

LESS
THAN
THE
LEAST

LESS THAN THE LEAST

*Memoirs of
Cornelius Hanko*

Cornelius Hanko
Karen Van Baren, editor

Second Edition



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*Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints,
is this grace given, that I should preach among
the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*

—Ephesians 3:8

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Foreword to the Second Edition of *Less Than the Least*

This book arose out of the efforts of many people. It began with a dear grandfather who loved to tell stories to his children and grandchildren about his life as a charter member of the Protestant Reformed Churches and his ministry in those same churches. Thankfully, over the years he wrote many of those stories, kept diaries, and saved a treasure trove of pictures, sermons, articles, family documents, and correspondence.

I first became aware of the broader value of his story when my history professor at Calvin College, Jim Bratt, suggested that I do my senior project on Grandpa's life. Professor Bratt is very interested in the history of Calvinism, and while he did not know Cornelius Hanko, he knew the Protestant Reformed Churches well. For that project I tape-recorded interviews with Grandpa and others who knew him. My sister Sharon Kleyn typed the taped interviews. Then I dug through Grandpa's personal files and wrote a paper. That was step two.

Grandpa was in his mid-nineties when my husband, Philip, suggested that I weave together all the material I had gathered on Grandpa's life into a series of articles for the *Beacon Lights* magazine. That was step three.

The *Beacon Lights* articles, each proofread by my father, Herman Hanko, were received with interest. Many people suggested that the articles be put into a book for wider distribution. The family decided to self-publish the book, with my uncle, Fred Hanko, doing the typesetting. Thus *Less Than the Least* was born. That was step four.

Mr. Dan Van Uffelen was the first to suggest that the Reformed

Free Publishing Association publish a second edition of the book, and for that I am grateful. I have since done much work to improve, polish, and expand the book with appendices; a better map of the Grand Rapids neighborhood in which Grandpa grew up (drafted by Trevor Van Overloop while he was a high school student); additional family history; and more pictures. All pictures not credited to others are from Hanko family members and the archives of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Free Publishing Association. The comments at the beginning of each chapter and the footnotes are mine.

But all of this was not without the help of the staff of the publishing association and family members. What you hold in your hands is the result of many years of work by various people.

Grandpa would not have cared for any fame the book would have gotten him. His desire would have been that through this story of his life, you, the reader, would come to know God more fully, to love more ardently the truths of sovereign grace, and to pray more fervently for the church of Christ.

Karen Van Baren, editor

Preface to the First Edition of *Less Than the Least*

The content of this book originally appeared as a series of articles in the *Beacon Lights*, the magazine of the young people of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It is the result of the editing of several documents that Rev. Hanko prepared prior to his death in 2005.

Rev. Hanko prepared three or four such documents: two were memoirs of most of his life, while one or two were more detailed accounts of aspects of his work while in the ministry. Karen Van Baren, Rev. Hanko's granddaughter, wove all the documents into one narrative and edited them as she went along. This book is, therefore, an edited version of those documents.

Rev. Hanko's intent in writing them was really to prepare some more permanent record of his busy and active life, not just simply that the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren might come to know him a bit, but because his ministry spanned almost all of the sometimes turbulent history of the Protestant Reformed Churches in which he labored as a minister of the gospel. He was deeply involved in the controversies over common grace, which formed the occasion for the beginning of the Protestant Reformed Churches. He was also in the troubled controversies of the 1940s and 1950s when the denomination was split over the question of conditional theology.

Rev. Hanko wanted his succeeding generations to know the importance of the battles he fought in defense of the truths of God's sovereign and particular grace, so that the generations after him might appreciate their heritage and be faithful to it. Hence

these memoirs are really an “insider’s” look into the struggles of the denomination of which he was a part.

Because the requests for a printed copy came from all parts of the denomination, the family decided to make the memoirs available in book form. It is our hope and prayer that the book will be an inspiration to those who read it to be faithful to the heritage for which our fathers fought so valiantly.

Prof. Herman Hanko

Chapter 1

HERMAN AND JANTJE

Rev. Hanko begins his story with his birth in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1907. He then takes us back to the Netherlands as he explains the circumstances in which his parents, Herman Hanko and Jantje Burmania, were born and raised. The Netherlands that his parents knew was one in which the state church held religious sway and class divisions governed social life. His narrative continues with his parents' separate immigrations to the United States, their meeting, and subsequent marriage.

As I sit here probing into the past, my earliest recollection is of a small, dark bedroom with a bed in a corner. The shades were drawn, but the afternoon sun shone through the pinholes in the green fabric.

I have been told that I was born on Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 1907, soon after my dad returned from the morning service at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I have no reason to doubt it.

To provide a little context for the story, let me go back a couple of generations. Friedrich Wilhelm Hanko, my grandfather, was born in Prussia in 1822. He immigrated to Appingedam, Groningen, Netherlands. In 1851 he married Meike Beeker, who was from Hanover, Germany. Friedrich was a tinsmith. My father told me that Grandpa had made the silver candlestick that stood in the Roman Catholic Church in Stadt Groningen.

Grandpa raised his family in the *Hervormde Kerk* (the state

church) in the Netherlands. From every impression we received, the family went to church but was not very spiritual. Herman Hanko, my father, was born into the family on August 1, 1861. He was the fifth of six children. Two of those children died before the age of three, leaving his two brothers Harm and Willem, and his sister was Jetske. Harm immigrated to America and lived in Roseland, Chicago, and had three children—Fred, Agnes, and Henrietta. Willem never came to America. He was married to a daughter of the Pijpers, whose descendants had immigrated to America and joined Oak Lawn Protestant Reformed Church while I was the minister there. My father sent them money from time to time until he heard that Willem spent the money on liquor, and that was the end of that. Jetske was married to Jan Pijp, the father of the late Gerrit Pipe of Fourth (Southeast) Protestant Reformed Church.

Grandpa was of the better class, since he owned his own business. He was insistent that my father should learn the trade of painting and decorating, but did not seem overly concerned about the spiritual welfare of his family. Having been away from home and in the military service, my father did not have much opportunity to grow spiritually. That may explain why he was accustomed to using vulgar language. This language was a great offence to his second wife—my mother—and he gradually learned to distance himself from such language.

At age twenty-seven my father married Jeltje (Thelma) Schriemer. They were blessed with the birth of two girls, Jantje and Maike (Jennie and Maggie), before they immigrated to America.

My mother, Jantje Burmania, was born November 22, 1872, near Harlingen, Friesland, to a poor farm hand, Cornelius Burmania, and his wife, Sena Bouma. Cornelius and Sena had two children besides Jantje: Lucy and Geela. Geela died at age 14, and later Sena died of tuberculosis. Cornelius then married Heinke Kolthoff and had eight more children, six of whom survived into adulthood.

As the family increased food became scarcer. My mother spoke of getting a piece of rye bread for supper with a small piece of pork. The girls would push the pork to the end of the slice, so that the last bite would taste the best. Then they were sent to bed, holding their stomachs so the hunger pangs would not keep them awake.

Mother's family belonged to the *Afscheiding* (the Separation) of 1834, which was led by Hendrik de Cock. Although the family was poor, her father sent the children to the Christian school. Mother told how they passed the public school on the way to the Christian school and were mocked as *fijner* (pure ones) or *doe akelige Cockseanen* (you hateful followers of De Cock).¹

When Mother turned eleven, her father could no longer support her, so she was taken out of school and put to work. She found a job with a rich family in Leeuwarden. If I am not mistaken, her employer was the mayor of the town. He lived in a large, three-story house. The water for washing, cooking, baking, and baths had to be drawn from the canal. Mother ruined her back by hauling buckets of water from the canal all the way to the third floor of the house and suffered as a hunchback for the rest of her life. Years later her children would come into the house, take one look at their mother's face to see how intense the pain was on that particular day. If her face was severely drawn, they went about the affairs of the home without making undue disturbances. The sight of her pain-ridden face was deeply engraved in their minds for years afterward.

Her uncle, Doeke Bouma (brother of her father's first wife), showed deep concern for her spiritual welfare and often visited her. When Uncle Doeke came to see her, her employer allowed her to visit with him, but she had to keep ironing. On Sundays she prepared the whole family for church. After they had stepped

1 Those schools were not the same as public schools in the United States. They were supported by the government but operated by the state church.

into the coach, she hurriedly dressed and ran to church. The family sat in the rented pews. She often had to stand in the back of the auditorium throughout the service.²

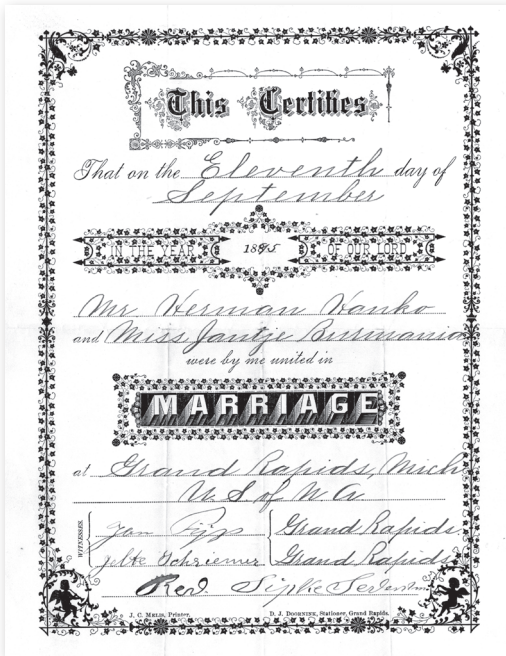
At first my mother worked only for room and board, but as she grew older she received wages, which she frugally saved for the day she could go to America. Her trip was delayed for a time by her hospitalization for a ruptured ulcer at the age of seventeen. At about age twenty she had saved enough to travel to America as a third-class passenger in the bottom of the ship. When she arrived at the port of Hoboken, New Jersey, she was deloused along with the others who had traveled third class. Jantje found this very demeaning. She never cared to go back to the Netherlands, not even for a visit, for as she said, “I never experienced anything there but poverty.”

She stayed first with her half-sister Lizzie Goeman, who lived in a house along Chicago Drive between Zeeland and Hudsonville, Michigan, near 62nd Street. Jantje quickly began looking for work. She needed to support herself, but she also wanted to save money so that her parents and her full sister, Lucy, could move to America.

Here we see the amazing hand of providence. My father had moved to America with his wife and daughters and settled in Grand Rapids to set up his painting and decorating business. The Hanko family had not been in the United States very long when Jeltje died in 1894, shortly after the birth of the third daughter. I later found a letter that Jeltje had written to family in the Netherlands, which letter had been returned to my father. In her letter she said that she likely would not live much longer, but that she had found the Lord and had peace in her soul. Father needed someone to take care of the house and children, so he hired Jantje—my mother—as a housekeeper.

2 At that time in the Netherlands it was customary for wealthy families to rent a pew in which to sit. Those who could not afford to rent a pew were forced to find a seat in the back or stand.

Jantje soon became attached to the three Hanko girls, Jennie, Maggie, and Henrietta, so that after a time and at least one rejection, Herman convinced her to marry him. Rev. Sevensma, minister in Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, married them in 1895. Being a Frisian himself, he told my mother that in her case it was too bad that she had to give up her maiden name to take on a German name!³



Herman Hanko and Jantje Burmania were married on September 11, 1895.

Jennie, Maggie, and Henrietta's grandmother lived only a few houses away. The elderly grandmother was at first very concerned whether a young woman in her twenties could take care

3 Burmania is a noble Dutch and Frisian name that can be traced back to the Reformation and beyond. Hanko family tradition includes a story of a Dutch noble with the name Burmania who refused to bow to the detested Catholic Philip II of Spain during the Dutch Revolt that was the beginning of the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Netherlands. The pride of the Frisians is well known. By contrast, the name Hanko can be found in various European countries, including Germany, but is not native to the Netherlands.

of her grandchildren. Later she became extremely jealous even at the thought that another woman was imposing herself in the place of her dead daughter. When Jantje dressed the daughters in bright, neat clothing, she was immediately rebuffed and accused of caring nothing for the dead. In the grandmother's mind, the girls should wear black for at least a year out of respect for their departed mother.

The result was that especially the oldest daughter insisted on having her own way. When that failed she threatened to pack up and live with Grandma because Grandma was so much nicer to her than her stepmother. That went on for some time, until finally one day Jantje had had enough. She told the complaining daughter to get her belongings together and go to live with Grandma indefinitely. The daughter then had second thoughts, and from then on she did not try to hide behind Grandma to get her way.

Within the next nine years Fred, Sena, Lucy, Corie, and I



Young Cornelius Hanko



Cornelius Hanko c. 1910

were born to the union of Herman Hanko and Jantje Burmania, so ours was a very busy household.⁴

Meanwhile, the Cleveland Panic had devastated the American economy.⁵ In the recession that hit the country following the panic, my parents lost their home and were forced to move elsewhere. They reached an agreement with a certain Mr. Johnson to purchase a two-story house nearby. The agreement was that Father would build a barn for the sum of one hundred dollars as a down payment for the house. Then by weekly payments the one-thou-



The house the Hanko family lost in the Cleveland Panic as it stood in the 1990s.

sand-dollar house would in due time become their own. Because of those bad economic times and the lapse in the home decorating business, Father had to work at cutting ice on Reeds Lake, near present-day Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a dollar per day. The ice was then stored in shacks to be sold for use in the preservation of food. Mother took in weekly washings to supplement the family's income.

It was not strange for us to have outsiders in the home with us. My dad often referred to our home as always having the welcome sign out. In fact, when my dad's sister Jetske died, her son, Herman Pipe, came to stay with us for a number of years before and after I was born. He was a gloomy fellow whose gloom deepened whenever he failed at business or love. Eventually he married and moved

4 Grandpa told the story from his viewpoint and did not include any information on those years. He was the youngest in the family.

5 The Cleveland Panic (1893–97) is named after Grover Cleveland, who was president at the time a recession hit the United States as a result of the country's going off the gold standard.

out of our home. Another regular visitor was Aunt Lucy, who had eleven operations and each time recuperated in our home.

In her younger days my mother was also the neighborhood midwife. She was called on from time to time to deliver a baby, for which she received little more recompense than a thank-you. She sometimes jokingly referred to a ten-cent set of salt and pepper shakers for which she had worked all night.

A mother for whom my mother was the midwife died soon after her baby was born. On her deathbed she asked my mother to take the baby, since she wanted it to have a good home. My mother consented, although she already had seven children to raise. After about six months, long enough for Mother to become strongly attached to the child, some relatives came and demanded the baby on the basis that they had more right to it than my mother. Since no adoption proceedings had begun, my mother could only turn over the child.

Mother was also known for her ability to make coffee in large quantities. In those days coffee was made in a wash boiler. To make the grounds settle to the bottom, a dozen eggs were added. At society banquets, or even at neighborhood weddings, my mother was asked to make the coffee. We sometimes received a free invitation to the wedding because of my mother's ability to make good coffee.

My father was quick-tempered and often impatient. I actually did not learn to know my father well until I was old enough to paint with him in the summer. Then I was sorry that I had not learned before to know his inner kindly nature, his understanding, and also his generosity. His generosity went far beyond my mother's, who always feared that the wolf of poverty was at the door.

We could always confide our cares and woes to Mother. She could be very stern and make a sharp distinction between right and wrong. As teenagers when we wanted to go out in the evening, we would first have to tell her where we were going and

when we would be home. She held us to that, saying, “I trust you, and I am praying for you.”



Herman and Jantje Hanko

So the family lived happily together. Mother especially exerted a spiritual influence on the family. She knew how to comfort in times of distress, but she also knew how to admonish in no uncertain terms. She was very matter-of-fact and very down-to-earth. Her stern disapproval of all that was wrong, her quiet admonitions, and above all her exemplary walk of life could not pass unnoticed. One sees the marvelous work of God in gathering his church in the line of continued generations. As a parent works out his or her salvation with fear and trembling, a mark is left upon each child, as either a blessing or a condemnation, but a mark that is never entirely erased.

A mother who was given only the most basic education can nevertheless be used by God to gather, defend, and preserve his church from generation to generation even as the promise came to Abraham. A mother has not lived in vain when in the great day of days she can say, “Behold I and the children which God hath given me” (Heb. 2:13).

Chapter 2

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

In this chapter Rev. Hanko takes us inside the Dutch enclaves of Grand Rapids, Michigan. When the Dutch settled in the United States they banded together by the province from which they had come. Thus there was the Groninger buurt, or neighborhood, settled by many of the people from the province of Groningen.

The story of his childhood in Michigan must be understood in the context of turn-of-the-century America, where the common American did not enjoy the luxuries of electricity and automobiles. Life for those immigrant families was often hard; still, it was a step up from the grinding poverty they had suffered in the Netherlands. All businesses were family owned and operated. Often a family took up residence behind its business. The need for community was satisfied by life in the closely-knit Dutch enclaves, most of whose members worshiped in the Christian Reformed Church.

All of southeastern Grand Rapids was divided into three parts.¹ To the south of my home were the Frisians,² who occupied the Oakdale Park area around Hall Street. To the north

1 The author makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to the opening line of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: "All of Gaul is divided into three parts."

2 The Frisians were from Friesland, a province in the northern part of the Netherlands.