

Howard Hong Obituary, 2010

Howard Hong died on March 16, 2010, from the effects of a fall on October 27, 2009. He remained in convalescent homes until Christmas, when he returned to his house near Northfield, Minnesota. There his daily view was of a wooded ravine and Heath Creek below. Eight days before his death, he moved to a private home in Northfield licensed to provide hospice care. On October 20, 2009, a day after he turned 97, he had been feted at a local restaurant by family and friends. He was then mobile and enjoyed bantering and matching wits with the guests.

A memorial service for him was held in Boe Memorial Chapel, on the campus of St. Olaf College, on Saturday, March 27. The burial service was at Trinity Lutheran Church, Hovland, Minnesota, on Monday, March 29. He was preceded in death by his parents, Peter B. and Ada Hong; by his siblings, Harold, Helyn, Gertrude, Theodore, and Paul; by his wife Edna; by a granddaughter, Blitz O'Sullivan; and by a great-grandson, John O'Sullivan. He is survived by his children (Irena, Erik, Peder, Rolf, Mary, Judith, Theodore, and Nathaniel) and spouses; and by twenty grandchildren and twenty-three great-grandchildren.

Howard Hong was born on October 19, 1912, in Wolford, North Dakota. His father went there from Willmar, Minnesota, to start a bank near the east-west route of the Great Northern Railroad. His venture was supported by the Willmar Commercial Club. With an eye chiefly on the grain trade, the railroad built a spur line north to Wolford and a new elevator nearby. The elevator was named "Hong" in honor of the banker, a fact that later delighted the banker's son.

Before this son began school, the Hong family moved back to Willmar, where the father became the president of the Kandiyohi County Bank. Howard Hong grew up in Willmar and always regarded it as his home town, even as he always recognized himself as a son of its Vinje Lutheran Church. He graduated from high school at 16 in 1929 and then went to the American Business College in Minneapolis. He left after one school term and returned to Willmar, where

he divided his time between work at the bank his father headed and at Gamble- Robinson, a food distribution warehouse.

He entered St. Olaf College in 1930 and graduated in 1934. He studied English there and became the business manager of the student newspaper. His interests ranged widely and he found himself reading Ibsen, whose volumes he had seen in his father's library. He learned from a biography that Ibsen had been influenced by Kierkegaard. The name registered because his father had spoken of a farmer he knew who owned books by Kierkegaard. He then began to read Kierkegaard, what little there was of his work in English at the time.

He was a graduate student in English at the University of Minnesota from 1934 to 1938, when the university awarded him the doctorate. While at Minnesota, he had taken a course with the Kierkegaard scholar David F. Swenson; after graduating, he and his new bride Edna Hatlestad went to Copenhagen, learned Danish, and translated Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination* into English. Their life-work as Kierkegaard translators had begun. It was to include a six-volume edition of Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers (Indiana University Press) and the twenty-five volumes of Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton University Press). The Hongs have been celebrated and honored for their work as translators. In 1968, they won a National Book Award for their translation of the first volume of the Journals and Papers; in 1998, when the Princeton edition reached its conclusion, the Times Literary Supplement (London) said of it: "All honour to the Hongs; Kierkegaard Writings is one of the outstanding achievements in the history of philosophical translation."

The Hongs, Edna as well as Howard Hong. At the time of her death in 2007, a friend of hers wrote that she was "a faithful friend to many, well-disciplined, accomplished, a woman of the church, always funny, a skilled and loving sparring partner with her husband." When her husband claimed that his dinner table proclamations were based on principles, she would gaze merrily at him and say, "Prejudices, Howard, prejudices—don't be an harangue-a-tang." He called her his "partner in words" and his "partner in seventy years." After her death, he spoke of

those who are "lonely, broken-hearted, and of a contrite spirit." Habitually indirect, he was speaking of himself.

Howard Hong taught philosophy at St. Olaf until he retired in 1978. His student Harold Ditmanson, later a colleague, remembered him in the classroom, "rocking back and forth from heel to toe, with arms extended and thumb and forefinger pressed together as though shaking the dirt from an imaginary radish, and saying 'Radish, radix, radical, root—to be truly radical is to get at the root of things'." That was his aim in teaching: "to get at the root of things." Students flocked to his classes and many of them came back to Northfield to visit him. Even in the last weeks of life, visiting students might be startled to find him wagging a finger at them and warning them against such infamies as the fused participle and the use of "nauseous" when "nauseated" is required. He remained the teacher: he took delight in word play to the end of his days.

President Lars M. Boe appointed him to the faculty in 1938, but Howard Hong won a scholarship and the Hongs spent that school year in Copenhagen. He later enjoyed saying that he was "gone the first year he was here." He did teach at St. Olaf from 1939 to 1941, but then left the college and worked with prisoners of war in this country during World War II and with refugees in Germany from 1946 to 1948. He worked first at camps in Missouri and notably at a camp in Algona, Iowa, under the authority of the War Prisoners Aid of the World Alliance of YMCAs. In Germany, with his young family, he was both the director of the Lutheran World Federation Service to Refugees and the senior field officer of the Refugee Division of the World Council of Churches. His refugee work bore fruit back in Northfield, where he helped resettle over 250 refugees, chiefly from Latvia. In the refugee camps, the Hongs saw squalor and lives torn apart by war. Desolation was all about them, yet they believed with Kierkegaard's Works of Lovethat "love builds up by presupposing that love is present in the ground" or basis of human

lives, even under the most desperate of circumstances. This book inspired the Hongs in their work with refugees, and it became their first post-war translation project.

Howard Hong's Northfield life was rich and varied. He not only became a prominent St. Olaf faculty member, directly involved in the everyday life of the college; he and his wife also established the Kierkegaard Library, which is housed at the college and bears their name. This library was originally their private collection, assembled over many years in support of their work; its core is substantial reconstruction of Kierkegaard's own library, in the same editions he owned. The Hongs gave their library to St. Olaf in 1976 and it has become an internationally renowned center of Kierkegaard research. The Hongs were also active members of St. John's Lutheran Church, as well known in the congregation as they were in the college. They offered an abundant hospitality to friend and stranger alike in their remarkable house. He built this house himself, of the native limestone he and his colleague Arnold Flaten quarried, and with materials he scavenged. It was first located on "Pop Hill," next to the campus; in 1961, he orchestrated a dramatic move of the house, deemed unmovable by "experts," a mile to the west, from its hilltop location to a lovely prominence on the edge of Heath Creek.

Another Minnesota place figured importantly in Howard Hong's life; since 1945, he and his family have lived during the summers at Hovland, next to Lake Superior, north of Grand Marais and near the Canadian border. They invested themselves in Hovland, as they did in Northfield. He worked with fellow members of Trinity Lutheran Church in Hovland in planning for a new church building, which was built by St. Olaf students in three successive summer work camps (1947, 1948, and 1949) under the supervision of his friends Arnold and Evelyn Flaten. He bought many tracts of land around Hovland, logged over by timber companies and sold for taxes, which he restored largely at his own expense and according to a plan devised by him and an experienced forester, Dave Eggen, of Moose Lake, Minnesota. His restoration work was officially recognized: in 2001, he and Edna were given the Minnesota Outstanding Conservationist Award by the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

The eminent Kierkegaard scholar Howard Hong came to enjoy introducing himself as a "forester."

Howard Hong was a "local." He invested himself in a large family, in a house, in St. Olaf, in the Kierkegaard Library, in Northfield, in Hovland, in two congregations; and he remained loyal to Willmar. He was also a "cosmopolitan." He had an intimate knowledge of Danish and German, together with an abundant love of forms and variety of the English language. He was at home in Copenhagen as in Northfield or Hovland. He had many friends in all walks of life scattered around the world and throughout the United States.

In the early 1950s, he went to a silversmith in Copenhagen, and had her make sterling silver brooches and cufflinks, based on his sketch of five wild geese in flight. He gave them to close friends, the brooches to women and the cuff links to men. Kierkegaard's parable, "The Wild Goose," stands behind these gifts. On Kierkegaard's telling, the wild goose urges the tame geese to fly and get beyond the comforts of domesticity, but it is always aware of the danger of itself becoming simply a domestic creature. The wild goose soars; the tame goose does not, but merely flaps its wings, quacks away, and remains earth-bound.

In the companion parable, "The Tame Goose," Kierkegaard imagines a goose who makes money, becomes "somebody in the world," has "many children," and is "successful." As much and more could be said of Howard Hong, yet he never rested content with his accomplishments. He was always a seeker, never a tame goose. This fact made his local investments complicated indeed. But local he was, as well as cosmopolitan. He aimed at free flight and would have others do the same.