



## 38 ❖ The unsinkable Schwartzes

Carlock Mennonite Church was one of the cluster of congregations in central Illinois that founded the inter-Mennonite missionary venture called Congo Inland Mission in the early twentieth century. Sometime later a shy farm boy named Merle Schwartz sat with his family at Carlock and listened to frequent reports by missionaries on furlough. He was moved by their appeals for more missionary volunteers. But what could he possibly contribute?

He sought out Rev. R. L. Hartzler, a pastor and member of the board of the Congo Inland Mission. “I feel that the Lord is nudging me toward missionary work,” Merle said, “but what can I possibly do? I’ll never be a preacher or a teacher.” Rev. Hartzler’s response was quick. “Merle, our mission board has been praying that the Lord would bring us doctors. You could make an enormous contribution to our new work in the Congo as Doctor Schwartz!”

Merle’s farmer parents quickly gave their blessing. It was the heart of the great depression and money was not plentiful, but Merle set a course from which he never deviated. He graduated from Bluffton College and enrolled, in the fall of 1934, in the University of Illinois School of Medicine in Chicago. He took with him a bag of wheat from the farm granary and a hand-operated coffee mill. In his sparse student quarters he would often grind a cup of grain and boil his own breakfast porridge before leaving for classes.

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photo—Dorothy and Merle Schwartz

Meanwhile, Dorothy Bowman had also sensed God's call. The daughter of fruit farmers in lower Michigan, she and her family were members of a Church of the Brethren congregation where the cause of world mission was constantly underscored. By the time she graduated from high school she felt a call to Christian mission in Africa. She decided to become a nurse and enrolled, in the fall of 1936, in the training program of Bethany Hospital in Chicago, a Church of the Brethren institution.

Merle was assigned to that hospital as an extern, and thus began their courtship. When Dorothy was assigned to the large Cook County Hospital for an eighteen-month period of bedside experience, Merle, whose classes were nearby, found it convenient to walk her home to Bethany, where they both had their living quarters. Their conversations began to focus on what would happen after they graduated. If the Lord was leading them both to Africa, why not go together? On June 30, 1940, they were married by Rev. Hartzler.

They set sail for the Congo from New York City in March 1941. By then World War II had exploded in Europe. They had secured passage aboard an Egyptian freighter curiously named the *Zam Zam*. Spotted in the course of its trans-Atlantic travel by a German raider, it was shelled, damaged, and halted dead in the water. Four days later it sank. Hearing of the sinking of the *Zam Zam* and having no other news to the contrary, their grieving families assumed that they had perished with their ship, and they held memorial services for Merle and Dorothy.

However, passengers and crew had been offloaded and transferred in mid-ocean to a German ship, the *Dresden*, which became their home for nearly a month. Finally debarked in a German-occupied French port, the Schwartzes eventually were transferred to Portugal and from there made their way back to the States—to much rejoicing and gratitude.

Now what? They had tried. All their Congo supplies were at the bottom of the Atlantic. Ocean travel was dangerous. But Merle and Dorothy set about gathering a second collection of supplies and waited for the next opportunity for travel. In the summer of 1942, word came that they could book passage on a freighter bound for the Congo seaport of Matadi. Were they ready? They were! In August they finally set foot on Congo soil.

Assigned to Mukedi station, they found a small, thatch-roofed dispensary/hospital built of fieldstone laid up in red mud mortar with external cement pointing. Word got around fast that a doctor had arrived at Mukedi station, and traffic from surrounding villages rapidly increased.

Using Merle's practical farm-boy skill with tools, and a Depression-honed make-do approach, the couple put together an innovative medical complex. No autoclave? No problem. They dug out the pressure cooker from their furnishings, parked it over an outdoor fire, and taught an aide how to use it. No shiny steel beds? They ordered a quantity of African bamboo beds from nearby Mukedi village. No electricity most of the time? Schedule surgeries during daylight hours and fire up Aladdin kerosene pressure lamps for nighttime emergencies. No traction mechanisms for broken legs? Bamboo frames rigged with clothesline worked well, with paint buckets filled with sand for weights.

With the help of Belgian government subsidies, a large hospital unit and a maternity ward were eventually built and equipped, which greatly expanded the medical services they could offer. Meanwhile, Dorothy was training Congolese midwives to help her in the maternity ward, and Merle trained a Congolese surgical assistant to help him.

Then came June of 1960 and the tumult of political independence which resulted in the total evacuation of Congo Inland Mission personnel. Merle and Dorothy happened to be at home on an extended furlough at the time. In a matter of weeks, however, urgent requests came from Congolese church leaders asking some men to return without their spouses to help reopen schools and churches. But there was more. The abrupt departure of the Belgians had left government hospitals, including the sizable complex at Gungu, just sixty kilometers from Mukedi, without staff. The new Congo government was asking the church to provide a doctor! Merle agreed to leave Dorothy behind and assume temporary responsibility for this medical outpost.

Merle lived alone in a large house left behind by Belgian officials. His days were packed with activity, but the evenings were long. He had packed Scrabble, one of the couple's favorite games. So he'd get it out and play a game with Dorothy, long distance. He'd play his hand then get up, walk around the little table, and play her hand,

back and forth, keeping careful score. In his weekly letters home he would report who was ahead in their marathon Scrabble game.

In the fall of 1969 the church leadership approached Merle and Dorothy with a daunting request. The Jeunesse rebellion had finally been defeated. The Mukedi schools and church life had been reorganized. But the medical part of the station lay in shambles. Would the Schwartzes consider returning and begin again from scratch? They were willing. Merle and Dorothy devoted the balance of their missionary career back at Mukedi to rehabilitating and relaunching a medical service that had so mindlessly been destroyed by misguided young rebels.

After they returned to the States in 1977, volunteer service remained the focus of their retirement years until health and energy no longer permitted. Dorothy passed away in 1997 and Merle joined her in 2002.

Today there is a special mission alcove in the Carlock church dedicated to Merle and Dorothy, featuring photos, newspaper clippings, and articles gathered during their long years of service. Their story is an important part of the congregation's history.

Jim Bertsche