

“Mother, give me something to eat”: Theodor Heinrich Block and His *Hungerlieder* (1922)

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I

When the Russian-Mennonite world was destroyed during the upheavals of the First World War and its aftermath, some 25,000 Mennonites left their homeland for North and South America. A handful of them settled in Germany as well. Among these refugees were a number of creative writers who in their prose and poetry mourned the loss of their homeland and transformed their experiences of tragedy into literary myths, thus making them an important part of Mennonite self-understanding and peoplehood (Loewen). While writers such as Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn in Canada and Johannes Harder in Germany were never popular among the majority of Mennonites, they were at least known and read by a handful of Mennonite readers. There were other writers who did not seem to fit into the established Mennonite patterns and institutions, and the subjects they wrote about and the questions they asked were less acceptable to the majority of their co-religionists. Consequently these writers were sometimes excluded from the Mennonite circles and soon forgotten.

One such forgotten poet is Theodor Heinrich Block (1885-1945), the author of a cycle of thirty poems entitled *Hungerlieder* (*Songs of Hunger*). Not much is known about Theodor Block's life. According to a short article by Ernst Crous in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Block was born on November 9, 1885, in Rückenau, Molochnaya. He received his training at the Gnadenfeld Zentralschule in Halbstadt and at the Russian teacher's seminary in Petersburg (1907-11). After his formal training he taught in Mennonite educational institutions, including Gnadenfeld Zentralschule (1911-14) and Halbstadt Zentralschule (1915-20). He also taught at the Halbstadt girls' high

school and at the Halbstadt Teachers' Seminary. With other Mennonite teachers, Block served as an official reporter on Russian-Mennonite education and schools at the All-Mennonite Congress in 1917. Block's name is mentioned in the official minutes of this first — and what proved to be the last — All-Mennonite Congress in the Soviet Union ("Protokol", 245-47).

In 1920 Theodor Block fled from Russia to Germany via Turkey, Bulgaria, Rumania and Czechoslovakia, reaching his destination in December, 1921. Between March 1922 and August 1923 he taught school at Wilhelmsdorf in Württemberg. In 1923 Block married Else Belz of Stuttgart. The couple had six children, of whom four are known by name (Heidi, Walter, Heinrich and Siegfried). Between 1923 and 1926 Block was an administrator in a German relief agency (Deutsche Mennonitenhilfe), assisting Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union. For some time he also worked for a life insurance company, but then returned to teaching near Meiningen which today belongs to the German Democratic Republic. Block's wife died in 1934 and in 1941 he remarried (Block letter, 1950). According to the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* Block joined the National-Socialists. Between 1936, the year in which his name still appeared on the membership list of the Hamburg Mennonite congregation, and 1943 there is little known about Block's activity.

According to the late Professor Heinrich Wiebe of the University of Manitoba, Theodor Block came to the Ukraine in 1943 to work as an educational administrator in the German-occupied area of Nikopol (Wiebe). A few months later, in the summer of 1943, Block was arrested by the German occupation forces, sent back to Germany, and imprisoned in Meiningen where he was badly mistreated. The precise reason for his imprisonment is not known. According to Professor Wiebe, who had met Block in the Ukraine, Block had apparently expressed criticism of the German military. According to two nephews of Theodor Block, A. J. (Abe) and Isaak Block of Canada, Block had written letters to his brother in Canada in which he indeed had criticized Hitler (Block, Abe and Ike).

According to Mrs. Elizabeth Schwarz of St. Catharines, Ontario, who worked as a nurse in a hospital in Meiningen toward the end of the Second World War, Block became severely ill in prison. His second wife, Paula, visited Block in prison, and according to Mrs. Schwarz was often depressed on account of her husband's condition. Mrs. Schwarz does not know exactly when or where Block died, but she remembers the date of his funeral. On February 22, 1945, there was an air raid on the town of Meiningen during which she and the patients in the hospital sought shelter in the basement. On that afternoon Theodor Block was buried (Schwarz).

Besides the *Hungerlieder*, Block wrote other poems, including a 1925 poem which celebrated the fourth centennial of the history of the Mennonites, thus joining other Mennonite poets and composers like B. B. Dück and Johann Loewen in reflecting on Mennonite history (Dücker and Loewen, "Mennolied" 1925). He also contributed several longer and shorter articles

on the Russian Mennonites to *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, including "Forstedienst" (I, 664-65), "Kaukasus" (II, 475-76), "Krim" (II, 574), "Kuban" (II, 580), "Olgino" (III, 299), "Tempelhof" (IV, 295), "Terek" (IV, 296), and "Suwarowka" (IV, 276). The last three articles were written jointly with Gerhard Hein, editor of Volume IV. It is, however, the *Hungerlieder* which will remain Block's crowning literary work and for which he will be remembered.

II

The historical setting of the *Hungerlieder* is the famine in the Ukraine between 1920 and 1922. This famine followed hard on the heels of several disasters: The First World War; the Revolution of 1917; the Civil War and period of anarchy in which lawless elements devastated the once prosperous colonies; and the disease epidemics which raged among the South-Russian population. C. Henry Smith writes of this difficult period in Mennonite history:

It would seem that the terrors of civil war, the ravages of banditry, the persecutions of a tyrannical and anti-religious government and the devastations caused by disease epidemics — all the result of man's greed and lust — would be enough grief for any people to bear at any one time; but it was as though providence itself had entered the lists against the ill-fated Russian people when in 1921-22 it sent the Ukraine, the breadbasket of Europe, a series of dry years which resulted in the worst famine in all Russian history (Smith 482-94).

The Ukrainian population, including the Mennoites, had lost their farm equipment and livestock during the period of anarchy. The government requisitioned grain and other produce from the farmers, leaving its citizens little for their own food and next year's seeding. Add to this the severe drought which followed in the early 1920s and one gets a picture of despair and hopelessness. While the Mennonites fared much better than most other Ukrainians, the list of those who died of starvation and as a result of the epidemic was a long one (Smith 488). It was only the timely response of German, Dutch and North American Mennonites which saved their coreligionists in the Ukraine from an even worse fate. Through organizations such as Deutsche Mennonitenhilfe, American Mennonite Relief, and Mennonite Central Committee, which was established in 1920 as a direct response to the Russian-Mennonite plight, many people, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite, were helped to rise again to a new life.

Theodor Block's *Hungerlieder* capture in poetic form the suffering, waste and hopelessness of this historic period on the one hand, and the response of fellow-Mennonites to their people's needs on the other. These poems are exceptional in Russian-Mennonite literature in that they are a poetic *danse macabre* and deal with questions concerning human misery in

relation to a loving God, questions which few Mennonite writers have dared to raise so starkly. The philosophical–theological reflections of these poems make the *Hungerlieder* an important work with a human appeal far beyond the Mennonite experiences which originally gave rise to these poems.

III

The *Hungerlieder* begins with a poem entitled “Die Sonne”:

Wie brütet und senget die Sonne,
Ein Feuerball, glühend und rot;
Sonst weckte sie Leben und Wonne,
Jetzt bringt sie Verderben und Tod.

(The sun is oppressively hot,
It’s a fiery ball, glowing and red;
Before it awakened life and joy,
But now it causes destruction and death) (p. 3).

The word “brüten” (to brood) suggests the image of a brood hen hatching its eggs into life. Ironically, however, the sun’s brooding produces death. This irony continues in the second stanza of the poem, where heaven itself “speit feurige Flammen” (spews fiery flames) upon the green earth, which causes the grass and the forests to shrivel up and die. In the next poem, “Der Himmel,” heaven is accused of being without mercy (p. 4). Moreover, a fiery angel appears in the sky with a drawn sword to punish the earth (“Der Feuerengel,” p. 5).

The result of this activity from above is waste and destruction. In “Die Öde” (Wasteland) the sky becomes bare and biting–blue: “Der Himmel kahl/und bissig–blau” (pp. 6–7). The provisions are running out, and hunger and misery threaten to take over. In “Das letzte Stück” (The Last Piece) the last piece of bread has been consumed with no prospect of bread for the next day:

Und stille ward’s im ganzen Haus,
Als wäre jemand tot. . .
Ein Jeder dacht’s mit scheuem Graus,
Doch keine Lippe sprach es aus:
Wo nimmt man morgen Brot?

(And silence filled the house,
As if someone had died. . .
Everyone thought it, terror–stricken,
Yet no one spoke it:
Where shall tomorrow’s bread come from?) (p. 8).

The children are the first to ask for bread which the mother cannot provide for them:

“Mutter, hast du’s denn vergessen?
Mutter, gib mir was zu essen!”

(Mother have you forgotten?
Mother, give me something to eat) (p. 9).

The mother’s face grows pale, the question of her child cuts her to the heart; she would rather die than see her children starving. In the poem “Umsonst” (“In Vain”), she goes to her neighbor for possible help. But her neighbor, who in the past was generous and helpful, has to tell the mother that she too has nothing to give. No one knows whether she is telling the truth (p. 10). In a later poem, “Die Blutschuld” (“Guilty of Murder”), a woman drowns her own child, not because she had a “heart of stone,” but because she could not bear to see her child suffer. The poet exclaims:

Armes Weib! Was machtest du?
Glimmte es nur eben noch,
War es immer Leben doch. . .
Sündhaft suchtest du nach Ruh’;
Doch für dich gibt’s keine hier. . .
Aber — Gott vergebe dir!

(Poor woman! What have you done?
There may have been little life left,
But it was life nevertheless. . .
Sinfully you sought your peace of mind,
But for you there can’t be any rest. . .
May God have mercy upon you!”) (p. 26).

In their misery people turn to God for help as they have been taught to do. In “Gebet der Hungernden” (“Prayer of hungry people”) they appeal to God’s omnipotence, holiness, love, and compassion. Surely God, whom they trusted in the past, can and will come to the assistance of his starving children. The refrain which follows each stanza in this poem expresses urgency, submission and faith:

Sieh, wir darben, wir verderben,
Wir verschmachten bis zum Sterben. . .
Hilf uns, Herr, in unsrer Not:
Machst Du doch aus Steinen Brot!
Hör’, Allmächt’ger, unser Flehen!
Laß uns nicht zugrunde gehen!
(Lo, we suffer, we’re destroyed,
Soon we’ll face death. . .
Help us, Lord, in our great need;
You, who made stones into bread!
Hear, Almighty, hear our pleas!
Don’t let us die!) (pp. 11-14).

Help, however, seems far away. Instead, the starving people experience the drought and famine as a curse (“Der Fluch”) upon the land. Life and joy have disappeared; all vegetation is dry and burnt; people search for food in the fields, fight over bits of grass and weeds, and are happy when they find rats and mice to satisfy their hunger. They remember the story about the biblical king who was cursed to live like an animal in the wilds, and they count him fortunate to have had at least lush vegetation to fill his belly (pp. 15–16). The desperate starving people wander about like skeletons (“Skelette”) through the streets of their towns in search of scraps of food. Among them is the Grim Reaper himself with his scythe, looking for living human beings. “Are there still some human beings left?” he asks rhetorically, after which he proceeds to do his grizzly work:

Und wuchtig saust die Sense nieder. . .
 Und auf der todesöden Stätte
 Erklappern schaurig die Skelette. . .
 (And down he swings his scythe with might. . .
 And on the dead and desolate place
 The skeletons rattle gruesomely) (p. 18).

Some of the suffering people give up, resigning themselves to their fate (“Ergebung,” p. 19), others become raving mad (“Tollheit” and “Die Tollen!” pp. 20–21). Since heaven has not answered their prayer, a group of insane sufferers lock themselves up in a house and set a match to it. Their death in the flames becomes “a sacrifice for the land” (p. 20). As the flames rise up the dying men sing a “death-happy tune” (p. 21) to the glory of the Almighty. In the next poem the poet asks whether it is possible to comprehend such self-destruction, implying, no doubt, that no one who has not experienced famine should judge the deed of these unfortunate persons.

Still other sufferers lost their faith in God. In the poem “Abfall” (“Apostasy”) they chant:

Der Himmel hat uns nicht erhört. . .
 Wir sind betrogen und betört!
 Wie könnte sonst bei solchem Schrei’n
 Ein gut’ger Himmel stille sein?
 (Heaven has not heard us. . .
 We have been deceived and fooled!
 How else could a loving God
 Remain silent in the face of human pleas?) (p. 22).

The nursery tale concerning a loving God is also a deception, and belief in reward, love, empathy and morals is used to subdue the masses and keep the rulers in power. The hungry people are thus justified to rob and kill for the sake of bread. Full of hate and with “the devil in their stony hearts” (p. 23), the hungry masses rebel and move against their rich and heartless exploiters

and oppressors. For the sake of a piece of bread they do not shrink from “tearing apart” (“zerfleischen”) their fellowmen. The hungry mob leaves a path of destruction and death behind it. After the grisly work all that is left are empty shacks with open windows swaying in the easterly wind, white bones bleaching in the hot sun (p. 24), and the stench of corpses and the plague (“Der Zug” — “The March,” p. 27). One solitary wanderer is left behind; he dreams of bread, steak and honey. The poem “Im Wahn” (Madness or illusion) concludes with the advice:

Still! Stört nicht seinen stillen Wahn!
 Laß so ihn wandern;
 Er ist gewiß nicht übler dran,
 Als alle Andern.
 (Silence! Do not disturb his illusion!
 Let him thus wander about;
 He is no worse
 Than the rest of them) (p. 25).

The drought, famine and disease, result in the dreaded plague epidemic. The poet’s words were apparently not sufficient to paint a picture of utter hopelessness — “So unheimlich ohne Wort?” (So uncannily without words?) —; he now resorts to a wailing song to describe hunger and the plague (“Hunger und Pest”). The song’s sighs and howls are about the end of all mirth and joy, wolves and vultures descending upon dead people, people dying lonely deaths, and the monster called the plague celebrating its harvest (pp. 29–30).

There follow five poems in the cycle which are addressed to people who have never experienced real hunger. These poems come after the depth of human suffering and misery has been reached and before the turning point in the poem cycle. Three of these poems address those who have contributed to the human misery described here, while the other two, the first and the fifth, indicate that if there is any hope of help, it will have to come from other sympathetic people (Menschen).

The first of these poems, “Den Mühevollen” (“Hard-working people”), praises those fortunate enough to have an opportunity to work and thus earn their bread and a good life (p. 31). The second poem is addressed to the parasites of society (“Den Schmarotzern”). These parasites, who have never felt the pain of hunger, have become rich at the expense of others. They should pause for a moment and consider the plight of others and how they would feel if their good life were to be taken from them (p. 32). The third poem is a hard indictment of the wicked ones (“Den Bösen”). They are cold, heartless and without qualms of conscience about amassing wealth from the pain, blood and tears of others. They trample down others for the sake of their own advantage:

Das nackte Elend starrt euch an
 Aus tausend Hungermienen . . .
 Ihr Bösen! Was habt ihr getan,
 Um eure Schuld zu sühnen?
 (The naked misery stares at you
 From a thousand hungry faces . . .
 You wicked ones! What have you done
 To atone for your guilt?) (p. 33).

Another poem addresses the rulers (“Den Machthabenden”) who are responsible for having destroyed a once prosperous land through their actions. They promised their subjects paradise on earth, but instead millions of their citizens now demonstrate outside their palace walls, accusing their leaders of plunging them into poverty. All that the rulers can offer their hungry subjects are bullets and the hangman’s noose. The suffering people chant:

Unwandelbar ist die Geschichte, —
 Ein Meister, streng und rechtgewillt, —
 Und da sich euer Maß gefüllt,
 Setzt sie ob euch sich zu Gerichte
 (History will not alter its verdict —
 It is a just and fearful judge —
 And when your measure of evil is full,
 You’ll have to give account on Judgement Day) (p. 35).

The fifth poem (“Allen Menschen”) is a reflection on the nature of man. Like enigmatic hieroglyphics, the human being is a most mysterious creature. As always, man is “a question, a riddle, and a problem”. On the one hand man is similar to God himself, and on the other he often descends to the level of beasts. The poet then challenges man to rise to his God-like heights and use his ingenuity and culture in the service of humankind. Noble human beings can, if they only would, help suffering and degraded people transform into divine-like creatures (pp. 36–37).

With this appeal to man’s nobility we have reached the turning point in the poem cycle. And miracle of miracles, this appeal to man’s better nature does not go unnoticed in those parts of the world where people are in a position to render assistance. The cry for help (“Der Ruf”), like an authoritative command “conquered the world”. Far-away strangers begin to weep tears of compassion and to do all they possibly can to send help:

Es sprach der Mensch zum Menschen
 Und bat um Brot,
 Es half der Mensch dem Menschen
 In Todesnot.

(People appealed to other people
 And asked for bread;
 People helped people
 Who were near death) (p. 38).

This remarkable appeal and response between geographically widely separated people, results in unprecedented relief activities. Steamers loaded with provisions cut through ocean waves and trains rush through the distant steppes to deliver food and other supplies to hungry people. A thousand human hands are busily filling packages and boxes for the destitute abroad. This relief action breaks the chains of misery and starvation. Again it is *people* who accomplish the impossible:

Und es lösen sich die Ketten.
 Menschen hörten, Menschen kamen,
 Menschen helfen, menschen retten —
 Und das Elend bricht zusammen.

(And the chains are loosed.
 People heard, people came,
 People helped, people saved —
 And the human plight is broken) (p. 40).

Because of human compassion and deeds of love the wasteland rises to a new life (“Auferstehung”); it is rejuvenated like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes. Cities and villages are resurrected to a new beginning and a carefree tomorrow (p. 41). The saved people (“Die Geretteten”) no longer raise their angry fists to heaven but fold their hands in prayer and thanksgiving. The “saved souls,” torn from the clutches of death, have faith again. They again believe in God, sacrificial love, and in nobility, beauty and goodness (p. 42). They sing a song of songs (Hohelied) about the greatest ideals (“Das Höchste”) on earth: Love and humanity (Liebe und Menschlichkeit). Even modern culture, with its double-face of good and evil, will be forgiven by history because of love’s action (p. 43). And thus there is once again peace in the land (“Der Frieden”): peace between people, peace between God and man, and peace between man and nature:

Zur Nachtzeit, zur Stunde der Ruh’
 Läßt sanft sich ein Engel hernieder,
 Ein lichter, und drückt die Lider
 Der Schläfrigen liebkosend zu.

(At night time, the hour of slumber,
 An angel comes down from above,
 And tenderly closes the eyes
 Of those who need rest) (p. 44).

The last poem like the first is entitled “The Sun” (“Die Sonne”). The sun is no longer burning hot and a harbinger of death, but a dispenser of beauty,

nourishment and life. In response to human compassion, a refreshing rain has fallen at night, for “how can heaven remain silent when people help one another?” The valleys are once again green with vegetation, the forests and fields breathe happily, and the new grain is filled with anticipation and hope. The poem ends with an incantation to the sun:

Sonnengold und Himmelshelle!
 O, du hehrer Strahlensender,
 Sei dem Lande Lebensquelle,
 Bleibe ihm ein Segenspender!

(Golden sun and heavenly light!
 Oh how fair and oh how bright!
 Grant our land thy living springs!
 Send it blessings on thy wings) (p. 45).

IV

As indicated above, Theodor Block's *Hungerlieder* is exceptional among the poetic works of Russian Mennonites. Russian Mennonites have written many verses about the early 1920s' famine (see Hofer), but there is nothing that can compare with the poetic impact and philosophy of the *Hungerlieder*. Some of the verses in this cycle are reminiscent of Heinrich Heine's poems dealing with hunger and its political implications (e.g. “Die Wanderratten” and “Die schlesischen Weber”). However, there is in German literature no such poem cycle as the *Hungerlieder* with its images of starvation, sustained pathos, and philosophical-theological reflection on the nature of God and human suffering.

Block's poetic reflections are certainly unique in Mennonite literature, which is not to say that other poets have not asked questions about God's dealings with his faithful. Fritz Senn, for example, in his “Hinterm Pflug” (“Behind the Plow”) poem cycle deals with such images as God as plowman and the Mennonite people as the field which the divine plowman works (Fritz Senn, 19–51). Indeed, Fritz Senn's poems express intense suffering, but this suffering is not without some purpose. In plowing the field — the Mennonite people — God is preparing it to bear more fruit. In Block's poems, on the other hand, the suffering of starving people is stark in its elemental nature and relentless to the end. In reading these poems one is left with the feeling that people waste away and that there is no purpose to their suffering. Moreover, the suffering in the *Hungerlieder* comes from outside; external forces beyond human control conspire to inflict pain and death upon helpless people. In Fritz Senn's poems there is inner motivation for the suffering of Mennonite people; the suffering is in a sense self-induced, a result of the failure of Mennonites to heed the voice of God in their history. In the *Hungerlieder* the sufferers are innocent, passive victims of natural and human forces which move mechanically and impersonally to destroy their lives. Even the divine forces — God and angels — in which Block's suffering

people were taught to believe, seem to be deaf to the cries and pleas of human beings and leave them to their fate. In Fritz Senn's poem cycle the reader's attention is directed to the purpose of God in Mennonite history; at the end of the *Hungerlieder* the reader has doubts concerning the love and power of God and instead reflects on the compassion of and response to suffering of fellow human beings.

Throughout the poems there is much irony which at times borders on sarcasm. The following references are but a few examples of this irony. The sun which in the past produced and sustained life, has now become a death-bringing fire ball (p. 3). Heaven, to which people turned for deliverance in times of trouble, now remains silent and compassionless (p. 4). A mother, the usual personification of life and nourishment, has not only nothing to offer her hungry children, but in the end also becomes a murderess of her own flesh and blood (pp. 9, 26). The hungry people pray earnestly to an omnipotent and loving God, but this God either does not or cannot answer their prayers (pp. 11-14). Believers were taught that difficult times ought to lead them to God and deepen their faith, but here the sufferers apostatize from God (pp. 22-23). Governments and political leaders, who ought to have the welfare of their subjects in mind, exploit their citizens at will (p. 32-35).

The human response to the tragedy is perhaps the most significant statement in the *Hungerlieder*. According to the historical documents dealing with the famine and hunger in Russia, it was German, Dutch and North American Mennonites who organized their efforts to assist their brothers and sisters in the Ukraine. In these documents we read time and again about the religious motivation in that enormous relief undertaking and about the recipients' gratitude both to their fellow Mennonites abroad and to God (see *Die Mennoniten-Gemeinden in Rußland*; Hofer). Numerous poems and stories were written between 1920 and 1924 which speak of God's presence in times of need and of miraculous answers to prayers. According to this pious literature the suffering of Mennonites was great indeed, but God's help and rescue were greater yet (see Hofer). Moreover, according to the documents the plight of Russian-Mennonite people and their gratitude for foreign relief was used by North American Mennonites to conduct successful evangelistic campaigns and deeper life services among Mennonites and other colonists in the Ukraine (see Kornelsen and Hofer).

In the *Hungerlieder*, on the other hand, the Christian element is toned down, to say the least. Toward the end we read repeatedly that it was *people* who heard the cry for help and did all they could for their fellowmen (pp. 38-40). Also, according to these poems, suffering and needy people come to believe in human kindness and regain their faith in a loving God only *after* they have experienced human compassion (p. 42). Thus spiritual healing and wholeness come *after* the physical and material needs of people have been met. Where there was conflict and enmity between hungry people and nature, there is now reconciliation and peace (p. 44). And where there was doubt concerning the perfectability of humankind and human achievement and

culture, there is now understanding and even acceptance of the “double-faced” history of mankind (pp. 36–37, 43). Pre-dating Berthold Brecht, the German dramatist, by several years, Block seems to be saying that before people can or will think of culture and morals, their basic physical needs will have to be satisfied (see Brecht’s *Die Dreigroschenoper*, 1928, and *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, 1942).

Unlike other Christian poets, Block in the *Hungerlieder* has no easy solution to the problem of suffering, nor does he sentimentalize the redemption when it comes. There is no attempt “to justify the ways of God to men.” The poet, in fact, asks or implies questions about God’s involvement in human affairs which must be troubling to evangelical Christians. Like the biblical Job, the poet is perplexed about the nature and purpose of human suffering. But unlike Job, the poet of the *Hungerlieder* does not experience God as a *deus ex machina* but rather as compassion on the part of other human beings. It is this Christian humanist emphasis in the *Hungerlieder*, coupled with the philosophical-theological reflections concerning God and human existence, which adds to the universal appeal of the poem cycle.

The *Hungerlieder* is not great poetry. Its message is basically propositional and its language and tone are rhetorical and at times shrill and moralistic rather than poetic. Some of the images in the *Hungerlieder* are clichés which the poet manipulates to his advantage. Moreover, the sustained pathos throughout two thirds of the cycle is depressing. By contrast, Fritz Senn creates poetic images which transform the mundane experiences of the Russian-Mennonite farmers into art which on the one hand remains rooted in those experiences and on the other transcends them. Block writes out of experiences and situations which affected him and his people deeply. As he witnessed the degradation of human beings through famine and hunger he became both sad and angry, emotions which animate the entire poem cycle. Block in the *Hungerlieder* thus makes a forceful statement about human suffering and man’s responsibility toward his fellow human beings.

It is a pity that Block’s *Hungerlieder* poems are no longer readily available. Moreover, there is no English translation of these poems. Those who can read the *Hungerlieder* will gain valuable insights into human suffering and reflect on God’s ways, and Mennonite readers in particular will be proud to discover that the author, one of their own people, has created an unforgettable cycle of poems about their own tragic history. And finally, Block’s poems are relevant to our time, reminding us of famines and hunger in Third World countries and our obligation toward suffering and starving people everywhere.

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