

EMU

INTERNATIONAL

Evangelical Mission to the Unreached

Evangelical Mission to Uruguay

PROCLAIMING THE TRIUMPHS OF THE GOSPEL

Volume LXVII

October 2024

Number 10



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ALONG THE WAY . . .

The adage “When it rains, it pours” has never been more appropriate than the last few weeks for the EMU office. As you see from the accompanying article, Ursula Thiessen passed away in September. In Uruguay, two other people also died who have close connections to EMU, though not official ties. **Delmiro Rodriguez** of “33” was the father of 2 of our EMU pastors: **Gonzalo**, who started the church in Vergara and succumbed to cancer in 2009; and **Rubito**, who is the current pastor of Calvary Temple of “33.” Delmiro was the first convert to Christ from the very large Rodriguez family. Eventually all the siblings and parents became Christians. **Chicha Rodriguez** is Delmiro’s youngest sister. Also, his mother, **Doña Pilar**, gave the land for Camp Emmanuel and Camp Bethel after her husband died. I cannot imagine the extent of godly impact from this family in Uruguay. Many of the siblings and grandkids of this family have gone into full-time Christian ministry. This family is a blessing beyond measure. And Delmiro maintained a wonderful testimony to his dying day. His wife still lives in “33.”

Also, the **mother** of several other of our missionaries in Uruguay died recently: **Hector Gomez**, the retired pastor of Calvary Temple in Rivera; **Gabriel Gomez**, the current pastor of Gethsemani Church in Montevideo, and **Patricia Donz **, the wife of the office administrator and Camp Emmanuel director in Uruguay. Also,
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A PROMISE FULFILLED - URSULA 1928-2024

by Ken Jensen

On the morning of September 19, 2024, EMU’s longest serving missionary entered the presence of her Lord and Savior. **Ursula Thiessen** was 96 years old. She joined **Evangelical Mission to Uruguay** upon her graduation from the Bible Institute in Montevideo in 1953 – 71 years ago! And she never officially retired.

My familiarity with Ursula and her amazing spiritual character pre-dated our first meeting in 1973 when I first visited Uruguay with my parents, brother, and sister. I had seen the various versions of a film – *The Challenge of the Purple Land* - which my father, **George Jensen**, had edited for **Fred and Seva Dabold** (Pa and Ma) when Dad still worked at Bob Jones University in the cinema department. I had also heard Dr. and Mrs. Dabold speak of her when they were at our home. When my parents became missionaries with EMU in 1967 and my father visited Uruguay to get to know the ministries first hand, he came home with glowing tales about Ursula, who was his translator during his extended sojourn across Uruguay. The Uruguayan Newsletter, likewise, communicated her exploits. Then in 1976, I became a co-worker with the EMU missionaries. In the early years, Ursula was also my main translator and travel companion on my yearly visits. We served together for almost 49 years. The point here is that I’ve known this marvelous saint of God for a long time and have been personally acquainted with her missionary service to the unsaved, Christians, and to her fellow EMU family.

For almost everyone you get to know really well, you will come across some flaw, be it ever so slight. With Ursula, I can honestly say, I never discovered any defect of character. That is not to say she had no shortcomings! Dad and I were unable to use any sermon illustrations that included sports or the workings of an automobile. I never heard her raise her voice in anger or speak unkindly about anyone. I never witnessed a moment of selfishness or pride. Her passion was lovingly and kindly giving others the



Ursula interpreting for George Jensen

Gospel message or encouraging Christians to press on in their walk with Christ. I have never known a more “others oriented” person, and probably never will.

The intent of this article is to recount several highlights from Ursula’s testimony so you will better know her life’s story. But I’m actually overwhelmed by the plethora of facets that made up her life. However, I want to begin by reminding you that in 2020 we published Ursula’s autobiography, mainly covering her life in Germany during World War 2 and her missionary service in the interior of Uruguay, ending around 1964. The 58-page booklet is entitled “**A Promise Kept.**” Friends, co-workers, and family from Uruguay and the USA for years asked Ursula to flesh out her testimony, as those of us who knew the basics hungered for more details. It was a privilege for Joan and me to help with this project – along with many others – and present her with the English version during our visit to Uruguay in March 2020. At the time, she was recovering from a broken hip sustained at EMU’s Workers’ Conference at Camp Emmanuel. Some of you have this booklet; however, if you are interested in securing a copy for a fuller description of her earlier life, you can contact the EMU International office at 209 Roberts Road, Taylors, SC 29687, or by email at kenandjoan74@gmail.com. We have decided to make the autobiography available for a donation of
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any amount. Postage will be subtracted from your gift. The remainder of the donation will go toward helping send **children and young people to Camp Emmanuel** summer/winter camps, a ministry Ursula dearly loved.

Also, this book is available in Spanish – it's original text. However, the tome's title is somewhat different, though the content is basically the same. In full disclosure, I named the English version. Ursula, in keeping with her German straightforwardness chose "*Salvada Para Vivir Para El*" ("Saved To Live For Him"). The same terms and order information apply to this version.

Much of what follows is an abbreviation of Ursula's own presentation, though later events will be saturated by my own thoughts and impressions. Ursula would want me to stress that any praise of her is *not* from her pen. Her goal was always to glorify God. But in glorifying God, it is likewise appropriate to honor those who faithfully serve Him in life and in death. He is glorified in this, too.

Ursula Thiessen was born in the Free State of **Danzig**, now a part of northeastern Poland. She grew up on a rich-soiled farm with her younger sister, three older sisters, and an older brother. Ursula was the 2nd to the youngest. The family was strongly Christian Mennonite. She couldn't remember when she actually became a Christian as she couldn't remember a time when she didn't believe and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. She believes she was converted sometime in her elementary years or earlier. Her father taught all the children how to do the farm chores, so, Ursula had an excellent work ethic and knowledge of how a farm should be run. She was also strong, and a very pretty young lady.

WW2 began just a few dozen miles from their homestead when Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, at the Polish port connected to the Port of Danzig. Ursula was not yet a teenager. They were not greatly affected by the war at the beginning as the invasion forces moved westward away from the Thiessens' farm. The most somber impact on the family was when, two years later, her brother turned 18 and was called up to the army. Within another two years, Ursula's father, who was a WW1 wounded veteran,



Ursula (lft) with 3 of her sisters, brother, & parents. Her brother had just been drafted.

was pressed into service. Only the son lived through the war, but the women of the family did not know this until two years after the war ended. Ursula took up her father's mantle on the farm and worked diligently with the Poles and Russians working on the farm. She also attended high school, three miles away, when not working. Her three older sisters were away in other cities attending school or working, so the physical responsibilities fell on Ursula.

By January 1945, the **Russians** were on the march westward to destroy the Third Reich. Their path, in part, led through Danzig. The Russian troops, embittered by the harsh treatment and slaughters imposed by the German army, did not simply conquer, but rather rampaged across Danzig – killing, raping, and burning houses and barns. The refugees fleeing the Russians passed through the Thiessens' village with stories of the carnage headed their way. At the end of January, the families in her area packed all they could carry onto their backs and wagons, and fled west toward the Port of Danzig. The Russian army soon enveloped Danzig on all landed sides. The only escape was by ship. By the time the Thiessen sisters and mother found a ship to take them to Western Germany, they possessed only what they could carry in handmade knapsacks they sewed from sacks. Thousands of refugees and German soldiers were drowned while escaping by boat, victims of Russian bombers and submarines.

The family arrived very close to the advancing Western Allies, but still in unconquered territory. But the Lord continued to preserve the little family. The Thiessens knew that although the English and Americans were headed their way, they felt somewhat safe knowing the westerners were at least "civilized" and would not butcher captured civilians.

When the war ended on May 8, 1945, the Thiessens were under Allied rule and in a refugee internment camp. Ursula and some of her sisters found work helping farmers in the area as there were few men available for labor. Through the keen work of the Red Cross, Ursula's brother was united with the family two years after the war ended.

The thousands of refugees from Danzig were destitute, having lost their land – now part of Poland – houses, businesses, and all their earthly possessions. And the German nation lay devastated. Survival was a struggle with bleak prospects for the future.

But God was already at work. **Mennonite churches** in the USA had a profound burden for the plight of their brothers and sisters in Germany. Representatives from the "denomination" contacted several South American countries to inquire whether or not they would accept Mennonite refugees from Germany to settle in their countries. Three Latin countries were viable options, though Argentina eventually rescinded their offer to the Mennonites. In addition, funds were

raised in the US to pay for the transportation, food, clothing, and basic resettlement of thousands of families to the Americas.

Three years after the end of the war, the Thiessen family, along with many hundreds of their fellow Mennonites in Germany, boarded the *SS Volendam* liner sailing for **Montevideo, Uruguay**, located on the Rio de la Plata. The majority of the passengers were bound for Paraguay. Just before departure from Germany, Uruguay expressed a willingness to take 750 of the passengers. A large contingent of friends and extended family of the Thiessens opted for Uruguay due to its milder climate and farming culture. After a three-week voyage, the Mennonites arrived in the Montevideo harbor, where they were enthusiastically welcomed.

Ursula and older sister **Ruth** found jobs in the capital almost immediately, though they didn't speak a word of Spanish. Besides work, the two sisters began visiting different evangelical churches. Within a short time they were told by acquaintances about a Bible study that met at the home of Fred and Seva Dabold, not far from where the siblings worked. From the very beginning, Ursula and Ruth were impressed by the sound Bible teaching, fervent atmosphere of sincere prayer, and the friendliness of the other attendees.

At that time, there were no official Bible schools in Uruguay where young people could receive deeper training in the Scriptures, although Pa Dabold had been teaching certain new Christians at his home in the evenings. Desiring more training, Ursula and Ruth determined to attend a Bible institute in Buenos Aires, Argentina, just across the river from Montevideo. However, the Argentina government would not give them a visa because the Thiessens did not yet have official legal papers from the Uruguay authorities. However, at that very time, the Lord led the Dabolds to begin the first **Bible Institute** in Uruguay. And Ursula was able to be a part of the first class of students. (In this first class was **Marianne Rauter**, also a German refugee who had arrived in Uruguay

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First Bible Institute class: Ursula (lft), Marianne (rt), Chelo (sitting)

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on the *SS Volendam*. She, too, became a missionary with EMU. Another classmate was **Chelo Figueron**, who became the mission's evangelist throughout Uruguay.)

Ursula graduated three years later – in 1953 – and immediately joined the relatively new missionary organization founded by the Dabolds named Evangelical Mission to Uruguay. Some young men who were already serving with the mission had been evangelizing in the north central part of the country, and a few people had made professions of faith. The Dabolds asked if Ursula would be willing to live and minister in the tiny settlement of **Cerro Pelado**. Chelo, who was visiting homes in this area, along with some other men, built a small mud-brick, grass-roof house/meeting hall for Ursula's residence. It was primitive to the extreme: no electricity, no running water, no bathroom or outhouse! Her living space consisted of a borrowed bed, a small table & chair, and a tiny set of drawers, but no closet. Ursula hung her meagre wardrobe on the wood rafter. Her space was separated by a sheet from the meeting room.



Ursula in front of her mud-brick house in Cerro Pelado

Though her living conditions were sparse, the spiritual results of her ministry were not. From among the scattered *ranchos*, women and children began to come to Christ – and then men, too. The fruits of these conversions could be seen generations later as children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren became children of God. In her autobiography, Ursula gave several illustrations of how the Lord blessed and protected her and the ministry in Cerro Pelado.

Three years later, after that congregation became a true church, Ursula was moved to the department capital of **Rivera** in 1956, where efforts were underway to start another church. She continued to visit Cerro Pelado on weekends but spent her weekdays in Rivera on door-to-door visitation and holding children's classes in various neighborhoods. Eventually, she even helped Chelo and his young bride, Etelvina, construct a new, larger church hall in Cerro

Pelado. This new church came with an outhouse!

In 1964, the director of the mission asked Ursula to move back to **Montevideo** to continue her ministry. There were two factors. First, Fred Dabold's former translator had taken a ministry in another country, and Pa needed a good translator. Ursula, who had learned English somewhere along the way became an excellent translator for Bible messages and business meetings alike. And her Scripture memory was such that she could quote almost any verse a preacher/teacher used in his message, without having to look up the passage! I have never personally met anyone else who could do this.

The second reason for having Ursula move to Montevideo was that a young lady named **Maria Teresa "Chicha" Rodriguez** had just graduated from the Bible Institute and would be working in Montevideo. The Dabolds decided that the two ladies living together would be helpful for the sake of both Chicha and Ursula. The two women could scarcely have been more different! The serious-minded, no-nonsense German, and a 16-years-younger, very funny, mischievous, country girl from the deep interior of Uruguay. They became the very best of friends. Watching them interact over my 51-year acquaintance with them constantly verified the wisdom of paring these amazing, godly women.



Ursula & Chicha - 2014

When I first met Ursula and Chicha, they were living close to the Dabolds' house and the main church, in an apartment I referred to as "the dungeon." It's difficult to describe the place. Think of an entire city block with apartments on the outer sides, but with doorways that also led to a labyrinth of twisting halls with other doors, behind which were apartments with no windows except maybe a sliver-of-skylight. And noisy! Several years later, when the devaluation of the Uruguayan peso was at rock bottom against the US dollar, the mission was able to purchase a very comfortable 2-story, 2-bedroom apartment for this duo. They lived together at this location until just a few years ago when Ursula moved to a house on her niece's property so Ursula could receive more help in her advanced years.

Although not stated in her autobiography, in addition to the above two reasons for

moving to Montevideo, I believe there was a third important factor. By 1963, according to a Newsletter from that year, Ursula's health was nearly broken. Both the physical hardships she endured with her living conditions, travel by foot, bike, and horseback (she never desired to learn to drive a car!), and the dearth of mature spiritual fellowship (cult & occult activity was rampant in the Uruguay/Brazil border region) took a heavy toll on her. It is my assumption that it was during her years laboring in the north that she also developed a severe problem with arthritis. Though continually active in ministry in Montevideo, her health continued to deteriorate. In 1975, Ursula's mother and sisters talked to George Jensen, the director at that time, and asked if there was any way to force Ursula to take an extended vacation. They were truly concerned that she was killing herself by not slowing down. My parents convinced Ursula to fly to the **USA** in May of that year for a 6-month sabbatical at their house. Much of that time was spent at the **Wilds Christian Camp** where my dad was the summer missionary speaker. While stateside, a local, **Christian nutritionist** in Greenville, SC, heard of Ursula's physical maladies and asked my parents to take Ursula by her store for a consultation. This relationship and the accompanying special vitamins greatly helped her recover much of her strength. However, I recall that her arthritis was a continuing burden for much of her life as Uruguayan houses and buildings have a perennial humidity problem. But Ursula never complained. As director for 30 years, I interviewed each of our missionaries at least once a year to see how their health, family life, and ministries were going. Too often when I asked about her health, I did not accept her answer of "fine." Tears would come to her eyes as she admitted the daily pain she was experiencing. But she would not complain or slow her schedule of ministry. This was so much a part of her Christian character and her German heritage.

Besides international travel to the USA, Ursula was given the opportunity to visit the **Holy Land** in 1971 and return to **Germany** to see relatives in 1990.

As my father's translator in Uruguay, Dad asked Ursula to be on the **Uruguayan Board of Directors**, as the sole female representative. She agreed but only reluctantly. This was the one ministry activity she loathed! Eventually, after Chicha became fluent in English, I asked Chicha to take Ursula's place. Chicha was reluctant, too, but we both knew how much Ursula wanted out of that position, so being the good friend she was, Chicha agreed. And she is still serving on the Board in Uruguay.

As mentioned above, Ursula was proficient as a translator. She was Pa Dabold's and my father's chief interpreter for many decades. She also translated for me in my earlier years with EMU. However, as happens to

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many of us as we age, her hearing began to fail. Although she seemed to enjoy interpreting for messages and Bible lessons – especially for the Bible Institute classes – she became more anxious as she strained to hear the speaker. My dad was much louder than me, so I was the first to begin using another interpreter. Eventually, Chicha became our main voice in meetings.

Ursula's ministry in Montevideo was expansive. For years she was the leader of the youth department at **Calvary Temple**. She also taught children's Sunday School for many years. Other ministry involvements included door-to-door visitation, hospital visitation, prison outreach, counselling at the mission's camps, speaking at women's retreats, outdoor neighborhood classes for children (and mothers), and teaching in the Bible Institute.



Ursula (center) on hospital visitation with a group from Calvary Temple of Montevideo

She also had a fervent prayer life and love for the Bible. Every meal I ever had at her house, everyone at the table would read one verse from a verse-card-catalogue that was always close at hand. And I already mentioned her amazing breadth of Scripture memory. And the term “**prayer warrior**” does not fully express the extent of her prayer life. I cannot think of anyone I would rather

have praying for me. In the last several years of her life, when she was unable to engage in public ministry, Ursula made her prayer life for others an even greater priority. Also, a number of Christians would stop by her house to solicit her spiritual advice.

One of the **greatest testimonies** of Ursula's influence across Uruguay could be witnessed wherever she and I traveled in the country. Every place we visited a crowd would immediately form to greet her. (I basically didn't exist in those situations, which was fine with me. I let her know that I would rather folks get caught up with her, and I would just watch in awe!) She seemed to know everyone in the entire country! And so many of them were her spiritual children or people she had poured her life into. She was a blessing to others and was, in turn, blessed by others. And I can only imagine the eternal blessings for the few families in the USA who supported Ursula.

During the Thiessens' wintery escape from the Russians, Ursula made a promise to the Lord that if He would deliver her and her family, she would serve Him with her life. And now, for Ursula, her promise was fulfilled on September 19. However, another promise was also fulfilled. The Lord promised eternal life to those who take Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Ursula is experiencing the manifestation of that promise. **Two promises fulfilled!** †



*Ursula & her younger sister, Dora - Mar. 2024
This is the last photo we have on file of Ursula.*

Along the Way . . .

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Nicolas Gomez is her grandson and he pastors Calvary Temple of Tacuarembó, and **Marcos Gomez**, Pedro Donze's assistant.

The physical storm came with the arrival of **Hurricane Helene** on Friday, September 25. Atlanta was supposed to take the brunt of this storm, but it unexpectedly turned east in our direction. If you have watched the news, the destruction here was as bad and even worse than you can imagine – unless you live here! I have not seen the likes of this in my 71 years living in Greenville, SC, and upstate GA. Our house/office has been without outside power and internet since that morning. I will be surprised to have power within a week. It truly looks like a war zone within the 5-mile radius that we have surveyed. Thankfully, our 2 small Honda generators have kept the home office, our refrigerator & freezer, and my fan (!) somewhat functional. *(I'm surprised! Power on Sep. 30, but no internet.)*

This newsletter will be very late reaching you as we haven't yet been able to reach Minuteman Press that prints the paper copies, and getting Mailchimp out will be more challenging.

There are many items of EMU news that did not make it into this October issue. I will try to give a better update in the next newsletter. The **Farmers & Brooke** return to Cambodia in October. The **Hancocks** are stateside for **Becky's** 7th delivery. **John Mark Steel** was here in Sept. during a very short furlough. And the **Espinels** arrived at the end of Sept. to begin a 4-month furlough.

Thank you for your prayers! †

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