# This Month in Moravian History

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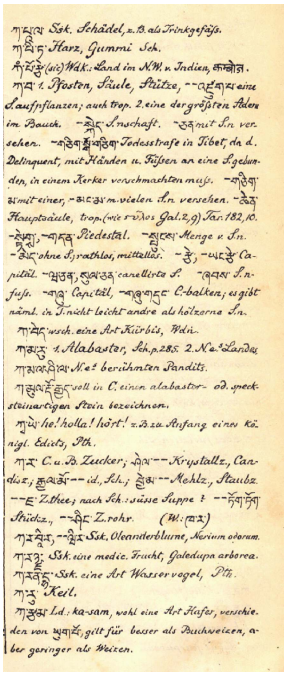
## Heinrich August Jäschke

*This month marks the 125th anniversary of the death of whom James Hutton called "the most distinguished linguist in the whole history of the Moravian Church." (A History of the Moravian Missions, 1923).*

The Moravian Church has a long tradition of preaching the gospel in the language of the people. Moravian missionaries have striven to translate the Bible and other Christian texts into the native languages of their mission fields. Perhaps no missionary faced a more formidable task than Heinrich Jäschke as he tackled the complex Tibetan language and its various dialects.

Born May 17, 1817 in Herrnhut, Germany, Jäschke was educated in Moravian schools where he displayed an almost genius-like proficiency in acquiring languages. Later he served as a teacher in various Moravian schools in Germany and Denmark, and in 1847 was named co-director of the Moravian boarding schools in Niesky, Germany. Jäschke was ordained in 1848.

Due to his linguistic gifts, Jäschke was called to the Moravian mission in Western Tibet (now northern India) in 1856, joining two other missionaries that had been sent earlier, Wilhelm Heyde and Eduard Pagell. When Jäschke arrived in Asia he had already mastered Latin, Greek, Polish, Danish, Swedish and Hungarian, and had a working knowledge of Czech, Arabic, Sanskrit and Persian. He quickly acquired Hindustani and Urdu, but Tibetan proved a bigger challenge. His appointment as director of the mission at first caused difficulties, since the other two men had already been there four years. In addition, Jäschke's academic nature did not always go well with his two more practical-minded colleagues. He reportedly was a shrewd but frugal overseer and rationed the missionaries' food "as if in wartime." He himself reportedly lived for a while on barley, chang (a fermented beverage), and one egg per day.



Jäschke married Emilie Rosenhauer, a volunteer to the mission field, in 1859. Over the next ten years he endeavored in his assignment to master the Tibetan language and to translate the Bible and religious texts into Tibetan. In introducing the foreign concepts of Christianity to Buddhist people, Jäschke decided against high-minded translations and instead used words that were "as simple, as clear, and as popular as possible." While stationed in Tibet Jäschke translated twelve books and various school texts and pamphlets. His work included a hymnal, a catechism, a liturgy book, a collection of bible stories, a church history, a dictionary and a conversation handbook. In 1868 the Jäschkes were forced to return to Germany due to ill health. In Germany Jäschke continued his work, translating into Tibetan all of the New Testament except the book of Hebrews. He also published a monumental Tibetan-German dictionary in 1871 (revised 1876), which he expanded and translated into English in 1881 (reprinted in 1949).

Despite suffering from failing health and severe headaches in his final years, Jäschke continued to persevere in his task. "The chief motive of all our exertions lay always in the desire to facilitate and to hasten the spread of the Christian religion and of Christian civilization," he stated in the introduction to his 1881 dictionary. Jäschke died in Herrnhut at 67 years of age on September 24, 1883.

Sources: *Dienerblätter*; Arthur Ward, trans., *Working and Waiting for Tibet*; Gerhard Heyde, *50 Jahre unter Tibetern*; J.E. Hutton, *A History of the Moravian Missions*, 1923.

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