

# In memoriam Ernest George Schwiebert

By Robert Kolb

On March 20, 2000, Ernest George Schwiebert died in Gainesville, Florida, USA, at the age of 104. As a student of Preserved Smith (1880-1941) and a colleague and friend of Roland Bainton (1894-1984) and Harold Grimm (1901-1983), he bridged several generations of students of the Reformation in the United States and promoted the study of the Wittenberg Reformation through his participation in academic societies and through his writing.

Born October 17, 1895, in Deshler, Ohio, the grandchild of emigrants from the area northwest of Hannover, the second of ten children of Frederick and Emma Freitag Schwiebert, the future historian left the farm to study at the theological faculty of the Lutheran Synod of Ohio at Capital University, in Columbus, Ohio, in 1914. World War I interrupted his studies; he fought at Belleau Wood and Chateau Thierry before returning to Capital, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1921 and completing his theological studies in 1924. Later ordained and active as a preacher, he never served as pastor of a congregation.

Schwiebert began graduate work under Wilbur Siebert (1866-1961) at the Ohio State University, writing a master's thesis on »Martin Luther as preacher« in 1926. Urged to pursue doctoral studies, he began further study at the University of Chicago with James Westfal Thompson (1869-1941), the foremost American medieval historian of the time, who sent him to the leading contemporary Reformation historian, Preserved Smith, at Cornell University, where Carl Becker (1873-1945) also helped shape his approach to history. Smith guided Schwiebert through a study of the careers of over 16,000 Wittenberg students who left the University to preach Luther's message between 1520 and 1560. The dissertation was entitled, »The University of Wittenberg and other universities in relation to the Reformation«. The Ph. D. was awarded in 1930.

By that time Schwiebert had assumed a position as instructor at Kansas Wesleyan College in Salina, Kansas. There he met and married his first wife, Joye Gayle Tustin († 1970), daughter of a rancher. In 1930 he left Kansas Wesleyan to become professor of history at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Following a research trip to Germany in 1936, he spoke out against what he saw as a military

menace in the rearmament of Germany under Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and elicited complaints from German diplomats in the United States because of this. During that visit he made the acquaintance of Johannes Ficker (1861-1944), Walter Friedensburg (1855-1938), and Walther Köhler (1870-1941), among others. The following year his first book, »Reformation Lectures« (Valparaiso, 1937) appeared.

In 1943 he left Valparaiso University, called to service by the United States military, training officers for the Office of Strategic Services. He assumed a position at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, following the war, but left that position to become chair of the history department at Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, in 1947. In 1948 the American Society of Church History elected him president. The call to government service brought him back to Germany in 1949, where he served first as a cultural officer with the military occupation forces and then with the United States Foreign Service, aiding briefly in the supervision of the University of Erlangen, engaging Paul Althaus (1888-1966), Hans Liermann (1893-1976), Walther von Loewenich (1903-1992), and Werner Elert (1885-1954), among others, in frequent conversation. These acquaintances remained a source of joy for him his entire life.

While he was in Germany, his second book, »Luther and his times: the Reformation from a new perspective (StL, 1950) appeared, at almost the same time as the more popular biography »Here I stand« by Roland Bainton. Schwiebert's 900 page work combined his extensive research on the University of Wittenberg with the fruits of the research of the Luther Renaissance. Its wealth of detail and its presentation of German scholarship from the first half of the twentieth century made it a standard guide to Luther's biography for English readers.

After a brief return to Wittenberg University in Ohio, Schwiebert assumed responsibilities with the United States Air Force as a command historian for the Air Research and Development Command, composing a book »A history of the United States ballistic missiles« (NY, 1965) from his work there shortly before his retirement in 1965. He had also remained active in guiding Reformation studies in the United States and participated in the International Congresses for Luther Research through that in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1993. With George W. Forell (\* 1919) and others he established the American Society for Reformation Research in 1956, serving as its first president. With President Alfred O. Fuerbringer (1903-1977), Professor Carl S. Meyer (1907-1972), and others at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, he organized the Foundation (later Center) for Reformation Research in 1957 and drew a number of his colleagues from across the nation, including Bainton and Harold J. Grimm and the younger generation of scholars, including

Lewis W. Spitz, Jr. (1922-1999), and Robert M. Kingdon (\* 1927), into building this research center. Schwiebert was particularly important in constructing the basis of its collection of microfilmed sources. He also assisted the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. as a consultant on the Reformation as it expanded its collection of continental Reformation publications. A number of American faculties invited him to serve as a guest instructor, including the University of Iowa, the University of Delaware, the University of Connecticut, the University of Michigan, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Florida. He was the oldest living graduate of Capital University when it awarded him an honorary doctorate, the Doctorate of Arts and Human Letters, in 1990.

After the death of his first wife in 1970, Schwiebert lived in Princeton near his only son Dr. Ernest G. Schwiebert, Jr. (\* 1931), and later in Fort Myers and Gainesville, Florida, where since 1979 he continued to research and write, assisted by his second wife, Billie Dudley Lanier Schwiebert (\* 1912). The result of these labors appeared in his one-hundredth year, »The Reformation« (MP, 1995). Two volumes in one (598 pages), it assembles a broad sweep of material under the titles »The setting of the Reformation« and »The Reformation as a university movement«. The first section of the work sketches in rich detail the background of the Saxon society in which Luther worked; the second section presents the particulars of the social, organizational, financial, and pedagogical aspects of university life at the time of Luther and Melancthon, and their special roles in the transformation of the institution. His research focused also on the Wittenberg library, the subject of a periodical article and a discussion in his second book.

Ernest Schwiebert helped cultivate an appreciation of the context in which the theology of the Reformation grew and flourished. Students found him kind, humble, self-effacing, and he amazed them with his command of the details of Reformation history. His abiding concern to link European and American scholarship, his dedication to providing materials in North America for further research on the Reformation, his personal commitment to continuing study of Luther's world have bequeathed a vital legacy to his successors.