

THE HOWARD V. AND EDNA H. HONG KIERKEGAARD LIBRARY IS
A WORLD-CLASS RESOURCE FOR KIERKEGAARD SCHOLARS.

THE GREAT BOOKS

IT HAS AN IMPOSING NAME and a distinguished pair of namesakes. The volumes are venerable and the subject matter sober indeed: despair and dread, faith and hope.

Yet for all the 12,000 books and their weighty implications at the Howard V. and Edna H. Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, in warm weather you might find a scholar has kicked off her sandals to pad around the library barefoot, with laptop perched on a book crate nearby.

Tucked away in the special collections area of Rølvaag Memorial Library, the St. Olaf Kierkegaard collection is “absolutely critical to the study of probably the most important bridge figure between modern secular society and Christianity,” says Bruce H. Kirmmse, professor of history at Connecticut College and chairman of the editorial board publishing Kierkegaard’s journals and notebooks.

The Hong Kierkegaard Library is a key repository of texts and research materials related to studies of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The Royal Library in Copenhagen, Denmark’s national library, has a wealth of Kierkegaard materials among its massive holdings — but not organized in a single location. Another collection is at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, primarily a research and publishing entity for a new edition of Kierkegaard texts. The research center maintains a core library of Kierkegaard materials but doesn’t have a staff or budget focused on a library collection as the Hong Kierkegaard Library has.

The St. Olaf library is an intimate space where scholars can seclude themselves with precious texts. It is also a study and publication center, acting as a hub of communication and research for international Kierkegaard scholars in philosophy, religion, psychology and literature.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

THE LIBRARY AROSE purely as a result of Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Howard Hong’s scholarly entrepreneurship. “It simply wouldn’t have gotten started without a person of his type,” says longtime friend Edward Langerak, a St. Olaf professor of philosophy and former chair of the department.

It all began modestly enough in 1938 when Hong skipped lunch in Copenhagen. A Fulbright grant enabled him to study the work of the 19th-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard at the University of Copenhagen shortly after St. Olaf hired Hong to teach philosophy. When Hong took a midday break by browsing an old bookstore, he found an interesting volume of Kierkegaard and bought it. He discovered that, sans lunch,

he didn’t need a midday nap. So he began skipping lunch regularly, instead browsing the *antiquariats*. His lunch budget turned into a subsidy for books by and about Kierkegaard, as well as for volumes Kierkegaard himself used to do his own research.

Indeed, Hong and his wife and collaborator, Edna Hong, searched diligently to find the same editions Kierkegaard used. An inveterate borrower but a haphazard attributor, Kierkegaard didn’t always list his sources. When he did, having the same editions he used, with the same pagination, gave the Hong collection a better chance at finding the reference and pinpointing his meaning. Over the years, the Hong collection grew. By 1976, thousands of Kierkegaard volumes were spilling off shelves and piling up under tables at the Hong home. Howard and Edna Hong had become internationally celebrated for their lifetime work of translating from Danish into English most of Kierkegaard’s published writings and journals. The couple donated their collection to the college as the Howard V. and Edna H. Hong Kierkegaard Library.

THE KIERKEGAARD HOUSE FOUNDATION AUGMENTS THE LIBRARY’S VISITING SCHOLARS PROGRAM WITH HOUSING AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, ENABLING SCHOLARS TO STAY FOR A YEAR OR LONGER.

The library distinguishes St. Olaf as a rare undergraduate institution with a center for graduate studies. Visiting graduate students, professors, writers and other Kierkegaard scholars receive fellowships with housing and food stipends for two to nine weeks. The Kierkegaard House Foundation augments the library’s visiting scholars program with housing and financial assistance, enabling scholars to stay for a year or longer.

St. Olaf students, area pastors and others use the library as well. “The Hong collection always intended that it be an open community here and not only academic scholars,” says Cynthia Lund, special collections librarian at the Hong Kierkegaard Library. She notes that the library’s activities closely parallel the mission of St. Olaf College: supporting study of a major Scandinavian Lutheran thinker, contributing to the study of the humanities and hosting scholars from all over the world.

Kierkegaard scholar Kirmmse ponders which is more important: the library itself or the opportunity it offers for scholars to meet and exchange ideas. “Both are absolutely invaluable,” says Kirmmse, “and they really put St. Olaf on the world map.” ■

The advantage the Hongs bring to St. Olaf is incalculable. “They’ve both been enormously important agents in the life of the school, both of them as accomplished intellectuals and translators,” says former Hong student Todd Nichol ’74, now King Olav V Professor of Scandinavian-American Studies at St. Olaf. “Thanks to both of them, Kierkegaard has been a formidable presence for decades at St. Olaf College and will be so for decades to come, thanks to their dedication and generosity.”

Translating Kierkegaard isn’t easy. His sentences are long, his concepts abstruse. Moreover, English speakers who learn Danish and spend time in Denmark risk writing English with Danish construction. “But is it English,” asks Howard. “That’s a subtle trap, you know. And in our case, that was my greatest peril.”

Edna, often busy with her own writing projects in English, became Howard’s shield against the dread Danish syntax. In her sure hands, Kierkegaard came to life in English. Howard was indispensable as the scholar and philosopher, Edna invaluable as the wordsmith who untangled Kierkegaard’s Danish for English readers — scholarly as well as lay readers. Alone, Howard the scholar might have focused less on the ordinary reader. “I think I interpreted Kierkegaard for the common man and woman in a way that he wouldn’t have,” Edna says, “because he’s too intellectual. But I’m not.”

“Edna never thought of herself as a scholar,” says Edward Langerak, a longtime St. Olaf philosophy professor and former chair of the department. “But she was a lot of inspiration to a lot of women.” Howard was the directing force, Langerak adds, but “he wouldn’t have been able to do it, I don’t think, without her.”

CHEESE AND ETHICS

THE 1950S AND 1960S were remarkable days in the St. Olaf philosophy department, with the Hongs in full bloom. They were great cheese lovers, and Howard would often travel to a favorite cheese shop in St. Cloud, Minnesota, canvassing other faculty members for their orders. “We’d often have 20- or 30-pound hunks of cheese on our front steps,” says Walter Stromseth ’50, a professor emeritus of philosophy. On the way to St. Cloud,

“Howard and Edna have deep humor, deep piety, deep love of their family and utter devotion to each other.”

— KIERKEGAARD SCHOLAR ROBERT PERKINS

Howard would stop in Plato, Minnesota, to mail postcards with “greetings from Plato.” Plato’s great teacher, Socrates, led learners by asking questions. Howard’s teaching, too, was Socratic. “He was always getting us to think,” says Helen Hagen Gangsei ’55, a board member at the Kierkegaard House Foundation, which provides funding for visiting Kierkegaard scholars at St. Olaf. “We had to learn the structure and then learn how to think in that structure.”

Howard often asked students to assume the role of various philosophers. When they misstepped, his deft questions led them back to the right path. His acumen at keeping learners on subject was legendary. Lars Kindem ’55, a retired high school teacher and president of the Kierkegaard House Foundation board, tells this story: When a young woman kept checking the clock during class, Howard finally said, “The problem, my dear, is not what time is it — but what is time.”

Dashing and prematurely gray, debonair in his tweed suits and wool ties, Howard enthralled coeds. “The girls all were crazy about him,” says Gangsei. “He was really handsome — that big shock of hair and his cute ways. And then he would wear these shoes that got popular later, very good-looking workman’s shoes. We always noticed the shoes.”

Howard challenged his students but he helped them to learn, with a forbearance that was never condescending. “I remember once speaking ill of a great classical work and being met with great patience on Howard’s part,” says former student Nichol. Years later, Nichol reread the same work and realized its importance. He told Howard, who deadpanned: “The book must have changed.”



THE HONG FAMILY

“Our greatest life’s work isn’t our translating,” Edna Hong told a reporter in 1998. “It’s our eight children.” Today, Irena Hong Elveton ’60, the eldest of Howard and Edna’s eight children, works in San Diego as a paralegal. Erik Hong ’66 is a property appraiser in Northfield. Peder Hong ’63, a retired judge, lives in Florida. Howard Rolf Hong, retired from a U.S. State Department job, lives in Texas. Mary Hong Loe ’66 is a university librarian in Oswego, New York. Judy Hong ’78 of Red Wing, Minnesota, is a retired electrical utility trainer. Two others are in Washington state: Theodore Hong, a special-education teacher, and Nathaniel “Nhat” Hong ’74, a college English professor.

A 1950s family portrait of Howard and Edna Hong at home with their eight children: Peder, Mary, Theodore, Howard Rolf, Nhat, Judy, Erik and Irena.

Faculty member Langerak lived in an apartment in the Hongs' gracious home, where residents and visitors alike gathered for Saturday night saunas. Guests were frequent and numerous. Bands of students trooping in for class discussions sometimes overburdened Howard's plumbing system. "He had to convince them that they could flush the toilet only every seventh time," Langerak says. "He called it the toilet sabbatical."

Howard also convened philosophy department meetings at his house. The meetings began with a sauna, attendees alternately baking and then dousing themselves in the ice-cold artesian well over which the house was built. "Then we'd be treated to Edna's fondue, which was well-laced with wine," says emeritus Stromseth. "So we were pretty soporific by the time department business came to be discussed."

The Hongs' hospitality set a tone: "Our department has always had a congeniality and willingness to disagree and do it civilly and in a friendly way," Stromseth says.

Howard is proud of having carried a full teaching load while translating and doing other work as well. "I like that. I value it," he says. "I think it's important."

However, after a 40-year career on the faculty at St. Olaf, Howard retired in 1978 to serve as editor-in-chief for the complete *Kierkegaard's Writings* from Princeton University Press. The 26-volume edition of the complete works came out in 2000. Meanwhile, the Hongs' relationship with St. Olaf has continued uninterrupted. "I'm still sold on the vision of the place," Howard says, citing its "amazing collection of teachers, wonderful people." He retains a formal post as associate curator at the Howard V. and Edna H. Hong Kierkegaard Library.

HONORING THE HONGS

Throughout their lives, Howard and Edna Hong have received many honors and awards, including Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degrees from St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges. They were the first recipients of the Minnesota Humanities Commission's annual Public Lecture Award. In 1967 they won the National Book Award for Translation of *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. In 1978, the Danish government, on behalf of Denmark's Queen Margrethe, conferred upon them knighthood in the Order of Dannebrog.

In 1988, Howard and Edna were honored by the Martin Luther *Schule* in Rimbach, Germany. Howard initiated the Ole-Rimbach service project in 1947 that enabled St. Olaf students to spend a year at the Rimbach school teaching English and literature. In 1999, the Republic of Latvia honored Howard for his World War II resettlement work.

In 1992, the University of Copenhagen named Howard an honorary doctor of theology. Edna received the Wittenburg Award for outstanding service in 1993 from the Luther Institute in Washington, D.C. In 1998, the St. Olaf College Board of Regents presented them with a rare Regents Award.

Nestled in at their "Brule River shack" near Hovland, Minnesota, Edna stares through the window at the sun on the Brule River and the glint of Lake Superior eight miles distant. "Hummingbird!" she says, interrupting her husband to point out a blur of tiny wings at the feeder outside their cabin, which Howard built in the 1950s.

The seasonal retreat reflects another Hong passion: the woods. A 2002 award from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources honored the couple for planting thousands of trees on their property in Northfield and their thousand acres 15 miles from the Canadian border.

Howard and Edna spend late summer and early autumn up north to relieve his hayfever. "Rice County," he grumbles, "is the ragweed capital of North America." The cabin is cozy, roughhewn and lined with books — but not insulated. So winters at the shack are out of the question. They've tried it. "We sit with our feet in the oven and read," says Howard.

For all the Hongs' tangible contributions, what may be their greatest legacy is invisible: faith. Reading Kierkegaard's sharp inquiries has an interesting effect, says Marino, the Kierkegaard Library curator. It deepens one's faith.

"Howard and Edna, I think, feel Kierkegaard is a great person to walk with in that," Marino adds. "And they've passed it on to generations of St. Olaf students." ■

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▲ "Love, companionship and mutual respect infuse the shared life of Edna and Howard Hong, now in their 90s. When they talk about Kierkegaard, they're all business. But when they talk about that walk in the rain, they look at one another like a couple of kids with crushes."