

Stalin's Legacy, the St. Petersburg Memorial Society, and Historians as Activists

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The world's largest collection of family letters written in a Soviet *gulag* during the Stalinist era is held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Seventeen years ago, the Bergen Letter Collection was donated to the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives (MHCA) by Canadian cousins of the original writers.¹

The collection spans the period 1930 through 1977. Of the more than 1,300 letters, 463 were written by the Regehers, while exiled in the Ural Mountains, to relatives in Carlyle, Saskatchewan. Franz and Liese Bergen had escaped from the Soviet Union in 1929, and migrated to Canada. Franz's sister, Maria Regehr, and her family were not so fortunate. The letters written by Maria, her husband Jakob (or Jasch), and three of their six children (Lena, Liese, and Tina) describe their imposed suffering in the Urals during the period 1930-1937. Some of the letters were translated from their German Gothic script by the cousins that found them, Anne and Peter Bergen, and were self-published in 1992 as *From Russia with Tears: Letters from Home and Exile (1930-1938)*.

More than a decade later, a distant relative, Ruth Derksen Siemens, based her doctoral dissertation on these letters. Now a professor at the University of British Columbia, Derksen Siemens continues to study the hardships of those imprisoned in Stalinist Russia. A revised version of her dissertation was published as "*Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-1937)*" by Pandora Press (Kitchener, ON) in 2007. She also has created a documentary, *Through the Red Gate* (Vancouver, Out to Sea Entertainment, 2007), and a website at <http://www.gulagletters.com/>. Both the book and the DVD are available for loan and purchase online through Mennonite Church Canada's Resource Centre at <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1011>. Part of the proceeds are donated to Mennonite Central Committee and various Mennonite Historical Societies in Canada.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), archival records in Russia, the Ukraine, and eastern Europe became accessible in an unprecedented manner to western researchers. The Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives made efforts to secure copies (and in some cases, originals) of documents of relevance to Russian Mennonites and their descendants in Canada. A reciprocal pattern was established, as copies of MHCA documents, via Ruth Derksen Siemens and others, were deposited at such places as the Memorial Society in St. Petersburg. Memorial is a group of such societies (as well as individuals), founded in 1992 to collect, disseminate, and remember the stories of the victims of Stalinist

oppression, and to promote human rights.² In addition to conferences, publications, and archives, Memorial maintains a database of more than a million names of Stalinist victims. Its most ambitious project is the Virtual Gulag Museum at <http://gulagmuseum.org/>, an effort to make accessible the collections of more than 300 museums and memorial societies throughout the countries comprising the former Soviet Union. The collection of Memorial was used by Orlando Figes in researching his recent book, *The Whisperers*.³

On 4 December 2008, the Memorial Society in St. Petersburg was raided by police and their files were confiscated. Electricity was cut, and eleven hard drives were taken which contained interviews, documents, photographs, diagrams of prison camps, and maps of mass graves. Also confiscated were copies of the material (including manuscripts, photographs, and letters) from both Figes' and Derksen Siemens' books. The ostensible cause for the raid was an alleged connection between the St. Petersburg Memorial Society and the publication of an article promoting hatred in the newspaper *Novy Peterburg*.⁴ The Society's director, Irina Flige, protested this deliberate attempt to undermine Memorial's efforts to collect Stalinist victims' stories: "Today, the state tries to reconstruct history to make it appear like a long chain of victories. And they want these victories to be seen as justifying Stalin's repressions."⁵ While there is debate as to whether Presidents Putin and Medvedev encourage(d) historical revisionism that callously dismisses the suffering and death of millions under Stalin, there is no doubt that the raid on Memorial was a deplorable act of intimidation.⁶ As such, an open letter to President Medvedev protesting the raid was signed by scholars worldwide.⁷ Two separate court rulings in January and March 2009 found that the police raid was illegal, and the files were returned in May this year. St. Petersburg Memorial Society Director Irina Flige and her staff now are assessing whether any material is missing or damaged.⁸

In an email sent to the Director of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives shortly after the raid, Derksen Siemens suggested several responses for those concerned by the incident: "Listen to family members and friends who fled Russia. Tell them you will remember. Share these stories with the online community and anyone else who will listen. . . . Regardless of what you decide to do, the most important act is to remember."⁹ Excellent suggestions – nonetheless, interviewers, researchers, teachers, historians, and archivists should do more. Incidents like this raid remind us that respect for historical memory (and the legal system), even in a democratic country, is not a given. Thankfully copies of the primary sources for Orlando Figes' *The Whisperers* and for Derksen Siemens' "*Remember Us*" were held not only at the St. Petersburg Memorial Society but also on Figes' website (<http://www.orlandofiges.com/>) and at the MHCA, respectively: further reason to encourage the deposition of materials at multiple sites. Limited funding for archives in Canada (and elsewhere), however, reduces

the capacity to acquire new fonds, limits archivists' ability to catalogue collections and make them accessible, and curbs expansion and upgrading of storage vaults. And though less coercive than the St. Petersburg raid, restrictions to historical study exist in Canada as well, where the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) and the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) have at times constrained researchers' ability to investigate potentially sensitive subject matter. We need to support professional organizations (such as the Canadian Oral History Association, the Canadian Historical Association, and the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences) that press the federal government to increase funding for archives and to amend legislation that hampers scholarly research.¹⁰ To remember is not enough; we must also act.

¹ An excellent summary of the discovery of the letters and their subsequent publication is Deirdre Fernand, "Postcards from Hell," London *Sunday Times* (31 May 2009), <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6374293.ece>.

² A detailed description of the varied members and activities of Memorial is provided by them at <http://www.memo.ru/eng/about/whowe.htm>.

³ For reviews of this book, see Alexander Freund, "Soviet Families' Inner Lives. Review of *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia* by Figes," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009): 1-8; Dan Stone, "Review of *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia* by Figes," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009): 1-5.

⁴ Catriona Bass and Tony Halpin, "Gulag files seized during police raid on rights group," London *Times* (13 December 2008), <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5333440.ece>.

⁵ Alex Rodriguez, "Russia rewriting Josef Stalin's legacy," Chicago *Tribune* (17 December 2008), http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2008/dec/17/nation/chi-russia-stalin_rodriguezdec17.

⁶ Alexander Filippov's reconsideration of Stalin in the textbook *The Modern History of Russia, 1945-2006*, for example, is seen by Orlando Figes as an attempt to whitewash Stalinist atrocities. Anatoly Karlin has translated the controversial portion of this text, and argues that views like that of Figes are misinformed. Orlando Figes, "Putin vs. the Truth," *The New York Review of Books* 56 no. 7 (30 April 2009), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22642>; Orlando Figes, "Russia's Re-Education," *Index on Censorship* (3 March 2009), <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2009/03/russias-re-education/>; Anatoly Karlin, "Manipulating Russia's Manipulation of History," (23 June 2009), <http://www.sublimeoblivion.com/2009/06/23/manipulating-manipulation/>; Alexander Filippov, "Debates about Stalin's Role," in *A New History of Russia, 1945-2006*, trans. Anatoly Karlin (May 2009), http://www.sublimeoblivion.com/articles/transl_filippov_on_stalin.pdf.

⁷ Orlando Figes *et al.*, "An open letter to President Medvedev," *Index on Censorship* (8 December 2008), <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2008/12/an-open-letter-to-president-medvedev/>.

⁸ Galina Stolyarova, "Human Rights Group Finally Has Seized Files Returned," St. Petersburg *Times* (15 May 2009), <http://www.sptimes.ru/story/29004>; Orlando Figes, "A Victory for Russian History," *Index on Censorship* (14 May 2009),

<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2009/05/orlando-figes-a-victory-for-history/>; Anna Arutunyan, "Memory quiz getting tougher," *Moscow News* (27 March 2009),

<http://www.mnweekly.ru/news/20090327/55372039.html>.

⁹ "Theft of Letters – Spring 2009," email from Ruth Derksen Siemens to Alf Redekopp, Gulag_Letters@mail.vresp.com, 29 April 2009.

¹⁰ The Canadian Historical Association (CHA), "Lobbying the Federal Government About the Census, Privacy, and Access to Information," (9 November 2005), http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/activ/advocacy_interventions/lobby.cfm; CHA, "The Right to Privacy in the Private Sector: What is at Stake for Historians and Historical Research," (9 November 2005), http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/activ/advocacy_interventions/burgess_bull.cfm; CHA, "Report of the Access to Government Information Services Task Force," (17 March 2005), http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/activ/advocacy_interventions/agis-report.cfm.