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## 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 diicht’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 condense, 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 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 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 *Mennoitische 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 Blumenorter 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 KFNW 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 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." After a successful career as *Der Bote* editor, Ens retired in 1991.

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 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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Gerhard Friedrich Muller (Fyodor Ivanovich) was a widely renowned Russian historian and professor of the Imperial Petersburg Academy of Sciences. He is most famously known for participating as a member of the specially picked team of three scientists in the Great Northern Expedition to Kamchatka (which would eventually result in the first European landing in Alaska by Vitus Bering) and his ethnographical theories that brought him into fierce conflict with many of his scientific peers, including the famous academic, Mikhail Lomonosov. After his 10-year journey through Siberia, the massive amount