

# *The Conrad Grebel Review*

Volume 18, Number 2  
Spring 2000

*Special Issue*  
Living with a History of Suffering  
Theological Meaning & the Soviet Mennonite Experience

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## Editorial

This thematic issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* contains papers given at the consultation, “Living with a History of Suffering: Addressing the Repercussions of the Soviet Mennonite Experience,” sponsored by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre in the fall of 1999. The consultation was prompted by and followed a series of events in Mennonite communities across Canada in 1998 that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the height of the Stalin purges (1937-38). For many Mennonites living in the former Soviet Union during that era, those years saw significant numbers of men in particular arrested and either executed or sent into hard labor, most never to be seen by their families again.

A bit more historical information is necessary to place in context the articles that follow. The century-old Mennonite settlements in south Russia were radically transformed by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the First World War, and the Civil War and anarchy that followed. Prior to the upheavals of war and revolution, Russian Mennonite society was characterized by a fair degree of administrative autonomy, a strong religious orientation, and economic prosperity relative to neighboring villages. By the early 1920s, however, the violence, destruction, and death wrought by revolution, world war, anarchy, and famine prompted the departure of about 25,000 Mennonites for North and South America. For those who remained, Stalinism introduced a new era of terror.

Soviet Mennonite society of the late 1920s and 1930s was shaped by collectivization, de-kulakization, forced famine in Ukraine, the closure of churches and cultural institutions, and several waves of arrest and deportation of alleged subversives to Asiatic Russia. During the purges of the mid-1930s, entire truckloads of men were taken from a village in any one night. Several sources state that by the outbreak of the Second World War, an average of fifty percent of Mennonite families were without a father. When the Soviet Union entered the war, Mennonites, along with the Ukrainian population, found themselves in the midst of the shifting battle lines between Soviet and German armies. Considered as ethnic Germans, Mennonites were subject to further repression by the Soviets and thousands were evacuated eastward as the German army advanced into Ukraine. When German forces began their

westward retreat in the fall of 1943, they took with them 350,000 Soviet Germans, of which about ten percent were Mennonites.

Of those who left Ukraine on the so-called ‘great trek’, approximately 23,000 went missing in the war or were repatriated to the Soviet Union. Most of the remaining 12,000 Mennonite refugees scattered throughout Europe eventually emigrated to Canada and South America. But extreme hardship continued for the thousands who remained or were sent back. The prisoners, the exiles and those repatriated were sentenced to hard labor in work camps and gulags, or were simply dropped off freight trains to eke out an existence in remote, sparsely populated areas. Within a few years, many had died of illness or starvation. Over the past three decades, some 100,000 individuals of Mennonite background have left the former Soviet Union and settled in Germany.

The devastating loss of life, identity, and culture experienced by Mennonites in the Soviet era has been documented and analyzed by historians from a number of angles.<sup>1</sup> The theological meaning attached to that suffering has received minimal attention, however. The consultation sought to address theological questions that arise out of these particular historical events and also responses that might assist Soviet Mennonites, their pastors, and their children to interpret the past within the context of their contemporary religious lives.

Biblical scholar Waldemar Janzen, himself a Soviet Mennonite who immigrated to Canada with his mother after the Second World War, was asked to write a position paper outlining biblical and theological perspectives. Using Janzen’s presentation as a springboard, three other papers addressed similar issues from different angles. Henry Paetkau, a Mennonite pastor, profiles and analyzes the writings of three ministers who lived through imprisonment and exile under Stalin in the 1930s. Historian Walter Sawatsky, who has studied and worked with Christian groups in the former Soviet Union over several decades, uses the theological paradigm of martyrology to compare the Mennonite story under Stalinism with that of sixteenth-century Anabaptists and also with other Soviet Christian groups. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast suggests that the primary contribution of the Soviet experience to a contemporary Mennonite theology lies in a focus on the nature of truth that emerges from a context of atheism.

Two respondents to these four papers offer alternative ways to think about Soviet Mennonite history and its theological repercussions. Carol Penner responds to the issues raised by Janzen and others with a new understanding of the Noah's ark-like character of the Mennonite church in which she grew up. She also makes crucial comparisons between the suffering of Soviet Mennonites and that of contemporary victims of torture and survivors of domestic violence. From his vantage point as a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, Len Friesen proposes the revisionist interpretation that Mennonites did more than simply endure suffering; rather, they found ways of actively resisting and subverting the policies that tried to break them.

It is important to remember that abstract ideas are informed by and interact with lived experience. With that in mind, we are also including excerpts from the personal life story of Werner Fast, whose poignant reflections moved many people attending the consultation.

The literary refraction in this issue is a piece of reflective prose by author Rudy Wiebe, introduced by literary editor Hildi Froese Tiessen. An eclectic assortment of book reviews rounds out the issue.

Marlene Epp, *Editor*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example, "Mennonites in the Soviet Inferno," a special issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998); John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1988* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989); John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets, and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982).

**Cover photo:** The westward trek of Soviet Germans, including Mennonites, from Ukraine in the fall of 1943. Courtesy of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

# **Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering during the Stalin Era and World War II**

*Waldemar Janzen*

## **Introduction**

This paper is neither a detached theological dissertation nor a conclusive treatment of the Mennonite experience of terror and suffering during the Stalin era and World War II. It will not be detached because I was born into the midst of that experience, so that the course of my life was largely shaped by it, although significant other factors also made their impact. From the distance of over half a century, I realize increasingly how much the experiences under discussion, which I at times believed to have left behind, still cast their shadows on my existence today. Nor will it be conclusive regarding an understanding of that era even for myself. I am still struggling for a personally satisfying perspective on those years, one that can somehow incorporate them into the true flow of Mennonite history, and not simply see them as a terrible interlude best left behind and forgotten. This struggle for incorporating into life a time that may seem like death is somewhat parallel to the task we face when serious illness strikes us. Our tendency is to consider such a time as a temporary cessation of life, a life that can begin again if and when we recover. Yet times of illness and suffering must be owned as real parts of our life rather than as interruptions. Only then can we continue to live without being held back by them.

In spite of these disclaimers, a time distance of half a century, or approximately two generations, seems right historically and for me personally

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to look at that era with some detachment from earlier emotions. Such detachment is necessary for gaining a comprehensive, if not conclusive, picture that can aid us towards incorporating that era into our understanding of God's leading and God's goals.

### **Starting with the future**

In a time conscious of the importance of narrative for the shaping of identity, we may well be ready for highlighting certain key dynamics of the confessional narrative of the Bible as helps for an interpretive telling of our own story. Pre-eminent among these dynamics is the forward thrust of the biblical story. This is what allows it to be a story of salvation. Its starting points are always those life settings where dark powers seem to have control. One is the story of the first human rebellion against God – the story of the Fall, culminating in human estrangement from God and the scattering of a splintered humanity across the face of the earth (Genesis 3-11). Another is Israel's enslavement in Egypt and rebellion in the wilderness (Exodus). Later there follows the captivity of Israel in Babylon, and then the "darkness" that lay over Judea at the time of the coming of Christ.

Yet the dynamic of the biblical story does not revel in these settings of darkness; instead, it highlights the goings forth, the new beginnings initiated by God. Abraham sets out for the land promised by God. Israel, after a long detour to Egypt, takes up this move towards the land. Judah in Babylonian captivity hears the call to a new exodus into God's future (Isaiah 40ff.). God's people are encouraged in prophetic and apocalyptic texts to see themselves as people on the way to the Day of the Lord, or the Kingdom of God as the New Testament calls it. And Jesus declares that this Kingdom has already gained a strong foothold, through his coming and ministry, in the present world, although its fullness still lies in the future.

To tell the story of God at work, the story into which God's people are invited, means to become more conscious of God's goal than of one's own starting point. We are called by the biblical story to see the significance of the experiences of the past to lie in shaping our understanding of God's goals for the future. The function of remembering is to awaken hope. The biblical story is more like a good novel drawing the reader's attention forward towards a promised ending than a judicial inquiry report dredging up once more all the

dark events of the past. (That the dark past needs to be revisited to some extent will receive attention later.)

The goal of the biblical story's forward movement is at first limited and concrete; it is contained in God's promise of descendants and land to Abraham, and later to Israel. The land, however, at first understood very concretely as the land of Canaan, becomes symbolic, pointing beyond itself to God's future, the Day of Yahweh or the Kingdom of God. Everyday life and the flow of history gain purpose and meaning to the extent that they become part of this movement towards God's ultimate goal. There is no golden age, no perfect society, no life now already fulfilled in itself, but only that fulfilment which consists of placing the self into the God-directed movement to the ultimate God-set goal.

### **The grip of a futureless present**

If we could find a way to place the Mennonite era of Soviet terror into a story moving toward that God-set goal or *telos*, we could be set free to find positive meaning in it for ourselves and our history. But the grip of a meaningless, static present is strong. People in the depths of suffering tend to perceive their situation as eternal. It is for them the state of things. During my childhood in the Stalinist Soviet Union it seemed to me – but I am sure also to many adults – that life had entered a static form of existence marked by poverty, want, scarcity of food, clothing and everything else, submission to authorities driven by a hostile ideology, and above all, fear for one's own life and freedom and for those of one's family, relatives, and friends. The powers that held sway seemed unchallengeable from within and invincible from without. Stoic, fatalistic, or despairing submission seemed the only option for living.

Israel's experience of such an apparently futureless present is well described in Exodus 2:23: "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out." The text continues (verses 24-25): "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." But this was not known to the Israelites at that time. When Moses came later to lead them out of Egypt at God's command, they considered him a stirrer of trouble who had made their lot worse rather than better (Exodus



5:19-21). Best to submit to the inevitable, they thought, than to cherish futile hopes for change.

I remember when, late one night, two young women came to visit the family with whom my mother and I lived and to whom they were related. Under the cover of darkness and secrecy they shared a rumor that Hitler would bring about the removal of all Germans from the Soviet Union to Germany. It seemed like a dream experienced momentarily as real, but bound to dissolve into nothingness. It was a dangerous dream at that. Don't say such things! It's dangerous! Who knows who might hear you! And in the end we will be disappointed anyway!

In retrospect we know that the apparently invincible Soviet Union would fall apart almost in the twinkling of an eye. But were the people back then not right to perceive their situation as a futureless present of oppression and endurance? What good would the knowledge of the Soviet Union's eventual demise have done my father and all the others in concentration camps who never saw that day?

### **Breaking the grip**

The only way out of the grip of a futureless, God-less present was the route of faith. There were those, and they were many, who had learned and come to believe that God is a God of the future, a God who is leading the world towards his Kingdom, and a God whom nothing can stop. These were the people who waited and hoped.

Such a hope could not be individualistic, however. These people had no assurance that they themselves would experience God's apparently stranded train of history moving again. If their hope sustained them, it did so as members of the people of God, a people who would continue towards God's goals, even if they as individuals would not experience the awaited future on this earth. But they would still be a part of it as sharers in the resurrection, in a life eternal awaiting them. To what extent they thought in corporate terms, that is, perceived themselves as members of a world-wide church that was ongoing even while their own church and personal life was being destroyed, I cannot say. My impression is that an individualistic hope for life after death predominated.

Many did, of course, escape to the west during World War II and were able to start a new life of freedom, comfort, and opportunity. I was one of them. Others experienced a lessening of the terror after the death of Stalin in 1953. Still others were able to resettle in Germany decades later, after horrendous hardships in Siberia and elsewhere.

Whether survival, escape, and new beginning were experienced as meaningless fate or accepted as foretastes of the work of a God advancing the work of salvation made a fundamental difference for understanding the times of terror. For those holding to the former position, the years of suffering were lost years, a lost stretch of life, perhaps so long that its ending came too late for life to pick up again. For those with the latter perspective, even the dark years could be incorporated into a life participating, through faith, in the dynamic forward-movement of God's story.

### **Modes of experiencing God at work**

Within this general framework of faith in the biblical panorama of God working to establish the Kingdom, and a sense of participation in God's ways, Mennonites in the times under discussion – if they lived by faith – drew on the Bible's perspectives on suffering selectively as they faced oppression, deprivation, persecution, or death. It may be helpful here to consider our ancestors' ways of appropriating biblical themes on suffering. My attempt to depict some of these ways is based on memories, impressions, and random readings rather than on systematic research. It is more an indication of the direction for further research than an authoritative characterization of attitudes in that time.

1. Throughout the Bible, suffering typically evokes the question of sin and punishment. The narrative books and the prophetic oracles are full of accounts and announcements of God's judgment, through various forms of suffering, on sinful peoples and individuals. Similarly, the lament psalms contain many confessions of guilt and promises of future faithfulness or, alternatively, of protestations of innocence. Even though the book of Job, the Suffering Servant text of Isaiah 52-53, and a number of words of Jesus emphasize that suffering does not *have* to be judgment for sin, they do not say that it cannot be.

As far as I know, however, few if any Mennonites in the Stalinist era and its sequels interpreted their sufferings as specific judgment from God calling for acceptance and repentance, either corporately or individually. Unlike what some North Americans have done in retrospect, they did not interpret the peaceful era of the Mennonite settlements in Russia before the Revolution of 1917 as deserving of special judgment. Although Mennonites have been given to a strong sense of personal and general human sinfulness, those of the era under discussion did not seem to account for their special sufferings by perceiving them as God's judgment on a sinful Mennonite history in Russia.

2. A second biblical option is represented by the suffering of Job, beginning with his vehement protests against a God whom he could only understand as the great Rewarder and Punisher, and ending – through the intervention of God – with an image of God as both more mysterious and more trustworthy than he had thought possible.

The outcry of Job in his innocence must have been repeated by many Mennonite men and a number of women in Siberian concentration camps, and by many a woman struggling to support her family without husband, father, brothers, or sons. Explicit references to Job's story, however, seem not to have characterized Mennonite attitudes. Had this biblical book not been studied much in religion classes? Had it been read – as throughout much of church history – with an emphasis on the patience of Job? Or had Job's sufferings been absorbed into the image of the greater innocent sufferer, Jesus Christ? I do not know.

3. A third biblical theme is that of vicarious suffering, or suffering for others. We find it in the sacrificial cult of Israel, in the "Suffering Servant" passages in Isaiah (particularly 52:13-53:12), and above all in the vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ. Again, as far as I can tell, Mennonites in the Soviet Union did not interpret their suffering as a sharing in Christ's redemptive work. To be sure, they tied their suffering very closely to that of Jesus Christ, but in three rather different ways. First, "taking up Christ's cross" meant leading a life of confession and obedience even to the point of incurring suffering, just as Christ had suffered obediently. In this sense they saw what was happening to them as a direct result of their Christian faith and life. Second, they were encouraged by the knowledge that God who in Jesus Christ had experienced great suffering could fully empathize with them (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-16). Third,

they were confident that God in Jesus Christ was with them even in their darkest hours. Many psalms and words of Jesus confirmed this for them.

4. The point just mentioned, the presence of God with faithful sufferers, must be distinguished from a notion enjoying considerable favor in theology today, namely that God suffers with, or even through, suffering humanity. Elie Wiesel, in his story *Night*, describes a concentration camp scene where prisoners watch a young boy die on the gallows. To the question, “Where is God now?” Wiesel has someone answer, “There on the gallows.” While many Mennonites in concentration camps felt the presence of God with them, I doubt that any of them thought of God as suffering in or through them.

5. Sometimes in Proverbs, and repeatedly in the New Testament, suffering is presented as a form of training or of meeting a test of one’s faithfulness (e.g., Prov. 3:11-12; 10:17; Rom. 8:18; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; cf. Heb. 12-13). Those found faithful would inherit eternal life. I am under the impression that suffering was often borne in this light in those times. The view of this life as merely preparatory for eternity was strong. It was part of the Pietist heritage, and it was confirmed by the experience that this world was indeed a “valley of the shadow of death.”

6. The Bible makes repeated reference to the sufferings of the faithful remnant in the face of super-human powers standing in conflict with God. The task of this remnant is faithful endurance. I am not aware of widespread, explicitly millenarian or otherwise endtime-focused expectations among Mennonites in the Stalinist era, but their attitude seems to have resembled that called for by the apocalyptic writings of the Bible (parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation). The political-military forces at work had all the appearance of super-human powers. In contrast even to the brief *Selbstschütz* interlude in the chaotic times of the Revolution, when some Mennonites took up arms to defend themselves and their families against anarchist terrorists, no one in the Stalin era contemplated resistance by any external means. Only prayer, faithful endurance, and the hope that God would step in remained available.

7. We should also consider a frequent modern attitude to suffering, even though not directly biblical, at least in its modern liberationist version. I refer to the notion that suffering is meaningful in so far as it is an agent for social-political change, whether it meets us in South American liberation thinking, in the Filipino theology of struggle, or related positions. As far as I

know, Mennonites in the Soviet era did not interpret their suffering as a means pregnant with power to bring about change in the social-political order.

### **Questions we need to address**

Those who lived in that time of terror made their decisions and died or survived, either with faith in God's – temporarily invisible – leading or in resignation to what seemed inevitable but meaningless. We today look back at that time with sufficient distance to face attempting to make sense of it as a part of our story; not just any sense, but theological sense. What are the areas we need to address and the questions we need to ask? The areas suggested here are but a start. I am sure they will lead to further explorations and questions.

#### **1. REMEMBERING**

Although I stressed the need to model our own story-telling on the biblical dynamic of focusing on the future, a certain kind of recalling and preserving the terrible past experiences of our people is necessary. It forms the basis for understanding even the darkest times in our history as times in which God has not abandoned his will to save. But remembering is a very selective activity. In the act of remembering we sort out what is to be remembered and, conversely, what ought to be forgotten.

The emphasis on God's salvific leading to God's future goal, rather than on the initial rule of the dark powers, has already been mentioned. The slavery of Israel in Egypt and God's judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt through the plagues had to be told. Nevertheless, they are not highlighted, expanded, or developed in Israel's confessions; they merely form the starting point for a recital of God's saving acts. These acts constitute the focus and substance of Israel's remembering. Similarly, the story of Jesus does not linger with Caiaphas and Pilate, but moves forward to the Easter events and God's new work of establishing the church and proclaiming the gospel. How do we appropriate biblical patterns of remembering for preserving our own story?

The task of sorting out the content to be remembered is followed, or perhaps accompanied by, the search for the proper forms of preserving it. Gathering and preserving material must be done soon, before eye witnesses die and letters and private papers are lost or destroyed. Story publishing and

history writing are natural further steps. We already see an increase of such publications.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. MEMORIALIZING AND RITUALIZING

Memorials and rituals can also serve the process of remembering. I refer to the work of visual artists, creative writers and poets, as well as musicians and worship planners. Who are our ‘heroes’ and ‘saints’ to be held up for admiration and imitation? Whose biographies do we promote, not simply as family tradition but as the stories of key figures for us as a people? For whom do we erect monuments, like the one on the grounds of the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba, dedicated on July 28, 1985, to the memory of victims of the Communist Revolution, World War I, the Stalin Era, and World War II? What events are the ‘stuff’ for novels like Al Reimer’s *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* (Hyperion Press, 1985), that vividly illustrates the Mennonite experience of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath? What paintings can capture our experience? What hymns might emerge from the times under discussion?

I am not referring here to the whole range of private artistic creativity; that will emerge and assert itself, and so it should. It will be varied and personal and, of course, uncontrolled. My concern is with the art that is theologically expressive of our faith, and that we as a people can and want to make our own. It is the art we place in our institutions, such as schools and churches. It includes the illustrations in our Sunday School materials and the hymns in our future hymnals. It is the videos, reader’s theatres, dramas and films, for example, that our church libraries and resource centres promote for educational and other church events. To speak of it in this way does not imply strait jacketing or censoring individual artistic creativity but the selection of what appropriately passes on the Christian-Mennonite story of the era in question.

This selection must take its direction from the Bible. It will, for example, not glorify violence, cunning adaptation, or ingenious self-preservation. Instead, it will focus on the Christian virtues, such as sacrificial service. It will look to the example of the biblical servants of God, and above all to Jesus and his example, but also to the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11) and the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) for guidance in selecting what deserves to be held up to posterity.

**3. ANALOGIES OF HISTORY**

The Mennonite era of terror in the Soviet Union is only one of many times of severe suffering of Christians and others in history. We can gain better perspective on it if we look at it in the light of other such times – for example, the persecution of early Christians by the Roman Empire or the sufferings of early Anabaptists as recorded in the *Martyrs' Mirror* and elsewhere. We might also ask how the descendants of those experiencing such times of terror handled that legacy. How have martyrs been remembered in the church? We might go beyond the church and attempt to learn, positively or negatively, how the descendants of non-Christian groups handled their past. A particularly relevant example is the Jewish response to the Holocaust.

**4. JUDGMENT AND REPENTANCE**

Some, but limited, attention should be given to the unavoidable question “Why suffering?” We should let the Bible guide us, however, in preserving the mystery of suffering, rather than seeking explanations and solutions that can only camouflage it.

In the Bible, suffering is by no means always understood as judgment from God. Israel in Egypt was not suffering for its sins, neither was the early Christian church depicted in 1 Peter or in Revelation. Many of the sufferings that befell the Old Testament people, however, are declared by the prophets and other biblical writers as God’s judgment on the people’s unfaithfulness. The most prominent events so characterized are the destruction of Samaria, followed by the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and the destruction of Jerusalem, followed by the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

To what extent should Mennonite suffering in the Soviet Union be assessed as God’s judgment on our history of unfaithfulness? This is a very sensitive question. It should certainly not result in blaming the victim for the crime. We must at all cost avoid – or, where it has rashly been done in the past, negate – the temptation to sit in judgment, from a North American perspective, on our ancestors in Russia. In the Bible we find repeatedly how later generations identified themselves with their history in the corporate confession, “We have sinned . . .” Only as we Mennonites in North America stand in solidarity with those in Russia can we perhaps declare some of *our*

joint history, not *their* history, as a history of covenant breaking and judgment that calls for repentance and re-commitment.

#### 5. FORGIVING OUR ENEMIES

There is no question that great wrong has been done to the Mennonite people in the Soviet Union. How do we deal with that? Both the Bible and historic Mennonite convictions reject, first of all, any literal attempt at revenge, and second, any harboring of historical grudges against Russians or Ukrainians, such as those that have vitiated relationships between peoples in many areas of the world for centuries. We must fight all anti-Russian or anti-Ukrainian biases among us, even while we condemn unhesitatingly the atheist Marxist/Stalinist ideology and power system that perpetrated the terror.

More difficult is the question whether and in what sense we have the right to forgive those who committed crimes and atrocities against our ancestors. Can anyone forgive what has been done to someone else? But if we identify with our ancestors in a solidarity of judgment and repentance, as I advocated above, we might also – at least in that corporate sense – exercise forgiveness. Requests for forgiveness have been expressed and granted between the descendants of various groups whose ancestors, sometimes centuries removed, had respectively incurred guilt and suffered injustice. What expression might such forgiveness best take?

#### 6. COPING WITH THE EMOTIONAL LOAD

The very existence of the time of terror in our history, and therefore in our minds, constitutes a heavy emotional burden. There were times in my life, and surely also in the lives of others, where I deliberately protected myself from the stories and memories of the earlier time of terror, such as the Communist Revolution of 1917, or the time of anarchy and of marauding bands, like that of the infamous terrorist Nestor Machno. Having heard volumes of oral tradition on these subjects, including the story of my grandfather's murder, I simply avoided listening to such stories whenever I could or reading any accounts of them. This was not simply repression; it represented to some extent the healthy self-protection of a young person against emotional overload. It was Reimer's novel *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* that made it possible for me eventually to look at that part of our history with the help of artistic



distance and ordering. I could not escape the terror of the Stalin era in the same way, since it was part of my personal experience. Many of my generation have thrown themselves with all their energy into the new possibilities offered by Canada, to rebuild life economically and professionally. Yet the burden cannot be lifted in this way alone.

All the descendants of the Mennonites who lived through the Stalin era carry this emotional burden. It weighs on us like the Holocaust weighs on Jews. How do we deal with it constructively? We eschew the satisfaction of revenge. We recognize the unhealthy character of silent repression. Yet, how do we deal with our pain, our horror, our sympathy with the victims, and our fear of similar times in the future? The program of Logotherapy, developed by the Jewish psychiatrist Victor Frankl on the basis of his concentration camp experience, is a prominent example of one approach to coping with suffering, an approach that tries to deal with suffering by finding meaning. It is mentioned here merely as one avenue – albeit a significant one – of approaching the psychological task under discussion.

A particular dimension of this task is the question: How do we hand on the knowledge of this part of our history to our children in such a way that they can own it as part of their corporate Mennonite story without being unduly burdened by it?

## **7. OUR SUFFERING-BASED MISSION**

Inherent in any significant experience is a call to new attitudes and actions. To understand our time of Soviet terror theologically cannot but lead to questions regarding the possibilities and responsibilities this places on us now and in the future. What have we learned? How have we been reshaped? How have we learned to understand God's ways better? How can our suffering help us to relate to and help others suffering today? In sum, what impact should this time of terror have on our life and our mission as a people?

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Early examples are Olga Rempel, *Einer von Vielen: Die Lebensgeschichte von Prediger Aaron P. Toews* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1979); and Hans Rempel, *Waffen der Wehrlosen: Ersatzdienst der Mennoniten in der UdSSR* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1980). More recent ones include Katharina Ediger, *Under His Wings: Events in the Lives of Elder Alexander Ediger and His Family*, ed. Elisabeth Schulz, trans. Mark Bachmann (Kitchener, ON: by the author, 1994); and Sarah Dyck, ed., *The Silence Echoes: Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997).

## 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.

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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.

## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 iconographers left. So she apprenticed herself to an iconographer 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.<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Those are the extremes of claiming exceptional suffering or charging unusual unfaithfulness to the Anabaptist legacy.<sup>7</sup>

### **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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

### **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.<sup>13</sup> Here we recognize the theme of the hiddenness of martyrdom and suffering.<sup>14</sup>

*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,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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*.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

### **The promise and problem of surmounting the events with meaning**

In Waldemar Janzen's essay in this issue,<sup>19</sup> 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 subgroup 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.<sup>20</sup> 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?).<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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 . . . .”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup>

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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup>

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 martyrdom 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 martyrdom 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.<sup>29</sup>

### **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?<sup>30</sup> 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?<sup>31</sup> 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 martyrria 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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.”<sup>36</sup>

**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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> Less well known are those about serving in prison for religious activity after the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> 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 martyrdom 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Part of the Redekop saga is recounted by Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up From the Rubble* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

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

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>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.

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

<sup>13</sup>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* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

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

<sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottsdale, 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.

<sup>17</sup>Published by Herald Press.

<sup>18</sup>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*.

<sup>19</sup>“Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering During the Stalin Era and World War II,” in this issue.

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

<sup>21</sup>*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).

<sup>22</sup>Gregory, 74-138.

<sup>23</sup>Radner, *End of the Church*, *passim*.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> 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).

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> See "Spetskomandatura," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. V. 1990.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Donald W. Shriver, Jr., "Victims' Right to Truth?" *Religion in Eastern Europe* 17.6 (Dec. 1997).

<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> Shriver, *Ethic for Enemies*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> 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).

<sup>38</sup> Hans Kasdorf, *Flammen unausloeslich. Mission der Mennonite unter zaren und Sowjets 1789-1989* (Bielefeld: Logos Verlag, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> 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).

<sup>40</sup> For example, Sarah Dyck, ed. *The Silence Echoes. Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> 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).

<sup>42</sup> 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*.

<sup>43</sup> "Bishop Transferred from Tomsk after Public Protest," *Keston News Service*, Nov. 5, 1998.

***Gott kann! Gott kann nicht!***  
**The Suffering of Soviet Mennonites and Their  
Contribution to a Contemporary Mennonite Theology**

*Arnold Neufeldt-Fast*

The major lesson and bottom line of all this could be distilled into the two words that C.F. Klassen spoke so often: “*Gott kann!*” God can! God is able!

– Peter Dyck, *Up from the Rubble*<sup>1</sup>

Christian talk of God is not complete without an account of hope in God’s final and decisive victory over the powers of sin and death. Out of this conviction, interpretations of the Soviet Mennonite tragedy have typically emphasized God’s sovereign leading of his people and hence the confident claim: *Gott kann!* God can. In telling the story from this perspective, the countless cases of suffering in which God did *not* stretch out his hand to deliver from human evil and tragedy tend to lose their profile in the divine triumph and mystery. The experience of suffering by Mennonites in the Soviet Union was a direct affront to their human dignity and wholeness as persons. Have Mennonites learned to say anything new about God or faith from this overwhelming experience of divine silence? The raw stories of abduction, starvation, and death during the Stalin years can suggest the possibility of divine abandonment and can provoke, at the very least, new thinking on the nature of God’s agency with respect to human transience, suffering, and death. Any Mennonite theology influenced by the suffering in the Soviet Union will be a theology in the shadow of modern atheism.

The theological questions at the heart of this story are not abstract. The chaos and suffering of the early Soviet era led Mennonites into an experience

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of primeval *tohu wabohu* (“formlessness/chaos and desolation” [Gen 1:2]) in which the light of God was dim and his creative voice muffled among the abstract, ideological babel of Communism, Fascism, or National Socialism. The stories are constructed from bits and pieces overheard in our grandmothers’ kitchens, of events that had not yet found a voice or convincing narrative. Dorothee Sölle proposes a helpful definition of theology as “the task of enlarging the borders of our language. A theology that could wrest land from the sea of speechless death would be a theology worthy of that name.”<sup>2</sup> Yet any real opportunities among Mennonites to respond in a sustained and articulate way to their suffering so as “to wrest land from this sea of speechless death” were brutally curtailed. Under severe persecution and loss of leadership, a theology that had been lodged in an essentially modern, optimistic view of human progress spent much of its remaining energies finding refuge in a traditional (pre-modern) view of divine omnipotence and omniscience. Yet this old route ultimately demands a satisfying response to a question moderns find almost impossible to answer: How can an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God permit such atrocities?

Diaries and stories from the Soviet Mennonite experience give signs indicating another direction in which our language of God could move at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Peter and Elfrieda Dyck write:

One [woman refugee] said, “I don’t believe God sends the suffering, he probably just allows it. But I believe he suffers, too. That’s why I pray to him. If God weren’t involved in some way, it wouldn’t make sense. The suffering wouldn’t make sense. Praying wouldn’t make sense.” We learned so much from the refugees.<sup>3</sup>

The alternative suggested here is a theology that centers on the God of faithfulness and love who is manifest in captivity, suffering, and exile. God’s sovereignty is thus not abstracted from human bondage but is God’s free choice to suffer with and for his children, and even at their hands, for the redemption of creation. The experience of massive suffering provokes us to think God concretely in self-identification with Jesus’ suffering and death. An account that thinks the eternal God together with transience and death will either offer an alternative to both traditional theism and modern protest atheism or fail altogether.

What God can or cannot do is linked to larger assumptions about God's future or eschatology. In section one below I trace a shift in Soviet Mennonite thought from a generally optimistic faith in the progress of humanity and of Jesus as ethical model, towards a pessimistic view about what is humanly possible one in which new possibilities and changes are identified with the dreaded end of the world. The two models operate with very different eschatologies, yet both are caught in what Waldemar Janzen calls "the grip of the futureless present."<sup>4</sup> I will suggest that this future arises out of God's creative power, and that the task of theological ethics is to create earthly correspondences of God's coming kingdom as well as to engage critically those tendencies that hinder the way into that future.

In connection with the intense experiences of systematic deception, spying, propaganda, and fear mongering by Mennonites in the Soviet era, a focus on truth in our faith language becomes particularly important. In section two I introduce the category of truth as an "event of interruption" to speak about the coming of God (or God's future) as an arrival that grants the "historical" future openness and possibility for creative anticipations of God's coming kingdom. Taking *truth* as a central theological category, we can think anew the old Anabaptist concept of *Gelassenheit*. This leads me to reflect on the peculiar nature of Christian worship as an event of truth.

### I. Eschatology and Ethics

What God can or will do is related to eschatology. The christological account of truth suggested above focuses on the coming of God to his creation – that is, an arrival, a future that already begins to liberate the present from the power of the past.

With this end in mind, Jürgen Moltmann has identified two modern "syndromes" with corresponding eschatological paradigms that have dominated Western ethical thinking in the last 150 years.<sup>5</sup> The "progressive syndrome" works with an optimistic anthropology: humans are by nature good and can be improved through education and training. The "conservative syndrome" operates with a pessimistic anthropology: humans are in need of containment through the orders of state, family, and religion. The former syndrome is based on a millenarian faith in the progress of humanity in which the golden age of "eternal peace" comes within reach in time. In this view the Christian world is the



kingdom of Christ that has already come near as the highest good for morality and the goal of historical progress. The later syndrome cultivates a negative eschatology characterized by an ethics of preservation until the final apocalyptic battle. Both accounts are in different ways closed to the future.

These two models are nevertheless helpful for identifying and tracing the theological and ethical shift that occurred in Soviet Mennonite thought in the upheavals of the twentieth century. This in turn provides an important backdrop for contemporary Mennonite theological proposals.

**1. The Progressive Syndrome.** At the dawn of the twentieth century, Mennonites in Russia were no strangers to modern, optimistic accounts of human nature and corresponding moralistic expressions of faith. The *Diary of Anna Baerg* indicates that it was not only the Mennonite intelligentsia who knew the works of the great German dramatist and poet Friedrich Schiller, for example.<sup>6</sup> Schiller's early tragedies attack the tyrannies of political oppression and social convention that threaten individual freedom to shape the future. Education, specifically aesthetic education, would serve to develop a happier, more humane social order, according to Schiller.<sup>7</sup> And this is how at least choral conductors in the Molotschna viewed the work of their choirs at the height of the 1922 famine in the Ukraine. When human values had come crashing down, J. Thiessen and Isaak Regehr suggested that "our choirs should represent the sensible, religious and moral foundation of our community. They should be vocal consciences of our society. Music should keep us from doing evil, should judge evildoing, and inspire the love of the good and the beautiful."<sup>8</sup> For moderns the connection between the beautiful and faith, on the one hand, and moral existence and freedom, on the other, is essential and within reach.

Steve Masterson, who counseled Mennonites for twenty-two years, noted: "I have counseled enough of them to know they worship the religion of the strong . . . . When you deal with personal weakness, that pulls them into an area they don't want to go."<sup>9</sup> In that thoroughly modern sense, Anna Baerg and her reading circle read Ufer Hold in the midst of the famine in the Ukraine, and asked:

How am I to develop my character to become a complete personality? The hero of the book says this: "Would you like to become a fuller, stronger, more mature and powerful human being,

inwardly happy and a blessing to others; do you wish to rid yourself of your torments, your unsteadiness and mood swings? Then come to Jesus, the great character builder.”<sup>10</sup>

This close and natural connection between faith and training in moral and mental fortitude, between Jesus and character formation, suggests that Mennonites in this period had become reasonably comfortable with a modern, moralistic expression of faith. Christian millenarianism offered a universal interpretive framework for the great advances in colonization, mission, and science. Russia had conquered Siberia and settled the continent. With the seizure of technological and political power, the last revolution had already taken place and what remained was only a matter of evolution and proper development. Russian, European, and American imperialism were all fueled by a messianic sense of mission to redeem the world.

But with World War I and the Russian Revolution those millenarian dreams ended for Russian Mennonites. This particular positive syndrome, was largely discarded by Europeans – including Mennonites. The Stoic stance, that one who is in possession of him- or herself will suffer no loss, that wholeness comes through an act of obedience to an imperative, was retained. In hindsight, though, many Mennonites came to view this period theologically as a time of apostasy in which creative anticipations of God’s coming kingdom were few.

**2. The Conservative Syndrome.** This syndrome operates with a pessimistic anthropology and assumes that humans are predisposed to evil. The conservative syndrome demands the strong hands of: (a) the Fatherland, which promises identity, (b) the patriarchal family, and (c) an absolute fear of God. Only thus do children and adults learn to control and master themselves and become obedient: God-Czar-Family, or after 1941 for a time, God-Führer-Family. When these God-given structures are undermined, the dams break open, bringing forth chaos. With the fall of the Czar and the ensuing rape, murder, and looting which Mennonites suffered at the hands of Nestor Machno and his anarchist bandits, Mennonites in the 1920s had good reason to interpret human nature in terms of this paradigm.

This view was later reinforced with the coincidence of official atheism and the closing of churches with economic breakdown, famine, and the

destruction of families. Already in the early 1920s the Soviet regime began to ban all religious instruction in the schools. But it was after the Fifteenth Party Congress held in December 1927 that the government-sponsored “League of the Godless” ardently began to establish itself in many Mennonite communities with the aim of converting Mennonite young people to atheism.<sup>11</sup> The League of the Godless provided public lectures and anti-religious instructional sessions, and held open debates with local Mennonite ministers to show the folly of belief in God. The League enjoyed some success in Schönwiese (Alexandrowsk) and a few villages in the Molotschna where they were able to enlist new recruits.<sup>12</sup> By all accounts, government intimidation and repression of the church leadership made serious debate, reflection, and intellectual exchange all but impossible. Against this background, Mennonites in the Soviet Union were systematically and inescapably confronted with the intellectual possibility that God is unnecessary as a foundation for thought or being. This context of official atheism was understood as the beginning of the end, and was accompanied by the rise of inept and corrupt bureaucrats and a widespread breakdown of morality.

The most horrible evidence for this conservative world view came with the terrifying arrests and brutal persecution of male heads of Mennonite households (and churches) in the mid-1930s. Jacob Sawatzky describes his father’s arrest by Soviet secret police:

His father entered the corner room, followed by a low-ranking, husky NKVD officer [secret police] . . . It became clear to Jacob. Here, in their own corner room, his father had lost his authority as master in his own house, of his own family. Authority belonged to the NKVD. And that “you” with which the NKVD-ist had yelled at his father? Wasn’t it lacking in courtesy? Wasn’t it even brutal?<sup>13</sup>

Sawatzky goes on to describe subsequent losses in his village: “Six fathers of families were arrested in this first fateful night . . . By the end of 1938 the total had risen to thirty-six men. With a population of 340 people living in the village, all in large families, that meant that almost no family remained with a father still present.”<sup>14</sup>

With the destruction of the Mennonite world, the end-time apocalyptic beast was now seen to be rising out of the abyss and bringing chaos and

destruction. Only the arrival of the German armies in 1941 and the strong hand of the *Vaterland* could restore order, discipline, identity, and security for these German-speakers – and apparently hold back the apocalyptic chaos of the evil empire. This view would only slowly be challenged with Nazi Germany’s defeat and the publication of its atrocities.

Moltmann is as critical of this conservative eschatology and ethics as he is of the progressive alternative. The conservative syndrome “blocks off every alternative future, because it immediately identifies new possibilities and changes with the dreaded end of the world. Because authoritative powers of history only ‘delay’ the end, they make the arrival of new possibilities impossible.”<sup>15</sup> Moltmann contrasts both syndromes with pre-Constantinian church life – to which early Anabaptists also appealed – “life in the community of Christ, lived according to the measure of the justice of God’s future world”; not a proclamation of Christian love within unchanging structures but the hoped-for “transformation of changeable structures” as announced by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>16</sup> Like the progressive syndrome, the conservative syndrome stifles creative anticipations of the coming of God’s kingdom, i.e., of freeing one’s own present to be open for the expected future of God’s kingdom. In both cases the eternal God remains distant, above, and in judgment of the transient human realm of suffering and change.

Christian eschatology, by contrast, assumes that the future arises out of God’s creative power, such that the historical future of the world is granted the openness and possibility for creative anticipations of God’s coming kingdom.

## **II. Suffering, Truth and Meaning**

The tenth anniversary of the collapse of “realized socialism” in the former East Bloc provoked many to reflect on the experience of Mennonites under Communist rule in the Soviet Union, and how that experience has shaped Mennonites’ theological existence. At the heart of that experience was a sustained attack on *truth*.

The monopoly on truth claimed by the Communist party in the Soviet Union beginning in the 1920s has been well-documented by Mennonite historians and testified to in many published letters and diaries. Corresponding to this total claim to truth was a total distrust and a totalitarian surveillance state implemented by government-sanctioned violence. The ideological control

of thought under Stalin demanded a corresponding suspicion of every deviation from Marxist dogma and its official interpretation by party officials. The new human was to be “realized” through the creation of the new, classless society by way of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The state perceived the church as a source of ideological opposition that could delay the socialization of the children and youth into the “new species of being” in accordance with Marxist-Leninist ideology; hence the church had to be rendered as ineffectual as possible. In such a context the pressure to lie is strong. Christians learned that questioning or contradicting official truths meant persecution and, too often, exile and death. Jacob Sawatzky describes a letter he received from his father in prison that speaks of betrayal by two other Mennonites:

“Jacob Krueger and Peter Loewen have accused me. They have signed a paper . . . .” But how did father . . . fit into the big lie? Only the NKVD [Secret Police] and Krueger and Loewen knew! The truth was hidden in the signature of the two . . . . And that was enough for the NKVD.<sup>17</sup>

Many Mennonite men and women were denounced as ‘enemies of the republic,’ often on account of their public or private piety.

The experiences of the last century, especially the ideological incursions on thought, suggest the value of giving the traditional Mennonite commitment to truth telling and rejection of oaths a more central systematic function in our theology. Our post-Soviet era theology will do well to focus on truth as a central theological category.

**1. Jesus as Truth of Life.** Contemporary Mennonite theology has emphasized Jesus as the wisdom teacher who makes known God’s will for human conduct. Specifically in his suffering Jesus offers an example to follow by extending love, not violence, toward his enemies. Yet in the experience of persecution the role of agent recedes, and one becomes increasingly passive, that is, an object at the hands of others. Humans can break both under the enforcement of ideology and in the imposition of ethical ideals. The intense experience of systematic deception, spying, and propaganda as well as torture invites an emphasis on Jesus as wisdom teacher, but it also demands a concrete theological clarification of Jesus specifically as the *truth* of life who makes whole.

“The truth will make you free” (John 8:32) – that is, free for living communion with God, free for the neighbor. In the New Testament truth is a power that interrupts one’s self-sufficiency (agency) and enables humans to achieve fullness of being. Here truth is more than faithfulness to facts or ideals; it is connected with wholeness. It points toward an eschatologically new situation in which God desires to be together with us in Jesus Christ. As such Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6) and whoever receives him *and* exists in love is “from the truth” (1 John 3:19). The Pauline writings add that it is in “speaking the truth in love” that one “grows up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). Truth understood christologically addresses the mystery of being human, clarifies what is obscure in our existence, and sets us free for faithfulness in relationships to God and the neighbor. Under this category humans appear as both active and passive; Jesus as the truth of life opens a new situation in which truth as correspondence to a particular state of affairs, and ethics as correspondence to God’s will, become possible. Minimally, such an account unleashes Christian thought both from pre-modern notions of God as ground or cause and from modern expectations of building God’s kingdom on earth. It suggests that the togetherness of God and humanity is ontologically prior to our attempts of “grounding” that which is. The biblical materials suggest that God’s coming to humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is an event of truth that reshapes the questions of God’s presence or absence that arise especially in times of suffering.

**2. *Gelassenheit*.** A similar christological account of truth and wisdom is reflected in the medieval Anabaptist understanding of *Gelassenheit*, a term that can be variously translated as letting-be, releasement, yieldedness, self-surrender or resignation before God, and that is often connected with a willingness to suffer for the sake of God. Primarily *Gelassenheit* is an open, patient mode of being and thought arising from the eschatological hope and experience that the kingdom of God is nearing in time and spirit. The attitude is prevalent in the *Martyrs’ Mirror* (1660), elaborated as a virtue by Menno Simons,<sup>18</sup> and developed as a central teaching by the Hutterite Brethren. The idea is first and most consistently articulated by Hans Denck. *Gelassenheit* in the Anabaptist tradition is a christologically established mode of being – an open, a non-manipulative or self-serving engagement with the world. It emerges from passivity and includes the readiness to yield to the call to become an

instrument of the divine, even to the possibility of external suffering.

This rich mode of ‘letting beings be’ rooted in the mystical tradition is being revived in post-modern philosophy. Stalinist era ideology is one extreme example of the collapse of thought in modernity, i.e., thought is reduced to calculation, such that things – and human beings – lose their mystery. Beings are assigned being, and are viewed, used, and misused in a technical way for purposes or ends outside themselves. In contrast, the meditative thinking that releases life and is identified with love is a radical alternative both to conceptual thinking, which grasps and grounds beings in self-reflection, and to the modern demand for “meaning,” which takes the inquiring human subject as its starting point and criterion for truth. The following reflection from the Soviet Mennonite experience is an example of *Gelassenheit* in action:

But, somehow she knew, this time there would be no reunion [with father] . . . . Toward noon, the storm broke out . . . . Thunder and lightning did not bother her. Rather, it was just the opposite. They calmed her. Here was a force not to be controlled by the Communists. It was the voice of God, and it gave her confidence and peace. Everything that was happening was as it should be.<sup>19</sup>

In the experience of faith or suffering, one’s being in the world is interrupted in such an elemental way that one begins to see more originally, without imposing a meaning, and lets beings be. Recent philosophical work on truth suggests that truth is more originally an event of interruption.<sup>20</sup> Not only faith or suffering, but a declaration of love or a work of art can also break open our everyday engagement with things and gather a world – enabling us to let beings (ourselves and others) be. “*Gelassenheit* is a certain intervention in these power systems which releases their grip and lets things be and lets mortals be, lets them go. *Gelassenheit* is freedom . . . giving us a taste of a non-metaphysical experience of things – and of one another.”<sup>21</sup> From this perspective I suggest that authentic theological thinking and ethics is concerned with keeping the mystery open, which entails that the theological and political relevance of faith consists in its ability and obligation to speak the truth in love.<sup>22</sup> It was precisely this openness to speak truth that was lost among Soviet Mennonites through the 1930s.

For medieval theology, the ontological significance of *Gelassenheit* grew out of the ancient Greek understanding of truth, which is literally an “un-covering” (*a-letheia*) that makes actuality recognizable and expressible, an event that is the condition of the possibility for truth as faithfulness to the facts. This event notion of truth is reflected in the pre-Socratic understanding of the human as the *logon zoon echon*, the living being interrupted by a word (later understood simply as the “rational” animal). In this sense, to be truly human is to be existentially “interrupted” or beside oneself, and thus opened by and for truth. Christianity can confirm and speak to this, ever while recognizing that not every elemental interruption of one’s life connections enhances one’s being. The experience of suffering is essentially ambiguous and does not necessarily point to or away from God; moreover, it can break the individual. Examples from the Soviet Mennonite story could be cited for each of these possibilities. I am arguing, however, that faith is different in that it is an event of truth that unambiguously enhances life and makes whole.

**3. Worship as Event of Truth.** I have suggested that the post-Soviet era Mennonite church has a not-fully-articulated conviction that in the midst of competing ideologies it must understand and preserve itself as an institution gathered and enabled by truth. In a context in which the new human was to be ‘realized’ – the sacrifice of millions of lives notwithstanding – the church can proclaim that the new humanity is already realized in Jesus Christ, who we are to put on through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Worship is the central event of Christian existence insofar as it recognizes, expresses, and points in all its humanness toward an eschatologically new situation, one in which God himself is together with us in Jesus Christ. Worship opens both the separateness and towardness of God and humanity, bringing God into our midst and translating us onto a new path through this world towards God’s future with creation. This is the presupposition of the Christian’s engagement with the world, and in this sense worship is an event of truth.

Worship bears more likeness to suffering than to those many explanations offered to justify or give suffering meaning. One account of religion holds that “every culture has its own sacred stories that give meaning to suffering and joy, birth and death.” From this perspective Christian pastors “are mandated storytellers. By what they say and do they reinforce the larger story. Their accumulated knowledge and wisdom is born in the context of a culture and in



turn reinforces that culture.”<sup>23</sup> Though this view of religion is widespread and accounts for much of what happens in worship on a sociological level, we should not neglect Nietzsche’s critique of both God and truth – namely that both introduce a supersensual horizon of meaning that robs the sensual of its vitality.<sup>24</sup> Thus I argue that in our post-Soviet era theology worship should be explored as event which interrupts and concentrates our being present in the world. As the sabbath rest or day of worship breaks the unending cycle of seasons and work, so also in prayer, singing, and proclamation individuals are removed from their activities and achievements in order to return to themselves – with God. Understood in this way, worship moves beyond the experience of suffering as an event which accrues being, that is, an event which interrupts in order to enhance human presence. As such, worship has ontological significance. This identifies the key difference between worship as an event of truth and worship as offering only another horizon of meaning. A closer examination of Mennonite worship emerging from the prolonged period of religious persecution in the Soviet Union might well conclude that the heart of a Mennonite theology is in its worship.

### **V. The Future of Mennonite Theology**

At the end of World War II Harold Bender’s Anabaptist Vision was already deeply entrenched in the American Mennonite colleges and was influencing Canadian leaders like C. F. Klassen and Peter Dyck who worked with Mennonite refugees emerging from the Soviet Union. The Anabaptist Vision was overwhelmingly successful in addressing the desperate physical needs of the Mennonites coming out; the recipients of this aid and their descendants are deeply grateful. But this same Anabaptist Vision and its emphasis on radical discipleship failed utterly to meet the moral and spiritual plight of those refugees. Tossed about as unwilling participants in the great upheavals of the twentieth century, they could not but carry a measure of “guilt” for hoping that Stalin would be stopped at any cost and that Hitler’s armies – and if need be, British and American armies – would liberate them. These refugees participated in the fallen orders and benefited from their largess. Yet the Anabaptist Vision declared discipleship to be the essence of Christianity and placed it in direct opposition to the Protestant-evangelical tradition of justification.

J. Lawrence Burkholder, an American Mennonite critic of Bender, argued the Vision's positive anthropology did not acknowledge the tragic side of life or take seriously the deep, structural, persistent character of evil, the frailty of human flesh, the subtleties of sin, and the ambiguities of existence.<sup>25</sup> So many left the Soviet Union with blood on their hands, all having fought inwardly, if not outwardly. Refugees who came to North America or were helped to resettle in Paraguay by the Mennonite Central Committee were challenged to process their experiences without a doctrine of justification, without a mature doctrine of God's forgiving grace, without a careful Mennonite articulation of Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously saved and sinner). As Burkholder observed, the "confident and triumphant" Anabaptist Vision enlivened one's moral sense but was closed to criticism and question, and was altogether "too narrow, too simplistic, too arbitrary and unrealistic when it comes to life in this world"<sup>26</sup> – of which these refugees had a huge dose.

Rather than reduce talk of divine action to a discussion of ethics and discipleship (the progressive syndrome) or see divine action in the sovereign containment of chaotic forces through the orders of state, family, and religion (the conservative syndrome), Mennonite theology that has seen the precipice must begin to think God's 'essence' out of God's own movement into the void. This implies a christology that enters into and emerges out of the struggle between life and death, theism and atheism. It suggests that we change our focus from an abstract reflection on what we or the metaphysical God can or cannot do, to a more concrete, original thinking of the life and wholeness (future!) that springs from God's own sovereign self-identification with suffering humanity and death: *Gott kommt!* God comes.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble: The Epic Rescue of Thousands of War-Ravaged Mennonite Refugees* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 377. The dedication reads: "We wrote this book to give glory to God for his great mercy in delivering people from the ruins of World War II. The day of miracles is not over. The arm of the Lord is not shortened. In the words of C.F. Klassen, *Gott kann! God can!*" (5). From 1945 to his death in 1954 C.F. Klassen was director of the Mennonite Central Committee in Europe on behalf of the Russian and Danzig refugees.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Dyck, *Up from the Rubble*, 379f.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering During the Stalin Era and World War II," in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "The Liberation of the Future and its Anticipations in History," trans. A. Neufeldt-Fast (forthcoming). Read at an Eschatology Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary on February 20, 1998. For this section of the paper I am indebted to Moltmann and his analysis.

<sup>6</sup> See *Diary of Anna Baerg, 1916-1924* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1985), 55.

<sup>7</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen," *Werke*, II (Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1955), 509-604.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Baerg's diary (January 12, 1922) gives a summary of an inspirational speech by choir conductor Isaak Regehr, quoting J. Thiessen on the meaning of a choir (*Diary of Anna Baerg*, 79; cf. also 157f.).

<sup>9</sup> Steve Masterson, *Mennonite Reporter*, January 21, 1991, as cited by Pamela Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars. Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Diary of Anna Baerg*, 80.

<sup>11</sup> I thankfully acknowledge the research on this topic by Colin Neufeldt: "The Fate of Mennonites in Soviet Ukraine and the Crimea on the Eve of the 'Second Revolution' (1927-1929)." Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Alberta (Edmonton, 1989), 67. For a report on the League of the Godless, cf. "Merkblatt des Gottlosen," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, October 30, 1929.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Colin Neufeldt, "The Fate of Mennonites," 121, n.153.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Sawatzky, "Never a Pioneer. For the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Arrest of my Father and Five Other Men," in Sarah Dyck, ed. and trans., *The Silence Echoes. Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 113.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 117. The village Sawatzky refers to is Felsenbach.

<sup>15</sup> J. Moltmann, "The Liberation of the Future and its Anticipations in History," 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Sawatzky, "Never a Pioneer," 111-118.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. "The Cross of the Saints" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 579-622.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Sawatzky, "Never a Pioneer," 116f.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger's "On the Essence of Truth," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed.

D. F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 113-141; cf. also the more recent work of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, in *The Lévinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 205. Heidegger's pieces on *Gelassenheit* are found in the collection *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. and ed. by John H. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, "Toward the Heart of the Matter," *The Christian Century* 108 (Feb. 27, 1991), 228-233, 229.

<sup>23</sup> Alvin C. Dueck, *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Ethical Perspectives on Culture, Religion and Psychotherapy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 76, 82.

<sup>24</sup> The early Nietzsche spoke instead of art as "the great stimulant of life." Cf. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, trans. D. F. Krell (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1979), 75f.

<sup>25</sup> J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *The Limits of Perfection* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1993), 49f.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 21f, 24.

## **More than Sheep to Slaughter: Reflections on Mennonites and the Stalinist Terror**

*Leonard G. Friesen*

It is clear that Soviet Mennonites suffered devastating losses in the course of the 1930s. Measured one way, thousands perished in wave after wave of devastation. By a more immediate measurement, fathers were unjustifiably separated from their families by police guards who arrived in the dead of night. They were loaded onto cattle cars and sent off to distant labor camps where many died under terrible circumstances. The fate of those left behind in the villages was often no less harsh as they confronted conditions ranging from famine to the advance of entire armies.

Two generations have passed since that time, and still the words “collectivization, industrialization, and the purges” embody the unholy trinity for many. How many people ended their days in unmarked graves in seemingly godforsaken outposts, far from those they loved? How many others survived this ordeal, and even managed to make a new life in the west, yet were ultimately unable to escape the ghosts of this era? How many old men and women today still carry the scars of their childhood, when worlds dissolved as family life disintegrated?

Thus, it is not surprising that so many presentations at this Consultation focused on Mennonites as utterly helpless victims against an overarching, all-controlling regime. In his powerful keynote address, Waldemar Janzen spoke of Mennonites’ seeming inability to respond in any way to the Stalinist terror: “The powers that held sway seemed unchallengeable from within and invincible from without. Stoic, fatalistic, or despairing submission to this static condition seemed the only option for living.” Henry Paetkau begins his paper with the claim that “The experience of suffering . . . is not so much something that we can solve or do something about as something that we live in response to and through.” Similarly, Arnold Neufeldt-Fast has emphasized the Mennonite

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inability to do much in the face of this relentless suffering: “Any real opportunities among Mennonites to respond in a sustained and articulate way to their suffering so as ‘to wrest land from this sea of speechless death’ were brutally curtailed.”<sup>1</sup>

Nor is this perspective surprising, for the historical memory of this period has reduced everything to an epic struggle between good and evil in which Mennonites were helpless and powerless participants. It seems as if Moscow got everything that it wanted, which was no less than the complete subjugation of the entire Soviet state. Those who hold these views, of course, are making claims about the Soviet state as much as they are about the Mennonite experience within it. If that is so, might reconsidering the one necessitate rethinking the other? This is a question that Mennonites can hardly avoid addressing, given the revolution underway in how historians understand the Stalinist era in light of the Soviet Union’s disintegration.

Those wishing to make sense of the Mennonite experience might start by considering how few historians still portray the Stalinist state as totalitarian and all-controlling, engaged in a Manichean struggle with “the people.”<sup>2</sup> Several works typify recent trends in the larger field and especially the rich possibilities that they open up for students of Mennonite history. In his study of the great Soviet industrial experiment in Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin has provided an impressive account of the countless ways in which Moscow’s decrees rarely made it to the Siberian steppe.<sup>3</sup> The Communist Party, faced with myriad obstacles, was anything but totalitarian; its reach always exceeded its grasp. As a result, regional officials were constantly compelled to improvise and thereby make sense of “Stalinism.” Even then workers themselves used what power they had at the local level to make sense of their lives. Kotkin disputes any suggestion that the center merely willed and the periphery merely implemented.

Recent studies on the Soviet countryside have reached similar conclusions. Sheila Fitzpatrick’s study on Stalin’s peasants has persuasively argued that peasants were not passive subjects in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Instead, collectivization involved a give-and-take between a Muscovite center determined to maintain absolute control and a peasantry that used every means at its disposal to block it. In the end, collectivization involved no small measure of accommodation and even resistance on the part of peasants. This latter

perspective has been argued most forcefully by Lynne Viola. In *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin* Viola seeks to catalog how peasants resisted the full-bore imposition of an urban, Stalinist model on their fields and villages. Peasants provided a meaningful opposition when they kept alive visions of a coming apocalypse, when they slaughtered their own livestock rather than surrender them to the state, and when they occasionally murdered Moscow's ambassadors when they set foot in the countryside. Peasants also appealed to the "good Stalin" in letters written in the late 1930s, considering this to be the only safe way to formally protest the actions of local officials. Though Viola's study is weak on statistical summaries of how many protests happened and when, her point is hard to dismiss.<sup>5</sup> Even those who argue for the eventual failure of such protests, given the eventual "victory" of Collectivization, have some difficulty accounting for the abrupt collapse of the Soviet state in the 1980s. Nor do these works dispute the massive famine which stalked the countryside in the early 1930s or the millions who perished as a result of it.

In almost all cases, these historians have been considerably influenced by James Scott, whose work has stressed the countless ways seemingly powerless peasants in contemporary Southeast Asia confront powers they regard as unjust. For example, Scott clearly regards apocalyptic thinking as a "weapon of the weak," as is the deliberate decision to put minimal effort into work done for the state.<sup>6</sup>

Might not students of Mennonites under Stalinism wish to apply these insights to their own investigations? Perhaps Mennonites were more than defenseless lambs being led to slaughter. Indeed, even a brief overview reveals the many ways in which Mennonites, like Fitzpatrick's peasants and Kotkin's workers, resisted the Soviet juggernaut. This resistance was evident when Mennonite children refused to sing the Soviet national anthem in school, or when families maintained their strong Christian belief that they were living in the "end times," in which God – not the Communist party – would have the final say. Mennonites resisted evil when they denounced it in the privacy of their own homes, or when they prayed at funerals. It happened when Mennonites destroyed their livestock rather than hand them over to the new collective farms, or when they refused to denounce those in their midst who clung to their religious practices. Others managed to outwit the state's directives when they declared their villages to have been "collectivized" even though

nothing else had changed. The state was challenged when women who had lost their husbands combined their households during the winter months so that heat could be preserved. In this way cousins became siblings, and the informal network of support and encouragement was enlarged. The Soviet state was threatened when families held onto their Bibles, or when remarkably resilient mothers took their children out to the fields to show them which weeds could be safely eaten for nutrition, and which could not.

Mennonites did indeed suffer, and they did so for overwhelmingly unjustifiable reasons, but they did much more than simply endure suffering. Even this partial rendering of Mennonite “resistance” suggests that we have barely begun to highlight a vital part of this story, even as we acknowledge the ultimate horror of those years.

In the end, those who today seek to understand the Mennonite experience in the Soviet Union must confront a terrible irony. On the one hand, the time is ideal for such investigations. Thanks in large part to initiatives undertaken by Harvey Dyck, there is now a truly global community of scholars committed to Mennonite history. It seems that new linkages are being made monthly, much of this development owing to the highly successful international conference on Mennonite history held in Ukraine in 1999. Moreover, scholars now enjoy an unprecedented access to primary sources as previously sealed archives in the former Soviet Union have begun to see the light of day. Under these circumstances, the scholarly potential for these investigations is enormous.

Yet all this has occurred at a time when the descendants of those Soviet Mennonites seem to have only a limited interest in this story. Almost none continue to live in the places where these events transpired. Instead, these erstwhile Russian Mennonites are now scattered to Germany, North America, South America, and beyond. Culturally, aversion to the Soviet system prompted many of them and their descendants to throw themselves fully into their new milieus. Beyond the first generation of emigrants, there appears to be little nostalgia or other positive association with the “motherland.” Their children and grandchildren do not speak German, let alone Russian or Ukrainian. Moreover, those who have stayed within the church find themselves in congregations richly textured with people of many different histories. The



Mennonite church has truly become a global church, and will continue to be one in a way that discourages the telling of more parochial stories.

Should we then abandon telling this particular story? By no means, though in this case context is everything. In his keynote address to the Consultation, Waldemar Janzen encouraged Mennonites to set their particular story within the larger context of the biblical narrative. I strongly agree, but to do so fully requires that we bring all of our stories into this larger narrative. The Soviet Mennonite experience was one such story worthy of inclusion, even it was not the only one. Nor was it a story of a perfect people, as so many are quick to point out. Quite the contrary; and like so many North American Mennonites, these people's imperfections were glaringly obvious then and remain so now. Yet none of these faults can even begin to account for the violence that unfolded in the 1930s. Suddenly, they were like sheep being taken to slaughter. Yet, remarkably, they were also so much more.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering During the Stalin Era and World War II"; Henry Paetkau, "Suffering Servants: Pastoral Leaders in the Stalinist State"; and Arnold Neufeldt-Fast, "*Gott kann! Gott kann nicht!* The Suffering of Soviet Mennonites and Their Contribution to a Contemporary Mennonite Theology," all in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this earlier historiography and its link to the Cold War, see Stephen Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Interested readers can also consult *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1 (Winter, 2000). This inaugural issue is focused on "Resistance to Authority in Russia and the Soviet Union."

<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985).

## **The Suffering Church Built Like an Ark**

*Carol Penner*

What does it mean to be a people shaped by suffering? It means we cannot look at our history and our theology without pain, without anguish, and without a deep sense of wonder. This much is clear after hearing what has been shared at this consultation. I want to begin to answer this question by beginning with my own history.

I love the Mennonite church, and I love the congregation in which I was raised. But I want to tell you about my experience of being in that church as a child and young person. To describe the atmosphere of the church services as ‘funereal’ might be an overstatement, but they seemed solemn to the point of dourness, at least from the perspective of a young person. The people themselves were not always that way. Some were very joyful, especially those who worked with children and young people, but that joy was rarely communicated in worship. There was an oppressive atmosphere that many young people simply could not tolerate, and many left the Mennonite church.

I stayed in the church until I went away to Canadian Mennonite Bible College. Only there was I given any coherent sense of Mennonite history. At CMBC I first heard about different waves of Mennonite immigrants and that those coming in the 1940s and ‘50s had had very different experiences from those of earlier migrants. In short, I had to leave the church in order to hear the stories that helped me to understand it. I learned I had grown up in a church of survivors. I had been raised by a group of people who had escaped a repressive regime and a painful past.

In 1966 my church built a new building, and my father took me to see the work in progress. I was five years old, and I still clearly remember the huge beams standing against the sky – it looked exactly like the picture of

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Noah's ark I had seen in Sunday school. The finished building looked even more like an ark, with a wall that sheltered the entrance from the street. Looking back now, these sorts of images make sense. It is no wonder this design appealed to my community, because so many of its members felt like they had escaped.

I have read and heard stories about the Soviet era, and they have filled me with compassion for the people I worshipped with all those years. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast suggested that the heart of the Mennonite church is found in worship. I would agree, and the heart I grew up with was broken. It felt funereal because so many people were in mourning. The further tragedy is that so few could, or would, talk about it.

The poet David Waltner-Toews has created a character named Tante Tina, and in one of the poems about her life, she says "maybe God is in the story hiding like meat in a fleisch piroshki . . ." <sup>1</sup> I did not hear the stories; not at home, and not at church. Only as I've come to understand the history of my people have I come to understand the theology that was given to me. Completing her sentence, Tina says "and when we open the bun, God is on us checking to ask how we are caring for the beautiful vineyard." The question is not just about how and whether and which theology carried people through the Soviet experience, it is also about how we are doing now. How is current Mennonite theology, shaped at least in part by Soviet suffering, meeting the needs of people in the church today?

The church is a place where we come to hear the gospel, to hear good news. What kind of theology helped carry people through the Soviet experience? We have certainly seen that in many cases, people's faith helped them to survive. But the collective story also includes people with different faith experiences. We most often tell stories of people in the church who went through the Soviet experience and emerged as positive, loving, and godly. The church tends to privilege the success stories of those whose faith sustained them. The stories of those who abandoned their faith or whose questions still haunt them are rarely told. <sup>2</sup>

Beyond examining the suffering years themselves, it is also important to realistically appraise how the Soviet experience subsequently shaped church life in Canada. In thinking about this, I quote theologian Christine Gudorf:

[I]t is certainly dangerous – and also cruel – to assume that suffering inevitably leads to real life, to joy, to meaning, to wholeness. For suffering destroys. It kills, it maims the body and the spirit, it produces despair and evil . . . History continues to demonstrate that if there is a lesson to be learned from suffering, it is that many violated persons become violent, that those treated inhumanely often become inhumane, and that some, when left without hope, kill themselves in despair. Suffering both kills and deforms. The message of the gospel is a hope-filled response to this truth – not a negation of it.<sup>3</sup>

We should not assume that suffering left Mennonites unscathed. Suffering is absorbed into the bloodstream, it becomes a part of the way you live your life. I wonder how realistically we have looked at Canadian Mennonite communities, particularly in the years after the Soviet experience. There are implications when one builds one's church like an ark. For instance, how much did the suffering in Russia and the Soviet Union contribute to ethnic insularity and racism among Mennonites in Canada? How did it foster suspicion and hatred towards people who were not like us? Did we build a church like an ark because we felt we were saved or because we wanted to keep people out?

People still come to church to hear good news. People are still suffering. In Canada we have not undergone the colossal breakdown of society that people who lived through the Soviet experience did, but our suffering is still real. There are victims of violent crime in our midst, there are survivors of torture and refugees from civil war who have fled from other countries. For the past several years I have worked for Mennonite Central Committee with those who suffer in abusive family situations. Violence still happens, and there are still victims who sit in Mennonite pews looking for a theology that will help them become survivors. Mary Ann Hildebrand comments on the theology of suffering she has observed in the Mennonite church and the effect it has on survivors of abuse:

Faithfulness is measured in terms of how well we are able to put up with our oppression and victimization. The glorification of suffering, servanthood, and the loving-your-enemy model of turning the other cheek have helped to acculturate women to abuse.<sup>4</sup>

One of the challenges I have faced as a theologian is trying to unravel why Mennonite churches have been so consistent and dogmatic in telling battered women to return to their abusive husbands. On the surface, it does not seem to make sense. Mennonites have a long history of fleeing from violent situations. One could logically assume that they would be at the forefront of the women's shelter movement. This is obviously not the case. So I have tried to unpack our theology of suffering, looking at hymns and theological texts, exploring our theology of the cross.

Related to the topic of theology is the question of how Mennonites use scripture. Waldemar Janzen speaks of the forward thrust of the biblical story, while Arnold Neufeldt-Fast calls for a new theology of truth-telling. What has puzzled me is that Mennonites have not latched on strongly to the concept of liberation as expressed in the Exodus. I agree with Mary Anne Hildebrand's suggestion that the Mennonite theology of suffering has focused almost entirely on endurance issues. Jesus' crucifixion (and a heavenly resurrection) are held up as paradigms for victims searching for good news.

This viewpoint contrasts starkly with the theology of other groups of people who have suffered. The story of the Exodus, for example, is a well known paradigm for African-Americans who suffered under slavery. Similarly, Jesus' stories of healing and his treatment of outcasts are pivotal in current literature about abuse issues. In these cases suffering is not something to be endured but something from which one can be liberated by the power of God. Why have Mennonites not claimed this story of liberation as our own? I wonder if the Soviet experience has not shaped our theology so deeply we still cannot use these stories. Yes, there was deliverance: God did deliver Mennonites from an evil Soviet system. But when one reads the stories about escape from Russia, the Soviet Union, and Germany, there is ambiguity in that deliverance, there is guilt in that escape. The reality was that Mennonites were delivered but many loved ones were left behind. The Exodus is a joyful story because all got out together.

The Mennonite theology I have read suggests that our theology of suffering is changing. Will new theologies comfort those who still have memories of the Soviet experience? Will those who create new theologies learn from, or simply discard as outdated, the theology that sustained people through horrific times? Being a people of suffering means that we have to eat a lot more fleisch

piroshki. We need to hear more stories, not just to understand what happened, but to ask what we're doing with our beautiful vineyard today.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>David Waltner-Toews, "A Request from Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society to put Salman Rushdie on the Prayer List," *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 92-93.

<sup>2</sup>A good example of a book examining a variety of theological stories is Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Christine E. Gudorf, *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 72.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Anne Hildebrand, "Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology." *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10:1 (Winter 1992):78-79.

## A Story of Family

*Werner Fast*

I was seven years old when one night my parents were roused by that ominous knock on the door which they knew was bound to come sooner or later. Indeed, it was the dreaded KGB who had come to take my Dad away. I remember very little of that fateful night, except for my Dad putting one hand on my shoulder and, with the other hand, lifting my chin to look at my tear-stained face. He said, “Werner, be good and behave yourself. You’re the oldest, so it will be up to you to take good care of Mother while I’m gone.” I don’t think he realized the heavy burden of responsibility those words placed upon the tender heart of a seven-year-old.

My mother impressed upon my mind that I should pray every night that God would keep Dad in his protective care and that we might someday be reunited with him. For years this remained the key petition of my nightly prayer. At the time of evacuation from our homeland in Ukraine in 1943 and on the refugee trek for the next five years, the prayers for our own immediate needs – protection, food, shelter – always included a plea for Dad’s safety and return.

When the war finally ended, we found ourselves in Soviet-occupied territory in East Germany. Mother, with her two sisters and several other families from our home village, desperately looked for an opportunity to flee from the east zone to the western, Allied-occupied, zone. Eventually this escape became a reality; whether by sheer human connivance or by God’s miraculous guidance remains a moot point. After a while we became aware of the Mennonite Central Committee and its efforts at relocating Mennonite refugees to either North or South America. We were fortunate to have relatives in Canada and succeeded in emigrating to this strange new country in 1948. I recall praying, “God, if you bring us to Canada, I will serve you in whatever way you choose.”

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*Werner Fast was an elementary school teacher for thirty-five years while serving as lay minister in the Niagara United Mennonite Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, where he became assistant pastor after retiring from teaching.*

Having seen so many of our prayers answered, I was sure God would also answer the most fervent and most frequent prayer of my life, that of asking him to keep Dad safely in his care and to bring him back to us. But I was ill-prepared for the way he chose to answer this prayer.

During our first years in this country Mother had a large portrait of Dad drawn from a small photograph. This picture adorned one side of our living room wall. One day after I came home from school, I noticed that the wall where the picture had hung was bare. When Mother came home from work, I asked her what had happened to it. After a moment's silence, tears came to her eyes and in a quivering voice she said, "He is not worthy to occupy that place any more. He remarried in Russia." I was thunderstruck. The emotional turmoil left me speechless. I withdrew to my bedroom and in mute despair buried my head in the pillow.

After supper that night, Mother said a little more about Dad's situation. He married a woman who worked in the hospital where he had been a patient and where he later worked as a book keeper. He had been sickly a lot, and she had shown compassion and kindness when he most desperately needed it. Besides, through other men who had located their families in Germany he learned that his wife, like many other women, had emigrated to Canada. As far as he was concerned, reunification was never going to happen. So he decided to start a new life. When Mother found out about it, the couple already had several children together. That evening I had a hard time concentrating on my homework. I finally gave up and turned to writing a letter to Dad. While I don't recall the exact contents, I do remember the angry and accusatory tone. Later my mother confronted me and reproved me for the harshness of the letter. She begged me not to send it, but rather to adopt a non-judgmental and forgiving attitude as she was trying to do. When I was finally able to cry, I felt a tremendous sense of relief. I found I was able to pray again, first for forgiveness for my self-righteous attitude and for Dad's violation of the marriage covenant; then, for grace to remain connected with each other and to know how to relate from here on.

I then took up correspondence with my father, and we stayed in touch until he passed away in 1988. I had the opportunity to visit Dad while on a tour in the Soviet Union in 1987. One of the stops was the city of Frunze, which was only an hour's drive from where Dad lived in Kirgizskaja. He was going to meet



me at the hotel where our group was staying for a few nights. One can imagine the excitement as well as the apprehension that I felt as the bus pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. A mass of people was awaiting us, as most of those on the tour were anticipating reunions with relatives and acquaintances. My eyes eagerly scanned the crowd for some familiar face. But I had not seen my Dad for forty-six years. No one in the crowd seemed to resemble the person I knew only from a photograph. I approached an old man at the edge of the crowd who looked wistfully at the scene of hugging and crying and laughing as long lost relatives discovered each other. Since most of them spoke the Mennonite dialect of Low German, I asked the old man in Low German, "*Tjanne see enen Johann Faust?*" (Do you know a Johann Fast?) He looked quizzically at me and said, "*Werner, best du dit wirklich?*" (Werner, is it really you?) The next minute we were embracing each other and crying on each other's shoulders. After a while, two younger men came reluctantly towards us and Dad introduced me to two of his sons. Hesitantly they came towards me, but when I approached them with outstretched arms, they gladly and warmly embraced me.

Each of the three days that we were in Frunze, my brothers and Dad came to pick me up in the morning and returned me to the hotel in the evening. We had a lot to talk about as we tried to fill each other in on the happenings in our lives during the past forty-six years. But the most significant conversation occurred on the last day. My Dad and his wife took me aside and poured their hearts out over the burden of guilt they had suffered throughout their marriage. And I had to confess my initial anger and lack of empathy for the difficult situation in which they found themselves. We knelt down and made our confession to God, asking him to purge us of any residue of resentment and unforgiving spirit. Then we got up, embraced each other, and through tear-stained eyes assured each other of total forgiveness. Absolution granted and received gave a new sense of freedom and joy to the remainder of our time together. I was able to accept their three sons as brothers, and they became excited at the thought of having more siblings in Canada.

Before the tour group left the area, we did some shopping. Among other things, I wanted to buy Dad a new suit. He resisted, claiming the one pair of pants and shirt and jacket he had worn for years to church were still good enough for Sunday apparel. But my mother had given me money for this

purchase, so I insisted that he choose a suit he liked. Eventually his wife and sons had to make the selection for him.

Our good-byes were painful, but not as uncertain and apprehensive as forty-six years ago. We both felt that we probably would not see each other again, but we parted with a sense of gratitude and peace. Dad died a year later, just after receiving permission to emigrate to Germany. Dad never made it. His wife and three sons with their families did emigrate. My wife and I had a good visit with them in the summer of 1998. I asked my brothers whether or how often Dad wore the suit we bought him. The answer was, Never! But they put it on him for burial. God bless our memory of him.

## Literary Refractions

On the morning of November 7, 1999 Rudy Wiebe preached a sermon about hope at St. John's [Anglican] Church in Elora, Ontario. Faith and love protect the heart, he said, but hope protects the mind, the head. Later the same day, also at St. John's, Wiebe delivered the second annual T.W. Smyth Memorial Lecture. He was introduced by T.W. (Bill) Smyth's eldest son, who spoke of his father's intense interest, during the last years of his life, in the writings of Rudy Wiebe. T.W. Smyth had completed his PhD dissertation, "Rudy Wiebe as Novelist: Witness and Critic Without Apology," in the spring of 1997, shortly before his sudden death. Smyth had taken the title for his thesis from Wiebe's article, "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness," published in *Christian Living* in 1965.<sup>1</sup> In his Smyth Memorial Lecture, published here, Rudy Wiebe uses that same article as a point of departure, and he speaks here, as he did in 1965, to issues concerning the role of the writer and the nature and function of his art.

In the past Wiebe has used images such as the great "steel lines" of the railroad to express the vast scope and weight of fiction. Here he suggests that fiction is like an iceberg, not as grounded (in fact) as it might at first appear to be. Like an iceberg, fiction inevitably "breaks loose at last from its stolid grounding." What the writer knows, Wiebe observes here, can carry him only to the doorstep of the great house of fiction, but the writer must move beyond the door, into territories he might not ever have wished to explore, "perhaps could not even have imagined existed until fiction itself forced them into visibility."

Wiebe's 1965 essay "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" was directed at a Mennonite audience, some members of which had expressed outrage in response to the publication of Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which had appeared three years before.<sup>2</sup> In that work of fiction, with its redemptive Christian vision, Wiebe had dared to address matters that members of his community had tacitly agreed should not be spoken of in public: most notably, the inevitable hypocrisy and destructive momentum of an unrestrained patriarchy.

At the heart of his Smyth lecture, Wiebe included a story that once more addresses a subject about which there has been mostly silence in the Mennonite community: the "sexual victimization" of women – especially during

what has come to be called the Great Trek of the Mennonites who fled Ukraine with retreating German armies in the closing years of the Second World War. On that late fall Sunday afternoon, Rudy Wiebe, framed by the wood and brass of pulpit and pipe organ, read what he called “a short piece of a novel I am trying to write,” and, while he read, the afternoon autumn light, refracted through the stained glass windows of the church, gradually faded. By the time the story was over, the dominant light in the sanctuary shone only on Wiebe’s script, and Wiebe’s audience sat rapt, in silence. The story Wiebe read that afternoon, still a work in progress and hence not available for publication here, is absent from this “literary refraction,” except for its evocative title, “Woman, You Come.”

Rudy Wiebe remarks, in the piece that follows here, that his story “Woman, You Come” is rooted in his own memory, during a time when, as a teenager, he overheard two men in church wondering, with reference to three post-war refugee women newly arrived in their congregation, what these women would have “had to do to make it through the war.” Here, Wiebe provides a context for his first public reading of that story. But he does much more. He explains why he refuses, as a creature of God, to remain wordless in the face of evil. And he provides his readers with another valuable “statement about the theoretical foundations of his art.”<sup>3</sup>

Hildi Froese Tiessen, *Literary Editor*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is reprinted in *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W.J. Keith (Edmonton, AB: NeWest, 1981), 39-47.

<sup>2</sup> For Wiebe’s retrospective reflections on the hostile reception his first novel received from members of the Mennonite community, see his essay “The Skull in the Swamp.” The essay appeared first in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987), 8-20 and was more recently reprinted in Rudy Wiebe, *River of Stone: Fictions and Memories* (Toronto, ON: Vintage, 1995), pp. 249-273.

<sup>3</sup> W.J. Keith’s introduction to Wiebe’s 1965 *Christian Living* essay in *A Voice in the Land* speaks of that work as “a valuable early statement about the theoretical foundations of his art” (p.39).

## **Living on the Iceberg** **“The Artist as Critic and Witness” 36 Years Later**

*Rudy Wiebe*

For three weeks during this past summer I was part of a Geological Survey of Canada camp on the northeastern coast of Ellesmere Island, in one of the many areas in our giant country where no human beings have lived for at least a thousand years. From the gravel beaches of the Nares Strait, which at that point narrowly separates Canada from Greenland, I watched the winter sea ice gradually shatter into pans and drift south; often its flatness was studded by icebergs broken away from some immense glacier even farther north, that sailed imperceptibly by like white craggy islands lost forever to the ocean blazing blue in the niveous summer sun. But there was one iceberg, not discernibly larger than the rest and despite all the ice grinding past, which remained motionless in the middle of the channel; obviously, it was grounded. After some days I began to feel I wanted to stand there, on it. It was not until several months after I had returned to my home in Edmonton that my imagination penetrated what, beyond the cold facticity of ice, I had been looking at, and felt.

Much of the fiction I have written in the last four decades rests on facticity – or perhaps I had better say *hinges* (“rests” implies far too much fixedness – too grounded if you please), much of the fiction I write hinges on *facticity*: data such as exact dates, precise places quite accurately described, the actual acts that living people have (insofar as they can still be established) literally, historically, done. In fact (!), I have often found far more imaginative

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*Rudy Wiebe, twice recipient of the Governor General’s Award, is the author of Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962), The Blue Mountains of China (1970), The Temptations of Big Bear (1973), A Discovery of Strangers (1994), River of Stone: Fictions and Memories (1995), Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman (with Yvonne Johnson) (1998), and many other works of fiction and non-fiction. Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta, he continues to live and write in Edmonton.*

stimulus in such historical, geographical data than in any fictional structure I might invent – though I do love inventiveness. My thinking often goes: why expend energy in concocting a world and people (as speculative fiction does, for example) when we actually live in such a marvelously evocative one already, one more dense with mystery and secrets and contradictions than anything most of us most of the time could possibly make up?

So, let me offer you a further, personal, fact (not a factoid): on the day I turned 28, October 4, 1962, I received in Winnipeg from my publisher McClelland and Stewart in Toronto, copies of my first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Further copies appeared in Canadian bookstores at the same time, and after that many people asked me two questions:

- 1) “Why did you write a novel?”
- 2) “Is it true?”

That is one of the things I liked about the literary scholar Bill Smyth of Elora, Ontario: he never asked me those questions. Of course, Dr. Smyth was an intelligent and highly skilled reader from whom you might not expect such queries, but I can assure you that numerous literary scholars have asked me exactly those questions, albeit using somewhat longer words such as “autobiographical” or “historiographic meta-fictions.” The fact is, Bill Smyth never asked me, personally, any question at all, and the first I heard of him was in a typically cryptic note of two sentences which John Howard Yoder wrote me from Notre Dame University on June 11, 1995. The first sentence (the second, and last, referred to a completely different matter) John wrote was: “Dear Rudy: Just met one T. W. Smyth who seems to have a good grasp of your work.” Among other things, that is what I greatly admire about the scholar in whose honor this lectureship is established: it seems he read the novels with great intensity, and whatever they told him, that he dealt with; he did not contact me – as he easily might have – and expect me to give reasons for actions perpetrated perhaps thirty years ago which are often as inexplicable to me now as anything I might have imagined then. Indeed, if I answer at all now, I have to make it up – as I sometimes do, especially in quick media interviews. Smyth studied the text, as it stands, or as it falls – no matter – the novel text is what matters, not what the writer can elaborate about it half-a-lifetime after the fact. He did what I have at times advised scholars to do: “If you want to, write about what is published, but leave me personally out of it;

just pretend I'm dead."

Well, time inevitably, and certainly, teaches us our mortality. But in 1962 I was too young to think that way. Besides, a Mennonite novelist was such an oddity, especially to Mennonites themselves, that speaking personally was demanded, and though I resolutely kept silent for six months after publication, I did write a piece about writing my first novel for the weekly newspaper *The Canadian Mennonite* (April 11, 1963), though I prefaced my short comments with a careful:

Any work of art worthy the name ... bears within itself its reason for existence and its own justification ... If (*Peace Shall Destroy Many*) does not say it [that is, explain *why* it exists], (then) why burden a dead matter with the appendage of an explanation?

Five months later, however, I was a professor of English at Goshen College, Indiana, an institution sponsored by the Mennonite Church, and so, more than ever, I was expected to speak professionally, or as it were, "professingly," about what I wrote; I tried to do that, in an arm's-length, third person kind of way, in an invited lecture first given in November, 1963 at Tabor College, Kansas (a college sponsored by a different branch of Mennonite church), entitled "The Christian as Novelist." In the following year this talk metamorphosed itself variously and was finally published in 1965 under the more encompassing title of "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" (*Christian Living*, Scottsdale, Pa., March, 1965; an earlier, and lengthier, incarnation appeared somewhat later in print, in *The Journal of Church and Society*, Fresno, Calif., v. 1, n. 2, Fall, 1965). To judge from his footnotes, Dr. Smyth used the *Christian Living* form of this essay as a certain basis in reading my novels, and, when considering this lecture, I thought it might be interesting to look at the essay again after all these decades.

If I may quote myself from an unpublished lecture called "Words to the End of the World" (1982):

In his essay, "The Wind at Djemila," Albert Camus writes:

A man lives with a few familiar ideas, two or three at the most, and here and there, in contact with the world and men, they are polished, shaped, changed. It takes years for a man to evolve an idea he can call his own, one he can speak of with authority.

I take the term "a few familiar ideas" to refer to large concepts, the

great bones and spinal cord that hold an individual's human shape erect in the factual and ideological confusion of contemporary life.

So now, if Camus is right, can I in 1999, beginning with ideas first expressed in 1963, can I see any imaginative evolvement of "a few familiar ideas" in the hundreds of thousands of fictional words I have since written?

(As a predictive aside: if no discernible imaginative change has taken place in my thinking and writing since 1963, then we are all wasting our time, me writing, you reading.)

The piece "The Artist as a Critic and a Witness" tries to explicate three fundamental principles about art:

1) that the work itself, not the artist as a person or a personality, is the crucial matter in artistic creation;

2) that there is no one, single "meaning" to a complex artistic work. "Its meaning depends upon the interaction between the work and beholder";

3) that there is an inherent moral quality in all art. "Literature is never amoral; it is either moral or immoral. Bad art is inevitably immoral."

It seems to me that in 1963 I had a much clearer concept of both morality and meaning in art than I have now; certainly a much more dogmatic one. I went on to speak specifically about the novel (the art form I am still struggling with), and asserted that the novelist was not a teacher of anything because the medium (that is, the art form itself) did not allow it, and that in order for the novelist to be a critic of and a witness to society, he must *allow the novel to be a novel*, that is, not try to make it a propagandizing or sermonic instrument but rather let it speak:

1) through the metaphor of story;

2) by showing life as it truly is. That meant, showing us man (I meant all human beings of course) both as he is and as he may be. "The artist must have the guts to look at everything man can do, in his best moments as well as his worst. He cannot allow himself to be stared down by life."

This is a hasty summary of what I said in 1963, and it still rings basically true. What seems clear now is that, after publishing one novel, I had learned at least one irreducible fact.

The controversy *Peace Shall Destroy Many* created in the Mennonite community taught me once and for all that, to a very large extent, *every reader reads their own novel*. If you can imagine the writer as an organ-



master playing a concert on the pipe-organ consciousness of the reader, then not even the greatest of masters – Tolstoi or Faulkner or Dickens, or take your pick – ever plays exactly the same concert twice: every pipe-organ-reader is simply too drastically different to sound the same.

But, however prescient these principles in that 1963 talk were, I did not understand their implications for trying to live a writer’s life. However separated writer and fictional text may be, the writer’s personality is nevertheless absolutely crucial to the text: every text begins (as creative writing instructors always underline) with “what the writer knows,” *but* that is simply the beginning. What I understand from over forty years of writing fiction is that the best texts go on into what the writer does not, indeed cannot, know when beginning to write. To speak personally, the fiction must move into worlds that perhaps I don’t like, that I wouldn’t ever want to explore, perhaps could not even have imagined existed until fiction itself forced them into visibility. In other words, “Write what you know” is barely a doorstep into the house of fiction – better we should say “mansion of fiction” or “skyscraper,” because certainly fiction at its most magnificent is always a building complex and immense beyond any of our known conceptions, and that includes the writer.

Oddly enough, it was the book which I wrote together with Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: the Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), which forced me to realize this most clearly. The book is called nonfiction because it tells the facts Yvonne remembers of her literal life, and also the facts of my searching it out with her, an overwhelming and wrenching life which, truly, I would not, could not have imagined on my own. And oddly, in a similar way, I realized that the fiction I have tried to write all my adult life is also that: though I always began with “what I knew,” or at least thought I knew, as each particular fiction developed, I always at some point found myself trying to write what for me was, in the first place, unknown and therefore, through ignorance, essentially unimaginable. The act of making fiction made the knowledge for the imagining unavoidable.

In that sense, writing *Peace Shall Destroy Many* gave me small experience for writing any subsequent fiction. Following the concept of “write what you know,” I wrote the last chapter of that novel first; then, knowing the end, I backed up just far enough until I had a beginning from which I could get the whole story in to explain the ending I had already made. Simple, eh? That

– and inexperience, of course – was why I could write it so fast: I began in July, 1959 and by March, 1960 it was finished. At one point I re-wrote a complete draft in 2 1/2 months.

Well, may the Creator be praised, writing novels is not a stopwatch competition with Donovan Bailey. It is not speed but nerve that counts, the courage of your imagination in exploring the black, mysterious, mostly opaque room of the house of fiction that opens before you, a room, you gradually realize, which cannot and will never exist in any human imagination unless *you and you alone* go in there and explore it.

The other implication of the writer principles I could not quite comprehend in 1963 was the one about not letting life stare you down. Again, trying to put Yvonne's life into words proved to me, in my soul as in my digestion, how grotesquely difficult that can be. You will understand if I mention one of the most unbearable human events of this century: how do you write about the holocaust? The ancient Jewish tradition that speaking about evil may in itself evoke that very evil, so great is the power of language – well, what if you write about it? Not only hear the words, but hold them in black and white before your eyes, make an indelible record which can be looked at and *contemplated* again and again? Should one actually remember, look into the very face of such absolute evil? Is writing about it not dignifying it? The “better” you write, is it not possible you will so much the more awaken, stir, that very spirit of inexpressible evil within yourself, and within your reader? Therefore, must you – as so many survivors have found it necessary – must everyone remain silent?

Thousands of European refugees came to Canada after the war, and around 1950 in the prairie town of my teens I remember that, among many others, three Mennonite refugee sisters arrived with some seven or eight children between them; but no husbands. The oldest boys were my age, their fathers had been destroyed by the war, and their mothers as I saw them were beautiful women. They came to Canada sponsored by our church, and there was a time when I heard one male church member say to another about those three: “I wonder what they did to make it through the war.”

I do not know, now, whether it was an older or a younger man speaking; or if perhaps he said, “I wonder what they had to do to make it through the

war.” But no matter, his meaning was in his tone, that tone makes those words indelible still, a half century later.

I once asked my friend Harry Loewen if his mother had ever talked about what happened to her, personally, on their trek in 1943 from the Ukraine with the retreating German armies, of being overrun by the Red Army, of their years in hiding and the eventual refugee camps. He told me essentially what he wrote in a book he edited called *Road to Freedom* (to be published in September, 2000):

“Mennonite women were willing and able to describe vividly many aspects of the terror they experienced, except for their sexual victimization. I know my mother knew much about this horrific aspect of the war, but she never spoke about it even when I asked her directly to tell me.”

So, nothing remains except to say, with Hamlet, “The rest is silence”?

But – human beings are animals that talk; for me, language is what makes us as god-like as we can conceive of God to be; in *Genesis* Elohim creates our entire world by his spoken Word. For human beings to remain wordless in the face of the greatest evil that humanity can perpetrate upon itself is to deny humanity its greatest gift: the very image of God in us. As a writer, a human being who all his life has tried to make things with words, I *must* dare to explore my greatest terror, even as it may prove to be my greatest ignorance. I may well make a grotesque mess of it – but I must try, or indeed, as Jesus himself told us, the very stones will cry out against me.

So, by way of illustrating what I mean by my title, “Living on the Iceberg,” I want to read a short piece of a novel I am trying to write. This part is set in the midst of horrifying war, which I have never personally experienced, and is told from the point of view of a person named Elizabeth Katerina Wiebe.

I dedicate the first reading of this story in progress  
to the memory of Bill Smyth:

*Woman, You Come*

When I left Ellesmere Island on July 17, 1999, all the pack-ice of the Nares Strait had streamed south, but the solitary iceberg remained in its spot, grounded. I had tried to persuade our helicopter pilot to fly me there; I had never, I told him, touched an iceberg. But he refused.

“Any weight on it, it could shift, roll, and you’re sliding hell-and-gone for ice water.”

“So hover, I’ll stand with one leg on a pontoon.”

He laughed; like every pilot I’ve met, he knew himself to be in absolute control of his particular mechanical world, and he did not bother answering me. But late one afternoon, after the helicopter had been repaired for a malfunction and he was testing it with the mechanic aboard, he roared away low over the strait and landed on the iceberg; when they returned, he had a jug of water collected from its surface pools: perfect, clear water, totally empty of taste in its niveous purity. I found it hard to forgive him.

Could one live on an iceberg the way a writer lives on fiction?

Purely; obsessively; trying to speak the hitherto unspeakable, to inscribe the hitherto unfaceable until both become the writer’s and reader’s unknowable but nevertheless determining mystery, as the genetic codes in our every cell determine our ancestry even as they focus our imagination? The ineffable joy of being a writer even as the iceberg of fiction breaks loose at last from its stolid grounding in sea-bottom mud and moves out between landmasses into the immense waters that girdle the earth, even as it sails on into its slow, inevitable, and human, dissolution.

## Book Reviews

Abe Dueck. *Moving Beyond Secession: Defining Russian Mennonite Brethren Mission and Identity, 1872-1922*. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1997.

I would like to have seen this book a decade ago. It sheds much light on the formative years of the Mennonite Brethren Church. What was its dynamic, identity, promise? What did it have to offer? Was there a convincing rationale for it? Why did the new church of 1860 have to carry the incubus of a Baptist image for so long? Why did it raise so much hostility from the Orthodox Church? These and related questions are answered in this book.

In his introduction the author, the director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, prepares the reader for the three main sections of this volume of documents. First there are maps, tables, and lists illustrating the Russian Mennonite Brethren (MB) conference structure. It encompassed all the churches to the west, north, and north-east into Siberia, the east, and the south into the Crimea. The use of *Reiseprediger* (itinerants) to keep the unity of faith was a practice carried over into North America. Second, there are minutes of nine MB conventions held between 1882 and 1918, some never before published. They clearly reveal what Mennonite Brethren brought with them to this continent: a sense of mission in evangelism at home and abroad. The interesting Russian MB association with the American Baptist Missionary Union, working in India, is clearly demonstrated in these documents. The MB conviction to convert Russians that landed them in trouble with the Orthodox and cast fear among the Mennonite Church during the Great War years.

Third, and most fascinating, a series of ten documents focuses on the crucial matter of identity as Mennonites and bring forward two combatants. No one was more pained by the discussions of 1910-1916 than Peter M. Friesen, who had just completed his great work *Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland* (1911). His “*Allianz*” position and his general irenicism seemed shattered. The chief protagonist on the MB side was Heinrich J. Braun. The documents make him the most prominent leader in 1910-1918. The strings of all MB activity seemed to end on his desk at

Raduga Press, Halbstadt, the publisher of Friesen's work. In 1910 Braun sharpened the focus in his "Mennonites or Baptists?" by restating the MB position on immersion, communion restrictions, and intermarriage vis-à-vis the Mennonite Church (117).

David Epp of Chortitza replied for the latter in the *Friedensstimme* of 1910. He felt that his church was being made into the "antithesis" of the MB Church. "How is this possible?" he asked (123). Whereas they had been "one family" they were still strangers to each other fifty years later and "the cause must be seen on both sides." The hurdles placed before his church were great. Where was the golden rule when Braun charged the Mennonites for continuing to think of MB as Baptists, yet repeated even if in a historical fashion, the MB's 1860 description of the general church as "decadent"?

In spite of this tension-filled debate, an earnest effort was made in 1914 to bring to the Tsarist religious authorities a common Mennonite confession which demonstrated that they together were a church and not a mere sect. However, another preacher from Chortitza, Peter Penner (no relation to the reviewer), apparently unauthorized, stated his pessimism at coming to the government with a united confession. He saw the MB continuing to endanger their Privilegium by preaching among Russians (147). This led to Friesen's review of the whole issue in "Confession or Sect?", including Braun's refutation of Penner's charges. Friesen was most upset that after fifty years he found so much intolerance on both sides. On the issue of rebaptism for admission to the MB Church, he believed that "we will proceed like Abraham and Lot, Paul and Barnabas."

This excellent volume will clarify for both Mennonite Brethren and Conference of Mennonites in Canada readers why the differences between the two groups, so deep-seated and carried by the Russlaender to North America, took until the 1970s to find a general reconciliation.

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Perry Bush. *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998;  
Glen Stassen, ed. *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998.

These two texts complement each other: while Perry Bush describes the difficult articulation of an ethno-religious group ethic, identity, and political acumen, the edited volume by Glen Stassen generalizes this learning process. Bush's social history, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America*, thereby saves Stassen's *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* from presuming too much and explaining too little. Together, they explore whether and how peace and justice might combine to form an alternative ethic to the realism, neoliberalism, and international institutionalism of the post-Cold War era. If we accept that a new paradigm is a sound insight emerging from the paradoxical relations of two very different things – say, peacemaking and justice, or good Christian discipleship and loyal state citizenship – then these books point to the grace (and genius) that might undergird church-societal-state political will. In Stassen's volume, ten essays posit the birth of a new "just peacemaking" ethic rooted in love and community. The introductory and concluding chapters claim to "remedy" the conceptual tension of justice and peacemaking by dwelling not on *positions* but on *practices* that incrementally create normative political behavior. Drawing on the experience of twenty-three Christian ethicists, international relations scholars, and moral theologians, the text describes peacemaking initiatives rooted in Christian discipleship (Part One), argues that God's reign requires critical engagement of peace and justice in a broken global political system (Part Two), and speaks of the church strengthening cooperative forces as a hopeful sign of God's incarnate love and sovereignty (Part Three).

Part One affirms the risky steps that ordinary citizens, citizen-diplomats, and people of faith take in making peace. Chapter 1 argues for nonviolent direct action, but knowledge as to how and when citizens (or states) may stage effectively such actions is presumed, not examined. In chapter 2, peacemakers pursue independent initiatives to increase international transparency and reduce the threat of force, yet there is no bridge for us to grasp how citizens, diplomats, or inter-state entities play such roles. Chapter 3 posits cooperative conflict

resolution principles that combine spiritual commitment, political and cultural anthropology, and self-disclosure of one's personal and corporate role in injustice. Here the "ordinary" citizen-diplomat-spiritual person who models just peacemaking is former President Jimmy Carter during the Camp David Accords. Yet in chapter 4, this same man is the enfeebled goat who rejects cooperative conflict resolution and responsive honesty in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Stassen could delve into this perfectly ambiguous (and revealing) case study. We might then sort out who is involved in what decisions at which levels of local to global peace and justice praxis. The text could clarify when and why just peacemaking is likely to be person-to-person, person-to-society, society vis-à-vis state, global civil society before international organizations, and states (large and small) in the world political and economic system. Complicated? Yes. But dissecting layers of legitimate political interaction is a firmer foundation than a presumption that peacemaking efforts will accrue in a statist system under realist, neoliberal, and internationalist paradigms.

Nonetheless, Parts Two and Three lead one further down the latter path. How might we begin to realize solidarity in "love and community" with less privileged actors or less developed states? The text largely ignores non-combat, non-weaponry means of domination, such as under-regulated neoliberal economic norms that disadvantage many states and people otherwise hoping for peace and secure conditions. Unsurprisingly chapters 5, 7 and 9 rehearse familiar self-interested arguments of states and international organizations in endorsing democratic peace theory and an enlarged free market system. Granted, Stassen does list obstacles to sustainable and holistic development for the underside of globalism, and pleads for enlightened and enhanced United Nations monitoring of speculation-driven commerce and investment. But his concluding chapter echoes the refrain that the accumulation of peacemaking *practices* is evidence that just (and economic) war thinking is circumscribed. The ambiguity of just peacemaking *positions* is understudied. If "just peacemaking theory must empower ordinary people" (181), then what levels of analysis, concepts, or empirical weight will help citizens or leaders grasp this new ethic of love and community? *Peacemaking* as presented here is not a compelling alternative that proclaims mercy, sacrificial faith, or solidarity among those most oppressed by injustice.



Perry Bush's social history shows the anguish, possibility, and ambivalence of melding justice and peacemaking. When examining the implications of personal and broader levels of integration for people of a peacemaking theology and community, Stassen's "ten practices" are better understood in this Mennonite case to mean "thousands of steps" – rearticulated identities, socialization and differentiation, a new theological hermeneutic, and a profoundly different relationship vis-à-vis the state and world. Initial chapters show how General Conference and Mennonite Church denominations in the mid-twentieth Century sought to acculturate as good citizens within American society. To do so, they proved they were just and equal to carrying civic responsibilities. There was also a demographic shift from rural to urban living. But the recurrent issue of enlistment in a "warfare state" heightened the trauma of their post-agrarian identity. They wrestled with loyalty to the state, obedience to God and one another, and legitimacy before society. The bargain with the state evolves from WW II-era Civilian Public Service, an exclusivist witness that distanced Mennonites from society-at-large, to I-W alternative service, designed to be a positive, engaging witness that sought parity with soldiers' benefits and further integration into American life. The latter form of alternative service emerges as a newly scripted norm, one that begins to identify Mennonite faith with service and sacrifice near and far.

This transformation of normative discipleship sets the stage for a Mennonite identity beyond a "good citizen-good pacifist Christian" pact with the state. The final third of Bush's text addresses the years leading up to and during the US-Vietnamese War. A vocal and public *minority* of this community re-examined their history and theology, and argued in the churches and before society and the state that I-W service did not speak truth about just war and genuine peacemaking. As the war escalated, these Mennonites saw themselves as pacifists in solidarity with suffering people. Nonviolence meant absolute non-participation in war and radical activism against a system that harmed others. Nonresistance meant political outspokenness and criticism of quiet pietism. As this minority protested more and more justice and peace issues, it risked the whole community's social fit in a "welfare state." Even though these youth did not speak for many in the Mennonite community, their domestic and global voluntary service began to reshape Mennonite theology and Christian ethics in the context of many forms of domination and conflict. In discerning a

new identity, this community relearned its theology and reinterpreted its history and socio-political relevance. There was a continuous production and construction of what a pacifist Christian response might mean. Bush engages the personal and communal costs of challenging statist, social, economic, and international norms.

The drawback of Bush's social history is that it devotes only a few pages to the *majority* of Mennonite young men who enlisted in WW II. The author gives but a few more pages to the significant number who joined the US-Vietnam conflict, protested the vocal Mennonite anti-war stance, voiced no qualms with I-W alternative service, or left the Mennonite fold altogether. A deeper analysis of theological hermeneutics would inform our understanding of this evolving sense of discipleship. Bush skirts a fuller discussion of pro-state arguments in the Mennonite church. This critique underscores the complex options of just war, pacifism, or a third path of finding common ground in justice and peace. If a new ethic of "love and community" is being born, then critical case studies will be those citizens, leaders, states, or communities of faith caught in the ambivalence of opting or refusing this alternative path. Here we must welcome the ambiguity inherent in *positions* and *practices* combining theological conviction, political ethics, community experience, and empirical evidence. By struggling in the midst of community, one perhaps discerns segues from an individual level of involvement and analysis to compassionate and communal responses. With these challenges in mind, I recommend both texts together for classes in conflict transformation, peace history, and international relations.

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Ray S. Anderson. *The Soul of Ministry. Forming Leaders for God's People*. Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1997.

This book does not focus primarily on the practical skills and strategies of ministers, but rather on foundational questions which shape ministering persons. In the author's view ministry is the calling of all Christians, something "in which every member of his (Christ's) body has a share." His understanding of ministry as the "office of ministry" is derived from this broad understanding of the "function of ministry" but does not seem to get adequate attention.

Anderson develops his understanding on a solid biblical foundation, offering helpful interpretations of the Bible as he does so. The ministry of the church must be seen first and foremost as God's ministry to the world through word and deed. "The ministry of God is to the world, for the sake of the world" (viii). On the basis of John 20:21 he concludes that "as Jesus was sent into the world, so too are Christians sent as a continuation of [his] ministry." The coming of Jesus clarifies God's ministry to the world and is thus the basis for all Christian ministry.

Three of the most valuable insights are found early in the book: ministry involves theological discernment, theological innovation, and theological praxis. By theological discernment Anderson means that we "must be open to the direction of the Holy Spirit in order to interpret any given situation in terms of the eschatological preference of God rather than merely conform to historical precedence and principle" (14). The idea of ongoing theological innovation is based on the examples of Jesus and Paul (sabbath and circumcision). "Conformity to the authority of God's Word may require nonconformity to a theological tradition as well as nonconformity to contemporary culture and ideology" (24). This is a challenge to some of our usual ways of dealing with contemporary issues.

Anticipating the question "where does this leave absolutes?" Anderson says that "what is absolute regarding the command of God is connected with the ministry of God" and, "there must be a theological antecedent for what becomes theological innovation" (19). The challenge he issues is for "those who minister not [to] be satisfied with conformity to what God has said, but [to] press onto participate in what God is doing" (16).

Discernment and innovation operate through theological praxis. “God’s ministry comes alive in the praxis of Spirit. First, through Christ’s ministry and then through those who are empowered by the Spirit of Christ” (26). Praxis means that the truths of God are discovered through the encounter with Christ in the world by means of ministry (28). Anderson uses the story of Peter and Cornelius as an example of praxis in the Spirit (Acts 10-11). Showing that “the law of Moses (scripture) clearly forbade what the Spirit was bidding Peter to do.” Theological discernment (‘I perceive that God is no respecter of persons’) led to theological innovation (going to Cornelius’ house, telling good news and baptizing Gentiles). Thus, “[p]raxis of the Spirit takes precedence over the practice of law” (30).

Anderson has much to offer as we think about the church as a caring and supportive community and about its role in the world. In fact, at some points the book seems to be more about an understanding of the church than about pastoral leaders and their functions. What is disappointing is the limited attention the author gives to the more narrowly understood “office of ministry.” The subtitle “Forming Leaders for God’s People” suggests that the work of those called to leadership roles in the church might receive considerable attention, but this does not happen.

While Anderson does consider the general concept of “servant leadership,” he does not deal with some of the derived and subservient functions of ministers. There is no treatment of the rather important functions of preaching or of administration. Pastoral care is treated broadly, by implication, but not in terms of such specific needs as bereavement. It would have been helpful to see how *The Soul of Ministry* impacts pastoral practice in preaching, administration, and care giving. How do these leadership functions contribute to the ministry of all believers in the world?

In spite of a few shortcomings, this book is well worth studying by pastors, lay leaders, and students who are exploring the meaning of ministry. It is a biblically-based reminder of the foundation of all ministry in the church – God’s concern for the well-being of all people in the world. The church is to continue ministering the way Jesus ministered.

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Bernie Neufeld, ed. *Music in Worship: A Mennonite Perspective*. Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998.

The book is a collection of fourteen essays on topics relating to worship and music. It is meant to be a resource for musicians and pastors as well as for seminary and university students in church music courses. (Curiously, there is no bibliography.) In this time of church music turmoil, with the ‘old’ and traditional pitted against the ‘contemporary’, these essays strive to paint a larger picture. This is a thought-provoking book, with a clear intent to foster and encourage an attitude towards music and worship that will result in spiritual growth within the church.

As so often happens, it turns out to be easier to discuss the theology and philosophy of music than the music itself. So it is not surprising that the emphasis here is on worship rather than on music. It is much easier to comment on texts (good, bad, indifferent, superficial, deep) than on musical notes. It is possible to propose a definition of worship, such as John Rempel’s: “the creature’s response of gratitude and surrender to the goodness of the Creator” (31), but who would attempt to define music? What makes a tune good or bad, trite or profound? The best essays in the book, such as John Rempel’s and Dietrich Bartel’s, are the more philosophical ones.

The authors agree in their promotion of simplicity and live music as opposed to recorded or amplified music. They emphasize virtues like honesty and integrity in worship, and avoid fruitless arguments over music styles. There is no support for taped accompaniments, electronic hymnbooks, McAnthems, or any kind of entertainment-music for pew potatoes. Yet there is openness to new developments such as non-Western music, and a positive recognition of today’s revival of interest in hymn writing and singing (The Iona Community, Taize, and numerous poets and composers). Eleanor Kreider (“Worship: True to Jesus”) explains that Mennonites attempt to base their worship on a New Testament model, in contrast to other denominations which take their cue from the Old Testament. The one approach is simple, the other may be extremely lavish. There is little in this essay about music *per se*, but Kreider lays a theological groundwork for the chapters that follow. She pleads for worship and music to express the “simplicity, the truth, and the power of the gospel” (29).

Bernie Neufeld (“Crossing the Border: Music as Traveler”) points out that “it is not important to ask where or how we worship but who and why we worship” (52). Or as Christine Longhurst puts it (quoting Don McMinn), “God is not just seeking worship. He’s seeking worshippers” (84). Simplicity carries over even to the planning of worship. George Wiebe (“Anticipating God-Presence”) provides a fascinating insight into the life of a director of music. There is much thinking, planning, and praying, but not so much as to “domesticate the Spirit,” as John Rempel would say (45). “Our concern with carefully, logically structured worship services, significant as they are, can never replace the prerequisite of crying for God’s help and blessing for ourselves and for our task” (Wiebe, 127).

It is not surprising to see congregational song, or hymn singing, extolled as the chief musical activity in the Mennonite church. In the Protestant/Mennonite tradition the congregation is the “basic actor” (43) and hymn singing is the fundamental, though not necessarily the only, musical activity. This theme is eloquently reinforced by Gary Harder (“Congregational Singing as a Pastor Sees It”), who refers to congregational singing as the center of a church’s music ministry, “a barometer of the spiritual vitality of the church” (110). Similarly, Kenneth Nafziger (“And What Shall We do With the Choir?”) states that “the most significant music of worship must be congregational song” (182). Bernie Neufeld expands on this concept by explaining that the “basic actor” in today’s global church, that is, the congregation, is made up of people with increasingly diverse musical backgrounds. In order to recognize and utilize these various gifts, it is important for leaders to “create a balance of musical styles” (55). Leonard Enns (“The Composer as Preacher”) draws fascinating parallels between preaching and composing, in showing how music, especially congregational song, can function as the sermon in a worship service. Text-only emphasizes the intellectual approach, whereas music “feeds and enriches the spiritual life” (242). He illustrates his thesis in non-technical terms by reference to two choral compositions by Arvo Pärt and William Matthias.

Marilyn Houser Hamm shares some of her enthusiasm in “Creative Hymn Singing.” Her examples are all taken from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, except for two Iona community songs published in 1995. J. Evan Kreider also highlights the congregation’s role in worship. His essay (“Silencing the Voice”) is an appeal for acoustically vibrant places in which people are drawn together rather than isolated. It is a sad comment on our churches today that this point

needs such stressing, yet most church buildings continue to be built not so much to help congregations worship as to feature the sounds produced from the “stage.” Acoustically live spaces will result in more energetic and enthusiastic congregational participation.

Although hymn singing has been central to worship among Mennonites, it is somewhat odd that Anabaptists have produced almost no original hymnody of their own. The essay by hymn writer Jean Janzen (“The Hymn Text Writer Facing the Twenty-First Century”) expresses a longing for more creativity: “Next to the Bible, they [hymns] are our best source for light and hope” (253). Flexibility, tolerance, and openness to present-day developments are themes in Mary Oyer’s essay “Global Music for the Churches.” In the demise of the organ’s role in church music, she sees a reflection of an end to the complete hegemony of the Western world. But rather than merely bemoan this fact, she highlights the beauty of non-Western sacred music and makes a plea for taking it at least as seriously as traditional Western music. In this way a “healthy and invigorating cross-cultural interchange” can occur in Christian worship (81).

Another, perhaps more appropriate, title for this book would be *Music in Worship – in Search of a Mennonite Perspective*. A specifically Mennonite point of view is never clearly articulated. Just as there appears to be no such thing as Mennonite hymnody (Jean Janzen), neither is there such a thing as “Mennonite worship.” The emphasis on congregational song is certainly not unique to Mennonites. Most if not all of the ideas in this book have been expressed by Christian musicians and theologians from other traditions and denominations (Marty, Routley, Westermeyer, Webber *et al.*). Mennonite features, such as the SATB a capella tradition, receive virtually no mention in the book. Perhaps it is in the very reluctance or inability to frame a uniquely Mennonite style of worship and music that a “Mennonite” perspective lies. The Mennonite church borrows from any and all traditions and cultures, to find and adopt what is good. Psalms are popular and form an integral part of all Mennonite hymnals, but so are all kinds of hymns and spiritual songs. At times, instruments and choirs play an important role in worship, but often they do not. Where this tradition is a genuine, loving, and caring ‘welcoming of the stranger’ and not merely a careless assimilation of other traditions and styles, an all-inclusive, dare we say “Mennonite,” attitude emerges.

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Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld. *'Put on the Armour of God': The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 140. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

Piqued by questions related to the theme of power and empowerment in Ephesians, and more particularly Eph. 6:10-20, Tom Yoder Neufeld in this stimulating, well-crafted, and concise monograph explores the biblical history of one aspect of the divine warrior myth – namely the arming and dressing of the warring deity. The study begins with Isa. 59:15-19, proceeds through Wisdom of Solomon 5:19-23 and 1 Thess. 5:1-11, and climaxes with Eph. 6:10-20. Essentially Yoder Neufeld's 1989 Harvard Divinity School doctoral dissertation, this work is rich in exegetical insight, sharp in theological acuity, and suggestive for ecclesial social performance.

The author argues that in the four texts, all of which presuppose a situation of social victimization, the motif of the divine warrior in armor is exploited "as a forceful expression of the power and inevitability of divine intervention both in judgment and salvation. . . . Divine intervention is interpreted as the presence and exercise of divine qualities, virtues, and actions in each of these texts" (154). Yet each text appropriates the motif in a distinctive way. In Isa. 59's social critique, addressed to a situation of social oppression, "a highly usable and reusable" motif is fashioned from the familiar myth – YHWH takes on armor (righteousness/justice as a breastplate, a helmet of salvation, garments of vengeance and fury) to reclaim the lost social virtues of justice and righteousness in the post-exilic Jewish community. In the Wisdom of Solomon, this motif is appropriated in the climax to the introductory segment, in which the divine warrior (with righteousness/justice as a breastplate, impartial judgment as a helmet, integrity as an invincible shield, and stern wrath for a sword) vindicates the suffering "righteous one" (modeled on the servant of Isa. 52-53).

The chapters on 1 Thess. 5 and on Eph. 6 unveil how the motif of the divine warrior in armor is transformed in early Christian ethical exhortation. Yoder Neufeld's passions come to full expression (also evident from the Conclusion) and he makes his most significant contributions here. He concludes: "In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul takes the breathtaking step of placing the



confused and even fearful Thessalonians into God's armour, thereby implicating them in the invasion of the divine warrior. Moreover, the surprise element of that divine intrusion is heightened by the nature of that participation – the militant exercise of faith, love, and the hope of salvation” (154).

The following are key elements of his argument: (1) The rhetoric in 1 Thess. 5 has an explicitly (but not exclusively) socio-political horizon, evident especially in “a brief but cutting critique of Rome” (82), caricaturing the imperial slogan “peace and security” (1 Thess. 5:3). (2) In contrast to prophetic and apocalyptic traditions in which the divine warrior is given *sole* agency to judge and vindicate, rendering the community largely passive as it awaits divine intervention, Paul exhorts the community to become engaged in the struggle. Paul's purpose is not simply to assure believers of their protection, nor to exhort them to a defensive stance, but to prod them into militant action. (3) This task emerges out of the community's particular status and identity, taking up the very role of the divine warrior, by virtue of its baptismal status, as believers “don the Messiah and with him his identity and task” (85). 1 Thess. 5:8 is interpreted in light of Rom. 6:1-14 and 13:11-14: “the experience of baptism [is] the entry into the armour” (a significant novel argument, though submerged in a footnote on p. 90). In this sense, it is the community that inhabits the divine armor, taking on the role of God yet without actually replacing God; in this way the divine warrior in armor is “democratized.” (4) Believers are exhorted to employ an ironic “strategy of surprise” – the warfare of love. Moreover, the absence of the “cloak of vengeance” (Isa. 59:17) suggests a restriction of the character of the divine armor and a recasting of the nature of divine warfare. In this sense, the divine warrior is “pacified” even as “God remains in the picture as warring judge who brings wrath” (89).

The final chapter provides one of the finest studies of Eph. 6:10-20 and a compelling treatment of the strategy of the entirety of Ephesians and its preoccupation with power and empowerment. Yoder Neufeld convincingly argues that the concern of the author of Ephesians (a pseudepigraphical document) is not the institutionalization or hierarchicalization of the church as commonly assumed but empowerment in its struggle. The author conflates for a circle of divided Paulinists the perspectives of heavenly status through completed salvation and the “unfinished task of cosmic struggle and victory” (97). Ephesians reappropriates the Pauline legacy of the divine warrior in

armor, maintaining an emphasis on the “democratization” of the warrior, based on the baptismal identity and status of the Christian community, (who “step into the role of the Divine Warrior by taking up his power” and so “inhabit the armour of God”). “In effect [the author] replaces Christ the warrior with the saints as corporate warrior,” Yoder Neufeld says. In contrast to 1 Thessalonians, the battle is against the cosmic “peers of God, as it were – the devil and his principalities and powers” – “diverse manifestations of a seamless web of reality hostile to God.” The socio-political dimension is muted, yet “it is in the realm of human interaction that the battle with the supra-human powers (also) takes place.” The warfare of the community is no longer ironic but overtly aggressive and confrontative, even as peace, love, and reconciliation are crucially important in Ephesians. The announcement of “peace” (6:15) refers not to an ironic mode of warfare but “to the state which follows cessation of warfare once the powers have been vanquished” (138). Paul’s earlier “pacification” of the warrior is given a new twist.

Yoder Neufeld’s work is especially suggestive for the interpretation of other passages in Paul in which divine warrior/warfare imagery applied to the community is evident or close to the surface (e.g. Rom. 12:21; 1 Cor. 16:13; Phil. 1:27-2:18). I hesitate slightly with respect to the argument that the community in 1 Thess. 5 is pictured as taking on the “role” of the divine warrior. I prefer to suppose that for Paul the community participates in the warrior’s judicial battle and dons the warrior’s virtues. While Yoder Neufeld nuances his argument carefully, noting that in 1 Thessalonians the role of God is not actually “replaced,” Paul clearly distinguishes the role of the community and the role of the divine warrior in the eschological battle, reserving special prerogatives of justice and vengeance for God (e.g., Rom. 12:19-21; 16:19-20; 1 Cor. 5:12-6:3; 1 Thess. 5:8-9). Thus I would prefer to understand the related roles of warrior and community in terms of synergism (e.g., Phil. 1:27-30; 2:12-13). Indeed, on this point of imaging the community as synergistically active in the cosmic battle (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:2-3), Paul stands in continuity with various apocalyptic writers (e.g., *Jub.* 23; *1 Enoch* 85-90, 93:1-10; 91:11-17; 1QM). What distinguishes him is not the notion of the community’s active participation in the warrior’s battle but his emphasis on the ironic character of the community’s warfare of love in the human plane.

These are minor points, however. Yoder Neufeld's work invites further theological reflection and conversation. First, it invites conversation with another biblically-oriented perspective on divine warfare which highlights the notion that, while the divine warrior is active, the community is to be passive (e.g., M. Lind and others). Assuming the ongoing validity of "biblical realism," Yoder Neufeld's thesis moves away from passive non-resistance as a pacifist framework toward active participation in the struggle for peace and justice, in concert with a peace-making, justice-vindicating God. Indeed, it suggests that the normal place of the Christian community is not in a zone of comfort, stability, or isolation, but in the heart of the struggle. On the other hand, his thesis invites conversation with Mennonite pacifists less comfortable with the biblical imagery of a warring deity in ethical discourse (e.g., H. Huebner, R. Gingerich, and others). Now in broader circulation, this book should become a strategic component of any biblically-oriented peace theologian's arsenal.

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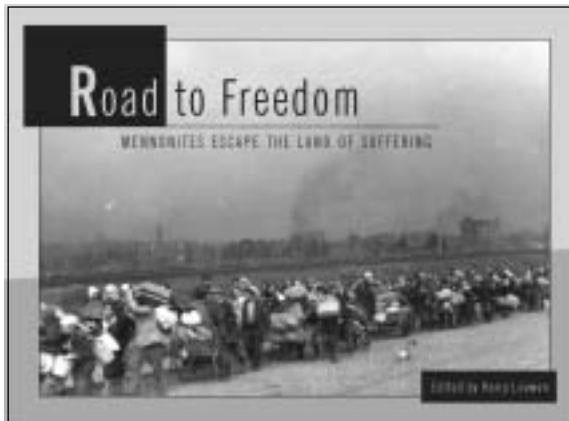
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