

# Agency and Structure in Harry Loewen's *Road to Freedom*: A Review Article

James Urry, *Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering*. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000). Hb., Pp. viii + 302.

This finely produced book, printed and bound in a “coffee-table” format, is one of those publications every Mennonite household should possess, to be read and examined by family, friends and visitors.

The impetus for this book came from the marking in 1998 of the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival in Canada of the first Mennonite refugees following the Second World War from the Soviet Union, as well as Poland and West Prussia. The Soviet Mennonites were those who avoided repatriation at the end of the War and managed to find new homes in Canada and Paraguay. Many Soviet Mennonites were not so fortunate and were exiled to Siberia and Central Asia, although some eventually found their way to the West after the 1970s.

At the 1998 celebrations, Professor Harry Loewen, himself a Soviet refugee, was commissioned to produce an account of the experiences of many of these peoples. He has brought together a fine set of stories covering the period under Stalin, the Nazi invasion and occupation, the move to the West and the experiences of escape or capture: emigration or repatriation. He provides an introductory essay, introductions to the selections which he has

often also translated and a fine reflective epilogue on the subject of suffering and forgiveness. The texts are carefully selected and illustrated with interesting photographs. At the end of the book are a series of reflections and scholarly essays. A useful bibliography is included, but unfortunately no index.

The real substance and value of the book lies in the stories of the people themselves. Some are in the first person, others Loewen has edited into the third person. A few are simple and direct, but many reflect a real mastery with words which has the power to convey the real sense of tragedy, terror and pathos of the refugee experience. This difference in expression reflects, in part, the different educational standards of their authors as many of the younger authors missed out on an early education because of the sorrowful events described. The stories though have a refreshingly honest feel to them. Sensitive issues, such as betrayal, rape, murder and unfaithfulness by separation in exile, are not avoided either by the story tellers or the editor. At the same time there is a measured assessment of the persecutors and *full due given to those who helped Mennonites and showed them kindness, irrespective of faith or ethnicity.*

Many of the stories tell of the real terror of Communism under Stalin. In popular discourse in Canada accounts of the Mennonite experiences in Russia and the Soviet Union are often muddled. For many Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s, and their descendants, the events of the Revolution and Civil War between 1917 to 1921 came to represent the real face of Communism. The events of the 1930s under Stalin, seen through the often coded and limited reports sent by friends and relatives left behind in the USSR, merely confirmed their established views. Communism involved anarchy and violence, sudden terror directed particularly at Mennonites, not a remorseless degradation of life in an atmosphere of total fear and uncertainty shared with all around. When those who survived Stalin's terror in the 1930s made it to the West after 1945 and could tell their stories, parts of their accounts were often appropriated by the earlier immigrants and added to their established view of Communism. These views found a welcome audience in the atmosphere of the Cold War which also served conveniently to disguise the dubious inter-war allegiances of some 1920s immigrants towards Nazi Germany, turning them into victims of Communism.

As the *Umsiedler* began to move West in the 1970s, a new opportunity occurred to tell their stories. But the accounts of the wartime refugees became lost in the flood of new accounts which viewed the 1930s and the War years from the perspective of post-war suffering and exile in the Soviet Union. Thus while for the 1920s immigrants the stories of the 1940s immigrants were appropriated and appended to their version of the violent destruction of the Mennonite Commonwealth, in *Umsiedler* accounts the 1930s and the war years became prefaces to accounts of exile and survival in Siberia and Central Asia after 1945. For all but the older *Umsiedler* the Revolution and Civil War were distant events and the Mennonite Commonwealth ancient history.

In this book, the experiences of the post-Second World War refugees is the primary focus and reveals a distinctive and important period in the experiences of Russian/Soviet Mennonites in the twentieth century. The accounts follow a well trodden path, Communist terror, German "liberation", escape, emigration and the rebuilding of lives in the new world. The stories thus reproduce a certain vision of events, a reflection of how in all cultures the collective recounting of history structures the past in particular ways. Within the accounts,

some topics are emphasised while other issues are passed-over without detailed comment. Memory can be as much about forgetting, as remembering.

The significant difference in the accounts I noticed lies between those who see themselves, as one person expressed it, as “playthings of fate,” and those who attribute specific events - and even their entire survival - to God’s direct, personal guidance and intervention. The trouble with the latter view is that it insinuates that those who suffered death, or who were returned to the Soviet Union, somehow lacked divine blessing and oversight. Did God fail these people, or did the people fail God? One view posits a very active and sometimes a highly personalized role for God in the world; the other that God has ordained the proper path that a Christian must follow and that it is up to those committed to faith, to walk that path according to the precepts ordained. In one view, suffering can be viewed as something the evil commit on the good, or as God’s retribution upon individual sinners, and even an entire “people.” Peace and prosperity can be viewed as God’s reward or blessings to groups and particular individuals. But hidden behind such views is an older one, where suffering is perceived as a test of a peoples’ and an individual’s faith. In this view, peace and prosperity, as much as persecution and suffering, might also be a subtle testing of the covenant. There is a major divide here between different Mennonite folk-theologies involving views on the nature and limits of divine intervention, the interpretation of events, and the duties and responsibilities of believers as individuals and members of communities.

Loewen raises one of these issues in his introduction: that of Mennonite “guilt” with reference to the view expressed by some Mennonites that the years of suffering under Communism (however viewed) were a punishment by God for Mennonites becoming wealthy, worldly and proud in Imperial Russia or failing to evangelize their neighbours. Loewen quickly, and correctly, dismisses such simplistic views.

An interesting question remains, however, concerning Mennonite “agency.” By this I mean to what extent have Mennonites been passive or active participants in events? Have Mennonites just been victims? Or have they been involved in their own destiny? In the past I have expressed this relationship in terms of Mennonite “innocence,” suggesting that Mennonites have never been separate from the world around them and claims that they were “just” victims is wrong. In hindsight I can see that this was an unfortunate choice of terms, since in English the opposite of “innocence” can be conceived of as “guilty.” It was not my intent to suggest guilt, but involvement. Mennonite views I believe are often coloured by established beliefs of separation from the “world” (which of course has never been totally achieved by any Mennonite community), and non-resistance, which suggests a high degree of Mennonite passivity when history clearly reveals periods of intense Mennonite activity and involvement in events beyond their immediate communities.

“Agency” is a concept usually used in the social sciences in conjunction with that of “structure” in discussing the extent to which people’s lives have been defined by external structures or to what extent people are active participants in their worlds and hence, to varying degrees, “in control.” This often occurs in discussion of power and resistance although neither terms are usually considered in Mennonite discourse. Some interesting questions can be posed about Mennonite history if their past is conceived as involving a shifting relationship between degrees of agency (in terms of involvement and resistance) and structure (in terms of Mennonite powerlessness due to their subordination to external power)

In classic accounts such as the *Martyrs Mirror*, the emphasis on Mennonites as victims stressed the power of external persecution and Mennonites as victims, while the only agency involved was the steadfast commitment to faith (and non-resistance), even to the point of death. The message clearly is that worldly “structure” is all powerful, but true believers dying in their faith will ultimately triumph. Such works were conceived in a time when earthly existence was seen as in a state of degeneracy and the task of a believer was to remove themselves from this process, remain true to the continuities of faith, and die in the hope of salvation. During the Nineteenth Century, leaders in some Mennonite communities, most notably the Russian, came to value discontinuity as a measure of progress and in their triumphalist writings celebrated the achievements of Mennonites within more benevolent structures of worldly states and society. Thus Mennonite agency was emphasised over structure, involvement over withdrawal, cooperation and service over non-resistance. Some even conceived of progress and success as an indication of God’s recognition and blessing.

The Russian Revolution, Civil War and the triumph of Soviet power were seen therefore as involving a loss of agency as Mennonites became the victims of structure - of forces beyond their control. Mennonite “resistance” such as political activism and even resort to force in the *Selbstschutz* could be justified against structures and powers that were so obviously “evil.” The Soviet state came to epitomize such an evil force. Certainly, in terms of ideology and practice, the Soviet state did exhibit the dominance of structure over agency: all the peoples of the Soviet Union were subordinated to dictates of the Communist Party, ironically in the name of the “People” who were reduced to poverty, terrorized, and murdered. But some degree of agency remained for those who wished to take advantage of this situation; humankind does evil to itself. Such people included those who aligned themselves with the structures of power and betrayed and destroyed any who resisted. In the stories in this book, unlike many written by some of the 1920s immigrants and their descendants, there are frank accounts of Mennonites in authority who persecuted their own kind and of Mennonite informers who betrayed their neighbours.

Mennonite accounts of life under the Soviet regime, tend to emphasize the power of structure over agency, often attributing agency only to God. Of course, the vast majority of Mennonites under Soviet rule, at least once Stalin seized power, were victims of structure. But in one way this book could be seen in a positive light in as much as it celebrates the re-emergence of personal agency, of individual “freedom” in Canada, Paraguay and Germany. However, the stories remain more silent about the shifting relationship between structure and agency among Mennonites during the twentieth century.

Two aspects particularly remain underdeveloped with regard to the people in this book. The first involves the period of German occupation in Ukraine and the second the time in Germany between the end of the war and emigration, as fears of repatriation to the USSR receded and Mennonite “order” was established in the refugee camps.

In terms of the occupation, the degree of Mennonite collaboration with the Nazis remains unclear. One section is devoted to stories of how young Mennonites became involved with military forces, Soviet and German, “volunteered,” conscripted, and brutalized. One major role Mennonites played was as translators for the Germans, at least in the initial period. This included, as recent legal cases in the United States and Canada have revealed, involvement with the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* which were involved in the mass murder of

Jews and others in Ukraine and elsewhere. The role of translators also involved other Mennonites in local civil administration, factories and other economic enterprises. Much of this was forced by circumstance rather than by design, and young Mennonites directly involved in military units and the police battalions, were victims of circumstance although never without a sense of agency. And it is obvious that, relative to their status under the Soviets, Mennonites regained a degree of agency over their lives, and over that of others, unknown for over a generation. Mennonites became people favoured by the invading Germans but they were often confused and troubled by their liberator's violent, racist attitudes and behaviour towards non-Germans, including their neighbours who had suffered along with them under the Soviets. As Nazi power collapsed, however, so did Mennonite privilege and control over their own lives.

In the camps, which appear in the stories as mere transit centres between terror and a new life, a Mennonite order was established - or in the views of some - re-established. Loewen elsewhere has written briefly of one aspect of this: the subordination of women to patriarchal authority, particularly by religious leaders. This reflects the sudden loss of women's agency which in reality had done so much to provide a continuity of faith for a whole generation (even if not named as "Mennonite") and their strength and fortitude on the trek to the west. Marlene Epp has recently emphasized the importance, and particularly the suffering of women in her recently published book, *Women without Men*. At the same time, for the young, the period in the camps was a time when they discovered themselves as men and women, as Mennonites, and as potentially a free people. The photographs tell it all: the adults look prematurely aged, their sad eyes lost in thoughts of their lost homeland, husbands, wives and friends, while the young look rejuvenated, almost joyful. For many there was no real escape, no freedom from suffering.

My reflections attempt to stand back from the book's stories, written with passion, sadness and hope, to point towards the more academic studies that will need to follow. Such studies, gain in analysis, but always lose some sense of the essential human intensity of the past. But only those who lived through the events can ever really "know" them in themselves. It is important that these have been brought together in a book such as this so we can understand, at a distance, the sufferings and joys of others.