



Paula Mojzes is seated at the bottom left at a Bible Course held in Novi Sad, Serbia, in 1950. She began serving as a District Superintendent in 1955, the year before the General Conference even approved the ordination of women in the Methodist Church.

# *The Rev. Paula Mojzes: Methodism's First Female Superintendent.*

Dr. Paul Mojzes (2004)

*Editor's note: Dr. Paul Mojzes is a clergy member of the Florida Annual Conference, but for many years has resided in Eastern Pennsylvania, and has worshipped at Westchester United Methodist Church with his wife Elizabeth. Dr. Mojzes is professor of Religious Studies at Rosemont College, and serves as editor of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies. He wrote this sketch of his mother for publication in booklet form by the United Methodist Church of Macedonia in 2004, under the title "An Extraordinary Woman," and graciously consented to allow us to republish it here. The editor is also grateful to Ms. Christina Cekov for supplying the photographs.*

Paula Mojzes was born on January 18, 1906, in Magyarboly, then Austria-Hungary, now Hungary, of parents Heinrich and Katharina Jassmann. Her father died when she was a child and she was raised by her widowed mother as the oldest of four siblings (three sisters and the youngest brother). She was raised an Evangelical-Lutheran in the pietist branch of that church. From an early age (about 14 or 15) she went to evangelize in taverns, telling the men to stop drinking, go home to their families, repent of their sins and accept Jesus Christ. She herself was 'born again' at an early age. Later she became dissatisfied with what she considered a too-worldly Lutheranism, and joined several more evangelical/pietist denominations, until she finally found her permanent home in the Methodist Church.

She had eight years of formal education and worked as a bank secretary in Osijek, Croatia. In 1934, she married Anton Mojzes, who was a minister of a Protestant church in Osijek, Croatia. They lived there until 1941, when World War II reached Yugoslavia. At that time they felt it was safer to move to Novi Sad, the area where Anton was from, than

under Hungarian occupation. They had three children, Paul, the oldest (born 1936 in Osijek), Lydia (born 1939 in Osijek) and brother Johannes or Jovan (born 1942 in Novi Sad). Anton was killed in a Hungarian fascist labor camp in Backa Topola in the summer of 1942, and Lydia died the same summer of complications caused by measles.

Paula's life was characterized by oppression and persecution. First she experienced it throughout the Nazi years – first fleeing Osijek to go to Novi Sad in the hope of milder persecution, but her husband was killed anyway. Then in October 1944 she, Paul and Jovan were taken to a concentration camp for Germans by the Partizans and she was almost taken on forced labor to Russia. But the family was released in January 1945, because neighbors testified that she was not a Nazi sympathizer, but to the contrary was harassed during the occupation. Later, practically during her entire life (until she left for Germany to retire), she was harassed by the Communist authorities. She and Rev. George Sebele had to cover the entire Vojvodina Methodist churches. Often the militia would turn them back without allowing them to visit, or they would interrupt their worship services. Usually two plain-clothed secret service (UDBA) men would come, mostly on Monday afternoon, to ask her what she had been preaching on Sunday, but she was aware that they usually already knew – there was someone in the congregation who acted as an informer.

While Rev. George Sebele was the District Superintendent of the Yugoslav Methodist Provisional Conference – it was not an official annual conference because it was too small, but had two districts, north, Vojvodina, and south, Macedonia – he employed Paula Mojzes as the church secretary. Rev. Sebele was the only ordained minister in the north (Vojvodina). In the south (Macedonia) there were five ordained ministers: Reverends Kalajlijev, Temkov, Cekov, Karmzov and Daskalov. She and a small group of women from both Vojvodina and Macedonia were called “church sisters” (*crkvena sestra*) but they performed almost all the duties of an ordained minister except the sacraments. She traveled throughout all churches in the north but also went to Macedonia and at least once to the Strumica region – the people of the church in Kolesino remember how she got very sick there and when she felt a little better was taken on horseback through very deep snow to the Strumica train station.

As a widow with two small children, she had to cook, clean, work in the office, preach in Novi Sad and became a modern day “circuit rider” – not on a horse but by train. Then, in her early 40s, she learned



Rev. George Sebele and Paula Mojzes transporting food and clothing on their bicycles to poor people in Banat.  
Note the overflowing Danube River in the background.

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how to ride a bicycle – which was not an easy matter, not only because of her age but because of her being overweight. By bicycle she could visit members of the church as well as nearby churches like Kisac. Then around 1960 she learned how to drive a car—she was apparently the first woman to drive in Novi Sad (a city of over 100,000 inhabitants), and everyone turned around to see “*baba koja vozi auto.*” [grandma who is driving a car]. With the car she had many adventures; one was when she drove back from Kisac on a mud road with a broken steering wheel!

In addition to these challenges she took on many intellectual ones. She knew how to play the harmonium as well as pray, sing and preach in a single worship service in Serbian, Hungarian, and German, but had to make the sermon interesting enough because there were people who spoke all three of these languages. In Slovak congregations she tried to use some Slovak in her sermon.

Her theological education was informal. Aside from having read the Bible intensively, she had also learned much from her husband, being an active minister’s wife. He received his training at the Bible School in Sanct Andrea, Austria, so all his books were in German. Afterward she



Participants in a Bible Conference, with their professors seated. Paula Mojzes is on the left, next to three Lutheran and one Orthodox professors, with Rev. and Mrs. Sebele seated to the far right.

had access to the ministers' library in Novi Sad. Rev. Sebele began organizing "Bible courses" for training church leadership among younger people from both Macedonia and Vojvodina, because at that time it was still not permitted to travel or study abroad. In these courses she taught a number of subjects and took care of the needs of the participants. Later when Rev. Sebele died, she continued with the courses, except that an even greater load fell on her shoulders. Rev. Kalajlijev would come from Macedonia to help out.

These were also the years when much concern was given to the imprisonment of Rev. Ceko Cekov, who along with Rev. Kalajlijev was much respected in the north. Then followed the murder of Brother Asen Palankov while attending the Bible course in Novi Sad. Paula was convinced that it was the work of the secret police, the UDBA. As a form of intimidation, there were from time to time hints by secret service people that a similar fate could occur to other church workers.

Here are excerpts from her son, Paul Mojzes's doctoral dissertation:<sup>1</sup>

When he [Rev. George Sebele] died suddenly in the fall of 1955 the church experienced its heaviest loss. Beside the loss of personal friendship, "the death of a capable, almost irreplaceable leader in Yugoslavia, Rev. George Sebele, has also created a problem of administration."<sup>2</sup> The Bishop then appointed Mrs. Paula Mojzes to serve as the acting superintendent besides her duties as the secretary of the church administration. This she did until Bishop [Ferdinand] Sigg could come to the Annual Conference in 1957 to appoint pastor Krum Kalajlijev as the new superintendent of Yugoslav Methodism. Mrs. Mojzes was on that occasion ordained a deacon of the Methodist Church with three men, Lajos Papp, Paljo Djuris, and Ljudevit Pelah. She was then appointed the supervising pastor of the Northern District.<sup>3</sup> Beside teaching and translating from German for the Bible course in Novi Sad and doing extensive traveling to preach and administer the sacraments in the church she was the editor of *Put Zivota* (The Path of Life) and *Crkvene Vesti* (Church News) as well as its contributor. She also wrote a short history of Methodism called *Metodizam* and helped with the creation of a Macedonian hymnbook. The burden of the work in Vojvodina fell on her and the church sisters.<sup>4</sup> She presently [1965] holds one of the most responsible places of any woman in any of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Church."

There are scattered other references to her in the dissertation but this is the most important part.

For many years, she was not permitted to travel outside of Yugoslavia, and even within Yugoslavia, she was sometimes turned around before arriving to her destination in order to prevent her from preaching. Finally, she was permitted to travel to Switzerland for her

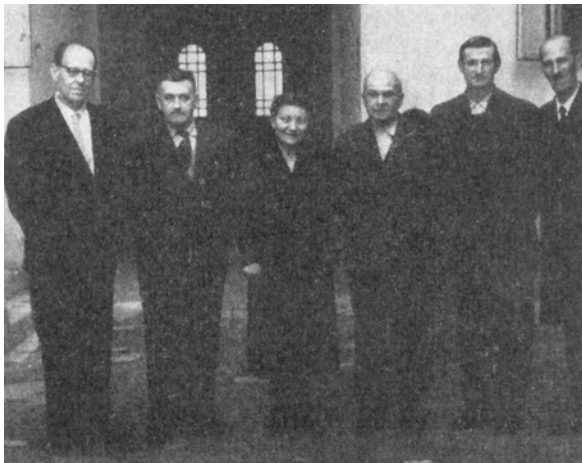
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<sup>1</sup>Paul Mojzes, "A History of the Congregational and Methodist Churches in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia," Vol. II (Boston University doctoral dissertation, 1965), 594-595. When I wrote the dissertation in 1963/64 there was still much fear of what the communists could do to people there if they found out negative information was written in the West, so I had to be careful what I wrote, often covering up internal information.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene L. Smith, "Yugoslavia," unpublished travel report, 195(?), Board of Mission Library, New York.

<sup>3</sup>Annual Report, Division of World Missions (1956), 38.

<sup>4</sup>Helmut Nausner, "Die Arbeit der Methodistenkirche in Jugoslawien," in *Der Methodist* (February 1960), 3.



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A photo taken on the day Paula Mojzes was ordained, September 1 1957. She had already been working as an acting District Superintendent for nearly two years.

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first vacation to Davos and Zurich, but was later accused by the UDBA of having spread anti-Yugoslav propaganda. In 1965 she received permission to come to the awarding of the Ph.D. degree to her son, Paul, at Boston University, and on that occasion also had the chance to visit a Methodist women's conference in Illinois and to preach in some churches. At a later stage, an UDBA officer bragged to her son, Paul, when he visited Novi Sad, how nice and kind he was to let her travel to the USA, as if that was a great concession.

Her ministering and preaching as a woman did not provoke resistance in the city and town churches, and even in Kisac and other places where church sisters were the congregational leaders, but in some of the more isolated and traditional villages where the custom was for the men and the women to sit on separate sides of the church hall, some of the men protested that, according to St. Paul's writing, it was prohibited for women to preach and they walked out. However the women continued to attend the services and pretty soon most of the men returned and actually came to appreciate and love her for her work.

In addition to her own worship leadership she also interpreted the sermons and other speeches of the visiting German-speaking ministers. While she never formally studied English, she taught herself enough to be able to carry on a rudimentary conversation with visiting English-speaking clergy and others (once in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, she even preached a sermon in English). When the Bishop was a Swiss national she interpreted at annual conferences.

She was modest, kind, and non-confrontational. Most people called her “tetka Paula” or “sestra Paula,” and some even “mama Paula.” During the entire period when she was a pastor, she remained secretary-treasurer/ administrator of the Yugoslavia ‘annual conference.’ She carried on a voluminous correspondence that helped secure funds from abroad for the work of the church. In some way she was the major connection between Yugoslav Methodism with world Methodism.



She was a feminist without wanting to be one, yet she certainly would not call herself one had she known the word. On several occasions she stated that she is doing the pastoral work only because there were no men to do it, and if there were enough men she would pull back. She encouraged and trained both men and women for the ministry. Her motto was that she would do anything that the Lord asked her to do. Her love and dedication was for Jesus rather than for any organization, community, government or ideology. She was non-political, basically viewing this life as a pilgrimage through difficult conditions on the way to life eternal with God.

The constant strain of the work was hard on her health. She had kidney and gallstone problems, eczema, and other ailments. In 1959 she spent two and a half months in a hospital in Switzerland. By the late 1960s she received permission to retire and she then decided to move to Pfungstadt and later Lampertheim, in Hessen, Germany, where she was re-united with her son Jovan, her mother Katharina who had moved there from East Germany, and her sisters Kathe, Maria, brother Otto, and their families. In 1968 she came to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, with the possible intention of immigrating to the USA. She stayed nearly a year, during which time she preached in several local Methodist churches. However, she returned to Germany. In the winter of 1970 at the age of 66 she succumbed to cancer of the liver, which, by the time it was diagnosed in the fall of 1969, it was too late to do anything about it. She is buried in Pfungstadt, Germany.