

Oss, Olga Bertina (Osnes) (1897–1977)

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Missionary to China, colporteur, fundraiser for Adventist and Red Cross hospitals and educational institutions, writer, and public speaker. Oss witnessed the Shanghai incident and the Second Sino-Japanese War in Shanghai and was a World War II Japanese concentration-camp survivor. Oss with her husband John returned to China after recuperating in the United States and stayed until they were forced to leave by the Communist Chinese government in 1950.

Early Years

Olga Bertina Osnes (hereafter referred to by her married surname Oss) was born on August 9, 1897, in Norfolk, Nebraska, to the large farm family of Peter Johannesen Osnes (1847-1933) and Tomina Regina Berentsen (1867-1905). After working as a sailor, Osnes had immigrated to the United States and married fellow Norwegian immigrant Berensten in Iowa on May 16, 1890.¹ In 1910 the Osnes family moved from Nebraska to South Dakota.

Oss attended seven years of school in Newman Grove, Nebraska, one in Burke, South Dakota, and two years at Plainview Academy. She was converted to Adventism during an evangelistic campaign in the summer of 1915 and baptized that fall. Oss worked as a colporteur to offset the costs of school at Plainview Academy in Redfield, South Dakota.² As a teenager Oss was an active leader of the Missionary Volunteer Society in her church and



Olga Oss

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wrote reports of the activities of several youth outreach groups for the regional denominational periodical, the *Northern Union Reaper*.³

Olga and John Oss (1892-1959) were married on September 17, 1917. She had known John for years prior to their marriage. Their fathers, Peter J. Osnes and Ole G. Oss (1861-1938), were lifelong friends and moved from Nebraska to South Dakota at about the same time. The young couple's fathers even died within two days of one another.⁴

Oss spent their first year of marriage at Plainview Academy while John finished his senior year.⁵ After their marriage Oss continued to participate in evangelistic and canvassing work with her husband.⁶ The couple had only one child, a son named Milan Thomas, born on August 8, 1918, and weighing only four and a half pounds at birth.⁷ He died in infancy.⁸ Shortly after this tragedy, John was recruited at the 1919 South Dakota camp meeting by General Conference President A. G. Daniells to lead colporteur work in Manchuria.⁹ Partially due to the recent death of their son, Oss later stated that she was extremely reticent about going as a missionary.¹⁰

Missionary to China

On October 16, 1919, the couple left San Francisco on the S.S. *China* for Manchuria.¹¹ The trip did not go smoothly. When they arrived in China, they knew no Chinese nor how to contact other Seventh-day Adventist missionaries. This led to rather a rough start to their mission service.¹² They spent their first six months in China learning Mandarin at the Peking Union Language School in Beijing.¹³ From there they were sent to Mukden, Manchuria (now called Shenyang) where John was to lead the Home Missionary Department and the Publishing Department and organize a Harvest Ingathering campaign. The General Conference Executive Committee had only called John, not his wife, as a missionary, initially leaving her without an official role, except as a missionary's wife in China.¹⁴ John traveled frequently, and Oss recognized that he would not be able to spearhead an Ingathering campaign to raise funds for a new Adventist school in Manchuria. Lonely, only beginning to speak and understand Chinese, and seeing a lacuna, Oss decided to attempt to solicit funds from foreign businessmen and to her surprise was successful. She, thus, found a lifelong mission to raise funds for Adventist schools and hospitals in China.

While in Mukden several Chinese women asked Oss to train them as colporteurs. Oss was aware of how little she knew of the Chinese language and culture and expressed anxiety about training them but, nonetheless, agreed to travel and canvass with them in Yingkou (formerly Yingkow) and Dalian (formerly Dairen). While in Dalian, Oss fell seriously ill and returned to Mukden. Mukden at the time was the center of a struggle between warlords Wu Peifu and Zhang Zuolin. While ill, Oss saw the execution of sixteen men. The next day she fell unconscious and was taken to the Presbyterian Hospital. While in the hospital, Chinese church members spent the night praying for her. ¹⁵ Oss attributed her healing to "that faithful loyal group of Christians."¹⁶ The experience was transformative for Oss, causing her to resolve "then and there that from thenceforward my life

should be gladly spent for China.”

Oss initially only solicited funds for Harvest Ingathering among Americans and Europeans but accidentally expanded to fundraising with the Chinese when she entered a Chinese-run business instead of one with a foreign manager and found the Chinese manager happy to contribute. Oss along with fellow foreign and Chinese women colporteurs distributed and solicited subscriptions to *Signs of the Times* in English and Chinese.

¹⁷ Eventually she expanded to canvassing Japanese businessmen in Manchuria and Shanghai.¹⁸ Of her early missionary experience, Oss wrote, “It seems to be a woman’s lot to be alone a good deal of the time in a foreign field . . . But . . . there is nothing better than to pack a small portfolio full of books and go out canvassing. This is a real tonic to both soul and body.”¹⁹

The indomitable Oss traveled widely throughout northeastern China including to Yingkou (formerly known to Europeans as Newchwang), Qingdao (Tsingtao), and Jinan (Tsinan). John encouraged Oss that it was more culturally appropriate in China to approach the governor first before soliciting funds in the region and then with the governor’s imprimatur fundraise. She found the deputy governor of Shandong Province especially helpful by personally raising \$400 for her from among the government officials.²⁰ She was specifically named along with other unnamed “workers, both foreign and Chinese,” as raising the funds to pay for the building of Tsinan Industrial Mission School and ensuring it opened debt free.²¹

In 1924 the denominational leadership in China decided to transfer John, partially due to his great success in canvassing in Manchuria, to head the Field Mission and Home Mission departments in East China Union Mission in Shanghai. This transfer was completed by the next year.²² In addition to his other responsibilities in Shanghai, John was involved in initiatives to expand the Seventh-day Adventist Church into Mongolia and later western China and Tibet. In October 1929 she was recruited to accompany Pastor and Mrs. Frederick Lee to Manila to raise funds to build Manila Sanitarium.²³ Oss experienced the Shanghai Incident in 1932, which along with the Mukden Incident in Manchuria the year before were precursors to the Second Sino-Japanese War.²⁴ In 1936 and 1937, she traveled with her husband to western China and participated in his expansion of Adventist outreach and medical missions in Chengdu and Kangding (formerly Tatsienlu).²⁵

But much of her time in the 1920s and 1930s was spent closer to Shanghai in training Chinese women as colporteurs, distributing and selling Adventist periodicals and books, and fundraising for the building and maintenance of hospitals, including those in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Canton, under the auspices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Red Cross. She also raised money to pay for the medical care of indigent patients.²⁶

John and Olga returned to the United States on their first furlough in the summer of 1926. Oss recorded praying on one leg of their boat voyage back to the United States with a Christian Chinese woman in an arranged marriage with a non-Christian.²⁷ They returned to the United States via Europe visiting John’s brother who was serving as a missionary in India and relatives in Norway along the way. Always busy during furloughs, Oss

preached at Adventist churches about their experiences in China to raise awareness, as well as, undoubtedly, money.²⁸

In the winter of 1932 to 1933, Oss and Mrs. Miller traveled to Mukden to solicit permission and funds from the Young Marshal Zhang Xueliang (also known as Peter H. L. Chang and Chang Hsao-Liang, the son of murdered warlord of Manchuria—Zhang Zuolin) for an Adventist sanitarium there. Zhang acceded to their request and in turn asked to meet with Harry Miller. Zhang urged them to build a sanitarium larger than the one in Shanghai and offered them land and funds for the new sanitarium, later called the Shenyang Hospital.²⁹ Presumably, this meeting with Zhang also resulted in Oss's sister Bertha Osnes to be recruited by Zhang to work for his family as a nurse on their trip to Europe in 1933.³⁰

Oss spoke of her experiences in China before the General Conference Autumn Session in 1934.³¹ Her talk resulted in the publication of *Triumphs of Faith*, her account of her activities and Adventist medical missions in China. The denomination included her book in the Church Officers' Reading Course.³² Oss's book particularly focused attention on the contribution of women, both Chinese and expatriate, in fundraising and personal evangelism. One of her final chapters was a tribute to Petra Tunheim, the Norwegian-born pioneer missionary and director of West Java Mission. Suffering from poor health, Tunheim had been sent to Shanghai in the attempt to recoup her health. Despite her illness, Tunheim learned Chinese and actively participated in evangelism in Shanghai. Seeking to inspire her American readers to emulate the Chinese and missionaries like Tunheim, Oss particularly emphasized the generosity of the Chinese, writing that "The Chinese people are very liberal in their gifts to charity, when they have confidence in the project presented to them."³³

Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II

Oss was to see a significant amount of war during her years in China. Some of her eyewitness accounts were later printed in American newspapers. In 1937 Oss and her husband delayed fleeing when the Japanese attacked Shanghai during the Second Sino-Japanese war. Therefore, she was one of the last two foreign women to evacuate.³⁴ Eventually they were forced to evacuate to Manila and from there to Hong Kong. Her correspondence published in an American newspaper graphically described the death and devastation of the bombing upon Shanghai citizens. The two children and wife of Mr. Wang, the head artist of the Adventist press, were killed in the bombing. Oss described attempting to volunteer to help some of the victims at Lester (also known as Renji) Hospital. The doctor turned her away as it was too late to save the patients. When the couple finally evacuated, the ship that they were on, the S.S. *President Hoover*, was damaged by a bomb.³⁵ Oss returned to Shanghai when active fighting was over. The foreign concessions in Shanghai were relatively peaceful between 1937 to 1941, but much of China was involved in active war. Refugees flooded the International Settlement in Shanghai. The Chinese part of Shanghai had a Japanese-controlled puppet government. The violence occasionally touched John and Olga personally, for example, when Tang Shaoyi, a Chinese statesman

who had supported Oss's fundraising efforts, was murdered.³⁶

The couple were in Shanghai for the quadrennial session of the China Division in April and May 1939. Shortly thereafter, they returned to the United States on furlough. During their time in the United States, Oss spoke of her experiences in China and fundraised for Red Cross hospitals (Adventists cooperated with the Red Cross in staffing, financially supporting, and running hospitals in China) and Adventist schools.³⁷ By November of 1939, they had returned to Shanghai.

Prior to Pearl Harbor, the United States State Department realized that the situation in Asia was becoming dangerous and by the spring of 1941 encouraged denominations with missionaries in China to evacuate them. At that time the General Conference Executive Committee recommended that Oss along with other women missionaries and children, be relocated to the United States or countries deemed safer, like the Philippines or India, due to the European or American military forces located there.³⁸ Oss did not evacuate. The day after Pearl Harbor the Japanese military sent forces to secure control over the International Settlement, and Oss realized they had waited too long.³⁹

The missionaries from Allied nations were told to get their affairs in order as they would shortly be interned in camps. Illness and lack of food and medicine, rather than direct cruelty, were the main problems in the camp. According to an American civilian who was released early from the Shanghai internment camp, Oss was "a great favorite with the other prisoners because of her kindness and helpfulness to them" and served as the receptionist of the camp.⁴⁰ The ever gregarious and busy Oss was one of the women who interacted with the Japanese commander of the camp and attempted to advocate for the needs of women and children. In the last year of the war, food grew more and more spartan. Food delivered from the Red Cross contributed to saving the interned noncombatants from starvation. Her husband John, suffering from malnutrition, became so ill that he was removed from the camp. She did not know until after the war what had happened to him and whether he was still alive. Except for bouts with malaria, intestinal parasites, and shingles, Oss remained mostly healthy. After the war she found him barely alive in a Shanghai hospital. He fell into a coma shortly thereafter. Both she and John attributed his survival and later recovery to the generosity and prayers of Chinese Adventists and God.⁴¹

Post-World War II

John miraculously recovered, and they were eventually taken aboard the hospital ship *USS Refuge* to Okinawa and later transferred to *USS Sanctuary* for return to the United States.⁴² John was voted \$950.35 from the General Conference as a rehabilitation allowance.⁴³ While recuperating in the United States, Oss spoke at Adventist churches and public events of their experience during World War II and solicited funds for an Ingathering campaign.⁴⁴ As soon as the opportunity arose and they were medically cleared, in late 1947, John and Olga Oss returned to Shanghai, but the Chinese Civil War pressed ever closer. Runaway inflation exacerbated by the war created challenges to rebuilding institutions and paying employees.⁴⁵ Oss and her

husband were reticent to leave China despite war conditions. They along with Abbie Dunn were among the last expatriate Adventist missionaries in China and were expelled by the new Chinese Communist government in 1950.⁴⁶ Both Oss expressed assurance that the Chinese pastors, colporteurs, and administrators were fully capable of continuing to spread the Adventist message in China.⁴⁷

John died from heart trouble in 1959 while researching a book on the Sabbath and China in Berkeley, California. John had spent his final years using his Chinese skills to translate Ellen White books into Mandarin and pastoring a Chinese church. Oss spent this same time raising awareness of Chinese missions and speaking about her wartime experiences. Oss had been in San Jose when she received a call from her husband that alerted her to the fact that he was not well.⁴⁸ Oss contacted Dr. Joseph Hwang to send a doctor to John, but she and the doctor arrived too late to save him.⁴⁹ Shortly before his death, the couple had adopted three Chinese orphans.⁵⁰ Oss died on November 22, 1977, in Phoenix, Arizona.⁵¹

Legacy

Oss proved influential by training other women as colporteurs and fundraisers. She raised significant amounts of money for many of the medical and educational institutions that the Adventist Chinese mission movement during the period was so well known for. She traveled extensively throughout China often with only another woman as a companion during a period scarred by frequent warfare, instability, and banditry. She developed close relationships with the Chinese women who fundraised and canvassed with her and wealthy Chinese government officials, businessmen, and women who contributed to her many fundraising efforts. Oss highlights the often-overlooked legacy of the wives of better-known male missionaries, who contribute despite not having official leadership positions.

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