



Iosif Seniavski and his wife.

Photo courtesy of D.O. Yunak.

Seniavski, Iosif (I zeps) Aleksandrovich (1900-1964)

DMITRY O. YUNAK

Dmitry O. Yunak graduated in Finance and Economics from a Soviet secular educational institution and completed a six-year course of Theology at an underground SDA Theological Institute (Moldova, USSR). In the Soviet times, he served as a pastor, administrator, and bible/history professor in the underground Theological Institute. In 1990, he was appointed as Treasurer and Publishing Ministries Director for the USSR Division. After the Euro-Asia Division was organized in 1991, Dmitry O. Yunak served as ESD auditor and under treasurer. He was the author of a dozen of SDA history books and scores of other publications. He owns a major SDA history archive.

Iosif (I zeps) Aleksandrovich Seniavski contributed to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist work in Moldova.

Early Years

Iosif (I zeps) Aleksandrovich Seniavski was born into the family of Aleksander Seniavski, a factory worker, in Riga in 1900. His parents were devout Catholics. However, Iosif arrived at the conclusion that the Catholic faith does not give answers to all real-life questions and is inconsistent with the Bible.

During the First World War, Seniavski lived in the city of Sloviansk in the Ukraine. In 1917, at the time of the Russian revolution, he participated in the workers' strikes. Subsequently he was called up to serve in the Red Army, but was hospitalized after an illness in 1919. Following his recovery, Seniavski became a paramedic and served on a hospital train. After the end of the civil war he went back to Latvia where he worked as a freight mover or a coal heaver at different factories.

Marriage and Conversion

In 1927 Seniavski married Erika Levinson. They had two sons: Valerian (1929) and Oyra, and a daughter, Irina (1934). The family was happy, but their happiness was cut short when Iosif got involved with alcohol. He felt spiritually empty, but fortunately not for long. In 1932 Seniavski joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church and was baptized by Pastor Herman Linde. Having accepted Christ, he found spiritual relief and relief from alcohol consumption. That he chose a new religion grieved his parents and they disowned their son. During this time Seniavski was supported and encouraged by his wife Erika. Both of them were actively involved in the musical life of the Russian congregation in the city of Riga. Seniavski conducted a church choir and a string orchestra. He was also elected as elder of the Russian congregation.

At the time of the Second World War, in 1944, Seniavski had to go into hiding to avoid conscription into the Latvian SS Legion. He grew a beard to look older than he was and thus managed to escape mobilization and active service.

Prisoner's Camp

In the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Adventist books in Russian were freely published in independent Latvia. This was in contrast to the Soviet Union where Stalin persecuted Adventist ministers and confiscated church literature. After the war, Seniavski, in addition to his local church ministry, was actively engaged in mailing Bibles and Adventist books to other areas of the USSR where there was a shortage of such literature. He received letters from across the country in which people asked him to send them Bibles. This can be illustrated by one letter: "Reverend father Seniavski, please, send me a copy of the Bible. I have not the money but I am willing to pay with my horse and cart..." In the long run, the letter writer received the Word of God free of charge without having to pay with "his horse and cart."¹

Seniavski did not earn his living from sending Bibles and Adventist books. He did so openly because he thought that such a “holy initiative” should not be concealed. Seniavski managed to send out more than one thousand book packages across the USSR, making use of the stores of Adventist literature in Russian that were kept in Adventist churches in the city of Riga. His active efforts caught the attention of state security agencies. Despite their thorough investigation, only 703 parcels with Adventist books were mentioned later on in the bill of indictment.

In 1949 a KGB agent was planted in the Russian Adventist congregation in Riga as a new church member. That agent, a woman, was a talented singer and actively participated in the church’s music ministry. She gathered the necessary information, and shortly after the police arrested Pastor Dmitriy Platonov, Elder Seniavski, and Deaconess Pekarnyak. Each of them was sentenced to five years of imprisonment in a camp.

While serving his term in the camps of Moldova, Seniavski endeavored to consistently keep the Sabbath regardless of the difficulties, emotional abuse, misunderstanding, and additional punishment. Seniavski was not allowed to communicate with his relatives, but he could receive an annual parcel from his wife. She put a small book of Psalms in one of her parcels. Surprisingly, the book was not seized by inspectors. It was the most valuable gift that Seniavski kept until the end of his term. He repeatedly read and even memorized the Psalms which in turn strengthened his spirit.

Release

In May 1955 Seniavski was released due to an amnesty declared after Stalin’s death. On his way home he visited the office of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists in Moscow to meet up with church officers (S. P. Kulyzhskiy, P. G. Silman, and A. F. Parasey) who ordained him to pastoral service.

Seniavski started to serve the local church in the city of Daugavpils, but his service there was not very long. He received a call to serve in Moldova and moved to B Iți in order to supervise all the many registered and unregistered congregations in the north of Moldova. At that time, Seniavski and N. A. Yaruta were the only ordained pastors in Moldova. Seniavski was not a brilliant speaker, but his sermons were simple and understandable even to the most uneducated people who constituted part of the Adventists in Moldova at that time. Meanwhile, churches grew both numerically and qualitatively with a new generation of members appearing on the scene.

In 1960 Iosif Seniavski was deprived of his official status as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor over the claim of Baptists who complained that he had been preaching at the funeral of a certain Baptist without permission.

Later Years

In November 1960, Seniavski returned from Moldova to Latvia and settled down in Riga. After the death of pastor Dmitriy Platonov in 1962, Seniavski actively served his home Russian congregation. But his health failed, and he died in Riga on July 17, 1964 at the age of 64. Iosif Seniavski was buried at the Central Cemetery in Riga.

Contribution

A special contribution made by Iosif Seniavski to the development of the Adventist Church in Moldova was resumption of Sabbath School activities in B Iți, Sângerei Noi, and other places. Iosif Seniavski also trained Sabbath School teachers and offered valuable advice while teaching the *Church Manual* and Adventist church policies to new ministers.

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NOTES

1. Peshelis, Andris, and Seniavski, J. zeps*Biograficheskiy ocherk*. Personal Archives of D. O. Yunak.

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