

LOVE

Kierkegaard translators

Howard '34 and Edna Hatlestad

Hong '38 were romantic long

shots who lasted. Are they

exactly what the master of

paradox had in mind?

KIERKE

and



FOR 60 YEARS, HOWARD '34 AND EDNA HATLESTAD HONG '38 DEDICATED THEIR LIVES TO MAKING THE EXTENSIVE WORKS OF DANISH PHILOSOPHER SØREN KIERKEGAARD AVAILABLE TO PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

GAARD

BY MARC HEQUET

Photographs courtesy of the Shaw-Olson
Center for College History



MITCH KEZAR

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT FAITH: Faith that you will meet someone special. Faith that love will last. And it's about hope — hope in the face of impossible odds. It's also about a brooding 19th-century Danish philosopher who gave up on love and came to regret it bitterly — but who never gave up on faith. And who never gave up hope.

Howard and Edna Hong's story begins on a rainy Depression-era spring night in Northfield. A graduate student comes back to visit his alma mater, St. Olaf College. He takes a deep breath, summoning his courage, then places a phone call to the English honors student he met a while back at a conference in Iowa. When he gets her on the line, he asks: "Would you like to go for a walk in the rain?"

She says yes. But later she calls back. "What if it doesn't rain?" she asks.

Søren Kierkegaard, the master of paradox, the poet of Christianity, the founder of existentialism, would have appreciated that retort.

Life is filled with near misses and what-ifs. A walk in the rain? What if she decides she has a headache? What if he gets cold feet and backs out? The chance that these two would ever meet at all was small — he a raw plowboy from the plains of North Dakota, she a farmer's daughter from the woods of northern Wisconsin. Nevertheless, they both found their way to St. Olaf, though not at the same time. Life is rarely that easy.

Dark-haired, blue-eyed Edna Hatlestad, valedictorian of her high-school class, delayed going to college for lack of money. Her sisters went first while she taught country school near Wausau, Wisconsin. Finally, in 1934, Edna arrived at St. Olaf as a first-year student, supporting herself by working in the student cafeteria for

30 cents an hour. She would earn honors in English, write and edit the college's literary magazine, the *St. Olaf Quarterly*, and write a regular column for the student newspaper, the *Manitou Messenger*.

By the time Edna arrived on the Hill, however, Howard Hong had moved on. The promising scholar from North Dakota by way of Willmar, Minnesota, had received his diploma a few months earlier and entered graduate school. Howard, at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, still received the *Manitou Messenger* and liked a particular column. He noted the byline: Edna Hatlestad.

While at St. Olaf, Howard was the *Messenger's* business manager and had left the paper in the black, no small achievement during the Great Depression. Because of his business acumen, Howard was invited to participate in a student-newspaper conference at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

◀ *Howard and Edna's lifelong work of translating the writings of Søren Kierkegaard involved meticulous attention to every detail, a process that took approximately two years per volume. Their collection, given to St. Olaf in 1976, was first housed on the sixth floor of Holland Hall.*

And there they met. Howard recognized the byline on her name badge. And he never forgot those deep blue eyes. Later, back in Northfield, Edna told her roommates: "I've met a man that I really could love, but I suppose I'll never see him again." Not long afterward, Howard and Edna went for that walk one spring night. It did indeed rain. And 70 years later they're still together.

That their life together is an improbability that came to pass is to the great benefit of St. Olaf College. Howard and Edna Hong have influenced generations of Oles and others worldwide with their passion for Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Scholars now can read his complete works in the Hong's faithful English.

Anybody who ever faced insurmountable odds ought to know the Hong's story — and Kierkegaard's. Kierkegaard's probe into the meaning of life is a "philosophy of hope," says Howard. "Paradoxical. Hope where there is no hope. Possibility where seemingly there is no possibility."

LOVE: THE DECIDING FACTOR

SØREN AABYE KIERKEGAARD (1813–1855) had a messy personal life. A loner genius dogged by despair, in 1841 he rocked proper Copenhagen society by breaking off a yearlong engagement with Regine Olsen, an 18-year-old from a respected family. Ten years her senior, Kierkegaard had called on Regine in the strict courting ritual of the day, escorting her on walks, reading to her. She was flattered and eventually smitten with this cryptic, brooding scholar. They became engaged. But sometimes he paused while he read to her — and the mystified Regine saw him weeping.

In Regine, Kierkegaard had wanted a spiritual protégé. But he had fallen in love. And he dumped her, overwhelmed by his feelings. Given her station in society, it was a scandal. Kierkegaard fled to Berlin for a year. When he returned, they exchanged glances in church. But they spoke to one another only once again. Before long, Regine married another — just before publication of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in 1843.

Fear and Trembling is about the Bible's Abraham, who gained back his son Isaac in spite of God's awful command that the patriarch sacrifice the child. Scholars have identified some late editorial changes in the text that reflect Kierkegaard's heartbreak. He was nursing the hope that somehow Regine would still be his. Kierkegaard never married.

Only when you give yourself up entirely to God's will — "infinite resignation," Kierkegaard calls it in *Fear and Trembling*, "prodigious resignation" — can you have hope. This, he says, is the requirement for real faith: surrendering completely to God's will. Kierkegaard should have listened to himself.

Why did he leave Regine, the one woman he truly loved? He realized that she was a blithe young girl, not a woman, a blithe spirit," explains Edna, "and he realized that his temperament would not be good for her."

Adds Howard: "He would have crushed her. Most people marry out of love, at best, you see. But really the rare thing is to *not* marry out of love."

"So he didn't marry her," Edna concludes, "well, actually because he loved her too much."

Love and companionship and mutual respect have infused the shared life of Edna and Howard Hong. 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. He touches her hand. She smiles.

In 1998, Howard was the commencement speaker for Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. At Central Lutheran Church in downtown Minneapolis, he told the gathered graduates, families and dignitaries that when he married Edna, he had made it clear that they would live by this rule: He would make all the big decisions and she would make all the little decisions. His listeners tensed; the sanctuary was hushed. "And you know," he added, a wink in his voice, "in 60 years of marriage, there haven't been any big decisions."

Maybe love renders any decision a little decision, if you let it. Kierkegaard didn't. The Hong's did.

Robert L. Perkins, a Kierkegaard scholar at Stetson University, has known Howard and Edna for decades. How to describe them? "Deep humor, deep piety, deep love of their family, love of their work — and utter and complete devotion to each other," says Perkins. "Gosh, those two people just love each other, and it's such a good thing in this society where love is taken so casually."

In one of his singular works of love, Howard built their home in Northfield using stone he had quarried or scavenged from St. Olaf buildings undergoing demolition or renovation. The house is so sturdy that it survived a move from its original site near the campus when a residence hall was to go up nearby. "The dwelling has a charm that's hard to define," wrote a *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter

in 1966. "There's a casual comfortableness, a complete lack of pretentiousness, a general use of natural materials — and just a bit of foreign, maybe Bavarian, feeling."

Howard cultivates that international ambience in their home, now situated on a heavily wooded lot just south of the St. Olaf campus in Northfield.



▲ *Guests at Howard and Edna's home were frequent and numerous. The house that Howard built (with the help of St. Olaf students) has long been a gathering place for friends, colleagues, students and visiting Kierkegaard scholars who enjoy the Hong's gracious hospitality.*

In Denmark, he says, a visitor would be invited to sit down, and a man would be offered a cigar. He offers one. And then he settles in beside Edna so they can talk about that rainy spring night in Northfield, their life together and Kierkegaard.

LIFELONG DEVOTION

EDNA AND HOWARD MARRIED the day after her graduation from St. Olaf in 1938. Her father approved, with one reservation. “It is too bad that you’ll waste your college education now,” he told his newlywed daughter. How could anyone have foreseen Edna’s remarkable career as an author, especially in an era when proper married ladies were expected to devote themselves to their husbands’ careers?

In 1938, her new husband joined the St. Olaf faculty as an instructor in English and philosophy — and straightaway went to Copenhagen to study Kierkegaard on a Fulbright grant. Howard claims the distinction “of being the only faculty member gone the first year I was here.” Edna went along, studying at the University of Copenhagen and beginning to polish her Danish.

Soon she was helping Howard with his Kierkegaard studies. “I went to the Royal Library to work,” says Howard. “She had a bicycle. She could have gone anywhere. But she went to the Royal Library, too. So we just worked on the same thing. That’s the way it went. Easy combination.”

When the teacher with whom Howard was working died, he and Edna took a honeymoon tour of Europe on a tandem bicycle. They passed themselves off as Danish tourists lest the Germans suspect them of being American spies. One night in early 1939, sleeping outdoors in the country because they couldn’t find lodging, they woke to the sound of German tanks on maneuvers. Back in the United States that September, they learned that Hitler had invaded Poland.

Hard days were at hand. War would repeatedly interrupt the Hong’s teaching and family life. By 1943 Howard was field secretary for the YMCA’s War Prisoners’ Aid, working with German and Japanese prisoners of war in the United States at POW camps in the Midwest. He scrounged books, musical instruments, sheet music and scripts for the POWs, and directed musicals for them.

In 1946, he became chair of the St. Olaf philosophy department, but he was soon overseas (on leave from the faculty) working with the World Council of Churches’ refugee division in Germany from 1947 to 1948 and with Lutheran World Federation’s refugee service in Europe from 1947 to 1949. With field offices in Germany and Austria and area offices in the United States, Canada and other resettlement countries, Howard’s plan called for U.S. and Canadian Lutheran congregations to find resettlement opportunities for refugees.

Howard also coordinated the work of St. Olaf students who volunteered to help. They cared for Lutheran war refugees — providing food and shelter and trying to help them find permanent homes. Many of the refugees came to the United States. “Cities were literally crushed,” Howard told an interviewer in 1997. “Spirits were crushed too. In the midst of all that despair were enclaves of refugees who wanted nothing more than to go back home but couldn’t.”

Edna joined Howard to work with refugees in Germany and Austria from 1947 to 1949, bringing along their four children. Among the refugees were two orphans the Hong’s adopted. Their brood eventually grew to eight. Indeed, Edna was so busy as a mother and homemaker that her work as an author sometimes faded into the background. “My children didn’t even know I wrote until a teacher mentioned it one day,” Edna once told an interviewer. “My son came home from school and asked me if I really wrote books. I showed him my first, *Muskego Boy*, and he replied, ‘Yeah, but how do I know you did it?’”

Muskego Boy, co-authored with Howard, came out in 1943. It’s about a Norwegian settlement in the 19th-century United States. It was the first of 12 books by Edna Hong, a prolific and versatile author whose subjects ranged from the philosophical and theological to children’s books, historical fiction and poetry. Her

early stories, a collection of 14 beautifully illustrated Christmas essays, began appearing in 1939 in the popular Augsburg Publishing House book *Christmas: An American Annual of Christmas Literature and Art*.

Edna’s primary legacy, however, will be her steady hand as co-translator with Howard of all of Kierkegaard’s works — a stupendous endeavor encompassing many volumes and seven decades.

The Hong’s first Kierkegaard translation appeared in 1940, the latest in 2004. Their first major translation was the seven-volume *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*. In 1968, they won the National Book Award for the first volume in that series.

The result of the Hong’s massive effort is English access worldwide to the complete works of a once obscure Danish scholar, now regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the 19th century. “The translations really galvanized the whole study of Kierkegaard in the English-speaking world,” says St. Olaf Professor of Philosophy Gordon Marino, curator of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf, which the Hong’s founded by donating their own collection.



▲ Edna and Howard Hong were married the day after her graduation from St. Olaf in 1938.



▲ One of Edna’s early stories, from Augsburg Publishing House’s *Christmas: An American Annual of Christmas Literature and Art*.

[Continued]

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." ■

Marc Hequet is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer and *Time* magazine stringer who also writes humor and fiction.



▲ "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."