"Writing Through the Flowers": Masked Messages in Letters from Siberian Special Settlements, 1930-1938

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> I am sending you the address of our "dear heart." He is quite well, just as we read of the youngest son Benjamin. He wants to come home on October 1st for 14 days. … He always writes through the flowers as if 2 are present. Peter, Liese, Michi shall also come to him if they can (F26, 206).[1]

Who is this "dear heart?" Who is Benjamin? Who are the two that are present? Who are Peter, Liese and Michi? Can we make assumptions from reading the text on the page? Or is tacit knowledge needed to understand the message in the letter?

Introduction

This letter is one in a corpus of 461 letters written by thirty three family groups from 1930-38. The writers are Russian citizens from

Mennonite communities, most of who were categorized as kulaks. The letters culminate in the era of Stalin's purges commonly known as "The Great Terror." One-third of the letters were written from a "special settlement" or *Spetsposelenie* [2] in the Ural Mountains near Perm, and two-thirds of the letters were written in southern villages in the larger Mennonite colony of Zagradowka, Ukraine.[3] More than fifty years later, in 1989, the letters were found by Peter Bargen whose parents had received them in the 1930s. The letters had been stored in a Campbell's soup box in an attic in Carlyle, Saskatchewan. Following the discovery of the letters, Anne Peters Bargen translated the entire corpus into English and Peter Bargen edited the collection.

Many assumptions have been made about letters in general and we as readers often accept them without further inquiry. Letters are most often perceived as a communicative *bridge* between a sender and receiver.[4] This bridge is often able to span great distances.[5] However, the writers of the letters in the Bargen corpus (despite the writers' desire to bridge the distance) are impeded by prison guards, limited by censors, restricted by betraying neighbours, and constrained by a perilous system of mail delivery, all of which expose a *chasm*, not a *bridg*e. The impediments the writers face increase their anxiety, affect their word choice and limit their use of epistolary conventions of the genre (such as the date, salutation and complimentary close). Hence, certain writers found it necessary to "write through the flowers"; to mask their messages and ignore epistolary conventions in order to bypass a hostile reader and increase the likelihood of their letters reaching their intended recipients.

Journey of the Letters

As noted previously, the letters did not all originate from one place. Although the majority of the letter writers were born in one of the sixteen villages of the Mennonite colony of Zagradowka[6] in south western Ukraine bordering the Inguletz River, one-third of the letters are from writers in the "special settlements" in the Ural Mountains. From the letters themselves and from the correspondence of survivors, it is evident that these settlements were in a region between Krasnovisersk in the north and Perm in the south. Between these cities lie Severoural'sk, Solikamsk, and Kizel. Although inhabitants of the camps were not permitted to describe their precise location, they do occasionally refer to Lunevka and Polvinka.[7] The writers also refer to the nearest town as Kizel (likely Kizel'skiy). From these locations, the letters very often travelled to the writers' home villages. Recipients, most often family members, then passed the letters along to others in

the village, then to those in more distant villages and eventually out of the country (Hempler, July 19, 2001; Fleming-Loewen, November 14, 2001).

In addition to the multifarious journey of the letters, the number of letters that reached Canada is remarkable, particularly in light of the ideological climate in the new regime. While we do not know how many letters were originally sent, 461 did reach their intended destination of Carlyle, Saskatchewan. Several scholars confirm the enforcement of a mail monitoring process within the camp system. Oleg Khlevnuik has duplicated an NKVD document (August 1939) that directs camp authorities to monitor letters that "make it outside, avoiding censorship, via unescorted prisoners and free camp workers." The document instructs authorities to "[p]lease take measures to prevent the sending of letters without the knowledge of the camp censors" (Khlevniuk 2004, 329). More indication of a mail monitoring system is evident in an edict of the *Narodnij Kommisariat Vnutrennih Del* (NKVD).[8] This document explicitly lists categories that identify "hostile elements" to the success of the Party's mandate and one which gives local authorities the occasion to arrest "all remaining elements expected of not being reconciled to the regime" (Conquest 1990, 257). The NKVD categories are as follows:

AS	anti-Soviet element
TS	active member of the Church
S	member of a religious sect
P	rebel (anyone who in the past was in any way involved in Soviet uprisings)
SI	anyone with contacts abroad

Although the specific categories in this edict may not have been known to the general population, most were aware of the risk of mailing letters abroad. Interviewees have expressed astonishment and bewilderment that letters were sent to Canada, regardless of their origin in home villages or prison camps. One of the explanations provided during an interview was that the letters could have been sent to various addresses within the former USSR before leaving the country. We know from the contents of the letters that some writers in the northern camps sent letters to family and friends in southern home villages in Ukraine. For example, one young woman, sentenced to a harsher prison for attempting to escape, sends a letter to her parents in their home village and instructs them to "[w]rite in Russian and very little or I will not get it" (F39, 226).

Regardless of whether letters reached recipients or not, interviews conducted for this research project substantiate that writers feared the

consequences of sending letters to locations both inside and outside the former USSR. However, all interviewees agreed that it was far more hazardous to send letters to locations in the "West" (Eggert and Eggert, June 13, 2001; Hempler, July 19, 2001; Fleming-Loewen, November 14, 2001; Bergen Price, August 4, 2002). Louise Bergen Price recalls that during the house searches conducted in the home villages, law enforcement officials specifically looked for mailing addresses to locations outside the Soviet Union. Finding one meant imminent imprisonment or death (August 4, 2002). Walter Loewen recalls that his mother's sister left for Europe in 1914, and the two siblings did not correspond for twenty five years for fear of the consequences (November 14, 2001).

Moreover, some interviewees report that restrictions were often dependent on whether letters were mailed in the village Soviet, in the Region or the Oblast (Sawatsky, November 17, 2001). Writers could have experienced rigid controls from some levels of government while others allowed more freedom of communication. It would have been difficult to maintain a consistent standard across the vast, expanding nation in the 1930s. However, official post offices with state-appointed letter carriers were operative in some villages and prison camps in the 1930s. During the years of the largest volume of letters (1930-34), some writers make reference to "waiting for the mail" and "going to the post office," but also to letters missing or lost.[9] The competence of a mail delivery system also appeared to depend on the route of delivery. For example, some writers instruct their readers to send mail through Iceland, Finland or Moscow. Overall, in light of the letters' precarious journeys and numerous obstacles, it is logical that the writers would have been very cautious in using language that might implicate them and their families.

Discursive Context

In the investigation of the corpus of letters, three levels of text have been examined: the original letters in German Gothic script; the transliteration from German Gothic into German Roman script; and, the translation from original German Gothic script into English by Anne Bargen. It has been my task to examine all versions of the text in the letters and to respect the words used in the original documents and in the Bargen corpus.

Peter and Anne Bargen never intended their edition of the letters to be an academic exercise, but their wish was to provide their descendents with a narrative of their history. If their translations and editorial comments appear confusing or even possibly inaccurate, contemporary readers must be careful. The Bargens were much closer

to the letter writers than any other reader. Peter Bargen was the one accompanying his parents out of Moscow in 1929 while many of his extended family members were left behind. The immediate social context of the letter writers was shared and understood by him.

However, many of the words and concepts (such as *Torgsin*, Kherson, *Drei Buchstaben*) and their precise role would have been as unknown to the writers of the letters as they were to the intended readers in Canada.[10] The writers were forced to live and work in a new reality, the unnatural, brutal world of "Archipelag Gulag." This new world would not have been comprehensible or reasonable. The writers would have had very little prior knowledge of Gulag culture. In addition, this new reality was changing every day. This might very well have been one of the purposes of the Gulag camps: to drain and destroy the prisoners by immersing them into an unknown, frightening and repressive reality. Thus, literally "defining" each word for the reader and supplying our present-day, encyclopaedic understanding of these words might actually detract from the authenticity of the story. Words and concepts of the Gulag camp world were not explicit, well known or comprehensible for any of the inhabitants. In this chaotic context, Aron Regehr writes, "We have been silent a long time, but there were definite reasons for it. Our love for you has not diminished. Our letters are being watched constantly" (D1, 426). Who is watching these letters? Is this watcher reading every word of every letter? How much does this reader understand?[11]

Masked Messages

Considering the NKVD dictum described above, vigilant prison guards, state censors, betraying neighbours and unpredictable informants, the writers needed to be very selective in their use of words. They intentionally masked their messages in order to bypass a potentially hostile reader.[12]

As the Bargen letters demonstrate, and as socio-linguistic philosophers assert, the communicative act is never simple. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of dialogic interaction, draws attention to the communicative act. He asserts that "an utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication, and it cannot be broken off from the preceding links that determine it both from within and from without" (1986b, 94). This assumes that an utterance not only reflects, and potentially transforms, preceding speech, but also has the potential to transform subsequent communication.

However, for the writers of the letters under study, utterances are not *necessarily* links in a continuous chain of discourse. In fact,

an utterance or word can be a deliberate misrepresentation for one reader and a clarification for another. An utterance can both inform an intended reader and delude another. As Bakhtin emphasizes in his explanation of the nature of dialogue in light of the Socratic view, "[t]ruth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (1984, 110). Even more closely aligned to the letter writers' purposes is Voloshinov's explanation that "[w]ords do not *have* meaning, but *arouse* a meaning in the hearer's mind" (Brandist 2002, 100).[13]

The arousal of meaning is evident in one writer's statement: "[w]e will probably be shipped to another place in the next few days—to the place where Peter is" (F20, 199). A reader who would have previously interacted with the writer would know the social context of this situation and would know precisely where this "place" is. But for most readers, such a statement is incomprehensible. In order to further mask their messages and create a more ambiguous text, some writers also took advantage of German and their familiarity with Gothic script, a language and script that most hostile readers (Russian neighbours, prison guards, censors or officials) would not be able to read. However, as Colin Neufeldt (1998, 29) elucidates, some former practising Mennonites were rewarded for becoming informants, and some became leaders in imposing a new order on the villagers.[14] These informers spoke and wrote German, and they also knew the history of the community and inhabitants so a particular kind of vigilance was needed to bypass this kind of hostile reader.

Despite this threat, writers found ways to circumvent unwelcome readers. One writer cleverly explains that "[y]our house friend is still in the old place as secretary with another R. who always visited at H.V. You will know the details" (III, A2, 20). In addition some writers used biblical references to communicate their messages, assuming that the censors would not likely be well-versed in the biblical text, and in view of the political climate of atheistic Marxism, would not likely have a Bible in their pocket. Other writers of letters, besides those in the Bargen corpus, faced similar impediments. Hildebrandt, Klassen, and Wolk, editors of a privately published corpus of letters from Germany (1930-70), report that until the end of World War II stamps were very expensive, and letters were often lost or stolen for use as cigarette paper by those who inventively made their own contraband tobacco. The editors note that correspondence was also subject to rigorous censorship. Writers assumed that the intended readers were able to "read between the lines" (1998, 16-17).

Further examples of the use of masked messages or Aesopian language are evident in several Gulag memoirs: Raphael Rupert, Helene

Celmina, Eugenia [Evgeniia] Ginzburg, Iadviga-Irena Iosifovna Verzhenskaia, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Kseniia Dmitrievna Medvedskaia. These memoirists recall using carefully constructed language in order to communicate desperate messages to family and friends outside the camp system. These memoirs also expose the restrictions placed on prisoners' correspondence, despite the permission granted to write several times a year. Prisoners could not write about the camp regimes, enforcement of rules, their location or the identity of camp guards and officials; hence, letters became bland accounts of weather, food and insects seen on the interior walls.

Yet in the Bargen corpus, twelve year old Tina writes a letter to her cousin Lieschen in Canada and includes her sketch of the smelter where she works (albeit, without a location identifier). Perhaps a child's drawing was not perceived to be a threat to the regime. She also does not appear to mask her frustration. She writes that "Michi has just come from work. I have to go for bread tomorrow and again stand in a line up from 6 until 9 to get it. What a *verschisseness* [shitty] Russia" (F30, 212). Regardless of this child's unmasked frustration, the anxiety laden, precarious and unpredictable journey of a letter written from a prison barrack in Siberia would have had a distinct affect on the way the writers composed their letters.

Returning to the letter provided in the opening statement above, a son in a prison camp in northern Siberia (Jasch Regehr) appears to be writing a letter to his mother (Liese Regehr) in her southern home village of Zagradowka.[15] The writer, Jasch, has provided the date (4/11/32), but not the precise location. He only writes "*Auf Ort und Stelle*" or "at the same place." The letter ends with underlined words, "*Ade, Ade*" (Adieu, Adieu). The signature at the end of the page is the nearly illegible initials "JR".

Mother Liese Regehr writes in the margins of the letter and then through some unidentified network of mail delivery, the letter arrives in Carlyle, Saskatchewan. Her explanation in the margins is as follows:

> I am sending you the address of our "dear heart." He is quite well, just as we read of the youngest son Benjamin. He wants to come home on October 1st for 14 days. … He always writes through the flowers as if 2 are present. Peter, Liese, Michi shall also come to him if they can …" (F26, 206).

The assumed "you" in Liese Regehr's directive "sending you" are her daughter and son-in-law, Franz and Liese Bargen, in Carlyle, Saskatchewan. The writer reports that she is sending the address of "*unserm Herzblut*" (Bargens' translation: "our dear heart"). We only know the identity of this "dear heart" (the primary writer) from the

editor's note. The most significant feature of this brief postscript is her observation that his words are not to be understood as they appear on the page. She also explains that this letter is written for more than one reader, "*als wenn zwei sind*" ("as if two are present"). Liese Regehr explains to her children in Canada that, because there are "2 present," her son is writing his words "*durch die Blumen*" or "through the flowers." It is notable that Liese herself is also writing through the flowers. She writes that "He is quite well, just as we read of the youngest son Benjamin." But we as readers are confused. We have not been given any context for the name "Benjamin." Is this one of her sons? Someone related to the intended reader in Canada? We are lost in the space between the flowers.

Additional discursive flowers are evident in Jasch's description of his situation:

> I am sitting beside Papa in the shop … and writing. Where she is I do not know, probably visiting around some place. Our P and N were fearful that we would get a different place, but we are very happy that we could come home once again. … This morning I went [to work] early. The place is in a dark cellar. Such things go on here, one after the other. How long I will have to learn I do not know. I always go there after work! Ber … is sitting across the street concealing himself and ready to shoot me. It is hard. It is enough (F26, 205).

The use of male and female pronouns in this passage is confusing and nonsensical. Who is "she?" What is the relationship between "she" and "Papa?" The writer's references to ongoing activities with "Papa" are particularly bewildering in light of his location and that of his parents in their southern home village.

Presupposition, Shared Knowledge, and Implicature

To facilitate further exposure of some of the flowers through which Liese and her son Jasch communicate, an analysis of presupposition, shared knowledge and implicature is helpful. Stephen Levinson explains that both "presupposition" and "conversational implicature" include inferences that cannot be analyzed semantically because they are founded on inherent assumptions. Thus, presupposing expressions are sensitive to the context in which they occur. Therefore, they cannot be understood only in terms of the linguistic structure of the sentence (167). Levinson explains that such references are based on specific situated assumptions that require the cooperation of participants in the

dialogue. In other words, understanding the significance and identity of "Papa" in the passage above requires that writers and readers of the letter cooperate in their use of linguistic expressions, and that they coordinate their knowledge of the world in order to achieve meaningful communication.

Significantly, presupposing expressions assume rather than assert; thus, they place constraints around knowledge. Considering this precondition, it is in the spaces between "the flowers" where assumptions are located. These assumptive spaces are shaped by the active experiences and common knowledge shared by the writer, Jasch Regehr, who is in prison, his mother, Liese Regehr, who lives in her southern home village (a "kulak" who has had her house and all possessions confiscated), and her intended recipients, the Bargens, who have previously fled to Canada. It is these spaces of common knowledge that Jasch, Liese, and the Bargens need to exploit if the intended meaning is to be understood. Levinson explains that negation of the main action verbs in a passage of text exposes the presupposing expressions; this provides us as readers with a tool to measure truth conditions that *survive* negation. In the following passage, the main negated action verbs of the passage are noted in bold font.

> I am **[not**] sitting beside papa in the shop … and [**not**] writing. Where she is I do not know, probably [**not**] visiting around some place. Our P and N were [**not**] fearful that we would get a different place, but we are [**not**] very happy that we could **[not]** come home once again. … This morning I went **[did not go]** early. The place is **[not]** in a dark cellar. Such things go **[do not go]** on here, one after the other. How long I will have to **[not]** learn I do not know. I always go **[do not go]** there after work! Ber … is **[not]** sitting across the street **[not]** concealing himself and **[not]** ready to shoot me. It is **[not]** hard. It is **[not]** enough (F26, 205)!

Following Levinson, if we negate the actions that the writer describes, the following truth conditions remain:

> Although the writer is not sitting beside a person, a man named "Papa" still remains "in the shop." A woman is located somewhere irrespective of her ability to visit "around some place." P and N exist as well, regardless of their fear or lack of it. The possibility of "getting a different place" remains as does the possibility of going "home once again." This morning the writer went somewhere, but did not necessarily go early. The writer goes to a designated place regardless of what occurs

> there. A long time is needed for a process that does not require learning. A person named "Ber" survives negation regardless of where he is located, whether he is concealed or whether he is clearly visible. The possibility of Ber shooting "me" remains, whether he is ready or not ready.

The consequences that survive negation are chilling. The danger is clear irrespective of the precise location and context of the action. This exercise of identifying presupposing expressions exposes the way the writer and the intended reader cooperate to expose the danger and its meaning. They communicate a truth that "is born *between people* collectively searching for truth" (Bakhtin 1984, 110). We are not included in the conversation and we notice the ambiguity and the gaps in reasoning. As outsiders, albeit sympathetic or neutral ones, we are confused, just as any unwelcome sinister reader would be. But most notably, if the writers of this letter (Jasch Regehr and his mother Liese) have succeeded in confusing us, they have been successful. For the intended recipients in Canada, the shared knowledge of the presupposing expressions, the space between the flowers, would give them the truth statements they crave. We are the outsiders. We are aware of the disturbing situation the writers are in, yet we experience the alienation acutely through the pragmatic analysis of presupposition.

Cohesion Analysis

The flowers through which the writers communicate are also revealed through a cohesion analysis. Such an analysis makes possible an effective assessment of extended linguistic structures. A word, phrase, or sentence is placed into its larger context—not only socially, culturally, and historically, but primarily linguistically—in order to expose some of the ways in which the writers communicate, whether tacitly "through the flowers" or overtly. Words and sentences do not exist in isolation, but derive much of their meaning from their surrounding linguistic environment. As Bakhtin observes, "[e]ach utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication" 1986a, 91). Cohesion analysis provides a measurement of these reverberations, and also measures the progress of the cumulative experience of sentences themselves, as well as the dependence of sentences on one another for their interpretation. Cohesive threads reveal the semantic relationships between sentences. Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan explain that "[c]ohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of

another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it" (1976, 4) [emphasis in original]. In other words, cohesion analysis is primarily concerned with the relationhips within and between sentences.

It is the inter-sentential coherence and its interaction with sentence structure that provides a clearer assessment of cohesive expressions. Particularly useful is Halliday and Hasan's explanation of "reference ties," which "instead of being interpreted semantically in their own right … make reference to something else for their interpretation" (31). They emphasize that reference ties constitute semantic and grammatical relationships in those words or utterances that appear in the discourse for a second time, and which are "signalled for retrieval" (31). However, it is important to emphasize that in considering the letter in the passage above reference ties are not necessarily evident within the text (endophoric reference), they can also be retrieved from the context outside the text (exophoric reference). Whether reference ties are exophoric or endophoric, Halliday and Hasan remind us that "there is a presupposition that must be satisfied; the thing referred to has to be identified somehow" (33). Through analysis, we will see that the "somehow" can remain very ambiguous, particularly if a writer is attempting to mask the actual "thing" referred to. In fact, in some instances, reference ties actually expose our lack of knowledge about the identifiable "thing" as we attempt to read the messages written through the flowers.

However, to avoid needless confusion, Halliday and Hasan propose that texts constitute much more than simple strings of sentences, but that these strings represent a wholeness of text. They define these cohesive relationships within and between the sentences as "texture." An assessment of this texture is provided by way of an examination of the passage provided at the beginning of this paper. To guide the analysis, the text is repeated here with numbered sentences:

> 1. I am sending you the address of our "dear heart." 2. He is quite well, just as we read of the youngest son Benjamin. 3. He wants to come home on October 1st for 14 days. … 4. He always writes through the flowers as if 2 are present. 5. Peter, Liese, Michi shall also come to him if they can.

The most evident cohesive texture in this passage is found in the reference ties that link the German masculine pronoun *er* ("he," nominative) and *ihm* ("him," dative). These pronouns are found in four of the five sentences in this passage (S2, S3, S4, S5). The use of these third-person singular pronouns in the nominative and dative cases respectively, evades explicitly identifying the individual who is so dear

to the heart of the writer. Yet the first names of those who will "come to him" (S5) are provided. However, we are not given any surnames or any clue as to the relationship between Peter, Liese, Michi and the person referred to by the masculine pronoun "him" (S5). An investigation of reference ties reveals that they most often do not name anything within our knowledge field. The lack of identity of the "dear heart" defies categorization as either endophoric or exophoric. This reference, along with other reference ties, appears incomplete and unresolved. Halliday and Hasan state that ambiguous references signal that meaning "must be made to the context of the situation" (1976, 33). While they admit that ambiguous references can often occur, they do assert that identification has to somehow be satisfied. In this instance, identification can certainly be satisfied, but the only reader who can resolve the ambiguity is the "you" to whom the address of the "dear heart" is being sent.

Unlike reference ties, collocative cohesion is not found in grammatical structures as we have seen above, rather, lexical ties are found to achieve a collocative coherence between sentences through mutually exclusive categories that expose recurrent topics in the text. Such cohesion is recognizable in "lexicosemantic" relationships, those that include synonyms, near-synonyms, complimentary superordinates, antonyms, and hyponyms (285). Words within such a set are significant to this analysis in that they reveal concerns and associations that are significant to the writers. For example, consider the first sentence of the above passage, specifically the affectionate term "dear heart." This term of endearment suggests a shared knowledge of a person who is mutually dear to both writer and recipient. This address forms an endophoric collocative tie to the German masculine pronouns *er* (he) and *ihm* (him). A collocative lexical tie is also evident in the phrase "the youngest son Benjamin" in Sentence Two. The masculine person "him" who is "well" is compared to another person who is called Benjamin and who is the youngest son in a particular family. The lexical tie does not clarify the identity of Benjamin or the family of which he is the youngest. A close examination of the entire text of this letter, as well as all other letters in the same set of 131 from Jasch and Maria Regehr, does not reveal any other references to Benjamin that might inform the reader of the identity of this person. Only a reader who is aware of a very specific context in which Benjamin exists would be able to read "through the flowers" of this text. All other readers, including an unwelcome hostile reader, would understand little or nothing of what the writer means. Considering Bakhtin's dictum that meaning or "truth" is "born *between people* collectively searching for truth" ("Characteristics" 110), the identity and fate of Benjamin and the "dear heart" would result in various versions of "truth," depending on which people were collectively conducting the search.

To further assist our understanding, it is helpful to explain a possible meaning of the name "Benjamin" that the intended reader might understand. If we consider the knowledge of the ethno-religious community of the writers, the expression written by Jasch's mother Liese "just as we read" (S2) could be a reference tie to "just as we read in the Bible." In the book of Genesis (Chapter 37-50), a story is told of a Hebrew patriarch with many sons. The youngest two, Joseph and Benjamin, are the most loved. Benjamin becomes a pawn in the hands of his older brothers as they compete for authority. A victim of his brothers' power struggles, Benjamin is transported from his homeland of Israel to the foreign land of Egypt. Eventually, when the power structures are stabilized, Benjamin is allowed to return home to his father. Taking into account this reference to the biblical Benjamin in the letter, it is reasonable to assume that "the youngest son Benjamin" could refer to Jasch; a son who is deeply loved and whose mother is suggesting that he is caught in a power struggle of competing forces. If it is indeed his circumstances that are going well for him, then he will be released and returned to his homeland, like the biblical Benjamin. But if this phrase is used to camouflage the intended meaning and signify the opposite of his actual situation (as in the examples above), and it is *not* going well with him, then Jasch remains a victim in a foreign place. Either way, the message for the un-intended reader is obscured by flowers: the situation of the "dear heart" is disguised by a name that appears to be common, but a name for which no context is provided that would clarify the referent or elucidate his particular situation. Again, rather than providing evidence that the writer is facilitating the activity of the readers' "collective search for truth," it is more apparent that the writer and intended readers are collectively camouflaging the "truth."

Conclusion

The examination of this corpus of letters has revealed that letters are not only complex genres to begin with, but that letters are also expected to span great distances and circumnavigate multiple obstacles. An even closer examination of the writers' words through a linguistic analysis reveals ruptures and absences in the text. It exposes some of the semantic and rhetorical strategies the writers use, particularly words that appear to be written "through the flowers" in order to circumvent a hostile reader. From this investigation of the letters, it is clear that the primary relationship in the letters is *not* between the writer and intended reader in Canada, but between the writer and a hostile reader. The writers' intent is to negate the power of the hostile reader

or censor. The secondary level of discourse is between the author and intended readers in Canada, a level of discourse that only emerges once the primary level has been enacted. Thus this analysis has not only investigated the linguistic structures in the letters, but has more importantly exposed the discursively constructed *subversions*.

The analysis conducted reflects the way in which truth in language can be de-stabilized, disrupted, undermined, overturned or subverted in order to communicate a vital message.[16] My assessment of the letters offers evidence that the writers communicate under great duress, and that intentional meaning is often deliberately not communicated – it is encoded. Specifically, the examination of linguistic features with the given passages has revealed fractures in the text and subversions of meaning. In fact, it appears that subversive messages and ruptures deliver the most significant meaning for the Bargens and their trusted acquaintances in Canada. The letter writers are attempting to negate the power of the *hostile reader* and diminish the influence of this person while calling into existence the *ally*: Franz and Liese Bargen in Canada. Thus one level of encoding carries the diminution of the hostile, and another level carries the enhancement of the ally. Perhaps Liese Regehr is most accurate in her description after all: Only "2 are present" (the hostile reader and the ally) and their interest and existence are opposed to one another. All readers can thus be understood to be either an ally of the writer or to be hostile to her.

Thus, the intent of the discourse is to negate the power of the censor to censor and the power to inflict negative consequences. This is done through the fabrication of a discourse that does not collectively seek *truth*, but creates *untruth* in the relationship. However, one could say that there is a "truth" being enacted if we take it as the writer's truth that is being enacted upon the censor. This is a more fragile discourse because it is carried within the distorted signal sent to the censor. Since it is fragile, it relies on additional levels of coding, and requires simplification of the signal. The means by which the additional coding (writing "through the flowers") is enacted, and the breadth of communication passed through the distorted coding speaks to the sophistication of both the writers and intended readers.

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Interviews

Bergen Price, Louise. Langley, British Columbia, August 4, 2002
Eggert, Richard and Erma Eggert. Abbotsford, British Columbia, June 13, 2001
Fleming-Loewen, Anna. Abbotsford, British Columbia, November 14, 2001
Hempler, Ida. Maple Ridge, British Columbia, July 19, 2001
Loewen, Walter. Abbotsford, British Columbia, November 14, 2001
Sawatsky, Jake. White Rock, British Columbia, November 17, 2001

Notes

1 The original letters were translated from the German Gothic Script into English by Anne Peters Bargen. They were then edited and compiled by Peter Bargen in the publication *From Russia with Tears* (1991). References to specific letters and page numbers in this paper follow the documentation found in the Bargen/Bargen publication.

2 *Spetsposelenie* or *ssilka* are special settlements that refer to the Gulag system of labour or prison camps. For a more comprehensive description and analysis, see Oxana Klimkova, "Special Settlements in Soviet Russia in the 1930s–50s," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8:1 (Winter 2007): 105-39. Also see Lynne Viola, *Lost World of Stalin's Settlers: The Unknown Gulag* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Primarily, the Russian transliteration of place names is used. Otherwise, spellings of Mennonite colonies, villages, and geographical markers named by the letter writers follow the Germanic style used by W. Schroeder and H. Huebert in *The Mennonite Historical Atlas* (1986)

4 Even the very earliest letters of Turpulius acknowledge the addresser/addressee separation and the attempt to bridge the chasm with "mutual conversation between absent friends" (Erasmus, 25:20).

5 Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* expands on the role of the epistolary genre with an emphasis on letters in fictional literature.

6 Most of the letter writers were born in the villages of Tiege, Altonau and Orloff in this colony.

7 Lunkevka (or Lunowka in the Bargen translation) no longer exists. Polvinka is a presently a small town in the Perm region of the Urals.

8 The NKVD evolved from the former Soviet political police force (OGPU) to become the primary enforcement of state security, arresting dissidents and administrating the Gulag system in 1934. This organization eventually became the KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*). People's Commisariat for Interior Affairs was the name for the primary political police in the former USSR.

9 A tabular database analysis of the letters substantiates that 61% of the letters contain references to previous correspondence.

10 The reader who claims to know the precise meaning of "Kherson" would likely only know that it was the main administrative centre for their region; it was the judicial centre of the newly established regime where crimes against the state and prison sentences were determined. Apart from the explicit meaning, the implications of the "*Drei Buchstaben*" (three letters) and "Kherson" was only understood by the writer and intended reader of the letter who had previously interacted in a very particular context in which Kherson had a specific meaning. The letter writers, in turn, would hope that the use of this word and its implications would not alert a "hostile reader" and jeopardize their safety.

11 We know from the editor's comments that this statement was written by Aron Regehr (D1, 427) just before he, his wife Katrina, and their six children were expelled from their home in 1930. Aron was arrested in 1933, imprisoned for three years, arrested again in 1937, and then disappeared into the Gulag.

12 Masked messages can also be described as a type of Aesopian language. This kind of language conveys an ambiguous meaning to outsiders but a clear meaning to informed readers. Its use was most prevalent in Russia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

13 Several important distinctions are evident in comparing the assertions of the Bakhtin (and colleagues in the Bakhtin Circle) with those of Ferdinand Saussure and Jacques Derrida. While similarities between philosophers of language can

be found, Saussurean linguistics is a limited analysis that does not consider the word in its dialogic action. Instead, Bakhtin provides a meta-linguistic approach that values dialogic interaction in living social contexts (shifts in tone, pauses, hesitancy and interruptions). Bakhtin also avoids the nihilism that entraps Derrida. While both theorists acknowledge the ambiguities of language, Bakhtin embraces the vagueness as a way to create meaning in dialogue through the social context.

[14] In "Through the Fires of Hell," Colin Neufeldt finds that "A significant number of Mennonites were actively involved in the political and administrative hierarchy of a regime that murdered millions of people" (29).

[15] We as readers cannot determine the identity of the letter writer from the contents of the letter. The editor, Peter Bargen, confirms in a footnote that the writer is Jacob (Jasch) Regehr (1885-1933). Jasch died one year after sending this letter.

[16] A similar theoretical perspective is offered by Leo Spitzer. Having read actual letters written by Italian prisoners of war during World War I, he is in a position to more aptly respond to discourse written in desperate situations. In his chapter on "Speaker and Situation," Spitzer asserts that

A situation is not stable, but a constellation of eternal changes exists at the moment of talking, it is a changing constellation with the articulation of each sentence, something that is always there but never stays. The situation is the epitome of all given moments, of all those moments of a person and [their] personal fate, external circumstances, but also of the speech itself, which come together at the moment of talking (*Italienische* 6-7).