

Hans F. Sennholz: Champion of Freedom and Austrian Economics

BY RICHARD M. EBELING



For more than half a century Austrian-school economist Hans F. Sennholz demonstrated that learning about the free market was not an exercise in the “dismal science.” An extremely popular public speaker and immensely prolific writer, Hans educated and persuaded thousands of people about the virtues of the free society and the benefits of economic liberty. His passing on June 23, 2007, at age 85 leaves a great void in the cause of freedom.

I vividly remember the first time I met Hans. It was in 1972 at a FEE regional seminar in Napa Valley, California, when I was 22. He already was one of the best-known expositors of Austrian economics and had been the chairman of the economics department at Grove City College in Pennsylvania since 1956. I had been reading his articles in *The Freeman* since I was a teenager in the mid-1960s and had learned many of the core principles of Austrian and free-market economics from his lucid expositions.

Rising to speak at that seminar, Hans was soon hunched over the podium, a finger pointed at the audience, in what I discovered was his characteristic pose. He proceeded to explain the “absurdities” of government intervention, socialism, and inflation. In a thick but easily understood German accent—that always had great effect on the crowd—he preached hell-fire and brimstone about how free markets and limited government were the only paths away from economic and political perdition.

In the evening he sat around with a group of the

attendees and told us about his early life. Hans had been born on February 3, 1922, in the Rhineland area. He had been drafted into the German Luftwaffe in World War II and was shot down while serving in North Africa. He ended up in a POW camp outside of Austin, Texas. I asked him what it was like to be a prisoner of war. He replied that those were among the best years of his life. The camp cook had been a chef in a Berlin

restaurant before the war, and all the meals were “wonderful.” It turned out that he had some relatives who had immigrated to America in the 1920s and who happened to live in the area. They vouched for him so he could enroll at the University of Texas at Austin. He was escorted by a military policeman, who would stand behind him at attention in the classroom.

In 1946 Hans was repatriated to Germany. He attended the University of Marburg and graduated with an economics degree in 1948. In 1949 he was awarded a doctorate in political science from the University of Cologne. While browsing through the library at the University of Mar-

burg he came across the German-language editions of *The Theory of Money and Credit* and *Socialism* by Ludwig von Mises and was deeply impressed by their insight and scholarship.

Since both books had been originally published decades earlier, Hans assumed that Mises must be dead. After briefly working as a lawyer in Cologne, Hans



Hans Sennholz lecturing at a FEE seminar.

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returned to the United States to pursue a career in business and enrolled at New York University to work on another degree. Looking through the university catalog, he discovered, to his great surprise, that Mises was in fact alive and teaching at NYU. Hans signed up for one of Mises's classes and soon decided to earn a degree under him. In 1955 Hans graduated with a Ph.D. in economics. His dissertation was published the same year under the title, *How Can Europe Survive?*

While studying at NYU, Hans found out about the Foundation for Economic Education through Mises, who was regularly lecturing at FEE seminars. Soon several of the Foundation's staff members were playing match-maker and "fixing him up" with Leonard Read's secretary, Mary Homan. They were married the year Hans graduated from NYU. Their marriage lasted 52 years.

Hans taught economics at Grove City College for 36 years, from 1956 to 1992. As chairman of the department he was able to move the economics program in a solidly free-market and Austrian direction. More than two generations of young men and women went through his classes and came away with a unique appreciation of the workings of the market economy and the dangers of all forms of political and economic collectivism.

He was an exceptionally prolific writer, publishing well over 1,000 articles over the years. He early on began contributing to *The Freeman*, with his first article appearing in November 1956 on "The Myth of Capitalist Colonialism." Among his many articles were "Welfare States at War," "You Cannot Get Even," and "The Great Depression." Many of his *Freeman* articles later appeared as chapters in his books: *Age of Inflation* (1979), *Money and Freedom* (1985), *The Politics of Unemployment* (1987), and *Debts and Deficits* (1987).

Hans also served on the FEE Board of Trustees (1969–1991) and, after his retirement from Grove City, as the president of FEE (1992–1997). During his tenure FEE expanded its publications and continued its long tradition of summer seminars at the Foundation. He also continued Leonard Read's tradition of missives and reports to FEE friends through *Notes from FEE*. A large selection of these essays was collected in *Reflection and Remembrance* (1997). His last book appeared in 2004 under the title *Sowing the Wind: Essays and Articles on Popular Economic Policies that Make Matters Worse*. (It was reviewed in the September 2005 *Freeman*.)

Fearless Defender

During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, free-market ideas were constantly under attack from Marxists, moderate socialists, welfare statists, and Keynesians. Free enterprise had far fewer friends than today, and not many academics were willing to make the uncompromising case for economic freedom. Hans Sennholz was one of them. When Austrian economics seemed faced with extinction, Hans explained and defended the Austrian theories of value and price; markets and competition; and money, inflation, and the business cycle.

During those years the professional economics journals were closed to almost anyone holding those views. So, instead, Hans used more popular outlets to help keep alive the ideas of the Austrian school and the classical-liberal ideal. Especially in the pages of *The Freeman*, Hans Sennholz aroused the enthusiasm of a new generation of students to develop and spread those ideas.

The freedom movement owes Hans Sennholz a great debt of gratitude. He will be sorely missed by all those who had the privilege to know and learn from him.

