

The Regehr family was among approximately 120,000 Mennonites who lived in the Soviet Union during the 1920s.¹ Mennonites are an ethnic² and religious Anabaptist group who traditionally practice pacificism, voluntary adult baptism, and a rejection of oaths.³ Following the teachings of a Catholic priest from the Netherlands, Menno Simons (1496-1561), the Mennonites were forced to frequently migrate to avoid persecution from both church and state authorities who were, at times, hostile to Mennonite religious practices.⁴ In the late-18th century, Empress Catherine II offered religious freedom and exemption from military service to Mennonites who would settle in Russia.⁵ But after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Ruth Derksen Siemens writes, “the exclusiveness of many Mennonite communities, their perceived prosperity, and their religious practices [attracted] the attention of Marxist revolutionaries.” The Mennonites’ status within Russia as a distinct group with special privileges was revoked, and following the collectivization of agriculture and the Mennonites’ reclassification as *kulaks*, many fled the USSR.⁶

¹ Lucille Marr, “The History of the Mennonite Identity: Developing a Genre,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 49.

² There is still debate over whether there is a distinct Mennonite ethnic identity. Both Ruth Derksen Siemens and John B. Toews, the main sources for my overview of Mennonite beliefs and history, contend that Mennonites are a distinct ethnic group due to community migration and isolation from wider society. See notes in Siemens, 37 for more information about Mennonite ethnic identity.

³ Ruth Derksen Siemens, ed., *Remember Us: Letters From Stalin’s Gulag (1930-37)* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 22.

⁴ John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 1-5; Siemens, 22.

⁵ Toews, *Czars*, 1.

⁶ Toews, *Czars*, 33; Siemens, 25; John B. Toews, “Early Communism and Russian Mennonite Peoplehood,” in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia, 1788-1888* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 268.

Originally from Altonau in the Sagrdowka colony of present-day Ukraine, the Regehr family, consisting of Jasch and Maria and their six children, attempted to flee the Soviet Union in December 1929, hoping to travel by train from Moscow into Latvia.⁷ Approximately half of the estimated 10,000 Mennonite refugees who congregated in Moscow by November 1929 escaped to Germany;⁸ however, the Regehr family was stopped at a railway station only a few hours after relatives, the Bargaen family, managed to escape.⁹ The Regehrs missed their opportunity to escape the Soviet Union, perhaps due to a decision to delay their departure by just twelve hours.¹⁰

The Regehr family was arrested in June 1931, and transported to the northern Ural Mountains where they were initially held in a work camp in Tarabunka before spending time in Lunowka, Uлахma, and Polowinka between 1931 and 1933.¹¹ From these locations, the Regehrs wrote many letters that made their way to the Bargaen family, who, after leaving Russia, settled in Carlyle, Saskatchewan.¹² Through these letters, translated and compiled in Ruth Derksen Siemens' *Remember Us*, the Regehrs inform the Bargaens about their lives, expressing the pain and suffering that they must endure working low-status camp jobs, harvesting lumber, working in mines and agriculture, as well as building rail lines, all while fighting off frostbite and starvation in the Soviet north. In a letter from 10 January 1933, Jasch writes, "if it would be possible to write all our days into a book under one title, it would certainly be called 'Lamentations.'"¹³ Whether or

⁷ Siemens, 25.

⁸ Toews, *Czars*, 131.

⁹ Siemens, 25.

¹⁰ Siemens, 25.

¹¹ Siemens, 26.

¹² Siemens, 29.

¹³ Siemens, 193.

not Jasch specifically intended to draw a comparison here between the Regehrs' situation in the Soviet Union and that of the Jewish people following the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in the biblical book of Lamentations, the Regehr letters appear to follow much the same structure and function as the laments in the book of Lamentations. This means that, as well as allowing them to express pain and despair, by using a biblical form of lament, the Regehr letters act as a form of dialogue that allows them to address both God and the Mennonite community, calling for and expecting change.¹⁴ It is through these laments that the Regehrs attempt to solicit material support and maintain hope for the future.

Part of the challenge that the Regehr letters pose is that it is difficult to determine how much of their writing expresses genuine faith in God and concern for the wider Mennonite community in Russia; how much of their writing is a performance designed to encourage charity; and how much these two positions overlap. Because these are letters to another family, they form just one half of a conversation: we do not get more than a suggestion of what the Bargins have to say in reply, which could help clarify how they interpreted the Regehr letters and used them to generate material support for the family. The fact that the Regehr letters were originally written in German Gothic script means that the translations available in *Remember Us* have already gone through a process of interpretation. The translators, Peter and Anne Bargin, relatives of the family that the Regehr letters are addressed to, write in the introduction that they have “tried to be

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Lament as Wake-Up Call (Class Analysis and Historical Possibility),” in Nancy C. Lee, Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Lamentation in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 228; Kathleen O’Conner, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 10.

faithful to the substance of the letters, and to reflect as accurately as possible the nuances and the emotional tenor of the words.”¹⁵ Despite this, Siemens notes the fact that many words and abbreviations in the letters are either unknown or illegible.¹⁶ This means that along with the process of translation that refracts the original meaning of the letters, the meaning of other parts of the letters is irretrievably lost.

Despite this inability to divine the Regehrs’ true thoughts and intentions, the Regehr letters provide an opportunity to look at the way one family within a religious and ethnic minority interpreted and described their Gulag experiences to family and community outside of the Soviet Union using biblical references and typology. Besides soliciting aid, the use of biblical references serves a number of purposes for the Regehrs: they act as points of reference that the Mennonite community will easily understand; they conserve valuable letter space by packing a lot of meaning within short phrases and allusions to biblical books; and they allow the family to say things that, perhaps, otherwise would not get by camp censors. Although, with only one exception, all of the letters from the Regehrs in *Remember Us* are addressed to the Bargas family, there are many references within these letters that suggest that the Bargas were just one of many Mennonite families that the Regehrs wrote to from the Gulags.¹⁷ This suggests that the Regehrs’ laments were not just intended to solicit support from their family members outside of the Soviet Union, but to encourage the larger Mennonite community to work to save their brethren suffering in exile in the Soviet Union.

¹⁵ Siemens, 31.

¹⁶ Siemens, 10.

¹⁷ Siemens, 147, 167, 234, 238.

By looking at Jasch's 10 January 1933 letter in which he titles the book of their life "Lamentations," it is possible to see one example of how the Regehers use elements of the biblical lament genre, identified by Kathleen O'Conner, in their letters.¹⁸ Jasch begins by voicing a complaint that his family has been without bread for three days, and that he can look forward to "only hunger and starvation, and again hunger." Yet, perhaps in an effort to reassure himself or the Bargens, he expresses hope and thankfulness because "[God] can feed and care for us here, and has done so until now." From here he moves to petition God and the Bargens for help, stating, "if God wants to sustain us . . . He will do it! And you dear siblings, and others who are our friends, God will reveal it to you: He saves only through people, and their prayers!" Further, Jasch questions what is being done to save the Mennonite community, stating, "we had hoped that our brothers would free us – as a nation. One seems to hear very little of this possibility today." The letter concludes with an explicit request for the Bargens "to look up all [their] friends" to request aid for the Regehers, and an apology as Jasch begs forgiveness for his "insistence [that the Bargens help], but [he] would rather not starve."¹⁹

Jasch's letter does not strictly follow each of the elements of the biblical lament genre, but as O'Conner notes, "few literary forms exist in their pure state. Instead writers choose among traditional elements, amending forms to their purpose."²⁰ Where the speakers in the book of Lamentations are trying to engage with God, the Regehers letters are intended to engage with an audience in North America.²¹ While Jasch's 10 January 1933 letter does not directly address God, this element of the traditional lament is present

¹⁸ O'Conner, *Lamentations*, 9-10.

¹⁹ Siemens, 193-195.

²⁰ O'Conner, *Lamentations*, 10.

²¹ O'Conner, *Lamentations*, 128.

in other letters. In one from 8 July 1932, for instance, Maria pleads, “oh God, please touch other hearts and make them willing to help;”²² in another, from 17 March 1933, Jasch writes, “oh God, make a way clear so our people can be saved.”²³ In both contexts, however, the Regehers call on God in the process of requesting aid from North America: Maria calls on God to “make [people] willing to help,” while Jasch’s plea comes in the context of a request for a relief organization to “erect some good kitchens” like those set up by the Mennonite Central Committee in Russia in the 1920s.²⁴

There is a note of self-criticism in Jasch’s 10 January 1933 letter when he writes, “the only thing we often lack is the faith, and deep confidence and trust.”²⁵ The idea that the Regehers are to blame for their own suffering comes up in a number of their letters. In April 1933, Maria writes that God has allowed her father and brother to die, yet she claims that “it is not [God’s] will! But our trespasses and sins are the reason!”²⁶ Again in May 1933, Maria asks, “should there not be one righteous person among all these exiles so that the dear Lord would save them for his sake?”²⁷ While these examples suggest that it is both the sins of the Regehr family specifically, and the sins of the Mennonite community, more generally, that has led to their suffering, in both cases Maria appears to use these self-accusations as a way to question why God is neglecting the Mennonite community. This comes across most explicitly in the May 1933 letter, as Maria questions why their “house friend,” Johann Toews had to “give up his life” when he “prayed and believed God would grant him a reunion with his loved ones,” and why her husband “has

²² Siemens, 162.

²³ Siemens, 202.

²⁴ Marr, “Mennonite Identity,” 47.

²⁵ Siemens, 193.

²⁶ Siemens, 221.

²⁷ Siemens, 240.

to be so ill, with such terrible pains in his legs,” saying “how difficult it is to understand the ways of God!”²⁸

While it is impossible to know if the Regehrs believed that their sins were the reason for their suffering, or whether they expected their audience to respond charitably to their self-accusations, this movement from accepting blame for their situation because of their sins, to an accusation towards God reflects the movement of the first chapter of Lamentations.²⁹ O’Conner explains that the author of this chapter moves from accepting the “justice of prophetic judgement” against Jerusalem, to “anger against God for unjust, excessive punishment.”³⁰ Similarly, Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, suggests that the penitent position in this lament is simply preparation for a petition for God to restore the Jewish population from exile. He continues, saying the lament in this context is a refusal to “collud[e] silence with God, who is either the perpetrator of pain or at least the negligent permitter of such pain.”³¹ Rather than simply accepting their circumstances as divine will or judgement from God, the Regehrs, in this context, may be calling for and expecting change.

The Regehrs’ use of the biblical form of lament seems appropriate given the parallels between the Regehrs situation and that of the Jewish people in Lamentations. The book of Lamentations was written following the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. that destroyed the city and sent many Jews into exile.³² The Regehr letters are,

²⁸ Siemens, 240.

²⁹ Kathleen O’Conner, “Voices Arguing About Meaning,” in Nancy C. Lee, Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Lamentation in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 40.

³⁰ O’ Conner, “Voices,” 40.

³¹ Brueggemann, “Lament,” 225.

³² O’Conner, “Voices,” 27-28.

similarly, written following the destruction of many Mennonite communities in the USSR through collectivization and purges that sent Mennonites into exile, both across the world and in Soviet work camps. And just as the communal voice of the personified city of Jerusalem in Lamentations 5 draws attention to the Jewish community's humiliation at the hands of the Babylonians,³³ the Regehrs write that they exist "to be the laughingstocks and objects of derision for the Communists."³⁴

The fact that Lamentations features interchange between the voice of a narrator and the voice of the personified city of Jerusalem, representing the larger Jewish community,³⁵ also draws interesting connections to the Regehr letters, which feature interchange between personal pleas for help and pleas for the entire Mennonite community in the USSR. The Regehrs accomplish this interchange, in part, by making comparisons between the situation that the Mennonites face in the Soviet Union and that of the Jewish people following the Babylonian invasion in Lamentations, but also by drawing connections to the Israelites enslaved in Egypt in the book of Exodus. Jasch references Exodus in his 11 May 1932 letter when he questions "why does not a Moses reveal himself here?"³⁶ This plea is found in many of the Regehrs' letters, which are often punctuated with exclamations for God to "raise up a Moses,"³⁷ or for Moses to "come out" and act as a "deliverer."³⁸ By connecting their situation to that of the

³³ Robert Williamson Jr., "Lament and the Arts of Resistance: Public and Hidden Transcripts in Lamentations 5," in Nancy C. Lee, Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Lamentation in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 72.

³⁴ Siemens, 181.

³⁵ O'Conner, "Voices," 24.

³⁶ Siemens, 139.

³⁷ Siemens, 163.

³⁸ Siemens, 226.

Israelites in Exodus, the Regehers express their suffering through an easily recognizable biblical narrative that encourages their readers to identify with them as part of the same Mennonite community. In this way, the Regehers use a form of lament like that of the Israelites in Exodus which acts as a form of protest to God against their slavery, and as a way to speak about shared community “catastrophe [that] enables them to take steps out of the isolation that intense suffering produces.”³⁹ Through this, the Regehers encourage the Mennonite community to share in their suffering, which belongs to all Mennonites, by sending material support.

In a particularly heartbreaking letter from fall, 1933, which turns out to be his last to the Bargins before his death, Jasch writes, “my days are nearing the end. What will my family do then? I put them totally on your heart. Use this letter as a call to many hearts.”⁴⁰ Jasch’s instruction that the Bargin family should use his letter “as a call for help to many hearts” may indicate that he wanted the Bargins to publish his letter in a church newspaper. The publication of their letters is first referenced in a May 1932 letter in which the Regehers seem to be replying to a Bargin request, saying, “you are welcome to publish, in the newspapers, the letters we wrote you describing our situation here. After all . . . things are actually worse than we can describe.”⁴¹ Publication comes up again in early-1933 when Jasch informs the Bargins that they have received a letter and money from someone who saw a letter from his daughter, Tina, in a “church paper, the *Bundesbote*.”⁴² In *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites*, John B. Toews notes that many Mennonites wrote to Mennonite church newspapers such as *Der Bote* and *Die*

³⁹ Brueggmann, “Lament,” 222; O’Conner, “Voices,” 31.

⁴⁰ Siemens, 275.

⁴¹ Siemens, 138.

⁴² Siemens, 256.

Mennonitische Rundschau in order to “inform the larger Mennonite constituency of the plight of their coreligionists in Russia.”⁴³ Other Mennonites wrote to Benjamin H. Unruh, a Russian-born Mennonite leader living in Germany, who published excerpts of many letters in newspapers that explained the circumstances of Mennonites in the Soviet Union to the Mennonite community that was now spread throughout the world.⁴⁴

The practice of Mennonites aiding their co-religionists in other parts of the world was not unique to the Regehrs or this period of the 1930s. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a charitable organization, was founded in 1920 as a way for North American Mennonites to aid Mennonites suffering through famine and revolution in the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Though the MCC did not operate any relief kitchens in the USSR during the 1930s, the Regehrs refer to a number of packages received from the “Board,” which traveled through Moscow “from that party in Germany,” who Ruth Derksen Siemens suggests is the MCC.⁴⁶ Although it is unclear how the Regehr letters travel to North America from the Soviet Gulags, as letters could only be mailed within the Soviet Union,⁴⁷ by the 1930s, Mennonite communities throughout the world had established some form of support and communication network. Many of the letters sent to B.H. Unruh survive, displaying a variety of Mennonite voices centered on the common theme of suffering in Soviet Union.⁴⁸ Just as Kathleen O’Conner describes *Lamentations* as a book of “stunning, intermingling, and clashing testimonies by survivors of [Jerusalem’s]

⁴³ Toews, *Czars*, 152.

⁴⁴ Toews, *Czars*, 152.

⁴⁵ Marr, “Mennonite Identity,” 47.

⁴⁶ Siemens, 273-274.

⁴⁷ Siemens, 27.

⁴⁸ Excerpts of some of these letters can be found in “Forced Collectivization and Exile,” in Toews, *Czars*, 151-162.

fall [where] each voice presents a limited view of the suffering that belongs to whole community,” the Regehr letters represent a limited view of the suffering of the Mennonite community in the USSR.⁴⁹ Through their letters, the Regehr aim to share their burden with the wider Mennonite community, and in this way, their lamentations, like those in the book of Lamentations, are acts of survival.⁵⁰

Of course, as Anne Applebaum notes in her chapter on survival strategies in *Gulag: A History*, “the whole subject of who survived—and why they survived— must . . . be approached very carefully [because] any one them might have had reason to conceal aspects of their biographies from their readers.”⁵¹ The fact that the Regehrs were just one of many families writing to friends, family, and community requesting aid means that the “intermingling and clashing testimonies”⁵² from the Soviet Union that represented Mennonite suffering to the larger Mennonite community may also have represented competition among Mennonites in the USSR for community resources. In a letter from 14 September 1933, Maria informs the Bargens about H. Friesen, who she says, “always has money. [Yet] he claims he starves more than others. He writes to all the countries that he has the poorest family and they are the most needy.”⁵³ Maria may just be expressing her frustration to a sympathetic audience, but by accusing H. Friesen of dishonesty, she may also be working to ensure that her own requests for aid are met first. Jasch displays this competition for aid in another letter that asks the Bargens to “mention us separately and not just on a list with [other Mennonites]” when sending letters asking

⁴⁹ O’Conner, “Voices,” 28.

⁵⁰ Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 43.

⁵¹ Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 346-347.

⁵² O’Conner, “Voices,” 28.

⁵³ Siemens, 271.

for help for the Regehrs. Jasch continues, “we think that . . . those in exile should have the priority,” presumably over those Mennonites that remain in their villages, and adds that the H. Friesens “are being sent a lot, and always in money.”⁵⁴

The Regehrs’ letters often mention the various families who have supported them by sending money or supplies,⁵⁵ but they also ask about those who have forgotten them. At times the Regehrs ask why the Bargens are not writing to them very often;⁵⁶ in another instance they state more generally that they have “a thousand friends in good times, but very, very few in bad times.”⁵⁷ The Regehrs are especially disappointed in the Peter Barga family (this is a different family from the Bargens, Franz and Liese, that the Regehr letters are addressed to), who emigrated from the Soviet Union and settled in Canada. In a letter from 1932, Jasch writes, “we are very surprised that [the Peter Bargens] do not maintain contact with us, especially when we remember what we did for them during the famine . . . They have forgotten what it is like to starve.”⁵⁸ In another letter, from April 1933, Maria complains about the Peter Barga family, saying, “they never write letters to us anymore – and then he wants to be our intercessor?”⁵⁹ Clearly, the Regehrs are unhappy that a family that they apparently helped during a famine in the Soviet Union will not help them when they need it. While it is difficult to define the emotional tenor of Maria’s comment about Peter Barga acting as their “intercessor,” it

⁵⁴ Siemens, 241.

⁵⁵ Lists of these families can be found in Siemens, 147, 167, 234.

⁵⁶ In a letter from 16 April 1933, for example, the Regehrs ask the Bargens, “have you forgotten us entirely?” Siemens, 220.

⁵⁷ Siemens, 172.

⁵⁸ Siemens, 172.

⁵⁹ Siemens, 212.

nevertheless suggests that Maria does not see value in prayer if it is not supported by action.

The Regehers recognize their tenuous position: they continually worry that the Bargens will tire of their begging, but to lose their support could mean starvation. In one letter from 3 March 1933, Jasch writes, “our hearts bleeds that we come to you as beggars,” but without help from God and the Bargens, they would not have “strength for the future.”⁶⁰ In another, from August 1933, Maria tells the Bargens that the Regehers “always pray that the people overseas [will] not get tired of helping the helpless ones here in Russia.”⁶¹ To encourage the Bargens, and others, to continue to send aid, the Regehr letters often speak of the ways God will reward those who have provided for them, both in heaven and on Earth. In Maria’s August 1933 letter, for instance, she tells the Bargens that “[God] will reward you richly even here [on Earth] – and how much more in eternity.”⁶² She continues, saying “how wonderful it will be when you hear the words as given in Matthew 25:34-40.”⁶³ Additionally, they remind the Bargens that they need support so that they “may represent the [Mennonite] people as a people of honour.”⁶⁴ The implication is that without support, the Regehers may lose strength and resort to dishonest actions to survive that will not just shame their family, but also shame the entire Mennonite community.

⁶⁰ Siemens, 196.

⁶¹ Siemens, 263.

⁶² Siemens, 263.

⁶³ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world . . . Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” These verses from Matthew are referenced numerous times throughout the Regehr letters. For examples, see Siemens, 141, 145, 263.

⁶⁴ Siemens, 197

In *Surviving Lamentations*, Tod Linafelt describes the book of Lamentations as “literature of survival,” which functions “not only to describe but to persuade.” He explains that this literature “moves from the basic need to give voice to pain to the project of giving testimony, [and] in this second function, description may serve an end beyond itself: that of drawing the reader, to the extent that it is possible to do so, into the experience of survival and [making] the concerns of the survivor the concerns of the reader as well.”⁶⁵ By using a biblical form of lament based on the book of Lamentations, the Regehers express pain and suffering, but also call on God and the Mennonite community for help. Rather than simply leaving their deliverance solely to God’s will, the Regehers use their letters to challenge the status quo and call for material aid from the Mennonite community outside of the USSR. The Regehers encourage their audience to identify with their situation through the use of biblical typology that suggests their suffering belongs to the entire community, and in this way, the Regehr letters represent acts of survival from the Soviet Gulags.

⁶⁵ Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations*, 49.