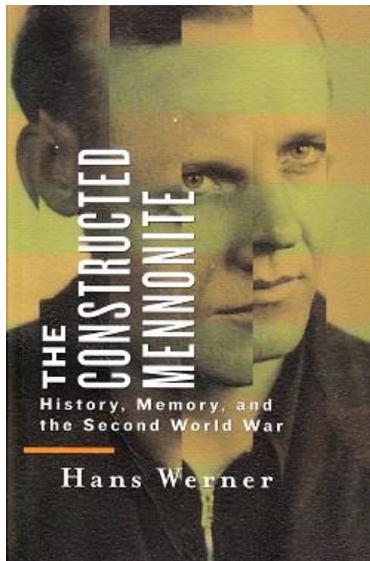


Hans Werner. *The Constructed Mennonite: History, Memory, and the Second World War*.
University of Manitoba Press: Winnipeg, 2013.
Book review by Robert Martens



Mennonite memoirs, Royden Loewen has remarked, are not written by those who perceive themselves as failures. Rather, they follow a script of a life that begins in ignorance and poverty and ends with an acquired wisdom and relative prosperity.* In other words, the remembered life is “constructed” into a story that realigns and modifies the “facts” in order to create an overriding theme to that life. Hans Werner’s recent book, *The Constructed Mennonite*, is an attempt to understand his father’s stories about his life, particularly those of World War II, as a constructed narrative with which his father tried to make sense of that life. “The stories my father told had a life of their own,” writes Werner in the book’s introduction, “and the following pages are also about the way he told them” (5).

Werner’s father went through four name changes that corresponded to four radically different periods of his lifetime. He was born as Hans Werner in Nikolaipol, western Siberia, in 1917: the year of the Bolshevik Revolution. Because of the intense turmoil of that era, young Hans learned nearly nothing about either his ancestry or the Mennonite faith. His life was difficult from the start. His birth father died of cholera when Hans was only four. Hans’ stepfather from his mother’s second marriage was an abusive drunk; and when his mother married for a third time, the father-son relationship didn’t improve much. And then there was the Soviet-inflicted suffering: collectivization of the land, hunger, arrests. Hans’ family participated in the panicked flight of 18,000 ethnic Germans to Moscow in 1929, desperately seeking to emigrate. The family was forced back home by Soviet police, just before some thousands of Mennonites received permission to leave the Communist state. Hans’ stepfather, Johann Froese, could not endure the misery. About a month after being forced back to his village, he hanged himself.

The stories told in this book are interspersed with reflections by the author on the meaning and deeper truth of those stories. Usually, Werner writes, “childhood memories follow the lines of patterned scripts: school, neighbourhood, chores, and other domestic routines. My father’s scripts were seriously disrupted by the waves of instability brought on by the cholera epidemic and the suicide of his stepfather” (30).

During his school years, Hans became Ivan, a Soviet student loyal to the state and with declining interest in his home life. He became a talented machinist, and was even honoured with an award for excellence in his chosen profession. Ivan’s faith in the state was not even shaken by Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937-38. “Although he was not a political person,” writes Werner, “[my father] must have quietly shaken his head at the ‘old ways’ of people such as his stepfather and uncles. ... The faith of his Mennonite forebears seems to have been far from his mind” (47). And then in 1938, Ivan was drafted into the Soviet army.

Joining the military forced Ivan Werner to leave a wife he later would rarely mention. “My father seemingly could never find a narrative that included the story of his previous marriage without destroying the ‘myth’ he was creating about himself. In 1990, I was not sure even my mother knew” (44). Leaving his bride, speculates the author, must have left Ivan with

considerable guilt. Whatever the circumstances, however, Ivan was swept up by the enormous political forces of the time. He was assigned to a tank corps, participated in battle against the Finns in the Winter War of 1940 in which he was first wounded, and was promoted to officer. His faith in the state, however, began to waver. Ivan had developed a fascination with aircraft, but when he applied for pilot training, he was turned down when it was discovered that he had relatives in Canada. Ivan was considered a flight risk. “Up to that time,” he later said, “I had always felt like a full-fledged Russian citizen, but then I started to doubt” (73).

And so it happened that, when German forces invaded the USSR in 1941, Ivan jumped from his tank and surrendered to the Reich. At this point he became Johann. He was examined in the nude by a panel of seven doctors to certify his racial purity, and thereafter was a German citizen, a member of the *Volk* (people). Johann was drafted as a mechanic, and there follows in the book a vivid and exciting account of his wartime activities. Much of his military career was spent as driver of a *Zugmaschine* (one quibble here: there are problems in the book with German spellings), in this case a machine that specialized in hauling cannon from one battle site to another. In the disastrous frenzy of the next few years, Johann was shot down over the Mediterranean, was wounded by partisans in Venice, spent time in Holland and Czechoslovakia, and ultimately ended up participating in the Battle of the Bulge, the costly engagement that was a major factor in ending Hitler’s Reich. He would later insist that he had helped Jews whenever he could, and there is some evidence of that.

However, the war memories of Johann, writes Hans Werner, are rather confused. Why? First, because of the bewildering theatre of war, especially bewildering to the individual who is caught up in it. Second, because Johann would repeat his stories over the years without relying on collaboration from other eyewitnesses. The truth became personal and was unquestioned. Third, because Johann was attempting, later in life, to gloss over certain incidents in his service as a soldier for the Third Reich. Finally, his unrevealed first marriage left gaps in the narrative.

In 1945 Johann surrendered to American forces. Contrary to popular mythology, prisoners of war were often brutally treated by allied forces, and thousands may have simply starved to death. Johann managed to survive by volunteering to work as a truck driver for the US Army. Life finally entered a kind of routine. “Now finally you were a free person,” he later said, “and you didn’t know what to do with yourself” (129). It was in 1947 in Bamberg that Johann attended his very first Mennonite church service. “The other Mennonites were a little perplexed at his name, since the Werner surname was uncommon among Russian Mennonites. However, his fluency in Low German sealed his identity – he was clearly Mennonite” (131).

It was at this Mennonite congregation that Johann met his second wife, Margarethe, who appears rather suddenly late in the book. Her story is radically different from that of Johann. She was born as Sara Letkeman in 1921 in Osterwick, Ukraine in the midst of revolution, civil war, and famine. Unlike young Hans Werner, Sara grew up in a steadfastly faithful Mennonite family, and her trust in God never wavered. Sara endured the Stalin-engineered Great Famine of the 1930s, hid with her family to escape Soviet deportation eastward in the face of advancing German forces in 1941, witnessed the atrocities of the German SS, was evacuated to Poland when the German invasion collapsed, married Peter Vogt there, lost him to the draft, and gave birth during a shelling attack. In a further evacuation, she managed to save her infant, but her daughter died shortly afterwards. Additionally, she lost all contact with her husband. Her sufferings seemed endless.

In spite of all this, Sara endured, sometimes defiantly. She joined with other refugees in refusing repatriation (which meant death or exile) to the Soviet Union. When Reich authorities

deemed the name of Sara too Jewish, and decided she would henceforth be known as Frieda, she resisted and chose to be Margarethe. Nevertheless, she was always grateful for the German troops who had “liberated” her from the Soviets. And she developed a faith of complete resignation: “In situations like that,” she later said, “the person just thinks about today and tomorrow, you don’t think any further. ... If you are living, you don’t know anything, you are just alive; about tomorrow, you know nothing; it gives you an entirely different feeling” (150).

Despite their missing first spouses, Margarethe and Johann were married in 1951. CF Klassen and MCC eventually helped them navigate the endless international bureaucracies and immigrate to Canada. They ended up in Steinbach, Manitoba, where Johann became John. He revelled in the new experiences of an intriguing new land; she did not. Margarethe would not feel at home in North America until late in life.

The life stories the couple told in Canada felt very different, writes Hans Werner. John’s narrative was that of an epic hero, fighting, surviving, rescuing; it was an odyssey. Margarethe told her story from the vantage point of helpless victim, at the mercy of monstrous forces but redeemed by the grace of God. And both narratives were coloured by the fact that they were related in the context of the Cold War, and modified to accommodate the current political climate.

In a sense, Hans Werner’s book is two volumes in one. The first is biographies, accessibly and vividly told. The second, smaller in scope but equal in importance, is the interspersing of reflections upon those biographies, and academic language occasionally used here might deter some readers. In addition, Werner’s relationship with his father is never made clear. There seems to be a reluctance to expose the self.

Nevertheless, Werner has written a remarkable book on the nature of memory and oral history. Sometimes, he concludes, we need to distance ourselves from the usual documents and just listen. Oral histories, he writes, spring from the perspective of the marginalized, the little ones caught in the ebb and flow of history. Despite their inaccuracies, he says, they provide a valuable counterpoint to the dominant narrative of leaders and states.

*See his “Presenting Promise: The Mennonite Memoirs of Yarrow, BC” in *First Nations and First Settlers in the Fraser Valley (1890-1960)*. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2004.

The Constructed Mennonite can be purchased at the MHSBC office at 2825 Clearbrook Road.