

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.”
Ecclesiastes 11:1

After Many Days

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Some details have been added, but the main events of this story happened in communist Russia in the early 1900s. Aaron Rempel's family lives in California today.

Near the Russian city of Gnadenfeldt¹ lived a Mennonite farmer named Aaron Rempel. Aaron owned a large farm, and forests so rich in game that the Czar Nikolai II often came from Moscow just to hunt on his estate. Aaron always tried to obey God and to love his fellow man. His motto was, “I can only do as God leads me,” and he sought in every situation to live by it.

One day, Aaron Rempel walked into Gnadenfeldt to transact some business. It was 1917, the year that the Bolshevik revolution spread to southern Russia, coming at last to Gnadenfeldt. The communist Bolsheviks killed many wealthy landowners and divided their estates among the local peasants. After six months of revolution, the government army had managed to rout the communists. Bolshevik soldiers were rounded up and exiled to Siberia.

Aaron had stopped at the grocer's on his way home and bought some treats for his wife and children. Leaving town, he walked past a long line of livestock cars sitting on the railroad tracks. He heard groans and curses coming from within the train. The slat-sided cars were full of Bolsheviks waiting to be taken to exile in Siberia.

“Sir,” a voice cried out from one of the cars, “Sir! We are so hungry. We have not eaten anything all day. Give us some food!”

Aaron climbed the **embankment** and took from his sack the dry sausage he had bought for his wife. He placed it in the hand reaching through the slats. The hand disappeared within the car, but immediately stretched out again.

¹ Gnadenfeldt: (gnä' den felt)

“Have you any more, sir?”

“Here!” Aaron said, handing loaves of warm white bakery bread to the hungry man.

Then he emptied his sack of cheeses, pastries, and fruit. Within the dark railroad car he heard the sounds of greedy eating.

“May God bless you,” Aaron said.

“Thank you,” returned the mysterious voice. “Thank you, thank you.”

Aaron went home empty-handed, but when he explained to his wife and children what had happened, they all praised Aaron for giving to their enemies, as Christ has commanded. That night they read from Matthew’s Gospel, where Christ says, “I was hungry and you gave me to eat.”

The government’s armies continued for several months to punish the Bolsheviks, but then the Bolsheviks again gained the upper hand. Thousands of poor Russian peasants joined the Bolsheviks — **allured** by the prospect of free land. They seized large farms and estates. All across Russia they burned barns and houses, and either murdered or arrested the landowners.

The Bolsheviks came to Aaron Rempel’s farm. Soldiers pounded on the door, and Aaron opened it, inviting them to come in. The communists shouted at Aaron and his family. One **intimidated** them with a rifle, and another waved a big knife at the children. Aaron did not resist, so rather than killing the Rempels, the Bolsheviks marched the whole family into Gnadenfeldt, and there forced them to climb into a livestock car. Other wealthy farmers from Gnadenfeldt and even Aaron’s own brothers and their families were crammed together into the slat-sided cars. After a short while, the train lurched northward, and Aaron knew that they were being exiled to the distant plateau of central Siberia.

Siberia is two weeks’ train ride from the southwestern corner of Russia. Many people died during the long journey. Children lost their parents, and mothers watched their babies die in their arms. But Aaron’s family managed by God’s grace to arrive safely in Irkutsk,² north of the Mongolian border on the shores of Lake Baikal.

The communists sent thousands of “undesirables” to Siberia, so Aaron’s neighbors were a mix of fellow Mennonite farmers, former officials of the republican government, and criminals thought too petty to be

² Irkutsk: (ir kütšk’)

bothered with in the Soviet prisons of the west. A communist government was set up, and people were put to work in factories and forests; but most lived in poverty, plagued by hunger, sickness, and despair.

But Aaron Rempel did not waste time feeling sorry for himself. Neither did he while away his hours with the other exiles, complaining about their conditions and cursing the new government. Aaron began to think. *What is it that people need in this awful place? What work is there for my sons and me to do? How can we keep busy?*

One morning as the Rempel family was eating breakfast, one of Aaron's sons began to complain about the cold. People spent a great deal of their time just trying to keep warm.

"It gets down into your bones!" he grumbled. "It's all right if you can stand by the fire, but as soon as you get out in the wind you might as well have one coat as three, for all the protection three coats offer!"

"What I wouldn't do for a flask of good hot tea on days like today," another son dreamed. But the Rempels had not seen a cup of hot tea since they left Gnadefeldt.

"Tea!" Aaron's face lit up. That was it. Tea! If only he could lay his hands on some tea, he was sure he could sell every sprig.

A neighbor came the next day and asked Aaron if he would like to ride along with him to Kyakhta, a town on the Mongolian border. Kyakhta lies on the road to Ulan Bator, and Mongolian traders from the capital city come there to sell their goods to the Russians. The neighbor had business to conduct in the government office there.

Aaron was glad to go along. After a few hours' journey by train, they arrived. Aaron decided to wait in the marketplace while his neighbor spoke with the commissar.

The Kyakhta market was filled with unusual goods from the Mongolian plateau: yak skins and ponies, goat hides and camel furs. But it was a vendor set up in an alleyway who caught Aaron's attention. "Tea!" the man was shouting, first in Mongolian, then in Russian. "Chinese tea for sale!" Beside his table sat two large sacks filled with loose tea leaves.

Aaron bought the merchant's whole supply of tea and arranged to meet him again in one month to buy more. The Mongol agreed, and Aaron returned happily to Irkutsk.

The tea sold more quickly than Aaron had imagined, and soon he and his sons were buying tea from several Mongolian traders and distributing their goods as far away as Kezhma, three hundred miles north. Once again, they were happy, their hands occupied with good work.

However, one of Aaron's neighbors was a bitter man who, before the revolution, had been mayor of a small city near Gorky. This man watched enviously as Aaron's family prospered in exile.

"The communists will not like you to be engaged in private enterprise!" he warned Aaron Rempel.

"But a man must find a way to support his family," Aaron said.

The following week a loud pounding at midnight roused Aaron from a deep sleep. He stumbled sleepy-eyed to the door. Opening it, he discovered the **impassive** faces of two policemen. They took Aaron away to jail in his nightclothes.

Soviet justice moved slowly, especially in the frontier areas of Siberia. Aaron spent weeks pacing back and forth in a cold, dirty jail cell before at last his trial date was set. Then he was released for a time to return home, since the jailer had given the judge his guarantee that Aaron would not run away.

The day of his trial arrived. Aaron was charged with "capitalistic activities against the Supreme Soviet" – the national government of the Soviet Union. A guilty verdict was punishable either by death or by imprisonment in the far eastern part of Siberia, a frozen wasteland extending to the Arctic Ocean.

The trial was simple. Aaron had engaged in illegal capitalistic activities – privately selling tea. His neighbor, the former mayor, took the witness stand against Aaron. The police **confirmed** that they had found a large quantity of tea in Aaron's house. He was guilty. He would be sentenced on March 4, in three weeks.

Aaron did not worry about the sentencing. He only dreaded separation from his wife and children. He knew his brothers, who lived near Irkutsk, would care for his family if he were sent to prison. Calmly he resigned the outcome to God and gently encouraged his family: "We can only do as God leads us. Let us wait and see what we receive from His hand."

On the day of the sentencing trial, Aaron sat on a backless bench with several other prisoners. He watched the judge **dispassionately** hand

down sentences to the men who came before him: fifty years in an eastern Siberian prison, life in Siberia, death by hanging.... The judge read the awful condemnations as though he were checking off a list of items needed at the hardware store.

Finally the clerk called Aaron Rempel. The clerk repeated the charge and the verdict: guilty. The judge was about to rattle off the sentence, when he looked up for the first time at the man before him. His eyes narrowed on the tea criminal. Aaron thought there was a look of especial scorn in them.

"What do you have to say about this serious crime?" the judge asked.

"I thought it was right to provide for my own household," Aaron said, "and I can only do as God leads me."

The judge stared at Aaron. "Where have we met?" he demanded.

"I do not believe I have ever seen you before, sir," Aaron replied.

"But I have seen you," the magistrate insisted. For a moment he thought, and then: "Were you ever in Gnadenfeldt?"

"Why, yes, I was born there and spent my whole life in Gnadenfeldt, before I was exiled to Irkutsk."

"Do you remember one night speaking with a prisoner in a cattle car?"

"Why, yes," Aaron said. *How does this judge know about that?* "I gave the man a little food, because he said he was hungry."

"I was that man," said the judge. "I was so hungry. You did not have to do anything for me, but you gave me your food to eat."

Aaron waited, hearing only the sound of the wind sweeping past the windows. At last the judge spoke, "What would you like me to do for you, comrade Rempel? I can give you immigration papers – where would you like to go, America?"

"Yes, to America," Aaron said, adding quickly, "And, sir, would you provide papers for my family, as well? For my brothers and their families?"

"Yes!" the judge said. "Whatever you wish. I will do whatever I can for the man who fed me when I was so hungry."

And so Aaron and his family emigrated to America. There they lived in freedom; and there Aaron continued to do as God led him.