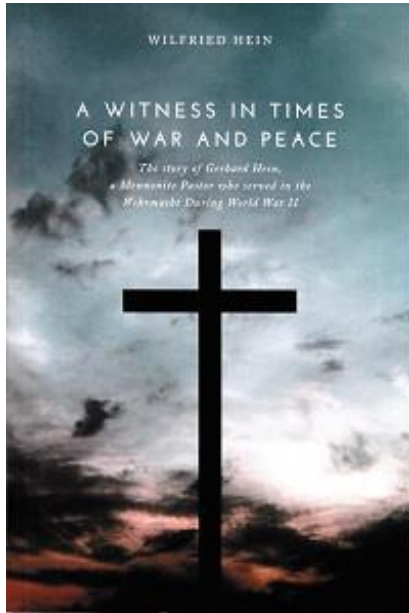


Wilfried Hein, editor and translator. *A Witness in Times of War and Peace: The Story of Gerhard Hein, a Mennonite Pastor Who Served in the Wehrmacht During World War II*. Victoria: Friesen Press, 2015. 335 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens



In 2015, Abbotsford resident Wilf Hein attended a conference held in Münster, Germany, the city that witnessed a violent Anabaptist uprising in the 1530s. The session, *Tagung über Mennoniten in der NS-Zeit* (Conference on Mennonites in the Time of National Socialism), was sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Germany (*Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein*). The intent was to study the role of German Mennonites in the Third Reich – a role that was frequently characterized by complicity. When the Second World War broke out, German Mennonites had largely abandoned their principles of nonresistance and separation from the state.

For several years previous to the conference, Hein had been translating and organizing the memoirs of his father, Gerhard Hein, a prominent Mennonite historian and pastor who was born in South Russia but lived most of his life in Germany. Gerhard Hein also served in the German Wehrmacht in the Second World War, working as interpreter and

translator. Wilf chose to present his father’s memoirs to the Mennonite Historical Society. He wrote to the organizers of the conference, thanking them for arranging the Münster conference and praising them for their courage in providing a forum for a theme which is so frequently hushed up. He continued,

“Historians are usually more interested in the original copies [of my father’s memoirs] which can be found in the Weierhof Mennonite Research Centre. However, these memoirs, in two volumes of about 140 pages, are typewritten manuscripts with many corrections which are often difficult to decipher. Sadly, due to deteriorating health, my father was not able to develop the manuscript into a good copy.

“My book is more legible, broader in focus and better organized. For example, my father relates certain instances of his personal conflict with the *Nationale Erhebung* (the National Socialist seizure of power) in the chapter titled: “Engagement and Wedding.” In my version, these comments, as well as the paper he wrote critiquing Alfred Rosenberg’s *Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*Myths of the 20th Century*, a profoundly anti-Semitic book extolling the virtues of the Aryan race) are all included in Chapter 4: ‘My Wartime Story.’ ...

“Also noteworthy is the fact that *A Witness in Times of War and Peace* contains much additional material, especially in the appendix, on the life of Gerhard Hein, not found in the original manuscript, including approximately sixty more recent photographs; documents, tables, sketches, maps; a selection and compilation of several articles and lectures; historical insights into Anabaptist history; acknowledgements; genealogy; his collected bibliography; preface and afterword; introduction and index; as well as an essay on the history of the Anabaptists and Mennonites by the author [W. Hein].” [trans. from German by Louise Bergen Price]

Gerhard Hein's very interesting memoir, as translated by his son Wilf, extend from his early life in Ufa, Russia to his later years in Germany, where he pastored several congregations, helped in refugee work and social aid projects, published historical studies, wrote poetry, and worked as editor of publications such as the *Mennonitisches Lexikon* (Mennonite Encyclopedia). Hein lived a full life – but it is his controversial role as interpreter for the German army that might most attract the public's attention. To serve in the Wehrmacht was not an easy decision for Gerhard Hein; this is apparent in his Christmas sermon delivered in Russia to German military in 1943, when the war was finally turning against the Third Reich. In this sermon, Hein is walking a tightrope, speaking of peace to masters of war. The following extract is indicative of how carefully he shaped his thoughts (trans. by Wilf Hein).

“... Dear friends, we don't want to say that this [the birth of the Christ child] is only a message for small children and for naive people. It certainly is also a message for men and soldiers. It was not coincidental that it was to men to whom the Christmas message first had been proclaimed. They were strong, harsh shepherds who guarded their sheep from wild animals and thieves during night. There were also men, even kings – as Scripture declares – who had come from a far distance to be the first to worship the child in the manger.

In a similar way, the German knights and kings of the Middle Ages, who certainly could not be considered weaklings, allowed themselves to be depicted by artists kneeling and worshipping the Holy Child in the manger or in the lap of His mother. Was this only a childish naivety of them or backwardness? No, it was rather a deep insight into the significant truth of life: that of honouring the Holy One, from whom comes the greatest strength. Those who offer genuine humility towards the Almighty are rewarded with the greatest courage. Piety and heroism, the fear of God and courage did not stand in contradistinction with the experience of knights and kings. In this they were right, and in this lay their greatness and strength.

As we can see, it is neither unmanly nor unfit for soldiers to celebrate Christmas as the birthday of our world's Saviour. Christmas wants to fill us with great joy and strengthen our faith. Otherwise Christmas would always remain a dark secret to us. But if celebrated in the right spirit, Christmas tells us that God, who controls and directs all our circumstances, and who is the creator of this world, is a God of love and mercy. Even if our personal experiences and the present developments in the world speak against it, the fact remains that God, who sent His Son into our world, will never abandon us, and will bring an end to injustice and meaninglessness. Everything has a purpose and an end, and this includes our sorrows, sufferings, trials and adversities we as individuals or as a whole nation may have to face. It is important to remain patient, strong, and confident in our outlook. We are to stand firm in our convictions without yielding to erroneous teachings in the battle we are ordered to pursue.

A time will come when light will dispel darkness, when truth will reveal the lie, when justice will replace injustice, and when order will be re-established. ...” (238-9)

*A Witness in Times of War and Peace* can be purchased online or accessed at the MHSBC library.