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Kristín Ingvarsdóttir

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Article abstract

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The Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America and its missionary in Japan, 1916–1941: Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson

KRISTÍN INGVARSDÓTTIR

ABSTRACT: In 1910, despite low membership and limited funds, the Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America began directly supporting mission work in Asia. It first sponsored a Danish missionary who was serving in India and later commissioned one of its own members, Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson (1890–1977), to carry out missionary work in Japan, where he ended up serving for 25 years, from 1916 to 1941. Although the synod's Asia initiative was well known within the Icelandic community, as was Octavius himself during his lifetime, the venture has not become a substantial chapter of the history of Icelanders in North America. The aim of this article is twofold: first, to shed light on the background and nature of the Icelandic Synod's missionary enterprise in Asia, and second, to examine the initiative and Octavius' career from the perspective of mobility and international influences in the early 20th century.

RÉSUMÉ: En 1910, malgré un faible effectif et des fonds limités, le synode luthérien islandais d'Amérique (Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America) entreprit de soutenir directement le travail missionnaire en Asie. Parrainant d'abord un missionnaire danois qui servait en Inde, le synode envoya ensuite comme missionnaire au Japon un de ses propres membres, Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson (1890–1977), qui servit pendant 25 ans, de 1916 à 1941. Bien que le projet asiatique du synode était bien connu dans la communauté islandaise, tout comme l'était Octavius lui-même de son vivant, cette entreprise n'est pourtant pas devenue un chapitre important

Kristín Ingvarsdóttir completed her Ph.D. in Social Sciences from Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo in 2006 and a Master's Degree from the same university in 2002. Kristín joined the University of Iceland as Assistant Professor of Contemporary Japanese Studies in 2019. Her research interests include the history of Icelandic-Japanese relations and Japan's policies on the Arctic, as well as other aspects of Japan's foreign policy.

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de l’histoire des Islandais en Amérique du Nord. Cet article a deux buts: d’abord, éclairer le contexte et la nature du projet missionnaire du synode islandais en Asie, et ensuite, examiner ce projet et la carrière d’Octavius du point de vue de la mobilité et des influences internationales du début du XXème siècle.

Introduction

In 1910, the Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America commissioned one of its members, Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson[1] (1890–1977), to undergo years of training and then serve as a missionary in Japan. Octavius, as he was usually called, stayed in Japan from 1916 to 1941, when his service abruptly came to an end due to the outbreak of the Pacific War. The synod's Asia initiative was well known within the Icelandic community, as was Octavius himself during his lifetime. However, the venture never became a well known part of the history of Icelanders in North America, not even in the specific context of the immigrants' religious community. For example, Octavius and his work are barely mentioned in the five-volume *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* [Icelanders in North America] published between 1940 and 1953, although the publication covers other aspects of church history in considerable detail. This stands in stark contrast to the attention that was given to the missionary enterprise at the time of events, both at the annual general meetings of the Icelandic Synod and in its main religious publication, *Sameiningin* [Unity]. It seems as though a chapter of the history of Icelanders in North America went missing and has now been all but forgotten.

Octavius moved to Japan in 1916 with his wife, Carolina Kristin Thorlakson (1889-1956), and before long, the family of two became a family of six. It is interesting to consider why the decision was made to support a minister and his family to preach the gospel in Japan; after all, leaders of the small Icelandic Synod had to strictly prioritize their goals each year, and just financing core activities across Canada and the United States was already a major challenge. The Icelandic Synod also had problems reaching the Icelandic immigrants, who were spread (often thin) across North America, with religious services (Eylands 27-28). On the other hand, the 19th century had seen a global expansion of protestant missionary activity around the world, led by the United Kingdom and "reinforced" by the United States (Porter 369). This sweeping trend probably inspired the Icelandic Synod to consider launching its own missionary efforts.

In recent decades, the history of missionary expansion in the 19th and 20th centuries has often been viewed in a negative light, for instance through the lens of cultural imperialism, or written off as little more than an embarrassing chapter of the past. Without downplaying the often harmful effects of overseas mission work or arrogant missionary attitudes, especially in the colonial era, this article looks at other relevant ways of regarding the global missionary movement. Historian Ryan Dunch (2002) is among the scholars who have called for an alternative approach to viewing modern Christian missionary movements[2]. Dunch argues that "the starting place is to understand

missionaries in the context of a globalizing modernity that altered Western societies as well as non-Western ones in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (318). Dunch further claims that "missions were uniquely placed as conduits for intercultural communication by virtue of their institutional structures," explaining that in most non-Western societies in the late 19th and 20th centuries, missionaries were not only more widespread than any other group of Westerners but were also "heavily invested in cross-cultural communication by the very nature of their endeavor" (320).[3] In addition, Dunch discusses how individual missionaries were shaped by a variety of international influences, for example through their work in the field and connections to other missionaries working around the world. This article draws inspiration from Dunch's approach and looks at the international aspects of the missionary movement, that is, the movement's international worldview and mobility, mission networks' international reach and connectivity, and the international experiences of individual missionaries acquired through years or decades of intercultural communication. However, the goal here is not to pass judgment on how the missionary in question influenced the Japanese people he encountered, but rather to illustrate how his work in Japan influenced himself and his family and how both his views and experiences were communicated to Icelanders on both sides of the Atlantic as well as fellow Americans.

The paper aims to shed light on the Icelandic Synod's missionary activities, which have been mostly overlooked in academic studies thus far. The goal is to answer the following questions: What is the story behind Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson's 25 years of service in Japan? Who was the man himself, and what was his role in Japan? Further, the paper considers the Icelandic Synod's missionary enterprise, as well as Octavius' background and career, from the perspective of mobility and international influences in the early 20th century.

Sources and Scope of Research

Scholarship on the Icelandic emigration to North America has devoted considerable attention to church history and religious life in the new communities.[4] Nonetheless, secondary sources that discuss the missionary efforts are few and far between. Likewise, there are very few publications to be found that discuss Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson and his work. However, many articles about him and interviews with him were published in various newspapers and periodicals throughout his long career. Articles about Octavius can be found in Icelandic-language print media in both North America and Iceland.[5] Further, letters and reports that he wrote to his supporters at home regularly appeared in the Icelandic Synod's periodical, *Sameiningin*. It should also be noted that the author has gathered information about Octavius' family

history from his descendants in North America. Additional primary sources used in this article were collected in Japan, for example from Japan Lutheran College in Tokyo and from Japanese newspaper archives. During Octavius' time in Japan, he was visited by two well-known Icelanders. Ólafur Ólafsson (1895–1976), widely known for his mission work in China, visited Octavius in 1921 and 1927, while the beloved children's book author and Jesuit priest Jón Sveinsson (1857-1944), better known as Nonni, visited Octavius twice during a stay in Japan that lasted from autumn 1937 to spring 1938. Jón and Ólafur were enthusiastic storytellers, and both Ólafur's travel narratives and Jón's diaries offer valuable glimpses into Octavius' life with his family in Japan.[6] Overall, the parts of the article that are concerned with Octavius' life and work are based mostly on primary sources.

To paint a fuller picture of the world in which Octavius lived, however, various secondary sources have been consulted. Because Octavius was born into a prominent family of ministers, a few bibliographical sources offer insight into his family background. Additionally, the Association of Icelandic Mission Societies has preserved the history of Icelandic missionary efforts from the very beginning. The association's 1989 publication *Lifandi steinar* [Living Stones] looks back at polemics and discussions about the need for mission work and introduces many of the first Icelanders who answered the call to serve as missionaries around the world. In the context of the present study, it is interesting to note that the book gives an overview of Icelandic missionary efforts on both sides of the Atlantic. Valdimar J. Eylands' *Íslensk kristni í Vesturheimi* [Icelandic Christianity in North America] from 1977 has also been of great value. Though the paper centres around a man of God, it does not focus on his religious beliefs. Indeed, his faith will only be addressed when it is directly relevant to the topic at hand. The complicated evolution of Lutheran denominations and synods in North America and Japan will also be omitted.

Icelandic Missions: At Home or Abroad?

Within the church community in Iceland, opinions on the benefits and cost of mission work had long been split. Fundamentally, Icelandic Christians disagreed as to whether the church's limited resources should be put towards ministering to their own countrymen (i.e., strengthening the church in Iceland) or spreading the gospel around the globe. Some pointed out that Icelanders had a moral obligation as Christians to minister to the "heathens," while others criticized or ridiculed the missionaries' ideals and efforts.[7] In this contentious environment, Icelanders' first steps toward the mission field were small and tentative. The first Icelandic missionaries abroad worked in nearby countries, for example proselytizing in Greenland and northern Finland in the 18th

century. Later, around the middle of the 19th century, individuals and congregations began collecting donations to send to Nordic mission organizations, which were increasingly venturing into Africa and Asia. Several mission societies were founded in Iceland, but most were short-lived. The Women's Christian Mission Society was an exception; established in 1904 and still active, it is the oldest mission society in Iceland (Björnsson 33).

Across the Atlantic, in contrast to the situation in Iceland, the Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America (established in 1885) and its forerunner (established in 1878) had made strengthening evangelical Lutheranism a goal from the beginning, and before long, the synod set its sights on sending missionaries abroad. Though it was clear that the synod did not have the resources to become a major player in overseas missions, it held special church services dedicated to missionary work and began fundraising (Eylands 24, 28). The synod managed to collect a respectable "heathen missions fund." In 1910, coinciding with its 25-year anniversary, the synod began directing these funds toward sponsoring its own missionary (Hallgrímsson 1910, 192). The first missionary selected was Sigrid Esberhn (1884-1976)[8], a young Danish woman who worked among the unchurched in India. When twenty-year-old Octavius declared his intention to become a missionary, the Icelandic congregation elected to financially support him so he could study and work abroad. The Christian magazine *Bjarmi* [Glow] reported the highlights from the Icelandic Synod's annual meeting in 1910:

> As far as heathen missions are concerned, it would be ... a great cause for celebration, if the synod's dream of having an Icelandic missionary were finally coming true, for a young man, S. Octavius Thorláksson, son of the Rev. N. Stgr. Thorláksson, revealed that he intends to dedicate his life to missionary work among the heathens. He is currently a schoolteacher in Manitoba and plans to study both theology and medicine to prepare for the mission field and would be pleased to have the support of the Icelandic Synod. ("Kyrkjuþing Vestur-Íslendinga" 125, own translation, spelling mistake in original)

In 1916, Octavius completed his theological training, was ordained as a minister, and left for Japan as a missionary with his new bride Carolina Kristin (Thomas) Thorlakson at his side. This was seen as an important milestone for the Icelandic Synod, and the matter received considerable attention on various fronts. The church in Selkirk, Manitoba, was packed when Octavius was ordained to his missionary role and most Icelanders in Selkirk attended the farewell party for the young couple ("Trúboði kirkjufélagsins ..." 181). News from the Asian missions became more frequent, prominent members of the community

encouraged others to support missionary efforts, and like Sigrid before him, Octavius wrote to his supporters in North America about his work and experiences in Japan.

In 1916, Guttormur Guttormsson, one of two editors of *Sameiningin*, also penned a lengthy article about this important milestone. This article offers interesting insights into the deliberations at home. On the one hand, it is evident that the editor wanted his readers to actively follow Octavius. The young missionary's work should not be forgotten in far-away Japan: rather, his countrymen should thoughtfully follow his every step:

> Let us also remember that it is not enough to dispatch a person and donate money to the cause. Each of us also needs to keep abreast of the development. Our interest and attention need to follow him wherever he goes, and above all, we need to give him our unwavering support through our prayers. ("Heiðingjatrúboð" 134, own translation)

On the other hand, it is also clear from the editor's writings that support for the Japan venture was not unanimous (132–34). Considering the small size of the synod and its many urgent projects, it is no wonder that opinions were divided on the missionary venture. Accounts of the synod's annual meetings clearly demonstrate that the heathen mission abroad (í. *heiðingjatrúboðið*) ranked high on the agenda, but they also show that the synod had many pressing requests from their congregations, such as providing Christian services to Icelanders across North America (í. *heimatrúboðið*), providing Icelandic studies, building and maintaining churches, caring for the elderly, printing hymn books, and supporting Sunday schools, to name but a few examples. In the beginning of 1916, the year Octavius left for Japan, the synod consisted of 49 congregations of various sizes with a total of 6,176 members (Hallgrímsson 1916, 246).[9] All church activities were financed by donations, and the $1,800 that it cost to send the Thorlaksons to Japan and support them through their first year (Ólafsson 54) was a major expense.[10] In his history of Icelandic Christianity in North America, Valdimar Eylands states that finances were the most difficult issue for the synod and its congregations—that "there were never enough funds and corners had to be cut everywhere" (42, 44). Why exactly Japan was chosen as Octavius' destination is unclear. As a child, Octavius stated his desire to serve on the African island of Madagascar (Spindt 1), but he was affiliated with the General Council of the Lutheran Church in America, which probably had an important say in where Lutheran missionaries were dispatched.

Observing their Lutheran brothers and sisters in North America, mission-minded Icelanders in the old country undoubtedly felt encouraged to take the leap and get involved themselves.[11] In 1921, Ólafur Ólafsson moved to China to

serve as a missionary under the auspices of the Norwegian Lutheran Federation for Missions in China. Ólafur was later joined by his wife, and Icelanders gradually took over sponsoring their stay in China. Ólafur garnered widespread attention in Iceland: He eagerly shared his experiences in Icelandic periodicals, filmed and photographed the sights he encountered, appeared on radio programs, and published books about his time in China, including *Kristniboð í Kína* [Christian Missions in China] (1928) and *14 ár í Kína* [Fourteen Years in China] (1938).[12] In comparison, Octavius has become a relatively unknown figure.

Octavíus: An Icelandic-Norwegian Canadian American in Japan

The Reverend Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson was born in the United States in 1890 into a distinguished line of ministers. His father was the Reverend Niels Steingrímur Þorláksson (1857–1943) and his mother, Erica Þorláksson (née Rynning, 1860–1947), was a Norwegian minister's daughter. Niels Steingrímur (hereafter Steingrímur) was born in Þingeyjarsýsla district in northern Iceland but emigrated to North America with his parents in 1873. A well-known minister in his own right among the Icelandic immigrant community, he was the younger brother of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson, a controversial but deeply influential figure who played a large role in establishing one of the first Icelandic congregations in North America.[13] Steingrímur studied theology in Norway, where he also met his future wife. He was ordained in 1887, serving as minister to the Icelandic community for decades and holding various other church leadership positions over the course of his career. Octavius' mother came from a long line of respected ministers in Norway. Octavius was the eldest of six siblings, who were all well educated and became known figures in the North American Icelandic community.[14] According to John S. Matthiasson's research on the Icelandic community in Canada, reverence for education was among the most important cultural values for the children and grandchildren of Icelandic immigrants in North America (163). Octavius' family history seems to support Matthiasson's findings.[15]

When Octavius was a child, his family spent a few years in Norway, where he learned to play the violin under the guidance of his maternal aunt (Spindt 1). The Thorlaksons later returned to Canada, but when it came time for Octavius to go to college, he headed again to the United States. He earned a BA from Minnesota's Gustavus Adolphus College in 1913 and went on to study at Chicago Lutheran Seminary. After completing his theology degree in 1916, he was ordained at the Icelandic Synod's annual meeting. That same year, he married his fiancée of seven years, Carolina Kristin Thomas, and after the wedding, they

sailed to Japan to begin their lives as missionaries. Carolina was born in Canada to Icelandic immigrant parents. She studied at the Winnipeg School of Art and the Toronto Conservatory of Music and worked as both a music teacher and a church organist before marrying Octavius (Kristjánsson 355). In a way, their relationship mirrored that of Octavius' parents; Octavius and Steingrímur both married musically gifted women who played important roles in their husbands' ministries.

Christian Missions in Japan

The logistics of Octavius' position and the organization of the Lutheran mission in Japan were rather complicated. Formally, Octavius was an employee of the General Council of the Lutheran Church in America, but the Icelandic Synod "supported the couple's work with an annual contribution" (Eylands 29). The same was true of many of Octavius' fellow missionaries; they were sponsored by congregations in various countries but often served in Japan under the auspices of Lutheran synods in the United States after studying or doing other preparatory work there before heading off to the mission field. Lutheran missions in Japan fell under the umbrella of two primary organizations, the Japan Lutheran Mission (est. 1893) and the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (est. 1898). Octavius was affiliated with the former, but the two organizations collaborated closely. Before long, the Nordic countries were deeply involved in missions work in Japan. Danish minister and missionary J. M. T. Winther, who would go on to become a prominent figure in the world of Japanese missions, first arrived in Japan in 1898. Apart from furloughs and other breaks, he spent the rest of his life in Japan, passing away in the port city of Kobe in 1970 (Hermansen 89–90). Two years after Winther's arrival, in 1900, the Finnish Lutherans sent their first representatives to Japan.[16] The Danish Lutheran Mission Society in Schleswig had originally commissioned Winther to preach the gospel in China, but just before the turn of the 20th century, after he had undergone training in the U.S., the United Danish Lutheran Church of America decided to send him to Japan instead, "because the climate there was assumed to be more healthy for Danes" (Hermansen 105).

The mission movement in Japan was young and growing when Octavius and Carolina arrived in 1916, and there was more than enough to keep a devoted, hard–working missionary couple busy. Octavius' arrival is listed in a retrospective commemorating the centennial of Christian missions in Japan (Tokuzen 19). After all, he remained in Japan for 25 years, becoming one of the most experienced mission workers in the country. In Octavius' day, a missionary's tasks were many and varied, as the following description of

Protestant missionaries from the 1907 book *The Foreign Missionary: An Incarnation of a World Movement* clearly attests:

> He must found not only churches, but schools, hospitals, printing presses, kindergartens, orphanages, and the various other kinds of Christian and benevolent work carried on in this country. He must train up a native ministry, erect buildings, translate and print books and tracts and catechisms. ... Those who imagine that "missionaries have an easy time" little realize the heavy and persistent toil that is involved in missionary effort. The fact is that foreign missionaries are among the hardest worked men in the world. (Brown 97)

In the context of Christian missions in Japan, this description is quite accurate, at least as far as the scope of Octavius' work is concerned. When he arrived, some key facilities had already been established, but the missionaries still had a long way to go to build up the infrastructure needed for their work, and Octavius played an active role in constructing a network of church facilities across Japan.

Lutherans were far from the only ones seeking to spread the gospel in Japan, however. In fact, there was considerable competition among several Christian missions and denominations, each one aiming to make its mark on important cities and towns around Japan. After the reopening of Japan to the Western world in the second half of the 19th century, the Japanese faced criticism from the major world powers of the day for their centuries-old ban on Christianity, and in 1873, the ban was lifted (Jansen 359). For many mission movements around the globe, Japan was an exciting choice, and soon a growing number of missionaries were venturing there. Unlike many other mission fields at the time, like the African continent, Japan was considered a safe and civilized country. In addition, because Japan was a rising power in Asia, mission societies imagined that if they succeeded in converting the Japanese, the rest of Asia would follow suit (Jalagin 87). The fact that Christianity was made legal in Japan does not mean that it was particularly appealing to either the government or the public, however. Christians, both Japanese and foreigners, and particularly foreign missionaries, were widely regarded with suspicion, and many journals and other personal accounts describe the hostility missionaries often encountered. However, the situation varied from place to place, and the atmosphere had improved by the time Octavius arrived in Japan. The Taisho period (1912–1926) and the 1920s are generally associated with a shift toward liberal attitudes at home as well as a more open foreign policy.

Growing Family and Growing Responsibilities

Missionaries commonly began their ministry with two to three years of language training, and indeed, Octavius' time in Japan started with language learning in Tokyo. As a newcomer to Tokyo, Octavius had much to report, and he diligently wrote home to his supporters in the Icelandic Synod. His letters and reports were published in *Sameiningin* in a regular column called "For the young people," where he shared his new knowledge and experiences, for example writing about the scale and organization of the Lutheran mission in Japan, his language training in Tokyo, and his first attempts at making contacts with the Japanese in order to tell them about Christianity. Before a year had passed, however, he was sent to the city of Nagoya to step in for a colleague (Spindt 1–2). Still far from fluent in Japanese, Octavius took the opportunity to experiment with using music as a tool for missionary work (Spindt 2). By putting all their musical training to use in this manner, Octavius and Carolina discovered an effective way to simultaneously harness their talents and compensate for their limited Japanese language skills. An unpublished biography of Octavius reveals that his first violin student was Shinichi Suzuki, who later became world famous for developing the so-called Suzuki method for teaching children to play the violin (Spindt 2). Shinichi Suzuki (1898–1998) was born in Nagoya, and his father owned and operated a factory that produced traditional Japanese string instruments.[17] The author has been unable to locate additional sources that mention Octavius' acquaintance with Shinichi Suzuki, but it is safe to assume that the information presented in the unpublished biography was obtained directly from Octavius himself or his closest relatives.

In the interwar period, Nagoya was an important industrial city, just as it is today. During his first years in Japan, Octavius opened two new missions in the city. Generally, missionaries served in the field for a few years at a time, returning to their homelands for regular year-long furloughs. Between 1917 and 1920, while based in Japan, Octavius and Carolina had three children: Anne Margarethe (1917), Steingrímur Octavius, Jr. (1919), and Niels Erik (1920). When the time came for the family's first furlough (1922–1923), they chose to spend it in Canada and the United States, with Octavius taking advantage of the time away from the mission field to study psychology at Columbia University in New York (Kristjánsson 354). During their stay in North America, the couple added a fourth child to their family, Carol Esther (1923), making her the only one to be born outside Japan.

Upon their return to Japan, Octavius and his family moved to Kurume City on the island of Kyushu. By the time Octavius arrived, there were already a variety of Christian organizations operating in Kyushu. During their last two terms of missionary service, the family lived in the port city of Kobe in east-

central Japan. Octavius took on more and more responsibilities with each passing year. Among many other things, he was tasked with managing the mission's finances and leading the building committee, which oversaw all new construction projects and maintained the mission's properties around the country. Octavius cooperated with a variety of local authorities and other organizations, from neighbourhood associations to city councils far and wide, and interacted with individuals of all ages and from all facets of society. Through his work and family, Octavius gradually became immersed in Japanese society on multiple levels.

Icelandic Visitors Arrive

Very few Icelanders called Asia home prior to World War II, so it is understandable that Ólafur Ólafsson went to the trouble of visiting Octavius on his way to China for the first time in 1921 and returned in 1927, after the Chinese Civil War broke out. When Ólafur visited in August 1921, Octavius was working in Nagoya. Though Ólafur spent just one day in Japan, his book *Frá Tókýó til Moskvu* [From Tokyo to Moscow] (1947) contains vibrant descriptions of everything he encountered on his brief visit. In 1927, a bloody civil war broke out in China, a conflict that would drag on for over two decades. Xenophobia had grown so rampant there that foreign governments advised their citizens to get out. Heeding the warnings, Ólafur and his wife Herborg made their way to Japan in the spring and stayed there through the summer. At the time, Octavius was serving in Kurume on the island of Kyushu, and he hosted Ólafur and Herborg for two months. Describing Octavius' work, Ólafur writes,

> There is something happening at the church most days of the week: Two services on Sundays as well as Sunday school, which was well attended. Prayer services were on Wednesdays. Tutoring for students and teenagers took place on Fridays. – Besides this work, the Rev. Octavius also oversaw two other congregations. (64)

Ólafur's accounts of China and Japan paint a clear picture of just how dramatically different life in the two countries was at the time. In Japan, the missionary couple could take time to relax and enjoy life. For instance, Ólafur writes about a visit to the Thorlaksons' summer house on Lake Nojiri, near the Japanese Alps:

> Standing alone on the southern edge of the lake is a pretty little house called "Valhöll." We lived there with Octavius and

> his family for a whole month. It was a wonderful time. Bright and early in the morning, we threw on "kimonos," ran down to the water, and swam until we were tired and breathless ... There was no better place to enjoy the natural beauty of our surroundings than out in the middle of the lake. From there, one could see tree–covered slopes in every direction, peninsulas and coves and islets. In the evenings, we often sat with a group of good friends and ate delicious fruit that was so inexpensive that you wouldn't believe it, or we went to gatherings, where natives and representatives of many countries and parts of society listened to music and informative speeches. (71, own translation)

At the time, Lake Nojiri was a popular destination for foreigners and anyone else seeking an escape from the oppressive heat of a summer in the city. Other sources clearly show that Octavius and his family spent a great deal of time at the summer house during the hottest months of the year—so much so, in fact, that the couple became prominent figures in the lake community. Japan's best-known English-language newspaper, *The Japan Times*, printed a column with news about the social scene in the Lake Nojiri area each summer, and the couple's names appeared there several times in connection with various events. Both were involved in a local choir, Octavius as director and Carolina as piano accompanist. In addition, Octavius led church services and performed weddings and other religious ceremonies, and the children were also active in the local community. Octavius was appointed secretary of the Nojiri Lake Association and served as its spokesman on various occasions.[18] Lake Nojiri was clearly a place where the Thorlakson family could forge important ties with locals from around Japan as well as foreigners from a variety of countries and professions.

Shortly after Ólafur's visits to Japan, in 1931, Octavius travelled to Iceland for the first time while on his way back to North America on furlough. Ólafur himself had been on furlough in Iceland two years earlier, and the Association of Icelandic Mission Societies was founded on that occasion (Ólafsson 129). Octavius was a guest of the new organization and stayed in Iceland with his family for about a month. Mission work in foreign lands offered the public a welcome glimpse of the world, and the Thorlaksons' visit was a topic of interest in both Iceland and North America, as reported in the *Lögberg*:

> The Reverend Octavius Thorláksson gave a presentation at the community centre two nights ago and showed slides related to the country's nature, economy, and the Japanese people's day-to-day lives, culture, and religion. Was simultaneously enjoyable and informative to see photos from this far-off land

> and listen to the minister's account of the "civilized yellow race" in the East. ("Frá Íslandi," front page, own translation)

The Thorlaksons also travelled north across the country and visited Octavius' ancestral farm Stóru-Tjarnir in Ljósavatnsskarð, where Octavius' father grew up. Along the way, the missionary visited nine ministers, gave several speeches, and shared photos from Japan (Gíslason 4).

A decade after Ólafur´s second visit, world-renowned writer Jón Sveinsson (Nonni) visited Octavius and his family during his stay in Japan from 1937 to 1938. The 1930s in Japan were characterized by a dramatic shift in policy toward increased nationalism and imperialism. The Japanese had fought the Chinese in a series of skirmishes on the mainland since 1931, but in summer 1937, all-out war erupted between the two countries. The conflict did not seem to particularly affect Jón, who greatly enjoyed being in Japan. He had a long, successful career behind him when he celebrated his 80th birthday in Japan, and he reported that he had never been welcomed so warmly (Guðmundsson 395-96). The famous author spent a full year at Sophia University in Tokyo at the behest of the Jesuits who operated the school, and his visit garnered great attention (Ingvarsdóttir 2020, 27-40). In autumn 1937, the Thorlaksons visited Jón in Tokyo, and he visited them in Kobe shortly after. He stayed with the family for nine days, and though he only briefly mentioned Octavius in his travel memoir, *Nonni í Japan* [Nonni in Japan] (1956), his journals testify to the fact that the visit and his acquaintance with the family made an impression on him. In addition to being strongly religious, both men were widely travelled, shared a passion for the Icelandic sagas, and had command of multiple foreign languages.[19] Octavius showed Jón the entire city and its surroundings, and they visited schools, preschools, and churches alongside ministers and scholars of various nationalities and religious persuasions. The Thorlaksons' home served as a community centre of sorts; it was a gathering place for parties, shared meals, home concerts, and other events, some of which were held in Jón's honour. Jón also accompanied Octavius as he went about his daily routine and visited parishioners. Jón made some notes about his stay with Octavius in his journal:

> Octavius, the leader, who toils away building churches and schools, holds prayer services, and prays with his family daily. I need to have a better discussion with him about his calling. I see strong faith and religious devotion in these folks: Thorl. visits his parishioners every day to give house-readings and pray, calls on the sick in the parish and outlying areas, that is, in very small outposts outside the city that are run by the mission. (Sveinsson, own translation)

As Gunnar F. Guðmundsson points out in his 2012 biography of Jón, in Jón's mind, "a true missionary was first and foremost one who shared the Catholic faith. For that reason, it was peculiar for him to meet Christian missionaries who, though not Catholic, were exemplary in word and deed" (391-92). Still, the Thorlaksons managed to win over the old Jesuit, forging a friendship across denominational boundaries.

A New Chapter: Life after Japan

The Thorlaksons' time in Japan ended abruptly in 1941. In a 1946 interview with the *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, Octavius explained that for the Japanese, the Pacific War had begun not with the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, but rather on 26 July that same year, when the U.S. government froze Japanese assets in the United States and imposed an embargo to prevent the Axis powers from obtaining materials integral to the war effort. From that day until Octavius left Kobe that same year, the Japanese spied on him and other U.S. citizens round the clock (Johnson). The president of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church wrote about the situation in a report dated 3 May 1941:

> A zealous nationalism, which has only worsened due to growing tensions in international relations, together with continued pressure from the U.S. government, has resulted in most of our missionaries being sent away. Most left in February or March, though the evacuation is ongoing.[20]

Documents reveal that Octavius was in the last group of Lutheran missionaries to leave Japan, departing on 25 September 1941.[21] His wife and children had already reached the U.S. safe and sound. The family settled in California, and before long, Octavius once again found himself with plenty to do. As the Americans were now fighting a war in the Pacific, Octavius' experience in Japan was rare and valuable. In fact, when the war broke out, there were reportedly "only 65 Caucasians in the whole of the U.S." with a good grasp of the Japanese language (Russell para. 5). Among Octavius' new responsibilities was to serve as a recruitment officer, urging Japanese Americans and other Japanese-speaking Americans to join the U.S. Army, and for some time he was affiliated with the Japan branch of the Office of War Information (Johnson). While Octavius fulfilled his obligations as a U.S. citizen, there is no indication that he turned against Japan or the Japanese people on a personal level.[22] On the contrary, Octavius' descendants describe how the Thorlaksons helped local Japanese families by safeguarding their possessions while they were being held in

internment camps (personal communication, 2020).[23] An estimated 117 thousand U.S. citizens of Japanese origin were detained in the controversial government-run camps ("Japanese Internment Camps"). But it was not only Octavius' experience in Japan that proved valuable when the war broke out. As of April 1940, Iceland overtook from occupied Denmark the responsibility for conducting Iceland's foreign policy and the Icelandic foreign service was formally established the same year (Thorsteinsson 171).[24] In the following years, the ministry had to expand quickly to promote the Icelandic economy and support private citizens travelling abroad, so enlisting capable individuals around the world to help was critical. Iceland's first consuls were appointed in the early 1940s and the first group mainly consisted of Icelanders or individuals with an Icelandic family background (Thorsteinsson 192-93). In 1944, two members of the Thorlakson family joined the ranks, when the brothers Octavius and Lorentz Halfdan were appointed vice consuls: Octavius in San Francisco and Halfdan in Vancouver, British Columbia (Thorsteinsson 193). Octavius was later made honorary consul, a position he held until he turned 80 in 1970.[25]

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, this article aims to explore the Icelandic Synod's missionary efforts in Japan, while taking special interest in the mission movement's international worldview and mobility, mission networks' international reach and connectivity, and the international experiences of the Synod's chosen representative, Steingrímur Octavius Thorlakson. The article demonstrates multiple international and intercultural dimensions, starting with short- and long-term mobility in the Thorlakson family, as well as Octavius' Icelandic-Norwegian family background. Further, it shows that during Octavius' 25 years in Japan, he immersed himself in Japanese culture, worked with Nordic and international networks of missionary colleagues, and became friends with equally travelled men of God for whom Iceland was also home. The article also discusses how Octavius diligently shared his firsthand accounts from Japan in writing and lectures in both North America and in Iceland. Few Icelanders in the homeland or Icelandic immigrants in North America travelled as far East and stayed as long as Octavius. In the Icelandic Synod's missionary enterprise and Octavius' work, we see multiple international influences, experiences, networks, and contacts.

There are still many aspects and angles of Octavius' story that would make interesting studies of their own. For example, Octavius' wife Carolina is a peripheral figure in this article, but the significance of her role in the family's missionary life in Japan is nevertheless readily apparent. Also, the paths people followed from the Nordic region to the Japanese mission field via Lutheran

institutions in North America are fascinating for anyone interested in Nordic identities and collaboration. From a Japanese perspective, it is interesting to see how Octavius' friendly view of Japan and the Japanese people remained stable throughout and after the war years, when American public opinion of Japan turned hostile or even hateful. His feelings towards Japan were no doubt complicated, but the story shows in various ways the importance of intercultural understanding at the time of war.

Octavius' story has largely gone untold. In a concrete way, however, his experiences reflect a far-reaching global movement of the day, with even the smallest Christian communities taking it upon themselves to spread the gospel to distant parts of the world. Octavius and Carolina's work in Japan was supported by the Icelandic Synod and began several years before Icelanders sent Ólafur Ólafsson to preach the gospel in China. In that regard, Octavius' story also ties into an interesting era in the history of the Christian church in Iceland. In this author's view, however, the significance of Octavius' work has nothing to do with converting the Japanese. In fact, the Japanese were—and still are—perfectly content with their ancient religious beliefs. Rather, Octavius' most important contribution was that he brought the outside world a bit closer and broadened his contemporaries' horizons, both in Iceland and in North America. This chapter deserves its place not only in church history but also in a larger narrative of Icelandic and Nordic mobility in the early 20th century.

NOTES

1. The Thorlakson family name appears in many different versions in Icelandic and English texts and the spelling also varies among family members. In this article the family names appear as they are registered in the book *Vestur-íslenskar æviskrár* (Kristjánsson). However, when the names appear in direct quotes the spelling follows the original text. The name of Reverend Paul Thorlaksson follows the spelling of his biography written by George J. Houser.
2. Another scholar who has criticized the concept of "cultural imperialism" and how it has been used to analyse the expansion of global missions is historian Andrew Porter. One of his central points of criticism is that there was such widespread cooperation between Protestants on both sides of the North Atlantic and beyond that their mission endeavours were "far from being the property or creation of discrete imperial nations" (380).
3. Thoralf Klein has also explained how "Christian missionaries emerged as the group of foreigners that interacted most closely with Chinese society" in the second half of the 19th century. As Klein points out, other groups, such as scientists and merchants, also travelled into the interior of China, but "missionaries were the only group to settle down, establishing mission stations as permanent bridgeheads of their evangelistic enterprise" (Klein 142).

4. Key historical sources, such as *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Þorsteinsson and Oleson) and *Icelanders in North America* (Thor) give considerable attention to this theme. There has also been much focus on specific themes, such as the heated debates and rifts among Icelandic settlers over religious matters in the 1870s and again in 1909 (Eylands; Houser; Júníusdóttir; Thor). Another important theme is schooling and efforts by the church leadership to establish an Icelandic school, which resulted in the Jón Bjarnason Academy in 1913 (Líndal; Eylands).
5. Articles appeared in both religious and non-religious publications, for example, in *Lögberg-Heimskringla* and *Sameiningin* in North America, and *Morgunblaðið, Tíminn, Nýtt Kirkjublað,* and *Bjarmi* in Iceland.
6. Ólafur's book *Frá Tókýó til Moskvu* [From Tokyo to Moscow] (1947) contains stories from his travels in Japan. Some of his travel narratives can also be read in Icelandic periodicals such as *Eimreiðin*. Jón Sveinsson published *Nonni í Japan* [Nonni in Japan] (1956) about his stay in Japan 1937-1938, but Octavius and his family are only mentioned briefly in the book. More information can be found in Jón's unpublished diaries, which are preserved in Iceland's National Library.
7. Around the turn of the 19th century, proponents of the Enlightenment, Magnús Stephensen chief among them, were already quite critical of what they saw as religious extremism (Þórarinn Björnsson 15). Just over a century later, the critics were joined by a powerful new voice, that of Halldór Laxness (future Nobel laureate in literature). Laxness did not mince words in writing about Icelanders' missionary efforts in far-flung corners of the globe (5).
8. Date of birth and death according to ancestry.com, https://www.ancestry.com/genealogy/records/sigrid-anna-esbern-24-ms16cj.
9. The synod was the largest religious group in the Icelandic community in North America. It had over 6,000 members in 1916, while the total number of Icelandic speakers in North America hovered around 20,000 (Jónsson and Magnússon 1997, 142).
10. For comparison, the annual fee for students at the Jón Bjarnason Academy was $36 that same year ("Jóns Bjarnasonar skóli" 4). The school had 34 students that year, so the annual income from school fees was ca $1200. Coincidentally, this is the same amount that it cost to sustain the Thorlaksons in Japan for one year.
11. Icelandic minister, physician, and missionary Steinunn Jóhannsdóttir Hayes (b. 1870) was certainly another important role model for many Icelanders. She went to China in 1904 and served as a missionary doctor there until 1942. She was educated in the United States, earning excellent grades, and worked alongside her husband in a missionary hospital in China. In 1909, Steinunn visited Iceland with her husband and encouraged her countrymen to support missions work. See more about Steinunn in *Lifandi Steinar* (Þórarinn Björnsson 34–40).

12. In Iceland, Ólafur Ólafsson is also known as "Ólafur Kínafari," literally, "Ólafur the China-goer," a nod to his well-known association with China.
13. He is also known for giving the first Icelandic-language sermon in Canada, in 1876 (Valdimar J. Eylands 57).
14. Two of his brothers studied medicine, and the younger, Dr. Paul Henry Thorbjörn Thorláksson, became a well-known physician and later served three terms as Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg (1969–1978). Octavius' youngest brother, Lorentz Halfdan Thorláksson, was an executive with the Hudson Bay Company. He served as Icelandic Vice Consul from 1944–1955 and was presented with the Knight's Cross of the Order of the Falcon in 1957 (Benjamín Kristjánsson 358).
15. Helgi Skúli Kjartansson (2018) has also argued that one of the key characteristics of the Icelandic community in North America was an interest in education and academic training, which he says was rooted in the Icelanders' centuries-old belief that education was the poor man's path from poverty to a better life (62-63).
16. The Finns sent additional missionaries to Japan in 1905 and moved their mission to another part of the country ("The First Lutheran Missionaries").
17. See more on the public home page of the International Suzuki Association (Wood).
18. See for example S. O. Thorlaksson (4).
19. An interview from 1964 reports that Octavius spoke 11 languages (Don Carter, 7). While the level of proficiency must have varied greatly from language to language, it is safe to assume that Octavius had rare linguistic capabilities compared to the average person in his day. The same is true of Jón Sveinsson (Nonni), who studied and worked in Iceland, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, to give a few examples (Guðmundsson 2012).
20. Quote taken from the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) President's Report dated 3 May 1941. The report, preserved in a collection of historical documents that JELC put together in 2017, also states that the church had approximately 1000 members in 1919 and over 5000 in 1939. See Kyoukaishi shiryou hensan iinkai 322.
21. Kyoukaishi shiryou hensan iinkai 335.
22. For example, a reporter who interviewed Octavius in 1964 wrote, "Thorlaksson has a deep affection for the Japanese people and came to learn their language well. His children were born in Japan and, like himself, speak the language fluently." Further, Octavius is quoted as having said, "The War (World War II) was something forced upon them by the militarist clique" (Don Carter 6-7).
23. Email correspondence with Octavius' descendants in the U.S., autumn 2020.
24. As explained by Thorsteinsson, 1940 is considered the founding year of the Icelandic foreign service, although sovereignty from Denmark had been

introduced in 1918. Iceland took over the handling of its own foreign affairs when Germany occupied Denmark, and Iceland later became fully independent from Denmark in 1944. See a detailed account of the events in April 1940 in Sveinn Björnsson's report (Appendix 3) in *Frá Hafnarstjórn til Lýðræðis* (Krabbe). See also article published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the foreign service ("80th anniversary...").

25. Octavius died in 1977 at the age of 87. Octavius was widely recognized and honoured with multiple awards for his work, including the Icelandic Order of the Falcon and a Distinguished Graduate Award from his alma mater in the U.S.

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