

# Breaking the Silence: *Aussiedler* Images of the Soviet Mennonite Tragedy

## A Review Essay

Harvey L. Dyck, *University of Toronto*

Sarah Dyck, ed. and trans., *The Silence Echoes: Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Waterloo, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997). \$19.50.

This is the kind of book in English we have long been waiting for, a representative collection of strong, guileless first-person stories, mainly by *Aussiedler*, about innocent Mennonite suffering and community destruction in the Soviet Inferno. Most of these stories first appeared in German in *Der Bote*. Well-chosen, superbly edited, translated and introduced by Sarah Dyck, this collection of 33 memoirs appears as a tribute to the Mennonite victims of suffering and death in the Soviet Union in the four decades after the revolution of 1917.

The book implicitly recognizes personal and community destruction as a central strand of Soviet Mennonite history. (*Das Ueberleben*, the struggle of terrorized survivors for simple physical life through adaptation and compromise, is another.) The dead in this human tragedy—victims of exposure, beatings, overwork, disease, starvation and shootings—numbered, according to

informed calculations of the late George Epp, roughly a third of all Soviet Mennonites, well over 30,000 people! In its magnitude and brutality, Mennonite suffering regrettably belongs in the major leagues of twentieth-century cruelty and guiltless misery.

The book represents a long overdue effort, together with like initiatives presently underway, to break the silence, noted in the title, that has long enveloped the subject of Mennonite suffering. There is, of course, the silence inherent in the resting places of the victims, isolated, nameless bogs, mine shafts, quarries, forest camps, along remote railway sidings, in mass secret graves close to their one-time homes in southern Ukraine and Russia and across the breadth of the USSR. As well, there is the eerie silence experienced by tourists even today visiting hundreds of once vigorous villages emptied of their Mennonite inhabitants through starvation, killings, deportations and flight. A different silence long persisted among Mennonite survivors in the USSR fearful of publicly, or even in the privacy of their families, recalling memories of Soviet criminality so long as the empire survived. "Thanks be to God! Those dark days are behind us," a memoirist explains from the security of her now-German home.

A less justifiable silence is that long maintained by many English-speaking scholars who have written of Mennonite life in the Russian and Soviet empires. For example, the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, that specializes in the area, under its first editor, virtually ignored the subject.

A handful of historians did not, notably George Epp, John B. Toews and Walter Sawatsky, of an older generation, and Leonard Friesen, Marlene Epp and Peter Letkemann, of a young. Also helping to break the silence are a cohort of young historians now publishing in post-1991 Russia and Ukraine who have taken up the subject of Mennonite suffering in a spirit of profound respect for the victims and of the promises of Russian Mennonite life aborted by Soviet rule.

Sarah Dyck has sensibly arranged the *Aussiedler* memoirs chronologically to follow the six main chapters in the history of the Inferno. The early memoirs are about pogrom-like violence crashing in literally out of the blue, anarchic attacks and violence from below during the revolution and civil war with its Bolshevik and Makhnovite terror. This part-targeted, part-random horror lives on in the Mennonite imagination as a kind of ultimate Manichean abomination. There follow numbing stories linked to the state-organized terror of collectivization, famine and the Stalin purges in the 1930s that paralyzed people, destroying Mennonite community life and exacting a hugely disproportionate number of Mennonite casualties.

Although the anthology contains no memoirs about the wartime trek of Mennonites westward from Ukraine to Germany, it includes numerous heart-rending stories about suffering and losses attending the forcible Soviet deportations of 1941 from Mennonite villages as well as the repatriations in 1945 and 1946 eastward of large number of Mennonites who has reached Germany. Also absent are stories of Mennonites in the *Trudarmia*, the so-called "Labour

Army,” literally a slave-labour organization that dragooned masses of Mennonite men and women into its ranks. My own research suggests that under 50 percent survived the World War II and early post-war ordeal. Still, while not totally comprehensive, the anthology comes close to covering the widest range of Mennonite suffering. And whatever the specific period and locale dealt with, the memoir-stories pay equal attention to the men, women and children (masses of children) who perished and those, also victims, who survived.

In her eloquent introduction, Sarah Dyck calls these the “stories of Everyman, related by the few who have dared to tell, stories emerging out of a self-imposed (or fear-induced) past silence, originating always in great pain and suffering, sometimes (but rarely) in bitterness, occasionally in utter despair, never in thoughts of hatred or revenge, retribution or retaliation, often in gratitude for an unexpected human kindness or for a miracle from God, sometimes with exhortation or a fable-like moral attached.”

Diverse Soviet and international developments naturally provide the context for these stories. These include two world wars, two revolutions, two German occupations, terror-enforced programs of sweeping social and human engineering and two terrible famines, one natural, the other artificial. Yet the stories in this anthology have a remarkable narrative unity arising from the fact that destruction followed logically from deeply-rooted, sometimes clashing, twentieth-century ideological fanaticisms and utopian secular visions—anarchist/Makhnovite, Bolshevik and Nazi—and was inflicted upon a single, helpless Mennonite population. I know of no minority in the USSR that suffered more proportionately.

The strength of these stories lies in their detail, their emotion, the stark contrasts they offer between a peaceful, innocent people and the sudden, titanic forces that tyrannized and destroyed them. “How can one write about such sadness,” one memoirist mourns, describing a lifetime of repeated trauma that included the starvation death of her infant daughter in exile. “Sometimes I can scarcely find my way through the internal maze,” another confesses. A third offers a simple moral explanation of Soviet cruelty and misadventure: “[The Communists] were human beings who wanted to achieve the good by using evil means.”

But however unadorned the stories, with little conscious effort to analyze or provide the interpretation, they nevertheless strongly suggest underlying themes and conclusions. In story after story the *Aussiedler* memoirs remember past Mennonite life, before the terror, as a veritable idyll of community and family life. They document subtle shifts in the marks of their identity, from ethno-religious “Mennonite” in the 1920s to more ethno-cultural “German” in the 1930s and 1940s. The shift accompanied the brutal Sovietization of their society in the 1930s, which they depict as a systematic demolition of Mennonite institutions and leaders: of the disproportionately large number of Mennonite lay clergy, deacons, choir leaders, and Sunday school teachers; of independent-minded and/or devout school teachers; of entrepreneurial merchants; of some of

the best farmers of the empire, hunted down as *kulaks*; and, finally, of a high proportion of adult Mennonite males.

As we watch the men, especially from 1936 to 1938, being swept away in massacre-like secret police raids with genocidal overtones until fewer than half remained in the Mennonite villages, we witness the birth of a new theme, the emergence of strong Mennonite women self-sacrificingly rescuing what they can from the rubble. And as their communities are eroded, then destroyed, we see adult Mennonite survivors, the majority now women, clinging ever more tightly to what remains, remnants of their families, or made-over families stitched together from whatever shards of several survive.

These stories are strong medicine and most readers will likely read only a handful of them at a time. But when they finally put down this sad and disturbing anthology, a residue of gnawing questions is likely to remain behind. What moral claim do these stories make on the reader? Is redemption of a sort to be found in remembering innocent suffering, as the Mennonite and larger Judeo-Christian tradition suggests? Is it better, even cathartic, to go through long-postponed mourning over tragic loss than to try to blot it out as no more than fables or a bad dream? Why have Mennonite ethicists and theologues failed to reflect on this unequaled chapter of suffering in a quest for a more modern understanding of innocent suffering in the Mennonite tradition?

There are of course questions on the other side as well. Would it not perhaps be better to put something so painful behind us and move on. Do we not otherwise risk plunging so deeply into our grief that we lost sight of what we must surely grasp, the future? By focussing on this admittedly huge wrong in the Soviet Mennonite past do we not run the risk of overlooking terrible injustices in the here and now.

To each of these legitimate questions, and there are others, Sarah Dyck's *Aussiedler* memoirists implicitly offer a respectful and persuasive answer. They suggest that when done with the sympathy and understanding that these stories evoke, the remembrance of innocent suffering and death can make Mennonites, and others, more sensitive to comparable wrongs in their world and more compassionate.

In such a wide-ranging, multi-authored anthology, small errors inevitably creep in and should be eliminated in a second printing. Some are errors of fact and interpretation, as in the historical preface. There are errors with respect to the physical landscape and to place names. Transliterations from the Russian are not always consistent. A handful of peculiarities have crept into the maps.

But such easily remedied blemishes aside, Sarah Dyck's anthology will be warmly welcomed by scholars and a popular audience alike as a signal effort to breaking the English-language silence on Soviet Mennonite suffering.