

‘Can the Son Answer for the Father?’ Reflections on the Stalinist Terror

(On the 60th Anniversary of my Father’s Arrest, 1937-1997)

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The Black Raven

It was on a dark September night in 1937. As a six-year-old boy living with my parents in the village of Friedensfeld, Ukraine, I was rudely awakened by loud knocking. I heard my parents stirring in their bed and Mother saying in whispered tones: “Now they have come to get you.”

Just three months earlier the NKVD had arrested my grandfather Johann Loewen. They had taken him to a Nikopol jail where they interrogated and physically tortured him until he signed the trumped up charge against him. He was supposed to have destroyed vineyards and orchards in the villages.¹

My father and mother got up, dressed and lighted a lamp. Father then went to open the door. Two NKVD officers in plain clothes entered the house. They searched drawers for letters and documents and told Father to get ready to go with them.

Mother cried uncontrollably, pleading with the officers not to take her husband, the father of her three young children. One of the men turned to her and with a sneer said: “Don’t cry so much, your husband will soon come back.”

I can still hear my mother snapping angrily at the official: "Don't give me that! I know how he'll come back. I'll never see him again."

As Father was led away between the two NKVD men, Mother, still crying, rushed after him with his overshoes. "Kolja, you've forgotten your galoshes."

Father turned, came back and embraced Mother one last time. He came to my bedside, put his hand on my head and said: "Harry, I may not see you again. Be good to Mother and help her as much as you can."

Crying myself, I heard a motor start outside and the "black raven"² car driving off. I never saw my father again.

For the next few weeks Mother visited Father and Grandfather in prison. She brought them food and hoped to hear news about what might happen to them. Like his father before him, Father had to sign false charges laid against him. As a veterinarian he was accused of having poisoned cattle on collective farms. Father too was physically tortured until he signed the charges against him. Before long the prisoners were moved, either transported to the Far East into exile or to a place of execution. What happened and where and when Father died we never knew.

If there was some comfort in this tragedy, at least for my mother, it was the fact that she was not alone in her suffering. Many women experienced similar tragedies during Stalin's terror. There were hundreds and thousands of Mennonites and tens of thousands of non-Mennonites who suffered similarly. It was usually the women who were left alone to care for their families,³ often now the spouses of "non-persons" and unable to turn to the state for support.

What happened to the exiles? In the summer of 1935, David Penner, later a professor of physics in Odessa and Moscow, spent a week with relatives in a German colony called "Deutsch-Maikuduk" near Karaganda. He was impressed with what these "kulaks" and "class-enemies" had accomplished in a short time. The village had a long straight street similar to the villages in the Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine. The neat individual houses were surrounded by newly planted trees and well-kept gardens. In the centre of the village stood the school which was also used for club activities.

And all this, according to Penner, the "resettlers" had achieved by themselves in their "free time."

According to the school teacher of this community, the beginnings had been most difficult. The resettlers had been forced to give up their farms, join the collectives, and then ordered into exile. During their month-long train journey, crowded into suffocating box cars, the exiles thought of nothing else but physical survival. There was a lack of food and water. The mothers could hardly bear the sight of their small children begging for a piece of bread and a drink of water. Some mothers in desperation opened their veins to quench the thirst of their children with their blood. When the exiles arrived in Karaganda they were dumped in open areas with no roof over their heads and little food. They dug holes for shelters, were forced to work in coal mines, but little by little they built up the community which the visitors later admired.⁴

Similar conditions existed elsewhere in the Gulag Archipelago. In Vologda, for example, the resettlers were initially housed in a church where they had to sleep on the damp floor and kept inside for a long time. Relatives of the exiles travelled to this northern region, bringing them food and clothes and hoping to alleviate their suffering in any way possible. They even appealed to the widow of Lenin, N.K. Krupskaja, but to no avail. They were told that the tensions that had existed between her and Stalin, had not been forgotten by the dictator. Also, papers like the *Deutsche Zentral-Zeitung* would not report the plight of the exiles. As Penner writes: "From the pages of this and other papers there issued endless dirty smear campaigns against the 'kulakian class enemies'."⁵

From a People of Faith to Individuals with Faith

During the 1930s religious changes that took place among Soviet Mennonites, changes from living in well-ordered church-based societies to surviving as individuals, trying to hang onto private religious lives in which institutional control and influence became things of the past. In such collections as *Letters from Susan*⁶ and *From Russia With Tears*⁷ we can trace these dramatic changes. The letters written in the 1920s still reveal a Mennonite world more or less intact, although the winds of change are beginning to blow through the colonies. Religious services continue as before, Mennonites as a people participate in church activities, elders and preachers lead their congregations, and the German language is still the vehicle of spiritual and cultural communication.

In the early 1930s, especially after Stalin's Five Year Plan, churches are closed and turned into community halls, religious leaders are removed and exiled, and worship services, often in homes, are attended largely by women and older people. At the time of my father's banishment there was little if anything left of organized religious or cultural life. The young were now systematically instructed in the ideology of the new order, including atheism. However, faith and Mennonite culture did not die. While the leaders and many men were away, it was the women, mothers and grandmothers, who taught their children to pray and to believe in Mennonite-Christian faith and values.

This change from institutional to individual religious faith is well illustrated in the letters of minister and teacher Johann J. Toews in Bargens' *From Russia With Tears*. In exile and no longer able to preach before his flocks, Toews in his beautifully-written letters expresses and teaches on a most personal level a deep and unshakable faith. This "house friend" of the Bargens, as he calls himself, writes powerfully and movingly about what it means to believe and trust in God in difficult times. Separated from his handicapped wife, who had emigrated to Brazil, and his friends in Canada, Toews writes: "... all the leadings of our Father in Christ are only pure love!"⁸ Of his difficult experience in Moscow in 1929 he writes: "They assaulted me vigorously, they singled me out to make an example

of me... Then came the possibility, yes, the direct permission to go to a foreign country, to be spared of all this... and begin anew to believe, to hope and to love."⁹ Toews remained true to his faith and died in exile.

Not all Mennonites persevered under pressure. Susan's letters indicate that while many Mennonites continued to believe and to attend religious services, there were those who became religiously lukewarm, and ready to fall in line with the new reality. In 1931 Susan writes: "The people have completely given up their own will. Most of them work on Sunday. There are mostly women in the church... the apostasy is great...."¹⁰ In 1932 she writes that even some minister's children "have completely accepted the prevailing values...."¹¹ And later that year she writes: "The women's side [in the church] is usually fairly full, but on the men's side there are often no more than five."¹²

Susan's last letters, written between 1936 and 1941, register the completion of the transition from corporate religious life to individual lives of faith. Resettled to Melitopol, Susan writes in 1936: "It's so quiet and peaceable and yet it's not home. Will we ever find a home on this earth or will we always be wanderers until we reach our heavenly home, where there is no earthly suffering?"¹³ After a short visit to her former Ohrloff home, she writes in the same year: "Back home there is no longer anything attractive. The people have become so modern. I went to the cemetery and weeded my parents' graves. They were covered with weeds. Most of the people there are strangers."¹⁴ In 1937 Susan reports the arrest of her brother Peter, a minister. In 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet union, Susan together with others was loaded on trains and transported to Kazakhstan where she died in 1944.

James Urry observes that Mennonites were tested both as a *people of faith* and as *individuals with faith*.¹⁵ Some were found wanting while others persevered and were strengthened. Peoplehood stopped being institutionally based and was reduced to the raw reality of a social community backed only by moral faith. Individuals had to act as moral beings on their own. The faith retreated from conferences and churches to the core familial groupings, ultimately finding solace in the parent/child link, often just mother/child. For these Mennonites faith not only survived but was reshaped and strengthened, as is evidenced by the *Aussiedler* in Germany today. For others it was clearly lost.

From a Historiography of Faith to Scholarly History

Until a few decades ago the memory of Mennonite experiences in the Soviet Union was kept alive by lay- and preacher-historians, many of whom had left the country after the Revolution and Civil War but before the terror of the 1930s began.¹⁶ Understandably, their interpretations of the Soviet period reflected their personal experiences and were mainly framed in a religious-theological language. These writers portrayed a Mennonite people who before the Revolu-

tion had developed a prosperous way of life with advanced religious, educational and economic institutions compared with most of the surrounding populations. But this innocent, established way of life was destroyed after 1917 by alien, hostile and evil forces. The many, often moving, stories were written by writers who themselves had experienced terrible events and lost everything. They told of courageous men and women who because of their faith and loyalty to their ideals were persecuted, exiled and driven to their death by an evil atheistic regime. When a large group of Mennonites was able to leave "the land of terror" in the 1920s and escape to Canada and Paraguay, or when during the Second World War they were liberated from Communism by the German forces, Mennonites considered this as miracles wrought by a gracious and powerful God.

I am not suggesting that these stories were untrue or the events spoken of exaggerated or falsified. In fact, these story tellers of Mennonite faith and suffering performed an important function: Like the prophets of old, they kept the memory of the Mennonite experience alive, interpreted God's ways to their people, and gave meaning to their recent suffering. They also laid the foundation for the work of later historians.

Academically-trained social historians and literary critics have now emerged. Beginning with the late David G. Rempel and continuing with John B. Toews, Walter Sawatsky, James Urry and other younger scholars at the September 1997 'Mennonites and Soviet Inferno' symposium, the writing of Mennonite history for the Soviet period has become more critical, contextual, probing and undoubtedly more nuanced.¹⁷ The recent discovery of archival collections by Harvey Dyck and George Epp will further lead to a better understanding of this complex and painful period.¹⁸ Moreover, the narrow emphasis and stress on religious institutions in earlier histories has given way to broader analyses incorporating a consideration of political, social, and economic factors which have influenced the Mennonite experience.

What emerges is an altered portrait of Russian-Mennonite society. We are beginning to see that while religious faith and traditional values were an important part of a large segment of Mennonite society, there were other groups and individuals who were motivated and lived by less religious values and considerations. We now see a picture not merely of a world of religious martyrs and innocent victims, but of a people who desperately sought to preserve their entire separate way of life. In their attempts to achieve this they often opposed the new regime and in the end were cruelly defeated by forces which they were unable or unwilling to understand and come to terms with. In other words, this emerging picture is one of Mennonites as both active agents and tragic victims. In this portrait Mennonites' suffering is not always just a result of their faith, but also of other factors: their status and roles before 1917 and their opposition to the "new reality" following the Revolution and during the establishment of Soviet power.

An Increasingly Complex Mennonite Society

Mennonite society before and after 1917 was becoming considerably more varied and complex.¹⁹ This is reflected especially in the emigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the 1920s to Canada. There were certainly those who emigrated primarily for religious-cultural reasons, including fears concerning their children's future and their own in an officially atheistic world. They viewed with dismay the end of their institutions, the opposition of the new masters to their religious beliefs and values, and the introduction of Soviet ideology in the schools.

Others left for economic reasons. Following the destruction of the Revolution and Civil War, many hoped to build a better economic future and society in a new land. There were some who at first rejected the option to emigrate, believing that the New Economic Plan would provide them with a chance to reestablish themselves, even hoping that the Soviet regime might not survive or become more benign and enlightened. My grandparents and parents apparently belonged to those who felt that the future under the new regime might not be as dismal as some early emigrants predicted. They thus delayed their decision to emigrate until 1929, but by then it became almost impossible to leave the country and Canada had closed its doors to more immigrants.

There were even a few who following the Revolution sympathized with the ideals of the new order, believing that the privileged position of Mennonites under the old regime had been unfair in comparison with the poverty, landlessness and misery of the peasants and other groups around them.

This fragmentation of Mennonite society had begun long before 1917. The religious disputes in the 1860s and the struggle between the landless and the property owners caused deep social-communal divisions within the colonies. Moreover, after the 1870s migration to North America, Mennonites in Russia became increasingly receptive to higher education, and more and more students attended theological and secular institutions at home and abroad where they came under the influence of different schools of thought. When these students returned to their colonies they brought with them ideas that were to have a subversive influence on traditional Mennonite thinking.²⁰ There is some evidence that in the 1905 revolution some young Mennonites sympathized with the political radicals. The late A.B. Enns of Lübeck told me that in that year he participated with other *Zentralschüler* in a demonstration and march in support of the revolution.²¹ We also know that the *Sanitäter* during the First World War absorbed new political ideas which were to radicalize the thinking of some Mennonites.²² At the All-Mennonite Congress in Orloff in August of 1917 delegates wrestled with such questions as the relationship between Christianity, capitalism and socialism, with some expressing the view that Christianity might be more compatible with socialism than with capitalism.²³

A few young Mennonite intellectuals were attracted to the idea of a new industrial future. In the 1920s and 1930s there were a number of Mennonite journal editors and writers of novels, short stories and poems who distanced

themselves from their community and faith and worked toward the establishment of the new order, including collectivization.²⁴ Writers such as David Schellenberg (1903-1954) and Gerhard Sawatzky (1901-1944), for example, became loud voices for social, political and economic changes. As a member of the Soviet-German writers union, David Schellenberg wrote such novels as *Lechzendes Land* (1930) and *Pundmenniste* (1932) in which he portrayed pre-revolutionary Mennonite estate owners and rich farmers as greedy, grasping and reactionary “fat-cats” who abused their workers and who stood in the way of collectivization, greater efficiency, and justice for the poor.

There were also poets such as David Loewen (1888-1974), Margarete Friesen (?), Johann Janzen (1893-1967), Helene Ediger (b. 1905), and Johann Warkentin (b. 1920) who welcomed the new era, expressing admiration for Lenin, singing the praises of Communist achievement, and protesting against oppression in capitalist countries. These writers also criticized religious belief as a false consciousness, and ministers as deceivers of the common people.²⁵

One of the fiercest critics of Mennonite religious and social life was David Penner (b. 1903). Under the pseudonym “A. Reinmarus,” Penner published in 1930 a book called *Anti-Menno* in which he accuses the Mennonite religious and secular leaders of blatant hypocrisy, moral corruption, influence peddling, and acts of resistance and sabotage against the Soviet state and “the people.”²⁶ Having grown up in a Mennonite Brethren community, Penner was well acquainted with Mennonite religious and communal life. Papers like the *Friedensstimme* and *Odessaer Zeitung* were well known to him. He claimed that principles such as nonresistance did not mean much to Mennonites when it came to protecting their property, or when these principles stood in the way of material profit.

According to Penner, Mennonite industrialists “Martens, DeFehr and Dyck” of Millerovo in 1915 produced at great profit war materials for the government, including hand grenades and land mines. The Mennonite Brethren debated the issue hotly, according to Penner, but in the end material profit prevailed over principle.²⁷ When Mennonite industrialists, factory and mill owners no longer saw a future for themselves in the Soviet Union, they left for Canada to reestablish their enterprises there. Like other critics of the German colonists in Russia, Penner attributed the great wealth of Mennonites to the special privileges they had been granted by the tsarist government and their exploitation of Russian labour and resources.

Ironically, most Soviet-Mennonite writers fell victim to Stalin’s purges during the 1930s. After Hitler’s rise to power Soviet Germans were increasingly mistrusted and the writers were suspected of disloyalty to the regime and accused of “collaborating with the enemy.” They were effectively removed from their positions as editors and teachers, prohibited from publishing their works, and denounced for not writing along correct Party lines. Most were arrested and exiled to eastern regions where they died in obscurity.²⁸

Mennonite Martyrs?

In A. A. Toews' *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, my grandfather Johann J. Loewen is included in the long list of Mennonites who were arrested and exiled during the Soviet purges. Reading from his letters to Grandmother and Mother, I am deeply touched by Grandfather's sense of tragedy on the one hand and his deep faith on the other. To my mother he wrote: "Dear Anna, look after mother when she is sick and weak... how I have prayed for you... do not despair. God will help."²⁹

While I am grateful to the author for including the story of my grandfather, I ask myself whether Grandfather and many of his fellow-sufferers would have thought of themselves as "martyrs" for their faith. The subject of martyrdom is no doubt complex, as Toews himself implies. In the introduction to his book he seems to question the appropriateness of the label. While agreeing with H. Zeller that "[m]artyrs are those children of God who, filled with a holy courage to witness, proclaimed Jesus as their Lord through the giving of their lives," Toews adds that "[r]ightly or wrongly, we have expanded Zeller's concept... One can also become a martyr due to national hatred, language [and] racial derivation."³⁰ Similarly, Abraham H. Unruh in the Foreword speaks of Mennonites who were persecuted "as a religious organization," but adds that economic conditions and "tactical mistakes" on the part of Mennonites played a role in these persecutions.³¹ It may also be instructive to quote Cornelius Krahn on Mennonite suffering: "... we cannot simply label all the suffering they endured as 100 per cent religious martyrdom. Former economic status, social and cultural affiliations, and at times their German background were probably counted against them as much as their deeply rooted Christian convictions."³²

There is no doubt that initially the religious beliefs of the Mennonite leaders played a part in their removal from their flocks. The anti-religious propaganda was especially aimed at the church leadership. Thus one might consider a number of these Mennonite sufferers martyrs in the true sense of the word. Like the Christian martyrs in Roman times and the Anabaptist martyrs in the sixteenth century they suffered and were killed because their religious beliefs were considered deviant and dangerous to the state. Moreover, like the martyrs of old, these believers had a choice: they could either renounce their faith and live by incurring lighter sentences, or they could persist in their beliefs and be condemned to exile or death. These Mennonite martyrs died voluntarily, thus witnessing to their faith. Many other Mennonite victims, including the many sufferers in Toews' work, certainly died *in* the faith but not necessarily *for* the faith. They were tragic victims of a totalitarian regime which crushed the people who stood in its way of building a new society. These victims perhaps deserve the tears of their descendants more than did the early Christian martyrs. The martyrs became *heroes* of faith. The many sufferers in Stalin's camps often perished alone in distant places, unknown to their families and the rest of the Mennonite world.

It seems significant that the *Aussiedler* in Germany today seldom if ever talk about having suffered as martyrs for their faith. They saw themselves as victims among many other nationalities of a repressive state, suffering their fate with fellow-Soviet citizens. In their churches today they give thanks to God for helping them through difficult times and for preserving their faith.

The Jewish Holocaust and Mennonite Suffering —are they comparable?

Among some Mennonites who suffered at the hands of the Soviets, there has been a temptation to compare the Mennonite experience with that of the Jews in the Holocaust. Sometimes we hear expressions like “We too have had our Holocaust,” and there are hints about common experiences like transportation in cattle cars to concentration camps in the Gulag regions.

There is little doubt that Mennonites in the Soviet Union have suffered more than perhaps any other Mennonite group in modern times. The Swiss-Mennonite historian C. Henry Smith wrote: “Never since the days of the martyrs [of the sixteenth century] have the Mennonites suffered as much as during the twentieth century in Russia.”³³ Nevertheless, I think it is inappropriate to apply the term “Holocaust” to the Mennonite experience in the Soviet Union. Holocaust is used to describe the genocide of Jews, the greatest crime perpetrated against people on account of their identification with a faith and a peoplehood in our time.³⁴ To apply the term to Mennonite suffering is to relativize the horrendous slaughter of the Jews as well as to deny or to diminish the *Einmaligkeit*, the uniqueness of the Jewish tragedy. As Hans Küng insists: “...we must maintain...that the Holocaust is a singular crime...because the dimension of ideological-industrial mass-murder...is unprecedented, incomparable and barely imaginable even now.”³⁵

Without minimizing the experience of Soviet Mennonites, there are significant differences between the Holocaust and Mennonite suffering: Mennonites suffered together with all the peoples of the Soviet Union who were victims of Stalin’s purges. They suffered not primarily because they were Mennonites—although their being German played a role—or because they were a people of religious faith. Nor were they selected for suffering by allegations of “racial” heritage. They were dispossessed, exiled and “liquidated” because they were labelled “kulaks,” privileged and well-to-do people of the former regime, and seen as opponents of the economic, political and ideological policies of the Soviets. In the so-called “class struggle” many Mennonites, together with many others, happened to be on the “wrong side.” The Jews, on the other hand, were systematically exterminated by the Nazis because they were identified as Jews and as Jews were considered sub-human and unfit to live.

The Jews were not killed in order to create a new society, but to establish a pure race in which other groups, the “Slavs,” for instance, were to become slaves

to a new master race.³⁶ Moreover, while the Soviets wanted to eradicate religion as a “false consciousness,” the Nazis wanted to eliminate Christianity and replace it with a pagan faith based on fabricated views of pre-Christian tribal beliefs and rituals of the Aryan *Volk*. It is thus ironic that some Mennonites, who consider themselves Christian, are less critical of the religion and ideology of the Nazis than they are of Soviet ideology and atheism. Is it perhaps because Mennonites often identify with Germany and Germans and because it was the National Socialists who liberated them from “wicked Communism”? There also seems to be a feeling among some Mennonites that it was Communists *and* Jews who caused them to suffer and that they suffered because they were a German people of faith.³⁷

The Question of Forgiveness

When in 1978 I assumed the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, CKY-TV interviewed me on their “Profile,” a weekly half-hour programme. During the interview the host asked me to relate something about my past and about the experiences of Mennonites in the Soviet Union. After listening to my stories, the host asked whether I was not angry and bitter about what the Communists did to me and the Mennonite people.

My answer went something like this: I know there are Mennonites living in Winnipeg who are still very angry about the Soviets’ actions. I can understand their feeling, for they have lost and suffered much. However, I can honestly say that I feel no hatred or bitterness toward the Soviets, and that for two reasons: first, as Mennonites we try to love even those who harm us; Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. Secondly, I view the suffering of our people in the Soviet Union within its historical context. I cannot justify what the Communists did to us, but I can understand the reasons why they acted as they did. To understand is not necessarily to forgive, but understanding helps me to come to terms with a dark and painful past.

About a year before Gerhard Lohrenz died he and I conversed about the *Selbstschutz* and its place in Mennonite history. Lohrenz did not agree with writers like Dietrich Neufeld who believe that Mennonite participation in the *Selbstschutz* was a religious-moral and strategic mistake.³⁸ At one point in the conversation Lohrenz’s eyes flashed and he burst out: “If those terrible and chaotic times were to come again and I were confronted by a robber gang, I would grab a gun and shoot as much as I could!” (“Ich würde schießen, was das Zeug hält!”) While I did not agree with Lohrenz, I understood and respected his feelings.

I sense among some Mennonites an anger bordering on hatred toward those who caused them and their people to suffer. In probing their bitterness, I find that they often single out the Communists generally and Stalin in particular—and

sometimes Jews who were part of the system—as the cause of their painful experiences. It seems that many Mennonites find it most difficult to come to terms with their past and deal with it redemptively. Yet when it comes to the Jewish Holocaust and the “war criminals” about whom we hear so much in the news media, these same Mennonites advocate leniency and forgiveness. Some Mennonites cannot understand why Jewish organizations insist that war criminals be brought to justice. Why not forgive the perpetrators of horrific crimes against humanity who are now old or near death? some Mennonites ask.

It has been argued that forgiveness is a complex matter. However, it is generally accepted by ethicists and moral philosophers that before forgiveness can take place, the person to be forgiven must show remorse for the injury or harm committed, ask for forgiveness, resolve not to repeat the injury, and be prepared to make restitution.³⁹ It is asked, moreover, can anyone today take it upon themselves to forgive on behalf of the victims who are long dead? And have perpetrators of crimes against humanity ever admitted to the wrongs they have been accused of, let alone ask for forgiveness?

This thinking about forgiveness, it seems to me, is not all that different from Christian theology. As a Mennonite I have asked myself repeatedly whether I can or must forgive the Soviets for what they did to my family and to “our people.” Did the Soviets ever ask for forgiveness? I of course can forgive those who hurt me *personally* by depriving me of my father at a very young age. But can I really forgive on behalf of persons other than myself? Can I even forgive on behalf of my mother or father? And who is to be forgiven? The perpetrators, who also are long dead?⁴⁰

There were individual sufferers who loved their enemies and forgave them, or who prayed that God might not hold their evil deeds against them. And there were those who accepted their suffering as from God, believing that they needed to consider seriously their past life, learn from it, and turn their suffering to some good.⁴¹ There are many *Aussiedler* with whom I have spoken who not only have come to terms with their past in the Soviet Union, but who also accepted their hard life as something positive and redemptive. Some *Aussiedler* in retrospect even see the comic side of their experiences. One young Mennonite *Aussiedler* in Germany, who also served time in prison told me with a twinkle in his eye: “As Lenin says, whoever has not been in prison is not a human being!”

It was my mother who taught me how to deal with the tragedy that struck Mennonites in the Soviet Union. When the German forces in 1941 occupied the Ukraine, many of the Communists who were instrumental in exiling Mennonites were apprehended, tried and executed. At the trial of two such men in our village of Friedensfeld, my mother was pressured to testify against these men so that proper charges could be laid. Mother refused, saying that she would not become responsible for the death of human beings. I do not remember my mother ever talking about forgiving those who had done her and her family harm, but I know she accepted her tragic losses and pain as from God, and she seemed to understand the reasons for the tragedy that she and others had to endure.

As my mother's attitude and action demonstrate, to understand the factors that led to her suffering is also to understand the human condition, including the evil that human beings are capable of. Moreover, as a Christian believer she not only understood and accepted the human condition, but she also relied on God who for her was ever present within the human condition *and* the factors which caused her to suffer. Her faith enabled her to endure her pain and not to become bitter and hateful toward the perpetrators of evil. Perhaps this is one way for Mennonites to come to terms with their difficult past.

Notes

In the preparation of this paper I have had numerous valuable exchanges with James Urry in New Zealand. The title of the paper was suggested by a poem by Aleksandr Tvardovsky, made available to me by Urry, "The Son Does Not Answer for the Father," in *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union*, ed. and intro. by Stephen F. Cohen (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1982), 62-69. In the poem Tvardovsky deals ironically with Stalin's comment about the son, a Soviet citizen in good standing, who is not responsible for what the "kulak" father had been or done. For this article I have merely adapted the title of the poem to reflect on the role of children as they come to terms with the suffering of their parents in the former Soviet Union.

¹ Johann J. Loewen, poet, choral conductor, and later orchardist, had planted vineyards and orchards in Friedensfeld and other villages in Ukraine. Loewen is mentioned by P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, 1911 (Fresno, CA: MB Churches, 1978), 834, as a Russian Mennonite poet.

²"Black raven," a police vehicle so called because it was used to take away people in the dead of night.

³See "A Courageous Mother" in Harry Loewen, *No Permanent City. Stories From Mennonite History and Life* (Waterloo/Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), 203-206.

⁴David Penner, "Kindheit und Jugend," in *Heimatliche Weiten: Sowjetdeutsche Prosa, Poesie und Publizistik 2* (1989):211-12.

⁵*Ibid.*, 211.

⁶*Letters From Susan: A Woman's View of the Russian Mennonite Experience (1928-1941)*, ed. and trans. by John B. Toews (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1988).

⁷*From Russia With Tears: Letters From Home and Exile (1930-1938)*, trans. by Anne Bargaen and ed. by Peter Bargaen (Winfield, BC: Privately printed, 1991).

⁸*Ibid.*, 456.

⁹*Ibid.*, 459. See more stories about Johann J. Toews' suffering in A.A. Toews, *Mennontische Märtyrer der jüngsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1949), I, 47-56.

¹⁰ *Letters From Susan*, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵ James Urry email to author, September 6, 1997.

¹⁶ There are numerous books on Mennonite suffering under the Soviets. See, among others, Gerhard P. Schroeder, *Miracles of Grace and Judgement* (Lodi, CA, 1974); Jacob A. Neufeld, *Tiefenwege. Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland-Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949* (Virgil, ON: Niagara Press, n.d.); Gerhard Lorenz, *The Lost Generation and Other Stories* (Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1982); Karl Fast, *Gebt der Wahrheit die Ehre!* (North Kildonan, MB, 1951); Anita Priess, *Verbannung nach Sibirien* (Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1972); Julius Loewen, *Jasykowo. Ein mennonitisches Siedlungschicksal am Dnjepr* (Winnipeg, MB: Regehr's Printing, 1967).

¹⁷ See especially the following: David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: A Sketch of its Founding and Endurance, 1789-1919," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (hereafter *MQR*) 47 (1973):259-308; 48 (1974):5-54; John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland. The Story of the Mennonite Emigration From Soviet Russia, 1921-1927* (Scottsdale/Kitchener: Herald Press, 1967); John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets & Mennonites* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982). On religious diversity and changes, see John B. Toews, *Perilous Journey: The Mennonite Brethren in Russia 1860-1910* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1988), 55-65. See also James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989); James Urry, "Peoplehood, Power and Politics. Aspects of the Russian Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union and Canada, 1880-1940," unpublished manuscript based on lectures given at the University of Winnipeg, November 3-4, 1994; James Urry, "After the Rooster Crows: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite Bolshevik Relations During the Early Soviet Period," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (hereafter *JMS*) 13 (1995):26-50; Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1981). In 1996 this book was translated into Russian and well received by Russian evangelical groups. See *Der Bote*, September 3, 1997, p. 10.

¹⁸ Harvey L. Dyck, "Odyssey to Odessa: Fresh Sources and Perspectives in Russian Mennonite Studies," *MQR* 65 (1991): 437-48. See also, Terry Martin and James Urry, "The Significance of the Peter Braun Russian Mennonite Archive: A Review Essay," *JMS* 15 (1997): 211-27.

¹⁹ See especially Urry, "Peoplehood, Power and Politics."

²⁰ Harry Loewen, "Intellectual Developments Among the Mennonites of Russia: 1880-1917," *JMS* 8 (1990):89-107. On the radical nature of some Mennonite poets and artists, see my "A Mennonite Artist as a Young Man: the Letters of Johann P. Klassen to a Friend, 1905-1913," *JMS* 5 (1987):21-36.

²¹ Interview with A.B. Enns, Luebeck, Germany.

²² Al Reimer, "*Sanitaetsdienst and Selbstschutz: Russian-Mennonite Nonresistance in World War I and its Aftermath*," *JMS* 11 (1993):135-48; David G. Rempel, "Mennonite Medics in Russia During World War I," *JMS* 11 (1993):149-61.

²³ John B. Toews, ed., *Selected Documents. The Mennonites in Russia From 1917 to 1930*, (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1977), 455.

²⁴ Harry Loewen, "Anti-Menno: Introduction to Early Soviet-Mennonite Literature, 1920-1940," *JMS* 11 (1993):23-42.

²⁵ See *Anthologie der sowjet-deutschen Literatur in 3 Bänden* (Alma-Ata: Kasachstan, 1981); for more Soviet-German, including Mennonite, literature, see *Heimatliche Weiten* 1984, 1986, 1989.

²⁶A. Reinmarus [David Penner], *Anti-Menno: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mennoniten in Russland* (Moscow: Zentral-Völker-Verlag, 1930).

²⁷Penner, "Kindheit und Jugend," 172. C.A. DeFehr, writing in *Memories of my Life. Recalled for my Family* (Altona: D.W. Friesen, 1967), p. 33, admits that their factory in Millerovo produced ammunition in 1915: "... we also manufactured numerous mobile army kitchens, as well as the forms for hand grenades and land mines. The mines were to be transported to another factory for filling with explosives. However, even though we poured several thousand mines, delivery was never ordered. When the Revolution broke out the mines were scrapped, and we were grateful." On Mennonite pacifism and profits, see Helmut-Harry Loewen and James Urry, "Protecting Mammon: Some Dilemmas of Mennonite Non-resistance in late Imperial Russia and the Origin of the *Selbstschutz*," *JMS* 9 (1991):34-53.

²⁸See Annelore Engel-Braunschmidt, "Sowjetdeutsche Literatur im Aufbruch: Die Zeitschrift *Der Sturm* zwischen kultureller Autonomie und dem Würgegriff Stalins," *Germano-Slavica*, Fall (1983):169-90.

²⁹Quoted from Aron A. Toews, *Mennonite Martyrs. People Who Suffered for Their Faith 1920-1940*, trans. John B. Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1990), 133.

³⁰Toews, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, Vol. 1, 12. See also Marlene Epp, "The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (1997): 58-87.

³¹*Ibid.*, 8.

³²Cornelius Krahn, "Martyrs (Russia)," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* III:526.

³³*Smith's Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 340.

³⁴Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany. A New History* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 492-93. Lucy S. Davidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 17, writes: "By denying the particularity of the Jewish experience under the German dictatorship and, still more, the enormity of Jewish losses, by equating the destruction of the European Jews with other events, [some historians] succeed in obscuring the role of anti-Semitism in accomplishing that murder." On questions of comparisons between the Holocaust and other atrocities in history—and taking issue with Ernst Nolte's arguments in this regard—see Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1988), especially chapter 3, "A Holocaust like the Others? Problems of Comparative History."

³⁵Hans Küng, *Judaism Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 224. At the same time Küng states that the "Holocaust must not be made an absolute," and then goes on to refer to the millions of Soviet citizens who suffered and died under Stalin. Jewish readers will no doubt see this as relativizing the Holocaust, which it seems to be.

³⁶For the ideas in this paragraph I am indebted to James Urry.

³⁷I have encountered many Mennonites who lumped Communists and Jews together as twin-evils in the Soviet Union. There were, of course, Jews in the Communist Party, but there were also many other nationalities, including Germans and Mennonites, who identified with the new regime. Jews often joined the Party because they had been severely persecuted (pogroms) and discriminated against under the tsarist regime.

³⁸Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death. Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*, trans. and ed. by Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1977), 79-80.

³⁹See especially Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 56-61. Concerning Simon Wiesenthal's story about not forgiving a dying SS officer and scholars' responses to it, see Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken, 1976). See also Henry F. Knight and Marcia Sachs Littel, *The Uses and Abuses of Knowledge: Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the German Church Struggle, March 7-9, 1993, Tulsa, Oklahoma* (University Press of America, 1997), Chapter 30:

Bernard Weinstein, "The Dilemma of Forgiveness and Reconciliation," in Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 441-49.

⁴⁰ Luise Rinser's reflections on forgiveness are instructive. In 1944 Rinser was denounced by two friends and subsequently arrested by the Nazis. She was saved by the end of the war. Her former friends now asked Rinser to forgive them for what they did to her during the war. Rinser answered them: "No, I do not accept your excuses, what I can never forget or forgive is the hatred which lay in your eyes when we were confronted by the security service...It was not you, it was the madness that had taken possession of you, just as it possessed so many others. But now let us make an end to hatred, blood and death. What we need, we the survivors who must have learnt something from these terrible years, is peace and humanity." Rinser's comment on her answer: "You see: I have forgiven and not forgiven. What my two friends did to *me* I have forgiven in the sense that I abandoned any thought of revenge and was ready to render them any sort of assistance had they asked me for it. But I did *not* forgive them for declaring their solidarity with the followers of a stupid and wicked ideology, which caused the deaths of millions of people...I realise that there are limits to understanding, forgetting and forgiving. The limit is where somebody does something, not to me but to others." Quoted in Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 196-97.

⁴¹ There are numerous examples in letters written from exile indicating that the sufferers not only accepted their fate from God, but also forgave those who made them suffer. See, for example, in Toews, *Mennonitische Märtyrer*, Vol. I, 30-56, the stories of Jacob A. Rempel and Johann J. Toews. On the faith and confidence of Mennonites in difficult times, see D.M. Hofer *Die Hungersnot in Russland und Unsere Reise um die Welt* (Chicago: K.M.B. Publishing House, 1924), especially pp. 151-357. Some exiles in the 1930s went so far as to state that their suffering was not only God's will but also God's judgement upon them, which they accepted and from which they learned. See, for example, Franz Thiessen, "Aus meinem Leben: Die Gnade in Gottes Gericht," *Der Bote*, September 10, 1997), 9, 12, and subsequent issues for continuation of Thiessen's story.