

Hessel, Albert Hugo (1897–1985)

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Albert Hessel was a German missionary to Ethiopia and Iran.

Early Life

Albert Hessel was born March 4, 1897, in Auerbach/Vogtland in Germany.¹ He was the son of Franz Louis Hessel and Anna Mart Todt.² He was raised in a Protestant family and in 1914 he joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church through baptism.³ Hessel served as a soldier in the First World War.⁴ In 1920, after completing training as a merchant,⁵ he became a pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁶

Education and Marriage

To be fully equipped for his ministry, Hessel began attending the Mission Seminary in Friedensau 1920⁷ and he spent about a year studying at Newbold College in England.⁸ On May 10, 1929, in Addis Ababa, he was married to Marta Lauk (born July 6, 1899, in Upper Silesia).⁹ Their first child, Wolfgang, was born in Addis Ababa on January 31, 1931,¹⁰ while their daughter was born in Gleiwitz on August 23, 1934, during their furlough in Germany.¹¹

First Period of Mission Service in Ethiopia

In 1923 Hessel began serving as treasurer of the East German Conference.¹² On September 9, 1927, he was sent to work in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) as a missionary. Initially he was stationed in Addis Ababa,¹³ where he began learning the Amharic language.¹⁴ He was in Ethiopia until the Italian invasion of 1936.

In February 1929, Hessel was transferred to the mission station in Balbaleti.¹⁵ There he founded a school in which he hoped to impact children and adolescents as well as train Ethiopian nationals.¹⁶ While working there, Hessel saw his primary role in the mission field as reaching as many natives as possible. He reasoned that if there were to be any notable success, it would be up to the nationals to present the Adventist message in their own social context, since foreign missionaries were limited in various ways, including language and cultural barriers.¹⁷ His methods included public lectures and colporteur ministry.¹⁸

In 1931 he became the director of the East Abyssinian Mission of Balbaleti. Around 1932 the Hessels returned to Addis Ababa when he was made treasurer and field secretary of the Ethiopian Union Mission.¹⁹ During this time he toured the sparsely populated empire of Abyssinia and in many places reached people who had not known the name of Jesus Christ.²⁰

In 1935 Hessel began construction of the mission station in Godjam, despite the outbreak of war between Ethiopia and Italy.²¹ When the Italian troops got the upper hand in Abyssinia in 1936, Hessel and other missionaries were captured at the end of April and deported to Germany after about two and half months.²² Thus, the work of the Hessels in Abyssinia was ended by the military unrest.²³

Hessel's View of the People and Culture of Ethiopia

In his descriptions of the people and culture of Ethiopia, Albert Hessel not only used military language, but he also judged the country and its people from the point of view of military history and strategy at the beginning of his service.²⁴

Hessel always stressed the difference between “blacks and whites.” Often Hessel referred to the battle with the Italians of 1896 in Abua, to note that the victory of the Ethiopians was not a reason for them to feel superior or equal to the Europeans. Hessel believed he was able to observe two essential characteristics of “the Abyssinian” who, according to him, was generally in danger of becoming a Christian because of certain advantages which included improper motivations, his great instability, and the love of material things.

He also regarded “the Abyssinian” as a proud man and as reserved towards Whites.²⁵ Hessel's focus was therefore on the differences between ethnic groups, rather than emphasizing certain equality based on a Christian worldview. The political conditions of his time, as well as his military service in the First World War, seem to have influenced his worldview, although he clearly distanced himself from national socialism.²⁶ Towards the end of his mission service and on the basis of his experience with the natives who faithfully supported him in times of need, Hessel stated that he and his family had “come to love this land with its coloured inhabitants.”²⁷

Internment

After spending a short time in Germany, the Hessels traveled to Persia in April 1938,²⁸ where Albert served as secretary and treasurer of the Iranian Union and as director of the Iranian Literature Society.²⁹ The Hessels were stationed in Tehran, the capital, from where Hessel sometimes traveled to distant communities.³⁰ However, they did not have much time to work there. With the invasion of Persia by the Allied forces, Hessel was captured and his family was sent to Europe.³¹ While his family went to Germany, Hessel was taken by the British troops to Australia as a civilian prisoner.³²

Later Life

From 1941 to 1945 Albert Hessel was interned in South Australia.³³ In 1947, Hessel obtained Australian citizenship and, owing to the circumstances, returned to his former work as an accountant for the Sanitarium Health Food Company in Adelaide where he remained until his retirement. He also continued to serve the Adventist Church in Australia with some pastoral responsibilities. On July 13, 1948, the family was reunited after eight years of separation and started a new life in Adelaide. On January 21, 1985, Albert passed away in Adelaide at the age of 87. His wife Marta followed him to rest on June 2, 1988, at the age of 88 at the Lutheran Nursing Home, Glynde.

Contribution

Albert Hessel was one of those missionaries who worked in sparsely populated countries like Ethiopia, and in culturally-challenging countries like Iran, at a time when it was a challenge to carry the Adventist message to those extreme corners of the earth. With the training of nationals and the construction of centers of influence such as mission schools and hospitals, Hessel focused on those missionary foundations that contributed to the early growth and establishment of the Adventist Church in Ethiopia. The work in Iran required missionaries like Hessel, who in times of turmoil such as the Second World War, and in the face of the mortal danger due to the hostile nations, pushed the work of the Adventist Church with all their strength.

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NOTES

1. See *Einwohnerverzeichnis Friedensau*, Historical Archives of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe.

2. Karl Rieckmann, Email to Matti Neumann, July 18, 2019. Franz Lois was born January 24, 1867, in Tippersdorf and worked as a senior postman. He died at the age of 94. Anna Marta was born November 4, 1866, in Neuemühle and died at the age of 94. The Hessel family had three daughters besides Albert. Albert's parents became Adventists in the early 1920s. Karl Rieckmann, email to Matti Neumann, July 19, 2019.

3. H. Zschunke, "Missionary Albert Hessel," *Adventbote*, May 1, 1985, 12.

4. Karl Rieckmann, email to Matti Neumann, July 16, 2019.

5. Ibid.

6. In *Einwohnerverzeichnis Friedensau*, in the register of inhabitants of Friedensau the entry year of Hessel was recorded as 1920. Thus, between the years 1914 and 1920, he must have served in the First World War (until 1918) and completed an apprenticeship. That he completed his education before 1914 is also conceivable.
7. See *Einwohnerverzeichnis Friedensau*, Historical Archives of Seventh-day Adventists in Europe.
8. Rieckmann, email to author, July 18, 2019.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. Wolfgang later became a theology teacher in Peru. See G. Smith, "Fostering a Secure Future," *Australasian Record*, October 27, 1984, 12. He died on March 21, 2015, in Abbotsford, Canada. See Mission City Record and Black Press Group Ltd., "Wolfgang Hessel," accessed July 11, 2019, <https://www.missioncityrecord.com/obituaries/wolfgang-hessel/>.
11. Rieckmann to Neumann. Rosemarie married Dr. Karl Rieckmann on March 12, 1957. They both lived in Queensland, Australia.
12. Zschunke, "Missionary Albert Hessel," 12.
13. Albert Hessel, "Reiseerinnerungen," *Adventbote*, February 15, 1928.
14. Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien," *Adventbote*, June 1, 1928, 171.
15. Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien," *Der Adventbote*, November 15, 1929, 348-350.
16. Hessel did not just see the challenges in the merely formalized Christian society in Abyssinia, but rather in the achievement of Muslims, who were dissatisfied with Christianity because of imminent difficulties in their social context. In a report about it, the Hessels are photographed in a photo with mission students. See Albert and M. Hessel, "From Abyssinia," *Adventbote*, May 1, 1931, 139-142. Rosemarie confirms in her testimonial that her father trained missionary students, which he himself did not mention. See Rosemarie Rieckmann, "The Grace of God in our Lives (1)," November 2017, 1 (This review appeared in the local journal "Good News" of the Caloundra Adventist Retirement Village in Queensland. See also "From In & Out & Round About," *The Advent Survey*, February 1931, 8.
17. Albert Hessel, "Den Gemeinden der Oberschlesischen Vereinigung," *Adventbote*, February 1, 1928, 38.
18. Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien" *Der Adventbote*, March 15, 1933, 96. It was in the process of doing the colporteur work that he translated the book *Steps to Christ* into Abyssinian. See Ibid., 95.
19. "Ethiopian Union Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933), 151. At the same time, he worked hard to build the literature evangelism department in that region. See J. J. Strahle, "The Beginning of the Literature Work in Ethiopia," *The Advent Survey*, October 1932, 14.

20. Albert Hessel, "Hebt eure Augen auf und sehet das Feld," *Adventbote*, August 1, 1968, 291-292
21. By the time the war had started, several missionary families were leaving to their home countries based on advice from their embassies. However, Hessel remained in Ethiopia for the sake of the mission. See Zschunke, 12.
22. Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien: (Fortsetzung aus Nr. 24 letzten Jahres)," *Adventbote*, February 1, 1936, 42-43. See also Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien," *Adventbote*, March 3, 1928, 90.
23. Albert Hessel, "Aus Abessinien," *Adventbote*, March 15, 1937, 85. Hessel, Mr. and Mrs. Erik Palm were moved by the Italian troops from Debre Tabor to Gondor in April/May 1936. Rieckmann, Email to author. After two and a half months of captivity, they were then able to travel to Germany. The secretary of the General Conference, E. D. Dick, described the capture by the Italians as follows: "They drove him and his family out of their house, put them on donkeys and brought them quickly to Asmara." It took about "two weeks to become infected with malaria and dysentery" and at their destination "they were thrown into jail and treated like criminals." See N. A. Ferris, "In Prison, and Ye Visited me," *Australasian Record*, April 17, 1944, 8.
24. For instance, he described the emergency situation of the mission observed by him with these words: "Wenn das Notsignal aus dem Graben aufsteigt, muß der Soldat an die Front." ["When the distress signal rises from the ditch, the soldier must go to the front."] See Hessel, *Aus Abessinien*, 382.
25. Hessel, "Aus Abessinien," 171.
26. See Johannes Hartlapp, *Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten im Nationalsozialismus*. Kirche - Konfession - Religion, vol. 53 (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2008), 418.

Furthermore, a certain racial language can be found in Hessel which, at that time, was not uncommon even outside of national socialism. For example, he noted, "from the beautiful, racy, colorful face down to the ordinary negro type with a flat nose and thick, bulging lips, one meets them here." And in 1928, after initial prejudices, he stated that "black people are human too." See Hessel, *Aus Abyssinia*, 171, *Ibid.*, 170.
27. Hessel, *Aus Abessinien*, 85.
28. A. W. Cormack, "Laborers Together With God," *ARH*, February 24, 1938, 15.
29. "Iran," and "Iran Literature Society," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1939), 99, 300.
30. "Spiritual Gains Despite Great Obstacles: An Afternoon with Central European Division, Section II," *ARH*, June 1, 1941, 93.
31. E. D. Dick, "Day of Intercession for Interned Missionaries: October 30," *ARH*, October 14, 1943, 3-4.
32. Zschunke, *Missionary Albert Hessel*, 13.

33. Email, Rieckmann to author, July 16, 2019.

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