

# A Retirement Tribute to Dr. Hans Werner

It is my pleasure to salute Hans Werner on his retirement as Mennonite history professor and executive director of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc. He has held this position at the University of Winnipeg since July 2005, a time during which he helped shape the Plett Foundation and provide it with sterling leadership. During this time he has exercised his duties with dignity, thoughtfulness and a steady hand. The Plett Foundation Executive Director is an exacting position, requiring community outreach, financial oversight, and editorial skills and, because it is linked to the broader enterprise of Mennonite history, it also includes the role of a teacher, researcher, and committee member.

Hans has also served to advance Mennonite scholarship and the social history of Mennonites in particular. His Ph.D. dissertation, *Imagined Homes: Soviet Germans in Two Cities*, published by the University of Manitoba Press, allowed his skills as an immigration historian to shine; he compared and contrasted a sending society (the Soviet Union) to two very different receiving societies (Bielefeld, Germany and Winnipeg, Canada), and then within this comparison he also accounted for different faith expressions, including that of the Baptists, Lutherans, and Mennonites. His second book, *Living Between Worlds*, was a community history of Winkler, a place in which Hans (a son of an immigrant family in the East Reserve) made his home with his wife Diana (a daughter of West Reserve settlers), farmed with his extended family, served as a young man as chair of the town's credit union, and raised their

three children – Christopher, Melissa, and Julia. His third book, *The Constructed Mennonite: History, Memory, and the Second World War*, took him in yet another direction, to the memories recorded in a lengthy oral history project with his father, John Werner. Hans introduced his readers to the fascinating story of ‘Johann’ born in Siberia, who served in the Russian Army as ‘Ivan,’ and then in Germans forces as ‘Hans’, and finally, who worked as a mechanic for the US Army as ‘John’, a name he kept when he moved to Manitoba in 1948. His father’s many names were made meaningful by a deft hand and an inquisitive and empathetic mind that in so doing also seriously engaged the theoretical underpinnings of memoir studies. Hans’s most recent book venture, a global historical atlas of Dutch-North German Mennonite migrations will open up this story to a multi-variant set of explanations, including those related to class, ethnicity, and gender, but also to mobility, acculturation, agricultural innovation, and environmental relations; further, it will link the disparate worlds of Western Europe, Russia, North America and the Americas more generally.

Among his most noted pieces of scholarship are his many papers given at conferences and published in various journals; Hans’s papers are always innovative and ever seeking of alternate explanations from those offered in the traditional canon. His work on an unlicensed female herbal medical practitioner, sued by Manitoba’s College of Physicians in the 1890s, pointed to ideas of social boundary and gender in an insightful manner. His work on pre-marital sex and pre-nuptially conceived children among Manitoba settlers, based on extensive research on genealogical and marriage records, was among the most widely read articles ever published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*: it evidently asked questions everyone else was too afraid to ask. His paper on land sale records for Mennonites who moved from Manitoba to Mexico shed light on a long-held consternation of how it was that Old Colonists could move from the richest farms of the West Reserve and then be caught in a sharply downward financial vortex in Mexico. Other papers on a Mennonite deported from Canada to Russia in about 1930 because he failed mental health standards and then disappeared into Russia’s maze of madhouses, or a paper at the recent Holocaust conference in Kansas where Hans reported on careful research about Nazism and the Mennonite in hidden places, all point to a willingness to pose difficult questions.

Along the way Hans served the University community itself in multiple ways. Most notably he was a long-serving member of the University of Winnipeg Pension Board, but also served with

distinction on numerous Department of History committees, as well as on the editorial board of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. Hans could always be counted on to provide independent thought and insight. No doubt, looking back, he will be best remembered for having served as the architect of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies. Perhaps it was created through collaborative effort, but the Centre was his idea, and the structure of it cast by his steady mind. The Centre was created to allow the next generation of Mennonite historians at the University of Winnipeg to recognize that Mennonite Studies in today's world can never focus solely on one country. In this instance it allowed the Plett Foundation, with its focus on the Dutch-North German-descendant Mennonite diaspora in the Americas, to be linked to the global Mennonite community. And linked to the Centre was another one of Hans's ideas and that was its partnership with Canadian Mennonite University and Mennonite Church Canada to take over the archives at Mennonite Heritage Centre and put it on a new foundation with a full time archivist, a re-cast transnational mandate, and new name, the Mennonite Heritage Archives.

Hans is a friend to a great many folks. The size of the McNally Robinson bookstore audience gathered for any one of his regular book launches is always held as a standard against which to judge other launches. His friendships are based always on his magnanimous personality, quick wit, and friendliness. At the University we will all remember his many stories: often intricate, full of irony, heartfelt, always entertaining and timely. He would sprinkle his exchanges with wisdoms and adages: history is the process by which the present is made to seem inevitable; it is a virtue not to be tempted to write your memoirs; we should all have the right to be forgotten; beware of the two dimensional person. He would be self-deprecating and always speak about his family in positive, not boastful terms. He would speak of his 'most remarkable' wife, or of his 'sharp penciled' children in a high-cost housing market, or their abilities to turn misfortune on its head with a good dose of cunning and chutzpah. Of course he would also say that for some reason his own grandchildren were the smartest and most beautiful kids he had ever met.

Hans's accomplishments and his sense of citizenship, his congeniality and kindness enriched daily life for all of us, including Andrea Dyck, the executive assistant at the Centre. He certainly made my life as Chair in Mennonite Studies easier, in every respect. Hans was an excellent teacher: among his many admirers is a student who wrote this about him: "The best prof at the U of W hands down. Hans has made me a better writer,

thinker, debater and student. Here is a man whose true calling is teaching.” This record of teaching and indeed of service allowed me to approach the Vice President when Hans announced his retirement, not to ask for a new Mennonite historian who could double as Executive Director of the Plett Foundation, but simply for the permission to ‘replace Hans.’

It was an easy request to make; filling his shoes will be more difficult. We all wish Hans a magnificent retirement, happy sailings on Lake Winnipeg, an easy and joyous time with his wife Diana and family, and much more of his innovative historical enquiry.

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