

# In Memory of ANSGAR SOVIK '34

## MY PROFESSOR, MY MENTOR, MY LONGTIME FRIEND

By Jeff Johnson '81

SOMETIMES WHEN I THINK of Ansgar Sovik (1917–2007), professor emeritus of religion and co-founder of International and Off-Campus Studies at St. Olaf, the words of an old John Prine song run through my head:

*Oh, grandpa wore his suit to dinner  
nearly every day  
No particular reason, he just  
dressed that way.*

In all the years I knew Ansgar and visited him, I hardly ever saw him without a shirt and tie. Even in the last years of his life, in the nursing home, he wore a dress shirt and dress slacks during the day.

I know that people of his generation, following their parents' customs, dressed up more than their children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren do today, but Ansgar's clothes showed more than a generational custom. His Sunday clothes, worn nearly every day, were a blend of his personality and his vocation, signaling his habits of hospitality and his energetic educator's ideals.

His clothing indicated that he anticipated at any time the arrival of a special guest, whether a foreign church leader or diplomat to be honored, or a homesick student in need of his counsel and a cup of coffee. He honored the student as well as the dignitary. So there was no particular reason why Ansgar dressed up every day, beyond the ordinary occasions of daily life that he honored.

As a teacher Ansgar drew students into conversation with one another by introducing them to new ideas and new cultures and environments. Ansgar and his wife of 62 years, Muriel, together were awake to events in the wider world. From their home in Northfield, they kept close watch on world events, even in the years before satellites and the Internet brought the world to us where we sit, back when this kind of monitoring took considerable time and effort.

Throughout their married life, the Soviks traveled to Europe, the Middle East and Mexico, learning from their experiences, telling others what they had discov-



Ansgar Sovik '34, circa 1967. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SHAW-OLSON CENTER FOR COLLEGE HISTORY.

ered and making arrangements for St. Olaf students to go where they had gone. They formed lasting friendships with residents of the greatest cities of the world: Istanbul, Rome, Jerusalem, London and Athens. Ansgar would tell stories of his early childhood in China, where he lived with his missionary parents, or of his military service as a U.S. Navy chaplain during World War II. Photographs and various artworks of their experiences in other places adorned the walls and shelves of their home.

Ansgar's political views matched his gracious and generous personality. Even as he welcomed others, he reached out, speaking up on behalf of those for whom no one waited with hospitality and welcome. He advocated for the basic human rights of Mexican workers and Palestinian refugees, and he and Muriel set up a foundation to raise money for the specialized hospitality ministry of an order of Dutch nuns who interpreted the art of Rome to pilgrims and tourists.

I have a memory of Ansgar in his 60s, the dignified, well-dressed professor and pastor, sitting at a card table across from the mailboxes in the old St. Olaf student center, collecting signatures for a handgun control petition.

Ansgar taught my January Interim

course in Athens and Rome on the origins of Christianity, and I was with him on the St. Olaf Term in the Middle East in 1979 and 1980. Ansgar and Muriel were the program advisers.

One sunny autumn afternoon I sat with another student in a seat behind Ansgar on a wobbly Palestinian workers' bus east of Jerusalem. A Palestinian mother, carrying her baby and several large packages, climbed in, with a small boy trailing behind them. The family of three took the empty seat in front of Ansgar. The little boy fidgeted and squirmed until Ansgar reached out and touched his hand. The two of them — a disheveled, dusty Arab boy and a Midwestern professor in a clean, pressed shirt — played a hand-slap game until the bus reached the family's stop on the slope of the Mount of Olives.

I am thankful and honored to have known Ansgar for 30 years, and I join that little boy on the bus and all the others who were comforted and encouraged as they traveled with him toward the city of God. 🙏

An ELCA pastor in Sudbury, Massachusetts, **JEFF JOHNSON '81** and his wife, Kirsten Nelson Johnson '84, have two boys, Matthew and Nathaniel. Johnson's second book, *Harbors of Heaven, Bethlehem and the Places We Love*, was published in 2006.