

Edna Hong Obituary, 2007

Edna Hong died of congestive heart failure on April 3, 2007, at her home on Heath Creek, west of Northfield, Minnesota. She was 94. Pastor Mark Ditmanson conducted the funeral service for her at Trinity Lutheran Church, Hovland, Minnesota, on April 5, 2007, Maundy Thursday. She was buried in the Old Cemetery of Trinity, near both Lake Superior and the place in the woods where she and her family lived in the summer since 1945. Pastor Ditmanson also conducted the graveside service. There was a memorial service for her at St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield on April 7, 2007, Easter Saturday, conducted by Pastor John Quam. She was preceded in death by her parents, Otto and Ida Hatlestad; by her siblings Agnes, Carl, Margaret, Alfred, and Bernard; by a granddaughter, Blitz O'Sullivan; and by a great-grandson, John O'Sullivan.

She is survived by two of her siblings, Joseph Hatlestad and Eleanore DeWitt; by her husband, Howard, and their children (Irena, Erik, Peder, Rolf, Mary, Judith, Theodore, and Nathaniel) and spouses; and by twenty grandchildren and nineteen great-grandchildren. Edna Hatlestad was born on January 28, 1913, on a farm near Neillsville in Clark County, Wisconsin. She was the sixth of eight children. Her family later moved to a farm in Holway Township in Taylor County, near Medford. She grew up in Our Savior's Lutheran Church, three and a half miles from the Hatlestad farm. Our Savior's formed her: she later wrote that here is where she "learned by heart" Luther's Small Catechism and Pontoppidan's Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism. She attended country school near the farm for eight years before renting a room in Medford and attending its high school. She graduated in 1930. She then took a teachers-training course through the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin to qualify herself for teaching country school, which she did for three years. Her purpose was to save money so that she could attend St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota.

Edna Hatlestad entered St. Olaf in 1934 and studied chiefly history and literature during her four years there. She also wrote a humor column for the student newspaper, the Manitou Messenger; served as the editor of the St. Olaf Quarterly, a literary journal; and wrote an honors thesis titled "The Nature Tradition in American Literature." According to the college yearbook in

her senior year, the 1938 Viking, she wrote “very extensive and original papers in literature,” was “keen and intense,” had “convictions,” and aimed to “live genuinely.”

She met Howard Hong in the spring of her junior year. He had graduated from St. Olaf in 1934, had already discovered the nineteenth-century Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard, and was studying at the University of Minnesota. They were married on June 6, 1938, at St. Olaf, in the lounge of Mellby Hall, one day after she graduated. Two months later, after she had typed her husband’s dissertation, they hitchhiked to New York and then sailed to Copenhagen, where they lived for a year and began their study of the Danish language and of Kierkegaard.

When they returned to Northfield in 1939, Howard Hong began more than forty years of teaching at St. Olaf College. They raised a family of eight children, two of them Latvian refugees they adopted during the years when the Honges lived in Germany and worked to resettle displaced persons after World War II.

Edna Hong will be remembered as a Kierkegaard translator. She and her husband worked as a team, first translating *For Self-Examination* (1940), then *Works of Love* (1962). Two major translation projects followed: the six volumes of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, and an index volume (1967-78), and the twenty-six volumes of Kierkegaard’s *Writings*, also with an index volume (1978-2000). The first two volumes of this last series were published in 1978, when she and her husband were sixty-five, the year that he formally retired. For twenty-two years, they continued to work at top speed, translating all but four of these volumes themselves. Commenting on this last major project, the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) said, “All honour to the Honges: Kierkegaard’s *Writings* is one of the outstanding achievements in the history of philosophical translation.”

She will also be remembered as a writer of stories, essays, and books. Some of her twelve books grew out of her early years as a farm girl. One of these is her memoir, *From This Good Ground* (1974), dedicated to her parents and siblings, and another is *Muskego Boy* (1943), the later a work of fiction written with her husband. It portrays the first Norwegian-Lutheran congregation in Wisconsin, Muskego, founded in 1843, only sixty years before the founding of her home congregation. Other books grew out of disturbing experience. One of the best-loved of these is *Turn Over Any Stone* (1970), in which she struggles with the doubt that gripped her after

she saw the “paindom” of a beautiful granddaughter who was profoundly retarded. Another is *Bright Valley of Love* (1976), which has been published in twelve countries. It tells the story of Bethel, an institution she discovered in Germany after World War II. Bethel was home to epileptics and other damaged human beings, whom the Nazis had planned to exterminate. Pastor Fritz von Bodelschwingh, the courageous director of Bethel, successfully fought the plan and spared the residents a grim fate. The central character in the story is Gunther, a “pilgrim soul” with a “flippering walk” and “crazy crooked hands,” who prospered there under von Bodelschwingh’s ministry. The book’s epigraph comes from Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*: “To love forth love is to build up. But to love forth love means precisely to presuppose that it is present at the base.”

In addition to her work as a translator and writer, Edna Hong will be remembered for the zest and variety of her Northfield life. She tended her large family, befriended the many souls in need who came to her door, and was an active member of St. John’s Lutheran Church. A legendary Sunday-school teacher there for thirty years, she also taught midweek religion classes at the church and wrote the history of the congregation for its centennial: *The Book of a Century* (1969). She reached beyond St. John’s, when invited, and gave original and highly energetic talks at other churches and larger church convocations.

Edna Hatlestad Hong’s merry spirit flourished at home. She baked whole-wheat bread that she gave away freely, tramped along Heath Creek with friends, fed the birds and squirrels, carried on an extensive correspondence, gardened, and read widely.

Honors came her way, sometimes given jointly to her and her husband. Among these were a National Book Award for volume one of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers* in 1968, knighthoods conferred by the Queen of Denmark in 1978, and the *Christus Lux Mundi* Award from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1998. She was awarded the Doctor of Humane Letters degree by St. Olaf College in 1977 and the Wittenberg Award by the Luther Institute, Washington, D. C., in 1993. The citations that accompanied the most local of these awards, the ones from from St. Olaf College and Luther Seminary, touched on the amplitude of her life, for they recognized not only her achievements as a translator and writer but also her everyday discipline and the works of love that were integral to it.

She ran at full stretch for the whole of her life, until her final illness. In For Self-Examination, Kierkegaard offers a parable that points to what was essential in her. He first depicts a pair of horses who had grown slack, with “dull and drowsy eyes,” who had been driven only according to “the horses’ understanding” of their work; but then he shows these horses after they had submitted to the discipline of “the royal coachman,” when they were in top form and could go long distances “in a stretch without stopping.” Edna Hatlestad first learned the discipline of the royal coachman, of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the home of her parents and at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Taylor County, Wisconsin, and submitted to it for the rest of her long life.