

## AN ELMHURST COLLEGE 'ACTIVIST' IN '07 Reinhold Niebuhr: Crusader

### from the Start

By BARBARA SUTTON

Perhaps in the strict atmosphere of Elmhurst College in 1910, young Reinhold Niebuhr might have been considered a campus agitator.

The eminent Protestant theologian was then, as he was for the rest of his life, in the forefront of events, one pace ahead of his times.

When he died June 1 in Stockbridge, Mass., Niebuhr was generally recognized as one of the greatest of theologians, a role he supplemented with a keen interest in political affairs and a persistent preoccupation with social problems. His theology of "Christian Realism" has earned him the respect of Protestant and Catholic intellectuals alike.

Both in composition and curriculum, the Elmhurst College attended by Dr. Niebuhr from 1907 to 1910 was far different from the existing institution. It had 160 men as compared to 1,775 men and women day students today. Its courses were classical — Latin, Greek, History, Music — as opposed to the variety of programs available today.

According to Dr. Robert C. Stanger, president emeritus of the college, an understanding of the nature of the school during that period is important to a grasp of Niebuhr's life there. Dr. Stanger, college president from 1957 to 1965, was born on the college campus and knew Niebuhr and other students thru his father, C. G. Stanger, who taught at the college for more than 50 years. Niebuhr was one of the elder Stanger's music pupils.

In the early 1900s, the college, then called The Proseminary, comprised three buildings on one end of what is now a built-up 30-acre campus. The remainder of the land was used as a college farm, and nearby Elmhurst was small enough to be considered a farming village. The course of study and strict discipline at the German-oriented Proseminary were designed to pre-



Niebuhr

pare young men for entrance into a theological seminary and to train teachers for the parochial schools conducted by the sponsoring churches.

As was the custom, Dr. Niebuhr, who "came from a brilliant family," arrived at the school in his teens, destined for the ministry in the Evangelical Church, a union of German Lutheran and Reformed that served mostly the German immigrant population in the Midwest.

At the time of young Reinhold's enrollment in The Proseminary, Niebuhr's father, Gustav, was a minister in Lincoln, Ill. At The Proseminary, where he lived in the dormitory with the other students, Niebuhr excelled as a "brilliant student" and was valedictorian of the class of 1910. "He was a very energetic and effervescent type of person," Dr. Stanger, who was seven years younger, recalls.

If the cry for change is a criterion, Reinhold Niebuhr, his brother H. Richard, and their friends could well qualify as the 1910 equivalent of campus agitators. Their cause: the transformation of The Proseminary into a "full-fledged American college," an event that did not occur until more than 10 years later.

Using the vehicle of the school literary journal and the public forum provided by the school's literary societies ("the only student organizations in those days"), the two Niebuhrs and their group wrote and argued "vigorously and insistently" for the transformation they believed was "a requirement of the times."

"Reinhold was writing quite a bit then," Dr. Stanger said. "And that became a strong suit afterwards." (In his later life, Dr. Niebuhr wrote 17 books, including his two-volume "Nature and Destiny of Man.")

Interestingly, H. Richard Niebuhr was to become the first president of Elmhurst College to see it begin to develop as a four-year institution. He was president from 1924 thru '27, and it is his vision of the campus layout that has been largely implemented thruout the years.

"The two brothers were completely different," Dr. Stanger said. "Reinhold resembled his father — fiery, energetic. Rich-

ard was more like his mother, a calm, reserved, gentle type."

After his years at Elmhurst, Reinhold Niebuhr, like most of The Proseminary students, spent three years at Eden Seminary, St. Louis. Unlike most students, however, he continued his studies, choosing the prestigious Yale Divinity School.

"He had a problem there because, inasmuch as Elmhurst was not accredited, he didn't have a college degree," Dr. Stanger said. "He entered Yale on the basis of an examination and became one of its brilliant students." This paved the way for other students from the college to attend Yale, and Dr. Stanger noted that he was one of those to benefit from Niebuhr's trailblazing. Dr. Stanger attended the divinity school in 1920-21.

Dr. Stanger also crossed paths with Dr. Niebuhr when he succeeded Niebuhr as

pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, where Niebuhr served for 13 years after his ordination.

"He was idolized by the people, very highly regarded," Dr. Stanger said. It was at this point in Niebuhr's career, according to Dr. Stanger, that Niebuhr began to attract the attention of a wider public. He became a popular speaker, eventually having speaking engagements all over the country and was known in Detroit as a champion of the rights of the working man. His congregation, which was about 50 or 60 when he arrived, grew to 800 by the time of his departure.

"He would have Sunday evening for ruins," Dr. Stanger said. "Social issues Please turn to page 33"

## Niebuhr's Crusade Began Here

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were discussed — labor, war, peace. He was a pacifist in those days and didn't turn until World War II, when he thought opposition to Hitler was a Christian duty." (Later, Dr. Niebuhr was "very much opposed" to the war in Viet Nam.)

While in Detroit, however, Dr. Niebuhr, who with his brother was becoming known as one of the young voices in his church, maintained his ties to Elmhurst College. In 1921 he led a fund-raising campaign among the young people of the denomination to raise \$40,000 to construct a library as a memorial to the men who had died in World War I. The library is still in use but will be used for another purpose when the new A. C. Buehler Library is completed later this year.

From Detroit, Niebuhr left in 1923 for

Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he was destined to spend 32 years as a professor of Christian ethics. Unlike many theologians, he was active in politics, at one time running unsuccessfully for Congress on the Socialist Party ticket. He was also a prime mover in the formation of Americans for Democratic Action and the New York Liberal Party. It was at Union Seminary that he met his wife, Ursula, a scholar in her own right.

Thruout the years, Niebuhr returned to Elmhurst College to speak on special occasions. The memory of the two Niebuhr brothers is preserved on the campus thru the Niebuhr Lecture Series and Niebuhr Hall, both named for the two men whose lives were interwoven with the development and reputation of the college.