

The footprints of Three Latvian Female Missionaries in Colonial Contexts¹

Kristina ECE
University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

ORCID: 0000-0001-9816-5214

Abstract: During the era of colonial domination of much of Africa and Asia, many female missionaries from Europe served in these parts of the world. They served as teachers, medical practitioners, and evangelists but were also often seen as supporters of colonial culture. This paper examines the previously unresearched work of three female missionaries from Latvia who were sent by German mission societies to China, India, and Indonesia, respectively. The study uses historical-comparative, content analysis, and hermeneutical methods to interpret the missionaries' own texts and those written about them. It finds that the missionaries felt compelled to cooperate with colonial forces in order to carry out their ministry, even though colonial policies sometimes restricted what the missionaries could do. They also exhibited effective application of cultural frameworks and use of language skills in serving and collaborating with local populations.

Keywords: female missionaries, Latvia, Sumatra, German East Africa, India, Barmen, Leipzig, Liebenzell, Prozell, Weetneek, Griwing.

Introduction

During the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the territory of Latvia was incorporated within the Russian Empire and was divided into two governorates: Kurzeme (Courland, the western and southern parts of today's Latvia) and Vidzeme (Livland, the eastern and northern parts). Even though the state church in Russia was the Orthodox Church, in the territory of Latvia the Lutheran church, which retained ties with Germany, was dominant. Ethnically, most of the residents were Latvians, but Baltic Germans played a major role in running the Lutheran church and making decisions in many areas of life. However, one's nationality during that time period was quite fluid. Once a Latvian gained an education, especially at the university level, he (or later also she) would be considered German. Therefore, in this paper I will use the term "Latvian

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missionaries” to denote people who came from the territory of today’s Latvia, not to indicate that their original ethnicity was Latvian rather than Baltic German.

The main focus of this paper is on the first female missionaries from Latvia, starting from 1896 when Hildegard Prozell left for India. However, to give a wider context regarding the complexities of colonial powers and missionary involvement in colonized lands, I will discuss male missionaries from Latvia as a reference point. The great increase in missionary numbers from Latvia started in the 1880s. Initially, they were sent through Basel Mission, but soon afterwards, other mission societies joined in the sending activity. Due to historical circumstances (mainly the Soviet occupation), Latvian missionaries are practically unknown in their own country and in the wider European context. As a result, this paper will supplement general knowledge of overall European mission history.

Missionaries from Latvia went to various mission fields in Africa and Asia. Therefore, I will briefly discuss the different mission fields, to provide the context of missionary involvement in colonial situations.

The study employs a historical-comparative method to examine the ministry of female Latvian missionaries in their specific historical context. It also examines the impact of colonialism on their experiences in the mission field through content analysis, including searches for key words such as “mission,” “foreign,” “women,” “heathen,” “war,” and “peace” in their documents and related texts. Moreover, I acknowledge that the absence of certain key words can be just as significant as their presence. The hermeneutical method is used to interpret the missionaries’ own texts as well as texts written about them, by considering their historical, cultural, and theological contexts.

The primary sources for this study are archival materials from several mission societies affiliated with Latvian missionaries, along with some publications from late 19th- and early 20th-century periodicals.

Historical Context

The period from the 19th century until the Edinburgh Mission Conference of 1910 is referred to as the Great Protestant Missionary Century. During this time, Africa was divided by the European powers, and there were various disturbances in China. India fell under British rule, and Sumatra became a Dutch colony after a prolonged war. The I Ho Ch’uan (“Boxer”) Rebellion of 1900 resulted in the death of at least 188 Protestant foreigners, mostly missionaries, in China. The China Inland Mission, particularly the German branch, suffered the most casualties.² In Africa, the colonies of German East Africa emerged, where local tribes were brutally subjugated by colonial forces, especially after two missionaries from the Baltics were killed.

Mission in the 19th century usually happened with support from colonial powers. Missionaries from Latvia went to various mission fields in Africa (Namibia and

² Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, ed. Owen Chadwick, rev. ed. (Penguin Books, 1991), 287–88.

Tanzania today) and Asia (India, China and Indonesia today). The “Scramble for Africa” was taking place during the 1880s and 1890s, involving the invasion, annexation, division, and colonization of most of Africa by European powers.³ Germany became a colonial power after 1890s, obtaining territory in Southwest Africa and Tanganyika (Tanzania today). The Leipzig mission society, founded in 1836, operated mission fields among the Tamil people in India and in the British and German East African colonies (present-day Tanzania) by the end of the 19th century. When Karl Segebrock from Jelgava who will be introduced below joined the society, their work in Africa had recently begun.⁴

The first recorded missionaries from Latvia served as early as 1806, when Gustav Berthold Nyländer went to Sierra Leone.⁵ The greater increase in missionary numbers from Latvia started in the 1880s. The missionary who had the closest involvement with the colonial war situation, which would also cost him his life, was Karl Segebrock, born in 1872 in the capital city of Courland, Jelgava (*Mitau*) in Russian Empire, Latvia today.⁶ He became a missionary with Leipzig Mission in 1895 and was sent to the Wadschagga people in East Africa.⁷ Segebrock commenced his ministry with his Estonian colleague Ewald Ovir at the Mamba mission station, with assistance of fellow missionary Gerhard Althaus, who acted as their senior supervisor and aide during the initial phase of their work.⁸

Following a year of missionary work, Segebrock and Ovir were invited to extend their mission efforts to the Tchagga territory, which encompassed the Arusha and Maasai tribes located approximately 80 km to the west. In October 1896, they embarked on a journey to Mt. Meru to begin their work. Both missionaries had made significant progress at their mission stations, establishing connections with the locals and initiating the dissemination of the gospel.⁹ However, Ovir expressed in a letter that they were aware of the formidable obstacles they would face in the vicinity of Mt. Meru. Nevertheless, they considered it a significant privilege to be selected to establish a new mission station after only a year of service. Both missionaries professed a strong faith in God’s guidance, and their main incentive was the fact that nobody else had yet preached the gospel in that area.¹⁰ The missionaries were escorted by 70 carriers from the local population, and on October 15, they arrived at Akeri on Mt. Meru.

³ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent From 1876 to 1912*, Perennial (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xxi–xxv.

⁴ “Ziņas,” *Baznīcas Vēstnesis*, no. 3 (March 1, 1897): 117–21.

⁵ “Die Missions Arbeiter Aus Russland,” *Missions-Flugblatt Für Die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden Liv-Est-Und Kurlands*, 1911, 6–7.

⁶ Karl Segebrock, “Mein Lebenslauf” (die Personalakte von Karl Segebrock, 1889), ALMW II/32/412, Frankesche Stiftungen.

⁷ Evang. -Lutherischen Mission zu Leipzig, “Vocation for Karl Joseph Segebrock” (die Personalakte von Karl Segebrock, June 8, 1895), ALMW II/32/412, Frankesche Stiftungen.

⁸ Karl Segebrock, “Letter to Karl von Schwartz” (die Personalakte von Karl Segebrock, October 7, 1895), ALMW II/32/412, Frankesche Stiftungen.

⁹ “Tēvijas Kalendāra” redakcija, “Kāds Vārds Par Pagānu Misioni,” in *Tēvijas Kalendārs 1899. Gadam* (Rīga: Z. Veinbergs, 1899), 5–23.

¹⁰ Ewald Ovir, “Ein Brief Vom 11. October. Inland.,” *Duna Zeitung*, no. 263 (November 20, 1896): 2.

They were warmly received by Matunda, the leader of the Wameru tribe. A German colonial unit led by Captain Johannes was stationed nearby. However, during the night of October 19th to 20th, an attack took place, resulting in the deaths of both missionaries and five Chagga civilians.¹¹

This was the first such tragic event in Latvian mission. Although it received attention in both Latvian and German press in the Baltics, the coverage was mostly in the form of short death notices. Nonetheless, echoes of the incident can be found in Latvian publications until 1904, with Segebrock and Ovir being mentioned periodically in the context of mission work in Tanzania. In 1900, *Baznīcas Vēstnesis* reported on the unfortunate outcome of the German colonial punitive expedition, concluding that armed soldiers posed the greatest obstacle to mission work, as they caused people to feel intimidated and distrustful and ultimately undermined the message of peace.¹² Therefore, the mission did not seek government assistance.¹³ The clash left permanent marks on the Latvian mission community, and the female missionaries who served later were most likely aware of it. Below, I will introduce Latvian missionaries who went to three different mission fields through three different mission societies.

The Leipzig Mission, Tamil Nadu (India) and Hildegard Prozell

During the 19th century, Britain established its dominion over all of India.¹⁴ The East India Company was formed in 1600 as a commercial enterprise that would later become part of an empire. It was the dominant power in India at the end of the 18th century. By 1858, the immense empire that it had developed was taken over by the British government.¹⁵

Hildegard Prozell,¹⁶ the second of four children, was born on August 9, 1869, to a family of landowners (*Gutsbesitzers*) in Schwarzeckhof (now Jaunmārupe), near Riga. At age 10, she moved to Riga with her aunt, and she later attended the *Höhere Töchterschule I Ordnung*, a higher girls' school, where she graduated in 1886 with qualifications to work as a teacher. In 1887, she received confirmation from Theophil Gaehtgens at the Riga Dome Cathedral.¹⁷

¹¹ More information on Karl Segebrock can be found in a book section in preparation by Leipzig Mission Society: Kristina Ecis, *Rediscovery and Reevaluation of Mission Understanding of the Courland Lutheran Consistory and Missionary Martyr Karl Segebrock*. More research regarding the tragic events at Mt. Meru has been done by other authors, including Joseph Wilson Parsalaw, Robert B. Munson, and Moritz Fischer.

¹² "Misione," *Baznīcas Vēstnesis*, no. 9 (September 1, 1900): 361–64.

¹³ "Kurzeme. No Zaļeniekiem. Pirmais Latviešu Tautības Misionārs.," *Latviešu Avīzes*, no. 45 (June 6, 1903): 2.

¹⁴ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 210.

¹⁵ Neill, 197, 223, 228.

¹⁶ More information can be found in Kristīna Ēce, "Leipcigas Un Lībencellas Misijas: Hildegardes Procelas Un Lilijas Otilijas Grīviņas Kalpošana," *Ceļš* 73 (2022): 24–42, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.22364/cl.73.02>. There is a Legacy article about Hildegard Prozell in preparation at the *International Bulletin of Mission Research*.

¹⁷ Hildegard Prozell, "Autobiographie, #301," April 1896, ALMW II/31-1/143. 301, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

In February 1896, Prozell applied to join the Leipzig Mission (*Die Ev. Luth. Mission zu Leipzig*) and received a positive recommendation from pastor Gustav Cleemann. The pastor emphasized that Hildegard's faith was pure, deep, and sincere, and that she was a person of great dedication and determination. He wrote, "She is a living branch on the vine of Christ, drawing from Him the juice and power, with a rich and deep life of faith, a fervent love for the Lord, and a fervent tendency to bring the lost, poor, blind pagans unto Him."¹⁸ In May 1896, Prozell was accepted into the Leipzig Mission, and in September of that year, she was sent to India to work as a teacher at a mission.¹⁹ She remained in India in this capacity until 1909.

Prozell worked as a professional missionary in the Volga region of Russia after her return from India, but due to health reasons, she had to leave. During World War I, she stayed in Riga, but because of the political uncertainties, she retired from the Leipzig Mission Society on November 1, 1917.²⁰ Prozell and her sister moved to Germany after the war, and this marked the end of their connection with the Baltics. However, Prozell continued to work on home missions in Germany until the end of her life. She passed away on March 8, 1948, in Spangenberg, Germany.²¹

The Liebenzell Mission, Hunan (China) and Lilija Otilija Grīviņa

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, China was also a dangerous place for missionaries. About her call to mission, Lilija Otilija Grīviņa²² from Riga wrote in 1905 or 1906, "I read the book *China's Martyrs*, [and] it became clear to me that I should go to China. I felt very happy about this commission from the Lord, but in my heart, I said: If the Lord asked you to lay down your life as a martyr, you would deny it out of fear and shame the Lord."²³

Grīviņa's reference to the deaths of missionaries was associated with the political instability that started as early as 1895. According to Stephen Neill, an historian of missions, the missionaries were susceptible to attacks as they were a conspicuous and sizable group of foreigners. In some cases, the missionaries were responsible for the unrest due to their abuse of the benefits of interstate treaties, but others were innocent victims. In 1900, an imperial edict was issued to eliminate all foreigners, triggering the so-called Boxer Rebellion (*I Ho Ch'uan*).²⁴ According to Neill, the precise number

¹⁸ Gustav Cleemann, "Rekomendācija," February 24, 1896, ALMW II/31-1/143. 302, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

¹⁹ Kollegium der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Mission, "Vocation Der Lehrerin Fräulein Hildegard Prozell," September 13, 1896, ALMW II/31-1/143. 290-295, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

²⁰ Paul Fleisch, *Hundert Jahre Lutherischer Mission* (Leipzig: Verlag der Evangelisch-lutherischen Mission, 1936), 313; Carl Paul, "Ein Brief an Hildegard Prozell. #65-66," November 17, 1917, ALMW II/31-1/143. 65-66, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

²¹ ALMW II/31-1/143. 1. 12.03.1949.

²² Her last name is spelled in various sources as Grihwin, Griwing, and Griewing.

²³ Lily Griwing, "Bericht Über Die Abordnungsfeier. Abendversammlung," *Chinas Millionen*, no. 9 (November 1913): 248-49.

²⁴ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 278-88.

of Chinese Christians and missionaries who lost their lives during the Boxer Rebellion is not known; however, a trustworthy source reveals that among Protestant foreigners, 188 individuals were killed. The China Inland Mission, which was a parent organization of the Liebenzell Mission, suffered the largest loss of personnel.²⁵ Thus, when Grīviņa wrote her letter, she was certainly aware that her life might be at risk in China. Most likely, even though she was still only 13 years old when Segebrock was killed in Africa, she had heard about that event as well.

Born on December 25, 1883, in modest circumstances in Riga, Grīviņa²⁶ received her education at Tailova Gymnasium, which used Russian as the language of instruction. On June 2, 1902, she was confirmed in the German-speaking congregation of the Lutheran Jesus Church. Despite being qualified to work as a teacher after graduating from high school, Grīviņa worked as an accountant for a small construction company in Riga.²⁷ Around 1905 or 1906, she discovered the magazine *Chinas Millionen* and Liebenzell Mission. After some struggles at home with obtaining permission from her parents and pastor, she went to study at Bad Liebenzell in Germany for four years.

When Grīviņa was at Liebenzell, China faced another wave of challenges. In 1910, a severe famine erupted there, and some Chinese attributed it to foreigners, thereby reigniting xenophobia. After an attack, a telegram was sent from Changsha to Liebenzell: “All Changsha missionaries affected by the attacks lost all their personal property, but lives were saved.”²⁸ During this period, China faced several other challenges, such as Sun Yat-sen’s rebellion against the imperial family in 1911 and the civil war between the north and south in 1912.²⁹

Grīviņa went to Hunan province of China and served there as a missionary with Liebenzell Mission Society from May 1914 until late 1924. For the first year, Grīviņa was in Hengchow (Hengyang today) learning Chinese and passing the language exams that enabled her to become a teacher.³⁰ Starting from 1915, she served in Changsha, first at a school for blind girls³¹ and then from fall 1922 on at the Hunan Bible Institute, founded and led by Dr. Frank A. Keller.³² In 1925, Grīviņa returned to Riga, by that time to the independent Republic of Latvia, married a pastor of a Brethren congregation, and resigned from missionary service. She passed away in Riga in 1944.³³

²⁵ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 288–89.

²⁶ More information can be found in Ēce, “Leipcigas Un Libencellas Misijas: Hildegardes Procelas Un Lilijas Otilijas Grīviņas Kalpošana.” Also, an article about her life and ministry is in preparation at the International Review of Mission.

²⁷ Jūlijs Spalis, “Vēstule Mācītājam R. Feldmanim,” April 26, 1945, Mape Nr. 11, RFBĀM.

²⁸ Kalmbach, *Mit Gott*, 76.

²⁹ Kalmbach, *Mit Gott*, 84.

³⁰ Spalis, “Vēstule Mācītājam R. Feldmanim.”

³¹ “L.O. Griwing Personas Lieta,” n.d., Liebenzell, Deutschland, Libencellas misijas arhīvs.

³² Kevin Xiyi Yao, “The Legacy of Frank Arthur Keller,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 34–38.

³³ Spalis, “Vēstule Mācītājam R. Feldmanim.”

The Barmen/Rhenish mission, Sumatra (Indonesia) and Auguste Vietnieka

In Indonesia, Dutch missionary societies devoted themselves to Christian work, and they were particularly successful in establishing large churches among various ethnic groups. The Barmen/Rhenish Mission, a German missionary society, achieved the most notable success in upland Sumatra among the Bataks, who were previously untouched by Dutch rule or Muslim influence. Despite earlier failed attempts by other missionaries, the Barmen/Rhenish Mission settled in Sumatra in 1861 after being driven out of Borneo.³⁴

Auguste Vietnieka³⁵ was born in Wilkenhof (Viļķene today) in the Limbaži area in Vidzeme (*Livland*) on May 16, 1873, to a parish teacher's family; the family later moved to Riga. Her father died when Auguste was nine years old, and six years later, her mother also passed away.³⁶ Vietnieka was educated at a girls' vocational school (*Mädchen-Gewerbe-schule*), after which for one year she learned crafts at *Fröbelschen Bonnenkursus*. With that, her formal education was finished and Vietnieka was confirmed on May 19, 1891, in the Lutheran Jesus Church's German-speaking congregation.³⁷ At this time, Auguste's only brother, Eugene Hugo, (1870–1923), had become a teacher at a secondary school in Tallinn and invited his sister to live with him. He also gave Auguste the idea of becoming a teacher. The teacher's exam could be taken only in Russian, but Auguste had studied at a German school and knew Russian very poorly. In 1892, Auguste arrived in Tallinn, spending two difficult years there until in 1894 she passed the private teacher's exam and was able to go to Sevastopol, where she was offered a teaching position.³⁸

While in Sevastopol and other Volga German colonies, Vietnieka met pastor Johannes Alber (1845–1932), who shared with her the need for workers in the mission field. Vietnieka felt called to mission, and in 1899 she was seconded to Sumatra Island through the Barmen/Rhenish Mission Society.³⁹ For three years, she served in Laguboti as a teacher in a boarding school. In 1902, Vietnieka was sent to Pangaloan to start a new school for both boys and girls.⁴⁰ Even though, in her view, the work in Pangaloan was successful, her superior, mission leader Gottfried Simon (1870–1951) considered

³⁴ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 294–95.

³⁵ Her last name is spelled in various sources as Weetneck, Weetnek and Weetneck.

³⁶ Auguste Weetneck, "Autobiographie, #3-9," ap 1898, RMG 2.087. 3-9, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

³⁷ Roberts Feldmanis, "Vietnieks (Weetneeks), Auguste, Johanna. Misionāre," n.d., Mape Nr. 11, RFBĀM.

³⁸ Weetneck, "Autobiographie, #3-9."

³⁹ "Die Aktiven Missionare Aus Unserer Heimat," *Missions-Flugblatt Für Die Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden Liv-Est-Und Kurlands. Livland.*, 1907, 6–12.

⁴⁰ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #19-25," February 23, 1903, RMG 2.087. 19-25, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

Vietnieka too independent, and she was called back to Laguboti⁴¹ where she served from 1903 to 1910. She continued to serve as a teacher to girls⁴² as well as to the lepers in Huta Salem colony.⁴³

In 1910 Vietnieka came to Europe for a furlough and was encouraged to go to the Volga region in Russia. Her final letter is dated from 1912; at this time, she hoped to go to Germany to properly resign from the mission society and say goodbyes.⁴⁴ We have no more information about her life and ministry, and her date of death is unknown.

Teachers in mission fields – dependence that requires cooperation with colonial forces

The three missionaries from Latvia were not directly involved in colonial war conquests, as they reached the mission field after the colonial wars had ended. Their main mission task was to be teachers at mission schools, as well as do women's ministry by sharing the gospel and sometimes by providing medical care as well. The only one lived through some war situations was Liliija Otilija Grīviņa, who wrote in 1924 about a war in the Hunan area between two governors. She mentioned that all travel on the river had been stopped as soldiers were shooting from both sides. Missionaries were detained and could not return to their mission stations.⁴⁵ Vietnieka's writings simply describe the Bataks' life in Sumatra and their situation under the Dutch government. Her description is somewhat mild, as if from an outsider, which of course she was. She observed, for example, that the Bataks had to pay taxes to the Dutch and to build roads and bridges at their command. Vietnieka also commented that the new rulers had allowed them to follow those cultural rituals that were not clearly against the Christian faith, but that they were not allowed to kill people as a sacrifice.⁴⁶ Most likely, the local people would view this colonial occupation differently, but this is how a missionary from a province of the Russian Empire saw matters. It must be acknowledged, though, that the press was heavily censored in the Russian Empire, so that would be another reason for Vietnieka to write as she did.

These missionaries wanted deeply to serve God and His calling. To be effective, they perceived that it was important for them first to understand the general situation. Prozell wrote in 1897 that she would like to observe the larger British and American

⁴¹ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #26-31," March 4, 1903, RMG 2.087. 26-31, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁴² Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #85-93," January 20, 1910, RMG 2.087. 85-93, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁴³ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #71-77," July 4, 1909, RMG 2.087. 71-77, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁴⁴ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #99-101," January 11, 1912, RMG 2.087. 99-101, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁴⁵ Lily Griwing, "Chinas Größtes Bedürfnis," *Chinas Millionen*, no. 3 (March 1924): 40.

⁴⁶ Auguste Weetneck, "Pie Bataku Tautas Sumatras Salā," *Latviešu Avīžu Baznīcas Un Skolas Pielikums*, no. 8 (April 23, 1911): 58–60; Auguste Weetneck, "Pie Bataku Tautas Sumatras Salā," *Latviešu Avīžu Baznīcas Un Skolas Pielikums*, no. 9 (May 7, 1911): 65–67.

schools in Madrasa and Tanschaur (today Tanjavur).⁴⁷ Vietnieka in her vocation document (instructions from her superiors about her ministry) was commanded to observe and learn from the two mission sisters who already served there.⁴⁸

Being on the mission field meant learning several foreign languages. Knowing languages and being able to communicate showed honor to the local people to whom they ministered and also enabled the missionaries to work with the authorities. Prozell, being Baltic German, had to learn English to communicate with the British authorities; she also devoted considerable effort to learning Tamil.⁴⁹ Several times she wrote that Tamil was difficult to learn and that she initially was very limited in her ministry.⁵⁰ Vietnieka, being a Latvian, had learned German at school, but she had to learn Russian later to become a teacher. In her letters, she did not mention learning the language at all, probably assuming that it was understood from the beginning that she would have to learn the Batak language as soon as possible.⁵¹ Printed sources mention that she learned the language in one year.⁵² It is not known if Vietnieka had learned Dutch to work with the government or whether she interacted with the government in English. Grīviņa spoke Latvian and German at her home, went to a Russian gymnasium where she also learned English and French, and then had to learn Mandarin on the mission field.⁵³

Teachers in both India and China were required by the ruling authorities to pass a language proficiency test. Prozell was able to complete it September 1898,⁵⁴ or about two years after her arrival in India. Grīviņa reported that her last language exam was in 1917,⁵⁵ a little over three years after arriving in China. Both acknowledged having greater freedom in communicating with the local people and more free time for ministry after they passed their language exams.

Teaching and schools were quite tightly regulated by the ruling authorities. If the missionaries wanted to be effective in their teaching ministry, they had to cooperate with the government. Prozell had some difficulties in proving what education she had received at home. British authorities were very strict, indicating that if she wanted to be

⁴⁷ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #259-262," October 19, 1897, ALMW II/31-1/143. 259-262, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁴⁸ Die Deputation der Rheinischen Mission, "Instruction Für Die Missionsschwester Auguste Weetneck," ap 1900, RMG 2.087. 13, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁴⁹ Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #259-262."

⁵⁰ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #267-269," May 1, 1897, ALMW II/31-1/143. 267-269, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁵¹ Die Deputation der Rheinischen Mission, "Instruction Für Die Missionsschwester Auguste Weetneck."

⁵² "Latviete Kā Kristīgās Ticības Izplatītāja Sumatras Salā," *Lidumnieks (Brazīlija)* 23 (December 10, 1908): 4.

⁵³ Lilija Otilija Grīviņa, "Anketa," 1924, LVVA 3234-5-18526, Latvijas Nacionālais arhivs, Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhivs.

⁵⁴ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #224-229," August 29, 1898, ALMW II/31-1/143. 224-229, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁵⁵ Lily Griwing, "Nachrichten Aus Dem Missionsfelde. Netzauswerfen in Changscha," *Chinas Millionen* 10 (October 1917): 125-26.

a school principal, she had to present her diploma.⁵⁶ There was also some financial gain if she could present her education document, as then her position would be partially sponsored by the government.⁵⁷ Vietnieka reported that the schools where she worked were also government-sponsored,⁵⁸ with the result that the government required the Batak assistant teachers to pass state exams to continue to teach.⁵⁹ Vietnieka saw those state exams as one positive way to prepare able girls who could then be hired to work and support themselves in that way.⁶⁰

Prozell experienced the greatest difficulties and opposition from the British authorities during her second ministry period in Mayavaram. Leipzig Mission gave her the task of establishing three schools for girls in Mayavaram, Kornat and Tiruvilandur. The battle for registration started in September 1906⁶¹ and continued through April 1907.⁶² Some reasons for the difficulties were connected with the parents of the prospective students, as I will discuss below. Other reasons were directly connected with the authorities. In Prozell's view, the smaller local mission schools in Tiruvilandur and Kornat obtained registration more easily because there was no competition. In Mayavaram, where a government girls' school already existed, registration was denied on the first attempt.⁶³ Therefore, it can be concluded that to fulfill their calling, missionary teachers had to cooperate with the governing authorities.

Teachers' cooperation with the local people: students and their families

Cooperation with the colonial powers was not the only interaction the missionaries experienced. The most intensive interaction for teachers was with their schoolchildren, their parents, and school staff. When the mission teachers went to a school that was already established, the interaction was quite easy and rewarding. In Prozell's early stage of service, when she did not yet know Tamil, she wrote that the children

⁵⁶ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #247-250," January 18, 1898, ALMW II/31-1/143. 247-250, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁵⁷ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #245-246, 240-243," March 12, 1898, ALMW II/31-1/143. 245-246, 240-243, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁵⁸ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #37-45," April 3, 1905, RMG 2.087. 37-45, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁵⁹ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #46-51," February 16, 1906, RMG 2.087. 46-51, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁶⁰ Auguste Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #59-70," February 16, 1909, RMG 2.087. 59-70, Archiv- und museumsstiftung der VEM Wuppertal.

⁶¹ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #141-144," September 1, 1906, ALMW II/31-1/143. 141-144, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁶² Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #131-133," April 22, 1907, ALMW II/31-1/143. 131-133, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁶³ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #137-140," February 2, 1907, ALMW II/31-1/143. 137-140, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

were happy just with her presence and wanted to be around her all the time.⁶⁴ Grīviņa reported that more parents wanted their blind girls to come to the school, but they did not have more space.⁶⁵

Starting a school in a new place was almost always a challenge. Vietnieka, sent to start a new school in Pangaloan, reported that they went to several villages around that town, inviting children and trying to convince mothers and grandmothers to send their daughters and granddaughters to the school, but for several months they had no success.⁶⁶ Prozell had similar difficulties in Mayavaram. She wrote in a letter, "I have to say, that when I arrived in Mayavaram I was quite excited about the three schools that had to be established. ... Missionary Mr. Matthes said, 'You will have a difficult beginning as people here are very fanatic. The work here in this fanatic town will be very difficult, if possible at all.' I have already observed the truthfulness of this statement."⁶⁷ Prozell also experienced false accusations and attacks from the opposition.⁶⁸ Part of this opposition could be connected with the fact that they as white foreigners, they were perceived as representing the colonial powers, even though they were not British or Dutch.

After overcoming the initial difficulties, the missionaries managed to develop good relationships with the parents of local children, and the new schools were established. Prozell reported six months later that the opposition had decreased and the number of children enrolled had increased.⁶⁹ A year and a half later, she wrote that the schools had prepared the way to the parents' hearts and that parents could see the value of education for their girls.⁷⁰ Vietnieka reported similar success, stating that after initial difficulties the school in Pangaloan had attracted around 60 students of both sexes. Vietnieka was just quite skeptical about some of the parents, who did not see any value in educating their girls.⁷¹ Therefore, we can presume that much of the missionaries' efforts involved spending time with the local people, convincing them of the value of Western education, before they could introduce these students and their families to Christ.

Even though the cultures of Tamil, Batak and Hunan Chinese people were different, in girls' education missionaries from Latvia experienced similar attitudes. At first, they themselves had to overcome difficulties just to become missionaries,

⁶⁴ Hildegard Prozell, "Bericht von Hildegard Prozell an Das Hochwürdige Collegium Zu Leipzig, #270-272," May 1897, ALMW II/31-1/143. 270-272, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁶⁵ Griwing, "Nachrichten Aus Dem Missionsfelde. Netzauswerfen in Changscha."

⁶⁶ Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #19-25."

⁶⁷ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #154-157," January 9, 1906, ALMW II/31-1/143. 154-157, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle. Author's translation.

⁶⁸ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #150-153," March 6, 1906, ALMW II/31-1/143. 150-153, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁶⁹ Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #141-144."

⁷⁰ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #127-130," April 27, 1908, ALMW II/31-1/143. 127-130, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁷¹ Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #19-25."

since at that time many well-meaning Christian brothers did not see a place for women on the mission field. In other instances, the mission society itself desired to provide only basic training for the local girls attending mission schools.⁷² Female missionaries, however, wanted to enable the girls to pursue higher ideals and become more independent.⁷³ As females, they could navigate the local culture and customs and reach local women where men had no access. Therefore, they had also a passion for training local women to become evangelists.⁷⁴

Work with women within the culture framework

As noted above, one main reason why women were widely considered a powerful mission force was the cultural aspect. Missionary men simply had no access to the inner households where women resided.

Prozell was involved with what was called the zenana mission (zenana being the private part of the house for women). From the beginning, she was aware that training the “Bible women” (local believers who were taught the Bible so that they could evangelize others) was an integral part of her mission work.⁷⁵ Because of the lack of trained Bible women, Prozell asked the Leipzig Mission for additional finances to develop material for a training course.⁷⁶ However, due to her health and her furlough to Europe she was not able to implement the training. During Prozell’s ministry in Mayavaram, the Leipzig Mission required her to start zenana work there. Since it was a pioneering work, Prozell felt that it was developing very slowly.⁷⁷ A few months later, though, she could report eight Bible women in training.⁷⁸

In China, the ministry to women did not have a special name, but ministry happened nevertheless. Grīviņa noted that after her final language exam, she had more time for that work.⁷⁹ While serving at the Hunan Bible Institute, she helped to train Chinese Bible women and participated in the first outreaches done by local female missionaries.⁸⁰ It turned out that women’s work was equally good as men’s work, and sometimes even better, because when women spoke to other women in Chinese culture, men also came and listened. In contrast, in some places, when a man visited a home, women would leave the room.⁸¹ Seeing that the culture allowed women to share

⁷² Prozell, “Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #224-229.”

⁷³ Weetneck, “Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #71-77.”

⁷⁴ Griwing, “Chinas Größtes Bedürfnis.”

⁷⁵ Prozell, “Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #259-262.”

⁷⁶ Hildegard Prozell, “Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #207-208,” April 24, 1901, ALMW II/31-1/143. 207-208, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁷⁷ Prozell, “Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #154-157.”

⁷⁸ Prozell, “Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #150-153.”

⁷⁹ Griwing, “Nachrichten Aus Dem Missionsfelde. Netzauswerfen in Changscha.”

⁸⁰ Lily Griwing, “Evangelisationen,” *Chinas Millionen*, no. 9 (September 1923): 129–30.

⁸¹ E. Elizabeth Keller, “Summer Vacation Evangelism,” *The King’s Business* XV (January 1924): 23.

the Gospel, Grīviņa noted that she was happy to train the locals, so that they themselves could then carry out evangelism.⁸²

Besides teaching, the main ministry for Vietnieka was visiting the leper colony of Huta Salem, where she mainly taught women and men to read, so that they could read Bible stories for themselves.⁸³ She also taught women in Si Hobuk, and after years of ministry there, she noted that teaching those sick women was a joy and refreshment. Sometimes Vietnieka even felt that the women in Huta Salem had deeper understanding of Scripture than the healthy women in the villages.⁸⁴

From the communications discussed above, we can conclude that missionaries from Latvia applied their skills and their respective cultural frameworks to impact the women they served by teaching and sharing the gospel. In terms of ministry, these three missionaries were not much different from their colleagues who came from other nations. Prozell mentioned a missionary family from Sweden, named Blomstrand, who performed a similar teaching ministry.⁸⁵ Hungary started to send missionaries to India during the last year of Prozell's ministry.⁸⁶ Grīviņa served at the school for the blind in Changsha that had been established by Pauline Kumm in 1908 and was then directed by Irene Kunst (1909–1913), an east Prussian educated in Budapest,⁸⁷ and German Mathilde Vasel (1913–1939).⁸⁸ Vietnieka worked together with Norwegian Thora Wedel Jarlsberg.⁸⁹ Therefore, the names of Prozell, Grīviņa and Vietnieka add meaningful pieces to European female missionary history.

Conclusion

The main objective of the present research was to document how female missionaries from Latvia, who were coming from a small minority culture and a church within the Russian Empire, pursued their calling and cooperated with the colonial powers on their mission fields to accomplish their mission. They showed obedience to God in responding to the call to mission, while being fully aware of the risks involved in view of the death of Karl Segebrock and the political instability in the countries they were sent to serve.

⁸² Griwing, "Chinas Größtes Bedürfnis."

⁸³ Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #37-45."

⁸⁴ Weetneck, "Ein Brief an Herrn Inspektor, #71-77."

⁸⁵ Hildegard Prozell, "Ein Brief an Den Missionsdirektor, #257-258," January 10, 1898, ALMW II/31-1/143. 257-258, Frankesche Stiftungen zu Halle.

⁸⁶ A. M. Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way: The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B. V., 1993), 257–60.

⁸⁷ Kool, 236.

⁸⁸ Helene Luginland, *Draußen Vor Dem Osttor: Gottes Wirken Unter Blinden in China* (Bad Liebenzell: Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1976), 141–43; Kool, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way: The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)*, 149–50; Beate Eulenhöfer-Mann, *Frauen Mit Mission. Deutsche Missionarinnen in China (1891-1914)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 192–96.

⁸⁹ Inger Marie Okkenhaug, "Thora Wedel Jarlsberg (1863–1930): Tro Og Transnasjonale Gjerninger," in *Møter Og Mangfold: Religion Og Kultur i Historie, Samtid Og Skole* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2022), 149–74, <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.156>.

These three missionaries from Latvia were not directly involved in military actions or war. However, to be effective in their calling and to accomplish the task their mission societies gave them—establishing schools and teaching children—they had to cooperate with the colonial forces.

Female missionaries from Latvia also had to cooperate with the local people, to convince them that education was something the parents should want their daughters to have. They reached out to local women by effectively applying the cultural frameworks and their language skills.

Prozell's, Vietnieka's and Grīviņa's mission work was similar to that of other missionaries, as recorded by Kool, Eulenhöfer-Mann, Okkenhaug, and others, because they went through the same mission societies as many others. These studies offer important additions to our mission knowledge, though, as Latvian missionaries are virtually unknown due to historical circumstances. The findings open up a new area of understanding of Latvian mission history and its place in wider European mission history, as well as revealing previously unknown connections between missionaries from Latvia and those from Sweden, Norway, and other smaller nations that also sent missionaries through German mission societies.

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Слідами трьох латвійських жінок-місіонерок у колоніальному контексті

Крістіна ЕЦЕ

Латвійський університет, Рига, Латвія

ORCID: 0000-0001-9816-5214

Анотація: В епоху колоніального панування над більшою частиною Африки та Азії багато жінок-місіонерок з Європи служили в цих частинах світу. Вони працювали вчительками, лікарками та євангелістками, однак їх часто вважали також прихильницями колоніальної культури. У цій статті розглядається раніше не досліджена робота трьох жінок-місіонерок з Латвії, яких німецькі місіонерські товариства відправили до Китаю, Індії та Індонезії. У дослідженні використано історико-порівняльний, контент-аналіз та герменевтичний методи для інтерпретації текстів місіонерок, а також текстів про них. Дослідження виявляє, що місіонери були змушені співпрацювати з колоніальними силами, щоб здійснювати своє служіння, навіть якщо колоніальна політика іноді обмежувала можливості місіонерів. Дослідження також продемонструвало ефективне застосування культурних рамок і використання мовних навичок у служінні та співпраці з місцевим населенням.

Ключові слова: жінки-місіонерки, Латвія, Суматра, Німецька Східна Африка, Індія, Бармен, Лейпциг, Лібенцелль, Прозель, Ветнек, Гривінг.

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