

# Healing trauma, decolonizing memory

Elaine Enns

*The Rememberers... [are] those who have the traumatic event registered in their consciousness without actually having experienced it themselves: the second circle of witnesses to the violent experience.*  
—Lotem Giladi and Terece Bell<sup>1</sup>

All four of my grandparents fled Ukraine and Russia in the 1920s, coming to Saskatchewan with some 22,000 other Mennonite immigrants.<sup>2</sup> During the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917–21), they and other German-speakers endured a continuous climate of violence, plundering, rape, and killing.

As a child, I knew something unspeakable had happened to them. But my grandparents spoke only about the good times and the vast abundance and beauty of the land. In my senior year at a Mennonite high school in Saskatchewan, our drama teacher had us perform a reader's theater rendition of Barbara Claassen Smucker's novel *Days of Terror*.<sup>3</sup> Survivors of the *Zerrissenheit* (a German term loosely translated as "a time of being torn apart") spoke with us about their experience. Seeds of a call to become a "rememberer" in my community were planted in me, which have grown for thirty years.

*Rusländer* Mennonites settling on the Canadian Prairies were neighbors to Cree communities. Those Cree communities were experiencing the ravages of colonization: cultural genocide in Indian Residential schools; land displacement; broken treaties; socioeconomic discrimination; and the resulting epidemic of intergenerational substance abuse, family fragmentation, and cultural loss. While these communities en-

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1 Lotem Giladi and Terece Bell, "Protective Factors for Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma among Second and Third Generation Holocaust Survivors," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 5, No. 4 (2013): 150.

2 A previous version of this article appeared as Elaine L. Enns, "Trauma and Memory: Challenges to Settler Solidarity," *Consensus* 37, no. 1 (2016), article 5; available at <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol37/iss1/5/>.

3 Barbara Claassen Smucker, *Days of Terror* (Toronto: Penguin Global, 2008).

dured a virtually unbroken history of dispossession under colonization, settler Mennonites have experienced a complicated mix of persecution and marginalization on one hand but assimilation and privilege on the

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other. What are connections and disconnections between these two communities' respective experiences of trauma?

My forthcoming book (2020) explores the necessary inward and outward journeys of descendants of European settlers in order to better practice restorative solidarity with Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. Within my settler Mennonite community, I

am trying to identify and transform barriers that prevent us from living into deeper relationships and building solidarity with our Indigenous neighbors. I also seek to curate resources that will help us fully embrace the work of decolonization, which demands moral imagination, spiritual resilience, and political courage. In this essay I focus on three issues of critical self-awareness for settler Mennonites: impacts of intergenerational trauma; critically revising our communal narratives; and taking historical "response-ability."

### **Post-traumatic stress disorder and its transmission**

Trauma studies is a dynamic, emerging field. Rather than examining trauma as underwriter of victimhood, I look at it here as one heritable factor that prevents historically victimized, but now privileged, communities from seeing and responding to Indigenous pain.

Theologian David Carr offers the following definition: "Trauma is an overwhelming, haunting experience of disaster so explosive in its impact that it cannot be directly encountered, and influences an individual and group's behavior and memory in indirect ways."<sup>4</sup> Trauma often has a life beyond the initial experience. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), first identified in the late 1980s, describes how trauma survivors are unable to get violent events out of their mind and spirit.

Rachel Yehuda, professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, has been studying the biology of PTSD. She

4 David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 7.

argues that trauma caused by intensely personal violations (such as sexual assault, torture, or military combat) is far more likely to cause PTSD than,

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for example, a natural disaster. Yehuda also found that offspring of Holocaust survivors were more likely to develop PTSD when exposed to their *own* traumas, and as adult children displayed an unusually high rate of psychiatric disorders.<sup>5</sup> Pamela Sugiman is a child of Japanese Canadians who were dispossessed and interned after the bombing of Pearl Harbor; though not incarcerated herself

she claims, “The pain of that experience . . . is etched in my memory. It has become an integral part of my existence, as well as the defining moment in my own family’s history.”<sup>6</sup>

Recent research has focused on intergenerational transmission of trauma in a wide range of cultural groups and communities who have experienced war, slavery, genocide, and other political oppression. Studies have found that trauma is passed down through both nurture (i.e., family systems) and nature (biologically and epigenetically). Three current trajectories of research explore how trauma symptoms can transmit across generations.

1. *The role of cortisol.* Cortisol is an important hormone in our body; both elevated and deflated levels wreak havoc on health.<sup>7</sup> Exposure to stress triggers various biological responses, including the release of cortisol, which animates the famous “fight, flight, or freeze” responses.<sup>8</sup> If the body is not able to shut down these re-

5 Rachel Yehuda, “Biological Factors Associated with Susceptibility to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 44, no. 1 (1999): 34–39; Rachel Yehuda, “Clinical Relevance of Biologic Findings in PTSD,” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 123–33.

6 Pamela Sugiman, “Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 36, no. 73 (2004): 52.

7 Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 30.

8 Yehuda, “Clinical Relevance.” According to Carolyn Yoder in *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security is Threatened* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), the freeze response “traps the intense trauma energy in the nervous system. If it is not discharged or integrated within a few days or weeks, this constriction

actions after the threat has passed, however, the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (our central stress response system) becomes over-sensitized, resulting in lower cortisol levels.<sup>9</sup> Such low levels were a common factor among Holocaust descendants, which can lead to development of PTSD when faced with their own stressor.<sup>10</sup> Yehuda also studied women in their third trimester of pregnancy exposed to the 2001 World Trade Tower attacks; she found that both mothers and their infants had lower cortisol levels (meaning that cortisol levels were likely altered *in utero*).<sup>11</sup>

2. *Epigenetics*. Epigenetics is a relatively new field of study looking at heritable changes in gene function.<sup>12</sup> Alterations to the chemical coating of chromosomes (not gene structure) have been found in survivors of life-threatening experiences such as war, torture, or famine.<sup>13</sup> This coating becomes a kind of cell “memory,” which is then passed on, like other genetic characteristics, intergenerationally. Progeny thus can carry a kind of physiological “footprint” of the trauma.

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of energy is believed to be what produces common trauma reactions later” (20). Up until about twenty years ago, these studies had been conducted only on men; it was simply assumed that women responded similarly. More recent studies, however, have shown that women react differently. Related to the release of oxytocin, women can “tend and befriend” in the face of trauma, looking after their young and supporting each other. See Shelley E. Taylor, Laura Cousino Klein, Brian P Lewis, Tara L. Gruenewald, Regan A. R Gurung, and John A. Updegraff, “Biobehavioral Responses to Stress in Females: Tend-and-Befriend, Not Fight-or-Flight,” *Psychological Review* 107, no. 3 (July 2000): 411–29.

9 Yehuda, “Biology of posttraumatic stress disorder,” *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 62, no. 17 (2001): 41–46.

10 Rachel Yehuda, James Schmeidler, Earl L. Giller, Larry J. Siever, and Karen Binder-Brynes, “Relationship between Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Characteristics of Holocaust Survivors and Their Adult Offspring,” *American Journal Psychiatry* 155, no. 6 (June 1998): 841–43; Yehuda, “Biological Factors.”

11 Yehuda, S. M. Engel, S. R. Brand, J. Seckl, S. M. Marcus, and G. S. Berkowitz, “Transgenerational Effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Babies of Mothers Exposed to the World Trade Center Attacks during Pregnancy,” *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* 90, no. 7 (2005): 4115–18.

12 Rachel Yehuda and Linda Bierer. “The relevance of epigenetics to PTSD: Implications for the DSM-V,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 22, no. 5 (2009): 427–34; part of a special issue, “Highlights of the ISTSS 2008 Annual Meeting.”

13 Natan P. F. Kellermann, “Epigenetic Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: Can Nightmares Be Inherited?” *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Science* 50, no. 1 (2013): 33–39.

3. *Family systems.* A study of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia found that role-reversed parenting was a recurring symptom.<sup>14</sup> When a parent looks to a child to meet their needs of intimacy or comfort, the child trying to meet these needs can experience anxiety. Yehuda found that some offspring of Holocaust survivors experienced PTSD symptoms just from *hearing* about Holocaust-related events.<sup>15</sup> In my own interviews with Russländer descendants, some noted that their mothers were unable to bond with them because of trauma experienced.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a study of Kosovar survivors of war and ethnic cleansing found that children's depressive symptoms were significantly related to their fathers.<sup>17</sup>

These kinds of studies show a variety of ways in which trauma can pass from generation to generation.

Many of these symptoms present in my community. Lynda Klassen Reynolds has investigated the psychological effects of trauma on Russländer immigrants to Canada and their descendants. After surviving the fear and uncertainty of World War I, they were subjected to brutal violence during the Russian Revolution, which continued through the famine of 1921–23 and into the Stalinist era. Most of her respondents described witnessing the arrest or murder of a family member or loved one; seeing their home destroyed; and/or living in fear under the Soviet security apparatus. Reynolds also found that second- and third-generation subjects exhibited significantly higher than normal levels of, for example, anxiety, depression, phobias, obsessions, compulsions, and excessive para-

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14 N. P. Field, S. Muong, and V. Sochanvimean, "Parental Styles in the Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Stemming from the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 83, no. 4 (2013): 483–94.

15 Rachel Yehuda, Jim Schmeidler, Abbie Elkin, Elizabeth Houshmand, Larry Siever, Karen Binder-Brynes, Milton Wainberg, Dan Aferiot, Alan Lehman, Ling Song Guo, and Ren Kwei Yang, "Phenomenology & Psychobiology of the Intergenerational Response to Trauma," in *Intergenerational Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, edited by Yael Danieli (New York: Plenum, 1997), 639–56.

16 Interviews conducted with a Russländer focus group in Saskatoon, June 25, 2014.

17 Matthies Schick, Naser Morina, Richard Klaghofer, Ulrich Schnyder, and Julia Müller, "Trauma, Mental Health, and Intergenerational Associations in Kosovar Families 11 Years after the War," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 4 (2013); DOI: 10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21060.

noia.<sup>18</sup> Frank H. Epp notes that Russländers in Canada were required to pay “a 5-cent-a-month-per immigrant fee for the care of mental patients to prevent their deportation”; in 1931 there were 61 Russländers “sick with the nerves” in public mental institutions.<sup>19</sup>

### Trauma and communal narratives among Russländer Mennonites

Another trajectory for understanding how trauma is passed down is to look for “footprints” in a group’s communal narratives—both what is related *and* what is absent. For example, our received Russländer narratives often marginalize women’s victimization, which inhibits the processing of

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pain and complicates its intergenerational impact. Our Mennonite community continues to struggle with a patriarchal culture that tends to discount women’s experiences. This is particularly consequential regarding experiences of gendered violence. Our popular Russländer narratives still tend toward a heroic story of hardworking, faithful people, naming some kinds of violence endured (e.g., murder, disappearance, or robbery) but omitting (or alluding to obliquely) rape and sexual assault. Firsthand accounts

of survivors of the Eichenfeld Massacre describe in great detail the dismemberment, torture, and murder of individual men but speak sparingly about sexual violence toward women, making only general comments like “virtually every girl fell victim to the ruthless hands of these devils in human form.”<sup>20</sup>

Marlene Epp’s groundbreaking *Women without Men* brings to light disturbing stories of Mennonite women who survived the arduous journey out of the Soviet Union during World War II, surviving relentless

18 Lynda Klassen Reynolds, “The Aftermath of Trauma and Immigration Detections of Multigenerational Effects on Mennonites Who Emigrated from Russia to Canada in the 1920s” (PhD diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1997), 67, 70, 76.

19 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920–1940: A People’s Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982): 384.

20 Harvey Dyck, John Staples, and John B. Toews, *Nestor Makhno and the Eichenfeld Massacre: A Civil War Tragedy in a Ukrainian Mennonite Village* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2004), 46.

hardship and violation, including rape.<sup>21</sup> But these have received little attention in our community—largely overshadowed by stories of martyred men during the Stalinist years—partly because of shame and stigma associated with sexual violence.<sup>22</sup>

Narratives of Rusländers similarly focus on male experiences and avoid speaking directly about women’s violation. A descendant I interviewed reflected, “Rape never came up because it wasn’t appropriate to talk about. It was a hidden thing, but there were certainly children who

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were the result of rape.”<sup>23</sup> Revered historian Frank Epp only mentions this issue in passing: “Many incidents of rape during the revolution resulted in venereal infection of a significant number of women.”<sup>24</sup> A participant in one of my research focus groups deduced that her mother must have been raped based on her behavior and attitude towards sex; another heard her father speculate about his mother’s rape. Others acknowledged that rape was widespread, relating anecdotes of girls being hidden in an attic or hayloft or crawling out of a window

to escape soldiers. One interviewee wondered why her father’s skin was so dark; two others called their mothers’ experiences “too awful to talk about.” Another said, “My grandparents were reticent to speak of things,

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21 Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

22 Epp, *Women without Men*, 59. These women typically spoke only indirectly about rape, often using depersonalized or third person narrative or referring only to the consequences of rape.

23 Interview, June 16, 2014. Another interviewee speculated that incidents of sexual assault were “pretty high in the 1920s.” Another told me, “My mom said she knows that women were raped, but that none of my great aunts or my grandmothers were . . . at least not that she knows of. . . . The oldest child in a friend’s family is a half sibling, but their mom has never talked about why or how that came about. My friend believes her mother was raped” (interview, July 17, 2014). Reynolds’s study of 67 Rusländers found that while a significant percentage of her respondents spoke about experiences of arrest, murder, displacement, and fear during the *Zerrissenheit*, no one admitted to being raped—although half of the respondents indicated they knew someone who was.

24 Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1920–1940*, 476.

but my dad's older brother managed to get some information. But . . . a lot of people don't want to hear him talk about what he learned. These stories are somehow shameful or secret."<sup>25</sup>

Such reluctance to depart from the received communal narratives surely indicates a psychological distancing from pain. But these patterns of silencing can be damaging and function to exacerbate trauma. Among the reasons why women's stories of victimization are silenced or contorted are lack of safe space to recount painful experiences; power dynamics within family or community that determine which stories are vocalized; and manipulation of memory.<sup>26</sup> Communal narratives are not static but continually revised and retold; often in the process they are "cleaned up." Social power dynamics within a community can strip a victim of her ability to retain her narrative. When traumatized people are not allowed to speak and process their experiences, it deepens trauma, forcing it to fester. Silencing not only re-victimizes but also negatively affects the community as a whole across generations.

### **Historical response-ability**

Mennonites cannot only understand impacts and work toward healing of our own intergenerational trauma. We must also include that of our Indigenous neighbors whose collective experiences of much greater and more persistent trauma have had adverse consequences that are also communal and long-lasting.<sup>27</sup> Studies conducted within Canadian Indigenous communities demonstrate that traumatic events occurring across generations build synergistically and must be understood as part of a single trajectory.<sup>28</sup> They show that Aboriginal mental health can only properly be understood and addressed by acknowledging the impact of colonization,

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25 Interviews conducted with a Russländer focus group, June 25, 2014.

26 Erin E. Seaton, "Common Knowledge: Reflections on Narratives in Community," *Qualitative Research* 8, no. 3 (2008): 293-305.


27 On this see H. Karenian, M. Livaditis, S. Karenian, K. Zafiriadis, V. Bochtsou, and K. Xenitidis, "Collective Trauma Transmission and Traumatic Reactions among Descendants of Armenian Refugees," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 57, no. 4 (2011): 327-37; and Rachel Lev-Wiesel, "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma across Three Generations," *Qualitative Social Work* 6, no. 1 (2007): 75-94.

28 A. Bombay, K. Matheson, and H. Anisman, "Intergenerational Trauma: Convergence of Multiple Processes among First Nations Peoples in Canada," *Journal of Aboriginal Health* 5, no. 3 (2009): 6-47. See also Peter Menzies, "Intergenerational Trauma from a Mental Health Perspective," *Native Social Work Journal* 7 (2010): 63-85; and D. Smith, C. Varcoe, and N. Edwards, "Turning around the Intergenerational Impact of Residen-



particularly the devastation resulting from the Indian Act, the Child Welfare Act, and Indian Residential Schools. Poverty, addiction, and abuse on reservations today are a direct result of the synergistic traumas of colonization.

Unfortunately, there is also acute silence in settler Mennonite versions of our history regarding Indigenous peoples. Unlike many European settlers, we take a keen interest in history. My extended clan, for example, has produced multiple family history books—books that highlight how



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Catherine the Great invited Mennonites to settle the steppes of Russia/Ukraine in the late eighteenth century. But no mention is made of the Nogai and Cossack peoples (traditional inhabitants of the Ukrainian steppes) being forcibly removed by the Tsarina just prior to my ancestors' arrival.<sup>29</sup> Then, a century later and half a world away, Mennonite settlers procured land in Saskatchewan that had just been taken from the Young Chippewayan tribe without consultation or compensation by the Canadian

government.<sup>30</sup> Yet there is not a whisper of this in our family books. Indigenous peoples rarely appear in our settler Mennonite narratives. Such silence functions to perpetuate the dangerous fantasy that the land to which we came was uninhabited. This destructive myth dates back to the *terra nullius* aspect of the medieval Doctrine of Discovery, which *still* undergirds rationalizations of the European conquest and colonization of the Americas.<sup>31</sup>

We need a more critical literacy in our communal narratives in order to nurture a better understanding of, and accountability for, both exemplary and problematic aspects of our past and present. This is especially

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tial Schools on Aboriginal People: Implications for Health Policy and Practice," *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 37, no. 4 (2005): 38–60.

29 James Urry, *None but the Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1889* (Kitchener: Pandora, 1989), 96.

30 For further information see <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/land-less-bands-saskatchewan-2017-reserve-107-1.4245184>.

31 Robert J. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

true regarding issues of our complicity in social patterns of injustice and unacknowledged privilege. One of my research participants noted that most Mennonites believe “we purchased our land through fair and square deals” and prospered only due to “hard work.”<sup>32</sup> But this conveniently overlooks how our farming enterprises were made viable and successful by, for example, subsidies of granted or cheap land, governmental incentives, tax breaks, preferential markets, assumed water rights, and access to transportation and technology. One interviewee confessed:

*Mennonites were given all kinds of special privileges in Russia, and some became very wealthy there. . . . We went through a period of trauma, but then we came here, where the Canadian government wanted us and gave us breaks based upon the color of our skin or work ethic. Before long we were back in positions of privilege; we don't tell that side of the story very often!*<sup>33</sup>

We should no longer ignore these parts of the story.

Historical “response-ability” involves both learning the stories of our Indigenous neighbors and acknowledging ways in which racial privileges advantaged Mennonite recovery from marginalization. We need to unearth not only our own silenced stories of gendered violence but also those of Indigenous communities. In Saskatoon, I led a field trip for my Rusländer interviewees to Wanuskewin Heritage Park, which was hosting an exhibit called “Walking with our Sisters,” commemorating missing and murdered Indigenous women.<sup>34</sup> There we encountered the alarming rates of contemporary violence against native women.<sup>35</sup> It was a painful gift to our group’s efforts to un-silence our suppressed history, and it chal-

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32 Annual General Meeting, MCC Canada workshop, September 18, 2014.

33 Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission focus group interview, June 26, 2014.

34 The exhibit featured 1,800 colorful, beaded moccasin tops created by more than 1,400 artists—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—each with a unique pattern sewn on to it. The moccasins are unfinished, representing and honoring the lives of women and girls who were cut short; grandmothers and “process-keepers” curate the traveling exhibit.

35 According to Evan Radford, “Memorial Honours Murdered Women, Builds Dialogue,” *The Star Phoenix*, October 30, 2014, in Saskatchewan, “55 % of all homicides [have been] Aboriginal women. Police have reported this is the highest percentage among all Canadian provinces.”

lenged us to overcome our ignorance concerning the traumas of our Indigenous neighbors.

Settler faith communities can create brave spaces to hear testimony about intergenerational trauma and silenced stories (our own and others') and to face our culpability in an unjust colonial history and present.<sup>36</sup> It is my hope that by working with intergenerational trauma, communal narratives, and historical response-ability, we can better nurture our capacity to heal our own wounds and stand with Indigenous communities and their struggles for justice.

### **About the author**

Elaine Enns, a Canadian Mennonite, has worked in the field of restorative justice since 1989. She is co-director of Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries ([www.bcm-net.org](http://www.bcm-net.org)) in Oak View, California, and co-author of *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* (Orbis, 2009).

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36 Over the last five years I have facilitated groups inviting settlers to construct a parallel chronology of their migration stories and Indigenous communities where their ancestors settled and to ask questions like the following: What are the narratives your family and social group tell? Can you detect any masks or half-truths? How did your ancestors first acquire land? What are the histories and stories of the places they settled (especially of Indigenous communities), and what was the impact of colonial settlement? What is missing from your family or communal stories in terms of Indigenous history and acknowledgement of privileges that settlers enjoyed? Participants explore untold stories in their family or communal narrative, probing questions of why and how these stories were silenced and by whom, and the impact of that. And we investigate footprints of trauma, asking what stories of violence were passed on in family, church, or local neighborhood narratives and how trauma is encoded. My forthcoming book, *Landlines, Bloodlines, Songlines: Healing Haunted Histories* (2020), will explore these and other issues (including practices of healing and resilience) in depth.