

# Mennonites & the Soviet Inferno: Reflections on the Symposium

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(Excerpts of an oral presentation)

....I would like to go back to the very beginning of the symposium when Peter Letkemann mentioned the memorial in Steinbach [Manitoba]...on the grounds of the Mennonite Heritage Village. He mentioned two...people who were responsible for that memorial....I would like to pay tribute to Gerhard Lohrenz, as the one not only who always asked us to remember those days, [but] who was instrumental in opening the Soviet Union for visitors and Mennonite tourists and later Mennonite scholars. The other name that should be mentioned is the late professor Dr. Henry Wiebe.... Henry was...the one who said, "I need a place in lieu of a grave that I've never seen, [a grave] where my father is buried and this [memorial] is to be that place." I can still remember Henry's dedicatory prayer when we unveiled the memorial.

Now...what have these lectures meant to me? First of all, these lectures and this whole symposium has created in me a justifiable...and a humble pride in my people. The same feeling I had whenever I heard C.F. Klassen speaking. The same feeling I got when my father and I visited C.F. Klassen when he was still living in Winnipeg.... and asked him for some help in a placement during my own alternative service during war. It's the same feeling I had whenever I heard Peter Dyck speaking....My heart beat with humble pride when Harvey told us in his first lecture that our people remained true in the 1920's, when every method

was used [but our people] could not be cracked. It reminded me of a quote by B.B. Janz and a quote by Benjamin Unruh, "Our people will remain faithful." One is allowed to be a little proud because of that.

These lectures also gave me satisfactory vindication....In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Alexander Solzenitzyn related a little bit about the Gulag. And he said, "The men were living in quarters where the walls were coated in frost. We wanted to cry out to the world, to let them know what was happening to us. But we knew that nobody was listening. Nobody was listening." In 1932 Malcolm Muggeridge, the editor of *Punch*, visited the Soviet Union. Carefully supervised [as such visits were]...only the positive things [were shown]....But Malcolm Muggeridge realized that something horrible was happening. He realized that the biggest man-made famine in the world was happening in Russia. When he came back home he filed that story. And not a single editor accepted that story. They all refused those stories. It can't be true, not in progressive Soviet Union....Now a few years after the demise of the former Soviet Union when the archives are open and the top secret documents become available, we realize that every bit of it was true. There was no exaggeration. I call that satisfactory vindication.

Another thing that these lectures did to me was to create a profound sorrow for our people. We escaped. And that created in me...[an] absolute sorrow. But when you read the stories, and hear the stories, you can not help but be very very sorrowful. Helen Wiebe [tells in *Und dennoch Gluecklich*]....about the coming of the Black Raven to the village in Osterwick. And my wife, Annie [nee: Niebuhr], tells me about the taking of her father in 1938, the youngest child crying in her cradle, the others following the father up to the Black Raven. We heard Harvey [Dyck] and Anne [Konrad] reading letters. We heard Peter Letkemann...[tell] us his story. All you can feel then is a profound sense of sorrow.

And it also produced in me contrition. Have all Mennonites behaved the way they should? We know that there...were people who denounced and who informed. Others called and said that before we can pronounce them guilty we have to know the motivation. And so we can feel contrite knowing that we ourselves would probably have failed under circumstances like that. And we can be contrite without being judgmental.

I'm looking forward to 1998. I'm glad that at least one phase of 1998 will be played at the Mennonite Heritage Village....[W]e want to remember without bitterness, remember with forgiveness, and we want to leave this place feeling good, in the best sense of the word.