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### From Personal Hardship to Compassionate Service

Denis Kaiser

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# From Personal Hardship to Compassionate Service



▲ DENIS KAISER

PERSONAL NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES MAY PREPARE US TO HELP THOSE IN LIKE CIRCUMSTANCES. THE STORY OF JACOB BERNARD PENNER (1894–1985) IS A WONDERFUL ILLUSTRATION OF THAT PRINCIPLE.<sup>1</sup>

Born into a Seventh-day Adventist family in the Northern Caucasus region in Russia, he experienced hardships early in life. He lost his mother and his father at the ages of 7 and 13 respectively, leaving him and his two younger sisters orphaned. The sermons of able ministers helped him focus on Jesus and he was baptized at the age of 16. Nearly two years later he traveled to Friedensau, Germany, to be trained as a minister.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914 he was arrested and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp because, although being of German descent, he was technically a Russian citizen. Initial repression for his unwillingness to work on the Sabbath and to eat pork gave way when the commanding general realized that Penner and other Russian Germans did not constitute a threat. Shortly afterward they were released. Since he was not a German citizen, the German military authorities did not draft him into the military and he was free to take the place of church workers who had been drafted, allowing him to minister to church members in East Germany.

Jacob's sisters had immigrated to the U.S. in 1913 and after the war they called him to join them in this country. For the next two decades he served the Greater New York Conference as a pastor and evangelist, and then for 20 years as editor of German-language periodicals at the Pacific Press Publishing Association in Brookfield, Illinois.

His own experiences of bereavement, affliction and hardship sensitized him to the needs

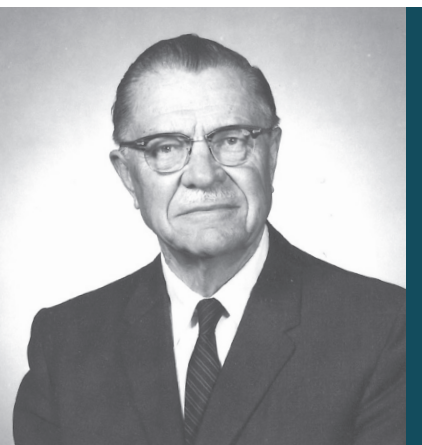
of others. From 1932–1933, when a terrible human-made famine killed millions of people in the Soviet Union, particularly among ethnic Ukrainians, Jacob and his wife Martha organized a relief network to provide food and clothing to relatives, church members and church workers in that region. A decade later, Jacob corresponded with and evangelized German prisoners of war in the United States. After World War II he and his wife collected clothes, food and German religious books for people in Germany to relieve their suffering in the post-war period.

Jacob said about his wife, “My good wife did most of the work because she loved to work for needy people. Her whole life was filled with love and care for others; remember, her name was Martha.” In total, they sent about 200 packages of books and 600 packages of clothes and food.

They spent their last years in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where they were buried at Rose Hill Cemetery. Our personal experiences may sensitize us to those in need and equip us to engage in Jesus’ ministry of sharing the gospel and helping the poor.

1. For more information, see Denis Kaiser, “Penner, Jacob Bernard (1894–1985),” *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, Jan. 29, 2020, accessed April 07, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=4AGK>.

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▲ Jacob Bernard Penner