In two of his letters, the apostle Paul mentions two individuals, Epaenetus and Stephanas (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:15), referring to them as “the first fruits.” This is the only time they appear in ecclesiastical history. Nothing is known about them, and had it not been for Paul, they would be completely forgotten.

Similarly, throughout the history of Adventist education worldwide, we find alongside distinguished and prominent figures, many valiant educators whose stories have not been told or have been forgotten. But they who “out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight” (Hebrews 11:34, KJV) must not be forgotten; their lives are the foundation upon which the ministry of Jesus Christ continues.

It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to share stories of three Adventist educational pioneers, who throughout their struggles and at the end of their days, were victorious, having persevered in the faith to overcome monumental obstacles in establishing schools in Brazil. Decades later, their achievements lie buried in the dust of time, and hardly anyone remembers them. The parade of these faithful forerunners begins with Huldreich Ferdinand Graf, who served with distinction in Brazil and the United States.

Huldreich Ferdinand Graf (1855-1950)

The Graf family had its origin in Germany but immigrated to Canada in the second half of the 19th century. Their descendants have passed down a story about friendship between the Grafs and the Henry Ford family that began with both families undertaking a long wagon trip on a “march to Michigan” from Quebec, Canada. Over time, the boys—Huldreich and Henry—became friends. In the 20th century, when the Ford Motor Company launched a large rubber production enterprise in the Brazilian Amazon, Henry Ford instructed his executives to locate his friend in Brazil. But the reunion never happened because the pioneer of the automobile industry apparently never came to Brazil. Whether the story is legend or truth, there is no way to know with certainty.

While in Michigan, the Graf family converted to the Seventh-day Adventist faith. Huldreich Graf attended the church’s theological seminary in Battle Creek and worked as a pastor and teacher in several places. In 1895, the General Conference sent him to Brazil as the first official Adventist pastor in the country. He arrived in Brazil with his wife, Alvina (nee Shauder, born in Alsace-Lorraine), and two daughters.

Graf and his family settled in Curitiba, the capital of
The Grafs’ less-than-1,000-square-foot home served multiple functions: It provided housing for the two families and served as both the school and house of worship. No resources were spared in the acquisition of didactic-pedagogical materials. The teaching methods implemented by the Steins were modern and innovative. In a few years, the school enrolled 400 students, and a new building had to be rented. This new building served the dual function of educational facility and house of worship.

Graf’s courage and ability to ride a horse for days at a time, accumulating thousands of miles, were legendary. One year, he rode for 300 days in a row! Some historians calculate that throughout his ministry, he rode approximately 15,000 miles. In 12 years of active work, he baptized 1,400 people and organized 20 churches, in addition to establishing the first Adventist school in that area.

All those miles on the backs of mules and horses provided Graf with extraordinary stories. He reported that: “[One of the mules] was behind all the time. Then on the second day, shortly after dark, my mule refused to pull and stopped. We were on a narrow path leading to a high mountain—a very dangerous place. For a while I tried everything to make the mules to move, but instead of going up the mountain, they turned and headed down the steep slope. At that moment I was led to think of Balaam and his donkey; then, kneeling down, I asked the Lord to make them go down the mountain if I were on the wrong road, and if the demons were in my way, and remove them. The Lord heard me, and the mules went up the mountain again. At two in the morning I reached Brother Schwantes’s house. In order to avoid frightening them into the great wild forest, I tried to awaken them by singing ‘Shall we gather at the river?’”

During these long journeys, his meals consisted of peanuts, cornbread, and water. When there were oranges and sugar cane, it was a reason for rejoicing. He never traveled alone, but with a company of local brothers in the faith and men interested in learning about God.

When the route was unknown, Graf depended entirely on maps, a compass, and the stars. The situation became very complicated when it rained. He reported that “we were struck by a terrible rain and storm hail. Arriving at a river...
that was full because of the rain, we tied most of our clothes to the mule, asked the Lord to help us, and we threw ourselves into the river. I was able to cross it unharmed, but Brother Schwantes was taken by the strong current, lost his boots, and the mule returned. A friend who had come to help us to cross the river, stopped the mule and we pulled it across the river with a long rope we had.

“We continued traveling, wet as we were, grateful to God for His care for us. Two hours later we reached the other river. There we found a cowboy who promised to help us to find a place to cross the river in the morning, and he invited us to stay at his house. He gave us a poorly prepared black bean dish, which we really enjoyed because the food was hot and we were very cold.”

Except for a brief period when he returned to the United States and worked in Ohio, Minnesota, and California, Huldreich Graf lived in Brazil. He died on the night of December 4, 1946. Today, more than 70 years after his death, Huldreich Graf is almost forgotten. However, his tomb, in a Protestant cemetery in a small town lost among the tablelands of Rio Grande do Sul, is certainly marked by the Savior to awaken him very soon!

Waldemar Ehlers (1879-1929)

As there were no Adventists in Brazil with a teaching certificate, a young Adventist employee from the German Publishing House left his home in Germany and took a ship to Brazil. His name was Waldemar Ehlers. Like the Steins, Ehlers did not have an official teaching license; however, church leaders believed that he and his future wife would be useful in further developing the educational work in Brazil. His fiancée, Mary Creeper, born in Bristol, England, and the daughter of German parents, had worked in Hamburg as secretary to the well-known minister L. R. Conradi. At the time of their marriage, they were both 20 years old. Despite being so young, they were already missionaries in a distant South American country. They learned to understand different habits and customs—among them, the carnival.

The family’s folklore includes this story: During the carnival parade one year, there was one float representing the young Ehlers family. A boy (a student, perhaps) imitated Waldemar with frantic gestures, a girl imitated Mary playing the organ, and the nanny was waving a newborn in her arms. This was all performed in such a way that the crowd watching would react with raucous laughter. No doubt, the community felt comfortable to gently mimic the family, proof of the couple’s popularity among the Curitiba population.

In 1902, the couple was transferred to the state of Espirito Santo on the central coast of Brazil, which also had a strong presence of German immigrants. Ehlers was already acting as a pastor. Because salary delays were frequent, his wife decided to open a church school to help with the domestic expenses of their growing family. It was the first Adventist school in that region of Brazil. We can imagine Mrs. Ehlers, fluent in four languages, busily providing for the needs of her family and teaching in the new school far out in the countryside. Their house was on the ground floor of the school, with no electricity, and for food they had only what the students provided for the family.

The Ehlers’ residence was separated from a tavern by a
wooden wall. At the tavern, the best-selling product was cachaca, a typical Brazilian drink with a high alcohol content. Waldemar Ehlers often held evangelistic meetings at night, far from his home, to which he always rode on horseback. While he was away from home one night, the clatter in the tavern was even greater than usual. Through the wall, Mary Ehlers overheard plans being made to murder her husband on his way back from the meeting that very night! With no one to ask for help, and no way to warn him, the only thing she could do was to ask for divine help. Oh, how she prayed that night!

At the usual time, she was relieved to hear the trotting hooves of her husband’s horse as he returned from the evangelistic meeting. It was not long before they both heard the return of those who had gone out to kill him. More cachaca, more shouting. They did not understand how Ehlers had passed through them without being noticed. 7 But the couple knew. God had protected him.

Despite the frightening experience the night before, early the next morning, classes resumed as normal, and all was quiet in the humble wooden school with its improvised desks, where the faithful teachers taught and preached simultaneously. The school remained open for decades, and it was there that many children gave their hearts to Jesus. The church continued to prosper, and many of those children became faithful servants of God who were employed in various branches of church work.

Decades later, Ehlers’ son-in-law, George Hoyler, also experienced serious difficulties in sharing the gospel in Brazil. A young shepherd in his native Germany, Hoyler was converted to the Adventist faith at the age of 19 from the example of his employers who did not allow him to work on Saturdays, and instead of coffee, served a drink made of barley. After graduating with a theology degree from the Marienhoehe Seminar, he received a call to Brazil in 1927.

In the 1940s, Hoyler worked in the south of Bahia State, not far from where his father-in-law’s family had lived years before. When World War II broke out, the Brazilian government united with the Allied Forces and declared war on Nazi Germany.
Schools and commercial and industrial organizations with a German presence were closed or nationalized.

One afternoon (in the city of Ilheus, the main city of the district where Hoyler was active), his teenage daughter, upon arriving home, found her mother sitting on the porch in near despair. “They arrested your father! He is German, and they suspect him! Run to see him. As a child they will let you see your father in the jail!” The girl ran to where he was being held. They allowed her to see her father, to bring him proper food, clean clothes, a pillow, and a mattress. All the native Germans were imprisoned, including the priest of the city.

Hoyler later described what happened: “. . . during the war I was imprisoned for several weeks in the company of priests, teachers and farmers for having committed the crime of coming to the world in Italy or Germany. Among the prisoners were people who feared even those who were buried in the cemetery. Here too we have a story to tell, for the enraged people invaded our house just as they did with the house of the other foreigners. I was taken away and our belongings were carried through the streets. But God in His mighty hand protected us as He did later, too, in my travels through the country of the state. While the imprisoned priests received rare visits, our brothers constantly brought me, from all around, assistance and comfort. They claimed to be with me in fasting and praying. A dear brother traveled 87 miles on foot to visit me. Even the police marveled at the contrast. What’s more, it was my privilege to unite one of the policemen to church through baptism. This experience had also benedictions for all, despite the hard days of uncertainty and distress for my wife, children and mother-in-law.”

Today, a long time after these events, we can find the descendants of both the Ehlers and Hoyler families, still teaching! They are still firm in the faith of their ancestors and inspired by the example they set.

**Edith Ruth Weber Martins (1916-1985)**

In 1912, on the eve of World War I, a ship docked in Brazil, bringing the German family of Otto and Maria Weber.
Why did this family decide to leave their homeland and immigrate to Brazil? A reason as simple as it is profound: the education of their seven children. In Germany at that time, it was mandatory to send the children to school on Saturday. There was even a “school police force” that checked on the students’ absence and searched for them at home. Refusing to accept the situation, the Weber family decided to relocate to Brazil and settled in Curitiba, where they did well financially. At that time, there was no Adventist school there, but the children attended German Lutheran schools. Later, the boys went to the Adventist seminary in São Paulo that was established in 1915 and is now known as Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo (UNASP).

One of the girls, Edith, became a teacher. In the 1930s, the local conference invited her to teach at one of its schools. She left the comforts of home and family to teach at a small Adventist school in the rural area of Xanxerê, in the state of Santa Catarina. A single room built of wood, the school was located in an open field in the middle of the tropical forest, and enrolled 20 children—all barefoot, poorly dressed, and of varying ages with different amounts of schooling.

Many years later, after her retirement, Martins told her three daughters, all Adventist teachers, about her memories. To enable her to survive, the students used to share with her what their families planted. Wheat flour did not exist there. Salary? It did not get there. She spent six months without eating bread! Since she came from a home that had everything, it’s not hard to imagine how difficult that must have been! The only foods available where she was assigned to teach were roots, tubers, cassava, potatoes, sweet potatoes, squash, and some fruits.

Today, descendants of that couple who immigrated because they refused to send their children to school on Saturdays, are fifth-generation Brazilians, many of whom work for the church.

Final Thoughts

Reflecting on all these memories, we are reminded of the words of Hebrews chapter 11 and affirm with the author: “And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of . . . the prophets: Who through faith subdued king domains, wrought righteousness, obtained promises . . . out of weakness were made strong . . . were tortured . . . had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment . . . afflicted, tormented” and “Of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:32-38, KJV).

The pioneers of Seventh-day Adventist education in Brazil experienced that faith. And what is faith? An unwavering trust in God’s guidance in the lives of His children. Faith is also the vision of the invisible, the anticipated possession of His promises. Faith is exchanging earthly ignorance for divine wisdom. It means exchanging human weakness for the strength that comes from above, sent to all those who aspire to spiritual victory.

To every Adventist educator today, the inspiration that comes from the pioneers is the certainty that faith is victory. May these thoughts and examples inspire us to press on in faith, trusting in God’s guiding hand.

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