Dying For What Faith: Martyrologies to Inspire and Heal or to Foster Christian Division?

Walter Sawatsky

Mennonites have gained a reputation for generosity to the poor, the marginalized, and the persecuted because theirs is a story of suffering. What has become increasingly apparent when listening to recent appeals to that story of suffering is the quite narrow and idealized reference to Anabaptist martyrs, whose witness to Christ should teach us and should provide the basis for a renewal movement. True, there is some notion that Russian Mennonites suffered under Communism; after all, those who escaped have been very generous donors to Mennonite Central Committee relief programs. But Mennonite martyrdom in the Soviet Union remains mostly unknown to contemporary North American Mennonites or is often viewed with suspicion as a deserved divine judgment for earlier unfaithfulness.

My purpose here is to address the inherent conflict between the dominant myths about sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrdom and twentieth-century Russian Mennonite martyrdom – in effect, to turn them around. This corrective may facilitate entering more deeply into the theological testing that the twentieth-century experience represents, not only for specific sub-cultures of Russian Mennonites but for Mennonites as a whole. For all Christians, as well as for Mennonites, the twentieth century has been the bloodiest century ever, so dwarfing the sixteenth century reformation story that it remains most difficult to comprehend. In what follows I will be referring mainly to the experiences within the Soviet Union, where I have in mind the Stalinist purges of the 1930s but also the following fifty years of war on religion in the name of a grand socialist project, as outright killing shifted to slower dying in labor camps, then to spiritual dying in the unequal propaganda war that left truth as main casualty. Recall that the martyrdoms of the twentieth century extended into

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many regions of Asia, emerged in Africa during wars of independence and their violent ethnic aftermath, and were experienced in Central and Latin America in more conceivable numbers during the era of the security states. Those experiences also need to enter into the Mennonite psyche.

Since the year 1937-38 saw by far the largest of the many waves of purges, there was an effort in 1998, notably by some Mennonites in Canada, to mark its fiftieth anniversary.[1] For Mennonites the number of arrests far exceeded what had happened so far, and the survivors of this purge or the families of victims had not yet found their voice. In contrast, the Mennonites who had been traumatized by the Civil War following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 – the so-called "Russlaender" Mennonites (to distinguish them from the Russian Mennonite immigrants to the USA and Canada of the 1870s, known as "Kanadier") – were telling their story so well that the movie "And When They Shall Ask" had become *the* Russian Mennonite story. While I want to reflect on "living with a history of suffering" by addressing the Refugee Mennonite story, I will try to incorporate at least as much illustrative material from those Mennonites who continued to live with a history of suffering within the Soviet Union, not leaving till after 1989. This latter group is often labelled Resettlers (*Umsiedler*) or Later Emigrants (*Spätaussiedler*).

By identifying some reasons for keeping this experience out of Mennonite theological discourse for so long, I hope to invite a less sanguine assessment of the sixteenth-century martyrdoms and to suggest that serious attention to the very troubling twentieth-century experience offers help for facing the issues of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, which at century's end are the code words within which a theology of peacemaking needs to be framed. I proceed on the assumption that an Anabaptist-Mennonite theology worth espousing requires Mennonites to become part of a general Christian effort to own this past century of martyrdom as well as the atrocities for which Christians bear some responsibility. To own this century calls for participation in 'healing of memories' processes that proceed better within a framework of penitence than of triumphalism.

A martyr story from the 1938 Purge: How does it inspire?

Sometimes a story writes itself. At first it seemed so amazing that a letter from Moscow with the simple address "To the Mennonites of Canada" should

arrive on a desk at MCC Canada in only ten days in early 1992. Within a few weeks Herbert Klassen had already called on the letter writer, Peter Rempel, who lived only one metro stop beyond Klassen's own apartment in Moscow. It was a most moving experience for me to meet with young Peter a few months later as he recounted discovering that his grandfather Peter Rempel was a Mennonite teacher and preacher who had been arrested in 1938. Young Peter's mother Natasha had learned these facts from her mother only long after they had moved to Moscow so she could study art at the conservatory. Her mother had met another 1938 alumnus by coincidence, who told her that Peter Rempel senior, after a quick trial, had been sent to one of the camps in the north of Russia where he most likely died. A week after our meeting, Peter the grandson was traveling up to the Murmansk region, planning to work his way through the known labor camp locations to seek more evidence for the final resting place of his grandfather. As it turned out, at the right moment young Peter also met someone who remembered the prisoner and where he was buried.

Much more memorable to me than the exact details of Peter Rempel's martyrdom was the image in the next room, where mother Natasha served us tea. This central room in the tiny Moscow apartment was filled with paintings – she was gifted. But my eyes went to an unusual icon corner. It was a painting of a prison camp with barbed wire and towers on all sides with armed guards. In the center of the courtyard stood a gigantic man pointing his arms to heaven – he was a human cross. This cross was suffused with light – the light of witness to the surrounding darkness so deep on the edges of the icon.[2] When Father Alexander Men' had come to hear the story, he responded by saying that Peter Rempel as Mennonite preacher could not qualify as a saint with his own icon, according to the rules of Orthodoxy, but he had clearly been a man of God whose saintly life was a witness to others. So he had blessed this artifact as the family icon of the Rempels – Saint Peter Rempel.

A few months later and in another part of Moscow, Walter Bergen, soon to become the MCC program director, told me that his mother had mentioned a second cousin to him just before he left Canada to join me on this trip. Once he gave the address I knew it was Natasha Rempel. But other relatives who had already met her had come back with a negative report – she had left the Mennonite faith. We met Natasha at the end of Vespers that late

afternoon. In the early 1980s when the search for faith among the intellectuals of Moscow was spreading, she too had found her way to Alexander Men's church where she had been baptized.[3] In anticipation of the resurrection of Orthodoxy that was to come, he said to her that soon they would be needing more icons as more churches opened, but there were virtually no icongraphers left. So she apprenticed herself to an icongrapher to learn the way of prayer, silence, and meditation so that she would be able to 'write' icons as a theologian.

Vespers was just ending as we arrived at the Donskoi monastery, and worshipers were reverencing a shiny new icon beside the altar, then passing the sarcophagus of Tikhon, the former missionary to America who had become Patriarch in 1917 but was imprisoned and then kept under house arrest in that Donskoi monastery, where he died in 1925. He had just been declared a saint, hence someone was needed to paint an icon in his honor. Natasha had painted the icon.

Common elements of the problem

This story carries a lot of the elements of the problem of the Mennonite relationship to martyrs. A teacher and preacher had disappeared in the camps; only parts of his story trickled out many years later, never making it into the few martyrologies that were published. He had prayed for all prisoners without regard to confessional membership. He had shared bread and water as communion, and the Orthodox prisoner had felt it was a holy moment. But other Mennonites viewed the daughter as having been unfaithful to her Mennonite roots and now she was part of a ritualistic religion that had people actually kissing a painting of a bishop.

By the time Walter Bergen met Natasha, he had learned to read that story differently. One teaching moment had come when as a rebellious teenager rejecting the peculiarities of the Mennonites, he came to Grandpa Redekop's house for a supper invitation and found himself quite out of place in his jeans attire for a solemn celebration of stone soup. As his suited uncles and aunts ate the watery soup and the biscuits with mere hints of bacon chips on them, they began reminiscing.[4] Suddenly Walter realized how little he knew, how little he had wanted to know or been able to understand, including not catching on till then why one relative was always overstocking her larder for that day of catastrophe he thought would never come. When I have heard him explain

what he and his family were doing back in the enemy's capital, Moscow, it was always a story about people from his past who had been hungry and a neighbor had risked personal safety to share a piece of fish; now he was seeking to share in return.

So little telling, so little listening

For me reflecting on living with suffering has a lot to do with what I was thinking a decade ago when Waldemar Janzen published an essay in *Der Bote* entitled "Was Sagen Wir Unseren Kindern."[5] The article noted the increasing likelihood that if the Soviet empire was to collapse, then surely new research to uncover the secret past would result in accusations of guilt, judicial trials, and sentences of punishment thereafter. Would Mennonites follow this common method or did they have alternatives? His answer was to delineate the options of either yielding to an ahistorical urge to forget or walking the way of forgiveness (he made a distinction between being able to forgive the perpetrator for the impact on one's life of the loss of a father but not having the right to forgive in his father's stead). Janzen presented a five-fold biblical model for entering into the time of Soviet terror that included not forgetting; personally forgiving what was done to us, not for others; avoiding the sustaining of hatred and feelings of revenge; giving praise to the saving leading of God; and passing on the record of suffering the way the *Martyrs Mirror* passed on the witness.

Having spent more than a decade in Europe that included systematically collecting the stories of many recent immigrants who told their own story and that of other martyrs, I had reached the conclusion that what I knew and was living with and being shaped by was too often a taboo subject when visiting North American churches. In my presentations in 1989 to the faculty and administrators at AMBS, I developed a vision for organizing interviews with persons in western Canada, both to collect stories in danger of getting lost and to enable the interviewee to experience liberation from various bonds in the telling of the story. It seemed self-evident that young pastors needed to know the history of the members of their churches, what had never yet been unburdened in the counseling hour, and how to be able to receive a confession that might include long suppressed feelings of hatred, of disappointment in leaders, of self-loathing for what they had done or for what had happened to them to make them feel so permanently soiled. I have a heavy sense of failing

to attend to that agenda. Not only was there no urging from the school and its board to develop a program, but even the interest in Mennonite history still there when I first arrived in 1985 has dwindled. So I have spent more time recently helping Soviet evangelicals recover their story.

Perhaps now the time is ripe at least for a few Mennonite scholars to attempt to converse together more seriously. Yet the atmosphere is still fraught with deeply held conflicting views. A recent letter to the editor of *Mennonite Weekly Review*, took issue with the reported claims by a Mennonite scholar that the Russian Mennonites had suffered to a degree "the likes of which the world has not seen." The writer, Jon Christoff, went on to note the pro-Nazi sympathies of the Mennonites, their wealth among so many poor people, their racism, and their resort to self-defense during the civil war. Therefore the suffering at the hands of the Soviet government was "God's hand at work to punish the arrogant Mennonites." Christoff finished by saying that he converted to being Mennonite because he believed in the teachings, but if all he knew of Mennonites was their history in Russia he would flee from them.[6] Those are the extremes of claiming exceptional suffering or charging unusual unfaithfulness to the Anabaptist legacy.[7]

Owning the story – by whom?

At an assembly in Winnipeg in the mid-1970s Elder Gerhard Lohrenz thought he was making a generous compliment when he remarked that I spoke almost as if it was my own story I was describing. I was of course only the Kanadier Mennonite, one of the few who had gone to graduate school, who now reported back from Europe. When reading the reflections by Waldemar Janzen sent to presenters for this present consultation, I detected a tone of possessiveness about the Russian Mennonite story. It is there in the assumption that an outsider cannot participate in the forgiveness process he is advocating, and in the assumption that the Russian Mennonite story is the one about the refugee Mennonites who went through more than the Russlaender did, yet the latter seemed so shocked by the atrocities of Machno that in reality lasted for only a short time.

This possessiveness is there when I think and speak about the Russian Mennonite legacy as one that shapes me and that I neither can nor wish to escape but one that Mennonites of Swiss and other ethnic origin do not

understand. They do not understand because we have not managed to tell the story in a way that compels them to hear, to feel, and above all, to come to own it and its obligations. Since I assume that the extensive and long-term sufferings of Russian and Soviet Mennonites not only reshaped or even transformed those directly affected but had deep repercussions on Russian Mennonites throughout the diaspora, this legacy also must be appropriated in some way by the 'New Mennonites' with whom we formed partnerships. Thus this exercise in reassessment necessarily calls us to soberly review our efforts at history and theology.

My thinking went through a change when I returned from a dozen years in Europe, having concentrated on religion in the Soviet Union, and began teaching general church history to seminarians. The major changes in historical interpretation of the past generation forced me to notice aspects of the Mennonite perspective on Christian history that I had too long taken as definitive. I began to notice how deep has been our dismissal of much of Christian history, how unwilling to see the hand of God in the other confessions and even to see in them primarily the agents of the evil one. As I began pointing this out, I encountered fellow Mennonites relieved that their own doubts about our sectarian posture may be articulated. To question that posture means that one claims a much larger portion of the people of God as the story of my people. Yet it has been Mennonite ethicists to whom American Mennonites continue to look for answers to the moral questions of peace and justice – and in general they overlook the Russian legacy.[8]

Finally, our thinking has also been affected by a decade of rethinking many things in the former Soviet Union. The discovery of so much that the average Soviet citizen neither knew nor wanted to believe has resulted in seeking some reconciled 'way to the church', an attempt to engage in societal repentance along the lines of the famous Georgian movie "Repentance" that posited a recovery of a faith worth living for.[9] I am surely not alone in my profound disappointment at the limited way Mennonites have entered into the process of repentance and forgiveness. Much more popular has been the sending of relief supplies as an implicit reconciliation gesture.

As a theologian working from the discipline of history, I have felt uneasy about the way the history of our martyrs is usually recounted. As do many Mennonites, I recall stories from childhood about martyrs for the faith, people

with a special aura of sanctity to whom one did not ascribe either false motives or sinful behavior. After some years of immersion in the vivid reports of human rights violations in *Samizdat* accounts from the Reform Baptists or *Initsiativniki* of the Soviet Union, I had learned to differentiate more.[10] In particular the encounter with Soviet immigrants to Germany, or even the conversations with believers in the Soviet Union, often gave me alternate angles to the same story found in the *Samizdat* source. Sometimes that resulted in understanding why a particular person was arrested, starting to understand the 'truth' in the victim's account and the 'truth' in the oppressor's account. Over time this enabled me to take a more analytical view of the Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century, noting so many parallels. Both the way of valor and of discretion are legitimate Christian (and Mennonite) options; indeed the options are invariably more nuanced than a simple polarity would suggest.

More recently I paged through Soviet archival records and came to appreciate the chaotic conditions of the early Soviet years more, especially the parallels to the present decade of chaos. Further, I found myself reading files concerning Orthodox believers – lay persons, nuns, priests – as they experienced the suppression of their church and resisted. By any human measurement, their brutal treatment by Bolshevik authorities in its excess and extent vastly outstripped that of the Mennonite experience. So often their letters of appeal cited Scripture. So many prayed to God without, it seemed, ever getting divine attention and protection, yet they died as believers. I was reminded of those tentative tones often noted among Umsiedler (Soviet German immigrants) interviewees as they wondered uncertainly whether I would frown at their having shared worship with people of other confessions or taken basic communion in prison from the priest who shared his bread and water.[11] I began hearing differently a remark so often made by Mennonites who had joined the Evangelical Christian Baptist unions in the USSR: "there is no difference in the essentials of Christian faith among us." I came to see how that claim had involved an inner *Gelassenheit*, and I now found myself pausing in my too easy assumption that these people had thereby converted to nonpacifist churches and had been unfaithful to the legacy.

That is the type of legacy I called to mind recently when trying to understand the words of a Seventh Day Adventist leader from Tula, as he proposed an ecumenical mission agenda for the people whom he called "our

spiritually starving parishioners." He went on: "their foremost need is not a theoretical acquaintance with the peculiarities of our teaching, but an acquisition of the basic Christian understanding of God, the world, and the human person."[12]

Barriers to living with a history of suffering

As North American Mennonites we have never really entered into the twentieth-century sufferings of Mennonites, when suffered at the hands of outright enemies of God. Several reasons for that are worth exploring.

1. The stories seem implausible. Some of the atrocities reported during the Russian Civil War years seemed implausible to other Mennonites. This implausibility theme applied even more to those surviving the Stalinist purges, Nazi invasions, and forced dislocation of World War II. Those coming to North America as refugees were in a dependency relationship for some time, trying not to hurt the relatives who stayed when speaking in public, and personally preoccupied with their own rebuilding phase. They too sensed when they did tell their stories that they were not believed. Even more, the Umsiedler or even the present residents of the former Soviet Union have said little in public, because those who had also been through the experience knew, so they had survival (and whatever attendant damages) in common; others could not understand.[13] Here we recognize the theme of the hiddenness of martyrdom and suffering.[14]

2. Much of the data remained unknown for a long time. Because those involved were unable to write and record, others did not have access to sources. Data that Cornelius Krahn and others did insert into the biographical sketches in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* often ended with 'later fate unknown,' then were updated in passing in a church newspaper. Nevertheless, there was *Samizdat* that began appearing in English translation in the late 1960s. It was extensive and involved many Mennonites, the most famous Mennonite names being Georgi Vins, David Klassen, and Otto Wiebe. Gradually more oral history data dramatically expanded the data base, though most of it remained unpublished or served as background material, often for reasons of security.

3. There has also been a problem of language. For example, Aron Toews' *Mennonitische Märtyrer* (1948-50) was not known very widely. When the English translation came along,[15] it did not evoke response as did other general works on Mennonites a decade earlier. I have often wondered why Mennonite readers of my book on the Soviet Evangelicals took so little ownership of the Mennonite story that suffused it.[16]

4. The Russian story might detract from the North American Mennonite agenda. When material on the Soviet Mennonite martyrs was becoming known (in 1968, including in English translation), it coincided with two developments that had a silencing effect. (1) To draw attention to the suffering seemed to run counter to the obligation to peacemaking stressed in Mennonite ethics and MCC programs. (2) This was the era of the programmatic appropriation of an Anabaptist vision and of a new idealizing of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Not only was a particular reading of Anabaptism the desired model for a recovered Anabaptist vision, there was a widespread attitude that the Russian Mennonites during their Russian and Soviet sojourn had surrendered important distinctives, hence their being killed or going through major suffering had as much to do with divine punishment for unfaithfulness. So studying and publishing their testimonies was not expected to be as fruitful for encouragement to faithful witness as was the sixteenth-century martyrology.

Here it is crucial to remember how sectarian were the Mennonite subcultures. Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) may have started its slow road to a joint seminary between Swiss and Russian origin Mennonites in 1958, but H.S. Bender always told C.J. Dyck that the churches were not ready for a common history of the Mennonites. Though there is distinct movement between the three editions of Dyck's subsequent *Introduction to Mennonite History* toward a more inclusivist story, the American chapters pursue quite different strategies when discussing Mennonite Church, General Conference Mennonite, and Mennonite Brethren developments. Nor is that volume cited much when the denominations account for their developments. Thus till at least the end of the 1970s, any serious treatment of the Russian Mennonites of the twentieth century would have had to come from insiders and was not likely to be read by other Mennonite groups. Not unless they were reading the numerous articles by Cornelius Krahn

in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* Volumes I-IV, or by Lawrence Klippenstein and by this author in *Mennonite Encyclopedia V*.[17] Due to limited marketing and distribution they were not reading the growing list of important publications from Kindred Press (Mennonite Brethren), Bethel College, or Canadian Mennonite Bible College.[18]

The promise and problem of surmounting the events with meaning

In Waldemar Janzen's essay in this issue,[19] following the pattern set in his published essays of 1988, the author seeks to address breaking the grip of a "meaningless static present," meaning that the problem is the victims' inability to surmount the events with meaning. Janzen's earlier essay had described the situation as one of victims in a state of daze or else fearful, filled with hatred and bitterness, or keeping silence and trying to forget. No broadly accepted theology of the terror had been found. If the Russian Mennonites were to process the time of terror inwardly in Christian fashion, then they could do it "only according to a Biblical model." This involved a search for a strategy of forgiveness that consisted of a reframing of the story.

The first task is to remember, but with some cautions. As has been observed numerous times when comparing truth and reconciliation commissions, not every single atrocity needs to be made known – there is the damage to the victims or victim's family in the retelling to consider – but when the tone seems to restrain the truth telling, trust is an early casualty.

Having established some parameters, then comes the historical writing. This raises the question of the emotional and theological tone to set. When I think of the content of many personal stories, then the crying out 'from the depths,' the deep and serious doubts that God is really there, or the crushing powerlessness of the sense that God's face has turned away because of something we did as people which the individual can do nothing about, these are the basis for letting the impact of those years become conscious. It was not guaranteed that people would always find divine consolation, their faith often ended up not requiring a happy ending. This then facilitates a further phase of memorializing, and Janzen points to the classic criteria for martyrdom – as applying to persons whose suffering and death should teach the Church (or more specifically, as stated by numerous writers, the task of the martyr is to point to Christ).

A further task is to develop a comparative perspective on the "Mennonite era of terror in the Soviet Union" by drawing analogies with "other such times," namely the persecutions of early Christians under the Romans and the sufferings of early Anabaptists. To the degree that Janzen steps outside this common pattern, it is to suggest analogies with the Jewish response to the Holocaust. This raises problems I will address in the next section, but it is striking that nowhere is there a reference to other Christians or groups, whether in the twentieth century or the sixteenth for drawing helpful comparisons. There follow comments about "judgment and repentance," where again the juxtaposition of the two regulates the imagination in a particular direction – something to reconsider. Why does it seem easy to think in group and generic terms about judgment from God on the Russian Mennonites, but to freight most of the repentance agenda with concerns about which sub-group of Mennonites gets victimized in the repenting? Most problematic is the framework available to North American Mennonites for the difficult task of forgiving our enemies, Janzen's sixth agenda point. What is the difference between warning against national bias (i.e., against Russians), while asserting full condemnation of Marxist/Stalinist ideology? Janzen's (and others') deep anxiety about who has the right to forgive also needs further discussion. Does it manifest a highly personalist orientation? Does it apply to forgiveness between nations? I think that this predilection for avoiding thinking in societal terms is a fundamental flaw in our Anabaptist Mennonite tradition, one where we need the help of other churches.

Dying for what faith?

The impression I have gained from congregations and even from students is that they seem to think that during the three centuries before the fall into apostasy of the church with Constantine, Christians everywhere were suffering persecution and demonstrated quite astounding fortitude of faith. The Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth century also suffered greatly, but none of the other churches apparently had martyrs, so those Anabaptists model what real Christianity should be like today.

In his recent book *Salvation at Stake*, Brad Gregory has developed at length this curious feature of confessional narrowness about martyrdom in the sixteenth century. There were, after all, at least 2400 Dutch Reformed martyred

between 1523 and 1573, and 1845 Anabaptist martyrs, most killed between 1527 and 1538.[20] Then there were at least 335 English Protestants killed during the Reformation era, many of them included in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, plus 254 Catholics in Elizabethan England and at least 130 Catholic clergy in Reformed Low Countries. Indeed, the first martyrology by Ludwig Rabus described Lutherans who had paid the price of personal sacrifice for their faith (or was it for their version of Christian doctrine?).[21] Even when we consider the relatively smaller population, these statistics hardly compare with the extent of suffering and death for reasons of faith in the twentieth century, especially in China and the USSR. Gregory tried to account for the "willingness to kill" and the carefully regulated approach to coercing faith conformity on the one hand, and for the "willingness to die," as well as how the performance of death would have didactic meaning for the witnesses, on the other.[22] There was indeed such a conviction of rightness of confessional perspective, it is hard to see analogies either to the persecution of Christians under the Romans, or under Persians and other rulers and religions across Asia over the succeeding centuries, or to the settings of organized social hostility in Russia and China.

Mennonites have had little difficulty noticing the shortcomings of other Christian churches and thereby sustaining some doubt about the efficacy of the work of the Holy Spirit in such churches. We, after all, had the martyrs who sought to live out a genuine reformation in word, deed, and spirit. That makes the probing questions of Ephraim Radner's book on pneumatology within the divided Christian west all the more disturbing.[23] An understanding had developed that saints maintained the holiness of the Spirit in their lived witness when there were no longer martyrs for the faith. Yet as a kind of renewed search for models of inspiring holiness, the divided churches of post-Reformation Europe celebrated their martyrs. As Radner put it,

> the feature especially characteristic of Reformation and post-Reformation martyrdom however, is that it was both denied by competing Christian parties and usually directed *against* other Christians, both in its perpetration and in its possession. This simple reality – that sixteenth and seventeenth century martyrdoms were most often at the hands of other Christians – renders their significance as pneumatic acts highly problematic.[24]

Radner pointed out that the paradigm established by the *Acts of the Martyrs* for early Christian martyrdom included an opposition between the Spirit and Satan, the martyr confessing Christ, the pagan oppressor denying Christ. The demeanor of dying martyrs then served as confirming evidence of being filled by the Holy Spirit: "they are filled with gentleness and love, even toward their persecutors . . . ."[25] When applied to the sixteenth century, the shift that emerged was that "the persecutors, being Christian heretics, are liable to some greater kind of punishment than would be a pagan executioner."[26]

Yet a further perversion evident in the Reformed martyrologies of Crespin in France, Haemstede in the Netherlands, and Foxe in England was how inquisitorial records quoted to tell the martyr story stress doctrinal teaching. Although Radner does not doubt the sincerity of the martyrs, he does question the special claims to Holy Spirit power for that martyr's church. In his words, "to see this purity, to see this holiness [of the martyrs], as the Spirit's life unveiled and resplendent in its 'power' and 'authority' is no longer something any of us could dare affirm before the eyes of the Church, let alone the world."[27] The alternative in the twentieth century has been to see people like Oscar Romero as victims of political oppression, where their holiness "pertains . . . to the universally recognized virtues of courage and conviction . . . devoid of a clearly accepted Christian impetus... at best admired, but not evidently inspired."[28]

That leaves us with the thousands of Mennonite martyrs in the USSR, quite a large number if you include not only those executed for being preachers and teachers but also those languishing in prison, those lost to the camps and, in a literal sense of martyria as "witness," those many faithful women and other laity who kept meeting for worship when the leading men were gone and who suffered with persistence. The analogy to the sixteenth century may not work – to the disadvantage of the image of the sixteenth-century martyr – but how do the martyrs of Russia model the witness to Christ? Was it really necessary to have taken a personal stand in a court, possibly answering the persecutors not a word, like Jesus, in order to qualify as a martyr? Did it reduce the quality of their witness if a reason for their elimination was their wealth or disproportionate advantage in the new socialist society? If they had engaged in active mission and evangelism in violation of new rules, did that make them better candidates for a martyria that teaches and inspires?

To ask these questions is to remind us that there were many persons qualifying by those standards, whose life and death of faith must teach us all, whose witness deserves to be shared globally. Since it is now easier to recover the evidence from court records or smuggled letters from prison, then surely our churches would spare no cost to bring such records of witness to light. But, indeed, part of the pain of this history is that these people's stories remain unknown, and we wonder whether new martyrologies would sell. Further, to ask these questions is to recall the many more who perished without name, who were swept up in some wave of arrest without even the benefit of a traitor accusing them falsely. What is the meaning of their death? This is an area of ambiguity where the generosity of many Russians/Ukrainians from the Memorial organization reminds one of the excessive charity of Christ, for they believe that even the Nazi soldier deserves a respectful burial after his remains have been sorted from the others in the mass graves.[29]

Martyr memories within a penitential framework

There is another question we are just beginning to test on each other in scholarly conferences. It has to do with the fact that there were people within the Mennonite community who tried to save their own skin by condemning someone else. "God will judge" has always been an answer, and Mennonites have also posited the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. One aspect of that context must also be named, in order not to perceive the setting too simply as Mennonite Christian victims among atheist persecutors, even if we recognize how relatively small were Mennonite contingents in the annual harvests of social scum, as the propagandists liked to put it. Must we view the Mennonite Church of Russia as without spot and wrinkle? Does it retain its part in the body of Christ even if it could not resist the resort to arms in Molochnaia for more than a year?[30] Did it still retain its Spirit-filled holiness when its young men were forced to serve in the army after 1935, and again after 1956 when Mennonites like other Soviet Germans were released from the Spetskomandatura?[31] The illustrations can surely be extended, but the point is that according to Ephraim Radner's careful logic, Russian Mennonites as part of a divided Christianity need to adopt penitence as more appropriate than pride of Holy Spirit power. Indeed, that penitent tone has been observed consistently by visitors to Christian believers in Soviet Russia, and it persists

today – they are living out of a penitential mode, a keen sense of falling short and therefore a keener sense of the grace of God in Christ.

We are beginning to face two healing-of-memories projects as North American Mennonites that require emotional energy and mental creativity. There was initially warm resonance to the fact of Roman Catholic - Mennonite conversations framed around the healing-of-memories agenda articulated by the Pope in his statement of 1995, *Ut Unum Sint*. It included the recommendation to begin to adopt each other's martyrs. To begin to undertake such gestures is better than to stay in our present divisions, though the theological barriers to seriously accepting each other's martyrs are major, unless a penitential spirit frames the process. What it seems to call for among Mennonites is some inward preparation as church not only to hear and receive Catholic apologies for the sixteenth century, but also to place the theological purpose of the martyrology on something else than its present pedestal of reverence.

The second agenda relates to developing a fuller panoply of martyrs for the faith in the USSR, and figuring out how to communicate the complexity of their lives so that the educational materials of the denomination no longer overlook their witness. It also has to do with developing an appreciation for the witness or martyria of all those whose too soon end needs private and possibly public mourning. Since most Mennonites had left the former Soviet Union by 1993, the process of coming to terms with the Soviet record could no longer be done by the victims and their families, as has been true for many millions of former Soviet citizens experiencing various forms of rehabilitation of reputation. That makes more obvious the societal agenda that we have too easily claimed not to be part of. Since the middle of the twentieth century, Mennonites participated in the maintenance of a bi-polar ideological world, pollsters regularly saying that the majority of us voted for the candidates of nuclear strength. How does a people that does not normally apply Children of Israel analogies to itself when it comes to national identity enter into the social reconciliation project between 'us' and 'them'?

Learning social reconciliation from other Christians

Mennonite literature on theology and ethics lacks serious attention to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This has become particularly striking as

thoughtful writing, especially from a Reformed (Calvinist) tradition, notably from South Africa, has emerged.[32] These writings offer a framework for thinking through the process at a societal or social level, and for identifying the expectations and symbolic or vicarious devices that serve such an end. In his book on forgiveness in politics, *An Ethic for Enemies*, Donald Shriver utilized case histories both from the civil rights movement in America and from American relations to the Germans and Japanese to develop an ethic of forgiveness.[33] When the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission began doing its work, Shriver offered a helpful essay on the problem that Waldemar Janzen had concentrated on, namely whether victims have a right to truth, to how much truth, whether it always liberates and heals, and whether some truth should rest. Speaking in social terms, "if we refuse to recall the wrongs we have committed, we cannot protect the future against their repetition. Cheap reconciliation simply does not reconcile."[34] Shriver and others stress that forgiveness is a process that takes time. It begins with remembering and requires engaging in moral judgment. Forgiveness then demands the renunciation of vengeance but not the abandonment of justice. Over time the attitudes and feelings of hatred must give way to empathy – even at the societal level this requires the deliberate work of engaging each other's peoples. And forgiveness seeks the renewal of human relationship, which in political terms means programs of economic and cultural exchange and trade.[35]

Yet a further beneficial adjustment to standard Mennonite ethics follows from arguments recently advanced by Miroslav Volf and Kyle Pasewerk that challenge the notion that before we can reach reconciliation and peace there must be justice. The divine pattern, most explicitly manifested by Christ in offering to the enemy of the young church, Saul, a vocation to lead and eventually shape forever the theology of the church, is a free offer of reconciliation that makes a renewal of relationships and justice possible. The relevant processes are detected by Shriver in a remarkable statement made by black Roman Catholic bishops in 1985: "Let us, who are the children of pain, be now a bridge of reconciliation. Let us, who are the offspring of violence, become the channels of compassion. Let us, the sons and daughters of bondage, be the bringers of peace."[36]

Russian Mennonite martyrs to point the way

In 1998 as part of Mennonite memorializing of the victims of 1938, I had the opportunity of telling the Mennonite story several times to audiences of Mennonites who did not know much more about the Russian Mennonites than the Russlaender version contained in the movie "And When they Shall Ask." My question to them was, will you remember our dead too? To do so meant they needed to name a few people who might represent dimensions of the lived faith of that people. Sometimes the published materials now helping us to name the martyrs consist of a single memoir – for example, Peter Epp's pastoral reflections on times of trial during the Spetskomandatura, or the series of vignettes Gerhard Hamm recalled to illustrate the lived reality of his preaching texts. There are dramatized accounts based on experience such as the novels of Herman Hartfeld, although the vivid word pictures painted by Walter Wedel living "only twenty kilometers away" from the last train track have stirred me more deeply. After living through years of fantasizing about bread, the discovery of the bread of life so overwhelmed and transformed him that the reader will also say, Give me that bread.[37]

We have also been learning about Mennonite missionaries in Russia. One of the mythologies was that Russian Mennonites had failed to do mission in their area. In fact, their role in overseas mission and evangelism around them preceded that of the American Mennonites, though it also needed its William Carey's. One overview has helped Umsiedler Mennonites sustain a stronger sense of mission legacy, but Hans Kasdorf's history of Russian Mennonite mission has appeared only in German.[38] A series of mission biographies by Johannes Reimer has also appeared, in German and Russian. One portrays the mission efforts of Johann and Sara Peters, with numerous other families joining them moving north along the Ob river in northern Siberia to the Ostiak people, ending with martyrdom for some. Another concerns an early missionary to the Kirgiz people, Martin Thielmann, who died away from family and friends, a song on his lips as final memory.[39]

There are numerous stories, some published, many still buried in my interview files of ministers and elders, of people who did not forget their vocation at the worst of times. I lost track of the number of persons who reported a visit from elder Johann Penner during inclement weather or political danger. He spent years in various prisons under Article 58 for antisoviet

activities, and there too others recalled him as the pastor who still remembered a Psalm of comfort and shared a prayer.

Many of the stories that have appeared in German in *Der Bote* and *Mennonitische Rundschau* concerned the interwar years, and some are now available in English translation.[40] Less well known are those about serving in prison for religious activity after the Second World War.[41] Because it is so relatively recent, more Mennonites should know about the trial of the Eleven in 1952, POW returnees from American and British camps working in the uranium mines of Central Asia, whose guilt was that they had organized a church. All received some prison sentence but their leader Heinrich Vins, who had been a POW in America and must have been given an assignment by the CIA under religious cover (so the charge), received the death sentence. Vin's life and death turned out to be a martyria of witness. One day Franz Thiessen, who was nearing the end of his sentence and sent out on work brigades each day, began to wonder about a fellow Afghani prisoner's behavior. He followed him into another room in the apartment block under construction, and saw him kneel down in a corner. Then he proceeded to recite the Lord's Prayer in German. The man had once been on death row with Heinrich Vins, and it had been the care for others, the offer of hope even to a foreign prisoner, that had left an indelible impression and made the man want to pray to Vin's God.[42]

The story of Saint Peter Rempel involved twists that some might attribute to accident but that Christians have learned to associate with the leading of the Holy Spirit, who works with less than perfect human beings. I once thought I knew the story of Viktor Fast of Karaganda, the young man who organized the 200-year-anniversary celebrations in Zaporozh'e in 1989. Then I obtained the diary of his mother Lena Fast, who had recorded her hopeless prayers to God after her husband had been sent off to prison (and remained there for a decade), and who was then separated from her little son Willi. Later Willi caused her anxiety as he went off to university, married, and no longer believed. But her husband returned, and he and Lena had two more boys, Viktor and Vasili. Vasili found his way to Russian Orthodoxy, eventually taking the correspondence course for seminarians. Viktor became a Mennonite preacher.

Because of the joint witness of Viktor and Vasili, older brother Willi found his way to the church and was baptized into Russian Orthodoxy. In 1998 Willi Fast and his extended family made the international news.[43] It is no

secret that some of the clergy and bishops of the Russian Orthodox church are at best a mixed blessing. The assistant bishop in Tomsk, Siberia was poorly trained, authoritarian in style, and had a proclivity to make homosexual advances to some priests. The news story described how Willi's son and son-in-law, both Orthodox priests, had successfully agitated to have the bishop removed. In my private reading of that story, I saw God was mixing up the confessional order, so that at the appropriate time a priest raised in a Mennonite home with high expectations of moral behavior would have the persistence to remind Orthodox leaders that the same code was expected of their ministers. I cannot imagine Lena Fast praying for her children toward such outcomes, but I can imagine her noticing that this too was a way God answered her prayer.

Notes

[1] See for example Doris Penner, "Mennonites a Puzzle to Soviets, Historian Says. Archives Shed Light on an Era of Terror," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, Nov. 1998.

[2] For a helpful brief explanation to assist in reading the symbolism of icons, see John Baggley and Richard Temple, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Significance* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988).

[3] Fr. Men' was killed with an axe when on his way to church in September 1989. Though the case was never solved, Alexander Men' has become a symbol of saintly piety. See Janet M. Wehrle, "The Life of Aleksandr Men': Hagiography in the Making," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 19.3 (June 1999):16-42.

[4] Part of the Redekop saga is recounted by Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up From the Rubble* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

[5] *Der Bote*, Nr. 2, January 6, 1988, p. 2. English version: "What Do We Tell our Children About the Time of Terror in Russia?" *The Mennonite*, April 25, 1988.

[6] Viewpoint by Jon Christoff, *Mennonite Weekly Review*, January 1999, p. 2. The actual quotation did not appear in the Doris Penner report as printed in that paper, though the statement "the Mennonite losses from peasant pogroms, civil strife and Civil War-related diseases were among the worst experienced by any group in Russia" appeared in Harvey Dyck's essay on "Reform Without Class War" in *Preservings*, December 13, 1998. Claims about authorities singling out the Mennonites, though disputed, arose in the discussion period numerous times at a Conference on Mennonites and the Soviet Inferno, held in October 1997 in Winnipeg.

[7] The declension theme was developed to excess with highly selective illustrations in Jacob Loewen and Wesley J. Prieb, *Only the Sword of the Spirit* (Hillsboro, KS; Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1998). See also their "The Abuse of Power Among Mennonites in South Russia

1789-1919," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996):17-44.

[8] In the writings of Guy Hershberger, John Howard Yoder, Lawrence Burkholder, J. Richard Burkholder and even Duane Friesen, the Russian legacy is essentially ignored.

[9] For more detail set in a broader background, see Walter Sawatsky, "Truth Telling in Eastern Europe: The Liberation and the Burden," *Journal of Church and State* 33 (Autumn 1991):701-729.

[10] Starting as an Initiative Group (*Initsiativniki*), then forming a union of Evangelical Christian Baptist churches that remained illegal and persecuted till the end of the Soviet Union, they reported to each other and abroad about imprisonments, harassment, and court trials through self-published (*Samizdat*) bulletins and letters in a style reminiscent of *Martyrs' Mirror* or Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Many of Mennonite origin and radical Christian commitment were its leaders and activists.

[11] Between 1974 and 1980 the author conducted systematic interviews in Germany, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee. Most of that material remains unpublished since at the time the interviewees requested confidentiality.

[12] Michael Bourdeaux and John Witte, Jr., eds. *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 162.

[13] A similar phenomenon was reported for Mennonites harassed as COs during World War I, often not telling their families crucial details that finally came out in formal interviews. See Gerlof Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

[14] See Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 121-133.

[15] John B. Toews, ed. *Mennonite Martyrs* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1997). Both the original two volumes and the selections in English translation lacked an interpretive structure and organization.

[16] Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981). See also the author's "From Russian to Soviet Mennonites 1941-1988," in John Friesen, ed. *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 299-337.

[17] Published by Herald Press.

[18] These included the English translation of Martin Friesen's *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia* (originally published in 1912); several volumes of essays edited by Paul Toews discussing themes from that massive tome; Rod Sawatsky, *Authority and Identity*; and John Friesen, ed. *Mennonites in Russia*.

[19] "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering During the Stalin Era and World War II," in this issue.

[20] Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

[21] *Ibid.*, 187. See also Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints. Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

[22] Gregory, 74-138.

[23] Radner, *End of the Church, passim*.

[24] *Ibid*.,122.

[25] *Ibid*.,123.
[26] *Ibid*., 124.
[27] *Ibid*., 133.
[28] *Ibid*., 131.
[29] For a history of the beginning of Memorial in 1990 and its subsequent struggles, see Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin's Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), especially chapters 5-7. A fuller statistical picture of the varieties of violations of human rights in the forced labor system emerges in Edwin Bacon, *The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labor System in the Light of the Archives* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).
[30] For an interpretive overview of Mennonite self-defense in 1919, see Helmut-Harry Loewen and James Urry, "Protecting Mammon. Some Dilemmas of Mennonite Nonresistance in Late Imperial Russia and the Origins of the Selbstschutz," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991):34-53.
[31] See "Spetskomandatura," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. V. 1990.
[32] For example, Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[33] Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
[34] Donald W. Shriver, Jr., "Victims' Right to Truth?" *Religion in Eastern Europe* 17.6 (Dec. 1997).
[35] Kyle A. Pasewark, "Remembering to Forget: A politics of forgiveness," *Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1995, 683-5; Miroslav Volf, "The Core of the Faith," *Christian Century*, March 4, 1998, 239. Volf develops the argument more fully in his "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation," *Religion in Eastern Europe* 18.3 (June 1998):19-34.
[36] Shriver, *Ethic for Enemies*, 178.
[37] Walter Wedel, *Only Twenty Kilometers* (German original *Nur Zwanzig Kilometer*), (Wuppertal: Oncken Verlag, 1979); Herman Hartfeld, *Faith in Spite of the KGB* (German original *Glaube Trotz KGB*), (Gummersbach: Friedenstimme Verlag, 1976); Gerhard Hamm, *Du hast uns nie verlassen: Erfahrungen christlicher Familien in der Sowjetunion* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1978); Peter Epp, *Ob tausand fallen . . .: mein Leben in Archipel Gulag* (Weichs: Memra-Verlag, 1988).
[38] Hans Kasdorf, *Flammen unausloeslich. Mission der Mennonite unter zaren und Sowjets 1789-1989* (Bielefeld: Logos Verlag,1991).
[39] Johannes Reimer, *Seine letzten Worte waren ein Lied. Martin Thielmann Leben und Wirken des Kirgisen Missionars* (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1997); Johannes Reimer, *Bis an die Enden Sibiriens. Aus dem Leben und Wirken des Ostjaken Missionars Johann Peters* (Logos Verlag, 1998).
[40] For example, Sarah Dyck, ed. *The Silence Echoes. Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997).
[41] For a recent collective effort to publish documents, letters, and memoirs, see Julia Hildebrandt, Heinrich Klassen, Gerhard Woelk, eds. *Aber wo sollen wir hin. Briefe von Russlandmennoniten aus den Jahren ihrer Gefangenschaft, Verbannung und Lagerhaft in der Sowjetunion*

(Frankenthal: Verlag Hirtenstimme e.V. 1998). Cf. Georg Hildebrandt, *Wieso Lebst Du Noch? Ein Deutscher im Gulag* (Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein, 1990).

[42] See Sawatsky "From Russian to Soviet Mennonites 1941-1988." Franz Thiessen also described his life in the privately published history of Neuendorf Colony (N. Kroeker), which is excerpted in English in Sarah Dyck, *The Silence Echoes*.

[43]"Bishop Transferred from Tomsk after Public Protest," *Keston News Service*, Nov. 5, 1998.