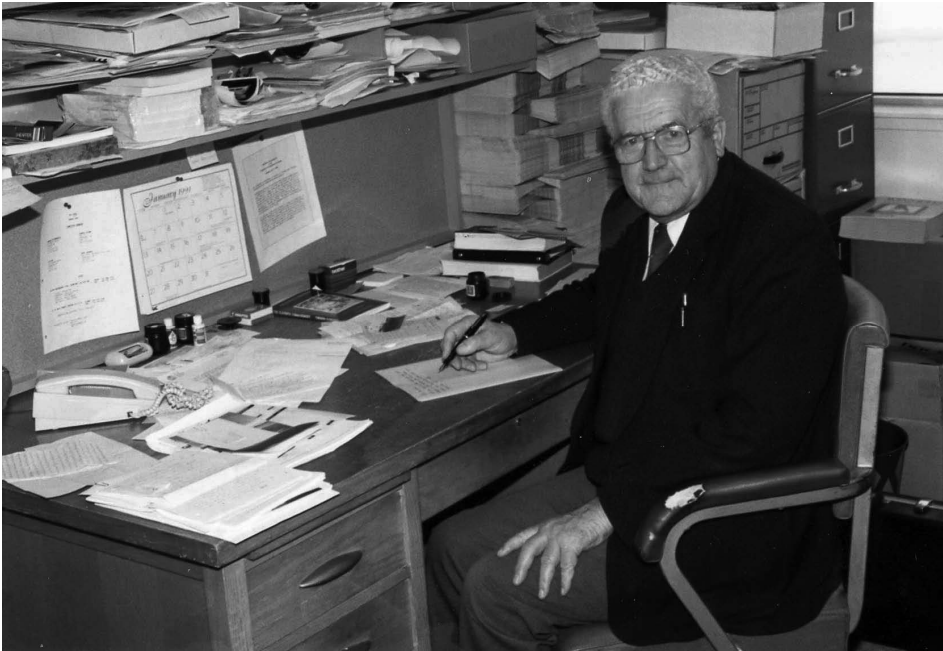


# Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA



Gerhard Ens (1922-2011) at the office where he served as editor of *Der Bote* from 1977-1991. Photo: Courtesy of Werner Ens.

## Gerhard Ens: Historian, Minister and Educator

by Conrad Stoesz

Each week thousands of people would gather around their radios to hear Gerhard Ens begin his radio broadcast with “*goode owent, leewe frint en nobasch, fonn wiet auf, en fonn dijcht’bie. Ekj freid me daut wie fonn’doag dit owent aulwada toop koom kenne. En daut wie unse en bätje äwa onse Je’schijch fetale kenne...*” (Good evening dear friends and neighbors from far away and close by. I am happy that today we can gather and that we can talk a bit about our story). This was Gerhard’s passion - Mennonite history. He was a man who immersed himself into the study of history. He was a voracious reader who not only had a sharp memory but also a keen ability to con-

dense, collate, and organize the information he read with his own thoughts. At his funeral, it was said he was the search engine before Google. Ens had a long career in the church, as teacher at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, editor of *Der Bote*, and radio host for his own Low German history program. Gerhard Ens saw each setting as an opportunity to impart not only historical understanding but also a love for Mennonite history.

Gerhard Ens (1922-2011) was born on August 4, 1922 as the oldest child of Gerhard Ens (1893-1990) and Helena Sawatzky (1894-1992) in the village of Gnadental, Baratov Colony, Russia. The

family immigrated to Canada in 1923 and settled in the village of Reinland, Manitoba where they took up farming. In 1925 the family renovated the machine shed into a temporary home. This machine shed remained their home for the next eleven years. Times were tough starting up a farm as the depression hit in the 1930s and the travel debt for the move to Canada needed to be paid. The farm was a mixed farm with animals and grains.

Travel was limited with short excursions to Winkler for supplies and visiting family members. It was not until his late teens that Gerhard first visited Winnipeg.

At the age of six, Ens started his school career in the one-room, one-teacher, public school in Reinland along with 60 other students in eight grades. Ens finished grade 8 and then moved on to grades 9 and 10 in the nearby village of Gnadental on the insistence of his father. Here Ens lived with his grandmother and took a great liking to studying. He went on for grades 11 and 12 at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute (MCI) in Gretna. From here Ens went on to Normal School in Winnipeg to receive his teacher’s certificate.

The move to Winnipeg proved to be a big cultural shock. “The lifestyle of non-Mennonite students seemed strange to me”, he said. After receiving his teacher’s certificate, his first teaching post was in the village of Gnadental in 1941, where he once went to school. Then in 1942 Ens received his call for military training. This was a significant point in his life. He applied for conscientious objector status and was successful. However, when the Department of Education found out that Ens had applied for conscientious objector (CO) status they arranged an interview with him and revoked his teaching certificate for fear he would inflict his views on the children. He worked a few weeks on the family farm and then in summer got his assignment to work on the Jack Wurmnest farm near Sperling. At his request he was transferred to work in a mental hospital in Portage la Prairie, where he worked as an orderly along with other COs. The work was not always pleasant but it was necessary. Near the end of his service he began to take correspondence courses through the University of Manitoba and he taught himself to type. It was hard to plan for anything because the service term was for the duration of the war and no one knew how long that would be. The war ended in

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1945 but Ens was not free from his duties until 1946. Ens later reflected, "... those two years have been really meaningful years of my life. I learned to know another group of people... which has given me a great many insights for later years.... I would recommend this type of alternative service for the future."

During the war the Ens family had some contact with people in Russia through letters in the 1930s. Ens believed that communism was evil and that perhaps Germany would bring some relief to the Mennonites and their situation in Russia. However Ens remembers thinking "...how could a civilized nation like Germany fall for a man and a party like Hitler and the Nazis? How did the Germans realize their mistake? How could a people of poets and thinkers become a people of judges and executioners? I identified with German culture and I got this from my father."

After the war, in 1946 the MCI called Ens to teach at the school. Ens accepted, and because it was a private school, he did not need his teacher's certificate. While Ens had requested on several occasions to have his certificate reinstated, he decided to try another route. He went to see W.C. Miller, the Minister of Education and the Conservative party MLA for the area. Miller called in the deputy minister and



Gerhard and Anni (Niebuhr) Ens

said "I have known this man since he was this high (motioning with his hand showing he knew Ens from a young age). I want him to get his teaching license back. Can't you fix that up?" After a short interview Ens got his license back.

In 1948 a friend introduced Gerhard to Anni Niebuhr while he was taking summer school in Winnipeg. A courting relationship started and during the school year Ens traveled by bus to Winnipeg to see Anni. The two were married in 1950 and had five children between 1951 and 1961.

At the MCI he taught with his former teachers such as Paul J. Schaefer. Gerhard thought he was there to "help out", but it turned into a long tenure at the MCI. His teaching load was very heavy at times and he did not always feel academically prepared. Gerhard was interested in Mennonite history and in the early 1950s he was a part of the *Mennonitische Historische Vereins* which worked at republishing the *Woher, Wohin, Mennoniten* series by Paul Schaefer. In 1958 this committee became the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and Gerhard Ens remained heavily involved by being on the board, which went on to establish the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum in Steinbach in 1964, in time for the 1967 Canadian centennial celebrations.

One of Gerhard's other interests was the church. He was baptized in 1946 and was given the opportunity to preach in the Blumenort Mennonite Church, near Gretna. In 1958 he was ordained. Gerhard Ens was also involved with the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba. As early as 1949 he was a member of the provincial youth organization, *Manitobaer Jugendorganisation*, and by 1952 the recording secretary. He became a popular guest speaker in churches, anniversary celebrations and historical

events. In 1955 he was elected to the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba radio committee. In 1956 he led a half-hour Sunday German radio program, *Frohe Botschaft*, on the Christian radio station KFNB in Fargo, North Dakota. This program was later produced by Faith and Life Communications in Winnipeg and after 1974 Ens was one of the regular speakers. He was commissioned to produce German Sunday School lessons which were widely-used in churches.

While at the MCI Gerhard became involved in the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial committee which planned celebratory events around the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. In anticipation of this, Gerhard was asked to start a 15 minute radio broadcast in Low German about Mennonite history. Soon this was increased to half an hour. Ens kept to this task of promoting the Mennonite story on the air in Low German for 34 years. It aired from 1972-2006, airing some 1400 programs, on three radio stations without remuneration. He built up a large following of listeners who would tune in each week to listen. He is known to have teased professional recording engineers that he could produce a radio program with his little tape recorder and microphones while they needed a whole room of equipment. In 2008 Ens reflected on the Low German language saying "Mennonites of the Low German persuasion have no homeland in Europe they call their home. Low German has become a home where people can move in and out and express themselves".

In 1967 principal Paul Schaefer retired and the job was offered to Gerhard. He remained principal until 1977. He considered these hard years. His students fondly remember Ens as witty, versatile, and well-prepared. He was a teacher who taught 10 different subjects. During his time as principal he oversaw the expansion of the music and sports programs and the shift from German to English instruction. The students knew him as "General". One former student recounted how Ens would come into history class without any notes or textbook and ask the students where he had left off last class. From there he picked up the subject and carried on.

In 1977 Ens resigned from the MCI and moved to Winnipeg after accepting an invitation to take up the editorship of *Der Bote* with the editorial office of the paper moving from Saskatoon to Winnipeg. Ens

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## Bible School in Herbert, Saskatchewan, Canada.



Herbert Bible School students and faculty, 1914-1915. Hermann Fast, author of the article, is believed to be the bearded man in the front row. Photo credit: Centre for MB Studies, NP165-01-22.

Recently Bert Friesen at the Centre for MB Studies processed some early records from the Herbert Bible School, which operated from 1913-1957. The following article found in the *Zionsbote* tells what students could expect to learn when the school opened, and what was expected of them in 1916.

Translated by Bert Friesen

Nov. 1, 1916.

The four month course will, God willing, begin on 4. December 1916. Our intended students are the mature youth of our people. Our two curricula goals, as set by the school, will include a thorough learning of the mother tongue and – as the name of the school indicates – knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. We will seek to make the students familiar with church history, world history, natural history, and geography, only in so far as they fall within the context of our textbook. We will maintain, with practice, the use of the eyes and hands in writing and drawing. We will offer tuition in singing by reading notes [as opposed to numbers/*ziffern*] as well as playing organ (with notes), although the latter will have an extra charge. If available, each student should bring along a Bible and gospel song book.

Biblical history and reading books, as well as notebooks, can be purchased in the school.

Students will be offered room, board, heat, and lighting as space allows. Local students should bring along a single bed frame, as well as a mattress, bed linen, pillows, blankets, and towels. Non-local students will receive a bed and mattress here. The course tuition will be \$2.50 per month; for lighting, heat, and other material, the cost will be \$1.50 per week. For the four-month educational term, each student should bring: 80 pounds high

quality flour, 40 pounds meat, 8 pounds lard or cotton oil, and 2½ bushels of potatoes. For non-local students, these items can be covered by fees. Students, who live in the town, can take their noon meal at the school for \$1.50 per week. It is expected, that all accounts will be settled in advance monthly. Extra meals will be charged at 20¢.

Since the curriculum constitutes a coherent whole, it is desirable that all students of this school appear promptly on the 4. December, and remain until the end of the school term on the 4. April 1917.

It is the request of the undersigned, that the friends of Christian education in this Bible school in Herbert remember us in their intercessory prayers.

Hermann Fast

--from the *Zionsbote*, 29 November 1916

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looked forward to more contact with the larger constituency. He saw the mission of *Der Bote* as facilitating communication among the various groups of Mennonites in North America, South America, and Europe; and to provide a forum for discussion. Ens brought an interest in Mennonite history to the paper with articles on schools and the national conference, for example. Ens later said of his time as the “Bote Onkel”, “...[It was]

the most immediately satisfying work I did. It was one of those things where when you finished an issue and put it to bed and mailed it out there was something visible. One had the feeling of having accomplished something.”

Shortly after settling in Winnipeg in 1977, Ens was invited to share his teaching and preaching gifts with the Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church “for the time being.” Ens later remarked that “nothing is as permanent as something that starts for the time being”. He continued this service until 2006.

At an event thanking Ens for his ministry at Sargent Church, fellow minister, Martin Friesen, said of Ens, “[he] has enriched the life of the congregation as a preacher who made his sermons relevant, a teacher who developed a special bond with his Bible study students, and a historian who made the church’s past come alive”. It was estimated that Ens preached over 2,000 sermons. Another fellow lay minister, Menno Wiebe, recounted how one Sunday Gerhard sat down in the pew and his wife Annie showed him the church bulletin which listed Ens as preaching. Gerhard responded with “*was ist geschrieben ist geschrieben!*” (What is written is written). He went to the church office, picked up a Bible and took his place at the front of the church. That Sunday he preached a magnificent sermon.

Ens, while in Winnipeg, continued his involvement with the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach. In 1988 the organization undertook a 3 million dollar expansion in time for the 1990 Mennonite



Gerhard Ens at Mennonite Heritage Village

World Conference to be held in Winnipeg. Ens became president of the board in 1989 and oversaw the elimination of the debt. He resigned as president in 1998. He served on the board for over 40 years.

Gerhard Ens' contributions to the Mennonite community were recognized on a number of occasions. In 2004 he was named past president emeritus of the Mennonite Heritage Village and in 2010 the "Gerhard Ens Gallery" was named in his honor. In 2005 Ens was given an honorary lifetime membership into the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society. In 2008 he was given the "Award of Excellence" by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

In 2008 Gerhard moved from his home to Donwood Manor Personal Care Home where he received daily visits from his wife and family. The next 4 years were difficult for him. He died on February 13, 2011 at the age of 88, leaving behind his wife, 5 children and their families. He will be missed by many "...dear friends and neighbors from far away and close by".

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[Editor's Note: *The MHC Archives has some of Gerhard Ens' archival collection –sound recordings, writings and other files from his various activities.*]

## Book Notes

by Harold Peters-Fransen

Herald Press' *Tongue screws and Testimonies, Poems and Essays inspired by the Martyr's Mirror*, (2010, 309 pages) edited by Kirsten Beachy, is a collection of literary pieces, in response to the seventeenth century book, *Martyr's Mirror*. *Martyr's Mirror* was itself written to reclaim a heritage for the Dutch Mennonite people in their time of becoming wealthy. This 21<sup>st</sup> century work in some ways displays the vast diversity of literary expressions among the daughters and sons of Menno, at least in North America, as they reflect on *Martyr's Mirror*. Arranged under the themes of book, fire, water, wounds, memories, tongues, enemies, and heirs, the pieces reflect admiration, critique of the martyrs themselves or the literary approach of the telling of the story, humour, awe, spiritual reflection, and intellectual curiosity. The writers include young adults and seniors, and they themselves have various levels of closeness and distance to the faith and the church. Some are reprints from other works, some have been written for this anthology. Ian Hubert's drawings at the beginning of each chapter, parody Jan Luyken's image of Dirk Phillips rescuing the jailer from the ice. The very range of viewpoints of the writers would make it impossible for anyone to agree with every writer. This work inspires, questions, and disturbs our understanding of martyrology in our collective story.

Abram Teichrib writes, *Der Weg zur Heimat, Erinnerungen meiner Mutter* (The way home, memories of my mother), self published, 285 pages, 2005. It is the biography of Elisabeth (Pätkau) Teichreb, 1915-1997. Born in the Russian Mennonite settlement of Orenburg, her father was a minister. Her father was sent into the gulag when she was fourteen. She married a teacher in 1933. He was taken from her four years later, and she never heard anything about him again. She moved in with her in-laws in the Ukraine in 1938, and so was there during the German occupation. Together with her remaining son, (a daughter died in infancy,) she retreats with the German army, telling of the trek, their stay in Poland, and the ultimate return to the Soviet Union. She also experiences some time in the gulag, before settling back in Orenburg. It is in the 1980s that she with her son and family end up in Germany.

The story is told with a strong faith perspective. There is much pathos, but also moments of compassion and humour in this story. It is anticipated that there will be an English translation, which will make this compelling story available to a new audience.

*Under the Shadow of the Almighty: Eleven Years in Exile* is the autobiographical writings of Isaak and Olga Reimer, 196 pages (translated into English by Esther Patkau, Saskatoon), originally written in 1974. The story begins in the German occupation of Ukraine, where Isaak takes on administrative posts. Retreating with the German armies, and eventually ending up under the Soviet zone, they were separated from each other in January 1945, and did not see each other for a little over 10 years. Isaak chronicles his becoming a prisoner of the Soviets, his eventual transport to the gulag, and when they realized his administrative skills, his assignment to office duties through much of his gulag experience. Details of judicial proceedings, his and others, life in the camps, and slow improvement in living conditions and diet are chronicled. In all his experiences, Soviet officials and fellow prisoners become human, including many with positive traits. He also tells the stories related to the reduction of the scope of the gulag, 1955-1956, and his reuniting with his wife. Her story is told more briefly, but does include exile and deprivation. They left the Soviet Union in 1966.

*An Enduring Faith: Mennonite Stories, their History and Persecution*, 288 pages, self published, is primarily the story of Emma Salmon-Plett, born to Russian Mennonite immigrants, part of the 1929 Moscow exodus group, to Paraguay. She does contextualize her story within the wide sweep of Mennonite history, but the strongest part of the book is telling her own story. Growing up during the early years of deprivation in Paraguay, she becomes a teacher in colony Fernheim. She is baptized and received into the Mennonite Brethren Church in Paraguay. Emigrating with her family to British Columbia in 1957, she eventually receives her PhD in Germanic studies at University of British Columbia. She served with Mennonite Central Committee in Berlin 1962-1964, working with the Mennonite Church in East Berlin. Upon return to Canada, she eventually marries John Salmon. They have two children. John is

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