



In Memoriam: Wolfgang Peter Ahrens

(1940–2022)

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Nestled in the northeast corner of Germany, on the coast of the Baltic sea, is the Hanseatic city of Stralsund. Founded in the 13th century on the *Strealasund* 'strait' just opposite the Island of Rügen (Britannica 2022), by the 20th century, the small fishing village had grown into one of Germany's most important harbors, for both commercial and strategic reasons. It was in this bustling sea port that Siegfried Ahrens and his wife, Else, had their first and only son.¹ Born on January 4, 1940, Wolfgang Peter Ahrens came to the world during a period of unimaginable upheaval and violence. The Second World War was raging as the Allied Forces attempted to stop Hitler's relentless surge across Europe. Stralsund, like many harbor cities at the time, was a prime military target. On October 6, 1944, the Allies released hundreds of tons of explosives over Stralsund in a coordinated air attack (Hacker 2014). The air raid destroyed large sections of the city and claimed the lives of nearly 700 people (Hansestadt Stralsund 2022). After Hitler's defeat and the official end of WWII, much of Stralsund lay in ruins. The Ahrens left their home in Northern Germany and relocated some five hundred miles south to the southwestern town of Schwetzingen. Located just six miles outside of Heidelberg, Schwetzingen had largely been spared during the war. From the wind- and rain-battered shores of the Baltic Sea to the verdant hills that undulate along the Rhine River Valley, the Ahrens family began a new life in a completely new region. Unbeknownst to Herr and Frau Ahrens at the time, this move would be the first of many life-changing journeys their son's life would take.

By the time Wolfgang had reached his twenties, he had left Europe for North America, where he began his university studies. In 1963, Wolfgang or "Wolf" was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in German and Italian at the University of Toronto. Just six years later, he had relocated again: this time to the United States where he earned a PhD in German at Ohio State University. Immediately after his graduation, he landed a position in Canada at York University which would become his institutional home. For some four decades, from 1969 to 2005, he was instrumental in first founding and then developing the University's Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics. During his tenure at York University, in addition to his substantial

ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 70, No. 3, Summer 2022

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2440



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administrative and teaching duties, he also researched extensively. Within onomastics, his areas of scholarship were remarkably diverse. Indeed, as many of his long-time colleagues remember, his impressive intellect was matched only by his intensive curiosity. Breadth of his interests and his ability to combine his passions for travel, onomastics, and his family are clearly reflected in his publications. For example, in 1987, he and his wife, the former ANS President Professor Sheila Embleton², published “Toponymy, Language and Spontaneous Naming in Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao” in *Onomastica Canadiana*. Then in 1999, he paired up with his favorite co-author again to publish the *NAMES* article “The Naming of Bermuda”, which examined the toponyms that have been given to the Islands in various European languages. And, just a year before his passing, the pair published a piece on product/trade names for *Onomastica* called “Contemporary Trends in the Names of Wines and Wineries in the English-speaking World”. Professor Ahrens’ uncommon ability to combine work with pleasure soon was a source of much good humor at onomastic gatherings.

Professor Grant Smith, retired English Professor at Eastern Washington University and senior member of several of the world’s leading onomastic societies, had this to share about his congenial colleague and friend:³

My memories of Wolf go back to the mid-80s and many meetings of CSSN and ANS through the years. What I remember most are his presentations about names in unusual places, his clarity and kindness in analyzing the work of others, and the support he gave to Sheila in organizing ICOS 23 (2008) and many other matters. He joked easily about his opportunism in combining his research and travel in warm, touristy climates. He succeeded in arousing my envy. In meetings his analysis was always helpful to presenters and in conducting business. Sheila was the leader of organizations—CSSN, ANS, and ICOS are those I know best. [. . .] Wolf was a major contributor, and all of us have benefited from his support. He was really intelligent. I have missed him at meetings, and I will continue to miss him as long as I’m active.

Similar sentiments were expressed by fellow German-speaking onomastician, Professor Peter Jordan of the Austrian Academy of the Sciences and the Institute for Municipal and Regional Studies. As Professor Jordan fondly recalls:⁴

The 23rd Congress of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS) in Toronto in 2008 was the first I attended, and Wolfgang Ahrens was one of its local organizers. According to his wife, Sheila Embleton, another organizer of this Congress and future ICOS president, Wolfgang always preferred to work behind the scenes rather than to speak in public. But, it was obvious that he was a true pillar of the Congress. As a fellow German native speaker, I had a unique opportunity to speak with him and exchange thoughts and ideas. He impressed me from the very first moment. I always found his papers to be fascinating. He was one of the guideposts on my own way to toponymy. [. . .] He was not only an exceptional researcher. His students and colleagues all agreed that he was also a most talented teacher and mentor as well as an overwhelmingly kind and supportive person. As such he will remain engraved in my memory.

Such fond memories were also shared by *NAMES* Editorial Board reviewer and long-time ANS member Professor Edward Callary. A renowned expert in toponymy, Professor Callary often crossed paths with Professor Ahrens at international onomastic conferences. At ICOS gatherings, for example, Callary related that he always enjoyed speaking with Professor Ahrens: “I always found him affable and welcoming, whatever city or country we happened to be in. Wolf’s intellect was quite sharp and tho most of our meeting were quite short I learning a great deal from him”. One interaction in particular remains particularly clear in Callary’s memory:⁵

I remember one time at a break during an ICOS meeting we were talking about what makes a successful names book, something I thought I had solved. Wolf made several pointed remarks that changed my thinking entirely. Onomastics will miss him and my personal regret is that I did not know him better.

As members of the ANS will know, Professor Ahrens’ contributions to the field of onomastics were widespread. Along with his tireless work for ICOS, he also made key and long-lasting contributions to the administration and development of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names (CSSN). Over four decades, he held several different positions of leadership within the CSSN. From 1988 to 1994, for example, he served as the CSSN Secretary-Treasurer and from 2003 to 2012, he was the CSSN President.

According to Professor André Lapierre, Emeritus Professor of the University of Ottawa's Department of Linguistics, Professor Ahrens uncommon dedication to supporting onomastic research can be seen in his remarkable record of service to the CSSN:⁶

Wolf was a longtime friend and colleague of mine. We often attended CSSN, ANS and ICOS meetings together, exchanging comments and engaging in discussions, sometimes quite animated, on various aspects of names and naming. Above all, Wolf will be remembered as a pillar of CSSN, having occupied every single position at the executive level in addition to his editorship of both the *Names Gleaner*⁷ and *Onomastica Canadiana*. We will miss him dearly.

As Professor Lapierre described, of all the positions his colleague held over the years, some of his most lasting contributions to onomastics came through his service as an editor. For example, in 2008, he, along with Professors Lapierre and Embleton, co-edited *Names in Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural, Multi-Ethnic Contact*, the proceedings of the 23rd ICOS conference which was held from the 17th to the 22nd of August 2008. This multi-authored collection quickly became seminal in modern socioonomastic research. Between the years 1994 and 2003, Professor Ahrens served continuously as the Editor-in-Chief of *Onomastica Canadiana*. Incredibly, during the same period of time, he also served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, the scholarly journal of the Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada (AASSC). As Professor Jordan explains, Professor Ahrens's contributions were instrumental in helping to establish the AASC and in developing the scientific investigation of Viking and Baltic cultures. Thus, despite the undeniable breadth of his research interests, the great lengths his love of travel had taken him, and the heights his illustrious career had achieved, Professor Ahrens' connections to his birthplace by the sea remained strong.

On February 18, 2022, at the age of 82, Professor Ahrens died in the company of his family, in his Canadian home away from home. He is survived by his daughter, Anne Ahrens-Embleton, and his wife, onomastic scholar Professor Sheila Embleton. In line with Professor Ahrens' life of caring for those around him, in lieu of flowers, his family has requested that donations be made to the Ahrens Scholarship (<https://giving.yorku.ca/WolfgangAhrens>), the Embleton Award for Women in Science and Engineering at York University (<https://giving.yorku.ca/EmbletonAward>), or any other charity of your choice. The American Name Society would like to express its heartfelt condolences to the Ahrens-Embleton family for their profound loss. We are thankful for the invaluable contributions Professor Ahrens made and, indeed, continues to make to onomastics across the Americas and around the world.

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information presented here was taken from two official obituaries published in *The Toronto Star* and York University's notices on employees who have passed away.

² An accomplished multifaceted onomastic scholar in her own right, Professor Embleton is a Past President of the ANS, the CSSN, the ICOS, the International Quantitative Linguistics Association, and the Linguistic Association of Canada. For more on her many accomplishments, see her webpage at York University: <http://www.yorku.ca/embleton/>

³ E-interview conducted with Professor Grant Smith on July 14–19, 2022

⁴ E-interview conducted with Professor Peter Jordan July 15–18, 2022

⁵ E-interview conducted with Professor Edward Callary on July 14–19, 2022

⁶ E-interview conducted with Professor André Lapierre on July 14–19, 2022. In an upcoming issue of *Onoma*, an article on the life and passing of Professor Ahrens will appear.

⁷ *The Names Gleaner* or *La glanure des noms* was a special bulletin to facilitate the exchange of scientific information between members of the CSSN (Hamlin, 1989).

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