

# Suffering Servants: Pastoral Leaders in the Stalinist State

*Henry Paetkau*

William May, in a book entitled *The Patient's Ordeal*, offers the provocative suggestion that suffering “resembles a mystery more than a puzzle; it demands a response that resembles a ritual more than a technique.”<sup>1</sup> The experience of suffering, in other words, is not so much something that we can solve or do something about as something that we live in response to and through. While May's observations are based on medical experience, I suspect they apply more broadly and can help us understand the experience of Mennonites in the Soviet Union. The stories of three ministers who lived through imprisonment or exile, or both, under Stalin in the 1930s will serve to illustrate this point.

## I

Aron Toews was born in Fuerstenau in the Molotschna Colony in southern Ukraine in 1887. After completing high school, he became a teacher. In 1922 the family moved to the Chortitza colony, and two years later Toews was elected minister of the Chortitza-Rosental church, a congregation of over 3,300 members. The Scripture he chose for his ordination was from Rev. 2:10, “Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life.”<sup>2</sup> In November 1934 he was arrested and imprisoned in Dnepropetrovsk, and some nine months later he was sent into exile in Siberia. From there Toews wrote many letters and a variety of sermons to his family and friends. The diary he painstakingly kept also reached his family shortly before his disappearance in 1938. That diary and correspondence, first published some forty years later, gives us insight into the life and faith of a religious leader in exile.

---

*Henry Paetkau was pastor of Grace Mennonite Church, St. Catharines, Ontario for 15 years. He recently assumed the role of Conference Minister for Mennonite Church Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba.*

Heinrich Winter was born in Neuenburg, Chortitza in 1896. He also became a teacher and was called to the ministry by the Chortitza congregation in 1923. In 1935 he was arrested and sentenced to five years in exile in Kazakhstan. He survived that experience and returned home to become the last *Aeltester* (Elder or Bishop) of Chortitza. In 1943 he and his family fled the Soviet Union together with the retreating German army. Five years later they, together with several hundred other Mennonite refugees from Russia, were permitted to emigrate to Canada. The family settled in Leamington, Ontario, where both Heinrich and his son Henry served the church. The younger Winter has recounted his father's experience as "a shepherd of the oppressed."<sup>3</sup>

Hans Rempel saw his minister father arrested and exiled in 1935. His death was reported to the family ten years later. Rempel himself was detained in 1937 and released after two years of imprisonment. His memory of that experience, put to paper many years later, offers a glimpse into the harassment of believers by the authorities.<sup>4</sup> The persecution of the church by Soviet authorities under the Stalinist regime is generally well known. In an attempt to eradicate religion, church buildings were heavily taxed or simply confiscated. A special tax was imposed on ministers, who were also disenfranchised and prohibited from working for the state. Preaching the gospel warranted arrest, detention, and often exile.

Hans Rempel reports that his father was arrested and detained for three weeks in April 1934 on suspicion of preaching. He was released with the warning that should he preach again, he would be detained permanently in one year's time. Upon his return home he asked his children whether they would understand if he continued to preach the gospel, should he be called upon to do so. Exactly one year later, on the day after Easter (traditionally a church holiday), the elder Rempel traveled to a preaching assignment, only to discover that the secret police were in the audience. Nonetheless, he carried on. Following the service, a young couple approached him and asked to be married. They had come from another village after hearing that a minister would be present that evening. Only too willing to oblige, Rempel married them on the spot! The government agents then followed him home, where he was arrested in the presence of his family.<sup>5</sup>

Aron Toews officiated at the funeral of an eighteen-month-old child in 1934, fully cognizant of the consequences should the authorities become aware

of his activity. “It doesn’t matter to me whether I have to go today or in a week,” he told the grieving but grateful mother. “I must go regardless.”<sup>6</sup> Three months later he too was arrested.

Hans Rempel recalls the night he was arrested in 1937. The NKVD (Soviet secret police) arrived, typically, at 3 a.m. and searched the house. Then they told him what he should pack to take along. “That bundle we had prepared long ago,” Rempel reports. “I took my leave of Mama, and then I knelt at the bedside of our [three-month-old] child . . . . Then we went out into the night . . . . Behind me fell the curtain of darkness. What would happen to my wife and child from here on was beyond me.”<sup>7</sup>

## II

The experience of arrest, detention, trial, and exile of these men is likely not very different from that of millions of other Soviet citizens during that time. Their response to it is what stands out, however. They interpreted their suffering, as Waldemar Janzen has suggested, from the perspective of faith in a God who was in control of the present, and in light of the eschatological hope offered in Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

(1) Suffering was understood as a mark of the faithful disciple of Christ, a sign both of being chosen and being faithful to the call of God. In a letter to a friend in Canada in 1933, Aron Toews wrote, “[I] thank God that I can still proclaim the precious gospel. Isn’t that a special privilege?”<sup>9</sup> Several years later he wrote from exile about the suffering of Christ who gave his life in obedience and service to God: “And what about us? Paul writes: That is why you were chosen, to declare the wonderful deeds of Him Who has loved us. What a call! What a great task!”<sup>10</sup> That this calling to serve Christ had serious, sometimes even fatal, consequences simply confirmed its divine origin and purpose. Ministers of the gospel, who had received a special calling from God, also expected to pay the ultimate price for their obedience, as Jesus had done. Olga Rempel, Aron Toews’s daughter, recalls her father musing out loud after a long interrogation, “It is not my turn yet, otherwise I wouldn’t be here [at home]. Am I unworthy to suffer for Christ?”<sup>11</sup>

Suffering was a mark of the faithfulness of the preacher. It was, however, also the call of Christ to all believers. From his Siberian exile, Aron Toews wrote,

A resolute commitment to Christ and His salvation, through faith in Him, His suffering and death, shall be much more to us than wife, child, and household. The meaning of this is shown clearly in the martyr stories of the Anabaptists. Even today many a one could be at home with his wife and child, if he had denied his Lord. The Lord demands nothing impossible or out of the ordinary; just total commitment to Him! Our claims on the Kingdom of God must be based on a profound conviction, a faith for which we are willing to die, to give up everything: land, houses, even wife and child . . . . Jesus never promised earthly wealth for His followers; on the contrary, He promised privations of all sorts, the cross, scorn and contempt.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, the suffering of God's people in the Soviet Union, including Mennonites and their ministers, was not so much a factor of historical and political circumstances as a condition of Christian faithfulness. The state was therefore regarded less as evil and the enemy of God's people but more as another manifestation of evil in the world. Perhaps that made submission to it and acceptance of it easier for those who felt powerless against it.

(2) This experience of suffering was sometimes also interpreted as God's judgment on the unfaithfulness of his people. Aron Toews wrote:

We are to blame, not God the Lord. And we too have to confess: our iniquities are the reason, our attitude to the God-given inheritance. Our people have fallen deeply, ethically and morally. Even during the war, or perhaps a decade earlier, this decline already existed. "Land, land" and "money, money" and "business and education" were corrupt catchwords of the time. The old staunch steadfastness gave way to a puffed-up enlightenment. The quiet Mennonite has become a contentious faction-monger and partly a supporter for ideas he doesn't understand; or for money. Our faith in God's defense, which through the centuries has protected our

people, our fathers is replaced by “Self- defense.” Our youth spends their leisure time in dancing and other frivolous parties.

“O Lord, remember not our former iniquities.” Should that not be our confession, the words of our repentance? “Save us and forgive us our sins for Your name’s sake!”<sup>13</sup>

Henry Winter adds,

We all needed forgiveness of our sins. Many calamities and much suffering had happened as Christian brothers and sisters were used to betray each other. Some had suffered more than the others under the evil dominion of the Soviets. We had all become guilty before God and before each other. We needed forgiveness from above, but we also needed to forgive each other . . . .<sup>14</sup>

In this understanding, suffering also served as a time of testing, purification, and preparation. Commenting on the experience of Job, Aron Toews writes:

Job’s friends thought that it was punishment and yet were wrong. Life brings tests and trials to be overcome . . . . We must pass into the Kingdom of God through many afflictions, must be proven, refined, cleansed, sanctified, grounded and prepared. These are the marvelous ways of God on our pathway which we often do not understand . . . . The daily difficulties, troubles, sickness, crosses and sufferings about which so many of us complain, are often our redemption. This is the token of love, helping us on to heaven.<sup>15</sup>

In the last letter received by his family, written in February 1938, Toews encourages his wife and children with the words of Jesus to the disciples in John 14:1, “Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God and believe in me,” and from Luke 21:19, “By your endurance you will gain your lives.” Then he comments, “Yes, even in sorrow and affliction there is hidden a good bit of salvation; sad to say, we do not always recognize it.”<sup>16</sup>

(3) This testing and suffering precipitated an intense personal spiritual struggle. All of the memoirs confess that human side of the experience of imprisonment and exile. Heinrich Winter described them as “the desert years” of exile.<sup>17</sup> Aron Toews, writing in 1936 in anticipation of the third Christmas away from his home and family, adds, “I too was often at wit’s end, powerless and depressed. One thinks one cannot go on . . . Oh, how restless and disturbed one often becomes! What will the future bring? What will become of us? These questions often fill our hearts.”<sup>18</sup> Hans Rempel details the horror and humiliation of imprisonment and interrogation experienced by those accused of “political” crimes, as he and others detained for practicing religion were.<sup>19</sup> Prisoners were regularly stripped, shorn, and showered before being returned to cells so overcrowded that sleep was possible only in an upright or crouching position. Food and water were scarce. Christians and Jews were subjected to constant ridicule and harassment by fellow prisoners. Interrogation methods included sleep deprivation, needles pushed under fingernails, fingers pinched in doors, and genital mutilation. All this with the intention of coercing a signed confession.

While this treatment exacted a devastating physical toll, Rempel acknowledges that the personal and spiritual struggle was sometimes even more difficult.

Then Satan storms upon one with his questions and challenges . . . and whispers: “You are a Christian and you’ve always confessed that. Now you see the consequences. Your faith has been a fraud. And in your stubbornness you will destroy yourself, and your wife and children with you, and you are responsible for them. What do you think of your faith now?”<sup>20</sup>

Rempel’s faith and determination held. Despite the suffering he never signed the confession that the authorities promised would provide freedom and privilege in a great, new land. Many, however, succumbed. “People signed the most terrible things,” Rempel recalls.<sup>21</sup> The suffering was simply too great.

(4) What allowed people like Rempel, Toews, and Winter to stand firm was the conviction that this experience of suffering was within the realm of God’s will and power. Toews writes, after reading Psalm 42:

“As the hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God.” With my whole heart I can join in this psalm. In a strange land, among strange people, in strange and uncultured conditions where there is no appreciation for the higher ideals and interests than that of beasts! How my soul cried to God, to the living God! No news from my loved ones, no steady work, no earnings. How empty is life, how meaningless! In addition one hears cursing, swearing and obscene and abusive talk daily. . . .

Then I pray verse 3 of Psalm 42, “My tears have been my food day and night.” And yet I know that this all happens according to the will of God, the Father.<sup>22</sup>

In another letter home, Toews quotes 2 Cor. 1:8-12, in which Paul writes,

“For we do not want you to be ignorant . . . of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”

Then Toews adds,

A list of the men of God who had the same experiences would be long. And naturally the seeking mind asks, “Why is it thus?”

It is good if we ask this question in order to gain clarity and understanding about this matter. Psalm 4 gives us an answer: “But know that the Lord leads the godly marvelously.” Not in the usual way, but in a special way. He leads to heights and depths, through darkness and troubles, in dangers and trials. Blessed is he who knows that being led “marvelously” is a characteristic of God’s children. Think of Job. God, so to speak, exposed him to the will of the devil. What calamities befall this servant of God, as well as Paul, Peter and John. One is led differently than the other, yet

always “marvelously.” The forces of evil are evident also in the life and experiences of God’s children. It isn’t always punishment when accidents, suffering and hindrances cross our path of life.<sup>23</sup>

Hans Rempel states quite simply, “I gave my situation over to God.”<sup>24</sup> That faith gave him the peace, confidence, and courage he needed to endure imprisonment and interrogation. Rempel found special comfort in the words of the hymn *So Nimm denn Meine Haende* (Take Thou My Hands, O Father), words he prayed repeatedly.<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Winter’s favorite hymn was *Befiehl du deine Wege* (Thy Way and all Thy Sorrows), the sentiment of which carried him into a more complete trust in God.<sup>26</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses the same confidence in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Such things come from God and from him alone . . . [B]efore him there can only be subjection, perseverance, patience – and gratitude. So every question “Why?” falls silent, because it has found its answer.<sup>27</sup>

At another time Bonhoeffer explains how that faith allows suffering to become the path to freedom.

In suffering, the deliverance consists in our being allowed to put the matter out of our own hands into God’s hands. In this sense death is the crowning of human freedom. Whether the human deed is a matter of faith or not depends on whether we understand our suffering as an extension of our action and a completion of freedom. I think that is very important and very comforting.<sup>28</sup>

(5) Suffering and even death are transformed by faith not only into temporal meaning but also into an eternal hope. Waldemar Janzen reminded us of the power of faith in “a God who is leading the world towards his Kingdom and a God whom nothing can stop.”<sup>29</sup> That faith and hope helped people make some sense of their circumstances and find the courage to keep going. Hans Rempel recalls that many ministers recognized the prophetic signs of the times. “They didn’t calculate days or hours,” he notes, “but with great



confidence they portrayed the unfolding of world history and the events of the future.”<sup>30</sup> In a 1937 Epiphany meditation, Aron Toews suggests that as the magi looked to the stars to guide them, so

we have a calendar in the precious word of God, the Bible. There we find the signs of the times, especially the appearance of the heavenly King. We do well to heed these. Let us then not be like the scribes in Jerusalem who, though they knew a great deal, did not recognize the moment. Jesus passed by them. Let us follow the advice of Herod and diligently search the Scriptures. Beloved, take note of the signs of the times. The new year 1937, which we recently entered, will bring us signs which we can recognize as “stars” of the second coming of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Six weeks later, Toews penned a meditation on the parable of the ten maidens, five wise and five foolish, as recorded in Matt. 25:1-12. This passage refers, he writes,

to the last period of the Kingdom of God on this earth . . . . The events of the world are becoming more serious; it is evening and the night follows . . . . The Church becomes silent and more silent; no services, no worship, no mission, no fellowship or teaching. The church slowly becomes sleepy. Perhaps soon all will sleep till midnight; till the trumpet calls: “Wake up . . . .”<sup>32</sup>

But these apparent signs of the return of Christ and the end of time were not only warnings to both the faithless and the faithful to be prepared. Even more, that hope of the heavenly Kingdom offered what Toews called “recompense” to those who had endured this time of suffering. He encouraged his people to hold fast to the hope of a sure reward.

“Recompense” – In a special way this also concerns those who bear crosses, who are fellow sufferers, inasmuch as they have accepted their sufferings and crosses from the Lord. The righteousness of God demands compensation . . . . There must be a compensation – God’s absolute righteousness demands it, and it will come . . . . So wait, dear cross-bearer, you too will one day enjoy what today you must do without. This will be in the life to

come, when, as our text says, the Kingdom of Heaven will be established on the new earth and God's righteousness will reign. O blessed hope! O glorious end!<sup>33</sup>

While that eternal hope sustained the faith of those who were suffering, earthly connections also helped to sustain their spirits. Here the ministers, even while in prison or exile, offered a significant comfort by virtue of their role and status in the Mennonite community. Henry Winter recalls how letters from his father encouraged not only the immediate family, but also many others.

My father's faith in God was strong; he placed his hope entirely in God who can also save us from death. With firm faith, with words from the Scriptures and with Christian song verses he greeted us in his letters. These letters radiated a peace which the world cannot give, but can also not take away. The extended family read these letters along with other people who felt a thirst in their souls and were strengthened.<sup>34</sup>

Aron Toews sent letters, poems, and sermons to family and friends from his exile. Many offer words of encouragement, comfort, and hope. Some provide pastoral counsel and comment on the life situations of the recipients. Even in exile Toews never ceased ministering to those at home. For example, he kept informed about and acknowledged the passing of those in the congregations he had pastored who died from year to year.<sup>35</sup> And from exile he wrote pastorally about the meaning and practice of Christian marriage and Christian funerals so that those left back at home, who were without pastoral leadership, might continue practicing these rituals in a faithful and meaningful way.<sup>36</sup>

(6) Finally what sustained the faith of many during the Soviet persecution were simply the rituals of the church. Of necessity, religious practice had for the most part become an individual exercise. But the rituals associated with baptism, communion, marriage, and death continued to carry meaning when other aspects of the faith could no longer be practiced. Before his arrest Aron Toews traveled from village to village, teaching catechism and conducting baptisms.<sup>37</sup> When the German army occupied Ukraine (1941-43) and church

life began once again, Hans Rempel recalls, one baptismal service followed the other.<sup>38</sup> Henry Winter adds that

Everyone was invited to attend catechism classes and they came: young people, married men and women, fathers and mothers. 42 people from our village were baptized in 1942. Baptisms were large at that time. In Chortitza alone 99 people were baptized in 1942 and one year later, in 1943, 105 people were baptized in Neuendorf.<sup>39</sup>

What this experience taught these leaders is that, in the words of Henry Winter, “the heart of the Mennonite church must be found in its worship.”<sup>40</sup> To recall the words of William May that introduced this paper, these rituals enabled people to enter into the mystery of their suffering and to respond to it in faith. Perhaps these rituals are what enables believers to live through their suffering rather than trying to solve it. And when rituals are most needed, then those to whom they are entrusted carry considerable authority and responsibility.

It was to that place of authority and responsibility in the community and in the lives of their people that these men felt called by God. Their response was obedience, regardless of the cost. That is the price their faith in God, as revealed in Jesus, required of them. Of course, they were not alone in their suffering; millions of innocent people suffered under the Stalinist regime. Some, like Winter, Toews, and Rempel, found meaning and purpose in the context of their personal Christian faith and the Mennonite community. That is what gave their suffering meaning and enabled them to endure it.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Arthur W. Frank, “A Medical Ethic of Suffering,” *Christian Century*, May 20-27, 1992, 542.

<sup>2</sup> Olga Rempel, *Siberian Diary of Aron P. Toews*, trans. Esther Klaassen Bergen (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1984), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Henry H. Winter, *A Shepherd of the Oppressed* (Wheatley, ON: self-published, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Hans Rempel, *Er Fuehret Mich auf Rechter Strasse um Seines Namens Willen: Der Weg der Familie Rempel* (Virgil, ON: self-published, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Rempel, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Rempel, 145f.

<sup>8</sup> See Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror," in this issue.

<sup>9</sup> Olga Rempel, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 105

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 115f.

<sup>14</sup> Winter, 64f.

<sup>15</sup> Olga Rempel, 118.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Winter, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Olga Rempel, 120f.

<sup>19</sup> See "In Prison," in Hans Rempel, 150-170.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Rempel, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Rempel, 165.

<sup>22</sup> Olga Rempel, 110f.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 117f.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Rempel, 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 146, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Winter, 54, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 32.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>29</sup> Janzen, "Time of Terror," in this issue.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Rempel, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Olga Rempel, 132.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Winter, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Olga Rempel, 134f.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 159ff, and 162f.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Olga Rempel, 71-75.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Rempel, 248.

<sup>39</sup> Winter, 76.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.