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FOUNDATIONAL MISSIONARIES

OF SOUTH AMERICAN ADVENTISM

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EDITORIAL

Foundational missionaries

of south american adventism

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Becerra

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Foundational missionaries of south american adventism

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1

Introduction

Research project called “Foundational Missionaries of South American Adventism” was ambitious and challenging. It committed researchers to work for a period of more than four years (2007-2011) in the line of South American Adventism, with the conviction that the denomination needs to grow a bigger awareness of its own history.

The history of Adventism in South America is rich in testimonies of devotion and service from an outstanding cast of missionaries that began, established or developed the Adventist work in its different ministries: evangelism ministry, publishing ministry, medical missionary work, educational work, etc.

This work was not intended to write the history of Adventism in South America, which was done by Héctor J. Peverini (1988) among others, and more recently by Floyd Greenleaf (2011), but to save a number of paradigmatic characters of historical Adventist tradition in South America.¹ Foundational names such as Geörg Heinrich Riffel, Frank H. Westphal, Joseph W. Westphal, Robert H. Habenicht, Thomas H. Davis, Eduardo W. Thomann, Luis F. Ernst, Ferdinand A. Stahl, Ana Carlson de Stahl, Pedro Kalbermatter, Guillermina Deggeller de Kalbermatter and Walter Schubert, were the focus of the main effort; meanwhile, other significant names such as Reinhardt

Hetze, Pedro Peverini, Julio Dupertuis, Frederick W. Bishop, Víctor Thomann, Carlos E. Krieghoff, Nelson Z. Town, Manuel Zúñiga Camacho, etcetera, garnered brief mention.

A previous address of South American Adventism pioneers has been done but briefly. Existing works such as doctoral thesis by Walton John Brown and Egil H. Wensell aim at the history of the Adventist Church.² There are texts of stories or devotionals that feature the activity of some specific missionary.³ Also, some monographs and postgraduate thesis have been developed about the beginnings of Adventism in some of the countries mentioned in this project.⁴ Other research point to the origins of a particular area, such as the ministry of denominational publishing.⁵ One important source is church magazines with reports from the protagonists and missionary chronicles. There are additional autobiographical stories that have some documentary value.⁶

This research had the following aims: (a) identifying conspicuous missionaries of South American Adventism who developed their work in the countries composing the South American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay) in its different ministries; (b) recovering its history as biographical data and as motivational source for service and evangelism work; (c) offering a sample of methods employed and personal qualities that allowed them to achieve success in the proposed objectives; (d) spreading results orally and in writing as contribution to the knowledge of the origins of Adventist Spanish-American mission and as an important element in maintaining denominational identity; (e) making recommendations to the Center for Adventist Memory, to the School of Theology of the Universidad Adventista del Plata and other Adventist institutions regarding future research projects.

The methodology employed covered several unavoidable stages. An exploratory reading of available sources, published and non-published, was made about the work of foundational missionaries of Adventism in the South American Division. On the basis of said reading, twelve outstanding personalities from the different countries and areas of church mission were identified, and a report was made following the following steps: (a) his/her personal background; (b) his/her preparation and beginning of his/her work; (c) methodologies that were used and results that were noticed; (d) his/her personal qualities regarding likely achieved success; and (e) interpretation and valuation of historical data that was found.

The report made possible a brief presentation of used strategies, of obtained achievements and of common patterns in the carrying out of missionary work.

Research results could provide clarity to the understanding of the background and qualities of South American Adventism to an indeterminate number of potential readers. Additionally, they may be used in academic work in Adventist educational institutions, particularly in departments related to the history of Adventism. Besides, they will serve as the basis for diverse ecclesial programs, in extracurricular activities and in outreach circles. The most important transfer is the one that will be achieved through the spreading of the published work.

Daniel Oscar Plenc

¹ Héctor J. Peverini, *En las huellas de la Providencia [In the Footsteps of Providence]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 1988); Floyd Greenleaf, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2 vols. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992); Floyd Greenleaf, *Tierra de esperanza [Land of Hope]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2011).

- ² Walton John Brown, "A Historical Study of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Austral South America", 4 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, California, 1953); Egil H. Wensell, *El poder de una esperanza que educa y sana [The Power of a Hope that Educates and Heals]* (Libertador San Martín, AR: Universidad Adventista del Plata, 1993). There are more general works that mention South America in some segments: Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Portadores de luz: Historia de la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día [Light Bearers: History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church]*, trans. by Rolando A. Itín and Tulio N. Peverini (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2002); Emma E. Howell, *El gran movimiento adventista [The Great Adventist Movement]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 1975); Don F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-Day Adventist Encyclopedia (SDAE)*, vol. 11, 2nd rev. ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996).
- ³ Alejandro Bullón Paucar, *Él nos amaba: La aventura misionera de Stahl entre los campos [He Loved Us: Stahl's Missionary Adventure Between the Campas]* (Lima, PE: Asociación Peruana Central, 1976); Salim Japas, "Fue una llama que ardía [It was a Flame that Burned]", *Ministerio Adventista [Adventist Ministry]* (Jan.-Feb. 1989): 7-11; Salim Japas, "Walter Schubert" (monograph for Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan, May 1974); Elbio Pereyra, *Eduardo Francisco Forga: El pionero casi olvidado del continente descuidado [Eduardo Francisco Forga: The Almost Forgotten Pioneer of the Neglected Continent]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2004); Barbara Osborne Westphal, *A Man Called Pedro* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1975), of which the Spanish version is: Barbara Osborne Westphal, *Un hombre llamado Pedro*, Ethel Mangold, transl. (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2004); Barbara Osborne Westphal, *Ana Stahl of the Andes and Amazon* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), of which the Portuguese translation was published as: Barbara Osborne Westphal, *Ana Stahl Dos Andes e Amazonas*, Carlos A. Trezza, transl. (São Paulo, BR: Casa Publicadora Brasileira, 1967).
- ⁴ Alcibiades Aguilera, "Análisis del desarrollo de la Iglesia Adventista en el Paraguay" [Analysis of the Development of the Adventist Church in Paraguay] (Master of Religion monograph, Latin-American Adventist Theological Seminary, Libertador San Martín, Argentina, 1992); Samuel Antonio Chávez, *Breve historia de las raíces del adventismo en Bolivia 1897-1927 [Brief history of the Roots of Adventism in Bolivia 1897-1927]* (Cochabamba, BO: Ediciones Nuevo tiempo, 2007); Marcos Chuquimia Espinoza, *Breve reseña histórica de la primera iglesia adventista de Bolivia en Rosario [Brief Historical Review of the First Adventist Church of Bolivia in Rosario]* (La Paz, BO: n.e., 1986); Heriberto Peter, "Desarrollo histórico de la Iglesia Adventista en la Argentina hasta 1908 [Historical Development of the Adventist Church in Argentina until 1908]" (M.Th. thesis, Seminario Adventista Latinoamericano de Teología, Libertador San Martín, Argentina, 1984); Mario Utz, "Origen y desarrollo de la Iglesia Adventista en el Paraguay [Origin and Development of the Adventist Church in Paraguay]" (M.Th. thesis, Seminario

Adventista Latinoamericano de Teología, Libertador San Martín, Argentina, 1984); Juan Carlos Viera, “Los adventistas del Séptimo Día en América Latina: Sus comienzos, su crecimiento, sus desafíos [Seventh-day Adventists in Latin America: Their beginnings, their Growth, their Challenges]” (Missiology D. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, 1993); Oscar Nelson Wasiuk, *Reseña histórica de la Iglesia Adventista del 7º Día en el Uruguay [Historical Review of the 7th Day Adventist Church in Uruguay]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 1996); Leopoldo Zambra Ríos, *No con ejército, no con fuerza, sino con su Espíritu [Not with Army, not with Force, but with his Spirit]* (Santiago, CL: Servicio Educativo Hogar y Salud, 1994).

- ⁵ Fernando Adrián Mammana, “Historia del colportaje y la distribución de los impresos adventistas en la República Argentina desde 1891 hasta 1942 [History of the Canvassing and Distribution of Adventist Forms in the Argentine Republic from 1891 to 1942]” (B.Th. thesis, Universidad Adventista del Plata, Libertador San Martín, Argentina, 2005); E. H. Meyers, *Reseña de los comienzos de la obra en Sudamérica [Overview of the Beginnings of the Work in South America]* (Florida oeste, AR: Casa Editora Sudamericana, n.d.); Miguel Salomón, “Una reseña histórica del Colegio Adventista de Bolivia y su aporte a la Iglesia Adventista en Bolivia [A Historical Review of the Adventist College of Bolivia and its Contribution to the Adventist Church in Bolivia]” (M.Th. thesis, Seminario Adventista Latinoamericano de Teología, Perú, 1985).
- ⁶ Otilia Peverini de Ampuero, *Delantales blancos [White Smocks]* (n.p.: self-published, n.d.); Alcides Campolongo, *Evangelismo minha paixão [Evangelism My Passion]* (São Paulo, BR: Casa Publicadora Brasileira, 2009); Enrique Chaij, *Ese chico travieso llamado por Dios [That Naughty Boy Called by God]* (Buenos Aires, AR: Ediciones E, 2005); Pedro Kalbermatter, *20 Años como misionero entre los indios del Perú: Apuntes autobiográficos [20 Years as a Missionary Among the Indians of Peru: Autobiographical Notes]* (Paraná, AR: Nueva Impresora, 1950); Pedro Kalbermatter, *La constancia y fidelidad del soldado adventista Pedro Kalbermatter [The Constancy and Faithfulness of the Adventist Soldier Pedro Kalbermatter]* (Rosario, AR: Imprenta Romanos Hnos., n.d.); Hans Mayr, *El abuelito Hans [Grandpa Hans]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2004); Manuel F. Pérez Marcio, *Los hijos de la selva [The Children of the Jungle]* (Florida oeste, AR: Casa Editora Sudamericana, 1953); Benjamín Riffel, *Providencias de Dios en métodos de superación que mejoran la personalidad [Providences of God in Improvement Methods that Upgrade Personality]* (Coral Gables, FL: Asociación Editora Interamericana, 1983); Ferdinand Anthony Stahl, *In the Amazon Jungles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publication Association, 1932); Ferdinand Anthony Stahl, *In the Land of the Incas* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1920), Ferdinand Anthony Stahl, *En el país de los Incas [In the Land of the Incas]* (Florida oeste, AR: Casa Editora Sudamericana, 192?); Niels Wensell, *Semblanza de un misionero adventista [Semblance of an Adventist Missionary]* (Santa Fe, AR: Imprenta Acosta Hnos., 1995); Frank H. Westphal, *Pioneering in the Neglected Continent*

(Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1927); Frank H. Westphal, *Hasta el fin del mundo [Until the End of the World]*, Silvia C. Scholtus, transl. (Libertador San Martín, AR: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2016).

2

A Space for Memory

By Daniel Oscar Plenc

In a place formerly called Barranca Blanca, near the confluence of Gómez and La Ensenada creeks, in Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, Argentina, there is an undeveloped plot significant for the memory of the community and its foundational institutions. Today, it belongs to the campus of the Universidad Adventista del Plata, about three kilometers of its lecture rooms and administration buildings. Everything began there, for the town and the institutions, although there was nothing or next to nothing in the place for about 120 years (except for a minuscule plaque that commemorates the site where it stood the humble abode of Russian-German farmer Reinhardt Hetze and his family).¹

It was precisely Reinhardt Hetze (1851-1939) who, in the small port of Diamante, Entre Ríos province (about 20 kilometers from his home), received the first lay Adventist missionary Geörg [Jorge] Heinrich Riffel (1850-1917) and his family, coming from the United States of America with an evangelizing mission. Evidence indicates that Riffel (also a Russian-German farmer) and Hetze had met in Russia and had been in contact since a while ago.² Hetze, emigrant from Russia in 1887, had certain knowledge of Adventist doctrines, although he had not embraced them until that

point.³ The truth is Hetze picked up the newcomers with his Russian car and accommodated them in his house located in Barranca Blanca.⁴ That Friday (date unknown) of February, 1890, marked a beginning for South American Adventism, for the emergence of the first Adventist church in the Southern Cone of America and for its institutions.⁵ Hetze had received letters from his brother, Gottlieb, resident in Kansas, and Jorge Riffel, announcing his coming. Hetze wrote: "I lived two leagues away from Aldea Protestante, near Diamante. When I heard he had arrived, I hitched up my horse and went to see him... On the second day, people came to my house. There were 60 people present..."⁶

Jorge H. Riffel arrived to "the neglected continent" and was, together with his first convert, Reinhardt Hetze, an apostle of South American Adventism.⁷ In 1894, Frank Westphal (1858-1944), first Adventist pastor sent to South America, gathered the first believers and organized the first church in the rural area surrounding Crespo, Entre Ríos, on September 9, 1894, with 36 members.⁸

The ancestors of Jorge H. Riffel came from the Canton of Valais, in the valley of the Upper Rhône, in Southwest Switzerland. His adherence to Protestantism took them to the North of Switzerland and on to South Germany. Along thousands of German immigrants, they took part in the call of Empress Catherine the Great (1762-1796) and moved to the banks of the Volga River in Russia in the 1770s. A hundred years later (1876), Jorge H. Riffel, his wife, María L. Ziegler (1852-1910) and his son David (1873-1937), boarded a ship to South America. First, they settled in Río Grande do Sul, Brazil, then in Entre Ríos (1880), Argentina; later still they moved to Kansas, in the United States (1885), where they adopted Seventh-day Adventism (1888), and from there they moved definitely to the Argentine Republic (1890), establishing residence in Aldea Jacobi,

near Crespo, Entre Ríos.⁹ Riffel convinced another three Russian-German Adventist families to accompany him in his South-American missionary project (the Fricks, Yankes and Zimmermanns).¹⁰

In the house of Reinhardt Hetze, together with his wife María Gerlach de Hetze (1856-1911) and his children, David, Santiago, Alejandro, Amalia, Catalina, Julia, Emilia and Hanna, probably was where the first Adventist meetings in South America were held.¹¹ Hanna Hetze de Bernhardt remembered years later that Jorge Riffel talked about Adam and Eve.¹²

Then, all that core moved to Aldea Jacobi, beginning the first Adventist church.¹³ In that very place it was agreed in 1898 the creation of Colegio Camarero, then Colegio Adventista del Plata, today Universidad Adventista del Plata, under the leadership of pastor Frank H. Westphal. Jorge H. Riffel and Reinhardt Hetze were connected with the organization and development of the church and its institutions in Libertador San Martín. Riffel was member of the Executive Committee of South American Union-Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1906) and both of them were members of the committee that created the River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital (1908).¹⁴

Colegio Camarero appeared by the decision and support of a small group of Adventists gathered in Crespo on Monday, September 26, 1898.¹⁵ It was there that Jorge Juan Lust (1856-1929) donated 17 hectares of land in Colonia Camarero for the establishment of the college. Since then, the September 26, 1898 has been adopted as the date for the foundation of the educational institution and the same date is taken as the founding of Libertador San Martín.¹⁶

However, it was in Barranca Blanca where the flame was kindled of all that later development. In that place where nothing stood (only a small partially destroyed plaque that students of the School of Theology placed in 1996), the

management of Universidad Adventista del Plata erected a worthy space for thought and remembrance.¹⁷ In this place, in 2008, the educational community from Universidad Adventista del Plata held a thanks-giving meeting on the 110 years since the humble beginning of the institution. Surely many people will return to that site in the future in search of their roots and the inspiration needed to achieve their lofty goals. Barranca Blanca will probably be one of the “seven stations” of the historical Adventist circuit that is being developed with help from the Argentine Union, its institutions in Libertador San Martín, the Central Argentine Conference, and the Crespo-Ramírez pastoral district. Those “seven stations” might be: (1) the Port of Diamante on the Paraná River, where pioneers disembarked since 1890; (2) the house of Reinhardt Hetze, where the first Bible study meetings were held; (3) the Universidad Adventista del Plata Visitor Center, where the largest number of visitors will surely arrive; (4) the Roberto Habenicht Museum, of the City of Libertador San Martín, a memorial to the founder of the River Plate Sanitarium and Hospital; (5) the “Crespo Campo” Site Museum, where the first church is still in place; (6) the cemetery of Aldea Jacobi, where many of the pioneers and the first Adventists are buried; and (7) the parish cemetery of Libertador San Martín, where many early pioneers and Adventists rest until the coming of the Lord.



Reinhardt Hetze, his wife María Gerlach and his children in 1901.

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- ¹ See Brown, "A Historical Study of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Austral South America"; Howell, *El gran movimiento adventista*; Peverini, *En las huellas de la Providencia*, 35-38; Daniel Oscar Plenc, *Misioneros en Sudamérica: Pioneros del adventismo en Latinoamérica [Missionaries in South America: Pioneers of Adventism in Latin America]* (Florida oeste, AR: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 2008).
- ² Robert G. Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina [Centenary of the Adventist Church in Argentina]", *La Revista Adventista* 94, No. 9 (Sept. 1994): 23; Santiago Bernhardt Hetze, "Yo soy el mismo ángel [I am the Same Angel]", *La Revista Adventista* 82, No. 11 (Nov. 1982): 13.
- ³ Apparently, Reinhardt Hetze knew Adventism in Europe through his brother Gottlieb Hetze (Hetze, "Yo soy el mismo ángel", 13).

- ⁴ See the obituary of Reinhardt Hetze in Carlos Becker, "Necrología [Obituary]", *La Revista Adventista* 40, No. 7 (July 1940): 11.
- ⁵ E. H. Meyers, secretary of the Publishing Department of the South American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, believed that Riffel and Hetze did not know one another (Meyers, *Reseña de los comienzos de la obra en Sudamérica*, 7). See also Mario Rasi, "Progresos de la Escuela Sabática en la Unión Austral [Progress of the Sabbath School in the Southern Union]", *La Revista Adventista* 52, No. 3 (March 3, 1952): 3.
- ⁶ Reinaldo Hetze, "Cómo empezó la obra en Entre Ríos [How the Work Began in Entre Ríos]", *La Revista Adventista* 33, No. 3 (Jan. 30, 1933): 16.
- ⁷ Adventism spread from North America to Europe (1874), Australia (1885), Africa (1887), Asia (1894) and South America (1890). Westphal, *Hasta el fin del mundo*, xi.
- ⁸ Joseph W. Westphal, "The Beginnings of the Work in Argentina", *Review and Herald* 97, No. 33 (Aug. 12, 1920): 6; Meyers, *Reseña de los comienzos de la obra en Sudamérica*, 7. Frank H. Westphal, his wife María Thurston and his children Carlos and Elena arrived to South America in September of 1894 (SDAE [1996], see "Westphal, Frank Henry;" Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina", 20).
- ⁹ The knowledge of Adventism spread through German evangelist Louis Richard Conradi (1856-1939). Riffel, *Providencias de Dios...*, 188-204; Carlos Becker, "Necrología: Riffel", *La Revista Adventista* 37, No. 13 (June 21, 1937): 15; Robert Wearner, "The Riffels: Planting Adventism in Argentina", *Review and Herald* 161, No. 37 (Sept. 13, 1984): 4-6. About the family history of the Riffels, see document: "Descendientes de Juliana María Weiss y David Riffel [Descendants of Juliana María Weiss and David Riffel]", in the Ellen G. White Research Center, Universidad Adventista del Plata, Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, DF 3023-e.
- ¹⁰ See Wearner, "The Riffels: Planting Adventism in Argentina", 4-6.
- ¹¹ Some have called this first meeting in the Hetze's house the "first Sabbath School in South America" (Wearner, "The Riffels: Planting Adventism in Argentina", 4-6; Hetze, "Yo soy tu ángel", 13; Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina", 23).
- ¹² Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina", 23.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-23.
- ¹⁴ Westphal, "The Beginnings of the Work in Argentina", 6.
- ¹⁵ The story written by the mentor of the college can be read in Westphal, *Pioneering in the Neglected Continent*. For a brief description of this educational institution, see Pablo C. Rodríguez, *Cien años educando: Origen y desarrollo de la Universidad Adventista del Plata [One Hundred Years of Education: Origin and development of the Universidad Adventista del Plata]*, pamphlet in the archives of the Ellen G. White Research Center, Universidad Adventista del Plata, Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, Argentina.
- ¹⁶ See Wensell, *El poder de una esperanza que educa y sana*.

¹⁷ The humble abode of Reinhardt and his family disappeared long time ago (Wearner, "Centenario de la iglesia adventista en la Argentina", 23; Robert G. Wearner interviewed Hanna Hetze de Bernhardt on February 2, 1964; letter from Juan Riffel to Robert G. Wearner on April 8, 1984). In that place still stands an ombú planted by Hetze in 1892, at the back of what used to be the backyard of his house. Under that tree, Hetze and his wife used to have moments of prayer. In 1982 the place was recognized and bricks of the old house were searched for by brothers Santiago Bernhardt Hetze and Alejandro Bernhardt Hetze (grandsons of Reinhardt Hetze) and professors Humberto Raúl Treiyer and Rafael Rifel from Colegio Adventista del Plata (Hetze, "Yo soy el mismo ángel", 13).

3

Geörg (Jorge) Heinrich Riffel

By Sergio E. Becerra



Introduction

The origins of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Argentina are closely linked to the missionary efforts of two lay leaders from Entre Ríos province, Argentina: Georg (Jorge) Riffel¹ y Reinhardt (Reinaldo) Hetze. Both were

German immigrants from the Volga² who settled on the west of the Entre Ríos province together with other German families from the Volga in the second half of the 19th century, seeking economic, religious and social stability.

During the 19th century, one method favored by Adventist missionaries throughout the world was to arouse interest in Adventism among the Protestant communities and even among Sabbath-keepers,³ who due to their religious background would be more sensitive to the Adventist message. This was the preferred model to enter South America, since the first colporteurs for reasons of language and/or religious affinity, sought to sell their religious books and win interested people among the European migrant communities of Protestant background wherever possible.⁴ That was the case of the small community of Adventist believers among *The Germans from the Volga*, that was born and grew in its first years among German migrants of Protestant background. Unlike what happened other places, this foundational task was not in the hands of North American missionaries, but it was the result of the labor of Jorge Riffel and Reinaldo Hetze, lay leaders whose Adventist conviction led them to share their hope with neighbors and family years before the church would send an official missionary to Argentina.

Background and Preparation

The Riffels came originally from the valley of the Upper Rhône, today a part of the Canton of Valais, in Southwest Switzerland. The meaning of the Riffel name is “flax comb or rake,” that is in turn related to the verb riffeln, “to comb”.⁵ Undoubtedly, it refers to the family job in their original living place, that consisted of growing, combing and selling flax for cloth making.

Some of them embraced the Protestant faith during the Reformation. The valley of the Upper Rhône was part of Church lands, its prince was the Bishop of Zion, at that time. It was a time of upheaval and great religious intolerance. This forced the Riffels to leave their homes and principality behind to move to the north of Switzerland in search of a region with population of the same faith. Finally, they settled in the south of Germany, where they became farmers.⁶

The invitation of Catherine the Great to settle in Russia was attractive, as well as other residents of the German Empire of the 18th century, after decades of suffering wars, hardship and violence. Germany was coming out of seven years of bloody international war. The decrees of this sovereign of German ancestry, according to which their professions and faith would be respected, they would be exempt from taxes and the duty of serving in the Russian army, plus the giving of land were very convincing. The Riffels moved to Russia and settle in a Protestant settlement called Deutsch Scherbakovka, founded in 1756 west of the Volga River (the Bergseite), south-west from Saratov. There Geörg (Jorge) Heinrich Riffel was born in January of 1850, in the home of Petter Riffel and Susana Kraft.⁷

Although at the beginning life's conditions in the new land were not easy, a hundred years later the loss of certain privileges granted by the Russian crown, with the addition of the lack of land for the new generation,⁸ provoked a new migration. Encouraged by reports of the first emigrants to the United States and Brazil, in the settlements enthusiasm arose to leave in search of a better future in American land. Heart-rending were the farewell moments between the young emigrants and their elders that stayed behind. Because of scarcity means of communication and transportation, they realized they would not see them

again.⁹ By that time, Jorge Riffel had married María Ziegler and they had a son named David who was three years old by that date. Along with other Germans from the Volga, Riffel decided to leave with his family to Brazil in November of 1876. They set off on a long journey across Russia and then to the port of Bremen to board a ship that would take them to the southern hemisphere. In Brazil, they settled in the state of Río Grande do Sul for three or four years. These were not fortunate because of bad crops. It was apparent that tropical lands were not suitable for growing wheat, staple of this community. Around 1880, Riffel decided to leave for Argentina, where a big number of Germans from the Volga had concentrated in the Diamante department of the Entre Ríos province.¹⁰ Again, conditions were unfavorable. Bad crops followed plagues of locusts between 1885-1886 that forced them to choose another emigration, this time to the USA. They settled near the family of Friedrich (Frederick) Riffel, brother of Jorge, in Tampa, Marion County, Kansas State. Thus, after a decade of separation, the Riffel brothers found themselves farming the land together in the United State.

It is then that an incident happens that changed radically the course of their lives. Around 1888, Louis R. Conradi, a young German evangelist from Michigan, carried out meetings in Hillsboro and Lehigh aimed at the community speaking that language. In reports written in the periodical of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Conradi, H. Schultz y S. S. Schrock praised God for the excellent response he and his associates had. Since 1884, work was done among the Germans of the Volga in Tampa with excellent results. In 1888 the combined membership of Hillsboro, Lehigh and Clark churches were about 500 people.¹¹

The families of Jorge and Frederick Riffel attended the meetings of this Adventist preacher. As a result, both families were baptized in the Seventh-day Adventist

Church. Jorge Riffel embraced the Adventist faith with enthusiasm. He attended Adventist camp meetings and conferences and began a lively correspondence with friends in Argentina sharing with them his new faith. Over time, he received letters from Entre Ríos indicating that his efforts were bearing fruit. A friend, Reinhard Hetze, wrote to him saying he would keep the Sabbath if somebody would do so with him.¹² Next year, Riffel decided to return to Argentina as self-supporting missionary, intending to share his new faith with family and acquaintances that were Germans of the Volga. Riffel encouraged his brother Frederick to go with him, but he did not since he had to support a family of ten children and thought he was in no place to start a new uprooting. However, Adán and Eva Zimmermann, Augusto and Cristina Yanke and Osvaldo and Eva Frick and their families joined Riffel.¹³

The travelers arrived at the port of Buenos Aires in February of 1890. The Riffels continued to the port of Diamante without waiting for the other three families delayed by immigration procedures. Hetze was waiting for them and took them home, 15 kilometers from the port. During the journey, Jorge taught and exhorted Hetze regarding his faith. Then, Hetze decided to accept the Adventist teachings, becoming the first South American Adventist convert, along with his family. It was a Friday, and everybody made plans to celebrate the first Sabbath together.¹⁴ At that time, the Hetzes lived near the confluence of Ensenada and Gómez creeks. It was in the property of Hetze that it was held the first meeting of Adventist believers in the Argentine Republic a Sabbath day of February of 1890.

The Riffels obtained lands in the district of Isletas, near Camps, Department of Diamante, Entre Ríos. Soon they were joined by a small core of Adventist families composed by the immigrant families and those of the new converts.

Hetze moved to live among them, too. This gathering of believers was known in the place as the “Sabbatarian Colony.”¹⁵ There were 20 people that kept the Sabbath. First, they met in the house of Hetze and then in a small chapel by the cemetery of present-day Aldea Jacobi. He would live in this place until his death.

His Work and Method

Jorge Riffel experienced an intense desire of sharing his Adventist faith after his conversion. Reinaldo Hetze pointed out that Riffel wrote him from the USA telling him about his new beliefs and that they would come to share with him the truth about the Sabbath.¹⁶ The exchange with Hetze and the reading of an article by Ellen G. White encouraging believers speaking in other languages to volunteer as self-supporting missionaries encouraged them to return to Argentina.¹⁷ After arriving to Argentina, he did not stop actively preaching, teaching, baptizing and organizing the church.

Evidently, his method is witnessing through exhortation to relatives, friends and acquaintances, Bible study and testimony through his life example. The memories of his descendants talk about a missionary Jorge Riffel who was persuasive, insistent and convinced that Christ would return soon and whose duty was to warn everyone willing to hear him. And his vision went beyond his place and the community surrounding him. He combined farm work to support his family with mission work near and far from his home. One descendant states that Riffel used to periodically hitch up his horse to his Russian carriage, loading some hay bundles to feed the animal and serve as a makeshift bed, and thus leave for several days to visit German settlements in distant places of the Entre Ríos province.¹⁸

He complemented this task with supporting the work of the local church, as lay leader and preacher. Finally, when the church organization was established, he supported it with his own funds and got involved in affirming the work of evangelist pastors. The church repaid this calling by granting him missionary credentials and licenses and appointing him member of different administrative boards.

By 1891 arrived the first Adventist missionaries sent by the organization of the church. When the leadership of the church knew of the existence of this group of German-speaking believers and other immigrants, they saw the need of strengthening them and building a solid Adventist presence. It was decided to send colporteurs Edwin W. Snyder, Albert B. Stauffer and Clair A. Nowlin.¹⁹ Their task was to distribute Adventist publications as a means of evangelization. They worked with publications in English, French and German, but they communicated poorly in Spanish and had no literature to sell in that language. Stauffer, who was German, worked quite a lot among German settlers.

In 1892, the Foreign Missions Board of the General Conference sent L. C. Chadwick to Argentina to visit the colporteurs. He also met with Adventist German of the Volga families of Entre Ríos.²⁰ He advised the leaders of the group, trained and preached to the converts that until then had not heard the exhortation of an Adventist pastor. In his own words, he states:

I think I never enjoyed so much freedom to preach the Word. The meetings were held in a mud house of one of the brethren and the attendance of the neighbors was good. There are eight families of Sabbath keepers in the settlement and since their houses are a stone's throw away from each other's, they are well placed for the meetings. The last Sunday we were there with them, two of the brethren were chosen as leaders of the group and a third as treasurer. A Sabbath School director was also chosen and since they had just received the first copies of a subscription for

Hausfreund they will be able to obtain their Sabbath School lessons from it.²¹

The appointed leaders where, undoubtedly, Riffel and Hetze, that had naturally been established as leaders of the small Adventist community. Chadwick stated that he did not see that the group was ready to be organized as church because it needed more instruction than what he could offer them, but the members would wait patiently for a German-speaking worker to be sent to them, who would find many doors open among the settlers thanks to the work of Riffel and the first Adventist families of Germans of the Volga.

A year later arrived Frank H. Westphal, Adventist pastor coming from the Illinois Conference, USA, sent by the Foreign Missions Board to organize the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Argentina.²² After taking a week to settle his family in Buenos Aires, he traveled immediately to Entre Ríos to take care of the small community of German-speaking believers, the main motive of his trip.²³ His arrival produced a great sensation. Quickly, a group of listeners gathered. The first night a sizable group met to hear him preach. After hearing the first sermon and attempting to close the meeting with a hymn and a prayer, he was surprised that nobody left. He preached a second and even a third sermon, after which they let him close with the promise of meeting again the next day.²⁴ This incident clearly shows the interest aroused by the Adventist message and the desire for greater religious instruction. A congregation was soon organized, the first in the Southern Cone, with 36 members but it quickly increased to 200.²⁵ Westphal was reaping the work began by Riffel. There are testimonies that affirm that he had taught and baptized, together with Hetze, several interested people that became the core of the first congregation, as well as that of Diamante.²⁶

After the organization of the first Adventist congregations, the support of Riffel and Hetze to witnessing did not abate. The magazine of the church points out how Riffel contributed with evangelism in the cities of Entre Ríos by himself or along with pastor Godofredo Block, one of the first native pastors. They also participated actively in administrative meetings of the church, then in the organization of the South American Union. Riffel was member of the executive board several times. Both showed their commitment to the development of the church and its work, contributing with generous donations for the purchase of a press for the church in Chile. The organization of the church recognized the valuable contribution in time, dedication and material support granting them missionary licenses or credentials that authorized them to fulfill some ministerial responsibilities.

Qualities and Motivation

In the personality of Riffel stands out the conviction with which he embraced the Adventist faith and the spirit he used from then on to share his faith and to support the beginning of the Adventist organization. He showed it first in his correspondence with Hetze trying to convince him to his new faith. In expressing this interest on the Sabbath and Adventist doctrines but making his affiliation to Adventism dependent on the support of other believers, Riffel mobilized to form a group of missionaries that would be willing to move for good to Argentina, including his family, to be part of the group of believers that would begin the seeding of Adventism in Argentina.

With the development of a group of regular believers in Entre Ríos, he took the initiative of making contact with the General Conference insisting in the need of a pastor to organize and lead the nascent church. In the absence of an