# Of suffering, forgiveness, and closure
## Reflections on Russian Mennonite experience

Harry Loewen

Writing about suffering is especially difficult when our past experiences of suffering remain unresolved. The problem is compounded when we consider suffering from a Christian perspective. Traditionally, Christians are expected not to bear resentment and to forgive those who have caused us injury or pain. Yet for victims to forgive is difficult when they feel that justice has not been done, when the perpetrators have not admitted their guilt or asked for forgiveness.

The case of Mennonites in the Soviet Union during the 1930s and 1940s is especially complex. Their suffering was excruciating, the perpetrators never admitted their guilt, and the victims lived with the memory of affliction for many years, often without really coming to terms with it. There are Mennonites who say, "We don't hate the Russian people, but we hate the Soviets who took away our homes and sent our loved ones to suffer and die in Siberia." That statement in itself reveals that the past still has a certain hold on these victims.

In the following pages I will briefly tell the story of my own experience as a young child in the Ukraine and then reflect on that experience, suggesting what pastors and counsellors might do to help former Russian Mennonite refugees bring about redemptive closure.

### "Now they have come to get you"

I was among those Russian Mennonites who lost their fathers during the Stalinist terror in the mid-1930s. My story is not unusual; thousands of people, Mennonites and others, suffered at the hands of the Soviet NKVD, the state secret police at the time.

One night in September of 1937, we heard a loud knock on our window and then the voice of a man demanding that the door be opened. I heard my mother whisper to my father: "Now they

have come to get you." Father got up, lit a kerosene lamp, and went to open the door. A couple of NKVD policemen entered the house. They began to open drawers and closets, removed documents and letters, and told Father to get ready to go with them. When they completed their search and took what they wanted, they grasped Father by his arms and led him toward the door. From my bed I saw Mother crying uncontrollably and pleading with the men not to take her husband and the father of her three young children. The men told her to calm down, assuring her that her husband would return soon. Through tears, sobs, and anger, Mother almost screamed at them: "I know how he will return. He'll never come back!"

Almost all the men in our village were arrested and disappeared that year. The trumped-up charges against them included engaging in espionage; communicating with a foreign country; destroying crops and livestock; and speaking critically of Stalin, particular communist party members, or the Soviet Union in general. In nearby prisons, the men (and also some women) were tortured to induce them to sign the charges against them. My grandfather, who had been arrested a few months before my father, had to stand for hours under a bright light with water dripping on his balding head. My father's toes were mutilated and crushed before he signed the accusations against him. Others' fingers were smashed between doors and door frames, and some had hungry dogs let loose on them in the prison courtyard.

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Most of those arrested were eventually transported to the northern and eastern regions of the vast Soviet Union, where they lived and worked in harsh conditions until most of them died of hunger, cold, disease, and physical and mental abuse. Of those arrested in the mid-1930s, few survived or came back. I never saw my father again. My twenty-seven-year-old mother was left to feed and take care of her children on a meagre income from the collective farm (*kolkhoz*). My sickly grandmother helped Mother as much as she could with household chores and childcare.

When the German army invaded and briefly occupied Ukraine in 1941, the German-speaking Mennonites hoped for a respite and a better life. But two years later, in 1943, in order to avoid falling into the hands of the Red Army, some 35,000 Mennonites—including our family—fled west as far as Poland and Germany. Twenty-three thousand Mennonite refugees were captured and repatriated to the Soviet Union. The members of my family were among the fortunate 12,000 to escape the clutches of the Soviets; we eventually emigrated to Canada. Here we enjoyed a better life in a land of freedom, but the difficult past was still very much with us. Because my mother did not know what had happened to my father and what his end was, she was unable to fully grieve her loss.

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### "Stalin, you have killed my papa!"

It was not until 2000 that we learned that my father and grandfather had not been sent to the gulag with so many others. My sister Helen and husband, Art Dick, travelled in that year to Ukraine, where they had access to recently opened archival files of the former Soviet Union. They discovered that our father and grandfather had been shot just a few months after their arrests in 1937.

According to Father's file, which my sister was allowed to open, he—a veterinarian in our village—was charged with poisoning more than a hundred cattle and with other treasonous acts. Helen and Art were told that Grandfather, an orchardist, had been found guilty of destroying the state's fruit trees and of other crimes. After "confessing" to these crimes, Father and Grandfather were summarily executed. When Helen and Art held Father's file in their hands, they wept for a long time. The Russian translator and other staff members at the archives felt sorry for them. When my sister e-mailed me from Ukraine to tell me what they had found, I too broke down and cried—for the first time—over the death of my father and grandfather, nearly sixty years after they were arrested.

Not long after that, I had a strange dream. I dreamed that Stalin cried! In my dream I saw him standing in an open field,

sobbing. A step or two from Stalin stood my mother, covering her face with her hands and weeping quietly. I walked up to Stalin, bent down to him (physically he was a small man), embraced him, and whispered in his ear: "Stalin, you have killed my papa!" Stalin did not say a word but continued to shed tears while I held him in my arms. I did not tell him that I forgave him for what he had done to our family, nor did my mother say anything; she just stood there, looking at the ground.

I recounted my dream to several close friends, and one of them wrote, "Harry, the dream tells more about you than Stalin. It indicates that you are a forgiving person, but that ogre Stalin would never feel sorry for what he did." Soon afterward, my wife and I travelled to Nelson, a beautiful historic town in southeastern British Columbia. In the market square I met an aging hippy, sitting behind a table, selling old books. Among the rows of books I spotted Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which prompted me to tell the man my recent dream and some of my experiences in the Soviet Union. When I completed my story, he said in all seriousness: "According to your dream, you have not quite come to terms with your tragic past, even after these many years. But you are on your way to recovery and healing, and in time you will be free of the psychological damage that you experienced as a child."

**It was not until 2000 that we learned that my father and grandfather had been shot just a few months after their arrests in 1937. When I learned of it, I cried—for the first time—over their deaths.**

C. Henry Smith has written, in his *Story of the Mennonites*, that "never since the days of the [Anabaptist] martyrs have the Mennonites suffered as much as during the twentieth century in Russia."[1] Not all Russian Mennonites who suffered or were killed can be called martyrs in the sense that they suffered on account of their Christian faith, but the majority of them were targeted by the Soviets because they clung to their religious faith and values in opposition to the atheistic ideology of the state. Soviet attempts to reeducate Mennonites to think and act in line with communistic values met with little success. One might have thought that when the Soviet regime collapsed, the new rulers would apologize to the millions of their citizens who had suffered under Stalin, but to date no such apology has been forthcoming.

**"You have brought us out to a spacious place"**

How do I and many other victims of Stalin's crimes come to terms with the cruel wrong done to the Russian-Mennonite people?

There are those who say that Christians ought to forgive those who cause our suffering, regardless of whether these oppressors have asked for forgiveness; we should turn away from our painful past and from our memories of suffering, and go on with life. This advice is more easily given than followed, of course—and it may not be all that biblical, either. Biblical reconciliation requires an admission of guilt on the part of the perpetrator, a promise not to repeat the offence, and a request for forgiveness (Luke 17:3–4). Obviously, these conditions have not been met by the Soviets or by those who have replaced them. How then do I forgive those who have not asked to be forgiven? Apparently only God can forgive the unrepentant sinner (Luke 23:34).[2]

Personally I have found at least a partial answer to the question of how to respond to what happened to my family and more generally to the Mennonite people in the Soviet Union. In the book of Daniel, chapter 9, the prophet reflects on the Babylonian captivity of his people. They have undergone intense suffering, including loss of their homeland, desecration of their holy places, humiliation, and death.

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Instead of accusing the Babylonians of causing Israel's suffering, Daniel's prayer reviews Israel's history and confesses his and his people's sins that led to their suffering. In the end, Daniel gains "insight and understanding" (9:22), insight into and understanding of the *historical* relationship between his people and their enemies. God then answers Daniel's prayer and confession by showing him a vision of what is to come and how in the end it is God who will intervene in behalf of Daniel's people, bringing victory (Daniel 10–12). So Daniel begins to view his people's history and suffering from the end that God reveals.

In viewing our people's sojourn in Russia, including their great suffering during the Soviet period, we need no longer be angry at the communists for the evil they did. From my study of Russian

Mennonite history, I know that many of our people were far from blameless in their relationships with their Slavic neighbours. They sometimes took advantage of these neighbours and often treated them with contempt. During the lawless period and civil war after the Revolution of 1917, these attitudes and actions came back to haunt the Mennonites. Also, Mennonites' religious faith and values, especially their peace witness, had declined and in some instances disappeared altogether. In the midst of Mennonite suffering in the 1920s, B. B. Janz, one of the Russian Mennonite leaders, asked, "What were the reasons for this [tragedy]?" His answer was, "We have sinned!" He meant that God was punishing them for their sins.[3]

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I don't think we can know whether the suffering of Mennonites was God's punishment for their sins, but I want to believe that by allowing the Soviets to inflict suffering on my family, God had redemptive purposes for us: to draw us closer to God, to help us recapture our Anabaptist faith heritage (in Russia I didn't even know that I was of Mennonite background), and to make us more conscious of the material and spiritual needs of people around us. Some of the refugees from Russia have even thanked God for the suffering they went through, for they have become better people as a result of what they have endured. Since the Soviet Union came to an end, many Mennonites have gone back to the former land of terror to help the Russian people materially and spiritually.

Had it not been for the difficult 1930s and our flight from the Soviet Union to a devastated Poland and Germany in the 1940s, I would never have come to Canada, where my life developed altogether differently from what it would have been in the Soviet Union. As my grandmother later said of me and my brother and sister, "Had we remained there, they perhaps would have had to end their lives as communists." No doubt.

Other Mennonites were not as fortunate. Many refugees were repatriated to the Soviet Union, where they continued to suffer for many more decades. Why I was led to freedom and safety

while others were not, I don't know. All I know is that in the case of me and my family, suffering was turned to a life of abundance; as the psalmist says, "We went through fire and through water, yet you have brought us out to a spacious place" (Ps. 66:12). My painful past, thank God, does not hold me in its grip and cripple me. I harbour no resentment against the perpetrators of my family's suffering. I have let go, which is no doubt a form of forgiveness.

## Notes

[1] C. Henry Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*, 5th ed., revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Newton: Faith & Life Press, 1981), 340.

[2] There is also the question of whether the children of parents who suffered in the 1930s have an obligation or moral right to forgive those who caused their parents' suffering. For my reflections on this subject, see Harry Loewen, "A Mennonite-Christian View of Suffering: The Case of Russian Mennonites in the 1930s and 1940s," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (January 2003): 47–68; and Harry Loewen, "'Can the Son Answer for the Father?' Reflections on the Stalinist Terror (on the 60th Anniversary of My Father's Arrest, 1937–1997)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998): 76–90.

[3] John B. Toews, "'No songs were sung at the gravesite': The Blumenort (Russia) Massacre, November 10–12, 1919," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 62. Other reflections on the Russian Mennonite experience during these years can be found in these sources, among others: Waldemar Janzen, "Time of Terror: Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Mennonite Suffering during the Stalin Era and World War II," *Conrad Grebel Review* 18 (Spring 2000): 6–18; Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000); and Walter Sawatsky, "Historical Roots of a Post-Gulag Theology for Russian Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 (April 2002): 149–80.

## About the author

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