

The Harvest in France

Brother Adolphe Debski, 2003

The work of “harvest” of the Gospel Age was announced by the Lord Jesus Himself: “...in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.” Matthew 13:30

This work started in the USA in the last quarter of 19th century, by the ministry of Pastor C. T. Russell, and it spread progressively to other parts of the globe, including France.

In fact, already in 1891, when Brother Russell visited Paris, his perspectives for the development of such work was not particularly optimistic. His analysis was reported in the “Zion’s Watch Tower” (in English) in November 1891.

Let us see what this was:

In the 1890s, a modest Swiss woodcutter, named Adolphe Weber, left his country to live and work in America. By providence, he was hired as a gardener by Pastor Russell, who lived in Pittsburgh-Allegheny at that time. He received from Brother Russell a good knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Seeing the work of the “harvest” which started to develop in the USA, he suggested returning to Europe to proclaim, in the countries having the French language, “the good tidings of great joy.” Brother Russell approved this project and undertook to meet the expense of distribution of the Truth in French-speaking Europe.

Back to Switzerland, Weber began translating into French the works constituting “Present Truth,” and announced in the newspapers the existence of the first Volume of Studies of Scriptures and other brochures.

First responses:

In the month of August of 1900, a resident of the small village Beauvène in Ardèche, responded to the ad and ordered the proposed writings. It was Elie Théron, who later on, in 1905, started in his home the first stock of “Watch Tower” publications.

In 1901, a grocer by the name of Jean-Baptist Thilmant, practicing in Jumet, a mining village quite close to Charleroi in Belgium, also answered one of Brother Weber’s advertisements, asking to sending the offered literature. In 1902, a small group of Bible Students began to meet at his place.

In 1903, Brother Russell went again to Europe. On this occasion he decided with Brother Weber to start in the French language the printing of “Zion’s Watch Tower.” The first number went out in October 1903. It was a quarterly edition of 8 pages. This periodical became a monthly edition in 1904.

Work progresses:

As a result of continued announcements by the press, a growing number of people answered to obtain and study the biblical literature concerning “Present Truth.” During the summer, Weber worked in Switzerland as a gardener and woodcutter, and distributed tracts and preached among the French-speaking population of Switzerland. Then he began long trips to France and Belgium visiting all those that had ordered publications or those that had subscribed to the “Watch Tower.” In 1904 he visited the family of Thilmant at Jumet in Belgium, and encouraged them to extend their activities to the North of France.

The Truth in the North - Pas-de-Calais:

In August 1904, Thilmant and his grand-daughter Josephine took a train to Denain, where they distributed tracks and “Watch Tower” publications at the exit of a Baptist church. Several

Baptists read these publications with interest and subscribed to the "Watch Tower." They were not long in raising embarrassing questions with their pastor, who finally asked them not to attend his church any more. So they decided to meet in Haveluy, a place close to Denain, to study the Bible with one named Jules Lequime.

After Denain, Thilmant and his grand-daughter went to Auchel in Pas-de-Calais, where they spread the Truth with the same success.

After Denain and Auchel, Sin-le-Noble:

In 1906, Weber returned to visit the group of Denain and helped them to organize. The assembly of Denain then began distributing of tracts at the exit of a Protestant temple in the city of Sin-le-Noble, not far distant. Several families became interested and an assembly was formed at the residence of Victor Jupin.

The work in Bretagne:

During this time the work progressed a little more in South-West.

In 1907, a teacher from Rennes distributed "Volume 1 of Dawn of Millennium" in the Catholic regions of Bretagne. This was the first volume of Studies in the Scriptures, and "The Watch Tower."

Extension in the North - Pas-de-Calais:

During the years 1908 and 1909, the classes in Denain and Sin-le-Noble preached in this region and formed study groups in other cities, particularly in Lens and in Auchel, in the department of Pas-de-Calais.

The Truth penetrates to Alsace-Lorraine:

At the same time the Truth came to Alsace-Lorraine. Brother Schutz, in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines and other Bible Students in the small town of Petersbach distributed the German translation of "Food For Thinking Christians."

1909 - Quick visit of Brother Russell at Lievin:

This is what Brother Paul Jerville wrote on the subject in his book : "A Man of God."

"Brother Russell was accustomed to visiting the groups in England once or twice a year. He then gave one or two conferences at the Royal Albert Hall in London. In 1909, the year of receiving my study certificate (I was 11 year old), Brother Adolphe Weber wrote to Brother Russell a letter asking him to find some time to visit with those interested in the region of the North. After receiving a positive answer, Brother A. Weber went to meet him in Calais. Both of them arrived at the train station in Lens, where several other Brothers were waiting for them. I still recall, coming out of a heavy, small steam train which at the departure served Liévin and Calonne-Ricouart, this man with white beard, of impressive presence, upon whom everyone in the street turned around. He was 57 years old at the time. The meeting was held at Liévin at my cousin Lambert's and my aunt Céline's home. She was a great reader, one of the first interested, with my father. In the largest room of this particular house, about fifteen brethren were already gathered. All was filled. Brother A. Weber was the interpreter of Brother Russell's discourse, which dealt with the Kingdom and the attacks against false doctrines which tarnish the name of the Eternal God. Who can express the feelings of liberation of those old minors rubbed by the hard existence of the past, hearing texts with support that there is no eternal torment of fire in hell, listening to him speak about the return and presence of Christ, coming to bless all the families on the earth, and to destroy the works and unjust organizations of this earth?

The day was unforgettable and I remember seeing the joy and the peace on all faces. The meeting ended with a prayer and without losing any time, Brother Russell left for London. Brother A. Weber accompanied him to Calais. The Truth continued to progress in our region at the great displeasure of local churches."

First visits of the pilgrims:

From December 1908 to February 1909, Weber, as a pilgrim, visited groups of isolated brethren in 20 departments, especially and successively in the cities of Besançon, Grenoble, Valence, Bordeaux, Nantes, Angers, Paris and Nancy.

In December 1909 and January 1910, three pilgrim brothers, A. Meyer, S. Segulier and Adolphe Weber, visited 34 French towns and held meetings in most of them, especially in Roubaix, a great center of textile industry in the North, where a congregation was formed. They stayed a longer time in Paris, from the 18th to the 20th of December 1909 which shows that interest for the Truth started to awaken in the capitol.

The year 1910 ended with a new trip around France by Brother Weber. He left December 22nd, 1910 and finished his journey on January 28th, 1911. His pilgrim service led him to visit 30 groups of Bible Students. Shortly before his departure, a General Convention of Bible Students was held in Lens, on December 4th and 5th of 1910.

It was an indication of increase in the Truth movement.

Russell pays two other visits to France:

The major event of 1911 was the visit of Charles Taze Russell. On April 14, he addressed an audience of over 100 persons gathered in Denain. The next day, 70 others awaited him in Lens. Bible Students from Belgium also attended those meetings. For this occasion Brother Russell received help from brothers Weber and Freytag. The latter, of Switzerland, also played an important administrative role in French-speaking countries.

A Tour of the world:

Brother Russell made a tour of the world from December 1911 to March 1912. In the notes of the voyage he reported:

“From Rome we went to Paris where we met the small group of International Bible Students working in this large city.”

During his voyage, Russell made provisions to create in Geneva in Switzerland, a “French Office,” in addition to the “Central Office” of Switzerland which was created in Zurich. Opened in 1912, the French Office supervised the work in France, in Belgium and in French-speaking Switzerland. Brother Russell appointed Emile Lanz, a Swiss dentist living in Mulhouse, to be responsible for this subsidiary company. Lanz received help from Alexander Freytag’s services who helped with the translation of the “Watch Tower” in French. Later, in 1916, Freytag replaced Lanz as head of the Geneva Office, and the responsibility for the Central Office in Zurich was entrusted to Conrad Binkele.

1912 - About the middle of the year:

We read what Brother Paul Jerville wrote again:

“In the middle of year 1912, after his tour of the world, during a visit in Europe, Brother Russell came to Denain. The brethren who lived in Denain, Haveluy, Arenberg, Douchy usually met at 135, St Amand street, not far from the station. Brother Vaucamps lived in a house which he opened to the disposition of brethren and their meetings. It was there, in 1913 that I was baptized by Brother A. Weber.

We do not know how, but the pastor of the Baptist church learned that Brother Russell would be there and address the assembly. He came with several Protestants with the intention to obstruct the meeting. They knew what to do, to disturb a peaceful assembly. One had a prayer, started a hymn with full voices as brethren did usually. Then Brother Russell began to speak. He thanked the assembly for their warm welcome, explained the progress of the Truth and as it extends into the future age. But as soon as he started one word against the false doctrines preached in the churches, especially hell, purgatory, the pastor interrupted him without any politeness and

directly addressed the assembly. Brethren stood up and reminded him that ones came to hear Pastor Russell speak and not him. The Protestants got involved by saying that he should go to preach in America. Finally the room became stormy where, despite Brother Russell's gestures calling for calmness, everybody was talking to the point where the meeting became impossible to continue. Brother Russell seeing this, left the place, went upstairs where a room was saved for him to place his suitcase. Finally the pastor and his friends left and Brother Russell could continue his talk. Several days later, Brother Elie Larvent met the pastor on the street and asked him if he was not shameful for not showing more respect to the white hair of a Christian older than himself.

Later on this same year, there was a small assembly of brethren in Paris, where Brother Russell came for business with the House Pathé Frères to discuss the "Photo-Drama of Creation." My father went there too with others who came from Denain and Roubaix, brothers Lequime, Durieu, Lefebvre, and others. The voyage did cost 25 Francs, at the time when a whole day's work paid only 3 Francs..."

August 1913, Brother Russell again in Paris:

August 31, 1913, Brother Russell stopped again in Paris and had a meeting in the Agriculture exposition Hall. 70 brethren assisted. Some came from Switzerland, from Belgium and Germany.

1914 - Strasbourg - public meeting:

The year 1914 marked an extension of the work in Alsace. In February, brethren from Mulhouse organized the first public meeting in Strasbourg. Emile Lanz gave a discourse "Where are the dead?" to a significant audience, and 350 persons gave their addresses to the brethren. This interest that was manifested there was kept up with a German colporteur, and so a small group of Bible Students was formed in Strasbourg. In July seven new brothers were baptized.

Mulhouse:

It seems that the class of Mulhouse started much before 1914, but after 1900, as a result of preaching in the German language. At that time, Alsace and Lorraine too were parts of Germany. The studies were always in German, even after the return of those territories to France, as the result of the war of 1914-1918.

Just before and during the First World War:

Just before the first World War several conferences or "conventions" were organized in North of France. One of them was held in March 1914, in Lens and another in Denain during the summer. But the general assembly planned for August 15 and 16, 1914 in Denain could not take place, the war having been declared on the 3rd of that same month.

During the war, brethren continued to meet, on one side of the front as well as on the other. It was so in Denain and surrounding areas, occupied by Germans.

Of course, the non-realization of the predicted hope attached to the year 1915 (the taking of the remaining members of the Church and introduction of the Kingdom) brought disappointments. On the other hand, the unexpected war of 1914 fulfilled the expectations of brethren who were waiting for an important event in this year, in accordance with biblical prophecies.

Stressing of difficulties:

A stressing of difficulties took place in connection with the news relating to the end of the earthly career of Pastor Russell (October 31, 1916), and problems that resulted from it. It was a time of sifting not only of brethren in France and in French-speaking countries but also for those in the entire world, and particularly for those of the USA.

Everywhere, problems were solved by separations. The touchstone was apparently fidelity with the message of the Present Truth, as presented by Pastor Russell, taking into account his rectified thoughts of the years 1915 and 1916.

- There were those that followed Brother Johnson and organized under the name “Mouvement Missionnaire Intérieur Laïque”. [Laymen’s Home Missionary Movement]

- There were those that followed Freytag, who founded the group of “Friends of the Man”.

- There were those that gathered around judge Rutherford, who gave, in 1931, the name “Jehovah Witnesses” to the members of the “Society” which he directed.

- And there were those who formed the Association of Bible Students, of which we are presently members.

To date, these four movements continue.

The continuation of our narrative will refer particularly to the last mentioned movement, i.e. to ourselves.

A new development:

The tests we just described were followed by an unexpected development. A particular phenomena of the time that followed the First World War was the arrival in mass, to France, of foreign workers under contracts, of which a good many Polish who came directly from Poland or from Germany, where then prevailed a serious crisis. They were needed in mines, in industry as well as in French agriculture. 1923 was the year of the most important immigration, but the wave of immigrants started already a little before and continued later.

At the same time, pilgrim brothers came from USA. They were Americans of Polish origin, knowing Polish perfectly. Let’s name few of them: Kret, Kuzma, Wnorowski, Tabaczynski, Rycombel etc. They preached the Gospel, explained to these workers, in their own language, the wonderful Plan of Salvation prepared by the Almighty for His human creature. Brother Stahn also came from Poland, and, just before the declaration of hostilities in 1939, came Brother Nicolas Grudzien.

This message filled the audiences with joy and hope. Halls were full. Many accepted the message of Divine Love. And so started in France, in the 20s and 30s, new assemblies where the studies were led not in French but in Polish. In the course of time, French gradually took over, so that currently it is used in almost all the assemblies.

In the North region - Pas-de-Calais, there were: Anzin - Wallers-Arenberg - Auby - Rouvroy-Nouméa - Sallaumines - Lens - Bruay - Leforest-Ostricourt - Oignies – Croix-Wasquehal.

In the Paris region: Lamorlaye – Saint-Maximin.

In Lorraine: Longwy - Tucquegnieux - Metz – Creutzwald.

In the South: Saint-Etienne - Carmaux - St-Leonard.

Alsace:

As for Alsace and regarding Polish speaking Assemblies, it is necessary to explain that they were the result of preaching the Truth by a brother that came from Poland to work in France in 1926. It was Brother Theophile Drozd, Brother Joseph Skarbek’s grandfather. He worked in the potash mines and spoke with his colleagues at work. Some of them became interested in the Word of God, and accepted the message of the Gospel and consecrated to the service of the Almighty. So started the Assembly of Bollwiller. From that assembly resulted the Pulversheim Assembly. The last one was named after the city, and still bears its name of Staffelfelden Assembly.

When Brother Drozd arrived in Alsace he wanted to find out if there were any existing Assemblies of Bible Students in the region of Bollwiller. His investigations led to Mulhouse,

where there was already an Assembly that we described previously, an Assembly of the German speaking brethren in Alsace. Those brethren, as well as Brother Drozd, were very happy to contact each other.

All these Assemblies grew stronger in the holy faith by studying the Bible through additional Biblical aids constituting “food in due season,” and organized themselves according to the order and discipline as recommended in the Holy Scriptures (Acts14:23; 1Tim.3:1-13), by periodically electing Elders and Deacons with privileges and obligations for all of them. In addition to regular weekly meetings, conferences or “conventions” were organized during holidays, giving possibilities to brethren of growing in Christian virtue and knowledge of the Word of God by listening to the sermons preached by speakers. In 1923 there was already one in Sallaumines. Another in 1924 at Bruay-en-Artois, (it was a general convention); another still in 1925 in Sallaumines (it was also a general convention) etc. Thus were built the Assemblies between the two wars.

Assembly of Croix-Wasquehal, taken to prison:

With the start of the war of 1939-1945, contact between brethren of different regions became rare. The “conventions” ceased but weekly meetings continued without particular problems, except the one in Croix-Wasquehal.

One Sunday of 1943, when the meeting started at the home of Brother Kubiak in Croix, someone knocked on the door. Sister Marthe Krawczak, who later on became Marthe Kowalski opened the door. They were German soldiers. They interrupted the meeting, took the brothers and sisters - with their Bibles, Volumes of Studies in the Scriptures and Hymn books - and escorted them to the prison in Roubaix, except for two elderly brothers. They kept them for three days. Apparently, they were looking for a spy. After having listened to all brothers and sisters, and after strong efforts of Brother Kubiak who was not arrested because he was absent from the meeting that day - he served the Assembly in Aubry, and after intervention of the employer of sister Marthe, when they understood there was no offensive character of their meetings, they released them all giving them back their literature.

Brother Pokrzywka executed:

In the beginning of hostilities, when a group of the German army was heading from Douges to Oignies-Ostricourt, in the North - Pas-de-Calais, a broken bridge was to be repaired so they could cross the channel. During the work, Germans encountered difficulties. Some of their soldiers were killed by English soldiers, informed by civilians. By way of reprisals, once in Oignies, German soldiers took civilians (10 civilians for each of their killed soldiers). The column of soldiers passed close to Brother Pokrzywka's house, who, intrigued, came out to see what was happening. A soldier ordered him to join the column as he was, without going back to his place. Those civilians were taken to Courrières, a bordering locality. And there, in a given place, each one had to dig his own grave and they were put to death, one does not know too well how. This way Brother Pokrzywka finished his earthly course. He was a spiritually developed brother with a wide knowledge in the field of practical life and filled with brotherly affection and love for the Word of God.

Great reunions:

Once the war was over, brethren from different regions reunited again with great joy. The “Conventions” began again with visits of pilgrim brothers from USA, from Poland and other countries too, as it is presently done.

And since, the Assemblies persevere in faith, endeavoring to glorify and praise the Eternal, from whom comes all excellent grace and all perfect gifts.

Assembly of Mouchin in the North:

Just after Second World War, another event is to be noted; it is the beginning of the Assembly in Mouchin, very close to the frontier with Belgium. This is how it started: a brother in Roubaix, Brother Henri Piorkowski went on bicycle to the countryside to visit Brother Adolphe (Dolek) Zak. Brother Zak lived in Landas. When he was passing by Mouchin, he met a farmer with a horse. Conversation started. Brother Piorkowski spoke about the Truth. The farmer, Michel Katrun, got interested and accepted this great Truth, himself, as well as his brother to whom he spoke about it, and the family that lived and worked at the farm. The Assembly was created in Mouchin, it was then regularly visited and spiritually sustained by strong brothers.

Witnessing:

As much as they could, brethren in France endeavored to spread the message of the Truth, with those close as well as far away.

We saw the zeal deployed before the First World War by the pioneers of that time, in the very first few days of the work of the harvest in the country.

Colporteur and Photodrama:

Between the two wars, there were colporteurs that took their bicycles or motorbikes and went to different villages and cities load of biblical booklets. There were also projections of the “Photodrama of Creation”, which was then an invaluable tool in witnessing work.

A Deportation, following a projection:

An event is to be reported on this point. A brother from Lorraine, living in Boulange (Moselle), Brother Edouard Jedrzejski, father of our Brother Adam Jedrzejski, in his zeal for God and the Truth, in collaboration with other brethren, organized a projection of the Photodrama of Creation. It was decided that the projection would be in the Hall attached to a bar. But at the last minute, the owner of the hall refused to rent it. Because the announcement of the projection was already made and people started to come, Brother Jedrzejski invited them into his place. And the projection took place at his house. But the event was reported to the authorities. It should be said that the department of Moselle was governed by certain particular provisions, instituted by the Germans, at the time when Lorraine and Alsace were attached to Germany. These provisions granted some rights to the clergy who could use their influence in case they wanted to. Therefore it seems that Brother Jedrzejski was judged and condemned to deportation. Although being able to appeal to remain in France, he preferred to return to Poland, and he left with his family. Two other brothers suffered same punishment: Brother Valentin Korpala and Brother Pierre Tomiak, father of our brothers Casimir and Joseph Tomiak. Brother Tomiak hired a lawyer who defended him calling on the law of human rights. Brother Tomiak was relieved from his condemnation and permitted to stay in France. Brother Korpala did not have to leave either. All this had happened in 1937.

Radio Luxembourg:

In 1950s an opportunity of cooperation with brethren from Dawn (U.S.A.) was open, by the diffusion of radio broadcast in French, financed by Dawn.

The day and time of broadcast were very good. It was Thursday afternoon. Thursdays were at that time days of rest from school; and the broadcast was attached to children’s broadcast which was very popular. Many listeners heard the Biblical message of the Truth. And many asked for booklets proposed at the end of each broadcast, as well as requests for explanations.

But it happened that Radio Luxembourg changed its broadcast hours, and scheduled a very early morning hour for religious broadcast. Brethren from Dawn refused the new time slot and these broadcasts stopped.

Radio Monte Carlo:

So we contacted Radio Monte-Carlo which accepted the presentation of our programs at a convenient time. This broadcast went on for some time and ceased also eventually.

Frequence-North:

About thirty years later, within the framework of “the local expression”, Radio Frequence-North gave us the possibility to broadcast five minutes per month. Five minutes, we can say - it is not a lot, but it is sufficient to attract attention of listeners on a specific Bible subject. That was done from 1981 to 1983. That broadcast was free of charges.

Other local radios:

In 1984, an other possibility of witnessing by using radio broadcasting was open to us. It was at the occasion of the opening of local radio stations. These stations were coming up a little everywhere, and offered time without difficulties. The material was prepared and recorded on audio tapes which were given for broadcast. This broadcast was made once per week and lasted from 10 to 12 minutes.

This privilege lasted from October 1984 to November 1988. During a certain time, there were up to seven stations broadcasting the good news of great joy, with the message of Present Truth. Five of them were financially supported by our Association: Radio Valenciennes in Valenciennes (North) - Radio Verton in Verton (Pas-De-Calais) - Radio Push in Meurchin (Pas-De-Calais) - Radio Pévèle in Mons-en-Pévèle (North) - Radio Seclin in Seclin (North); and two by the Dawn: Radio Galaxy in Arras (Pas-De-Calais) and Radio Ciel in Lyon (Rhône). For those last two Radio stations, we furnished the audio tapes with recorded programs and the Dawn paid. There were not many letters or inquiries from listeners. But we know we were heard. When Radio Push changed our hour of transmission, some telephoned to know what happened with the broadcast of “Pierre and Thomas,” which was ours. We have to say that thanks to those broadcasts (by Radio Galaxy) Brother Gabriel Glowacki contacted us.

As those radios became organized, they entrusted to pastors and priests the management of religious airtime in the region. Because of that, gradually, the five stations that we were financing, slipped between the fingers. The Dawn did not renew the contracts with two stations that they were financing, estimating the results as not sufficient. Thus, our radio witnessing ceased.

Projections of “Why did He Come?”

Seeing the success that brought the projection of “For this Cause,” which we called “Why did He come?”, we made a French version of it, in collaboration with Brother George Tabac - creator of this projection. In our first version we used slides and then we made a video.

This way, projections started, preceded by a necessary public advertising.

Those projections were shown from 1984 to 1988:

- In France: at Metz, Lens, Cysoing, Valenciennes, Lille, Oignies, Aix-en-Provence, Lamorlaye;
- In Belgium: at Charleroi;
- In Germany: at Mannheim;
- In England: at York, Oxford, Yeovil.

With two or three exceptions, the results were satisfactory. The witness was given, tracts and booklets were distributed and discussions followed the projections.

Activities for young people:

For about thirty years now, to interest our youth, we are organizing special conferences for young people, we also prepare occasional seminars which are renewed - besides classes for the

youth, which the Assemblies arrange themselves when possible. The inheritance of faith and knowledge, which can be transmitted to them in this way, will surely be beneficial to them.

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,” Proverbs 22:6

Periodicals and booklets:

Every two months, brethren publish a periodical.

From November 1956, and for twenty years, it was “Journal of Zion and Messenger of the Presence of Christ”; then it was, and it still is “Messenger of Good news.”

Booklets are published too, as needed.

Internet:

Our website is: <http://biblelude.free.fr>

Over a thousand net surfers have consulted it. Questions have been asked, literature was requested.

100 years later:

100 years went by since Brother Weber started his advertising in papers. We are happy to be able to cast this eye behind us and see the major outline of what had happened in the Lord’s Vineyard, here in France. The work of harvest is well visible, and we can say that it is well advanced, showing the establishment of the Kingdom is close.