazed: "Mr. Thompson, there is not another village in all Peru like this one. Here there is not one that drinks alcoholic liquors, not one that smokes, not one that chews coca, and they all seem to be happy and contented, with all and more than they need to eat. It is a unique village." See J. T. Thompson, "The Peruvian Mission," *ARH*, November 17, 1932, 13.
16. Colburn, "The Sutchique Mission," 28.
17. Due to the advantages of the mission village like the good medical care, food by cultivation and storage, and the peaceful way of life, attracted by the gospel, more and more relatives of the villagers joined, committed themselves to live according to the customs of the mission village, and were baptized after some years of living together to become a member of the Christian community as well. See Wilhelm Schaeffler, "Sechs Jahre in den Dschungeln des Amazonas der 'grünen Hölle': Rundfunk-Vortrag gehalten in München," November 26, 1931, 5–6.
18. Colburn, "The Sutchique Mission," 19. The close relationship between the Schaefflers and the tribes with whom they lived becomes clear from the fact that shortly before the Schaefflers' holiday abroad began, the natives were not prepared to let their "Pastori" go, fearing that he would not return. After it was ruled out that the aborigines would keep the Schaeffler's daughter as a pledge until they returned, a pole was set up inside the village, from which the villagers could read when the ninth full moon was about to break after their departure, before which Schaeffler had promised to be back. This promise was kept, and when the Schaefflers were now back in their homeland, the return was celebrated with a big party. See Familie Schaeffler, "Wieder daheim," *Der Adventbote*, July 15, 1932, 220–221.
19. J. L. Brown, "'Our Pastor with Wings,'" *South American Bulletin*, November 1933, 5.

20. Familie Schaeffler, "Wieder daheim," 220–221.
21. Oliver Montgomery, "Advancement in the Face of Adversity," *Ministry* (June 1933): 12–13, 13.
22. "Inca Union News Items," *South American Bulletin*, November 1933, 3.
23. L. D. Minner, "News Notes from the Inca Union," *South American Bulletin*, April 1934, 3–4.
24. Wilhelm Schaeffler, "Work and Fight Hard," *South American Bulletin*, April 1936, 7.
25. Schaeffler notes with regard to the mission history of South America: "If the wild Indians are such good people, then why do they murder missionaries, as one so often reads in the newspapers? I have talked about this with such murderers, and they have given me two reasons. The first is that the missionaries don't always bring the gospel of action, practical Christianity, the only thing the savages understand, but a talk of religion and morality, ideas that don't interest the savage and are too abstract to impress him. If one goes undesirably among the pagan jungle dwellers and merely imposes on them an alien worldview, how one forces a saddle on an unwilling horse in order to tame it, it can be very easy that this attempt costs the life of the conversion-seeking zealot. Not all missionaries murdered in the jungle have died as witnesses of their faith, but many of them, as victims of their ignorance." (Translated from the German original.) See Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle*, 106–107. The Schaefflers, on the other hand, differed in their work and their point of view, their relationship to the natives with whom they lived. Later, Schaeffler noted in retrospect that a successful missionary is "a genuine Christian with a deep love for people regardless of race, color or creed." So it was unrestricted Christian love that made the difference in Schaeffler's work and led to success. See Miller Brockett, "MV Briefs," *Pacific Union Recorder*, November 23, 1953, 6.
26. Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle*, 104–105.
27. *Ibid.*, 61.
28. Translation from German. See Wilhelm Schaeffler, "Ist Heidenmission notwendig?" *Der Adventbote*, March 15, 1939, 86–88.
29. Schaeffler, *Als Pionier in der grünen Hölle*, 109–110.
30. H. B. Lundquist, "Inca Notes," *South American Bulletin*, May 1939, 8.
31. Schaeffler planned a new Indian mission in the Sucumbios region, in the north of Ecuador. The Indians living there had a hostile dislike for whites because of their history with the Spanish Conquistadores, who almost completely exterminated them and destroyed their once high culture, just as with the Peruvian tribes in which the Schaefflers once worked. See H. B. Lundquist, "Ecuador," *South American Bulletin*, December 1939, 4.

32. Quito, the capital of Ecuador, centrally located in the northern part of the country, already had well over 100,000 inhabitants in Schaeffler's time. "Stamps: Exchange," *Youth's Instructor*, June 25, 1940, 13; H. O. Olson, "A Visit to Ecuador," *ARH*, January 4, 1940, 19. Quito, the capital of Ecuador, centrally located in the northern part of the country, already had well over 100,000 inhabitants in Schaeffler's time.
33. Olson, "A Visit to Ecuador," 19-20.
34. Carl Becker, "Central Argentina Reports," *South American Bulletin*, September 1942, 6.
35. Theodore Carcich, "District Leadership Changes," *Lake Union Herald*, November 19, 1946, 11.
36. "Elder Schaeffler was an outstanding, lively speaker. As pastor of the German church, he succeeded in increasing the membership of the church, which now has grown to 130 active members, most of whom are below age 40." Roland Blaich, "German Church Pastor Retires," *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 23, 1965, 5.
37. Ibid.
38. See "Directory of Workers," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1980), 784.
39. "Necrology," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), 512.
40. 1910 United States Federal Census, 1910, Census Place: Manhattan Ward 12, New York, Ancestry.com.
41. N. P. Neilsen, "Progress in the Inca Union," *ARH*, July 14, 1932, 11.

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