

26 December

Fr GERHARD PIEPER

18 June 1940 – 26 December 1978



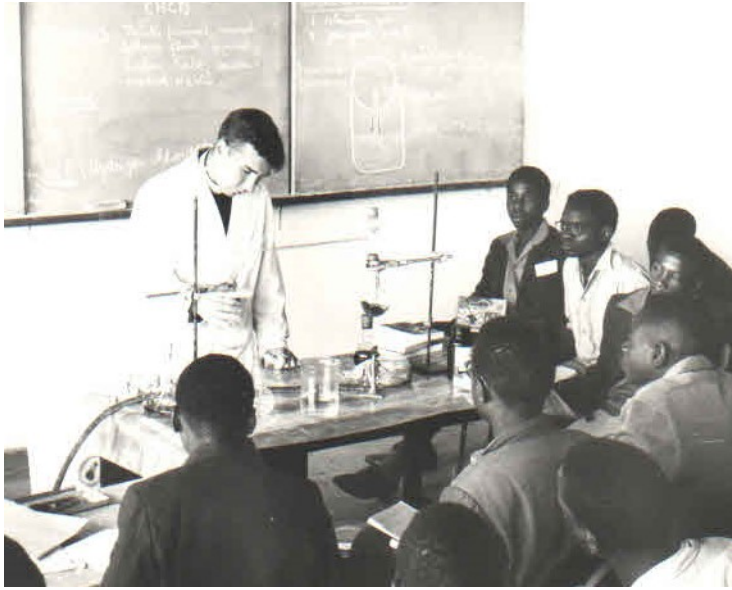
Gerry's father died before he was born in Berlin in the first year of the war. He was very close to his stepfather. Oskar Wermter wrote that his German companions knew him as a typical Berliner, 'quick-witted, extrovert and sharp-tongued.' He entered the Jesuits in 1959 and after vows was supposed to study Latin but he felt he knew enough and attacked the garden instead. The noise of his lawn mower drove others crazy but Gerry dismissed their complaints as sign they were taking Latin too seriously. The second years demanded observance

of all 656 rules and Gerry dismissed this as fanaticism and became an advocate of humanity. During philosophy at Pullach his room, 'the Café of Widow Pieper', became a refuge for all who felt low. They could get a cup of good coffee, a cigarette or a cognac. When called to account for such challenges to the established system Gerry showed no contrition. Later, when he was at a meeting in Oxford, this writer heard him correct someone, 'That is not how we speak English!'

He arrived at St Albert's in 1964 while the school was still a building site. He showed his great natural ability as a teacher of mathematics, biology and chemistry. In 1967 he went to the University to supplement his practical experience with theory and obtain a teaching diploma. He impressed his fellow students by getting to know them all and helping them. He did his teaching practice at St George's undaunted by the quaint English ethos of the place.

He took his theology studies in England seriously and never seemed to question his commitment to religious life at a time when so many were. He was ordained in 1970 in Berlin. He returned to Rhodesia and had one undisturbed year of teaching at St Albert's (see picture over page) before the war overtook them and the local white farmers, suspecting St Albert's was in cahoots with the freedom fighters, had the school closed. When this crisis was over, a worse one came on them with the abduction of 250 students by the guerrillas. All came back except for a few and no one died except for Hedwig Nyadebvuvu who was accidentally shot.

In 1975 the school had to admit defeat and it was closed. Gerry went on his tertianship to Australia where he impressed those he met with his common



sense and made new friends. On his return to Africa, he bought a motorcycle in South Africa and rode it all the way home. He went to Kangaire where he found himself alone in the midst of the war. He made long phone calls to friends.

As the war intensified Gerry did not feel directly threatened though he said one or two enigmatic things

which Sr Borromea Murasiranwa noticed. 'Lets hope they do not kill me before I have said the Christmas Masses.' Hardly anyone came to Christmas Mass, a sign the people had been intimidated.

At 7.30 p.m. on St Stephen's Day six guerrillas came and Gerry invited them in. They became aggressive and he said, 'if you want me, let the sisters go.' At 8.30 Karl Steffens phoned from Marymount. Gerry spoke to him and told him of the visitors. They too spoke to Karl. Then they led Gerry out and shot him. The sisters were in tears. The guerrillas kicked and punched them, 'Go home and have babies.' A rowdy drinking party followed.

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Karl Steffens spoke at his funeral, addressing Gerry whose coffin lay before him,

You loved visitors and it was a joy to be with you. You loved good books and literature, music, good cooking and home-made cigarettes. ... you loved to chat and have a good conversation like the genuine Berlin kid that you were. Your interests were wide; scouts, ecumenical prayer groups, ... Your work was planned and well thought out. Your concern for people was genuine ... I thank you for all you ever did, but especially for the witness of your faith which was so forthright and uncompromising that I was surprised at times...

Gerry had written to his friends on 8 December, 'Many of you will perhaps ask: Is it worthwhile? Would it not be better to leave these people to their own fate. ... Believe me, if we were to leave here now, we would be like the hireling who

runs away and leaves his flock unguarded. I would never be able to read the parable of the Good Shepherd with a good conscience.'