Mennonite Holocaust Perpetrators?

Mennonites as Holocaust perpetrators? Did Mennonites actually help destroy Jews? Yes, unfortunately so. Recent research is uncovering this unsavory truth, too long hidden in darkness.

Consider the following quoted from “Mennonites and the Holocaust” in the October 2010 issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. “SS-Hauptsturmfuhrer Heinrich Wiens … had a record of efficient methods in this ghastly business....For his tasks Wiens had the advantage of using “gas vans,” newly arrived from the manufacturer of “murder implements” in Berlin. As in all massacres by the Einsatzgruppen the 800 to 1000 Jewish people in the area were first “registered,” which took eight days. Then came the command to start the killing process. Jews from the city itself and the surrounding localities … had until September 5, 1942, to report to the calvary barracks in Pjatigorsk. At the barracks they were told that they would be resettled and were to prepare themselves for travel. Then they were transported in trucks a short distance to a gravel pit guarded by the members of EK 12....As each truckload of Jews arrived they were ordered to disembark, deposit their valuables on spread-out blankets and then told to remove all their clothes. They were then forced to climb into the “gas van,” which drove back and forth several times before it stopped on the edge of the pit. There several Jewish prisoners were compelled to pull the bodies from the truck and throw them into the pit on the promise that they “would be saved” from such a fate. None of the Pjatigorsk victims survived, including the prisoners unloading the corpses of their fellow Jews, who were killed when their grisly work was done.”

Commander Weins went on to systematically repeat the procedure in other places, becoming personally responsible for the deaths of thousands of Jews.

Henrich Weins, born March 22, 1906, was the son of a prosperous Russian Mennonite farmer and merchant who lived in the South Russia Mennonite settlement of Molochna. From 1926 till 1930 he served as a dairy inspector at various Ukrainian locations. On January 10, 1931, he joined the Nazi party in Danzig, Poland, and two days later intensified his identification with Nazism by joining the elite SS. By April 1939 Weins was an SS captain.

He described himself as a “believer in God” while working in the officially atheistic Nazi SS. He had left the Mennonite church somewhere between 1931 and 1939.

For the complete story and much more read Gerhard Rempel's *Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Colaboration to Perpetuation* beginning on page 507.

Heirich Weins was just one individual among thousands and thousands of Mennonites in Germany, Poland, and the Ukraine who identified with Adoph Hitler and the Nazi Party. While only a few like Weins participated actively in destroying Jews, most Mennonites in Europe just looked the other way. They were mostly silent participators, although some Mennonites did dislike Jews because of Jewish involvement in Communist government. They were proudly pleased with their German nationalism. They could be this way because they had already lost their Two Kingdom Concept, and thus their nonresistance by World War 1. These German Mennonites supported German nationalism so strongly that one hundred forty-four Danzig Mennonites lost their lives in combat during the Great War. (Two thousand German Mennonites served as soldiers.) The next generation, living while the Holocaust was happening, seemed glad to rally around Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party. German nationalism had become more important than the eternal Kingdom of Christ.

What happened? A detailed story of what happened is chronicled in Mark Jantzen's recent book *Mennonite German Soldiers* (2010). The book recounts the gradual step-by-step downward spiral experienced by the Danzig Mennonites. From the principled stance of a persecuted sect, yet recognized and tolerated by the government, the Danzig Mennonites completely lost their recognition as nonresistant people in the space of one hundred years. The Danzig story happened in a completely different political and social environment from what we experience in the United States. Thus the Mennonite parallels are not identical. However, large historical lessons loom. Human beings face similar situations in all ages and places.

For preservation as a people part of the Kingdom of Christ, we must be realistic with the issues we face. The Kingdom of Christ does not just happen; it is perpetuated by people cooperating with Christ in the building of that Kingdom in the midst of a hostile society. He has been fair to educate us with stories and teaching from the Scripture as well as non-Biblical stories of those who lived before us. We have a wealth of information at our disposal. We need interpreters and appliers!

Reading these accounts provided me with quite a bit of food for thought. We are also writing a story that will be read by our descendants (if Christ tarries). I look at the German Mennonite story from a distance of time, geography, and ethnicity and yet some lessons loom large. What will people read about us? What life lessons will those who read about us, make about us? We do not live in a vaccuum or in an obscure corner of the world. It seems that Christ has put us close to front and center in the American context.

Following are some of my observations and interpreted life lessons as I try to bridge the gap between the German Mennonites and ourselves. Much more could be included.

1. The Kingdom of Christ is separate from the kingdoms of this world. They can never be presumed to be one and the same no matter what rationalization we try to make. The two operate with two different operating systems. The Kingdom of this world centers on “ME,” while the Kingdom of Christ centers on “HIM.” Jesus Christ said, “Love the LORD with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself.” Such love requires “setting our affections on things above” because naturally we love ourselves.
2. The Kingdom of Christ is incompatible with a political system. Participation in politics by voting and office holding denies and confuses the two separate systems. Jesus simply said, “My Kingdom is not of this world.”
3. When hearts truly are seeking Christ first, His grace goes to work to accomplish what we in our human weakness can never do. We need not worry about having the right strategy or the proper five-year plan. The secret is seeking Christ first; His blessing will follow. Too often the German Mennonites lowered their gaze to themselves.
4. If we took three words CHRISTIAN, AMERICAN, MENNONITE, in what order would we arrange them? Am I a Mennonite Christian American, an American Christian Mennonite, or an American Mennonite Christian? Mennonites who participated in the Holocaust decided that German was the strongest word.
5. The way of acculturation, the way of gradual compromise with the system will eventually lead us to embarrassing places. Jesus tells us to “endure until the end.” The downward pull is relentless; the availability of grace is limitless! If we surrender to the downward pull, we have only ourselves to blame.
6. An aggressive teaching program is essential to reproducing conviction in each succeeding generation. We may spare no effort here because the society around us is also attempting to teach our children. The Kingdom's teaching program must provide solid, satisfying answers to young people who wonder about the issues of life.
7. While tradition is right and proper in many areas of life, tradition can become a binding and limiting force which actually sets itself against the movement of the Spirit of God. The Kingdom of Christ can never be frozen. The German Mennonites agreed with the government to allow no non-family converts into their churches!
8. Individualism is a corrosive force. The people of God must remain solidly together. To remain solidly together much Gelassenheit must happen. Christian community is a wonderful experience, one of the best on this side of heaven.
9. Unsound, non-Biblical doctrine must be met head-on and exposed for what it is, either on the leadership or membership level. We cannot press into the Kingdom of Christ while we are ignoring unsound doctrine among the people of the Kingdom. Christ and His message are an integral unit.
10. Leadership must know the way, show the way, and go the way. Leadership by default is not leadership. Christ appoints leaders which He then commissions to energetically lead the way into Kingdom fullness.
11. The Kingdom of Christ has boundaries. Those boundaries must have substance, not just exist as ideas or theories. The boundaries may differ at different places within the Kingdom of Christ but they must exist.
12. The Kingdom of Christ is always expensive; we must lose ourselves in order to be obedient to Christ. That obedience may demand our very earthly lives. But is earthly life the most precious possession we have? No, our faith is. Kingdom Christians with their faith in Christ first have always been misunderstood by their neighbors, often resulting in persecution.
13. Rewriting a confession of faith to accommodate a different value system is different from updating a brotherhood agreement. Our church standards must always be relevant and meaningful to the membership. To rewrite a confession of faith is a momentous experience for any group within the Kingdom of Christ; we had better know what we are doing!
14. Attempting to construct a bridge between the past and present when the present is on a different foundation from the past is a lack of integrity. The Danzig Mennonites claimed, “agreement with our forefathers that every war is a great evil that results from sin.” Yet they also said, “It appears to us to be very difficult to find an absolute prohibition of military service in the Holy Scriptures if such is required by the state of all citizens.” The German Mennonites now claimed that it was their Christian duty to seek the “prosperity, rights, and preservation of the state in which God has placed us.” The leadership claimed that their principles had not changed, only their form.
15. If families cannot support what is happening on a local level, their only recourse is relocation. In the Danzig area, out of twelve thousand Mennonites, two thousand emigrated, mostly to Russia, with some to the United States. Those emigrating felt the need to remain true to their convictions. Those not emigrating were often tied to their locality by wealth and power.
16. Governments get to know their people. Even though the state constantly pressed against the German Mennonites to take up arms, they did recognize that they were great taxpayers. Since governments need both men and money, the Prussian government reluctantly lived with just money, always wishing for the men also. Eventually the state got both the men and the money. Once they got both, they would not reconsider moving backwards. In America the Anabaptist people have a nonresistant reputation and liberal concessions from the government. We may never lose our reputation. It is better to remain as a thorn in the side of society as a separate Kingdom.
17. The Kingdom of Christ must educate its own children. To allow the state (the Kingdom of this world) to educate our children is serious collaboration with the enemy. No educational system is neutral; education always happens within a context of values. Why would any member of the Kingdom of Christ be content with education by the enemy? The German Mennonites became content with such an arrangement. The rest is history.

From colonial beginnings, especially with William Penn, the Anabaptist people have been favored with government respect and provision. Thus American Anabaptists have had an easy road compared with Anabaptist experience in the past. That easy road has too often caused us to be shallow, apathetic, complacent, and materialistic. Too often we have lost our sense of being Kingdom Christians and thus have lost our message. In our day American society knows and respects Anabaptists to a greater or lesser degree. They are observing the acculturating process at work among us, sometimes distressed when they see us succumb. So far the United States government has made liberal concessions to the Anabaptist people because they understand them as a people with a long history of authenticity. Will that reputation continue?

But with the freedoms we have, what is to hold us back from being aggressive with the Kingdom of Christ? Only our shallowness, apathy, complacency, and materialism. What would happen if conservative Anabaptists were wholly filled with the Spirit of the Living Christ?!