

# In Memoriam

## **Johannes Harder (1903–1987): A Reflective Tribute to a Remarkable Mennonite**

He was my special friend and soulmate for the last few years of his life. When I was with him I forgot that he was a generation older than I, almost the same age as my father. In appearance he was patriarchal, in personality and manner a young man — usually in full rhetorical flight, always testing the limits of his extraordinary vision, giving unforgettable expression to his manifold insights into God and man in a world he found endlessly fascinating even as he deplored and despised so many things happening in it. For the mindless complacency of *Spiessbürgertum* (middle-class materialism), for the hypocrisy and chicanery of politicians, for the spiritual mediocrity of so many churches (including Mennonite churches), he had nothing but scathing contempt. In conversation and personal letters he would fire off brilliant volleys of spontaneous satire at these and similar targets. For the purveyors of cultural vulgarity, for the fatuous apologists of the Establishment, for the reek and rot of nay-sayers, doom-gloomers and spiritual pretenders he saved his choicest epithets, his fiercest condemnation.

There was, naturally, a price to be paid for such open censure, for his moral candor. There always is. And he knew it. He was not always loved by those who should have understood him better. He was not always understood by those who needed his wisdom the most. That the vulgarians and bigots and charlatans in society couldn't stand him only made him exult and thunder back at them the more. That some of the people whom he respected or admired kept him at arm's length or rejected him outright caused him bewilderment and inner hurt. He was unconventional, flamboyant, cross-grained and sometimes strident, but he was also a loving, deeply committed Christian and a gentle, concerned and totally unselfish human being. To many Mennonites in Germany he was first and foremost "Ohm Johannes," the beloved elder of the Frankfurt Mennonite Church. His own image of himself was more that of "Prediger in der Wüste," a modern prophet who neither expected nor received the popular support of his own people.

Johannes Harder was born and raised in Mennonite Russia, in the Alexandertal settlement on the Volga, and emigrated to Germany after the Revolution. At the University of Königsberg he studied economics,

philosophy and German and Slavic literature. From 1928 to 1933 he pursued a career mainly as an editor and publisher. During the thirties he also began to write a series of novels, most of them set in his Russian homeland. From 1937–41, during the height of the Nazi period, he expressed his disapproval of the regime through active service in the dissident *Bekennende Kirche*. In 1941 the authorities sent him to occupied Russia as a civilian translator attached to the SS and stationed in Kiev. By 1943 he was "sitting out" the rest of the war in Hamburg.

In 1946 he began a new postwar career as an educator and scholar with his appointment as Professor of Sociology at the *Pädagogische Hochschule* in Wuppertal. After his formal retirement in 1968 he began yet another career as "Ohm" Johannes, the revered minister and elder of the Frankfurt Mennonite Church. In his busy lifetime he and his first wife Friedel had raised five children, three of whom — both sons and a daughter — followed him into the academic profession. His charming little retirement home near Schlüchtern, in the gently rolling countryside of Hesse, continued to be a centre of activity. There in his comfortably cluttered study he wrote copiously, spent many hours on the phone with friends and colleagues, or else, dressed in his favorite dark velvet Tolstoy shirts, received visitors from all over, his impish wit and intellectual sallies punctuated by appreciative laughter with his own delighted laugh leading the way.

Johannes Harder was a radical in the best sense of the word. Above all he was a radical Christian who believed literally and passionately in the revolutionary message of Christ as a transforming power in one's life. And for Johannes Christianity was rooted in the everyday world and daily life much more than in the formal ritual of church worship. He strongly believed that being a Christian meant trying to bring about a better world here on earth through personal, social and political service to others, to the oppressed, the needy and the unloved in this sinful world. It was in this sense that he was a socialist and that he understood at the deepest level the mystical yearning for truth and grace as dramatized in the novels of Dostoevsky. Like Dostoevsky, he came to see the world more and more as "a madhouse inhabited," as he once expressed it in a private letter, "by schizophrenics, and the directors of this institution are the greatest lunatics, who through political turmoil have elevated themselves to the highest positions." And only the power of love as taught by "the man of Nazareth" (his favorite designation), could counteract this madness through selfless action on behalf of others. It was his ardent belief in a radical gospel that made him a Christian socialist and a political activist even in advanced age.

Johannes Harder was also an intellectual in the best European tradition, that is, a man to whom ideas were not bloodless abstractions expounded for their own sake, but relevant extensions of real life, flesh-

and-blood expressions of what mattered most to the human condition. He was the kind of thinker who needed to filter all he experienced through a fine mesh of language in order to discover what was of significance, what could be discarded. He was a tireless verbalizer, but he was boring only to those not interested in the purposeful play of a lively mind or to those who instinctively distrust any person with "the gift of the gab." He talked and wrote as much as he did because he had a constant need to express his ideas and feelings in dramatic form, to hold them up vividly to others so that they and he himself could test their validity, gauge their reality.

And yet, for a writer and intellectual this unique man had scarcely any ego at all. When I was translating his first novel (*No Strangers in Exile*) and asked him for permission to make certain changes in the text he gave me an immediate *carte blanche* to make whatever changes I desired. What made his authorial generosity all the more remarkable was the fact that we had never met, that he did not know me at all. Having made a number of structural, stylistic and even character changes in my translation I awaited his verdict with some trepidation. I need not have worried. He endorsed my English version enthusiastically and wrote to me that I "had made something out of [his] firstborn [novel]."

His academic career was publicly recognized in 1979 when he was awarded the prestigious Federal Grand Cross for Distinguished Service to West Germany as the "father of sociopedagogical method and practise in German universities." Characteristically, he pointed out in his acceptance speech that he "would always feel closer to the Cross of Christ than to any cross of honor." That he must have been an outstanding lecturer goes almost without saying considering his erudition and lively style and personality. Certainly many of his former students found their way to his home after his retirement, or called him up to discuss things with him. As a raconteur he had few peers, and his marvelous personal anecdotes only became richer and more polished with repetition. At his death he was still working on his memoirs, which he was trying to write in the same vivid anecdotal style he used in conversation. Hopefully his devoted second wife Gudrun, whom he married in 1981 and who became his skilled secretary and typist, will be able to complete for publication what should surely be one of the most fascinating autobiographies ever written by a Mennonite.

Although he had lived in Germany virtually all his adult life, Johannes professed strong dislike for much of recent German history and contemporary culture, which he saw as vulgar, exploitative and materialistically oriented. His own soul was Russian, he liked to say, and he retained a great affection for his old homeland and its people. He deeply loved Russian literature and once confided to me that if he could do it all over again he would devote the time he had spent writing his own

"minor" novels to the translating of the great Russian classics into German. He had an almost mystical feeling for the Russian peasant, a feeling that went far beyond the superficial sentimentality so often expressed for the Russian peasant by Russian Mennonites. I often sensed that some of the most profound meaning of human experience was grounded for him in the age-old suffering of the Russian people.

He liked to say that while he did not regret having been born and raised a Mennonite, he had come to feel that he was spiritually and ethically closest to the Quakers with their quiet, informal meditative form of worship which did not need formal protestations of piety. He tended to be suspicious of all institutions and organizations, including the Christian church as an institution. One of his favorite sayings was "The early Christians waited for Christ and got the church." Pulpits, he maintained, were dangerous precisely because they elevated the ministers who stood in them above the congregation they were meant to serve. The business of Christ, he argued, began at the "bottom" where people actually lived and had their being. He believed that the Sermon on the Mount was a radical interpretation of the Ten Commandments, and that interpretation was the foundation of his faith.

One evening I watched with him on German TV a documentary on the Bekennende Kirche during the Nazi period. He knew everybody of note who appeared in the film and gave me a running commentary on events and personalities that was far more interesting than the one on the screen. He had known such giants of theology as Bonhoeffer and Barth, and with his amazing memory was able to recall in rich detail the many discussions he had carried on with them. He had a comprehensive grasp of philosophy, theology, history, culture and German and Russian literature, and had a knack for spinning off in casual conversation all kinds of illuminating and accurate lectures on an impressive array of subjects. One of his dreams (unfulfilled, alas) was to write a Russian-Mennonite social history from "below," one that would incorporate the rich life experience of ordinary but interesting people instead of the usual account of public events, institutions and power personalities.

For all his success and formal honors as an academic, scholar and churchman, as well as a Mennonite man-of-letters, Johannes Harder suffered during his last years a certain neglect at the hands of the Mennonite establishment in Germany. He was too much of a maverick, too much the spit-in-your-eye nonconformist, too much the critical gadfly to fit into middle-class Mennonite *Gemütlichkeit*. His sermons were too trenchant, too radical and demanding for conservative worship services (although it must be added that his talent as a guest speaker or lecturer at special functions was often drawn upon). When the young German-Mennonite terrorist Elisabeth von Dyck was killed by police bullets a few years ago, Johannes Harder was the only Mennonite minister who con-

sented to preach at her burial service. Typically, he used the opportunity to deliver a stirring admonition to a complacent middle class that had failed young people like von Dyck in a crassly materialistic society.

There were also the whispered allegations from certain quarters that during the War he had willingly served the Nazi cause as a member of the SS. The charge was ludicrous considering that here was a man who had early on expressed his abhorrence of the Nazi regime and had left the Mennonite church during those years in protest against its willingness to cooperate with that regime. He never denied that he had been compelled to wear an SS uniform while in the translation service in occupied Russia, but he insisted that he had always been simply a reluctant civilian pressed into special military service as a translator and that he had escaped from that service at the earliest opportunity.

The neglect and misunderstanding he sometimes received from his own people in Germany made him cherish all the more the new friends and contacts he was able to make in Canada during the last half dozen years of his life. On each of his three visits to this country he declared that if he were twenty years younger he would immediately emigrate to Canada, now that he had so many friends here.

And now he's gone, this extraordinary Mennonite and modern prophet, and we are left to cherish his memory and to renew ourselves in the luminous wisdom stored in his many-sided writings. A man like Johannes Harder does not come along very often. He must indubitably be counted among the most versatile and accomplished men of letters in the history of Mennonitenum. That he should have been misunderstood by some, undervalued or even despised by others because of his radical, fearlessly expressed views goes with the territory for a man as visionary, intense and unorthodox as he was. His joy was in living his faith humbly but with tenacious courage, his dignity lay in giving expression to the deep insights of his far-reaching mind, his glory came from the integrity of his heart in the love he bore to others.

Al Reimer  
University of Winnipeg