

Rasmussen, Steen Emil Marius (1888–1941)

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Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

Known as the friend of the youth, Steen Rasmussen played a major role in developing the youth work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, first in Scandinavia and later in the rest of Europe. As an energetic person with organizational skills and a winning disposition, he served as the head of the Home Missionary Department of the General Conference.

Early Years

Steen Emil Marius Rasmussen was born on December 21, 1888, on a farm at Auning outside the city of Randers, Denmark. At the age of eleven he moved in with his uncle, Svanefjord Rasmussen, and his wife in Randers, where he found a good Christian home. By 1904 he had passed his preliminary school examination which concluded 10 years of schooling. His uncle's wish was that he continued his studies and took a university degree in theology to prepare him for ministry in the Lutheran State Church. But Steen preferred to seek work at Randers Police Chamber, where he worked for two years as a clerk and an assistant to the auctioneer at the town bailiff's office. Further studies were considered, but he chose law rather than theology!¹

In the winter of 1906-1907 his way of thinking and goals in life suddenly changed. The Seventh-day Adventist Pastor Julius C. Raft and his assistants held public evangelistic meetings in Randers. Both Steen and his uncle attended the meetings. "The clear and urgent preaching of the gospel, the prophecies and the threefold



Steen Rasmussen, May 1926.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

message pleased the still unclarified youthful mind and heart," as he expressed it later. "I accepted the truth and was baptized by Brother Raft in Ebenezer July 14, 1907, and became a member of Skodsborg Church." His uncle was baptized on the same day. Before his baptism Steen had started to work as a stenographer and secretary to the medical superintendent Dr. Carl Ottosen at Skodsborg Sanitarium.^{2 3}

Steen Rasmussen stayed with Ottosen for about five years, until the fall of 1912. During the winters of 1908-1909 and 1909-1910 he was allowed a furlough to study at Stanborough Park College in Watford, England. During the summer of 1910 he canvassed with *the Great Controversy* in the Midlands and Wales.⁴ As Carl Ottosen looked back on their time together, he wrote about his young friend and secretary: "It has been a joy and an enrichment of life to have him as a coworker and a secretary for several years... Even if there are 24 years between us, we didn't feel it when we were running. Our rate was 6 minutes from St. Kongensgade 36-38 to Østerport Station. – There was joy in the competition of whom was the fastest, and joy in the competition of furthering the cause that we both loved."⁵ Rasmussen was also editorial secretary for the Danish health journal *Sundhedsbladet* in 1911-1912. From November 1912 to March 1913 he worked half-time in the Hamburg Publishing House while studying German.⁶

Steen married Anna, daughter of Peter Christensen, on December 31, 1912.⁷ Over the years their home was always open for the youth to share their joys and sorrows.

While in Germany Rasmussen received a call from the General Conference to go to America. In the spring of 1913 the Rasmussens sailed from Copenhagen to the United States, where Steen took up work in Chicago for Ole Andres Olsen, who was in charge of the Foreign Language Department in the North American Division.⁸ When Olsen died on January 19, 1915, Rasmussen filled the vacancy and lead the department until the General Conference session in San Francisco in 1918.^{9 10} Steen and Anna's son Glenn was born in 1915.¹¹ Steen was then called to the Pacific Press Publishing Association as editor of several foreign language papers,¹² among them the *Hungarian Signs of the Times* and the Danish-Norwegian *Missionæren*.¹³ As one of the youngest editors¹⁴ he attended the first ever editorial convention held among Seventh-day Adventists in April 1919, and where Elder A.G. Daniells and Elder W.W. Prescott presided over the Sessions.¹⁵

The European Years

After the European Council in Skodsborg, Denmark, in the winter of 1919, Rasmussen received a call to return to Europe. In April 1920 the Rasmussens landed in Denmark, where Steen took up his task as departmental director for the Scandinavian Union Conference with headquarters in Copenhagen.¹⁶ He was responsible for the department of Sabbath School, Education, Missionary Volunteers (Youth), and Home Missionary.¹⁷ It was during this time he introduced the Thirteenth Sabbath School offering, Harvest Ingathering, Big Week and the Youth's Bible Course and Reading Plan to the Scandinavian youths in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and later the Baltic countries.¹⁸ He organized the youth work and introduced "youth societies" starting in Denmark. He started

a new magazine, *Ungdomsfaklen* (The Youth Torch), for young people. Under his leadership Denmark became a pioneering country in Europe.

The first youth rally was held in 1921 in the barn of Brother Markussen in Kølækær with an attendance of 50. Others followed soon. The youth rally in 1925 in Onsrud, Norway, for all the Nordic countries gathered more than 300 and was long remembered.¹⁹ These rallies had a high spiritual emphasis and helped unite the youth and inspire them for the purpose and goals of the Advent movement. He sent the following message to the West Nordic Union years later in 1939:

What we want to do for the life and development of our church we need to do for our children and youth, especially regarding their education. Every ideal, that we want our church to reach, must first stand clear for our rising generation who in the future will be our responsible leaders. It is therefore true and wise policy that we concentrate our efforts on this important part of human life – the youth, the period when one's mind is most easily influenced.²⁰

In 1922 he was ordained by L. H. Christian and J. C. Raft.²¹ A friend described him this way:

With a clear conscience he used the talents that God had given him. A captivating speaker, a superb writer he was, with excellent organizational skills. This in connection with his great energy, initiative, and perseverance made him a highly esteemed worker... Bro. Steen Rasmussen was an Israelite without deceit, therefore both older and younger came to him confidently. He always had time, and never spared himself.²²

During his time in Scandinavia, Rasmussen wrote the following books: *Blade fra Livets Dagbog* (Sheets from the Diary of Life) in 1923²³ and *Fremtidsudsigter – En Verden i Opløsning* (Future Prospects – A World in Disintegration) in 1924.²⁴

In late 1924 Rasmussen moved to Switzerland to be Youth director for the European Division with headquarters in Bern. To this responsibility was added the department of Home Missionary from November 1927.²⁵ The trend of youth rallies that started in Scandinavia continued in other European countries. One memorable youth rally was the first youth congress in Chemnitz, Germany,²⁶ with representatives from all over Europe and more than 3,000 in attendance.²⁷ Rasmussen estimated that there were about 22,000 Adventist youth in Europe by the end of 1928.²⁸

Together with Luther Warren, M. E. Kearns and C. Lester Bond, Rasmussen ranks among the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist youth movement.²⁹ In 1928 the European Division was divided into four new divisions, and Rasmussen stayed in Bern as Youth and Home Missionary director for the South European Division.³⁰ In 1929 he prepared a comprehensive agenda for a home missionary convention on the division level in June, which included items on organization, leadership, Bible training classes, medical missionary work, missionary correspondence, and literature ministry.³¹

Steen Rasmussen made long and arduous journeys to the mission fields of the division – to West- and Central Africa, Madagascar and Mauritius. He was a rarely gifted speaker. It did not matter if his listeners were Portuguese fishermen, farmers from Romania or natives of Madagascar. Everyone was carried away by this man, who publicly could speak in three languages, and orient himself in several others. His voice filled the room, and his words reached the hearts.³² In 1930 Rasmussen was elected division secretary, in addition to his responsibilities as director of the departments of Education, Home Missionary and Youth,³³ which he kept until 1936. He became known for organizing large youth rallies, the most important possibly at the French School in 1935 with 800 youth from Switzerland and the Latin countries.³⁴

Move to the General Conference

In 1936 Rasmussen was called to Washington, D.C in the United States to lead the Home Missionary Department of the General Conference.³⁵ At the time he was recognized in the General Conference as one of the most successful departmental secretaries that the Church had had in any place in the world.³⁶ He was not a man that was tied to his office making plans. All over North America he gathered the church members, taught and encouraged them, and visited their neighborhoods. And the results did not fail. However, this gigantic work exhausted his powers. At sunset one Sabbath afternoon he became seriously ill. He had spoken at five meetings that day and for a long time had spoken an average of three times a day. He suffered a heart failure, from which nobody thought he would recover. But after a long period of illness, he recovered and felt that he was ready to work at full force again.³⁷ Shortly after returning to work he died from a heart attack on March 5, 1941, only 52 years old.³⁸

Legacy

Pastor J. C. Raft, who had baptized him, participated in his ordination, and followed his work through the years, said after his death: "In a time, when young and old look for men, who can, who will, and who dare lead the way, Steen Rasmussen was taken from us."³⁹ Another friend and mentor, Dr. Carl Ottosen wrote: "He was young with the old and young with the young and has inscribed his name unforgettably in the hearts of many young people and the elderly in the years it was allotted to him to work in the youth societies and the home mission."⁴⁰ And a doctor friend expressed: "In many countries Bro. Steen Rasmussen will be missed, but especially in Denmark, yes in all the Nordic countries."⁴¹

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NOTES

1. Steen Rasmussen, *Nogle Selvbiografiske Data*, kept in the files of HASDA, Denmark, written around 1928-1929, when Rasmussen moved to the South European Division, 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Jakob Raft, "Steen Rasmussen – Ungdommens Ven – er gået bort," *Advent Ungdom*, April 1941, 4. Later Svane fjord Rasmussen came to accomplish much for the advancement of the Adventist church.
4. Rasmussen, 1-2; Hans Jørgen Schantz, *I Troens Bakspejl* (Nærum, Denmark, Dansk Bogforlag, 1998), 71.
5. Ottosen, *Skodsborgersamfundet*, 1941, 26.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
7. A. Andersen, "Br. Steen Rasmussen in memoriam," *Missionsefterretninger*, April 1941.

8. Rasmussen, 2.
9. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
10. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1917), 12.
11. Jørgen Schantz, 71.
12. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1920), 244-245.
14. Of 145 editors representing the world field 25 were present at these important meetings that were held in conjunction with the Spring Meetings of the General Conference Committee gathered in Washington, D.C., U.S.A.
15. A. W. Spalding, "The First Editorial Convention," *ARH*, May 29, 1919, 1-2.
16. Rasmussen, 2.
17. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1921), 94.
18. Rasmussen, 2.
19. Raft, 3.
20. Mogens Bakke and Hakon Muderspach, eds., "Steen Rasmussen," *Advent Ungdom*, April 1939, 14.
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
22. Andersen, "Br. Steen Rasmussen in memoriam."
23. Raft, 4. Sold in 40.000 copies in Denmark and translated into other languages.
24. Jørgen Schantz, 72.
25. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1925), 91 and (1928), 99.
26. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
27. Raft, 3.

28. Rasmussen, 3.
29. P. G. Nelson, ed., "Ungdomsbevægelsens Pionerer," *Advent Ungdom*, March 1946, 5-8.
30. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1929), 143.
31. E. F. Hackmann, "Home Missionary Convention in Southern Europe," *ARH*, August 15, 1929, 25-26.
32. Raft, 4.
33. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Steen Rasmussen."
34. Nelson, 8.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Raft, 3.
38. Ottosen, 26.
39. Raft, 3.
40. Ottosen, 26.
41. Andersen, "Br. Steen Rasmussen in memoriam."

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