



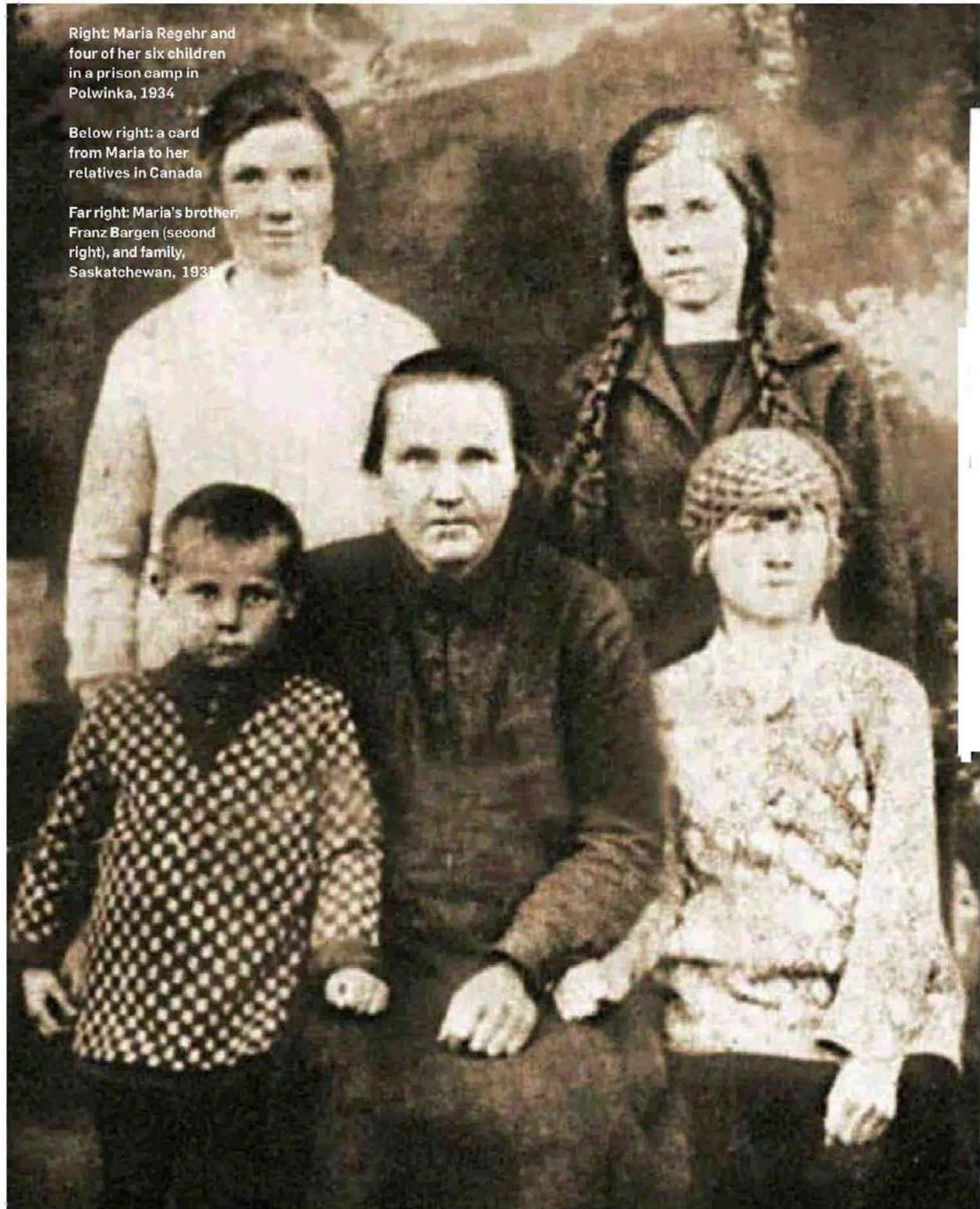
In Russia in 1929, two families flee for their lives. One catches the last train to freedom in the West, but the other narrowly misses it, to face decades in prison camps. Their letters — the largest cache of family correspondence to emerge from Stalin's gulag — reveal their tragic fight for survival. By Deirdre Fernand

POSTCARDS FROM HELL

27



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he cardboard box had once held cans of Campbell's soup. But now, as it lay cluttering up the loft, Frank Bergen had had enough. "It's probably full of junk," he muttered as he climbed up to fetch it. "I should have thrown it out years ago." Bergen, a 72-year-old Canadian living in Manitoba, hadn't bothered to examine its contents. As far as he was concerned, all it contained were old letters. Family papers maybe. But if anyone knew anything about the fading, scrawly handwriting, it was his younger, and possibly smarter, brother, Peter.

Frank was right. Peter knew exactly what the papers were – even if, on that hot summer's day in August 1989, he did not understand their significance. Wrapped in fraying ribbon were bundles of family letters yellowed with age. "The weather is cold here and rainy. I guess winter will close in soon," read one. It would – to about -40C.

The writers, he realised, were prisoners in Stalin's gulag, a network of forced labour camps across Siberia. "I cannot describe how we have already wept for our son," ran another, describing an outbreak of typhus. "Thousands of tears have already flowed from his dear mother's eyes."

The cache, some 131 letters written mostly between 1931 and 1935, had been sent by Frank and Peter's cousins trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Scrawled on scraps of paper, Soviet postcards and old newspapers, they were addressed to the Bergen family, who had left the Soviet Union in 1929 to farm in Canada. Documents from Stalin's reign of terror exist, but the Bergen archive is the largest collection in the world of family letters to survive from the gulag. Today, more than 70 years after the prisoners put pen to paper, their voices resonate loudly and clearly through the decades.

"Our Papa is so sick he can no longer get up. If our dear Papa should die, what will become of us?" asks nine-year-old Lena Regehr, who is imprisoned with her parents, Jasch and Maria, and her five brothers and sisters. In another letter, the ailing Jasch writes: "Many children are dying in our barracks. Yesterday one died and today another died. The poor children only get that sour black bread – no milk, no oil or fat, no sugar... Please help... we are here in the far north, with-

out bread, without clothes, without money!"

Peter Bergen, who saved the letters from destruction, spent the last years of his life translating them into English. He printed 100 copies, distributing them among his family scattered across Canada. After his death five years ago, it was left to a distant cousin, Dr Ruth Derksen Siemens, an academic at the University of British Columbia, to carry on his work. She contacted Russian scholars at [Sheffield University](#), which houses key documents from the Stalin era. Piecing together her family's story led to a PhD thesis and then to her book *Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag*.

To read these harrowing accounts of the struggle to survive is to understand the impact of

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* on its publication in the West in 1962. It was Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel prize for literature, who revealed the truth about the millions, including Russian Jews, Polish Catholics and Ukrainians, who perished in the gulag. Historians of the terror, such as Robert Conquest and Anne Applebaum, estimate that at least 45m died, while the average survival rate for inmates was one winter. Solzhenitsyn, a prison survivor, wrote his novel years after his own ordeal. But as Derksen Siemens reminds us, these letters are contemporary accounts – postcards from hell: "The family was writing in the moment, so there is a rawness to the language, an immediate tug."

Here is Maria, 41, writing in 1932: "And now to see the misery here every day – how the poor

children must go to work from early morning till late with 40-degree frost, and how they must walk in very deep snow to work... How a mother's heart hurts when the children plead and cry for bread is known only to someone who experienced it."


Remember Us tells the story of a brother and sister from the Ukraine: Franz Bergen, who fled with his wife and children in the nick of time to the safety of western Canada, and his sister, Maria Regehr, who failed to reach the border in time. With her husband and children she was exiled to Siberia. The contrast between the families could

not have been starker. The letters left the terror of the labour camp on the frozen Russian wastes to

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reach the safety of the little house on the prairie.

But how? After years of research, it remains a mystery to Derksen Siemens, if not a miracle, how Siberia was ever able to communicate with Saskatchewan. Contacting anyone outside the Soviet Union was forbidden, so the prisoners sent their letters to relatives in the Ukraine, hoping they would forward them to the West. "We know that there was a complex underground network of dissidents and some sympathetic officials, but that's the limit of our knowledge," she explains. The Regehers were allowed to receive mail from overseas; the occasional parcels of food and medicine that arrived helped save their lives.

Under Stalin's communism, the Bargins and Regehers had committed the double crime of being both foreigners and capitalists. Brother and sister were not Russians but German-speaking Mennonites, descendents of people who had migrated from central Europe in the 18th century in search of religious freedom. They were non-conformist and pacifist. Both families had settled in a small Mennonite community in the Ukraine where they laboured in the fields and worshipped on Sunday. They built up large farms and grew prosperous. So when Stalin, who came to power in 1922, embarked on his collectivisation policy, declaring war on the rich peasants, or *kulaks* ("enemies of the people"), the immigrants began to fear for their lives. Soldiers plundered for food and harassed the men. When Franz Bargin, who had risen to become mayor of his village, learnt that there was a warrant out for his arrest, he knew he must leave immediately. That night, November 7, 1929, he fled with his wife, Liese, and their four young children, catching a  :

**AS MANY AS SIX DAYS WOULD PASS WITHOUT BREAD.
WHILE THEY FORAGED FOR SCRAPS,
THE PRISON GUARDS WOULD LAUGH AT THEM**

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Left: Jasch Regehr as a medical corps officer in the first world war



Below: Tina Regehr's drawing of the smelter she worked in, aged 12

train first to Moscow, then to Latvia. Knowing that police would be looking for him at the nearest station, he drove a horse and buggy through the fields to board the train further along the line. He was hoping that his sister Maria and her family would not be far behind. However, Maria, her husband, Jasch, and their six children had lingered. "They visited relatives for a farewell supper of goose and delayed their flight until the next morning," says Derksen Siemens. "By the time they got to the station, the police were waiting for them." They had not only eaten their goose, but cooked it, too.

While the authorities were closing in on Maria, Franz and his family were on their way to Moscow — and eventual freedom. Franz's face was on all the wanted posters, yet the official who signed his exit papers failed to recognise him. His family could now board a train for Latvia. "Even then they could not be sure that they would not be turned back at the border," she adds. "Plenty of trains got redirected away back to the east and the passengers were never seen again." But the refugees did reach the border, leaving the hammer and sickle of the Red Gate behind. The Bargins travelled first to Germany, then to Canada. Frank could not know that his train was among the last to roll out of Moscow into Latvia that December of 1929. He had escaped the long reach of Stalin by a few hours. And neither, at least not for a time, would he know anything of the terrors awaiting his sister back home.

Packed into cattle trucks with hundreds of other prisoners, Maria and her family were transported for five days to the first of a series of labour camps in the Urals. The family of eight — six children aged 2 to 19 — had to share a space 5ft-square in freezing barracks. To begin with, the younger children were allowed to attend school, but the older three had to work. Liese, 19, and Mariechen, 15, toiled in mines, while Peter, 17, was forced to march miles away to chop wood. Conditions in the camps were inhuman. Bread was often rationed to 100 grams per person per day, though more could be bought

by earning food coupons. As Maria's letters recount, the family survived by dipping black bread in mustard, boiling up stinging nettles and eating worms. Cabbage soup was a treat, as was

watery millet. They had no proper clothing to protect them from the cold; their shoes, wholly inadequate for the sub-Arctic conditions, were made of felt or straw. "What has happened in this Red Paradise?" asked Jasch of Stalin's much-vaunted social reforms. "It is a slave trade! It is slavery as it has never been before!" Yet, he noted, "the entire world keeps silent". Perhaps the most poignant letter shows a drawing by 12-year-old Tina. She sketched the smelter where she stoked the furnace for over 10 hours a day. For that slave labour, she wrote, she got a "bigger piece of bread".

Sorrow was heaped upon sorrow, yet the writers never succumbed to despair. As Derksen Siemens says, "There was always the hope that they would be released one day. And the thought

of their loved ones living abroad and praying for their deliverance sustained them." They endured constant harassment from Stalin's police, the NKVD, who would round up men for interrogation and beatings. Women could never know if they would see their menfolk again. Both Jasch and Peter, the oldest son, were taken away for long periods to labour elsewhere. "Oh where are those beautiful golden times that we once enjoyed?" wrote Jasch in 1933, shortly before his death of malnutrition, aged 48. In another, he asked: "Remember us as we remember you." The letters stopped, without explanation, in 1937. Did the underground network fail? Was it too risky to write? Their ordeal would continue until after the death of Stalin in 1953: toiling in coal mines, digging out tree stumps from the frozen ground. As many as six days would pass without

bread, and while they foraged for scraps, the prison guards would laugh at them. In 1938 Peter, aged 24, was taken away and never seen again. Maria was arrested on trumped-up charges of arson, beaten and kept in solitary confinement for weeks. Signing a forced confession, she was reunited with her children 18 months later.



their release came with the second world war: Soviet leaders had other priorities. In 1947, the family was sent east to Kyrgyzstan, then part of the Soviet Union. Prisoners of the state until 1956, they were never

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allowed to return home. Living in exile and extreme poverty, Maria died in the east in 1976. After Eastern Europe's reforms in 1989, Liese, Mariechen and Lena were permitted to emigrate from Kyrgyzstan to Germany. Three days before she was due to leave, Liese died; Lena and Mariechen settled in Cologne. Tina, who had

married a Russian national, stayed.

At the end of their lives, the surviving sisters wanted the world to know their story. To forget their loved ones, they believed, would be a kind of betrayal. Hearing the letters had turned up, Lena was overjoyed. She took up her pen again in 1989 to write to Peter Bargaen, the cousin in Canada she had last seen 60 years earlier: "Such great waves of sorrow have swept over us that at times we cannot even remember it all. One forgets in time." The correspondence resumed, but the Bargaen and Regehr cousins never saw each other again; Peter Bargaen died in 2004, and Lena, last of the six siblings, in 2008. Their days together of laughter and play were a distant memory, fixed for ever in 1929 ■

Remember Us, by Ruth Derksen Siemens, published by Pandora Press, is available from BooksFirst at £22 including p&p. Tel: 0870 165 8585

**THEY SURVIVED BY DIPPING BLACK BREAD IN MUSTARD,
BOILING UP NETTLES AND EATING WORMS.
CABBAGE SOUP WAS A TREAT, AS WAS WATERY MILLET**

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Right: Mennonites leave
Ukraine, circa 1925

Below: a pleading card
from Jasch Regehr Sr

