

# Dividing the Righteous: Soviet Mennonites as Cultural Icons in the Canadian Russian Mennonite Narrative 1923-1938<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The meaning of the word “Russia” in the culture of the Mennonites who immigrated to Canada from 1923 to 1930 has been powerful and dynamic, placing those who suffered under communism in a very special place in Mennonite collective memory. In 1949 Aron A. Toews, a Canadian Russian Mennonite, published *Mennonite Martyrs: People Who Suffered For Their Faith 1920–1940*, in which he documented the lives of many Mennonites who had been persecuted under communism:

Nothing happens by chance in the lives of people who belong to the Lord. Everything occurs according to the unfathomable but wise decree of our God....The story of the Anabaptists, especially in its early stages, was mainly written with tears and blood. It has repeated itself during the last decades, especially in the case of the Mennonites in Russia....<sup>2</sup>

Toews linked twentieth-century Mennonites to their early Anabaptist ancestors through the theme of martyrdom. Cornelius Krahn did the same in the foreword of Frank H. Epp’s *Mennonite Exodus*, published 13 years later, by emphasizing their placelessness:

Mennonite Exodus deals with the most dramatic and tragic phase of the history of the Mennonites since the sixteenth century, covering the causes of the migrations and the settlements of the Mennonites since the Russian Revolution of 1917.<sup>3</sup>

These writers took part in the process by which Mennonites who immigrated to Canada after the Russian Revolution created an icon out of the Soviet Mennonite experience.<sup>4</sup> They took what they and those remaining in the Soviet Union had lived through and lifted it out of history, transforming it into a larger cultural narrative that drew upon the Biblical narratives of the exile from the Garden of Eden and later Exodus, the early Christian narrative of martyrdom, as well as the Anabaptist narrative of suffering and placelessness.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, those suffering under communism gained status within that cultural narrative precisely because of that suffering and the theological interpretation of it.

However, recent historical work by T.D. Regehr, Marlene G. Epp, and Pamela E. Klassen has documented the existence of friction between the 1920s immigrants and the post-World War II immigrants, some of whose family members had been included in *Martyrs*. Klassen's *Going by the Moon and the Stars* examines the lives of two women and the difficulty they experienced at the hands of the male leadership of their respective congregations.<sup>6</sup> In her recently completed doctoral dissertation, "Women without Men," Marlene G. Epp includes a very sensitive documentation of the experiences of post-World War II women refugees, taking note of the way they challenged and felt challenged by the dominant assumptions of the established Mennonite community.<sup>7</sup> Regehr includes many of their findings in *Mennonites in Canada: A People Transformed*, finally rendering this difficult chapter in the Mennonite past part of its official history.<sup>8</sup>

The juxtaposition of sacred suffering and judgement reflects the discourse that Canadian Mennonites generated concerning events in the Soviet Union that occurred after their exodus from it. On the one hand, Russian Mennonites were practically sacralized for their suffering, but on the other hand the actual treatment the later refugees received upon their arrival in Canada was fraught with tension, hardly the treatment one would expect for a group whose Canadian coreligionists had carefully watched and empathized with them since arriving in 1923. This article analyzes the development of that discourse by exploring how the Soviet situation was interpreted in Canada in the inter-war years, from 1924 to 1938 in *Der Bote*, the Russian Mennonite weekly newspaper established in Rosthern, Saskatchewan in 1924. That analysis provides a window through which to grasp how many of the 1920s immigrants reshaped and redefined their identity in Canada. I propose that the Soviet Mennonites, especially the religious leaders exiled during the 1930s, became the actors in a story that had strong theological significance, to the point that many of them were rendered virtual saints. Ironically, because of their suffering, they left behind them their women and children, the latter especially vulnerable to Communist ideology by the absence of a strong male leadership.

This story reflected changes in the immigrant Mennonite community and its insecurities about building a life that would secure the future of the faith in Canada. While Soviet Mennonite ministers were arrested, executed and exiled, Canadian Mennonite ministers found themselves attempting to establish their authority under very new circumstances, separated from the political and economic influence they had exercised in pre-revolutionary Russia. While Soviet Mennonite families feared the loss of their children to communism, Canadian Mennonites struggled to control their children's assimilation into the dominant Canadian society. As Canadian Mennonites watched the Russian world they had known disappear, they re-evaluated that world and their experiences within it. From their arrival in Canada, the immigrants sought to explain the losses they had incurred in Russia. And, the immigrants' experience in Canada mitigated the significance they attached to the suffering of the people they left behind in the Soviet Union.

While the 1920s immigrants struggled to establish themselves on Canadian soil and dealt with the lasting psychological impact of the Revolution and Civil War, their coreligionists worked to re-establish their lives in the Soviet Union. Soviet Mennonites experienced difficulties with the Communist government during the New Economic Plan (NEP) years in their attempts to re-establish and reform some of the privileges they had lost during the Revolution, such as control over a specified area of land, exemption from military service, and control of schooling. In the 1920s they managed to economically re-establish themselves and gain some control over religious and educational matters. Unfortunately, the situation deteriorated after 1928. They were saddled with heavy taxation and grain requisitions through "dekulakization" efforts by the Communist authorities, and were plunged back into extreme difficulty in 1929 when Stalin embarked on intensive programs of collectivization and industrialization and launched purges aimed at cleansing the Soviet Union of its dissident elements. They were also deeply affected by the Soviet Union's attempt to submit the Ukraine to Soviet rule. Ukraine had been a hot-bed of nationalist dissent during the Civil War. NEP had been installed under Lenin in part as a means to calm dissident factions and hopefully prepare the peasantry for collectivization. Stalin discontinued NEP in 1929 and began his attack on private property, nationalist sentiment, and religious practice. Arrests and exiles escalated in the late 1920s and continued through the 1930s, especially before 1932 and after 1936. Both as small and often successful landowners, and as a non-Russian religious minority living in the midst of a Republic already branded as dangerously nationalistic, Soviet Mennonites found themselves a target of the new political circumstances, economically, socially, and culturally. The famine of 1932-33 devastated them, as it did most of the peasants, and the arrest, exile, and execution of many of the men and women decimated the Soviet Mennonite population and dismantled any remaining Mennonite institutional structures.

These events were carefully monitored in Canada, and the narrative by which they were explained reflected as much, if not more, the immigrants'

Canadian experience. How they interpreted events in the Soviet Union reflected what was happening to their own sense of identity in Canada. Quite simply, they had lost and had to reconstruct their concept of place.

The concept of place allows us to locate ourselves, to establish our relationship to and boundaries concerning the physical, social, cultural and religious environment, all things intrinsic to the concept of identity.<sup>9</sup> The concept of place has been fraught with tension in the twentieth century. This century has witnessed human movement unparalleled in history. Literary critic Leonard Lutwack maintains that "place loss, place devaluation, has been without question one of the principle motifs of literature over the last one hundred years."<sup>10</sup> Identity is affected, therefore, as much by placelessness as by place. Russian Mennonites' identity prior to immigration was tied significantly to their colonies in Southern Ukraine; these colonies provided a physical manifestation of the boundaries that Mennonites maintained to separate themselves from the "outside." The events during and after the Russian Revolution destroyed those boundaries, materially, culturally and socially, leading approximately 20,000 to leave for Canada, hoping to recreate what they had lost.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, given their geographical dispersion from Ontario to Alberta in rural and urban areas, and then significant relocations during the Depression, place could no longer mean a central physical location. Canadian Russian Mennonites had to move away from the rigid view of place as geographically determined to place as a social construction.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the attempts of the displaced Russian Mennonite leadership to construct in Canada institutional structures resembling those in pre-revolutionary Russia. James Urry points to one significant example, the Central Mennonite Immigrant's Committee, as an example of the leadership's struggle to develop institutional structures in Canada. Headed by Dietrich H. Epp from 1923 to 1934, the committee was to represent the immigrants' interests, to promote their welfare, and to maintain unity. The committee quickly found itself unable to exercise the kind of power it was accustomed to. In Russia, Mennonite institutions had been funded by the landed, industrial and business elites. These no longer existed in Canada. Russian Mennonites had enjoyed some form of control over specific land blocks prior to the revolution. No such control was possible in Canada. In fact, Canada's strong provincial system hampered most attempts to establish national institutions. The committee's cultural aims also met with little success. Disagreements arose over whether it should focus on the financial well-being of the immigrants or the fight against forces of cultural assimilation. In 1934 the Committee folded due to financial pressures brought on by the Depression.<sup>12</sup>

*Der Bote* [The Messenger] had better luck. Founded by (again) Dietrich H. Epp, the weekly paper quickly became a major voice of the immigrant community. In the introductory issue, Epp presented the paper as an instrument for "the education of peoplehood. It conveys religious values and grounds Christianity; it affects the political landscape; it can build heart and courage or level them; it

influences agriculture, trade, and industry.”<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, Urry identifies Epp as one of the Central Mennonite Immigrant Committee’s members more inclined to focus on cultural issues, and he took that concern with him to *Der Bote*. “We...did not come here to live in isolation, but...to build the Kingdom of God on earth for the realization of ethical ideals that teach us our beliefs and allow us to raise up our people’s spiritual culture . . . . Today’s issue places in the ranks of the German newspapers of America a few more pages.”<sup>14</sup> The paper was a great success, and its survival to the present day indicates that it successfully developed some form of “place” in Canada.

The immigrant newspaper has significant qualities for the social construction of place because it provides a highly mobile medium on and through which to negotiate identity. Immigrants can create a place in their own language, literally and metaphorically writing themselves into existence in a new environment. A paper like *Der Bote*, therefore, had the potential both to be a place and a vehicle for the construction of place. I will suggest, though, that the sense of place constructed in *Der Bote* did not reflect the entire immigrant community, but more specifically, those who contributed most actively to it—the emerging Canadian Russian Mennonite leadership. Their voices appeared most frequently in *Der Bote*, not the voices of the lay membership.

Sociologist Donald Kraybill has developed a model representing the transition of Mennonite ethnic identity from traditional to modern forms. According to Kraybill, traditional authority depended on office and charisma, modern authority on organization, expertise and rationale. Traditional ethnicity grounded itself structurally in simple and stationary forms, modern ethnicity in complex and portable forms.<sup>15</sup> *Der Bote* reflected a new portable ethnicity grounded in a Canadian setting. Organized by leaders like Epp, who had exercised authority in Russia, it formed a useful tool to demonstrate their expertise and legitimacy to lead the immigrant community. That they needed to do so has been demonstrated by Mennonite historian Henry Paetkau. Paetkau maintains that although the Mennonite leadership received high respect from the lay membership, it carried very little real authority. The leaders did, however, remain “the single most important factor in the reestablishment of a distinct, cohesive, identifiable Russian Mennonite community.”<sup>16</sup> They were now the leaders of a minority ethnic group in Canada, not that of the privileged, geographically-cohesive group that Mennonites had been in Russia. And as such they had lost considerable power. They were attempting to define hegemonically their leadership role in a community which corporately functioned as a minority. *Der Bote*, therefore, embodied a strong political act. Natalie Zemon Davis sees print mediums “not merely as a source for ideas and images, but as a carrier of relationships.”<sup>17</sup> American historian T.J. Jackson Lears advances this idea when he writes, “a hegemonic culture becomes internally persuasive rather than merely authoritative.”<sup>18</sup> *Der Bote* functioned not only as a site of identity formation, but also as a medium upon which to internally negotiate a new set of relationships and hierarchies. Most contributors did not speak from the vantage point of the lay

membership and there were very few women's voices in its pages; it offered primarily the voices of Russian Mennonite leaders, both overseas in the Soviet Union and Germany, and domestically in Canada. One has to be very careful, then, how one uses *Der Bote* because it conveys the visions of a very select group of men, not the immigrant community in general.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the discourses generated within it must be properly identified and placed. By this I do not imply that the leadership operated in a completely different world than the lay membership, but it was somewhat different and those worlds cannot be interchanged at will. The narrative that this article seeks to analyze, therefore, does not hold true for the entire immigrant community, and how appropriate that it should be so. Klassen, Regehr and Epp identify several instances where the new immigrants came up against the judgement of the Canadian Russian Mennonite leadership. By analyzing the development of the narrative the leaders constructed in *Der Bote* in the inter-war years, we can gain some insight into the cultural predisposition towards the Soviet situation that they carried forward with them in their relations to the immigrants after their arrival, a disposition that reflected their perceptions of their own roles in the community.

This raises a deeper question: What could the Canadian Russian Mennonite leadership gain from an iconological narrative so focused on the Soviet Mennonite experience? The narrative they generated represented the struggle to establish their authority within the Canadian immigrant community, a struggle reflected in the very form of the immigrant newspaper itself. The Soviet Mennonites most ascribed to the hagiographical process were the men who died in exile. They represented the continuity of the Mennonite faith.<sup>20</sup> While the women and children also suffered, and their forms of suffering were discussed in detail, they did not become part of the hagiographical process. Their suffering represented the plight of a lost people, victims tragically absorbed into the communist system. The narrative demonstrated what would happen to the community should it lose its male leadership and the institutional structures through which it exercised its power.

## One People, Two Worlds

In *Der Bote's* first issue, Dietrich H. Epp's introduction emphasized the links that Canadian Mennonites shared with their Soviet coreligionists:

We left our siblings, our friends, our acquaintances to a very difficult situation. Our thoughts often travel across the ocean and we try in spirit to live with them. Through their letters we hear of their lives and actions, but still we miss the larger picture. Despite the huge chasms between here and there, *Der Bote* will try to bridge them.<sup>13</sup>

Spatially, *Der Bote* brought these two worlds together. Each issue carried news from both the Soviet Union and Canada, describing the various courses of action Mennonites took to better their situations in their respective locations. In its early years, the newspaper's spatial coverage of the Soviet Union often surpassed news from Canada. This gradually changed through the inter-war period, replaced primarily by a discourse focusing on the German language and German identity, and by 1938 only the odd letter from a Soviet coreligionist appeared on its pages, both a reflection of the political situation in the Soviet Union and the growing engagement of the new immigrants with their new homeland.

Epp incorporated a strong religious outlook to his paper. Although officially attached to no church organizations, the paper opened each issue with a sermon. Titled "Oberlicht," it stood prominently on the first column of the first page. Even a cursory glance at "Oberlicht" reveals how actively the contributors engaged in the theme of suffering and struggle. In 1924 P.A. Rempel, a regular contributor to the column, emphasized suffering as an intrinsic part of life:

Our life is a struggle for existence. We find this truth is proven again and again in the history of mankind....We must work, wrestle and struggle. It is no different in the spiritual life where the light has a difficult struggle to remain free of the Maker of Darkness.<sup>21</sup>

Strong pietist imagery portrayed the world as a battlefield between the forces of good and evil where evil always waited to take the upper hand. "The wretchedness of the human condition," he continued, "groans under the weight of the path of faithlessness."<sup>22</sup> J.P. Klassen encouraged all the "children of man...to pray. Maintain your ties to the Father's house and the Father's heart so that your soul will not die. Your entire inner life depends on it."<sup>23</sup> Titles such as "Heimatlos" and "Aus dem Nest geworfen" underscored the sense of bewilderment the immigrants felt in their new homeland.<sup>24</sup>

In 1930, a contributor asked his readers, "Who among you has not suffered in some way? Without suffering we are ruined. We must suffer. Without suffering there is no success, no reward."<sup>25</sup> This last sermon is significant for how the author categorized various forms of suffering. Not all suffering was equal. There was the struggle for survival, the struggle against nature, and political and economic struggle. None of this, though, was the struggle of the Christian. The Christian struggled to remain "above all that is unchristian.... We must accept the call to struggle as the Lord has directed us to: the harness of God, the belt of truth, the armour of justice, the boots of readiness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit."<sup>26</sup> Only the struggle intimately linked to suffering for one's faith constituted a religious struggle.

At the time this sermon was published, Canadian Mennonites found themselves at the mercy of the Depression, struggling and often failing to maintain what they had established in the first half-decade or so of settlement. In the Soviet Union, Stalin had implemented his first Five-Year Plan, and letters outlining its impact on the Mennonite community appeared in every issue.

Struggle was indeed something which, as the last author wrote, "is not unfamiliar for many of our readers. We know its form, we also know its content."

The focus on suffering brought into sharp focus a sense that the Mennonites had lost their Utopia, the colonies they had controlled prior to the Russian Revolution. Many contributors engaged in sentimental and highly passionate discussion about the merits of their lost world. It came to represent an irreclaimable paradise, the "golden years," a haven for the Mennonite people, a self-created Eden unfairly destroyed by greed and jealousy. In 1925 a contributor stated, "I believe, without a shred of a doubt that nowhere could one find such a rich, almost completely autonomous and isolated society."<sup>27</sup> "Since 1860, the spiritual faith burned in them," wrote Adolf Ehrts.<sup>28</sup> Chief in their minds stood the life they had enjoyed under the Privilegium, their charter of privileges, the contract into which they entered with the Czarist government when they settled in New Russia in the late eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> The Privilegium had gained iconographic status and had come to be bound up with Russian Mennonite identity.<sup>30</sup> It became the template of the ideal Mennonite society. Under it Mennonites had gained a concentrated land mass, exercised bureaucratic authority, and controlled their schools and churches. Some had also amassed significant levels of wealth. There was little mention in *Der Bote* of the economic disparity in the colonies or other internal social problems. That fact was lost in the mist that settled over the memory of pre-revolutionary Russia. More significantly, the grandeur associated with it was mourned as a dying paradise, and half-successful attempts during NEP, and failed attempts with the onset of collectivization to reinstate some of those privileges were decried in Canada as a sign of the end of Mennonite existence in the Soviet Union. In 1924, J.J. Klassen wrote:

More and more of our brethren from the old homeland come as immigrants from Russia. We rejoice that it was possible for them to come here. But always, we feel heavier and heavier with the knowledge of what a difficult future it will be for those who must remain.<sup>31</sup>

Others declared the impossibility of the survival of the Mennonite community in the Soviet Union. "Auch ein Emigrant" actually pointed to the inevitability of its end. The end began with the establishment of the Duma, a body through which Mennonites almost lost their political privileges when elected delegates, who could have reinstated their rights, considered identifying them as a sectarian group. Should the Soviet Union become a democratic state, he wrote, the Mennonites had much to fear from the Slavic masses, and even an autocratic monarchy would reinstate the Russian Orthodox Church as the state church and easily could fail to protect its minorities as it had before. And of course, a communist system was not even worth discussing, with its denial of private property and religious values. Regardless of the political situation, and particularly because at the time the communists controlled the Soviet Union, Mennonites had no hope of survival. Those considering returning should concern themselves with building a new life in North America and helping their coreligionists escape what was sure to come.<sup>32</sup>

Declaring a death sentence on Mennonitism in the Soviet Union, especially so soon after immigration and during NEP, an era often characterized as a calming period in early Soviet history, had important repercussions for Canadian Russian Mennonites.<sup>33</sup> It affirmed their choice to emigrate by denying it as a choice. James Urry has suggested that there was considerable ambiguity within the Canadian Russian Mennonite community concerning immigration. While viewing Canada as their new home, they also considered themselves exiles and refugees.<sup>34</sup> When they witnessed their inability to recreate in Canada what they had before the Revolution, many grew disenchanted and considered returning. A discourse insisting on inevitable misfortune in Russia could serve the function of legitimating the choice to emigrate and endearing the immigrants to Canada. It also suggested that the future of Mennonitism rested in Canada, leading to a heightened role for the leaders here.

### “Fall has descended on our people....”

In 1929 Canadian Russian Mennonites witnessed the fulfillment of their predictions. Stalin abandoned NEP and turned to rigorous goals of industrialization and collectivization. Concurrently, Europe and North America felt the first effects of the Great Depression. The Canadian government closed all immigration doors. Not only had communism escalated, but Canadian Mennonite leaders increasingly were unable to help their coreligionists enter Canada. In 1930 thousands of Soviet citizens, Mennonites included, fled to Moscow, hoping to obtain passports for North America. Canadian Mennonites implored their government to let these last refugees in, but given the Depression and consequent domestic anti-foreign sentiment, the government refused except in a few instances. The death sentence that Canadian Russian Mennonites had imposed on the Soviet Mennonite community since their own departure from it seemed about to become reality. *Der Bote* was filled with first-hand accounts of suffering that described forced collectivization, the flight to Moscow, exile to Siberia, arrests in the night, hunger, sickness, death, mass relocations, the destruction of families, and forced labour. The letters developed into an ongoing drama that played itself out week after week.

Hundreds of these letters entered into private Canadian Mennonite hands, many of whom sent them on to *Der Bote* for publication. *Der Bote* printed at most five or six letters in each weekly issue, many of which were edited, suggesting a rigorous selection process. What did emerge in print, therefore, is very significant, and reflects the choices of the editorship.

The chosen letters highlighted in particular the experience of those forced into exile, men and sometimes families, and the consequent suffering of those remaining behind. This division was created not only by the requirements of a narrative but also by the ideological choices of the Soviet government. In its war

against the kulaks in the first five year plan, authorities targeted the male heads of families. Sometimes the families were exiled with their father; at other times they chose to accompany him; more often the fathers made their way either to prison or exile alone. During the second round of purges, from 1937 to 1938, men were the prime targets and most made their way to prison, execution or exile without their families. The disappearance of large numbers of men came to have great importance both theologically and in terms of Mennonite peoplehood. Men, as leaders of their communities and of their families, represented a sense of connectedness with the past, with that template of Mennonite society represented by "the golden days," a template, it is important to add, that many of the contributors to *Der Bote* had been a part of.

The deaths and disappearances of the men were interpreted as the Soviet Mennonite demise. Take, for example, the coverage surrounding the death of Elder Isaak Dyck of the Chortitza colony. His death at the dawn of the Stalin years symbolized the plight of his people. In 1929 his obituary notice appeared in *Der Bote*. Based on Revelations 14:13, "Blessed are the dead," the article announced "Russia's sun has set. Small wonder, then, that through this latest news the people have descended into deepest mourning."<sup>35</sup> The officiating minister's funeral sermon painstakingly described Dyck's death: how his body slowly wasted away, how earnestly he prayed for his Father to take him home, and how eagerly he anticipated his release from life. At one point, the minister spoke for the dead elder, "Lord, I wait for your salvation....Death must come! Death must come quickly!" The writer interpreted Dyck's death as analogous to the death of the Soviet Mennonite people as a whole. "He served as a minister for 53 years....He baptized thousands, and performed tens of thousands of communion services" and he witnessed in agony the slow decline of his congregation. "He deeply shared every death in it. Small wonder that he stood so close to everyone, and that all felt so close to him."<sup>36</sup> Dyck had been a constant in the community from before the Revolution and his term of service bridged the events of the previous decade. As well, he came from Chortitza, the oldest Mennonite colony, often called the Mother. His death signified a blow to the genus of Russian Mennonitism and a break from any continuity with the past. Not only his death but also its coverage reflected the story constructed in the pages of *Der Bote* concerning events in the Soviet Union. The incredible detail provided of his last days is similar to the coverage given Soviet Mennonite suffering in *Der Bote*. Canadian Mennonites were exposed to the details of every form of suffering taken on by their Soviet coreligionists.

But in the years which followed, few men had the luxury, like Dyck, of dying at home. They were physically removed from the original Mennonite colonies and sent into exile, and their correspondence became a regular feature in *Der Bote*, identified by titles such as "In exile" or "From Siberia". In these letters the full impact of the hagiographical process becomes evident because their stories were so easily assimilated into a discourse of placelessness and suffering for the faith.

An anonymous Soviet Mennonite writer informed the Bote readership of Elder A. Klassen's last words to his community before his arrest: "Hold tight onto your faith and belief. Survive through them and hold onto them until the end." Klassen's suffering revealed the strength of his faith and the truth of God: "Our beloved elder survived through these hardships because God's grace was with him. He survived despite the difficult interrogations that he faced in his 14 months of imprisonment."<sup>37</sup> His suffering also reflected a cosmic battle waged on the body of the individual. His interrogations and physical struggles represented a war between the grace of God and the hate of the world. Klassen's spiritual survival allowed God to claim victory. Another letter discussed the situation of Elder P.P. Bergen. The writer begged for food and letters on behalf of the elder, and then relayed Bergen's spiritual message:

Our flesh does not tolerate suffering well, but suffering raises and prepares the undying souls of our men for the later heavenly joys.... Suffering is important. Through it the Master shows to us His holy intentions. And when we stand as one before God's throne, then we will feel as if this suffering meant nothing in the greater plan of God that is open to us. We will be able to fully experience it. But now we stand on the banks of the Jordan and look longingly at the land that will become our homeland.<sup>38</sup>

Bergen portrayed suffering as bad for the flesh but good for the soul. It turned the men who experienced it away from an earthly existence toward the divine. Suffering elevated them in God's eyes, brought them before His throne, and enabled them to gain access to His plan. They became privy to sacredness. Bergen's turn to the divine reflected a profound sense of placelessness. Taken away from their families, their homeland, and left with only their faith, these men stood anchored to "the banks of the Jordan", awaiting their physical deaths to enter heaven.

Those in exile recognized the impact their suffering could have on their Canadian coreligionists. In fact, they desperately needed to feel that they were heard; it legitimated their experiences. "May our place of exile provide you with a lesson in life," wrote one man. "We can speak with the Psalmist who says, "Had the Lord not been my comfort, I would have been lost in my suffering."<sup>39</sup> Another wrote, "Oh, how our heavenly father has cared for us! We want to trust in Him and remain faithful to Him in these most difficult hours of trial. Oh, faithful siblings, support us with your prayers!"<sup>40</sup>

The words of those in exile played a strong role in the Canadian Russian Mennonite community. Soviet Mennonites became people to be regarded with extreme empathy and respect. Their suffering gave them special recognition among their Canadian coreligionists, but not because they fought against suffering; they passively and humbly accepted it as their lot in life. Many Canadian Mennonite leaders used the Soviet Mennonite example to impress upon the lay membership the power inherent in passive suffering. J.H. Janzen, originally a Molotschna minister, then Bishop of the Ontario United Russian Mennonite churches, inscribed a resurrection motif to Soviet Mennonite passive suffering:

Fall has descended on our people and the deaths have shown us this. Let us think of our loved ones in Russia...they preach to us a strong message, "As they die,...we live." Even in their death lies a new life, and death leads the way into Winter which always leads to an awakening of new life. And what about us?...Many of our people have fallen, spiritually and physically....Their breasts beat with a saddened and honest heart. These may have fallen, but their blessing continues further and further. And what about us? We will also be saved if we do not fight the autumn....And sooner or later we will rise like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Mennonite people into a new life....<sup>41</sup>

The Soviet Mennonites had become almost Christ-like, able to breathe new life into their Canadian brethren through their burden of suffering. They passively died as Christ died on the cross, and their willing acceptance of death provided an example for Canadian Mennonites to follow in attaining new life.

This imagery had special meaning when placed within the specific context of Canada in the 1930s. The Depression destroyed many of the gains the immigrants made in the previous decade. Farms and businesses were lost. Loans, especially the Reiseschuld, went unpaid. They felt betrayed by the Canadian government when it refused to grant entrance to their families in Russia. The larger Anglo-Saxon community, itself feeling the effects of the Depression, turned much of its resentment towards immigrants. Combined with the inevitable stress of the immigrant experience, stress partially linked to dislocation and the fear of assimilation into the dominant society, these additional difficulties increased doubts about their ability to survive in the new world, and they may have responded very well to a discourse offering the hope of escape from hardship.

While Canadian Mennonites admired their Soviet coreligionists' passive suffering, their leaders by no means encouraged the lay membership to passively accept that suffering. The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization and Mennonite Central Committee continued to focus on providing for the immigration of their coreligionists. The German government offered only temporary care for Mennonite refugees. Mennonite organizations then petitioned the governments of Argentina, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Paraguay, and Canada, the latter three of which accepted the largest numbers of refugees, which, by 1932, still included only a third of those who fled to Moscow in 1929 in the hope of leaving.<sup>42</sup>

Mennonite organizations also actively encouraged individuals to send care packages to the Soviet Union, a significant undertaking considering the financial burden this would impose on an already struggling people. In fact, donations from the Canadian lay membership had dropped considerably due to the Depression precisely when the need in the Soviet Union increased. Therefore, the discourse delegates from the Board of Colonization and MCC used to impress the necessity of continued financial support upon the lay membership is understandably strong. Benjamin H. Unruh coordinated massive relief campaigns from his post in Germany. He identified Mennonite efforts at physical aid as a means through which to serve God and gain His favour. In one report, he

discussed the thousands of thank-you letters received from Soviet Mennonites for Canadian care packages:

These thank-you's come from those...who have laid themselves in the arms of mercy. The prospect that their requests can be fulfilled is like sunrise for the sleepless, bread for the hungry, health for the sick, so the thankfulness of these merciful ones is a fulfillment of a revelation, a rising sun following sorrow and fear. This thankfulness is the highest offering one can give to God. And blessed is every one who helped, who through the thanks offered them will find their place.<sup>43</sup>

The Soviet Mennonites blessed the Canadian Mennonites through their words of gratitude, the greatest gift they could give as they had little else. "The poorest of our brothers, have nothing materially, but in eternity they have everything."<sup>44</sup> Unruh's letter suggested that Soviet Mennonites' words of gratitude carried a sacred weight and provided for Canadian Mennonites their place in the Kingdom. Soviet Mennonite suffering then indirectly enabled Canadian Mennonites to attain salvation, because in offering aid to alleviate that suffering, the latter became the recipients of their coreligionists' gratitude.

The discourse of suffering moved beyond the actual immigrant community. David Toews, chair of the Mennonite Central Committee and a member of the Mennonite community that came to Canada in 1874, emphasized Soviet Mennonite suffering to encourage North American relief efforts: "We, who are no better than they are live in warm houses...and we speak of hard times, but what is our suffering compared to theirs?" Toews couched his Soviet coreligionists' pleas in Biblical language, "We were hungry, we were naked, and you have not helped us," and then used the Last Supper metaphor, "Let us send our bread over the water so that we may find it again in a later time,"<sup>45</sup> to suggest that aid symbolized one people breaking bread in anticipation of the Second Coming. Considering the strength of both communion and eschatological imagery within the Mennonite faith, along with the fact that both Soviet, and to a lesser extent, Canadian Mennonites were experiencing difficulty obtaining bread at all, Toews chose his symbols well.

Canadian Mennonites transformed the Soviet Mennonite experience into a multi-faceted theological narrative. They placed Soviet Mennonites on sacred pedestals for their suffering and turned them into agents through which to gain salvation. Soviet Mennonite suffering admonished those who took Canada for granted and reinforced the values of humbleness, passivity, and poverty. Soviet Mennonites acted as sacrifices for the further existence of the Canadian Mennonite people and became sacralized within Canadian Mennonite collective memory.

But who was actually accorded this sacred status? According to *Der Bote*, Soviet Mennonites were a dying people. Their suffering may have given them places in the Kingdom of God but it also removed them from the physical world. But who was being removed? By and large, the majority of casualties were the male population, the men who represented the order that used to exist under the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth. By their martyrdom and exile they enacted

the continuity of the Anabaptist faith through suffering and the image of the wandering, homeless people of Israel. By the injustice heaped upon their physical bodies they secured their heavenly salvation. The men gained sacred status. The very suffering through which they attained it, however, condemned their remaining families to enact the role of a people in decline, hopelessly vulnerable through the lack of male leadership. It might be worthwhile to recall the differing interpretations of suffering discussed above,<sup>46</sup> and to emphasize that coverage did not minimize the suffering of women and children. Their suffering was conveyed in many letters from the Soviet Union, but it was not implicated within a hagiographical process. It did not raise women and children to the same sacred level as their husbands and fathers. Their suffering symbolized the decline of the Soviet Mennonite people. Quite often, though, letters printed in *Der Bote* focused not on the suffering of women without men, but on that of children without fathers.

### Families and Fathers

Letters often conveyed the evils of communism through the threat it posed to parental authority. Even before 1929, one of the main Soviet Mennonite concerns was gaining exemption from military service and control of their schools, control that would have enabled the community to communicate its religious and cultural values in the German language to its children. Their efforts brought them into constant conflict with Communist authorities bent on restructuring the educational system to reflect Communist ideological priorities and to construct the foundation for the development of a loyal Soviet citizenry.<sup>47</sup> Difficulties in obtaining these measures prompted many families to emigrate.<sup>48</sup>

After 1929, issues concerning parental rights gained force and became a regular feature in the pages of *Der Bote*. Subscribers read that Communists baptized children into godlessness.<sup>49</sup> They forced Mennonite children into communist schools, even if it meant removing them from the family home.<sup>50</sup> The Communists assessed fines on fathers who sent their children to Sunday school<sup>51</sup> and they included Mennonite children in parades proclaiming the nonexistence of God.<sup>52</sup>

Occasionally *Der Bote* reprinted Communist propaganda fed to the public through newspapers and classrooms, such as the following article explaining the rationale behind the attack on parental rights:

We now know where our enemy stands. He barricades himself behind the word of God, but we will drag him out of his last hiding place and under-estimate nothing in our work, which is to raise the youth in hate against religion.<sup>53</sup>

In 1930 it offered this choice morsel as an example of what the children learned in school:

I am a Red student, and Christmas has nothing more to offer me. I will always laugh when I hear of the Christ child. Christmas only brought gifts for rich children, it only brought us gifts which have been dashed to the ground. This is what the Kulaks, of whom we are a part, are demanding. That is why they have been driven away, along with their Christ child. They betrayed us, and their fairy tale is now at an end. So shame to every student whose house celebrates Christmas.<sup>54</sup>

What was the effect of this war against parenthood? One mother wrote that the children were uncontrollable. Her own child had threatened to place her name in the local newsboard when she tried to exercise a parent's right to discipline her child. How did this woman rationalize such disrespect? Given that the incident formed the climax to a letter in part relaying the extent of church closings and ministerial arrests, it followed that her children acted inappropriately because of their deficient social environment. They lived in a vacuum, without male leadership, and were thus nakedly vulnerable to communist ideology. Indeed, she wrote, "We look with terror into our future."<sup>55</sup> Other Soviet Mennonites echoed her sentiments: "Is it any wonder that so many fall away, with so many preachers sent to Siberia."<sup>56</sup>

The diminished control parents wielded over their children cut to the very heart of Russian Mennonitism because this control made it impossible for them to secure the future of the faith through their children. The suffering they incurred liquidated one of the structures perceived as the essence of their religion and culture—namely, male leadership, both ministerial and paternal. In a sense, the image of the Mennonite peoplehood presented in *Der Bote* structured it as a big family unit with the ministers as its fathers. The disappearance of its ministers left the greater Soviet Mennonite family fatherless, resulting in its decline.

Mennonites perceived communist theory to be inherently anti-family and therefore anti-Christian, if not anti-human. Benjamin H. Unruh, for example, condemned communism because it exalted the worth of the citizen to the detriment of the family. In "Reason and Nature at odds," Unruh professed that the contradiction within communism, an ideology that claimed reason as its foundation, lay in its unreasonable, irrational war against the family and individualism. It had turned its back on everything traditional and sentimental through its adoration of reason, thereby separating itself from natural forms of human organization and committing itself to "the abolition of...the family, nationalism, religion and individualism."<sup>57</sup> He especially criticized communism for its stand against individualism and substantiated his argument not with a defense of individualism, but with a defense of the family:

The state and the people do not consist of citizens but rather of families. Families link themselves first to a stem, that stem to a larger community, and the community to a people, a state.... This alone provides the conditions for all tradition, peoplehood and culture.<sup>58</sup>

A person gained his/her entire identity from the family. Breaking the family structure collapsed the structure of society, leaving those remaining with no

community, no people, no culture, and no faith. How could Unruh defend individualism using an argument based on the family? Quite simply, Unruh's argument depended on a particular concept of the individual. He lumped family, nationalism, religion and individualism into a unified construct that stood in opposition to the evils of communism. When Unruh spoke of the individual, he did not mean every single individual, but rather those who should have the power to act as individuals, namely the male heads who led the family, the congregation, the people, and the state. They led these structures and through them enacted those in their charge into society. The family unit acted as an individual through the personage of its male head. In Unruh's words, "Family is the breastplate of the individual."<sup>59</sup>

Not only did male leadership enact its members into society, it enacted them into the Kingdom of God. Unruh's "Mennonite people" were composed of family units each with a male head. Those family units formed the congregations wherein the Mennonite people communally acted out their faith through membership and wherein a strong ministerial force brought the youth into the community through baptism. The congregations formed the structural foundation of the Mennonite people. At each level, the people should take their direction from their ministers, their husbands, and their fathers, and the exercise of their leadership was seen as a God-given right. Given this particular understanding of the Mennonite community, it is not difficult to see how those in exile were elevated into a form of sainthood. They carried with them the very essence of the Mennonite faith and culture. Removing the men removed the means by which to enact their charges into the Mennonite way of life.

### The Old World Grows Silent

During the 1930s *Der Bote* became the site of a fierce debate among Canadian immigrants and their coreligionists in Germany, most notably Benjamin H. Unruh and Walter Quiring, about Mennonite peoplehood, focusing primarily on Mennonite links to the German nation and the German language. As letters from the Soviet Union depicting the harsh impact of the first purges streamed into Canada and found themselves on the pages of *Der Bote*, they increasingly sat next to opinion pieces extolling the virtues of the German language and its intimate connection to Mennonite peoplehood and faith. Coverage of the Soviet Union bemoaned the loss of Soviet Mennonite children to the ravages of communism while contributors to the debate on German identity expressed the fear of their children's assimilation into English society. The debate increased through the 1930s while coverage of the Soviet situation diminished, primarily because of the decreased flow of information between the Soviet Union and the West. By 1935, Soviet coverage had shrunk considerably compared to earlier years, and in 1938 had practically disappeared, with the exception of the odd article or letter.<sup>60</sup> When correspondence did appear, it was

situated on the back pages. Debates focusing on Germanism gained prominence, usually appearing on the front three pages. Spatially, then, pages that once had been devoted to the Soviet Union now were filled with virulent debates about the future of the German language and Mennonite peoplehood. The disappearance of the Soviet Union from the printed page seemed to echo the end of Soviet Mennonitism that had been foretold in the 1920s. It also brought the focus of the leadership onto the future of Mennonites in Canada.

Frank H. Epp understands this intense flirtation with German nationalism as stemming from the fact that land no longer formed a cultural priority.<sup>61</sup> With the absence of a strong land base, “linguistic separatism” became the main sign of separation from Canadian society,<sup>62</sup> and it reached a feverish pitch when it became obvious how easily the young could turn from their “Mother tongue” to the English language, a turn that represented not only a loss of language, but a loss of faith. John H. Redekop emphasizes political elements in addition to cultural ones. Under National Socialism Germany presented itself as the enemy of communism, and in halting its spread proved itself sympathetic to Christianity.<sup>63</sup> A strong ethnic German identity then became a way to pronounce judgement on communism, enact Mennonite culture and faith, construct political links with a major western power, and differentiate the Mennonite community from the dominant Canadian society.

On almost all counts, coverage of the Soviet situation witnessed to a community losing its faith and its language to the ravages of communism. Bolshevik propaganda indoctrinated the children in the ways of atheism and communism and separated them from the German language and faith. The dissolution of institutions established during the “Golden Years” and non-Mennonite settlement on once-Mennonite land undermined Mennonite racial purity and isolationism. What Canadian Mennonites feared for their children in Canada, fears reflected in the pro-German debates, was happening on a macro-scale in the Soviet Union.

What is most perplexing, though, is that these links rarely were made directly. Quite often pro-German proponents like Quiring and Unruh focused on the history of Mennonites from their emergence in the sixteenth century to 1917 to establish Mennonites’ racial German identity. Walter Quiring emphasized Mennonite cultural isolation in pre-revolutionary times. It prevented pollution by “other races and lower cultures.” The war and emigration “ripped Mennonites out of their isolation and dangerously close to other peoples.”<sup>64</sup> But, Quiring did not focus his attention on those who remained in the Soviet Union, dangerously close to the “lower elements” they had previously avoided, or provide any recommendations to reverse the process of decline. Quiring discussed the uncertain future of Mennonites who left and what was needed to preserve their culture. Unruh, himself a former teacher in pre-revolutionary Russia, and the crucial link between Soviet Mennonites and Canadian Mennonites during the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as an original member of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union established in Moscow in 1923,

incorporated little of the contemporary Soviet Mennonite situation into his pro-German arguments despite his intimate role in monitoring it and the political role he played in negotiating with the Soviet government during NEP. Both Quiring and Unruh applied their findings to the Canadian Mennonite situation. Their Soviet coreligionists had been wiped from the debate. Redekop and others have argued that Canadian Mennonites were drawn in part to National Socialism because Germany provided an escape for some few thousand Mennonites in 1929 whereas Canada virtually closed its borders. Despite this indisputable fact, the Soviet Mennonite situation did not sit prominently in Quiring's and Unruh's arguments, or in the arguments of other Canadian Mennonites<sup>65</sup>, as if their disappearance from the chains of communication had wiped them from existence.

There is evidence, though, that the debate did impact the interpretation of events in the Soviet Union when some correspondence managed to enter immigrant hands. In one 1935 issue, *Der Bote* printed three letters from the Soviet Union. They contained standard information about work, prices, food availability, the weather, the necessity of maintaining a strong faith, and the general chaos of people fearing an uncertain future. Dietrich H. Epp subtitled their correspondence "Vom Judenplan" even though none of the letters said anything at all about Jews.<sup>66</sup> He interpreted their suffering as part of the Jewish plot, understood in Nazi ideology as intimately linked with the spread of communism, the same plot that in Canada threatened the Mennonite community's immunity from Anglo-Saxon assimilation. Epp's editorial choice, however, formed only an indirect link between the German debate and the Soviet situation. For the most part, debate focused on the feared decline of German identity among Mennonites in Canada. Most contributors to the debate did not mingle their predictions of the end of Soviet Mennonite life with their own fears of losing the German language, evidence that Canadian Mennonites increasingly viewed their community as distinct and separate from their Soviet coreligionists'.

The emotion surrounding both issues, however, was similar. The coverage of the Soviet Union and the attention focused on issues of German language and identity stemmed from a common fear that the Mennonite way of life was coming to an end. An element of panic pervaded *Der Bote* from the beginning of its publishing life. In the 1920s and early 1930s the pages screamed the inevitable destruction of the Soviet Mennonites; throughout the 1930s that panic turned inward and focused on the ability of Mennonite immigrants to maintain their faith and culture. But, that faith and culture never seemed to be destroyed completely, however great the panic. Letters kept appearing from the Soviet Union, no matter how scattered, and they kept warning that the end was near, but that end never arrived. Yet the fear and panic simply remained. Similarly, in the 1930s Canadian Mennonites responded almost with outright terror at the possibility of losing their language and way of life with their children's Anglicization. That terror remained present until the pro-German debates

abruptly ceased in 1939 for obvious reasons. Coverage of both issues revealed the tremendous insecurity of the Canadian Russian Mennonite immigrant community. Whether *Der Bote* focused its attention domestically or overseas, it displayed a nervousness at times bordering on paranoia. What is significant about the 1930s is that the panic became more introspective. The pro-German debates may have involved a negative relationship with their host society, but it was a relationship nonetheless and exposed a growing engagement with their new environment.

### Dividing the Righteous

Is it possible that increased Soviet Mennonite invisibility and silence spurred a growing opinion within the Russian Mennonite immigrant community that Soviet Mennonite existence in Stalinist Russia had in fact been eradicated, and that even where Mennonites existed their lives had been compromised to such an extent that they no longer constituted a real Mennonite community? An article reprinted from the *American Lutheran Weekly* in 1935 seemed to suggest just that:

A new generation of youth, trained in the new ways, has grown up....They have learned the communist theories. But once in the real world, these theories fall into nothing....The youth are sick. They are bitter, ill, poor, very prone to suicide and alcoholism.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, in 1938, a letter received from a Soviet Mennonite woman clearly stated that the Mennonite way of life was close to extinct:

We each celebrate Christmas only in our hearts; here Christmas consisted of the distribution of gifts and a tree. Pretty soon the religious aspect will be gone. The old hold on yet, but the youth! If only I could empty my heart! I hope you understand me. Pray, pray for us.<sup>68</sup>

Under her letter appeared an editorial note in which Dietrich H. Epp relayed the news of his brother's arrest and presumed death. How symbolic that these two pieces sat together on the same page. A Soviet Mennonite woman relayed the details of a dying people while the Canadian Mennonite editor informed the readership of the disappearance of more men. They represented two sides of the same narrative.

The circumstances of her letter are also significant. So few letters arrived in Canada in the late 1930s that her's was an event. By that time letters depicting the struggles of those in exile had all but disappeared from *Der Bote*'s pages. Most of the letters were authored by women and witnessed to the terrible plight they embarked upon with the disappearance of their men. Their lone voices and the message they carried represented the decline of the Soviet Mennonite people. "You would cry," wrote one woman, "if you could see how the children are growing up."<sup>69</sup> Another compared their plight to the people of Israel who

despaired and found the Lord's mercy. "But oh Lord," she cried. "How long will this last? We still live, but only you know where our loved ones have gone. We wait and work willingly so that we can be with our children, but it is not enough."<sup>70</sup> "Can you believe what I have been through?" another woman asked. "Now I am old; my eyes are weak. I am no longer of worth."<sup>71</sup> These women's voices demonstrated the powerlessness of a community devoid of its men. They were defined and defined themselves by the absence of their husbands and the loss of their children.

The women's suffering was interpreted more as self-sacrificing than heroic.<sup>72</sup> Mennonite leaders did not turn a blind eye to the suffering of women in the Soviet Union, but they did understand their suffering, and even the suffering of some men who did not exercise religious authority, in a different way. Aron A. Toews, a frequent contributor to *Der Bote* and an active member of the Mennonite Board of Colonization, gave some indication of these different views of suffering in *Mennonite Martyrs*, in which he originally intended to focus on Mennonite ministers who died in the 1920s and 1930s (a focus returned to in the later 1990 condensed English version). A fire destroyed his original manuscript and notes, and he appealed to the community to send him information. So many responded that he expanded the book to include others—men, women, ministers, and lay persons—who had died in that time period. This posed a dilemma: Could they all be labelled martyrs, regardless of the reason for their deaths? Toews redefined his understanding of martyrdom and then rationalized, with some difficulty, choices that left him uncomfortable because he could not accept that all persons included in *Martyrs* had in fact died for the faith. "Not all who have been designated a martyr's crown by humankind will receive it," he wrote. "[In] addition to the many who for reasons of faith were exiled and killed as martyrs, we have found a place in this book for those who were tortured and murdered in some terrible way."<sup>73</sup> Pain, suffering and death at the hands of communists became his guide for inclusion in *Martyrs*.

His discomfort spoke of the contradictions within the narrative of suffering by which contributors to *Der Bote* framed events in the Soviet Union. While suffering enabled men to attain virtual sainthood, it doomed the others to moral decline. The men suffered because of martyrdom and placelessness, two continuities in the Anabaptist narrative that gained them sacredness and respect. The others suffered because they lost the male leaders through whom they should have learned the fundamentals of the Mennonite faith and culture. The children in particular were lost to the Mennonite faith by the loss of their fathers. They internalized the discontinuity of communism and thus sunk into the corruption of the world. They were a "lost generation," the casualties of a cosmic battle fought between the forces of good and evil.

What is important to remember, though, is that despite the dire predictions cast over the Soviet Mennonite future, those predictions persisted throughout the inter-war period, implying, in fact, continued Soviet Mennonite existence. Coverage may have moved to the back pages, and news may have ushered out of

the mouths of women who themselves predicted the end, but coverage continued nonetheless, suggesting a continued hope that things somehow would improve. *Der Bote* warned that the end was near, but it could not turn its back on its people.

This double message remains an element of the Canadian Russian Mennonite narrative as understood by the original 1920s immigrants. In 1963 Walter Quiring published a photo album, *In the Fullness of Time*. He dedicated it “to those who remained,” and in his preface asked, “Does this mean the final ruin of Russian Mennonitism?... Though it might now appear, that Mennonites as such cannot survive in Russia, God may still have a way to preserve them...”<sup>74</sup> In 1982, Gerhard Lohrenz, a 1920s immigrant, published a selection of short stories entitled *The Lost Generation* in which he relayed the plight of the children:

The children born to Mennonite parents during the years 1916 to 1941 were a unique group. They grew up and witnessed all this misery.... They heard about arrests, exiles, executions, concentration camps and beatings. Very few families remained intact, since in most cases the fathers had been arrested and exiled ....

The parents were not permitted to be an example to their children. At school these children were instructed in atheism, and the values of their parents were ridiculed. Parents were forbidden to teach religion to their children and the children were encouraged to report their parents to the Communist authorities if they did. Soon everybody learned to put on a false face, to mistrust everyone, to watch their tongues and never to express or reveal their true thoughts and feelings ....

Truly these people were “The Lost Generation.”<sup>75</sup>

But were they really lost? In Lohrenz’s lifetime he published many short stories, as well as a picture book, *Damit sie nicht vergessen*. In its short historical overview, Lohrenz predicted the future of Mennonites in the Soviet Union: “Russification is rapid. Soon, Mennonites as we have known them, will completely disappear in the Soviet Union.”<sup>76</sup> Like earlier immigrant leaders, he declared his coreligionists’ inevitable end, but by this time more than fifty years had elapsed since the arrival of the immigrants in 1923, and still he focused on the theme of extinction. The ongoing fascination of Canadian Mennonites with the fate of their Soviet coreligionists belied an intense need to hear and know of the suffering, and so to live vicariously with them. As long as the Soviet Mennonites suffered and as long as the threat of extinction remained a possibility, there was a relationship to maintain, or, in Dietrich H. Epp’s words, a “bridge” by which to cross the “huge chasms between here and there.”<sup>77</sup> Declaring “the end to come” created an emotional response that caught one’s attention. Continually declaring it maintained the relationship and actually indicated the survival of Soviet Mennonites. As long as they suffered, as long as there was an “end” to predict, they lived.

There was, though, some sort of an “end”, and Lohrenz’s words, “Mennonites as we have known them, [my emphasis]” indicates exactly what kind of an

end it was. The experiences of Soviet and Canadian Mennonites, the raw fact of living in two such different worlds, meant that what "Mennonite" signified had been transformed for both peoples. Lohrenz's description of "the lost generation" documented the plight of a group gradually removed from the pre-revolutionary Mennonite cultural and social system as the elements defining it disappeared. They were even farther removed from the cultural and social networks that developed among the immigrants in Canada. "The Lost Generation" became lost not because they were less "Mennonite" but because their experience grew increasingly foreign to their North American coreligionists.

For the Canadian Russian Mennonite leadership in particular, part of being "Mennonite" meant a drastic restructuring of what it meant to be a leader. Mennonite leaders in pre-revolutionary Russia exerted considerable power in the public sphere, politically, economically, and ministerially. They lost most of that power during the Revolution and became firmly entrenched in the private sphere upon their arrival in Canada where Mennonite leaders increasingly enacted their power in the congregational and conference setting; the faith was denominationally rooted. In the Soviet Union, most if not all churches had been closed by 1935. To be Mennonite increasingly grew dependent on family and kinship ties, most specifically, the relationship to a mother and other female relatives. It existed without a formal congregational network led by capable male leaders. In Canada, no congregations meant no Mennonite community.<sup>78</sup> Soviet Mennonites were "lost" because their institutional network had ended.<sup>79</sup> There was no way to place them, physically or metaphorically, in a familiar structure that safeguarded their identity as Mennonite. They were not "Mennonites, as we have known them," or more importantly, "Mennonites, as we know ourselves." Therein lay the basis for their "end".

And yet, they remained coreligionists. On the one hand, they were perpetually on the verge of extinction, the last remnants of a glory that once was, vanishing from the Mennonite world as the immigrant Mennonites, the leaders at least, came to know it. On the other hand, the repeated invocation of the threat of extinction spoke of their continued existence. If the extinction was still a threat, they were not yet extinct. The Soviet Mennonites were simultaneously a people in decline and "one of us."

## Conclusion

The roles played by Soviet Mennonite women, children and men on the pages of *Der Bote* reflected the Russian Mennonite immigrant community's adjustment to Canadian society. This paper has focused on one particular facet of that community—the leaders. During the inter-war period they faced particular challenges to their authority and those challenges mitigated the interpretation of events in the Soviet Union. This is not to say that Mennonite leaders

deliberately misconstrued events so as to effect a conscious form of social control over the lay membership. They read the events through the particular lenses by which they understood their role in the community. The leaders identified themselves as key to the future of Mennonite existence in Canada. How then could they respond with anything but dire predictions for the fate of the Soviet Mennonite people? To suggest that Soviet Mennonites could persevere without strong ministerial guidance negated the role Canadian leaders circumscribed for themselves as ministers and as men.

Between 1947 and 1951 almost 8000 Soviet Mennonite refugees landed on Canadian soil,<sup>80</sup> a disproportionate number of whom were women and children; they symbolized within the Canadian Russian Mennonite narrative the decline of Mennonitism in the Soviet Union and although they were welcomed into Canadian Russian Mennonite congregations with a great deal of compassion, as their stories had been welcomed into *Der Bote* during the inter-war years, there remained that lingering concern over the spiritual state of a community that had endured such oppression under Soviet rule. A narrative which juxtaposed heroism with decline, and which reflected more the restructuring of the immigrant Mennonite community in Canada than events in the Soviet Union, left the Canadian community ill-prepared to confront the real people who joined their congregations after World War II.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank William Westfall for all his words of wisdom which guided and helped develop this paper over the two years in which I worked on it. H.V. Nelles provided sound criticism in its early stages. Many of his observations helped transform this paper into its current form. Reg Good also deserves a special word of thanks. His watchful eye placed many a valuable source in my hands.

<sup>2</sup> Aron A. Toews, *Mennonite Martyrs: People Who Suffered for Their Faith 1920-1940*, 1949, trans., John B. Toews (Winnipeg, MB, Hilsboro KS: Kindred Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Krahn, "Forward" to Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution*, (Altona, MB: D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1962), v.

<sup>4</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell has defined iconology as the way that "the notion of imagery serves as a kind of relay connecting theories of art, language, and the mind with conceptions of social, cultural, and political value." Iconographic images can be mental, physical, verbal or literary, and reflect "the concept of man as image and maker of images." *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> By narrative I mean a story that serves to explain why things happen the way they do. Narrative gives experience meaning by placing it into a larger framework. Literary critic Arthur Danto writes that "narration exemplifies one of the basic ways in which we represent the world, and the language of beginnings and endings, or turning points and crises and climaxes." *Narration and*

*Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), xiii. Mennonites have developed a narrative of suffering, and in doing so are not alone. Many religious and national groups point to a history of suffering and persecution as a marker of collective identity, for example, Baha'is, Jews, Irish Catholics, Ukrainian Uniates, Mormons, and we see the narrative invoked in numerous nationalist movements, both historical and contemporary.

<sup>6</sup> Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women*, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Marlene G. Epp, "Women without Men: Mennonite Immigration to Canada and Paraguay after the Second World War," Ph.D. Diss., U. of Toronto, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939-1970: A People Transformed*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), ch. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 184.

<sup>11</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 139.

<sup>12</sup> James Urry, "Peoplehood, Power and Politics: Aspects of the Russian Mennonite Experience 1880-1940," Paper Presented at the University of Winnipeg, November 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich H. Epp, "Zum Anfang," *Der Bote* [hereafter *DB*], January 14, 1924), 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Donald Kraybill, "Modernity and Identity: The Transformation of Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. C.W. Redekop and S.J. Steiner (University Press of America and the Institute for Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ont., 1988), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Paetkau, "Separation or Integration? The Russian Mennonite Immigrant Community in Ontario 1924-1945," thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1986, 192.

<sup>17</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, "Printing and the People," *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, (University of California Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>18</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 3 (90) 1985, 591.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Peters examines the structure of leadership in the Conference of Mennonites [CMC] in Canada as it shifted from a committee to a board structure, and argues that the years from 1903 to 1945 represent the committee era, characterized by "committee overlap and traditional leadership." The CMC was controlled by an "entrenched ecclesiastical elite." See: "Changing Leadership Patterns: Conference of Mennonites in Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 7 (1989), 168-169. Peter's argument is easily applied to this study, and reflects the range of contributors to *Der Bote*. Many contributors were elders in their congregations, as well as active members of the Central Mennonite Immigrants Committee, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and many had served in various political, educational and ministerial positions both prior to and after 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Credit for this concept belongs to Marlene Epp who first pointed out to me the excessive attention paid to the men who died in exile rather than to the women who remained behind.

<sup>21</sup> P.A. Rempel, "Oberlicht," *DB*, February 6, 1924, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> J.P. Klassen, "Oberlicht," *DB*, (April 24, 1924), 1.

<sup>24</sup> "Oberlicht," *DB*, September 24, 1924), 1; "Oberlicht," *DB*, June 25, 1924, 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Kaempfe den guten Kampf des Glaubens," *DB*, July 2, 1930, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Auch ein Emigrant, "Koennen die Mennoniten in Russland noch eine freundliche Zukunft erwarten?" *DB*, February 8, 1925, 6.

<sup>28</sup> "Ein Vortrag Adolf Erhts ueber die kulturelle Bedeutung der Mennoniten in Suedrussland," *DB*, May 30, 1925, 3.

<sup>29</sup> James Urry includes a copy of the Privilegium in *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889*, (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), Appendix 1.

<sup>30</sup> John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 118-119.

<sup>31</sup> J.J. Klassen, "Wer hilft mit?" *DB*, October 1, 1924, 1.

<sup>32</sup> "Auch ein Emigrant," *DB*, February 8, 1925), 6.

<sup>33</sup> James Urry characterizes the NEP period as "a time of compromise and experiment during which an attempt was made to unite the country, producing a situation in which, to a degree, Mennonites flourished, especially after 1924." Urry states that in Canadian Mennonite accounts this period hardly exists. "It is almost as if one period of disorder and terror ... was soon replaced by another." See: "After the Rooster Crowed: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik Relations During the Early Soviet Period," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 13 (1995), 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> James Urry, "Who are the Mennonites?" *Arch. europ. sociol.*, 24 (1983), 251.

<sup>35</sup> D.H. Rempel, "Aeltester Isaak Dyck: Nachruf," *DB*, October 2, 1929, 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, September 11, 1929, 1.

<sup>37</sup> "Aus dem Halbstaedter Rayon," *DB*, June 1, 1932, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Aus dem Briefe eines Verbannten, Alexandrowsk den 3 Nov 1930," *DB*, January 28, 1931, 3.

<sup>39</sup> "Aus der Verbannung," *DB*, January 20, 1932, 3.

<sup>40</sup> "Unstaet und fluchtig," *DB*, December 27, 1933, 4.

<sup>41</sup> J.H. Janzen, "Krusten," *DB*, November 9, 1932, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, 327.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin H. Unruh, "Dank und Bittbriefe aus Russland," *DB*, January 6, 1932, 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> David Toews, "Nicht muede werden," *DB*, January 13, 1932, 1.

<sup>46</sup> See endnote 25.

<sup>47</sup> Urry identifies military, educational and religious concerns as areas where the communist authorities were least likely to compromise. See, Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed," 40. For more information on educational policies in the early Soviet Union, see Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931*, (Indiana University Press, 1991), and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921-1927*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967), 81-82.

<sup>49</sup> "Nachrichten aus Russland," *DB*, October 30, 1929, 4.

<sup>50</sup> "Aus der alten Heimat," *DB*, September 17, 1930, 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> "In schwerer Not," *DB*, October 16, 1929, 2.

<sup>52</sup> "Chortitza den 9 Mai 1929," *DB*, June 5, 1929, 3.

<sup>53</sup> "Sowjetrussland: Vergeblicher Kampf der Gottlosen gegen die Religion," *DB*, September 18, 1929, 3.

<sup>54</sup> "Aus Osterwick, Chortitza Volost," *DB*, September 17, 1930, 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> "Aus dem Briefe einer Mutter," *DB*, January 5, 1930, 4.

<sup>56</sup> "Aus der alten Heimat," *DB*, September 17, 1930, 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin H. Unruh, "Der Vernunft und der Natur zuwider," *DB*, June 5, 1929, 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> In the early 1930s almost every issue contained correspondence from the Soviet Union; in 1935 that dropped to 18. By May, 1936 16 of that year's issues printed Soviet Mennonite correspondence. That dropped to virtually nothing through the remainder of the year. In 1938, only five issues printed correspondence from the Soviet Union.

<sup>61</sup> Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, 499.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.

<sup>63</sup> John H. Redekop, "The Roots of Nazi Support Among Mennonites 1930-1939: A Case Study Based on a Major Mennonite Paper," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 14 (1996), 90-91.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Quiring, "Unser Deutschtum," *DB* January 30, 1935, 1.

<sup>65</sup> See for example: C.H. Friesen, "Haltet fest an der Muttersprache un wenss nur ein Dialekt ist," *DB*, October 10, 1932, 2; Oscar Hamm, "Wie - - 1," *DB*, (April 1, 1936, 2; A.P. Klassen, "Gedanken und Fragen," January 30, 1935), 2-3; "Kultur und Politik," May 20, 1936, 2; J.J. Klassen, "Nicht nur schreiben, auch tun," September 23, 1936, 2-3.

<sup>66</sup> "Vom Judenplan," *DB*, April 17, 1935, 5.

<sup>67</sup> "Anzeigen erzaehlen," reprinted from American Lutheran Weekly, *DB*, May 15, 1935, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Z., "Chortitza, Suedenrussland, den 3 January," *DB*, March 9, 1938, 4.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Funk, "Coaldale, Alta. den 6 April - Aus der alten Heimat," *DB*, April 17, 1935, 5.

<sup>70</sup> "Aus dem Brief einer einsamen Frau, den 21 April 1938" *DB*, June 15, 1938, 5.

<sup>71</sup> "Russland, den 25 Mai 1938," *DB*, August 10, 1938, 3-4.

<sup>72</sup> Marlene Epp makes reference to Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), to explain the differing mythic images attached to male and female suffering in her article, "The Memory of Violence: Mennonites Refugees and Rape in World War II," Paper Presented to the Canadian Historical Association, 1994, 22-23. Women are presented as self-sacrificing, home-centred and acting more for the preservation of others than for themselves. Men more easily fit the image of heroic martyrs.

<sup>73</sup> Toews, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Quiring and Helen Bartel, *In the Fullness of Time: 150 Years of Sojourn in Russia*, (Kitchener: Aaron Klassen, 1974), 11.

<sup>75</sup> Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Lost Generation*, (Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1982), pp. 6-7.

<sup>76</sup> Gerhard Lohrenz, *Heritage Remembered: A Pictorial Survey of Mennonites in Prussia and Russia, 2nd Edition*, (Winnipeg, MB: Shaftesbury Publications, 1977), 44.

<sup>77</sup> Note 13.

<sup>78</sup> Frank H. Epp writes, "The widely scattered settlements of the immigrants ... reinforced their traditional dependence on the Gemeinde, the local congregation, as the ongoing source of that faith and culture without which they saw no meaningful future for themselves or for their children.... Where there was no local congregation there was no Mennonite community." Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, 237.

<sup>79</sup> Much contemporary research on Soviet Mennonites still focuses on their ability to recon-

struct themselves congregationally. A visible structure, especially one with a strong leadership, remains a measure of Mennonite identity. For instance, John B. Toews, in *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, writes, "Did the cultural-religious disruptions...doom Mennonite piety to oblivion? It appeared so in the 1940s....Throughout the 1940s faith was sustained by a mother telling Bible stories to her children, a few adults meeting for bible study and prayer, memorized hymns recopied by hand....Mennonite women preaching simple sermons and the copying of poems and tracts....*Were a few hand-copied songs and Bible verses sufficient to ensure the re-emergence of a Mennonite theology? If so, the past structure of community and religious life meant virtually nothing.*" [my emphasis]. See Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, 178-181. Toews measures Mennonite survival by the presence of recognizable congregational structures. He suggests that the survival of a Mennonite community without those structures negates their validity. Survival was secured only with the release of many men from exile in the mid-1950s, men who were able to reconstruct a recognizable congregational structure out of the remnants that the women had managed to preserve.

<sup>80</sup> Regehr, *A People Transformed*, 94.