

Alf K. Ebsen

THE first Canadian calligrapher in our biographical series, Alfred Karl Wilhelm Ebsen is a transplanted Berliner, having been born in 1908 in the German capital. The Ebsen family came originally from Denmark, but the opportunities were greater in Germany. Last year a family meeting in Flensburg counted 60 members, living between Copenhagen and Munich.

Alf has written down the story of his early experiences with the alphabet, as the first step in designing a body face, with a slight change of style every few lines. He did not think we could reproduce it, but we tried it on a copier, and feel the result is worth using. The remainder of his story we have written out in our own hand, so that you may have all of it.

A former teacher of Printing Quality Control, and now a teacher of handwriting and printing

lettershapes, Ebsen still has time to conduct workshops in his home, and through the Handwriters Guild of Toronto.

Married ("I think in 1960," he says) to Irene in Chicago, the Ebsens have a daughter, Andrea (17), who is interested in horses. The portrait was drawn expressly for *Italix* by artist William E. Robinson. Here is:

Alf V. Ebsen

MY INTEREST IN CALLIGRAPHY must have existed before I knew that such a word existed. Even today it is the only Greek word I can handle with fluency. That's the reason I try to avoid using it as I fear I could use it in the presence of a real Greek who, judging my Greek pronunciation flawless, would strike up a chat in Greek with me & it would be all Greek to me.

I still remember the shop window sample sign I had "lettered" (nobody had yet taught me at my tender-under-ten age that the gothic lettershapes I had used could be

easily written by hand instead of clumsily lettered) to get into business as a signpainter with the neighbouring drugstore in Hamburg, Germany. The nut of a druggist made me come back for three months asking for a job instead of telling me outright that he disliked my sign. My only remaining satisfaction after such a long time is the memory that I bugged him for 3 months before I gave up on him! He was no good guide for budding men!

In school I was supposed to acquire stylish *Copperplate* (you can see I haven't learned it yet), without success. Of course, at that time I could not explain to my English teacher yet why copperplate, in spite of its admirable beauty, is an inefficient style for general school instruction, i.e. it takes an immense amount of time to acquire it, to practice it, to keep it up, I could not explain to him that copperplate lettershapes have an inbuilt tendency to illegibility wh^{ch}

speedily written under stress & that its outstanding beauty is not more than just a trap as is the beauty of a woman whose husband, comes home from his exhausting work in the coalmines, discovers after their wedding that she cannot fry potatoes. "To hell with beauty," he will think. "I need my potatoes."

In my opinion our civilisation of scribblers has need of a set of lettershapes that will retain legibility even under rough & tough daily scribble, let beauty be a secondary consideration.

In spite of the copperplate torment my handwriting-english teacher put me through unsuccessfully (many times after hours) I loved that man. He gave me ten minutes at the beginning of each english class, whenever I had a public boxing match the night before, to report on it blow by blow. This must have raised the reputation of an-under-ninety-pound "fighter" immensely in the eyes of the school bullies. I don't remember ever to have

been the target of their amusements. I would have preferred if he would have let me report rather during the boring handwriting than the English classes.

My father could procure me a place as an apprentice lithographer in the most progressive litho-shop in town. I had to hang paper to ensure good register of the press run; it was worse than handwriting instruction. I had to rub litho touche from a stick & acquired such black under my finger nails that a bloody nose seemed so much more desirable than work in a printing shop. However I was moved through all departments of the house: bookbinding, photography (we sensitized our own glass plates), platemaking etc. These experiences helped me much when many years later I touched land on this side of the Atlantic & nobody placed an order for calligraphic designs with me.

Part of my apprenticeship training was

learning to handwrite lettershapes. Fortunately I escaped also this torture of uninspired instruction. I had damaged my right hand knuckles on the skull of somebody (this time without boxing gloves) who had deserved the blow. I was still able to feed myself with the right hand, but the tiny efforts required to put the delicate distinguishing subtleties of our lettershapes on paper caused me to shriek in pain. So, handwriting had to live without me & it was not the worse of it.

When at last I could put my mind to the production of handwritten lettershapes without pain, a miracle had happened: Rudolf Koch, the great handwriter & type designer, had published his

Dürrschreib-Lehrbuch

the title of which (I have tried to copy it above) made me cringe whenever I saw it. Inside its 46 pages was the most fascinating introduction to the broken lettershapes a young man could find anywhere. I learned to distinguish between what the master called **Schwabacher** which shows so many traits of handwriting but original-

ly was a printing type and **textura gothic** that in future my waking hours, & I presume the sleeping ones too, were filled with lettershapes roaming through my imagination. Also, the whole country teemed with great lettershape designers whose alphabets were produced by the typefoundries. This was an extremely creative time in the field of lettershaping & in my mind handwriting & typography always were twins.

It all ended through government ordinance. In the beginning over-zealous designers jumped on the bandwagon & maintained to create "national" scripts as they called it; the monkeys had forgotten, or perhaps they had never learned that it required a Charlemagne to have substituted the many national scripts of his time by one, his, caroline minuscule. Out of a living shape like this:

O they create constructed, technical monsters like this: **O** and Rudolf Koch died in distress.

Finally, the government & its representatives ^{wing} they tried to please so much with this put-on nationalism, turned against them: in 1941, a fellow with the

name Borman, of whom I had never heard, sent an ordinance to all publishing houses & large printing shops that "the so-called gothic type to be called german is wrong". He was right here; the Dutch had better gothic types before the Germans tackled them & what about good old English? It's the same thing! And then this brute went on: "In truth the so called gothic script consists of Schwabacher-Jewish lettershapes", and he prohibited their use forewith. I still wonder which practical joker had put that flea in the ear of this gruesome, stupid politician. The real reason for this ordinance was that the rest of the world did not show any interest in deciphering the newspapers printed in their "national script".

Well, when I tried to land a job in Montreal after the 1000-year empire had vanished after 12, too long years I had the same experience. The art directors checking my handwriting, beamed all over their faces: "It's BEAUTIFUL! But I cannot read it!" Can you understand that in my eyes beauty is suspect? I took a job as director of graphic arts in a company running part of their operation with a 1890 printing ^{equipment} even my appren-

tice knowledge was shining here. During the eight years I stayed in a superb rural surrounding there were many emergencies to be taken care of, one of them was the long delivery times of typeset design from Montreal & Toronto. Everybody did his best, but it could not be done faster. If some design had to be processed especially fast I just handwrote the message, had a negative shot, the printing plate made (in the beginning letterpress - later offset), and BANG! it was on the press.

I did not realize at that time that Gutenberg would never have invented typography if at his time our photo-mechanical means of reproduction would have been available to him.

A secondary concern of mine at that time was a set of lettershapes that would trade of some or all of its "beauty" to ease of reading. I was busy, with my daily tasks, had a sufficient income and no worries - there really was no urgency to solve another project. Somehow Rudolf Koch had provided me with a lively interest in lettershapes that kept surfacing in quiet moments & whilst I spent my lonely weekends on the shores of the Ottawa River I used to scratch lettershapes into its sand.

dy beaches which, in my opinion, were easy to read & easy to handwrite. And one day I was convinced to have designed a completely new alphabet!

This delusion lasted many years until I showed a series of slides to a meeting of handwriters; there, in the dark, I suddenly perceived on the screen my system of lettershapes! Invented 500 years (or so) before by a fellow Alfred Fairbank identified as Arrighi. Well, so much for originality in letter-shape design.

When I finally landed in Toronto there was an opportunity to teach night classes in handwriting on the same level with belly dances and gourmet cooking. The few first students were full of enthusiasm & their numbers kept growing until it was found worth our while to found the Handwriters Guild of Toronto. Members of the Guild guided 26 classes last Oct '78 and passed on successfully "The System" wh^{ch} developed as an easy to handwrite & easy to read set of lettershapes, which can be easily taught. Colleges all over Ontario offer now weekend workshops, new handwriters are sprouting in many places & some of these MUST have learned from the Guild's "System." The other day a flyer from the Master of

Note: The rest of Alf's story was quickly written on grid paper and did not reproduce well. His words were kept intact. EDITOR

the Mint in Ottawa settled on our desk; it was written by hand & nobody in the know could deny that it was calligraphed in OUR system, with lettershape styles we suggest to our beginning students. So, the knowledge of handwriting seems to grow. And should any benefit for our school children not grow out of the pleasure the Guild members have from fostering handwriting wherever they are asked to teach, at least they all have a great time doing it themselves.

FF

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