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Harold Schmidt

Harold Schmidt
Andrews University, schmidt@andrews.edu

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My story begins in Europe with the immigration patterns to the Americas in the 19th century. Among the many immigrants were the Riffel brothers; one ended up in Kansas and one in Argentina. George, in Argentina, found life hard and joined his brother in the United States. That is where he became a Seventh-day Adventist. He was so excited by his new faith that he went back and shared it with his friends in Argentina. Within a short time, 50 individuals became Adventists. George was an enthusiastic evangelist, but had no concept of needing a pastor to baptize people. The Seventh-day Adventist world church, however, soon put that right and sent the first missionary to Argentina. This was the beginning of the Adventist church in Argentina, and the university campus where this first group of Adventists were situated. George was my great-great-grandfather.

In the meantime, another family–originally from Germany, but relocated to Romania–also decided to emigrate to the Americas. The Schmidt family intended to get on a boat to Canada, but their 8-year-old son was too sick to travel. Two older brothers left for Canada and ended up in the Adventist community in Argentina. This 8-year-old was to be my grandfather on the other side of the family.

One more thread! J.N. Andrews, meanwhile, was engaging in mission work in Argentina from a distance, sending church magazines in the French language from Europe, where he was a missionary, to the French immigrants. They also ended up as part of the community of faith around the Adventist university in Argentina. In that way, J.N. Andrews impacted a country very
far away from where he was.

Three threads, all with roots in Europe, all coming together in what was to become Universidad Adventista del Plata—the Adventist University in Argentina—all influenced my sense of the largeness of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including the core value of Seventh-day Adventist education.

With this history, I wanted my children to experience more of the worldwide Adventist church and its education system. So, in 1998 I started my journey of exploration with my wife, Gisela, and our children. I was already a geography teacher with a master’s degree in administration, but to begin with I went to Chicago to take another master’s degree, this time in Christian ministry.

When it became time to think about college education for our children, my wife and I came to Andrews University. The only job opening for me was in Lamson Hall maintenance and since I was good at working with my hands, particularly carpentry, that is what I chose to do. Gisela later joined the Department of Nursing as a teacher.

I am still here—more than 14 years later! I know I make a difference by making the environment better for the students and helping them live their dreams. That is why when I was recently asked to craft a replica of J.N. Andrews’ trunk for the new president’s office, I thought of making it out of pieces of beds from Lamson Hall. Somehow that represented the living memory of the students who have been and are still part of Andrews University. It seemed appropriate that the history of J.N. Andrews and the history of students should somehow be represented in this box. And in it are the prayers of the current students for University Administration!

Better still, this also connected with my own history. If it had not been for the vision of J.N. Andrews and the immigrants from Europe to Argentina, I am not sure I would be here now.