

Gulag Ethics: Russian and Mennonite Prison Memoirs from Siberia

P. Travis Kroeker, *McMaster University, Hamilton* and
Bruce K. Ward, *Thorneloe College, Laurentian University, Sudbury*

This essay focuses on Siberian prison memoirs penned by very different authors, culturally and religiously. Fyodor Dostoevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn are renowned Russian novelists whose prison camp and Gulag experiences provoked their conversion from secular ideologies to radical (even if unconventional) Christianity that is identifiably Russian Orthodox. Bruce Ward argues in Part I that, for both writers, their Siberian exile transformed their understanding of human nature from vague humanism to a powerful conviction that the suffering Christ reveals the true *imago dei* that defines and redeems the human condition even in its sinful extremities. Their struggles to bear witness to the experience of the Siberian camps transformed them as writers and as people and left its religious and ethical mark on their entire literary corpus. The Mennonite experience of the Gulag, by contrast, involved an ethnic and religious minority who already inhabited a diaspora identity and a theological and ethical tradition of martyrdom focused on following the nonviolent, suffering Christ. Yet

the fictional prison memoir of Hans Harder and the Siberian diary of Aron Toews display a similar attunement to the transforming power of the suffering Christ experienced in the Gulag and draw lessons from it for the Mennonite people. Above all, they suggest that the only truly human identity is not one rooted in ethnicity or in the achievements of a people, but rather one rooted in the self-emptying humility of Christ who took the form of the servant even unto death.

Part I: Russian Prison Memoirs in Siberia

(Bruce Ward)

Two of the most illustrious writers in Russian and indeed global literature, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, each authored prison memoirs, and both of them spent time in prison in Omsk where this conference is being held—one when it was a hard labour camp under the Tsarist regime of Nicholas I in the nineteenth century (Dostoevsky) and the other when it was a transit prison within the Stalinist gulag system of the mid-twentieth century (Solzhenitsyn).

Dostoevsky was arrested by the Tsarist secret police in April 1849 for his involvement in the Petrashevsky group of radical liberals and socialists; after months of incarceration and interrogation in the Peter-Paul fortress in St. Petersburg, he was subjected to a mock execution and then sentenced to eight years of hard labour in Siberia. On January 23, 1850 he entered the prison fortress at Omsk, where he was to remain for four years (because of a reduction in his sentence), followed by four more years of Siberian exile as a soldier in a convict battalion stationed in the town of Semipalatinsk (now called Semey, in Kazakhstan, farther south down the Irtysh River from Omsk). He was finally to return to European Russia and resume his career as a writer in 1859, ten years after his arrest.¹

Solzhenitsyn was arrested in 1944 while an artillery officer on active duty on the Russo-German front, because of correspondence with a friend which included criticisms of Stalin. After a period of incarceration and interrogation in the notorious Lubyanka prison in Moscow, he too was sentenced to eight years of hard labour in Siberia. During his three-month journey to the camp where he was to serve most of his sentence, in Ekibastuz (also in what is now Kazakhstan), he stayed for a time in Omsk, not in exactly the same barracks as Dostoevsky, but in a dungeon of the former military fortress built under Catherine the Great.² His description of this dungeon demonstrates his consciousness of following in the path of Dostoevsky: “The prison at Omsk, which had known Dostoevsky, was not like any old Gulag transit prison. ... It

was a formidable jail ... and its dungeons were particularly terrible. You could never imagine a better film set than one of its underground cells. ... The cell has no ceiling, but massive, menacing vaults converge overhead. One wall is wet—water seeps through from the soil and leaks onto the floor. In the morning and in the evening it is dark, on the brightest afternoon half-dark. There are no rats but you fancy that you can smell them.”³ After his release from hard labour in 1953, Solzhenitsyn was to spend another four years in Siberian exile, until his “rehabilitation” in 1957 under Khrushchev. He was to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970.

Such, in brief outline, is the connection between Omsk and two of the most significant voices of Russian—and indeed world—literature. My concern in what follows is with how this Siberian prison experience proved to be decisively transformative for them, both as individuals and as writers (though neither would acknowledge such a separation). The focus will be on their struggle to remain writers within an environment hostile (to say the least) to this activity, and on how this struggle proved spiritually transformative for both. It is our expectation that placing the world-famous Russian writers side-by-side with the “humbler” Mennonite literature in Part II of this essay will yield some instructive parallels and contrasts.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

There are two primary sources for Dostoevsky’s experience in Omsk: his rare letters from Siberia and his memoir, *The House of the Dead*. Because the latter is a work of literary art, it has to be considered as much poetry as fact, and therefore not as an innocently realistic reproduction of his day-to-day existence in prison—for instance, he clearly takes great liberties with time, ordering and compressing incidents into a time-frame that serves his artistic goals. Nevertheless, the consensus among Dostoevsky’s best scholarly biographers is that if *The House of the Dead* cannot be regarded as accurate in *form*, it can be taken as accurate in regard to *substance*, and hence a reliable source of biographical material. This is corroborated by other memoirs we have from people whose prison terms in Omsk overlapped with Dostoevsky’s.⁴

It is Dostoevsky’s long letter to his brother, written just a week after his release from the prison camp in Omsk, which furnishes the most unvarnished description of the actual physical conditions he encountered, because the letter was not subject to the Tsarist censorship. It is worth quoting at some length:

Things were very bad for us. A military prison is much worse than a civilian one. I spent the whole four years in the prison behind walls and never went out except to work. The work they found for us was heavy ... and I was sometimes completely exhausted in foul weather, in damp and rain and sleet, and in the unendurable cold of winter. Once ... the mercury froze and there was perhaps about 40 degrees of frost. My foot became frostbitten... . We lived on top of each other, all together in one barrack. Imagine an old, dilapidated, wooden construction, which was supposed to have been pulled down long ago, and which was no longer fit for use. In summer, intolerable closeness; in winter, unendurable cold. ... Filth on the floors an inch thick; one could slip and fall. The little windows were so covered with frost that it was almost impossible to read at any time of the day. An inch of ice on the panes. Drips from the ceiling, draughts everywhere. We were packed like herrings in a barrel. ... We slept on bare boards and were allowed only a pillow. We spread our sheepskin coats over us, and our feet were always uncovered all night. We shivered all night. Fleas, lice and black beetles by the bushel. ... The food they gave us was bread and cabbage soup with a quarter of a pound of beef in it; but the meat was minced up and I never saw any of it. On holidays, thin porridge almost without fat. On fast days, boiled cabbage and hardly anything else. ... I often lay in the hospital. Disordered nerves have given me epilepsy, but the fits occur only rarely. ... Add to all these amenities the almost complete impossibility of possessing a book ... the eternal hostility and quarreling around one, the wrangling, shouting, uproar, din, always under escort, never alone, and all this for four years without change. ... Besides all this, the eternal threat of punishment hanging over one, shackles, the total stifling of the soul, there you have an image of my existence.”⁵

The worst aspect of Dostoevsky’s situation was that he was not able to write. By the time of his arrest, at the age of twenty seven, he was already a writer celebrity in Russia, hailed by the leading critics as the new Gogol, and now this immensely promising vocation as a writer had been catastrophically interrupted. As he said in a later letter to a friend, “I cannot find the expressions to tell you what torture I suffered because I was not able to write.”⁶ Indeed, he was not able even to read; the only book allowed him in the prison camp was the copy of the New Testament given him by a widow of one of the Decembrists while he was in transit to Omsk. Yet Dostoevsky was utterly determined to remain a literary artist and to resume his writing career in the

future. In the same letter to his brother I quoted earlier, he signaled this determination to make the most of his Siberian experience for his writing: “What a store of types and characters from the people I have carried out of the prison camp! I have lived closely with them, and so I think I know them thoroughly. How many stories of tramps and bandits, and in general of the entire dark and miserable milieu! Enough for whole volumes!”⁷

Dostoevsky read his New Testament, over and over again (also recording in a charming vignette from *House of the Dead*, how he taught a young Chechen Muslim, Aley, to read Russian from this same New Testament, and how enthralled Aley was with the figure of Jesus);⁸ and he reflected through long hours on his bunk in the evenings, when pretending to be asleep so as to not be disturbed by the other convicts with whom he lived in constant close quarters.⁹ He was very observant, endlessly gathering material in his head. And not only in his head; he also managed to keep an improvised notebook which he made for himself by carefully sewing together pages on which he jotted down impressions, turns of phrase, stories, proverbs, even songs he heard from the convicts around him. If he had kept the notebook on his person or among his possessions, it would have been stolen by one of the other convicts, or confiscated if found by the authorities, and he would very likely also have been flogged. So he kept it hidden in the prison hospital, confiding it to the care of a medical assistant there whom he trusted; he would add to it from memory during his hospital stays, which were fairly frequent because of his epilepsy. These *Siberian Notebooks* became a major source for the *House of the Dead* (it might also be noted that they have served as a source also for later students of ethnology and Russian folklore).¹⁰

The House of the Dead offers a fascinating series of vividly drawn impressions of Omsk camp life, covering subjects such as food, shelter, work, the smuggling of vodka, escape attempts, punishment, various extraordinary characters among the convicts, the convict theatricals, and even camp animals. Yet underlying the documentary detail, there is another level of concern, which we might call religious-ethical and which links this book to the metaphysical questioning of Dostoevsky's later major novels. At first glance, *The House of the Dead* can seem a fairly randomly organized series of impressions and episodes, but on closer examination reveals a carefully organized aesthetic, especially in regard to the deployment of time, which serves the underlying religious-ethical theme. The theme I have in mind is that of the transformative effect of suffering. This transformation, which could even be called, more strongly, “conversion,” has to do with the profound change of convictions wrought in the heart and mind of Dostoevsky himself by his experience in Omsk.

The popular literature on Dostoevsky often describes this change as an abrupt conversion from atheist socialist radicalism to a conservative upholding of Tsardom and Russian Orthodoxy. This is a caricature. The transformation was much more nuanced and more gradual, taking place over many years and not only the Siberian years. Its complexity is reflected in *The House of the Dead* itself. Dostoevsky makes it clear there that the transformation he underwent was not a matter of a dramatic discovery of God (perhaps through reading the New Testament), still less of the legitimacy of conventional Russian religious-political authority. The discovery that was decisive, according to *The House of the Dead*, was a discovery of human nature, an uncovering of what human beings are through the penetrating observation of people living at the extremes of life. Dostoevsky entered Omsk with a secular humanist vision of human nature, rooted in his youthful utopian socialism; it was a Rousseauian view of the innate goodness of humanity, rendered corrupt by unjust social institutions which, if altered for the better, would liberate that innate goodness. It was for these idealized human beings, identified as the poor and the oppressed people of Russia, that Dostoevsky had been willing to sacrifice his life. Now, in Omsk, he was among them and saw them up close—and the sight was not pretty. He was appalled, first by the absolute, unyielding hostility of the peasant-convicts towards the educated, upper-class political prisoners such as Dostoevsky (who were a small minority). As he puts it in his letter to his brother: “Their hatred for the gentry knew no bounds. ... They would have eaten us alive, given the chance.”¹¹ He was appalled also at the coarseness and violence, approaching the level of bestiality, which he saw in his fellow prisoners. Indeed, Dostoevsky’s greatest hardship for much of his term in the camp was simply the close proximity of these people, with their perpetual shouting, fighting, gambling, drinking (where possible), obscene language and constant bickering.¹² Yet most profoundly disturbing for him was his encounter with criminals, including murderers and violators of children, who showed no remorse for their crimes, no evidence of a moral conscience.¹³ This discovery of the ugliness, darkness and evil of human beings utterly shattered Dostoevsky’s secular humanitarian faith, what he later called his “Schillerism.” This is the discovery that so enthralled Nietzsche when he read *The House of the Dead*, the discovery of what seemed to be a human nature driven by the will to power, beyond the categories of good and evil.

Yet this is not all that is portrayed in *The House of the Dead*. The shattering of Dostoevsky’s humanitarian faith did not leave him mired in nihilism; for he made another, even more difficult discovery about his fellow inmates. He learned somehow to see through the brutalized exterior to the beauty of the human image beneath, to “discover

diamonds in this filth.” This was for Dostoevsky a profoundly Christian discovery, first because it was the Christianity of the convicts that was most evidently linked with the beautiful image sometimes showing through their “alluvial barbarism.” Dostoevsky witnessed this Christianity, for instance, during the Easter services attended by the convicts:

The convicts took their prayers very seriously, and each time they came to church each one of them would bring his widow’s mite with which to buy a candle or contribute to the collection. ... We took communion at early mass. When, with the chalice in his hands, the priest came to the words “receive me, O Lord, even as the robber,” nearly all the convicts fell kneeling to the ground with a jangling of fetters, apparently interpreting the words as a literal expression of their own thoughts.¹⁴

The discovery of the beautiful image (*obraz*) in the most unlikely of places was a Christian discovery for Dostoevsky also, and more profoundly, because it was related to the whole meaning of Christ as the transcendent ideal incarnate in reality. Indeed, this discovery was to become a leading element of Dostoevsky’s vocation as a Christian artist. As an artist at the centre of whose aesthetic was the image of Christ, his concern and struggle was to show the beautiful and the good incarnate in and transformative of reality, *without falsifying or sentimentalizing that resistant reality*. Thus his subject is so often the lowly human being; not according to some simplistic formula that the lowly, the downtrodden, the marginal is the beautiful, but in an attempt to reveal the presence of the beautiful in even the most fallen human beings.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, too, underwent a transformation of heart and mind in Siberia, and in a direction analogous to Dostoevsky, from secular humanism to Orthodox Christianity. When he joined the Red Army in 1941 to fight Hitler, he was an ardent communist (according to his first wife, Natasha, Lenin was his “idol”); but when he emerged from the Gulag in 1957, he was embarked on the path that would lead him to embrace Orthodoxy publicly and in an interview a few years before his death to maintain that the only hope for the modern world is “a return to religion.” Nor did Solzhenitsyn, like Dostoevsky, shy away from apocalyptic thought: in the same interview he notes that “In the Scriptures ... that which predicts the future always talks of the road towards the anti-Christ.”¹⁵

The primary sources for Solzhenitsyn's Siberian experience are his fictionalized account of his time as a bricklayer in the hard labour camp of Ekibastuz, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (first published in Russia in 1962 with Khrushchev's express permission) and, of course, the monumental three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* (first published in the West in the 1970s), which laid bare in exhaustive detail the various dimensions of the Soviet concentration camp system. Solzhenitsyn's memoir is to some extent continually in dialogue with that of Dostoevsky's; one can note, for instance, the repeated comparisons that Solzhenitsyn makes between camp conditions under the Soviets, in regard to food, accommodation, work, punishment and so on, and those that existed in the Tsarist nineteenth century. The comparison is invariably to the advantage of the Tsarist camps. One might say, in summing it all up, that Ivan Denisovich's "good day" under Stalin would have been a terrible day for Dostoevsky.

Out of all the overwhelming wealth of detail in the *Gulag Archipelago*, I will here only focus on the question of memoir writing itself, starting with the practical challenges faced by Solzhenitsyn. As was the case in Dostoevsky's camp, access to books, especially those not officially approved, was extremely limited; and in a way that is again reminiscent of Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn notes in *One Day* that Ivan Denisovich's bunkmate was a Baptist who kept a copy of the Gospels hidden in a hole in the wall near their bunk, which he would take out to read whenever the opportunity presented itself. Writing materials were even harder to come by, though it was not impossible for prisoners with the will to find a way to scavenge pieces of paper and pencil ends. In a fascinating chapter of *Archipelago III* called "Poetry Under a Tombstone, Truth Under a Stone," Solzhenitsyn describes the means the would-be writer had to adopt to get around the strict prohibition against prisoners *keeping* anything *in writing*, even where writing materials were allowed. In the face of this prohibition, he did not even dare to do as Dostoevsky had done, and keep a secret notebook hidden somewhere. His only recourse was to keep his manuscripts hidden in his head, by committing them to memory. He informs us that his procedure was first to compose on paper, so he could see it in front of him, then quickly memorize what he had written and burn the evidence. Since it was easier to memorize verse than prose, he would deliberately cast his work in verse form.

Solzhenitsyn also employed other mnemonic devices. As the number of verse lines grew day by day in his memory, he would repeatedly recite them to himself, keeping track of the lines, for instance, by breaking wooden matches into little pieces and arranging them in rows, then taking them away one by one as he worked his way through the verses. When he noticed that some Catholic Lithuanians among the prisoners

were making rosaries for themselves from bits of bread, he asked them to make one for him, with certain precise specifications; he told them that in his religion he needed one hundred beads, that every tenth bead must be cubic and every fiftieth immediately distinguishable at a touch. The Lithuanians were apparently impressed by his devotion. By the end of his sentence, Solzhenitsyn had accumulated 12,000 lines of verse in his memory (twice the length of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*). This method of writing naturally had immense drawbacks, as Solzhenitsyn notes: "The more you have written, the more days in each month are consumed by recitation. And the particular harmful thing about these recitals is that you cease to see clearly what you have written, cease to notice the strong and weak points. The first draft, which in any case you approve in a hurry, so that you can burn it, remains the only one. You cannot allow yourself the luxury of putting it aside ... and then looking at it with a fresh critical eye."¹⁶ Revision was impossible. On at least two occasions, moreover, he was not able to burn what he had written before a search. He barely escaped detection, once through lying about the meaning of what he had written to a badly educated guard, and the other time by throwing the paper away, fortunately to find it again the next day in order to destroy it properly.

Solzhenitsyn, no less than Dostoevsky, was relentless in his determination to remain a writer against all the odds. He, too, regarded his situation as also an extraordinary opportunity, and for the same reason—it was an opportunity to find the true human image, the *imago Dei*, within the apparently inhuman, and, moreover, to find in the midst of suffering spiritual renewal through writing. Indeed, Solzhenitsyn came to see the Gulag situation as a unique opportunity for creative discovery unprecedented in world literature. For the first time in history, educated insight and the lives of the lowly came together in a complete merger, so that the former did not merely *observe* the latter with compassion and pangs of conscience, but actually *became* what had been formerly only observed from a distance. As he puts it, millions of Russian intellectuals were thrown there—not for “a joy ride, but to be mutilated, to die, without any hope of return. For the first time in history, such a multitude of sophisticated, mature and cultivated people found themselves, not [only] in imagination and once and for all, inside the skin of slave, serf, logger, miner.”¹⁷

Solzhenitsyn did not regard his *Gulag Archipelago* as the final word on the Soviet camp system. In his afterword to the third and final volume, he laments its imperfections of style (noting that he never dared to have the entire manuscript in front of him at one time so he could revise it from beginning to end), and its omission of important details and facts. For instance, it is worth noting that in the vast index of the 1,800 page work, there are references to Polish and

Lithuanian Catholics, central Asian Muslims, Russian Old Believers and Baptists, Romanians, Greeks, and Germans, but not to Mennonites. Yet Solzhenitsyn always insisted that it remained for his account to be completed by other memoirs, which he was convinced were composed in secret desperation throughout the Stalinist Gulag. “How many of us were there? Many more, I think, than have come to the surface in the intervening years. Not all of them were to survive.”¹⁸ Among those that did survive and can help to complete the picture of that period of vast human suffering are the Mennonite memoirs to be discussed in Part II.

Part II: Mennonite Memoirs in Stalinist Siberia

(Travis Kroecker)

The path of suffering in the gulag strips away the idolatries of identity, whether those culturally and ethnically formed or merely ego-driven. What is revealed in these Siberian camps of exiles is both the bestial animality of human life and the true imago dei within the most destitute and appalling of human circumstances. What is revealed by celebrated Russian and unknown Mennonite writers alike is the basic spiritual and ethical crisis of the human condition at all times and places, which is only made evident in the path of suffering. Ohm Aron Toews begins his “Siberian Diary” (1936-38)¹⁹ with a meditation on I Corinthians 13:12 (“now I know in part; someday I will know as I have been known”) and I Corinthians 8:3 (“if one loves God one is known by God”), in which conventional human knowing is radically problematized: “The ways which God bids us go often seem dark and unclear. Many times we feel things could have been different and better. Our knowledge is imperfect, i.e. incomplete. We know neither God nor ourselves” (April 19 ’36, 91). In eternity we will know as we are known, but in the meanwhile God carries and we suffer in dark, entangled paths. Two days later Ohm Toews reflects on the reason for divine tarrying and human suffering: grace.

Forbearance! Love to all mankind! It is Grace versus Justice. Compassion versus Righteousness. ... My dear Maria and children, take note of how we so often look out only for our own wellbeing, our enjoyment. We do not like to go through “hard times,” but would rather live for ourselves and then be received by our Lord and Saviour! ... That is not a Christian attitude. ... How patiently God had to wait before he found you and me. He also wants to redeem others—He looks for them and is still looking. That is why we have hard times (April 21 ’36, 92-3).

This is the messianic martyrology of the early Anabaptists and indeed the early Christians who were well acquainted with political persecution. It is an engaged ethical stance of witness, not victim, that draws upon the spiritual disciplines and resources of the Christian tradition—a tradition not conceived as triumphal possession but as a training in suffering that refines the *imago dei* through affliction and patient endurance of hard times. In what follows I will examine two Mennonite Siberian memoirs: Hans Harder's *No Strangers in Exile* is a literary and therefore fictional memoir of Mennonites in the Siberian forest camps on the Mezen River east of Archangel. It is fictional, but closely based on fact and was written by Harder to alert westerners to the plight of Mennonite colonists in Russia under Stalin's vicious policy of "dekulakization" (euphemistically known as "voluntary resettlement") begun in 1929.²⁰ The *Siberian Diary of Aron P. Toews* was written by a former teacher and then (after 1924) minister ("elder" or "Ohm") in the old Chortitza colony during his exile in Goltjavino and other places at the edge of the *taiga* in Siberia in the years 1936-38 (he was arrested in 1934 and exiled in 1935). Written in solitude, it is addressed both to family and his congregation, taking the form not only of diary but also sermons, meditations, stories and poetry/prayer. He was able to get the diary to his family and he disappeared without a trace soon after.

*Hans Harder and the "University of the North"*²¹

Hans Harder's narrator Alexander Harms—a former village teacher exiled to the Siberian *taiga* with a group of fellow Mennonites but also Russian exiles drawn from various ethnic and regional backgrounds—reflects that these exiles "share a common identity now which transcends ethnic and cultural identities. In exile there are no strangers—only brothers known or not yet known" (Harder, 10; cf. 96). This common human and even familial identity is forged in the shared unspeakable degradation of suffering in which mental and spiritual discipline is crucial to survival. "To an exile hatred and grief are more dangerous than hunger and cold" (14), says Harms, and he struggles to forget the remembered images of his pregnant wife being raped by the drunken Cossacks of the White army and her subsequent death after the stillbirth. Ohm Jasch Peters, the devout unpretentious Mennonite minister whose "simple faith is our pillar of fire in this dark night" is important for Harms, but it is the layman Waldemar Wolff whose open-hearted humanity is "like finding a diamond in a manure pile" (32). Wolff calls their Siberian work camp the "University of the North" and the question is, what is the subject of their shared training

in this school of suffering? There is of course the isolation, monotony, weariness, hunger, exposure to the elements. There is the drunkenness, debauchery, cynicism, brutality and bestiality of other human beings. There is the ironic experience of spiritual disembodiment by a vast, harsh, frozen landscape devoid of human civilization in which the exiles “become separate atoms floating alone and silent and aimless in a void” (29), the “sheer physical insensibility” of the North (34). And yet, as Harms sees it, “The most insidious enemy in camp life is the kind of spreading indifference which begins as callousness towards fellow sufferers and ends as a general apathy so pervasive one’s very soul is frozen into it. Indifference to one’s own fate is the camp disease from which no one recovers” (41).

The “brutally elemental” world of camp life demands an equally elemental faith of the sort expressed by the Mennonite Ohm Peters and the Russian Orthodox priest Father Nikolai, which fights the deadening acedia, the sin of apathy, of camp life (58). There is the burial sermon of Ohm Peters meditating on the strange Pauline words “... by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily” (81), the free inner renunciation of this life in the recognition that life in this world is but a “way,” not a homeland (cf. 15-16). There is the spiritual counsel he gives the despairing Sasha Harms when he returns to the camp after his failed escape attempt:

God is a mysterious God, Alexander. By nature we are all fainthearted grumblers. ... Do you know when all that will cease? ... When we finally grasp the truth that the righteous One is waiting for us at the end of the road. Now it’s true our road is very hard, but He expects us to look beyond our own miseries to Him. God can’t smooth that road for us, Sasha. He can only wait for us at the end of it ... ” (104).

In the end, says Ohm Peters, we either give in to despair and become scoffers, or give in to the waiting, suffering God and become praisers (106)—that is the crucial choice and only the latter produces the inner spiritual strength that is able to withstand the spiritual disease that blasphemes against the divine image within the human. In Harder’s fictional memoir, such spiritual strength is also expressed in the ministry of the Orthodox priest Father Nikolai, who has asked to be accepted into the suffering family of Mennonite exiles, since “we are all travelling the same road” (17). “This is a time of exile” he says, and persecution, as in the early church, has again become the mark of the Christian. He says of his fellow Russians: “We are a nation of spiritual thieves” (and here he has in mind not so much the ideological Bolsheviks so much as the degradation of selfish drunken peasants).

“And what if these times finally change us from spiritual thieves into real disciples” (18) through the shared school of suffering? Like Ohm Peters (40), Father Nikolai considers the question of God to be far more important than the question of land (though Russian peasants and Mennonite kulaks alike are so destructively attuned only to the possession of the latter). Like Mennonites, the Orthodox consider the congregation to be essential in the humanizing process: “otherwise we’ll all topple individually, like the trees we cut. The true faith can exist only within the Church” (51). This gets expressed liturgically in the night time Easter vigil and mass conducted by Father Nikolai with the suffering peasants in which the climax is expressed as a prayer, by the power of the Resurrection, to “forgive those who hate us,” followed by the priest’s powerful admonition:

Be of courage even when you are forced to sacrifice your lives in the savage wilderness of the north. We have borne witness to His Resurrection, even here. You may be forced to perish, but not one of you will be lost—for Christ is risen! Go back to your harsh routine, ready to die but still happy, rich in your poverty as lost lambs found by the Lord (54).

Yet these icons of religious saints, Mennonite Ohm Peters and Russian Orthodox Father Nikolai, do not finally articulate the existential heart of gulag ethics in Harder’s novel. That is left to the “diamond in a manure pile” Waldemar Wolff, who answers the examination questions posed by the university of the north—“What have you got left? And what are you?”—and offers them as words of comfort to his beloved Marfa Preuss who is plagued by her sister’s debauched betrayal of her fellow Mennonite exiles for her own personal benefit. Wolff states:

When our existence here—after the loss of our former prosperity and social status—has torn the last shred of self-respect out of us, then and only then, will we arrive at the second question. When we finally understand the implications of that question we won’t want to answer it. ... we won’t even want to admit that we are Mennonites, or claim any status or identity for ourselves at all. The only proper and permissible answer to the question will consist of just one word. That word will turn out to have been the real subject of our studies here. It will sum up the ultimate meaning of all this painful nonsense. The word is *Nothing*—*nothing at all!* Do you follow me (76)?

There is a “secret message of love” in Wolff’s speech, says Harms, and it is related to the mysterious messianic secret of exilic faith, the

hidden divine wisdom expressed by Paul in I Corinthians 1:27f: “but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus. ...” It is Wolff who suggests that Father Nikolai and Ohm Peters are saints whose lives have no private meaning apart from the underlying divine life enlivening the church in the world: “the mystery that surrounds their personalities is God’s mystery. It’s the mystery of self-sacrificing love. It’s a love that demands nothing for itself, and so does not feed the kind of ego we identify as individual personality” (122). Wolff’s prayer ends the memoir: “God in his mercy grant that our world beyond the frozen Mezen be remembered as a real world with ordinary, decent, suffering and praying people in it ... people who lived and loved and hoped in the midst of despair—as long as they could. ... Many of us fell from despair to apathy to nothing” (123). The Epilogue reflects on this “nothing” as in fact the pre-condition *in extremis* of true spiritual liberty—the freedom to bless the people, even enemies, in a spiritual condition that “surpasses all understanding.” This is the *imago dei* that reveals how the Mennonites of the gulag are not just victims. This identity of *imago dei* goes beyond all egoistic personal identity in a sacrificial imitation of the kenotic Christ. I turn now to the diary of Ohm Aron Toews to spell this out in greater detail.

Aron Toews’ Siberian Diary

Early in his diary (May 17 ’36, 95f), Toews reflects on Jeremiah 3:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with loving kindness,” and he states that the footprints of divine love are found on the pathway of all humankind—an attempt to plant the vineyard of love. He meditates on the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 (cf. Mark 12), stating that peoples are able to respond to the initiatives of divine love with ingratitude, resulting in their bearing not good fruit but rather wild grapes. This, he suggests, happened to the Mennonites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the passion to acquire land and greater wealth, especially among the already rich, and it resulted in community-rending disparities:

Some had one, two, even three farms, others had no land. ... By 1905 non-resistant Mennonites had become landlords, guarded by Cossacks. The bank manager placed native guards before the door of his idol. What’s more, entire villages hired armed

Cossacks to guard their possessions, their mammons. The landless workers, poor widows and orphans remained ! (98)

Furthermore the *Selbstschutz*, which was established to protect villages from the incursions of anarchists such as Makhno, resulted only in burned villages and mass graves of murdered victims.²² Without love and the disciplined practices of love, violence and devastation ensues, and it is the consequence of serving Mammon. The only alternative is to “become silent and bow deeply in repentance and humility” (99). Like ancient Israel and the early Christians, Russian Mennonites will have to enter the wilderness of suffering, a wilderness largely created by their own idolatrous practices, in order to be given themselves as a beloved people again, in imitation of the suffering, self-emptying messianic *imago dei*.

For Ohm Toews, this is very much a matter of cultivating the *imago dei* so as to burnish the true image and fight idolatry within the self, and herewith he returns to the theme of “knowing”:

God and Self: these are the great antitheses which can never be combined. As long as mankind has existed, the struggle has raged under the watchword of the Serpent: “I will be like God, knowing good from evil.” To be like God is the aspiration of mankind. The “Self” is the idol who has the most servants. This idol is strong, much stronger than you and I can know. (May 27 '36, 103)

Only the conversion to the divine image away from egoism, self-love and self-honor can accomplish the true, non-idolatrous “coming to self” entailed in being known by God. The path of this conversion is that of the kenotic Christ who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2). This is not a conversion to a system, a person or a church; Ohm Toews comments on how the idol of “Self” can be well-versed in Scripture and devoted to the church, how it has managed “to create many churches, sects, confessions and fellowships” (105), and goes on to provide many negative examples of both Mennonites and also Russian clergy in exile (106). The process of conversion will entail a radical penitence for the Mennonite people, given their “shattering demoralization”; they will need to remember in deep humility their true spiritual estate revealed in the suffering servant Christ, the exemplary *imago dei*:

Our people have fallen deeply, ethically and morally. Even during the war, or perhaps already a decade earlier, this decline already existed. “Land, land” and “money, money”

and “business and education” were corrupt watchwords 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.” (Aug.2-9 ’36; 115)

Here lies the heart of the gulag experience for the Mennonite people. Suffering is not only or always a form of punishment (as Job’s friends mistakenly thought) but is “often our redemption,” as “the token of love” in which human beings may learn that strength is made perfect in weakness—that messianic Pauline conundrum (2 Corinthians 12:9f) (Aug. 16 ’36). The path of suffering in imitation of Christ, is the path, as Ohm Toews suggests in his Epiphany meditation of Jan. 6 ’37, that dispossesses the first heathen worshippers (the spiritual representatives of the entire pagan world, including Mennonites) of their idolatrous worldly wisdom which cannot fulfill the longing of the human heart. This longing can only be fulfilled in worship of and ethical conformity to the true *imago dei* who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself in order to become the instrument of divine love in the world even unto death.

Conclusion

The Mennonite authors, like Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn, vividly depict the coarseness, violence and physical suffering of the Siberian prison camps and reflect on the transforming effects of the camp experience upon their religious and moral self-understanding and understanding of the human condition. In each case this is expressed in terms of a Christian interpretation of the *imago dei*, a discovery of the profound truth and beauty of the suffering Christ in conditions of extreme deprivation and inhumanity. However, unlike Dostoevsky, whose transformation was from the secular humanism of his youthful utopian socialism, and Solzhenitsyn, who turned from ardent atheistic communism to an embrace of messianic Orthodoxy, the Mennonites sent to the gulag were for the most part not intellectuals and were already deeply shaped by a messianic Christian identity not part of the cultural mainstream. This is not to say that the transforming effects of the gulag experience were less radical for them, since in both Harder’s fictional memoir and Toews’ Siberian diary the school of suffering drives them to a deeper understanding of the profound truth of the *imago dei* as one that transcends and indeed negates all lesser cultural,

social, vocational and ethnic identities. In this situation of exile each finds the conditions for a renewed understanding of the underlying human community constituted by the suffering, self-emptying Christ who images God in human form and humanity in the divine image. It is in these regards that their written lives bear witness no less than those of the famous Russian authors to the divine authorship of all of life disclosed even, and perhaps most vividly, in the extremity of Siberian prison camps.

Notes

- ¹ For an excellent account of this period of Dostoevsky's life, see Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859* (Princeton University Press, 1983).
- ² See Leopold Labedz, ed. *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record* (Penguin Books, 1972), 13-14.
- ³ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago Three*, trans. Harry Willetts (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 49-50.
- ⁴ See P.K. Martanyov, "V Perelome Veka," *I toricheskii Vestnik*, nos. 10-11 (1895) and Waclaw Lednicki, *Russia, Poland, and the West* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1954), which contains a translation of the chapter devoted to Dostoevsky in the memoir of a fellow political prisoner, the Pole, Szymon Tokarzewski.
- ⁵ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Pisma I*, ed. A .S. Dolinin (Moscow, 1928-1959), 135-37.
- ⁶ *Pisma I*, 166.
- ⁷ *Pisma I*, 135-37.
- ⁸ F. M. Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 88-89.
- ⁹ This detail is found in Dostoevsky's retrospective account of a particular episode in the camp, written several years later; see the February 1876 section of F. M. Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994).
- ¹⁰ See Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal*, 83-84.
- ¹¹ *Pisma I*, 135-37.
- ¹² See the February 1876 section of Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*.
- ¹³ See, for instance, Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, 82-83, 104-106.
- ¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, 275.
- ¹⁵ For his early admiration of Lenin, see the biography by D. M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in his Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 75-76. The later interview is found in *Orthodoxy Today.org*, August 12, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago III*, 101.
- ¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago II*, 490-91.
- ¹⁸ Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago III*, 105.
- ¹⁹ *The Siberian Diary of Aron P. Toews*, trans. Esther Klaassen Bergen, ed. Lawrence Klippenstein (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1984). The original German edition (edited by Gerhard Ens) is entitled *Einer von Vielen*. I cite dates and page references to the English edition in brackets in the essay.
- ²⁰ A reviewer of this essay rightly noted that Hans Harder's fictional memoir has a different status than Dostoevsky's fictional memoir, insofar as Harder did not personally experience life in the Gulag. While he endured hardships and dislocation during this period, his literary depiction of the Siberian prison camp is a work of imagination based on the experiences of people he knew. Part of the argument of this essay is that each of these very different memoirs—rooted

in particular experiences and in different perspectives, written in varying circumstances—nevertheless shares the conviction that the divine image in the human is deeply revealed in suffering love, especially evident in conditions such as the Gulag.

- ²¹ Hans Harder, *No Strangers in Exile* (published in 1934 in Germany as *In Wologdas weissen Waelder*), freely trans., ed., and expanded by Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1979). I cite page references in brackets in the body of the essay.
- ²² Note also the harsh words by Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death*, trans. and ed. Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1977): “when the occupation Revolutionary forces disarmed the local peasants to create order and gave the arms to the German colonists, the Mennonites also allowed themselves to be armed in order to protect their lands. Militarization always ends in provocation, not reconciliation, and the landless peasants were provoked even as the Mennonite communities suffered spiritual damage” (69f). Mennonites are to be doubly blamed: “First, it was politically unwise. Then again it was in glaring contradiction to their hitherto professed concept of non-resistance. The Russian peasants pointed out this contradiction and called them hypocrites. A bitter truth was held up to the colonists: ‘When our Russia,’ so it went, ‘our women and children, were threatened with attack in 1914, then you refused to take up arms for defensive purposes. But now that it’s a question of your own property you are arming yourselves.’ Certainly it was a crying shame that the colonists’ actions were inspired neither by a desire to protect the state nor by a true Christian spirit” (79). Cf. *Diary of Anna Baerg: 1916-1924*, trans. & ed. Gerald Peters (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1985), 42f.