

*Letters of a Mennonite Couple: Nicolai and Katharina Rempel. Russia: War and Revolution 1914-1917.* Introduced and edited by Teodor Rempel. Translated by Teodor Rempel with Agatha Klassen. Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2014. 246 pp.

Book review by Robert Martens

In 1956 Teodor Rempel took leave from his teaching position in California to spend ten days in Canada at the bedside of his dying father, Nicolai. Much of their conversation focused on the Mennonite family history of the father, and for the son the experience was occasionally difficult. “It was an attempt to become reconciled, to try to understand what had happened between us and why I had become so alienated from my Mennonite roots” (ix). A day before Teodor returned to the United States, his father handed him two bundles of letters tied together by twine. It turned out that there were 350 letters in total, and that nearly all of them belonged to a series of correspondences between a very young Nicolai and his wife, Tina, between 1914 and 1917.

Over the following three and a half decades the letters remained in storage, neglected except for sporadic readings by family members. Then in 2007 Teodor Rempel and his wife joined the Mennonite Heritage Cruise in Ukraine. Teodor had brought the letters with him and showed them to the cruise lecturer Paul Toews, historian and archivist at Fresno Pacific University. Toews suggested that the letters be archived and perhaps published. Teodor Rempel subsequently took on the task of translating and editing the entire letter collection; Agatha Klassen helped with those letters that were written in traditional German Gothic script, which can be impenetrable for those accustomed to standard Western handwriting.

For Teodor Rempel, the translation effort was bittersweet. “To revisit parents long after they are gone is a privilege few people have” (x). Rempel had long felt a profound alienation from his ethnic history, having left the Mennonite milieu which he felt was “exclusionary.” Still, when he entered the secular community, he felt “ill at ease there also with its social behavior and code” (xii). He and his father had been wrenched apart by their quarrels over Mennonite religion and culture: the father’s insistence on staying within the tradition and the son’s determination to leave it. “[H]e asked me to forgive him for the wrongs he had done me. Was placing the letters in my trust his way of forgiving me for the pain I had caused him?” (xii)

In pre-revolutionary Russia, Mennonites had been granted the right to reject military service in exchange for work in the forests or, during the First World War, for service as medics to the wounded. In 1914 Nicolai Rempel, a young man in his twenties, left his wife, Tina (Katharina), and three children, as well as his beloved home village of Schoenfeld, to work as a medic on Russian trains carting the wounded back from the war front. He was one of about seven thousand Mennonite men to be recruited as medics. Over the next few years, Nicolai and Tina exchanged letters that are deeply intimate, revealing a marriage that was sometimes on the edge of breakdown. They portray their world from the perspective of two frail individuals living ordinary and yet extraordinary lives; they tell their stories of mundane daily existence as well as of the horrors of war; and in their eyewitness accounts, the momentous events of a revolutionary time spring vividly to life.

The first year of published letters, 1914, are all authored by Nicolai; Tina’s letters for that year have been lost. Nicolai tells of his induction, of rumours of Russian victories and his own proud patriotism, of youthful bravado and careless pranks – and then the reality of the war sets in. He is soon working thirty-hour shifts and more, and tells of feeling unspeakably fatigued. He is growing up very quickly. “A freight train had just pulled up next to ours with approximately

1,000 wounded soldiers, who lay in filthy freight cars terribly overcrowded. ... There were no heaters in those freight cars and it was cold. The wounded men had built fires directly on the floors, never mind the smoke that filled the car. These poor fellows just wanted to be warm. There were no bedsteads; the floors were covered with horse manure. For four days they had eaten nothing. When we gave them the bread, they devoured it as ravenously as wild animals. You simply can't imagine it" (18-19). Again and again Nicolai complains about the incompetence of those in administration, unable to provide proper care for the wounded and seemingly indifferent to their plight. At the same time, he is feeling that time spent outside the insular world of the Mennonite colonies is somehow freeing. Of his friends who may be inducted, he writes, "It will be good for many of them if they get away from home for a while" (25).

Tina's letters, saved from 1915 on, tell a different story altogether: the stresses of screaming children, helping with the family business, doing the chores and housework, quarrelling with family. "I am losing weight and I don't know why. I guess it may be because I am worrying so often about the future, what it will bring" (55). Later she writes of her listlessness: "Sometimes I have the feeling that I am not worthy in God's eyes. Then nothing seems to matter. I feel as though I really don't know how to train our children" (125).

Meanwhile, Nicolai is continually haranguing his wife to write more often and more extensively – and in the letters that follow upon these tantrums, he invariably apologizes. Although the couple long for each other's presence, the relationship is straining under the weight of separation. A kind of anxiety disorder is afflicting Nicolai, quite understandable – and common – under the circumstances. Some of the couple's most intense moments occur in 1915. Tina first writes of her love: "Well, I find it hard to express how very much I love you. At times I have such a strong yearning for you that I don't know what to do. That's how it is when one is married" (91-92). Nicolai replies: "I really have begun to notice how numbed I have become to the voice of God: how powerless my prayers are. ... Everything seems cold and numb in and around me, cold and hard as stone. When, but when, will this ever change? We have been torn from each other without mercy or love" (93).

The marriage, however, endures. Tina continues to send her husband – when she can – coffee and butter, seemingly indispensable to the Mennonite palate.

In 1916, Nicolai is reassigned to administrative duty in Moscow. Revolutionary fervour is mounting, and Nicolai is swept along with it. Like many young men and women, he is reacting to the perceived oppressiveness of life at home. The people of Schoenfeld, he writes, "look on us here as though we are little children who still need the guiding hand of the old fogies. That time, thank God, is past. For some three years now, we medics have looked on in dismay and disgust as we have been betrayed and lied to by the very men whom we looked to as our leaders – those who said to us when we were conscripted, 'Brothers, go out in joy. We will look after your families. They shall lack nothing.' How shamefully they deceived us whenever possible" (176-177).

Nicolai has become an activist, marching in the street with protesters and listening admiringly to political speeches. "If you stand back in objective judgment," he writes, "and ask isn't the worker a human being just like his master? Why should he exist in subservience all his life and be debased through his labor and reap no benefit? You must conclude that this situation is inexplicable and that the worker would be justified if he were to rise up in indignation and claim his right by brute force" (184). Tina responds that she shares his disgust for the rich Mennonite elite, the estate owners. It is not long, however, before food shortages afflict Moscow,

random violence escalates, and a “massive despondency” (205) descends on the city. Nicolai’s enthusiasm for the revolution quickly evaporates. And here the letters end.

Teodor Rempel’s book could have used some better proofing, as spelling and grammatical glitches are not uncommon. In this volume of letters, though, he has provided a moving account of how two quite ordinary human beings cope with the stresses of war, hunger, loneliness, and political violence. Near the end of the book, Rempel describes his ambivalence over publishing letters that so openly demonstrate Nicolai’s unjust outbursts of temper and Tina’s grating sense of inadequacy. But the letters also bear witness, he says, to the couple’s self-sacrificial love and care for others. “If that were all these letters show,” writes Rempel, “publishing them would not be justified. However, they do show more than that. ... They reveal the utter stupidity that ignited and fueled the war that consumed millions of lives. ... If these letters induce us to work as diligently, as tirelessly, against war as war demands of us, then, I believe, Tina and Nicolai would consent to opening these letters for all to read” (220).

*Letters of a Mennonite Couple* can be purchased at the MHSBC office.