



Hermann Hoffmann, the First President

No.34

1. The First President

Sophia University's first president was the German Jesuit Hermann Hoffmann (1864–1937). From the time he arrived in Japan in 1910 he busied himself with the various matters involved



in establishing a new university, from acquisition of the land to fulfilling the Ministry of Education's requirements for approval. Once the university had opened, he had to confront a new set of challenges, but these never interfered with the attention he devoted to the instruction of each individual student or the energy he put into his classes teaching German. His cheerful temperament and sense of humor endeared him to the students, who fondly referred to him as "Dad."

One expression of the students' affection for him is the bronze bust that presently stands near the university's main gate. When President Hoffmann entered the hospital in October 1936, alumni collected funds to pay for it and express their hopes for his recovery. The bust was unveiled in May 1937, but sadly, President Hoffmann was too ill to attend the ceremony, and two weeks later, on 1 June, he passed away at the age of seventy-two. Three months before his death he received a silver cup from Emperor Shōwa in recognition of his contributions as the university's first president.

President Hoffmann was born 23 June 1864 in Elberfeld, near Düsseldorf. He entered the Society of Jesus at the age of sixteen, studied philosophy and theology in Holland, Austria, and England, and subsequently taught philosophy at the Jesuit college at Valkenburg in Holland.

When he came to Japan in 1910 at the order of the Jesuit superior general, Father Hoffmann was forty-five years old. Concurrently with studying Japanese and teaching German at Dokkyō Gakuen (the present Dokkyō University; at the time a middle school emphasizing instruction in German language and culture), he busied himself with the various tasks involved in establishing a new university. The booklet

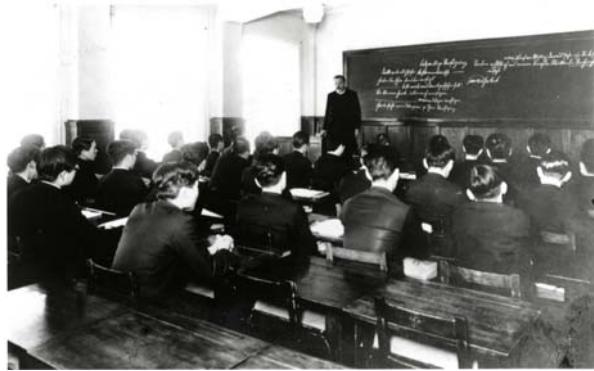


Memories of Father Hoffmann (published by the Tokyo Sophia Club in 1957) includes the following anecdote as told by the president about purchasing

The bronze bust of President Hoffmann. Unveiled 16 May 1937; behind Building No. 1.

the land for the university. After complicated negotiations with the various owners of the property, when the parties went to the registration office to record the purchase and transfer of

ownership, one of the brokers present demanded to see proof that the Jesuits actually had the money at hand. Father Hoffmann thus went to the German-Asiatic Bank branch office in Yokohama and had a check issued for the 430,000 yen (equivalent to 460 million yen in today's money) needed to cover the property's cost. Negotiations to secure official permission to establish a university



German class in Building No. 1.

were also complicated. When in the course of these negotiations Father Hoffmann called on the minister of education, the latter asked whether the Jesuits would be subject to orders from a foreign authority. Father Hoffmann responded that as president of the university, like all other such figures, he would be responsible to the Japanese government; his relationship with his superior within the order concerned solely him as an individual. The minister accepted this explanation, and ultimately the cabinet approved the establishment of the new university.

2. President Hoffmann as an Educator

A devoted teacher, President Hoffmann found great gratification in teaching German at Sophia. His younger colleague Father Johannes Laures recalled in *Memories of Father Hoffmann* that by mixing in jokes, President Hoffmann made learning even the intricacies of beginning German something enjoyable. When the university was on vacation, time would hang heavy on his hands, and he would seek out two or three promising students and offer them individual lessons.

According to Chikashi Naito, who studied with him and graduated in 1932, President Hoffmann would compare each incoming student's face to the photograph on his application for admission and by the time of the first class would already have remembered who was who. The president assigned large amounts of homework and would correct it carefully before returning it. Sometimes when, caught up in the momentum of the class, he enunciated a German word particularly strongly the students in the front row would receive a spray of saliva. None of them minded this; rather, they saw it "as a kind of baptism," an aspect of the close relationship between faculty and students characteristic of a Sophia education.

The *Fifty-year History of Sophia University* (1963) describes President Hoffmann's classes in German as follows:



President Hoffmann (second row, fifth from right) and the first entering class of students (1914)

Every morning Father Hoffmann would rush from the main building to the university administration office, a stack of books under his arm, a thick pencil in his hand, and the tails of his frock coat flapping. As soon as the bell rang he would enter the classroom and immediately begin to call on the students by name to answer one question after another. Lion-like, he would throw himself totally into each class, scribbling strings of angular German letters on the blackboard, erasing them, and writing anew. With his frock coat covered in chalk dust, he would thread his way among the students, firing off rapid questions, one after the other. When the students all did well, he would raise his arms in a triumphant banzai, as happy as if he himself had given the right answer. When the students did poorly, he would let his arms dangle dejectedly. At those times the piercing gaze of his blue eyes and his sincerity spoke directly to his youthful charges. The next moment, a witty remark would break the tension. The bell ending the class would ring just as the class broke out in laughter.

2. Notable Sayings by President Hoffmann

From the time of its establishment, Sophia University faced a series of challenges. In the aftermath of Germany's defeat in the First World War, the German Catholic Church found it difficult to continue to provide the university with financial support. The Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which left the recently built brick main building half destroyed, was another setback. Relations with the military in the 1930s were fraught with complications. Dealing resolutely with each challenge in turn, President Hoffmann helped to secure the university's survival and to put its future development on a firm footing.

President Hoffmann who, living in a foreign land, had to overcome these various trials, left several notable sayings relevant to people today as well:

Losing money should not be a reason to be discouraged or fall into despair, but if one loses hope and courage, one has lost everything. (*Fifty-year History of Sophia University*)

If one lies quietly in bed, one will not make any enemies, but one won't make allies, either. If one gets up and does things, one may make enemies, but one will make allies, too. (*Ibid.*)

A person's value lies not in the position obtained or how much of a name one has made in the world. Whether an actor is good or not is not determined by the importance of the role but how well it is performed. A person's value in this world likewise depends on how conscientiously one carries out one's own function. (*Ibid.*)

When you tell a joke, tell it at your own expense, not at someone else's. (Advice about how to



President Hoffmann in his later years

express oneself in Japan without being misunderstood, given to the young German Father Joseph Roggendorf, who arrived in Japan in 1935; *Memories of Father Hoffmann*)

President Hoffmann continued to think about his students even after he was hospitalized at Seibo Hospital in Tokyo in the autumn of 1936. Father Hermann Heuvers, who succeeded him as the second president, wrote in *Memories of Father Hoffmann*, “Through the force of his personality, kind to the depths of his being, he created the foundation of the ‘Sophia spirit.’ It is a spirit of ethical idealism—simultaneously rational, family-like, determined unconditionally to carry out one’s duty.”