

Heli Ahun



Three co-workers in Kashgar, Heli Ahun to the left.

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All of our colleagues in East Turkestan naturally had their good and bad qualities, as did the last hospital servant in Kashgar, Heli Ahun, who became our evangelist and colleague at the Kashgar mission station. However, because the good qualities in him were so much greater than usual we had reason to be particularly happy about this colleague.

Our proved veteran, L.E. Högberg, discovered Heli Ahun among his staff working during the hospital's establishment in Kashgar in 1908. Even though he was one of the youngest workers, Högberg appointed Heli Ahun to be the manager of equipment and material during the building process. Högberg had this opportunity to get to know him and his personality, which led to his position as a hospital servant when the hospital opened a year later.

It was in that role that I first met him when I arrived to the field in the fall of 1910. From the first moment, I was immediately fond of his happy and openhearted personality. During the four months in which we met practically daily, I recognized more and more the positive strengths of

his personality. He showed compassion to us newcomers by using simple words and actions to try to bridge the gap caused by our inability of the language between him and us and no one was happier than he when he realized that he had succeeded.

Friends of Heli Ahun gave their unreserved expression of appreciation for his work in the hospital and for his behavior to missionaries and visitors as well as to the interned patients. But as they thought about him and acknowledged his positive sides, there was a hidden suspicion. To some friends it was a special prayer request that Heli Ahun would become a Christian, but there were no signs that their prayer and hopes would be fulfilled. He continued year after year as a strict Muslim and at times, although he was shy and respectful to the missionaries, openly showed his opposition to the Christian faith. I will never forget a day when our friend Hilda Nordquist, who passed away several years back, came to the dinner table crying. When we asked for the reason, she told us that she had tried to convince Heli Ahun that he needed Jesus as his savior. But he had responded hard and bitterly that our attempt of conversions among the Muslims was in vain. The talk about Jesus being God's Son and that He suffered and died to be a sacrifice is to them blasphemy. Hence, no Muslim can be convinced that Christianity's way of salvation would be better than Islam's. For the newly arrived missionary this was very depressing, but it was hard not to be grabbed by the older missionaries' zeal and feelings of responsibility.

Due to my first placement in Yeken and later in the new station in Yingi Hessar, for years I was only able to follow Heli Ahun's religious development from a distance. The long and varying battle, which finally led to his conversion, could be compared to the conquering of a citadel, where one fort after another must tumble, until the citadel surrenders. At one point, he had heard of the invitation to a baptism service at our Chinese station in Han Cheng¹, where four Chinese and two Muslims gave their confessions and were baptized. Heli Ahun was completely gripped and afterwards he had a hard time holding to his old position. He didn't take his final step until after another several years of battle, and he made the decision at an extremely hard time to all of us, when missionaries barely expected any victories. His conversion, which many had long waited and prayed for, almost came as a surprise.

Heli Ahun's character and personal talents did not differ noticeably from the normal East Turkestanian, but because he exhibited several good characteristics you could say he stood above the average person. He was not like a weather vane, which flew here and there, yet he had no problems adjusting himself to others. He didn't go looking for trouble, and didn't claim to be brave, but he did not want to cut short of what he believed to be right and true. Even before he became a Christian, his morals were better than most. His seriousness, which gave color to his personality, was paired to a light and happy view of life, which made him more of an optimist. Through his open personality and easy way of relating to people, spiced with a good sense of humor, he easily got to know people and therefore possessed an important character trait for evangelism. His mind was not so set to devour deeper into the problems, yet he was alert and interested in both profane and religious questions.

In education he stood above most of the population because he was literate. He had also gained some of Islam's misguiding and soul-killing teachings at an Islamic university, which impressed the East Turkestan people.

Heli Ahun wasn't any special person but with the best situation, conversion to Christianity, plenty could be expected from him as a missionary's helper. During more than his ten years service at the mission and the daily engagement with missionaries, he had become comfortable with Christian teaching and character. His conversion wasn't a hasty decision but had been preceded by several years of battle and thorough consideration. He could, from the start, be

¹ Translator's note: Chinese City, normally cities in Xinjiang with Chinese population had the Chinese city located separate from the old Uyghur city.

counted as a stable Christian. When through unexpected, but joyful, circumstances the need of a native coworker was made obvious in Kashgar, it was like an open door to Heli Ahun to start his evangelistic calling.

The most important of the circumstances was an awakening, which broke out in 1922 in Kashgar. Heli Ahun received a huge task. Through him the seekers received their first contact with the missionaries, and during the ongoing baptism education he became a significant supporting link for both the missionaries and baptism candidates. It wasn't hard to understand how important this spring of spiritual development was to Heli Ahun. This time of respite and encouragement was needed for the important tests which were ahead of him. During the persecutions that broke out in the spring of 1923 which resulted in several Christians being put in jail, Heli Ahun was the one who encouraged the Christians to stay strong and acted as a messenger between them and the missionaries, since the missionaries weren't allowed to visit the imprisoned Christians. Heli Ahun and the missionaries had to continuously try to keep the imprisoned Christians' relatives strong and comfort them, even though at times neither him nor the missionaries themselves had any reassurance.

It was during this hard time that I started to work with Heli Ahun for a period of six years and got to know him as an evangelist and substitute preacher.

Heli Ahun wasn't the only native coworker who was an associate preacher, but he was the one with the most potential. His language was clear and easy to understand and his character was vivid and capturing. Through his preaching he could bring forward thoughts that to us missionaries were new and significant, and he had the ability to use real images to give power and life to the message. One of his last sermons in the old meeting room in Kashgar, before it was torn down for the new church building, is still fresh in my memory. It formed into a gripping revival sermon. The Bible verse which he had chosen was from Luke 13:24-30, when people are standing in front of the gate saying "Master, Master, open the door for us". He used the image of a person who had been away and was coming closer to Kashgar with the thoughts of getting home before night, but who didn't have time to get there before the city gates closed. So, in vane, he tried to convince the Chinese guard to open up. It was a situation that everyone could relate to. He continued: "You count on reaching the eternal home in time, but the gate will be closed and will not open for all your shouts and tears. Then you will hear Jesus shouting from inside: "Go away, I don't know you; you wanted nothing to do with me." When you try to excuse yourself He will reply: " Have you not lived around the mission station at Qum-dervaza² (name of the neighborhood in Kashgar) and weren't you part of the meetings in the old main room and heard of the requirements for entrance here? But you closed your hearts to salvation and now heaven is closed for you."

At another opportunity, when Heli Ahun addressed himself to the Christians and spoke about different types of church community, he used camel caravans as an example. One of the camels is linked with the other camel through a rope and has to follow where the leader goes. Yet you often see a few camels loose, which are calves and the young camels. They continue following faithfully, and the secret is that their mother is part of the caravan and under no circumstances do they want to be separated from her and manage without her. The understanding of this was natural. Many Christians have to be lead in a row in a similar way, but it should be that we must follow, because Jesus had become our love and indispensable.

One of the most demanding assignments regarding patience on the mission field is congregational care. Good native coworkers are the greatest asset for this and most significant to the missionaries. In Kashgar, Heli Ahun was a great help at congregational care. Our Christians, who lived outside of the mission station, entrusted Heli Ahun with their troubles and knew that

² Translator's note: Qum Dervaza was a gate into Kashgar and the neighborhood around the gate carried the same name, where the mission station was located.

he would always be there to understand. He would share their pains, troubles, and, once things had cleared up, their joy. When a missionary spoke to him about a congregation member's poor Christian life and possible expulsion, he would often respond that we should wait and see. Sometimes he referred to himself and said: "Look at me, I've become a bit better after all, haven't I?" "*Zaeber lazem, pyshader, pyshader*": Patience is needed, they mature, they mature; in other words, with time they'll grow and become better.

When I think of our cooperation during six years at the Hospital in Kashgar, we hospital workers focused on physically helping everyone who came for help. Heli Ahun, in the waiting room, tried to show them through conversation and the sharing of the scripture, the way to the soul's life and health. His work seemed much more important than ours. Our work was often appreciated and acknowledged, and at times we could feel the joy of great accomplishments. But Heli Ahun's words were often responded to with bitterness and opposition, and seldom could he feel the satisfaction of having succeeded. But, what he, through conversation and the spreading of the Word, was able to share to the East Turkestan people had eternal importance and was of much greater value than us healing physical pain.

Heli Ahun was far from being a perfect man. He was lacking in areas regarding his courage, his energy and certain other things we wish he could have had more of. But when you consider the position of the Christians in East Turkestan, and specifically our assistants, there is no place for criticism. An evangelist and associate preacher's deeds become such an open testimony for everyone to see that it is impossible to escape ignominy and distress in a land like East Turkestan. They have to feel like foreigners in their own country and often have to experience their closest relatives as enemies. Heli Ahun also had to go through this. In these situations it was a joy for both him, and also us, that we could tell him that there were people in Sweden who were thinking of him and supporting him. This was mainly the Immanuel Church youth group in Stockholm, which supported him for several years.

During the dark and suspense filled years when several were persecuted, before the missionaries were forced to leave East Turkestan in 1938, Heli Ahun received his own problems also. But as long as the missionaries were there, his life was spared. At one point he was taken away by the executioners, but through the missionary John Andersson's resolute and timely intervention, he was saved.

We still lack knowledge of what happened to Heli Ahun and our other Christian friends. Are they still alive and is the Holy light still shining in them even though they're alone in the darkness? We often ask ourselves these questions. Though it looks dark for our mission in East Turkestan, we don't believe that God has made his last move there.

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