

My Harp Is Turned to Mourning

Al Reimer

Introduction

This panoramic historical novel unfolds in the years 1905 to 1924, a momentous period that saw the Russian-Mennonite colonies in the Ukraine rise to their greatest heights only to be plunged into the cataclysmic depths of revolution and civil war. Set mainly in the Molochnaya, the main story traces the fortunes of three generations of the Fast family, which has been farming in the Molochnaya village of Blumenau (fictitious) since 1804.

Wilhelm Fast, the protagonist, grows up wanting to become an artist. After being accepted as a student in the famed Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, he is able to complete only a year of study before war comes and he finds himself enmeshed in a series of events that change the course of his life. While at art school he falls in love with Clara Bock, the daughter of a wealthy business family in Schoenwiese, who is in the capital as a singing student. Wilhelm's younger brother Nikolai (Kolya) is a strangely rebellious lad who grows up as the black sheep in the family. Defiant and contemptuous of his family and all things Mennonite, Kolya leaves home at an early age to make a life for himself in the outside world.

At the outbreak of war, Wilhelm joins the ambulance train service while Kolya does the unthinkable by joining the regular army. In this chapter Kolya has just become a prisoner of war in the siege of Lemberg. At about the same time in another sector of the Polish front, Wilhelm is wounded in the leg. For the first time the war is brought fully home to the Fasts and the Mennonites of the Molochnaya in general.

Chapter Seventeen

1

Galicia, June, 1915

Along with thousands of other Russian soldiers in rumpled, mud-colored uniforms, Nikolai Fast sat in the middle of a vast field on the

northern outskirts of the Galician city of Lemberg. They had been in the field for a whole day and night now, waiting. Just waiting. Ever since the relentless waves of *Germanzi* had forced them to surrender the city after weeks of fierce fighting.

The only men on their feet were the hard-eyed German guards in gray-green uniforms and brown spiked helmets, guns held lightly on their shoulders. Some were standing in small groups talking and smoking. Others were strolling around the perimeter of the huddled Russians, eyeing them warily or with open contempt.

Nikolai looked around at the impassive Slav faces and wondered how they felt about being prisoners. He supposed they were still too stunned by the fact of their capture to feel much of anything. He himself felt nothing — well, perhaps some relief that he was no longer trapped in the hell of a shell-torn city trying to fight off terror and sleep by turns, wondering dumbly whether he'd be alive tomorrow.

Here I am, he thought, a prisoner of the Germans and I'm as German as they are. No, he contradicted himself. I am not a German, I'm a Russian who happens to have German blood and can speak German. But I won't talk German to the bastards, he vowed. I'll listen to what they say, but I won't let on I understand them.

Home. Blumenau. The family . . . He squelched the familiar images. They don't matter, he thought grimly. All that matters now is me — my own fate. I don't even care anymore how the war is going. Let the Russian papers, blind drunk with chauvinism, blare the "Heroic Defense of Lemberg" and "Our brave troops went down fighting to the last man" — the diarrhea of lies will go on and on. Somehow, in the popular mind, defeat will become a noble victory. Or perhaps they'll simply keep the fortress city of Lemberg Russian by not even mentioning its fall. In the end what does it matter anyway? *Nichevo*. I have no faith left in the Tsar, or the Imperial Army — or anything else . . .

It was still early morning but the sun was already beating down fiercely from a cloudless sky. As the earth warmed up, the stink of piss and shit in the field lay acrid in the nostrils. The prisoners were forced to relieve themselves within the perimeter, and there were no latrines. They were being treated like cattle in this godforsaken field.

Nikolai slumped down on one elbow, wishing for the hundredth time that he had some *makhorka* to smoke. He and his buddies had already turned their pockets inside out for the last fugitive grains. Together they got enough for two thin cigarettes which they had shared with deep drags. The rumble in his gut was getting worse. Yesterday they had received one small ration of stale bread. Nothing so far today.

He reached up and pushed gingerly at the filthy rag around his head. The bloody thing had slipped down again. The hot sun was making his head throb and his skin itched under the bandage where he had been

grazed by a piece of shrapnel just before they surrendered. He took off his greasy peaked cap and examined it idly. It was blood-stained and rank with sweat and he noted that the regimental badge in front was half torn off. With a savage twist he ripped it off and tossed it aside. Where he was going he wouldn't need any more badges.

Where were they going? They hadn't been told anything. To Germany, he supposed. Land of his ancestors. His buddies were already kidding him about going "home." They were pestering him to teach them some German words. The words they wanted to know first were bread, water and the smutty ones.

He glanced up as he heard the synchronized whine of several aeroplanes. High overhead, they seemed to hang in the air like painted dragonflies, three of the pretty red machines. They were triple-winged, flying in a neat row. For a moment he wondered if they had come to drop bombs on them. That would be a quick way of getting rid of so many prisoners.

But the planes kept plying the air, seemingly indifferent to anything on the ground. In their alien element high up they reminded him suddenly of the family of storks that used to come to the Fast farm in Blumenau in spring. Long legs laid straight back, their great wings moving with lazy grace, they would soar majestically over the village several times before settling on the barn. They always made him feel they were doing him and the whole village an undeserved favor by showing up at all.

Craning his neck awkwardly, he watched the planes until they had dissolved into the empty blue.

Following the minute specks in the bright sky, he found, had darkened his sight, made him a little giddy. For a few moments the sprawling figures around him were opaquely wavering blobs.

He wondered how many prisoners the Germans had taken in the summer offensive so far. It must be many thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. And maybe killed even more. Always they employed the same deadly tactics. Simple but oh so effective. They started with an unbelievable hail of shells — for hours they flattened everything until you were ready to crawl under a leaf and die, if you could find a leaf. Then they started coming out of the smoke and fire — from all sides they came shooting and stabbing with their long rifles that never seemed to get empty, until they were on top of you with their thick bayonets to finish the job.

And you could do nothing, he raged, except take it. Half of us didn't even have guns, let alone enough ammunition the last week. How could you fight without arms? Over and over he and his comrades had pawed desperately through the mounds of dead after a battle — even during — looking for weapons and ammo so they could keep fighting. At the end,

when the *Germanzi* stormed them they were lying behind walls of their own dead with empty guns, shaking and cursing with rage and fright.

What were the people back home doing? Why weren't they making enough guns and ammunition? Had the factory workers all been sent to the front, leaving the machines in the factories idle? Or were the women and children manning them now? He tried to picture a munitions factory, like the one in Berdjansk, with female workers clumsily doing men's work.

But the Mennonite boys in the Molochnaya, he thought bitterly, were still on their farms staying sleek on ham and fried potatoes, working with their greedy fathers to make more rubles from the war. Oh, yeah, they stuck a few in the forestry stations and the hospital trains just to make it look good. Fools like Vasya, who didn't have the guts to break away from the whole rotten system. Cowards and hypocrites, the whole damn pack! Thanking God, no doubt, for keeping them safe from the war while honest men were bleeding out their lives for them at the front.

His anger was making him fidgety on the hard ground. He jabbed his finger at a passing ant and vowed that if he ever got back from this lousy war he'd do anything at all to help change things. He'd work for any cause or movement that opposed power and privilege and exploitation, including the Mennonite kind. In Berdjansk he had listened to them all — the Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, the Anarchists — and they had opened his eyes to what was really going on in Russian society. They had all agreed on one thing: that Russian society was rotten from top to bottom and only the most violent, fundamental upheaval could bring about real change. The whole rotten structure had to be brought crashing down like a decayed old building.

But the coming of war made us forget all that, he thought. Suddenly, miraculously, the tottering old building of Russia seemed transformed into a magnificent new palace. The would-be revolutionaries stopped orating in mid-sentence, the disgruntled workers started cheering, the students shouted patriotic slogans, the young men in their millions trooped gaily to the colors — all Russia forgot its ancient misery and guilt, and in one collective delirium eagerly directed its hatred at the Germans.

"For Faith, Tsar and Country," we sang, "For the Defense of Holy Russia!"

What an idiot I was! We all were! The Little Father Tsar and all his friends and supporters in the capital must have been laughing their heads off as we dutifully marched off to fight the evil Germans. Like schoolboys we boasted that we would whip the enemy and be back in time for Christmas! The Germans were only good at making sausages, we jeered.

Now we know what else they are good at. The Prussians fight a war exactly the way Mennonites run their farms — everything planned to the

letter in advance, only the best of equipment, then the iron discipline of hard work, of scrupulous thoroughness, of never quitting until the job is done. And doing it all with a feeling of righteousness and God's blessing!

The Hungarians and Austrians, he thought contemptuously, are more on our level. We could beat *them* all right. When we took the fortress of Przemyśl from the stupid Austrians in March I still had some hope. Like the others I felt proud that day the Tsar came to Lemberg in early April to savor the Russian advances on the Carpathian front. He came in a long, shiny black limousine with the giant Commander-in-Chief of the Army Nicholas Nikolaevich, almost seven feet tall, towering beside him. The ludicrous contrast in size between the short Tsar and his gigantic cousin made our eyes glisten with suppressed smiles as they slowly passed up and down the stiff rows. And then the Tsar, looking warm in his long, beautifully tailored greatcoat, made a flowery little speech while we shivered in the April rawness. He thanked the men for their gallant exploits and assured them solemnly that liberated Galicia would remain a part of Holy Russia forever! The pompous little ass.

"Forever" turned out to be three months. Now it was June and General Mackensen's Eleventh Army was pushing them right out of the Carpathians. At this rate the Tsar would be lucky to keep any part of Holy Russia forever until the end of the summer.

Well, no matter what happened now, for him the war was over. If Germany won, at least the Mennonites would be happy. If Russia did win in the end, they'd all come back and send the Tsar packing. In either case, he would never go back to the Molochnaya again. He'd had enough hypocrisy and self-righteousness and piety to last him a lifetime. He'd —

"*Auf — zum Marsch!*" The guards were prodding them to their feet. They were being moved out — but where? To the station? To a prison compound?

This was it then. The end of the war for him and all these other poor bastards.

2

Polish Front, August, 1915

"They're sending up some pretty spectacular fireworks out there, my friend," gritted Snapper Loewen, his face pressed to the train window.

He turned and looked at Wilhelm beside him. "Not exactly meant for kids though, I'd say". The flippant words only underlined his nervousness.

Train No. 188 was moving through darkness that every few moments was eerily rent in ragged slashes of bursting flares and explosions

that seemed to erupt on all sides. They could hear the deep whoosh-crump of artillery fire somewhere up front and, at longer intervals, even deeper, more rumbling explosions they could not identify. Their train seemed to be heading directly into a raging inferno, a front gone mad with shrieking, thunderous, random destruction. In moments of sudden hush they thought they heard the thin whine of aeroplanes overhead.

"If this keeps up we'll never make it to Kobrin," Wilhelm murmured. He could hear the dry rasp of fear in his voice.

The door connecting with the staff car up ahead swung open and their *starshi* Fritz Unruh walked in, his face tight with tension. His news was not reassuring.

"At our stop just now, fellows, we heard that Brest and the strongholds around it have been abandoned. The city has been evacuated and put to the torch. And the strongholds around it are being systematically demolished by our retreating troops."

"So that's what those deeper explosions are, the ammo dumps going up," Snapper said.

"Most likely," Fritz agreed. "I just hope we get to Kobrin and get our wounded loaded before the Germans get there."

"If we don't" — Snapper's grin looked forced — "we may get a free train ride all the way back to Germany."

They felt the train breaking speed, slowing down again. They looked at each other.

Fritz, dead cigarette stub dangling from his lip, couldn't hide his apprehension. "What's going on? We're not even close to Kobrin yet."

"Maybe old Barbarov has ordered a stop to see what'll happen," Wilhelm offered hopefully.

"Not likely." Snapper sounded dour. "If he's been ordered to go to Kobrin, he'll go. They'd have to explode the track before he'd order the train to stop."

Fritz Unruh blew away his dead butt. "I better go see what's up." He headed back to the staff car.

A few minutes later the train came to a grating stop. Snapper and Wilhelm searched the darkness for signs of a station. There was nothing on either side. They seemed to have stopped in the middle of nowhere.

Fritz was shouting from the front door. "Okay, boys, let's go. We've been flagged down by a Red Cross field unit. They've set up a first aid station nearby. There's a lot of wounded and they're expecting more."

They were surprised to find a neat, well laid-out dressing station differing markedly from the usual makeshift area with its jumble of hastily deposited, barely tended patients left lying in pathetic squalor on the bare ground. Here the more severely wounded were actually lodged in cots set up in neat rows inside a large field tent. The less serious cases were lying out in the open on the ground, but even they had been

arranged in orderly rows and provided with ground blankets in most cases.

"Doesn't look like a Russian station somehow," Snapper muttered in German as he and Wilhelm looked down at a field orderly who was dressing a patient.

"Heh, you guys, do I hear German? Where'ya from?" The kneeling corpsman rose with a grin, his cap pushed back over an unruly shock of curly black hair. He appraised them shrewdly. "You wouldn't be *Menniste* by any chance?" he asked hopefully in Low German.

Before they could answer, he stuck out his hand. "Friesen, Peter, from the Molochnaya, village Pordenau. Most of us are Mennonites in this outfit."

So that was why this station looked so different. There was little time for further talk, but in bits and pieces between trips to the train with their stretchers, Wilhelm and Snapper exchanged information with young Friesen. He told them he had been at the Polish front since January. His outfit had accompanied the advance that took Przemyśl in March and had been at Lemberg when that was lost to the Germans in June.

"We lost a lot of good men in that one," Friesen said with a sad shake of his black curls. "Our outfit pulled back with some wounded just before the final German assault. When we left our fighting men were actually using their dead comrades as barricades — piled up stiff like logs." He shuddered at the memory.

Since the disaster in Lemberg they had been retreating slowly northwards, always closer to the frontier at the Bug — through Bilgoraj, Zamose, Chelm, and a hundred little places in between — and finally across the Bug to Brest, then Kobrin.

"I tell you, boys, I've seen so many terrible things in this war when I get back to Pordenau I'll just pull my old *murratje's* apron over my head like a little kid and bawl my head off." He shook his curls again. "I joined the Red Cross Field Service because I wanted to see what war looked like close up, but without shooting like a regular soldier. Well, I've seen more than enough. I haven't killed anybody myself, but I've seen so much killing that sometimes I get this queer feeling that I'm part of it too — the killing, I mean . . . I don't know . . . I can hardly tell the difference anymore between killing and being killed . . ."

They left him still shaking his head dolefully, as they humped back to the train with another laden stretcher.

Fritz Unruh was bustling about, supervising the loading of the wounded. He came over to where Wilhelm and Snapper were lifting their stretcher into a car. He looked more harried than ever. For once his lower lip had no *poppeross* glued to it.

"I have a strange feeling, boys. The shelling's coming closer all the time, don't you think? We've got only about half our cars loaded. I don't

know how much longer we can sit here a standing target. Barbarov thinks we'll have enough time to finish. I'm not so sure . . . What do you — "

The explosion ripped away time and space . . .

Wilhelm saw and heard nothing, only felt himself disappear, sucked violently down a black maw. Out of nowhere space came back in horrible falling bits — showers of earth, steel, wood and flesh. He was being buried alive, suffocating under a weight of things falling on him.

He lay still and wondered why he couldn't hear anything. Maybe he was dying — oh God, no, please don't let me die now — and opened his mouth to scream protest. But his mouth was filled up and he was choking. In a panic he tried to spit out whatever was in his mouth and felt his chest and throat heaving with a stifled cough. His nose felt dead too. He got one hand free and tore frantically at the filth lodged on his face, in mouth and nostrils.

At last he felt breath filtering thinly back into heaving blocked chest. Then terror flooded in as he became aware that he occupied only head and chest. His lower body didn't seem to be there anymore.

Oh, God, I'm cut in half, he thought. How can I still be alive? Then felt his mind sliding away too.

Blackness engulfed him . . .

Far inside his head gray light. Moving. Distant pain. Pressure under his armpits. Nothing below that. He opened his eyes to a hazy impression of somebody bending over him . . . Then he was swimming again, swept down a tunnel . . .

Very gradually his mind focussed on the roaring in his ears. He seemed to be floating, swaying in space. He opened his eyes to darkness, a dark surface just overhead. The surface clarified to wood — planks, rough planks and canvas. A bunk, he thought. I'm in one too. On the train. It's moving. Where are we?

He freed the hand at his side and ran it cautiously over the blanket that covered him. His hand stopped at his right thigh and he groaned.

At least his body was still there. He grew conscious of an ache. It came from his leg, the one he had just touched.

I've been wounded, he thought, awed. I'm one of the wounded. But how? He remembered no shooting, no explosions.

He heard, from a great distance, groans and stirrings around him. And voices. Voiced from far away calling for something. *Voda*.

A closer voice. From a face above him. A familiar face. Snapper. Looking relieved.

"Well, old buddy, you're finally awake. I was getting a little annoyed with you. Sleeping on the job is *strengst verboten*. By rights I should report you to Barbarov."

"What, what happened, Snapper?" His own voice seemed to come from far away too.

"What happened? Our German brothers sent us a greeting card, that's what happened. A shell right in our midst." Snapper's voice went soft. "You and I are lucky to be here, Willie." He took a deep breath and his eyes filled. "Fritz wasn't so lucky . . . Fritz just disappeared, Willie . . . I thought you had been blown up too . . . Then I saw your hand and arm sticking out of the rubble that buried you." He paused, brightened. "You have a pretty nasty thigh wound, and bruises and contusions, but I think you're all right otherwise. No broken bones. No sign of internal injuries, thank God."

Snapper straightened up, looked away at the other bunks for a long moment, then faced his friend again. "And me, nothing happened to me, nothing at all. All the concussion did was slam me down under the car, where I was protected from flying debris. The old Loewen luck." His smile was almost apologetic. "Nothing ever happens to me, pal. I'm always the one who walks away unharmed."

He looked thoughtful. "I don't know why. Either God is protecting me — or playing with me. I happened to be standing a few feet farther from the center of the blast, and that's what saved me. Fritz was a little closer, so he . . ."

Fritz gone? So suddenly? He lay there stunned, too weak to grieve.

"And who else, Snapper? The station . . .?"

"Yeah, it was a direct hit on the station. I don't want to talk about that mess. There wasn't anything we could do. That Friesen from Pordenau, the others — they were just — vanished. We picked up our own wounded and dead, if we could find them, and moved out quickly, in reverse. We're still going with the locomotive in reverse looking for a station with a siding so we can get turned around properly."

Snapper's voice dropped again. "We lost three other men, too — Willms, Peters and Jash Toews, the new guy. Eight others are wounded, but only you and Pete Ediger seriously."

"My wound, Snapper. How bad is it?" He felt a curious sense of detachment, almost as if he were asking about someone else.

"It's mostly a flesh wound on the outside of your right thigh, the way you were turned, but there may be some damage to the femur. Dr. Barbarov isn't sure yet. He said he's search for shrapnel later." He stopped to feel Wilhelm's forehead. "Anyhow, I'm sure you'll walk again, my friend. Maybe you'll get a long recovery leave and the war'll be over before you report back, you lucky bum."

"I guess I'll be going to the Arbatt in . . ." He wanted to say more but felt his mind going dark again. He closed his eyes and surrendered to oblivion with a sigh, Snapper still hovering over him.

3

Moscow, August, 1915

Wilhelm, having propped himself up rather awkwardly in his white hospital bed, was trying to do some sketching. He was resting his sketch pad on his good thigh, carefully away from his heavily bandaged one. There was still a dull ache in it and sharper twinges whenever he moved, but on the whole he felt much better today than he had in the ten days he had been in the Arbatt Hospital.

The Arbatt was situated on the fifth floor of a large building in central Moscow. It was a hospital reserved for the personnel of the AZU. Most of the patients were Mennonite boys suffering various ailments while on active service. A few, like Wilhelm, had been wounded in action. Pete Ediger, the cheerful, freckled redhead from the Alexanderthal settlement on the Volga, was dozing in the bed alongside his. Young Ediger, on his first run to the front, had been hit by shrapnel in several places.

But he was recovering nicely. Wilhelm glanced at the sleeping lad and wondered, not for the first time, how he had managed to survive their tortuous five-day trip back to Moscow. He himself had been washed night and day by excruciating waves of pain as the train rocked and clattered its interminable course across the great plains. At least they had been brought to a hospital that was efficiently run, where the care of patients was exemplary and the food wholesome and plentiful.

He was working on a sketch of No. 188 nosing into the battle area near Kobrin, with the eerie, flickering light of flares punctuating the night sky and in the background a sinister tangle of burning and exploding fortifications. And aeroplanes buzzing overhead like lost insects.

But hard as he tried he couldn't seem to get things right. His pencil felt thick and awkward in his fingers; it did not move of itself, as it did when he was working well. The scene needed more depth, more realistic proportions and textures. He wasn't getting the hectic intensity, the ominous, chaotic quality he had experienced that night. But that was the trouble. He had witnessed the scene from the interior of the train only. And here he was trying to do it from the outside. He wanted to convey the sounds too, but how could he do that when he had only visual images to work with?

He threw down his pencil, feeling suddenly dejected. He pushed aside his sketch pad and sank back on his pillow. He would try again later.

He kept his eyes expectantly on the door. It was time for Snapper and Jacob's visit. They had promised to come again on Sunday afternoon. Maybe they would have some mail for him from home. By now his parents would know he had been wounded. Good old Jacob had used his personal connections to telegraph the news to the regional office in

Ekaterinoslav, from where it was relayed to Bolshoi Tokmak in the Molochnaya.

Snapper stood in the doorway, his greeting boisterous. "Look at him Jacob. It's disgusting. They must be feeding him five times a day here. His cheeks are fatter than ever." He came closer, peering exaggeratedly. "And who shaves you and trims your mustache? That pretty little nurse we just passed in the hall?" He winked broadly.

Jacob's warm smile enveloped Wilhelm as he handed him two envelopes.

"The blue one is distinctly feminine, old boy," Snapper boomed, "both in scent and handwriting. That Alexandrovsk postmark speaks for itself. The beautiful Clara Bock, the Mennonite gift to opera, has not forgotten her artist friend. Tra — a — a — la — la." His grotesque attempt at an operatic trill drew chuckles from near-by beds.

"Shut your trap, Snapper," Wilhelm smiled. "You can't sing any better than you can draw. You're just a farmer, old buddy. Stick to that."

"Right, Rembrandt, but first there's a war to be won. And when you get out of that bed," Snapper pounced in glee, "you'll be taking your orders from me."

"What — ?"

Jacob broke in softly. "That's right, Willie, Snapper's No. 188's new *starshi*."

"I'm applying for a transfer," Wilhelm straight-faced. "The man will be unbearable. He likes nothing better than to run things and order people around. He can hardly wait to take over his old man's *khutor*."

Wilhelm put the blue envelope aside for later. He picked up the other letter. It was from his parents but bore no postmark, which meant that someone had brought it to Moscow personally. He would open it now and skim it while talking to his friends. Later he would read it more thoroughly, along with his letter from Clara.

The letter was from home and began with jolting news. In his formal German style his father informed him that Kolya was missing in action, but was believed to have been taken prisoner in the fall of Lemberg in June.

"Oh, dear God, not Kolya," he murmured.

"He isn't — ?" Jacob's face finished the question.

"No, not dead — at least they don't think so — but missing in action at Lemberg and presumed captured," Wilhelm said disconsolately.

During the long, solitary hours on the train he had often tried to anticipate this moment, to prepare himself for it. But he wasn't prepared for it. And his family — how were his parents taking the news? This was an even more serious blow after his own bad news. He felt a sudden rush of compassion for them. They would be devastated. Forgotten would be all the shame and agony their wayward son had caused them over the

years. They would think only of their loss. At least there was hope that Kolya was still alive. They would cling to that.

He tried to steady his voice as he began reading the letter aloud to the friends who were sharing his pain.

My dear, dear son,

I write to you with a heavy heart but with my faith in a merciful and loving God as strong as ever. At long last we have news of Kolya — bad news. He is missing in the fall of Lemberg, but — God grant it be so — believed to have been taken prisoner rather than fallen in action. You can guess how your dear mother and I, and Heinrich and the girls, are suffering from the shock of this terrible news. We have sent word to Maria and Franz in Arkadak.

If the boy is dead, we must hope that the Lord in His infinite mercy melted his heart into obedience and acceptance before the end came. If he is a prisoner in Germany then there is, of course, further hope for him. The agony is not knowing which fate he has suffered. Not being sure. All we can do is wait and pray that we will hear one way or the other soon. Son, I ask you to add your own prayers to ours for the safety of your brother. He has been a heavy cross for us to bear, but as parents we still love him and as Christians yearn to see him saved.

We were shocked to hear about your injury, but relieved that it is not a serious wound. We received your telegram the day before we got the letter about Kolya. You can imagine what the double news did to us. We pray fervently for your full recovery.

The rest of my news, I fear, can only add pain to the grief you will already feel over your brother.

The Land Expropriation Laws aimed at the German colonists of our nation are giving us great concern. Apparently all German-speaking citizens with land holdings in the western and central parts of the country are to be dispossessed and resettled in the East. Right now we don't even know whether we will get a fair price for our land or whether the government will simply confiscate it and send us to Siberia. The ten months we were given to liquidate our land are now almost up and we simply don't know what will happen then.

What is to become of us, dear son? There is so much happening right now that defies human understanding. Even the mighty Tsar's behavior seems strange and erratic. They say that terrible monk Rasputin is practically running the country now that the Tsar is with the troops at the front. And just think, Willie: a few days before the monarch signed those two cruel liquidation laws last February, he visited Ekaterinoslav and was personally handed 35,000 rubles from the Mennonites of the Molochnaya and Old Colony to help the war effort. Can you imagine? Such lack of pity in the good Tsar Nicholas?

So far, no one here has lost his land. But apparently many German colonists in Volynia and other western provinces have already been uprooted and sent east. Innocent, loyal, hardworking Russian citizens treated like stateless gypsies. Shameful!

Recently a petition was sent around addressed to the Tsar himself which beseeches him to modify the harsh conditions of the expropriation laws. There is also a move afoot to persuade the government to reclassify our Mennonite people as of Dutch origin instead of German. That would be

one way of getting around these draconian land laws. Personally, I can't see that happening. How can we have it both ways? Here in Russia we have always prided ourselves on our Germanness and our German culture. Now suddenly we claim a Dutch heritage. But then these cruel and unjust measures have made us desperate enough to try anything, I suppose.

The violence of war is coming home even to us now. The other day in Halbstadt (sorry, Molochansk now) I was accosted on the street in broad daylight by a drunken Russian soldier who waved his pistol in my face and even drew his sabre. He wanted money for *samogon*, but in spite of his threats I refused to give him anything. Then one of our local policemen came by and rescued me. Can you believe it? In Halbstadt? In broad daylight?

Well, I must end this dreary chronicle, dear son. I'm sure the news about Kolya will be hard enough for you to bear. Your dear mother sends her love and prayers for your speedy recovery. If only she could nurse you herself, she keeps saying. She is sure they are not feeding you properly in the hospital. Will you be getting sick leave to come home? How we all long to see you again. Heinrich and the girls send their love and prayers too.

Poor Heinrich is worse lately. He coughs all night and looks so gray and tired in the morning. He still tries to work but it is becoming harder and harder for him to do even the light chores. Pray for him also, Wilhelm. And write when you can.

Your loving father.

P.S. I am sending this letter with a young recruit from Halbstadt — Waldemar Barg — who is going to Moscow to join your service. He comes from a good family. I think he has eyes for our Greta. Befriend him if you get the chance. He is a fine young man and a sincere Christian. I would never dare send such a frank letter as this through the mail.

Later, still brooding over his father's news, he opened Clara's letter. Most of it was chatty and inconsequential enough to cheer him up a little, but she also had unpleasant news to report.

As usual she fretted about "this beastly war," but said she was trying to do her bit by serving as a part-time volunteer nurse's assistant in an Alexandrovsk hospital. She complained that she hardly ever saw her father and brother anymore, as both of them worked long hours and often didn't come home till late in the evening, especially Gusha. The factory, of course, was on a war footing and manufacturing mobile field kitchens for the army, or something like that. She wasn't sure because her father and Gusha said very little about the factory these days.

Clara's unpleasant news was that the Bock family was actually involved in scandal — not yet public knowledge, thank the Lord — but "so shameful" that she could hardly bring herself to set it down even to "a trusted friend." It was all the doing of "that horrid Marusya Nikofoorovna, the thieving slut of a maid" whom they had turned out of the house last winter, if he recalled. Well, the creature was now a prostitute in Alexandrovsk, making her living off soldiers on leave. Exactly what one would expect. But that wasn't all. The nasty trollop was trying to blackmail the

Bock family! She claimed to have been Gusha's mistress while she worked for them, and that she was pregnant at the time she was dismissed. She claimed to have had a child in June and now wanted support for it. In a letter to Clara's mother the brazen harlot had even threatened to "leave her brat on the Bocks doorstep" unless she got the money she wanted. That was too much for her father, who was now taking steps to have the girl silenced. Clara didn't know what steps.

Gusha, of course, had sworn innocence in the matter. He would have to be, he had told his family more than once, "a complete idiot" to have taken up with such a "filthy, lying trull." And Gusha was far from being an idiot, Vasya would agree.

The rest of her letter was "less sordid," she assured him. She was still singing, had in fact performed at a benefit concert for wounded soldiers recently. She hoped he would not scold her for doing something so "un-Mennonite," but she felt that singing for wounded soldiers, while not as important as "binding up their wounds on the battlefield," was at least something for a "mere girl" who was forced to stay home and "suffer passively" while the nation was "bleeding from this nasty war."

She fervently hoped that her "dear bohemian artist-friend of long-ago peacetime" was safe and healthy, and that he would not "expose himself to unnecessary dangers" in carrying out his "extremely important — sacred really — duties of saving life instead of taking it." She closed by urging him to write whenever he could, that she found his letters "utterly fascinating" and would he please, please keep decorating them with "those amusing personal sketches" he was so good at.

With much love and the hope of an early end to this war so he could come home, she remained

Wilhelm dropped the letter on the bed. He felt suddenly very tired. His despondency weighed on him like lead. He wanted nothing more right now than to drop into a long, dreamless sleep.

But he knew he would lie awake for a while.