

Hans F. Sennholz, 1922–2007

BY LAWRENCE W. REED



After a long and productive life, a man of great faith passes on and is welcomed into Heaven. He is greeted with an invitation. “What would you most like to do?” he is asked.

“I always enjoyed giving speeches about what it was like to live through the Johnstown Flood,” he responds. “I’d love to tell everyone up here all about it.”

“That’s fine,” the man is advised. “But remember that Noah will be in the audience.”

With that story, Rev. James Seeley of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Grove City, Pennsylvania, began his remarks at services on June 26 for one of the most colorful and revered economists in the free-market firmament, Hans F. Sennholz. Well-known to readers of this magazine as one of its more prolific authors and a former president of FEE, Dr. Sennholz had departed this world three days before.

Dr. Sennholz, Rev. Seeley explained, was one of the first of his new congregation he came to know when he began pastoring at Holy Trinity nearly two decades before. During one of his early sermons the young minister dared venture into economic matters, though for only a few moments. Afterwards, a distinguished-looking gentleman with a thick German accent admonished him: “Young man, the next time you talk about economics, I hope you will know what you’re talking about!” Thus began the economics education of Rev. Seeley, who remembers fondly the many times in later months and years that his new mentor showered him with books and articles and listened intently every Sunday from the pews.

Any one of the tens of thousands who studied under

Sennholz would immediately recognize this story as vintage Hans. He never missed an opportunity to prick a conscience or deflate the self-assured when a good pricking or deflating was called for. The moral and economic case for a free society was just too important for him ever to keep silent. After all, he not only knew what freedom was, he knew firsthand what it meant to be denied it.

Born in 1922 in the Rhineland, Sennholz witnessed the rise of Adolf Hitler. As a teenager he was drafted into the Nazi air force, then later shot down over North Africa and transported to a prisoner-of-war camp in Texas. After the war he returned to Germany and earned an economics degree in 1948 from the University of Marburg, followed by a doctorate in political science from the University of Cologne in 1949. It was in Marburg where fate changed his life forever. He encountered the works of the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises and was transfixed by their illuminating logic. He became a passionate scholar and teacher of the moral and economic principles of the free society for the next half-century. In 1955, he earned a Ph.D. in economics from New York University, where he studied under Mises himself.

At Grove City College, where he taught from 1956 until his retirement in 1992, Sennholz was a memorable classroom lecturer with a distinct theatrical delivery that prompted both admiration and imitation. He knew how to mesmerize an audience, and no matter how large or



Hans F. Sennholz

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challenging it was, he did more than just rise to the occasion. He transcended it with his oratorical skills. Those of us who heard him speak in many venues over the years felt he was almost always at his best, but he liked to say the size of the crowd made a difference: “If there are 10, I give a talk. If there are 25, I give a lecture. Over 100, I give a speech. To 200 or more, I give an oration.”

Once, he held forth for 45 minutes with a ringing defense of free labor markets and a brilliant assault on compulsory unionism. With five minutes left in the class, a student raised his hand to ask a question. “Dr. Sennholz, what you say sounds appealing but the fact is, not many people think that way. So there’s got to be something wrong with what you’re saying.”

Silence. Then the response—gentle but firm, and forever quotable. “Truth,” he said, “is *not* a numbers game. You can be alone and you can be right.” Then a pause and the grand finale, “I may be alone, *but I am right.*”

And of course he was. And he was also right about a lot of other things that at the time weren’t widely accepted as true. He was right about the big picture, the paramount question of our age: *Should economies be led by central planners or by the sovereign choices and decisions of free individuals?* There was never a shred of doubt where Hans stood on that, and one of his greatest contributions was to instill in his audiences a similar certitude on that question.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to a teacher is what his students later do because of what he taught them. In this regard, Dr. Sennholz leaves a vast and enduring legacy. In all walks of life, thousands of Sennholz students are spreading the good word about liberty and free markets. Many are doing it from prominent platforms as economists, educators, philanthropists, pastors, and political leaders, and all of us have endless and wonderful memories of how inspired we were by the golden tongue of our illustrious mentor.

George Pearson says taking Dr. Sennholz’s economics principles course in the early 1960s “was a defining moment in my life.” Pearson has spent much of the past 40 years in various capacities encouraging young schol-

ars in free-market thought and is now a trustee of the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy in Kansas.

Economist and popular professor Peter J. Boettke of George Mason University notes that Sennholz’s lectures “changed my life and fuel my approach to economic education” a quarter century later. “Sennholz,” says Boettke, “was a man of deep moral conviction and never shied away from defending the moral and philosophical principles of the private property order.”

Scott Bullock, senior attorney at the prestigious Institute for Justice, counts himself among the many Sennholz students “who carry with them deep wisdom gained from a teacher who could explain complex economic subjects in common-sense and powerful ways.”

Sennholz’s fame spread far and wide, and students came from many countries to study at his feet. Alejandro (Alex) Chafuen came from Argentina. “Economics explains many things,” says Chafuen, the long-time president of the influential Atlas Economic Research Foundation, “but it can’t explain why people will devote their life to produce fruits that they will not see. If freedom has a chance, it is not only because it works, but because educators such as Dr. Sennholz chose to sacrifice many things to follow a principled path.”

John A. Sparks had the good fortune to be both a student and later a faculty colleague of Sennholz. He describes his teacher this way: “He spoke with the incisive reason of a first-rate economist, the long-term perspective of an historian, and the moral fervor and conviction of an Old Testament prophet, and all this with clarity of syntax punctuated with that distinctive German accent.”

Hans Sennholz’s impact on my own life is beyond my capacity to measure. It is arguably greater than anyone outside of my own parents. He set me on course to advance liberty as a teacher and writer more than 35 years ago. Someday, if I make it to Heaven, I think I’d like to give the folks there the same lectures on economics and liberty that I was inspired by my teacher to give so many times down here.

But of course, Hans Sennholz will be in the audience, which means I’d best get it right.



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