

Survival pieces

Mennonites, trauma, and musical family histories

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My daughter sits down at the piano. She gently places her hands on the keys, draws a deep breath, and closes her eyes as she begins to play. The melody spills out over the congregation, a healing balm. They catch their breath, yes this is our song, we hoped we would sing it.

My other daughter stands to lead the song. She sees us, inhales courage, closes her eyes, and begins to pray the first verse solo: “So nimm denn meine Hände, und führe mich” (O take my hands and lead me). It is courageous, reverent, beautiful. The singing, the playing, is inspired, a holy moment in tribute to Oma, my Mom, whose life we are celebrating.

“Bis an mein selig Ende und ewiglich” (Until my blessed ending and forever). Mom has died, she is at peace. All the trauma, the terror, the destruction of war and sadness that invaded her early life, is un-remembered. Forever.

“Ich kann allein nicht gehen, nicht einen Schritt” (I cannot go it alone, not one single step). How often I have sung these words, yet today they spring from the page. I remember that my mother lost her mother and father at the age of seven, and she kept going. In the grip of grief I, too, need to take a step.

“Wo du wirst gehen und stehen, da nimm mich mit” (Where you will go and dwell, take me with you). And I pray, God, in my grief take me to the places where I will see you.

–Ingrid, summer 2024

When approximately eight thousand Russian Mennonite refugees arrived on Canadian shores in the years following World War II, they were accompanied by the trauma of religious persecution, forced involvement in brutal political regimes, and the broader shock of constant displacement from the war. Newcomers were welcomed into Mennonite congregations,

which grew exponentially in the mid-to-late twentieth century. A hallmark of both newcomer communities and those that were more established was four-part singing. For Russian Mennonite refugees, this was a musical lineage that survived the trip across the Atlantic when so many of their beloved people and belongings did not. Traditional hymns sung in

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German, like “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände” (*Voices Together* #631), served as a reminder of the homeland and a nostalgic tie to the faith to which they clung. Jean Janzen, a Mennonite hymn writer, describes heart songs like these as a rope that pulls Mennonites through impossible situations: “With a hymn we are actually given some-

thing to hold on to, *a kind of survival piece*. . . . When we sing, we use all our bodies. We all lift our lungs; we breathe in and out together; we keep the pitch together. What I am doing with my body connects me with other bodies—even bodies of the past. We sustain the spirits of the past through this physical act of singing.”¹ Some of these newcomers to Canada were our parents or grandparents. Each of them arrived on Canada’s shores with German heart songs, and these songs were, as Janzen suggests, a “survival piece.”

We write this reflection as a mother-daughter duo, descendants of Russian Mennonite refugees to Canada following World War II. We are keenly aware of the intergenerational trauma that stems from our family’s history of religious persecution, forced displacement, and immense loss. Though this is our story, it is only one of countless stories of Mennonite trauma and migration throughout history, around the world, and across racial and ethnic lines. Our story is one of *many* contexts where music has been a survival piece for Mennonites. As we reflect on the role of heart songs—in this case, beloved songs that have ties to our family history—we recognize the ways we continue to use our voices and bodies to identify with our family history. In this short reflection, we consider our family’s adoption and use of the hymn “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände,” revealing the specific nuances of our family’s music history. What do individual family musical histories reveal about Mennonite music, beyond oversim-

1 Marlene Kropf and Kenneth James Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Herald, 2001), 49–50; emphasis added.

plified narratives and stereotypes of “Mennonite music”? How does our family’s story of trauma become embodied when we sing heart songs like “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände?” We invite others to consider what Mennonite music means to them based on their family’s musical lineage, whether their family history includes five hundred years of alignment with Anabaptism, or whether they are the first to explore it.

Constructing a musical family history

As a qualitative researcher, I (Anneli) am constantly invited to reflect on my own positionality: What internal and external forces shape the way I think about music and about my faith? How does my own family context inform how I interpret what goes on around me? Recognizing that it is impossible to be objective as a researcher, reflecting on positionality invites researchers to name the factors that shape their individual perspectives. As a musician—and specifically a church musician—I can name that my family’s church music history deeply shapes the way I interpret congregational music practices around me.

As I dive deeper into my family’s musical history, I find myself stepping into a tension. I appreciate the function that Euro-Western hymns have had in defining my family’s past. As the grandchild of Canadian refugees at the end of a long line of victims of religious and cultural persecution, I desire acknowledgement of the ways that this German classical music has been a source of religious identity and comfort in the face of discrimination. But as a practitioner and scholar, I find myself advocating for an expansion of what we consider to be Mennonite music. I regularly invite Mennonites not to cling to the white European classical music that defined a Mennonite canon in the past and instead to push forward for a Mennonite sound that acknowledges the breadth of Mennonites around the world.² I aspire for us to broaden our conceptualization of Mennonite music and to also elevate forms of Mennonite music beyond the ones embedded in the white European Mennonite story. I believe that these two desires can be held in tandem.

In reflecting on our experience of “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände,” we are in part constructing our own musical family history, one that is deeply intertwined with the story of persecution, displacement, and migration. We also recognize the privilege and domination that were often

² For more on this, see Katie Graber and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, “Publishing Privileges the Published: An Analysis of Gender, Class, and Race in the Hymnological Feedback Loop,” *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 3.

implicit in this story. In naming this, we are in line with methodologies like critical family history that “challenge family historians to construct their histories in the context of social relationships forged through colonization, racism, and other relations of power.”³ In other words, our musical family history needs to be constructed with recognition of the ways that privilege is embedded in the story, even as our ancestors experienced victimization and oppression. For our family, this includes acknowledgement of the realities of religious and ethnic persecution that forced our ancestors to take refuge in Canada. It also recognizes the ways that assimilation into Canadian culture was easier because our family was white and visibly matched the white majority around them: as soon as the first generation of children learned English they looked and sounded like the white majority. Elaine Enns captures this nuance, noting that “settler Mennonites have experienced a complicated mix of persecution and marginalization on one hand but assimilation and privilege on the other.”⁴ Reflecting on our musical family history serves as an invitation to remember these stories of displacement, to care for the music that accompanied that trauma, and then to use this experience to try to help other Mennonites who have been displaced to remember their musical lineage, too.

Our journey with “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände”

“So Nimm Denn Meine Hände” has accompanied our family for generations. I (Ingrid) don’t remember a time when I did not know this song. I sang it at home and at church. It was in the *First Mennonite Children’s Hymnary*, published in Winnipeg in 1960, found on page 189. This self-published volume of 193 songs was meant both to continue a story and to introduce a new story. It gently bridged the gap between English and German. It was used by children whose families had come to Canada either in the 1920s or the late 1940s. We, the hundred or more children at First Mennonite Church, would stumble through the Gothic script, giggling as we confused the “F” with the “S.” We waded through our bewilderment, singing the story of our people in tattered German.


The English songs in the *First Mennonite Children’s Hymnary* were a nod to the new reality that we, children of refugees, born in Canada, very quickly preferred to sing in English. Interestingly, “So Nimm Denn Meine

3 Christine E. Sleeter, “Critical Family History: Situating Family within Contexts of Power Relationships,” *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 8, no. 1 (2016): 14.

4 Elaine Enns, “Healing Trauma, Decolonizing Memory,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 20, no. 2 (2019): 15.

Hände” appears with English verses interlined in the score, the German verses below. Perhaps this was an attempt to make this precious song more broadly accessible and relevant to the new setting. As a teen I sang the song with the church choir in German, and much later in English.

I have held onto this song for decades: We sang it at my baptism, my wedding, my ordination, the funerals of my parents and my in-laws, and the funeral of our dear great aunt. It has been a source of connection between generations. My mother

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and I sang this song with her cousin in Germany after hours of hushed conversation where they retold stories of

their escape. Tears filled everyone’s eyes as we recounted our shared story through the singing of this shared song. My mother-in-law always wanted to hear the third verse: “with thee through night and darkness, I reach the goal.” These words were a balm for her soul as she aged. Most recently, while crouching beside my mother’s bed, her death imminent, I sang it again in German, rough and raspy. I wanted to offer her these tender words even as I drew strength from them myself. Someday I hope we will sing it at my funeral, in German and in English.

I (Anneli) have also sung this song my whole life and easily have the German first verse memorized, a semi-accurate English translation lodged in my head. I associate the song with my grandparents on both sides. My paternal grandparents were Mennonite Brethren, leaving Ukraine and Russia in the 1920s. My maternal grandfather was a born-and-raised Mennonite in Ukraine. My maternal grandmother grew up in a Lutheran home in Ukraine and became Mennonite when she came to Canada in the 1950s where she was warmly adopted by the Mennonite community. When I sing “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände,” I feel connected to their stories. I remember their trauma and acknowledge that it has been passed down: it lives in my desire for security in my faith community, in my longing to keep my people and my community close. Their story compels me to sing through periods of fear, doubt, or loneliness; I know that they sang through these moments before me.

There is much that we know about how this song came to be in our family musical lineage. “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände” was written by Julie Hausman, a Latvian hymn writer who lived from 1826 to 1901. Like many women hymn writers from her time, she wrote devotional material. This piece in particular found its way to publication when she showed it to a pastor in Berlin named Gustav Knak, who included the piece in a

collection devoted to pieces on stillness and quiet, which was published in 1862.⁵ The hymn is included in Mennonite, Lutheran, and Moravian hymnals, and despite what many Mennonites might assume, it is not written by a Mennonite.

While we can't be sure of the hymn's earliest adoption by Mennonites, we know that it was included in German in the 1943 *Gesangbuch* published by the General Conference Mennonite Church in North

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America, which was all in German and entirely in Gothic script. This would have been the hymnal used by our ancestors when they first arrived in Canada. Interestingly, the hymn is missing from the 1914 hymnal, called *Lobe Den Herren*, likely the last hymnal published in the Mennonite Colonies of Ukraine, possibly published before the song was

well known. As mentioned, “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände” was also included in the 1960 *First Mennonite Church Children’s Hymnary*. The song appears in the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal* (the first Mennonite hymnal to print it in English), where it is in both English and German, though with the English interlined. This language delegation stayed the same in the 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* but changed for the 2020 hymnal *Voices Together* when the German became interlined again (#631). This was an editorial decision for *Voices Together*, with first languages often (though not always) interlined and translations separated. The Intercultural Worship committee for *Voices Together* looked at Russian Mennonite heart songs as a form of intercultural repertoire, material that emerged from non-English speaking communities. For many of these heart songs—like “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände”—the German was foregrounded to highlight its origins.

With all that we know of this song, there are many unknowns about its place in our family history. We wonder: Was it sung in 1974 at my (Ingrid’s) grandmother’s funeral far away in Karaganda, Kazakstan? Had any of our family been part of the singing of this song at the train station in Molotschna, when families bid farewell to one another? Was it spoken under the breath of my grandfathers as they were taken away in the mid-

5 John Richard Watson, “Julie Hausmann,” *Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology* (Canterbury Press, 2013), <http://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/j/julie-hausmann>.

dle of the night? Or was the prayer instead lost amid the destruction and hatred of war? In pre-war times when my father's family sang on the front porch, was this one of their songs? Did any of them sing it on their trek out of Ukraine? Did my father utter these words as he desperately prayed on a German train in the summer of 1945, terrified because his papers had been stolen? Did my mother cling to these familiar words as she criss-crossed Germany alone in the final months of the war looking for any family at all? Did they sing this song in the little German village church where she finally found work? We will likely never know the answers to these questions, but we trust the fragmented stories that help us understand how this song shaped our family's history. As Janzen eloquently notes, "We sustain the spirits of the past through this physical act of singing." Whether at a funeral, a church service, or in someone's living room, embodying a song like "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" builds on real and constructed memories to help us sustain our family's story.

Conclusion

Trauma lives in our family's musical memory. Trauma also lives in the Mennonite story, far further back than we understand from our own family history and far into the future in ways we cannot yet predict. "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" offers our family a way to sing with the trauma of our family's history, moving from unspoken, unacknowledged pain to a shared, embodied memory of this war-torn past. As we do this, we recognize that this song is only one musical expression of Mennonite trauma. Although Mennonites may think of it as a Mennonite song, "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" has *expansive* meaning beyond Mennonite communities, and it has *particular* meaning in our family story. By understanding this story more deeply, we resist the narrative that there is *one* Mennonite musical history, and we embrace the uniqueness of our family's story.

For us, as with our grandparents and great-grandparents, "So Nimm Denn Meine Hände" is a heart song. It holds all the promises and hopes of our family in their hardest hours, searching for some place to call home. It names the uncertainties that were a constant companion, weak hearts (*schwaches Herz*), pain and sorrow (*Schmerz*) and uncertainty for the poor people (*schwaches Kind*) fleeing death and destruction. It promises the presence of God in the midst of it all. When we sing it in German, the language of our forebears, we are telling their story and ours. We did not live through this trauma directly but live with the trauma that has defined our family story. When we sing it in English, we are telling a story

so it won't be forgotten—a story of war and suffering and survival—and we claim that one of the threads of this universal tragedy is ours.

As the funeral draws to a close, we open our hymnals again. The piano gently leads, arpeggiating on a D chord, and I draw the bow across the strings of my violin. F#, E, D, slow, restful, almost painful. It was my mother who made sure we got music lessons. Her mother, she reminded us, had played the guitar, but no such opportunity existed for my mom.

We begin to sing “Be at Rest once more O my soul” (Voices Together #532). My heart aches as I think of my mother gone—and rejoices that finally she is fully at rest. In the mystery of death, she has been set free, embraced by the goodness of God. We sing, “For the Lord has been good to you.” Indeed, she saw her family and Canada as signs of God’s goodness.

This song was written in 2008 by an Anglican songwriter who lives and ministers in Winnipeg, the city where my family settled. My mother has never heard this song, but I’m singing it for her and me. The song is landing in my heart, a new musical memory. It will live beside “So Nimm Denn Meine Hände.” It will feed my soul for a long time; perhaps it will feed my family and carry them through whatever is ahead. Whenever I sing it, I will think of her and of our family’s story.

—Ingrid, summer 2024

About the authors

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