

Story of Joseph A. Ott, who prior to his death married Elizabeth Jolley (born 19 Jan 1878) to William Jackson Jolley Jr. and Elizabeth Stolworthy.

In far-off Europe, beyond a curtain of iron and a wall called “Berlin,” I visited, with a handful of members, a small cemetery. It was a dark night, and a cold rain had been falling throughout the entire day.

We had come to visit the grave of a missionary who many years before had died while in the service of the Lord. A hushed silence shrouded the scene as we gathered about the grave. With a flashlight illuminating the headstone, I read the inscription:

Joseph A. Ott  
Born: 12 December 1870—Virgin, Utah  
Died: 10 January 1896—Dresden, Germany

Then the light revealed that this grave was unlike any other in the cemetery. The marble headstone had been polished, weeds such as those which covered other graves had been carefully removed, and in their place was an immaculately edged bit of lawn and some beautiful flowers that told of tender and loving care. I asked, “Who has made this grave so attractive?” My query was met by silence.

At last a twelve-year-old deacon acknowledged that he wanted to render this unheralded kindness and, without prompting from parents or leaders, had done so. He said that he just wanted to do something for a missionary who gave his life while in the service of the Lord. I thanked him; and then I asked all there to safeguard his secret, that his gift might remain anonymous. [Thomas S. Monson, “‘Anonymous’,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 55]

Miracles are everywhere to be found when priesthood callings are magnified. When faith replaces doubt, when selfless service eliminates selfish striving, the power of God brings to pass His purposes.

About eight years ago, in far-off Dresden, a city in the German Democratic Republic, I visited, with a handful of members, a small cemetery. The night was dark, and a cold rain had been falling throughout the day.

We had come to visit the grave of a missionary who many years before had died while in the service of the Lord. A hushed silence shrouded the scene as we gathered about the grave. With a flashlight illuminating the headstone, I read the inscription:

Joseph A. Ott  
Born: 12 December 1870—Virgin, Utah  
Died: 10 January 1896—Dresden, Germany

Then the light revealed that this grave was unlike any other in the cemetery. The headstone had been polished, weeds such as those which covered other graves had been carefully removed, and in their place was an immaculately edged bit of lawn and some beautiful flowers that told of tender and loving care. I asked, “Who has made this grave so attractive?” My query was met by silence.

At length, a twelve-year-old deacon acknowledged that he had wanted to render this

unheralded kindness and, without prompting from parents or leaders, had done so. He said that he just wanted to do something for a missionary who gave his life while in the service of the Lord. He said, “‘I’ll never be able to serve a mission, as did my father. I feel close to missionary work when I tend this grave where the body of a missionary rests.’”

I wept out of respect for his faith. I sorrowed at his inability to fulfill his greatest desire—to serve as a missionary. But God did hear his prayer. He noted his faith. He honored one who magnified the calling of a deacon.

Eight years have gone by since that special night in Dresden. Many significant changes have taken place in the German Democratic Republic. A temple of God graces the land, chapels accommodate wards and stakes, and the full program of the Church blesses the lives of our members. On Thursday, March 30, 1989, the first missionaries in fifty years crossed the border into the German Democratic Republic. Already investigators are being taught and the first baptisms have taken place.

But what of the lad who so tenderly tended the grave of Joseph Ott? Well, Tobias Burkhardt, a deacon then, is an elder now. On May 28 he and nine other companions will come to the Missionary Training Center, the first ever from their country to serve abroad as missionaries. Asked concerning his feelings at this special time, he responded, “‘I am anxious to serve my mission. I’ll strive to work ever so diligently, that Joseph Ott can, through me, yet perform an earthly mission.’”

Brethren, the spirit of Joseph Ott has long since gone home to that God who gave it life. His body rests in the peaceful, well-kept grave in faraway Dresden. But his missionary spirit lives on in the service to be rendered by a faithful elder—even the deacon who so long ago trimmed the lawn, tidied the flowers, polished the headstone of Joseph Ott, and dreamed of missionary service once denied but now bestowed.

May our Heavenly Father ever bless, ever inspire, and ever lead all who hold His precious priesthood is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. [Thomas S. Monson, “‘All That the Father Has,’” *Ensign*, Jul 1989, 68]

Though he died upon arrival in Germany in 1896 to serve his mission, 24-year-old Elder Joseph A. Ott left an enduring heritage.

On the north bank of the Virgin River in southern Utah, near the town of Rockville, is a forgotten ghost town called Duncan’s Retreat. The town, deserted by its seventy-nine inhabitants in the 1890s, never knew success. Three decades later, nothing was left of the town except fragments of one or two buildings and three pear trees still bearing fruit.<sup>1</sup>

Much like the town where he lived, Joseph A. Ott, a young Latter-day Saint missionary who died shortly after entering the mission field in late 1895, never knew success as some define it. He never taught one discussion or baptized one investigator. Yet Joseph’s short-lived missionary effort is still bearing fruit one hundred years after his death.

## **A Mission Call**

Life must have seemed to be going just as planned for 24-year-old Joseph Alma Ott, the third son of pioneer parents. It was October of 1895, and he had just married his sweetheart,

Elizabeth Jolley, in the St. George Temple.<sup>2</sup> Only three years earlier Joseph and his family had followed President Wilford Woodruff's call to colonize an unsettled area in Utah now known as Tropic. Among the handful of other settlers there was William Jolley's family, of which Joseph's new bride was the second child.<sup>3</sup>

A mission call to Germany was far from Joseph's mind, but when it came three weeks after his marriage, Joseph immediately accepted the opportunity to serve.<sup>4</sup> From his parents' example, he had learned early in life to sacrifice for the Lord and his church.

Joseph's mother, Hannah Normington Ott, left her home in England at the age of six, crossed the Atlantic with her parents, and traveled across the plains in a pioneer handcart company. Her father and two brothers died while making the journey. At sixteen, Hannah married David Ott, whom she had met after her family responded to the prophet's call to colonize Utah's Dixie area. Hannah reared a family of thirteen children, including four who died before their twenty-fifth birthdays.<sup>5</sup>

Born in Indiana, Joseph's father, David B. Ott, was living in the eastern states with his parents when he joined the Church. David's family moved to Nauvoo to be with the other Saints. After the death of David's father, the rest of the family moved to Utah, where David helped settle two colonies and held Church callings until his death in 1921.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph showed similar dedication when, after receiving his mission call, he parted from his new wife and traveled north to Salt Lake City. On 8 November 1895, he was ordained as a Seventy by Elder Abraham H. Cannon, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>7</sup>

"Unfortunately," writes Joseph's great-nephew C. Eric Ott, "tragedy was Elder Ott's first ... companion. While disembarking from the ship in Germany, he slipped and fell into the cold water."<sup>8</sup> Joseph was rescued from the fall, but days later Elders William McEwan and J. M. Weller, Joseph's companions, sent a letter to A. O. Woodruff—a fellow missionary and the son of President Wilford Woodruff—saying that Joseph had become very ill.<sup>9</sup>

On 18 January 1896, one month and six days after his ill-fated arrival in Germany, Joseph died from black diphtheria. He had not had the chance to teach even one person about the restored gospel. George C. Naegle, the mission president over Germany, wrote to Joseph's parents to inform them of the death, commenting that "[Joseph was] full of courage when he arrived. He took up his labors with the German language and study of the scriptures with zeal and true devotion."<sup>10</sup> Joseph's parents had already heard the sad news weeks before from a telegram sent by President Woodruff to the presiding elder of Tropic, Utah.

Joseph's body was buried in his field of labor on 22 January 1896 at the St. Pauli (also called St. Paul) cemetery in Dresden, Germany. Eight missionaries performed the small, private ceremony.<sup>11</sup> Elder A. O. Woodruff made this entry in his journal: "We all got silk hats and white gloves for the occasion and proceeded to the St. Paul's cemetery. Here we all saw the remains of our dear Brother and Comrade Joseph A. Ott who has fallen in the battle for right against wrong. Elder Weller dedicated the grave and resting place for our dear boy who gave his life for the cause of truth. It is useless to say how sad I feel ... for his poor young wife and his loved ones."<sup>12</sup>

Almost six months later, a tombstone—bought with donations from German Saints—was placed on the grave site and dedicated to be protected.<sup>13</sup> The white marble tombstone reads: "In Memory of the Missionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph A. Ott. Dedicated to Him by His Fellow Believers."<sup>14</sup>

Since the death of Joseph Ott one hundred years ago, many changes have taken place in Germany: two world wars, the division of the country after World War II, and the rise and fall of

communism in East Germany. Yet despite the destruction in Dresden from the wars and the rebuilding afterward, Joseph Ott's tombstone still stands today. More important, the spirit of missionary work and sacrifice that he exemplified has lived on through the years in Germany and inspired others who have come after him.

## **A Light on the Tombstone**

Hella Smith was a young girl living at her grandparents' home in Dresden during World War II when she first heard the unique story of the conversion of her grandmother, Maria Strauch, to the Church. Located not far from her grandparents' home was the cemetery where Joseph Ott was buried. In 1908 Grandmother Strauch "would visit the cemetery frequently because she had relatives buried there," remembers Hella, who now has two daughters and lives in Salt Lake City with her husband, Roman.

"One day, during the middle of the day, she saw a light shining on one of the tombstones. She thought it was unusual, so she got closer and saw Joseph Ott's marker. She read the name of the Church and later looked it up," says Hella.

After finding the address of a local branch of the Church in Dresden, Maria attended meetings, embraced the gospel, and was baptized. A year later her husband, Herman, was also baptized, and many of their thirteen children followed suit, including Hella Smith's mother, Ghemela.

A few years after World War II and the creation of East Germany, Hella and her widowed mother escaped from Dresden. "I was fourteen when, on Christmas Eve, my mom told me we were going to take a long train ride. 'This is your Christmas present,' she said."

Because they were able to take along only what they could wear, Hella's mother dressed her in layer after layer of clothing. "I do remember that we said a wonderful prayer before leaving," Hella says. Hella and her mother crossed the border of East Germany and eventually made their way to the United States and built a new life for themselves.

Many years later, Hella and her husband were called to serve as missionaries in Germany. One day while walking down the halls of the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, the couple saw a door with the name Ott on it.

"Even though I had heard my grandmother's story many times, I had not thought about it for years—that is until that day in the MTC," says Hella. Curious, she and her husband opened the door and found C. Eric Ott, director of research and evaluation at the MTC and a great-nephew to Joseph Ott!

It was a memorable day for Eric Ott. "When our two stories came together that day, Sister [Hella] Smith and I sat quietly, savoring the sweet feeling that had settled over us. 'Brother Ott,' she said, 'It appears that your great-uncle Joseph was a successful missionary after all.' Knowing that something good came from Joseph Ott's mission has been a source of comfort to my family, like the healing of a long illness."<sup>15</sup>

## **Caring for the Grave**

Born into an active Latter-day Saint family in Chemnitz, Germany, during communist rule, Tobias Burkhardt grew up desiring to serve a mission but never thought he would be allowed to do so.

One day Tobias heard his father talking about a missionary's grave in Dresden—about an hour's drive from Tobias's home—that needed to be cleaned. Tobias, who was a deacon at the time, jumped at the chance to become involved in missionary work, if only in a small way, by

caring for that grave.

The first time Tobias went to Dresden to see Joseph Ott's tombstone, weeds covered the grave site. For three or four hours a day for two days, Tobias worked hard beautifying the site—clearing weeds, cleaning the tombstone, and planting flowers.

“I did all I could to make it look nice,” recalls Tobias, who now lives with his wife, Tannya, in the Segoe Lily Ward of the Sandy Utah Central Stake. “I knew the grave was a special site.”

Sometime during the several years that Tobias cared for the grave, President Thomas S. Monson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, visited members in East Germany. During his visit he was taken, in the night, to the cemetery to see Joseph Ott's burial spot. Impressed with the well-kept grave site, he asked the members who cared for it. Upon learning it was Tobias, President Monson asked him why he took the time to do so. Tobias responded, “I'll never be able to serve a mission, as did my father. I feel close to missionary work when I tend this grave where the body of a missionary rests.”<sup>16</sup>

But the Lord knew Tobias's desires and heard the prayers of the Saints there. In May 1989 the first ten missionaries to leave East Germany in fifty years arrived at the Missionary Training Center in Provo. Among them was Tobias, called to serve in the Utah Salt Lake City Mission.

“It was amazing to be doing something we had only heard about and imagined others doing,” says Tobias. “The MTC was strong and marvelous because the Spirit was so easily felt. It prepared me so well for the mission field. We are never handed blessings without effort and sacrifice. We must trust in the Lord no matter what.”

## The Award

Elder William Powley and nine other missionaries entered the newly created Germany Dresden Mission on 30 March 1989. For the first time in decades, East Germany had opened its doors to Latter-day Saint missionaries, and Elder Powley knew he was seeing history in the making.

Five months later, on 7 September 1989 at a Dresden mission conference, Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles told the missionaries that he saw in East Germany's future “stakes dotting the land.” Elder Nelson said he saw “the same reaching out to neighboring countries as was done from the first missionaries in England to Europe.”<sup>17</sup>

Elder Powley and the other missionaries were not too surprised when in November, two months after the conference, the East German government announced that its borders were open to free travel and that the Berlin Wall was to come down. That same month Dresden mission president Wolfgang Paul introduced to the missionaries an award for excellence in teaching—the Joseph A. Ott Award.

“We wanted to have something by which the missionaries could be inspired and motivated,” said President Paul, adding that he chose the name of the award after hearing Maria Strauch's and Tobias Burkhardt's inspiring stories that stemmed from Joseph Ott's missionary service.<sup>18</sup>

“Earning it was difficult,” said Elder Powley, one of the first two missionaries to receive the Joseph A. Ott Award. “It was a motivational award for teaching the discussions. It seemed fitting that to be awarded the Joseph A. Ott Award you had to teach the discussions really using the commitment pattern, something that Joseph Ott never had the opportunity to do. The award was more than just memorizing the discussions and scriptures. It set a teaching standard of

excellence in the Dresden mission, which helped us be better missionaries.”

## Fruits of His Labor

The story of Joseph Ott is similar to the story told by President Harold B. Lee about a missionary who thought he was a failure until years later he learned that his one baptism, a young Irish boy, had become an Apostle.<sup>19</sup> The success of Joseph Ott’s mission cannot be judged from the few weeks he spent sick in Dresden, for his example of sacrifice and love of the gospel inspires those who hear his story.

“There will always be an Abinadi or a Joseph Ott whose work comes to fruition in a later age. God’s purposes often go beyond the present moment,” writes Brother Ott, Joseph’s great-nephew. “The true worth of a mission or life can only be measured in the timetable of the Master.”<sup>20</sup>

In the words of President Monson, “The spirit of Joseph Ott has long since gone home to that God who gave it life. His body rests in the peaceful, well-kept grave in far away Dresden, but his missionary spirit lives on.”<sup>21</sup>

### Notes

1. Hazel Bradshaw, ed., *Under Dixie Sun* (Panguitch, Utah: Garfield County News, 1978), pp. 117–18, 437.
2. See C. Eric Ott, “In the Lord’s Time,” *Tambuli*, May 1989, pp. 7–9.
3. See Ida Chidester, *Golden Nuggets of Pioneer Days: A History of Garfield County* (Panguitch, Utah: The Garfield County Chapter of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1949), p. 134.
4. See O. W. Andelin, “Elder Ott’s Death and Burial,” *Deseret Evening News*, 10 Feb. 1896, p. 8.
5. See Layton J. Ott, “A Sketch of the Life of Hannah Normington Ott,” unpublished family history, Henrieville, Utah, 3 Dec. 1938, pp. 73–74.
6. See Layton J. Ott, “A sketch of the Life of David Benton Ott,” unpublished family history, Henrieville, Utah, 3 Sept. 1938, pp. 70–72.
7. See “Record of Members Collection 1836–1970,” Archives Division, Church Historical Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
8. “In the Lord’s Time,” pp. 8–9.
9. See Journal of A. O. Woodruff, Berlin, Germany, beginning 1 Oct. 1895, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
10. George Conrad Naegle, Letter to David Ott, 21 Jan. 1896, Archives Division, Church Historical Library.
11. See Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Archives Division, Church Historical Department, 20 Jan. 1896, p. 2.
12. See O. W. Andelin, “Elder Ott’s Death and Burial,” *Deseret Evening News*, 10 Feb. 1896, p. 8.
13. See Journal of A. O. Woodruff.
14. See “In the Lord’s Time,” pp. 8–9.

15. "In the Lord's Time," pp. 8–9.

16. Thomas S. Monson, *Ensign*, July 1989, p. 71.

17. Historical Records and Minutes, Germany Dresden Mission, Archives Division, Church Historical Library.

18. Interview with Wolfgang Paul, 24 Oct. 1991, Archives Division, Church Historical Library.

19. "Feet Shod with the Preparation of the Gospel of Peace," Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year, Provo, Utah, 9 Nov. 1954, p. 1.

20. "In the Lord's Time," pp. 8–9.

21. "Boy's Once 'Impossible Dream' Fulfilled with Call as Missionary," *Church News*, 13 May 1989, p. 4.

Lois Decker Brown serves in the Primary presidency of the Spring Creek Third Ward, Springville Utah Spring Creek Stake.

Lois Decker Brown, "Brief Mission, Constant Harvest," *Ensign*, Aug 1995, 46