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From Gerlingen to the Gold Coast

Linguist and Development Worker

A Medal honors Johannes Zimmermann. No town in the German federal state Württemberg has sent out as much missionaries as Gerlingen. One of them was Johannes Zimmermann. He was forgotten for a long time, now a medal reminds of him. That was a suggestion from Odumnase in Ghana where Zimmermann is nowadays a popular first name.

Translated into English from the German text of HANS-DIETER FRAUER, epd

Johannes Zimmermann (1825 to 1876) from Gerlingen (Germany, district Ludwigsburg) was forgotten in his hometown quickly after his death. But nowadays the remembrance of the great evangelical missionary, linguist and development worker is kept alive: A street is named after him, in the council hall there is a bust of him since 1970, in front of Gerlingen's church Petruskirche you find a Zimmermann memorial stone since 1976 and now a Zimmermann Medal was coined.

That all is due to suggestions from the West African Kroboland. In this area - which belongs nowadays to Ghana - Zimmermann lived and worked a few decades long. He influenced the country strongly so that he was always unforgotten there.

From him built wells are still in use to this day, in Odumnase there is since 1972 a "Johannes Zimmermann Church" and the first name "Zimmermann" is popular.

Zimmermann was one of the many missionaries who went out into the world in the 19th century. No other town in Germany's federal state Württemberg has spawned as much missionaries as the at that time pietistic village. It's known that 16 missionaries went to Africa, India or China; they descended from religious farmer's, winegrower's and craftsmen's families. The most famous are Johannes Rebmann, who discovered the snow covered Kilimanjaro in 1849, and Zimmermann.

The missionaries were not only preachers, but also teachers, linguists, translators and discoverers. Besides that they acted far upon their times - also as development workers: e.g. Zimmermann had agriculturally tools when he left Germany. Rebmann acted as brick layer. And Rudolf Höhn - missionary from Gerlingen who went to India - founded a brickyard to assist the by reason of their Christianity ejected former Hindus for earning money for their daily bread.

Johannes Zimmermann who was born on March, 2nd 1825 as first of ten children in a farmer's and butcher's family, learned the baker's trade and decided in 1843 to go into mission field. After his training in Basle/Switzerland he traveled in 1849 to the Gold Coast. He explored the until then only verbally reported Gã language and published a first dictionary and a grammar.

Furthermore he translated until 1866 the Bible and a hymn-book with more than 500 songs and published a school reader. He lived - in these times very unusual - in the middle of the village and shared the local's life. 1873 he became president of the Gã district: There he acted for 22 years. In very poor health he traveled back to Gerlingen in 1876; there he died on December 13th and was forgotten soon.



In contrast the remembrance of Johannes Rebmann stayed alive in Gerlingen; his birth house was listed for demolition for a long time but in the end it was saved. Nowadays it is a remembrance place and informs about life and work of Zimmermann and the other missionaries from Gerlingen. For Rebmann a medal was coined some years ago; it's today not in stock.

Now Zimmermann also has got his medal: The suggestion for it's coinage came significantly from Kroboland.

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