

Anabaptism and Jews

Collective memory and failure

Hans Werner

It is not a good time for commemoration. Or is it? We are on the eve of another milestone that begs for events, writings, and ceremonies that will remember and celebrate five hundred years of Anabaptism. As individuals, our memories and the stories we tell about ourselves and our past are shaped by the context in which we remember and tell them. The stories



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we tell to give meaning to our lives, even if we believe them to be true, are not timelessly objective but are shaped by the attitudes, social realities, and cultural trends of the day. Collective mem-

ory—the memories we share as a family, a people, or a nation—also reflect the sensibilities of our day. Those of us who style ourselves in some way as historians are called upon to help recover and, indeed, create the memories that we then celebrate together. Not surprisingly, we are called to dig out and tell the stories of our heroes: the great men and women of the past. We have become much more sober about our heroes who we now know were colonizers, racists, and at times misogynists and abusers even as they forged nations, offered theological insights, and led churches and denominations. Plaques, monuments, and ceremonies do not lend themselves well to complicating the stories of our past. And yet it is important to find ways to celebrate the vision, persistence, and remarkable events that led to the faith and church experience we call Anabaptism, while acknowledging the ambiguities of that history.

One such complication of Anabaptist history is the relationship with Jews. It is perhaps inevitable that the Holocaust would cast its shadow over five hundred years of history, and in Anabaptist circles the question has recently risen to the forefront with conferences, books, and public discussions that have focussed specifically on Anabaptism's response to

Nazism, the Holocaust, and Anabaptists' duplicity in its horrors.¹ It has been difficult for the discussion to balance a sense of timeless Christian morality while avoiding the prevailing presentism that characterizes our time and its tendency to offer simple solutions for moral dilemmas. A second challenge troubling Anabaptist-Jewish relations has been to know whom one should consider to be an Anabaptist. The variety among radical reformers in the Reformation period has necessitated some "lumping," while in later periods there has seemed to be more "splitting," as it is not always clear to what extent an Anabaptist family name or having grown up in an Anabaptist family or milieu should qualify one as being an Anabaptist, particularly when acknowledged faith or church practice is unknown or non-existent.

Despite these challenges, there is reason to commemorate and possibly even celebrate our shared fate as minorities in a Europe dominated by Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Christians. Certainly, there is also abundant reason to tell and retell the stories of shame and failure in our relationship with Jews, to offer penitence and seek reconciliation.

Early Anabaptist-Jewish relations

For most of the last five hundred years, Anabaptists and Jews lived in splendid isolation. The Reformation generally is tainted by Martin Luther's diatribe against the Jews. Written three years before his death, *On the Jews and Their Lies* is difficult to read and remains a potent example of Christian failure.² While Luther's diatribe has coloured Lutheran relationship with Jews, there is little evidence of overt Anabaptist expressions of antisemitism. Lisa Schirch notes in her overview of Anabaptist-Jewish relations, "Unlike most Catholics and Protestants, early Anabaptists did not embed anti-Judaism ideas into their scriptural analysis nor did they take part in anti-Jewish violence. Most Anabaptists in the 1500s were not

1 Of note are "Stimmen, Lebenssituationen, Erfahrungen. Mennoniten in der NS-Zeit," September 25–27, 2015, Muenster, Germany; "Die völkische Bewegung und der Nationalsozialismus bei den Mennoniten in Paraguay," March 11, 2017, Filadelfia, Paraguay; "Mennonites and the Holocaust," March 16–17, 2018, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas. Selected papers from the latter were published as Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). See also "Jews and Mennonites: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust," May 8–10, 2023, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

2 Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society*, IV, vol. 47, translated by Martin Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 121–306.

actively blaming Jews for blood libel, magic or the plague, nor were they instigating violence against Jews.”³

Not only were Anabaptists largely silent on what mainstream Europe considered the Jewish “problem” for most of the four hundred years between 1525 and the twentieth century, Mennonites and Jews suffered similar restrictions on their economic, social, and cultural activities. Both groups were outside of the mainstream religious persuasions that held sway in Europe, and both were at various times the object of discriminatory rulers and governments. As it relates to Anabaptist-Jewish relations, this period can be commemorated with relative ease. While there are no heroes, there are also no stories that force shame upon our collective memory.

Twentieth-century Anabaptist-Jewish relations

Not so for the twentieth century. Here our desire to remember fondly our Anabaptist heritage confronts the reality of relations with Jews that demand an accounting. As the recent conferences have forcefully shown, Mennonites became complicit in the crimes of Germany against Jews during the Second World War. In Germany, Anabaptist groups generally supported the Nazi regime, served in its military, and in some cases participated directly in war crimes. Some Anabaptists in the Netherlands became fascists, while others offered resistance.⁴ In Ukraine, Mennonites were tremendously relieved to see the German armies wipe away the Bolshevik regime under which they had suffered immeasurably for some twenty years. They cooperated with the German occupation and became witnesses to the destruction of their Jewish neighbours. In some cases, they even became translators or members of the notorious *Einzatsgruppen* (special action groups) that combed the countryside in search of Jews. When the German armies retreated, Mennonites were resettled in occupied Poland where many benefited from the spoils of the concentration camps and most men were drafted into the German army or ancillary units.

It is also here that the context for remembering the past is complicated by the present. The first of these is the dramatic rise of the Holocaust

3 Lisa Schirch, “Anabaptist Relations with Jews Across Five Centuries,” *Mennonite Life* 74 (2020).

4 See Alle Hoekema with Gabe G. Hoekema, *Hardship, Resistance, Collaboration: Essays on Dutch Mennonites during World War II and Its Aftermath* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2021).

narrative in modern Jewish memory and in society generally. Until the late 1960s and 1970s, the “memory of the Jewish catastrophe was either forgotten or repressed,” and the death of Jews in concentration camps was subsumed under the general category of war casualties.⁵ Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the memory of the Holocaust as both a uniquely Jewish story and a cautionary tale against genocide became a prominent feature of Western collective memory of the Second World War.

Since the 1990s, the validity of the Holocaust as a necessary collective memory beyond the Jewish community has faded somewhat. Alongside the ending of first-person memories as Holocaust survivors passed away, the rise of polarization and right-wing populism has seen the weakening and fragmenting of the Holocaust narrative and the consensus of its meaning.

Anabaptist-Jewish relations today

Commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of Anabaptism also comes at a time when there are tensions between Anabaptist church bodies and Jews relating to the actions of the state of Israel toward Palestinians. Anabaptist denominations and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) have made statements supporting Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.⁶ These statements have drawn criticism from some Jews who consider conflicts with Palestinians a question of the right of Israel to exist. Moreover, as Mennonites are just beginning to come to terms with their own complicity in Nazism and the crimes of the Holocaust, there is increasing awareness that dealing with the Anabaptist-Jewish past is needed to avoid antisemitism when criticizing the state of Israel.

The present context also has national particularities that make accounting for the twentieth-century Anabaptist-Jewish story challenging. In Germany, the national process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has been a feature of public discourse throughout the postwar period.⁷ Anabaptists have had to come to terms with their own culpability alongside a similar national conversation. Anabaptists in the United States who were not

5 Lawrence Baron, “The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 62–63.

6 “MC USA acknowledges ‘suffering’ of Jews, Palestinians,” <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/mc-usa-acknowledges-‘suffering’-jews-palestinians>.

7 *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the compound noun used in Germany to convey the process of digesting, or coming to terms, with the past, specifically the Nazi period.

directly involved find it easier to internalize the narrative of the Holocaust as a “never again” story.

Mennonites in Canada have their own vantage point that makes coming to terms with the events of the Second World War as a collective memory particularly difficult. In contrast to the United States where only a few Soviet Mennonites immigrated, some seven thousand Mennonites from the Soviet Union joined their coreligionists in Canada in the post-war period.⁸

Trauma was a constant theme for most of these immigrants, but many of their stories were suppressed as they focussed on resurrecting family life, finding work, and generally finding their way in a period of economic expansion. For them, Hitler was remembered as a saviour who had rescued them from Stalinist terror. In his

study of memory as it related to the Pinochet era in Chile, Steve J. Stern posits the notion of “memory as salvation.”⁹ An event, such as the arrival of Hitler’s armies in Ukraine that offered salvation from Stalin, is not easily reframed in memory even when it is shown to

have also involved atrocities against Jews, Roma, the disabled, and others. While in the immediate postwar period, North Americans wrote off the Holocaust as a subset of wartime casualties, Mennonite immigrants put aside what they knew had happened to the Jews on the Eastern front. In some cases, they could justify their own participation or duplicity because the arrival of Hitler’s armies had saved them, their families, and their people from the terror of the previous decades. As the scale of Nazi Germany’s crimes gradually penetrated public perception, immigrant narratives evolved, contextualizing their memories as a no-win situation. As George K. Epp—himself a postwar immigrant—notes in his overview of the postwar immigration: “They were caught between the two dictators. One had oppressed and killed and threatened to kill more of them when the time would come. The other was evil too, as some came to realize, but for the time being he tolerated their churches, and there was no direct perse-

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8 Ted Regehr, “Canada,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Canada/>.

9 Steve J. Stern. *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), particularly 30–31.

cution as they had known it for decades. . . . And in any case, there was no choice, their fate now depended on the German protection.”¹⁰

When the Holocaust became an integral part of North American memories of the war, immigrant memories held on to the idea of their salvation by reifying their own suffering as being at the same level as that of Jews. Immigrant narratives began equating Allied bombings of civilians and Stalin’s crimes during collectivization and the purges with Nazi crimes against the Jews.¹¹ They emphasized their own stories of suffering under Stalin, thereby holding onto and justifying the memory of Hitler as being their salvation.

Commemorating 500 years and learning from the past

As we honour five hundred years of the Anabaptist movement, our commemorations must not be only celebratory and certainly not filiopietistic. We are not finished digging deeply into the Second World War era as it relates to Anabaptists and the Holocaust. Those on whose shoulders blame falls tend to offer their apologies and then want to move on. For those suffering hurt and injustice, that is not so easily done. They need to hear the stories told and retold. The conferences in Germany, Paraguay, and the United States have been good beginnings, although absent is a Canadian effort to come to terms with this past.

In telling and retelling this story, we would do well strive to understand this part of the Anabaptist past in ways that also offer insight and understanding for the moral dilemmas faced by our ancestors. We must ask what the Christian is to do when all the choices that appear to be available are not compatible with Anabaptist Christian understandings of Jesus and his teachings. We must ask how MCC was to bring together their responsibilities to Anabaptist siblings with their mandate as a Christian organization, amid changing war and postwar realities and an unknown future. We may well conclude that they fell short, but seeing through their eyes will offer the possibility of genuine repentance and accountability. As Aileen Friesen has written, “To engage in a conversation of atonement, it is important for those of us who were not placed in untenable positions, not forced to make compromised choices, to acknowledge that faced with

10 George K. Epp, “Mennonite Immigration to Canada After World War II,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 113.

11 Hans Werner, “A Usable Past: Soviet Mennonite Memories of the Holocaust,” in *European Mennonites and the Holocaust*, 290–306.

the same dilemmas we also might not have emerged morally unscathed. It is time to heed this call for collective responsibility.”¹²

We must also seek a balance between the timeless moral and ethical principles that emanate from Jesus’s teachings as our Anabaptist heritage has understood them and the sensibilities of our time. Presentism, as a fallacy of history, imposes the knowledge, values, and understandings of our day onto our forebears in ways they could not have known. We are prone to believing our contemporary thinking will stand the test of time and are quick to impose our sensibilities on the past. Telling stories of the past necessarily and rightly involves reflections on what we believe to be true, good, and ethical today. We do well, however, to strive to understand their world and remember that we also “see through a glass darkly.”¹³

About the author

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12 Aileen Friesen, “Soviet Mennonites, the Holocaust, & Nazism,” *Anabaptist Historians*, <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2017/04/25/soviet-mennonites-the-holocaust-nazism-part-1/>.

13 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)