

# **Letters from Russia**

**By Dave Olson**

## Note to Readers

What follows is a collection of letters (albeit ostensibly) written by Henri LaFleur - a cobbler in the French army during the Russian campaign of 1812 - to Genevieve Vaschon, his fiancé in Paris.

Henri's fourteen letters offer his observations on the physiology of war, as well as discourse and personal sentiments on love, war, society, politics, and meaning of self. The accompanying landscapes give a sense of his search for solace and release in the surrounding chaos of war.

The letters were sent over an eight-month period beginning in Austria and moving through Prussia, Poland and into Russia. First with battles in Smolensk and Borodino, then fires and pillaging in Moscow, and finally the well-documented November retreat.

The final letter in the correspondence was sent on retreat near the Berezin Bridge at which location during three days, much of the remaining French army perished into the icy river while attempting crossing of the bridge. Others were stranded in on the Russian side with the pursuing Cossack troops when the retreating French army destroyed the bridge behind them.

As it were ... the collection of letters, along with a variety of sketches and paintings, was found bound and stored in an attic trunk, as per Henri's written request before leaving Moscow. There is no further verifiable historical information to confirm Henri's return home though regional folklore contends that he indeed survived and lived a long life in a small village near the sea with his dear Genevieve.

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Dave Olson  
Summer 2004  
Manzanita Oregon

April 6, 1812  
Encamped near Vienna, Austria

Cher Genevieve,

I have only been gone for less than two weeks but already I miss you more than I thought I would after many long months! We can only hope my duty goes quickly so to return to you soon. For this, we'll trust Napoleon's judgement.

After the hurried wagon trip, I've met up with my unit in a beautiful part of Austria. I've attempted a sketch to give you a sense of place. With the high mountain altitude come waves of late blooming wildflowers of every lavender and purple, gold, orange & the lovely blue of your eyes - glowing like patina on copper. Soaring peaks frosted with the immaculate sheen of ice.

As it is, there is little evidence of recent or impending war. The towns are lively and efficient and the people cordial considering the manner in which the French arrived! At the camp, there is a methodically, tense routine of preparing equipment & provisions of all manner. You know I do not fit well into routine and early mornings but I will make do.

As for my unit, I'll be traveling with a supply wagon along with a few others, a tailor Maurice; he tends to all uniforms for officers, both mending and outfitting. He somehow doesn't look the part - stout and chubby-fingered. He has a cynical wit and an easy wink. He remembers names and tells stories about fishing in rowboats with his uncle, a preacher in Arles. Besides M. is Eugenio, wiry and always smoking. He is also older than most everyone I've seen in camp and turns out he fought with Italy against Napoleon but now is conscripted as a painter, obliged to produce portraits of corpulent generals and grand scenes of battle. He knows well the history of the each campaign and seems unimpressed by the eager anticipation of orders.

Everyone assumes we are soon bound for Russia, combining with the northern troops to form one Grand Army. This alone should be enough for Russia's Czar Alexander to come to terms - ending this campaign and sending me back to your arms in just a few months of spring and summer. Even if we move into Russia, we will surely be returning well before winter.

Such a schedule will give me time to open up a cobbler shop of my own and marry you next Spring. I am glad we told your parents of our plans before I left - though they weren't as surprised as we thought! (Of course send my regards and best wishes to them.) But for now, I am bound by the wishes of Napoleon through the orders written for the day. The soldiers never question and maintain a sense of urgency to seize their place history. This is Napoleon's skill, a genius ability to motivate the troops with promises of glory, the causes of the revolution, importance of spreading French culture and our civil code throughout a united Europe. I must admit some reservations about the need of bringing Russia into our Grand Republic but I will leave such decisions to more seasoned minds. I can only trust the motives are not driven by ego. We can only

hope for sound judgement and that the state does not exceed the bounds of what can be expected from a citizen.

You and I (and so many others) will be the harvesters of the rich new, country. Rich in spirit, filled with light and truth.

I am eager to live in this France – a France as ideal as we believe it can be - where the unjustness of class and privilege at birth is eradicated. Where fair courts and laws bring sense and equality from the arbitrary whims of unfit monarchs. A country where virtue is celebrated and honesty replaces corruption. Please know that when I return, you, your family and our community will know I did my part to build this Republic - for us and our children and grandchildren.

Yours,  
Henri

April 8, 1812  
Encamped near Vienna, Austria

Cher Genevieve,

Again, I spent all day gazing at clouds while I wandered the camp, thinking of you and us. Remembering long lunches in second-story cafes, peeking below at passers-by, guessing the stories, Where they are going? What do they do? Their secrets, or their names.

Thinking of our future, perhaps a small country house where you'll teach at a school & I'll go bald & tend to radishes. Or maybe I will grow my shop and train apprentices, but honestly, I am not sure I want to force a profession on someone unless it is what they want to do. Rather I want to be the one who encourages others to find their essential nature, to explore their desires and predilections without shame. Honestly to make their way in the world without hindrance, fear or influence from Church or State.

Being from a merchant family, I am awkwardly struck between the so-called nobles, clergy and other suckling wastefully from the labors of others, - and those others being the peasants reduced to shame by the "sin-king" who shone nothing but scorn for those who produced the wealth of France. But neither class care for the trader and crafters, both fearing and envying our limited political influence. No matter, such a world is not mine to decide.

Though I have endless choices before me, I know only one choice to make and that is you. You Genevieve, you are the joy that sustains me, the antidote for the venom of fear.

With the vigor of our love, I will keep safe in my tasks so as to return to you whole.

Affectionately, H.

April 15, 1812  
En route in Austria

Mon Cheri Genevieve,

We are on the move now, a tremendous length of soldiers on foot, trudging with their packs and sleek polished weapons. Other plumed in comical hats, proud on horses that seem indifferent to the rank of their riders and more impressed with their importance.

Since my letter last, the camp became a flurry of activity as we readied to move through Austria quickly on into Prussia, Poland, then Russia who continue to allow British ships into port despite N.'s blockade.

Austria, now defeated again will march along with us, with the Italians, Dutch, Polish and more forces from twenty European countries unified under France. I wonder how they feel about their conscription by an enemy. But, such things are not discussed, dissent is grounds for persecution and ridicule ~ my aim is to avoid both and thus, consider my thoughts alone.

My hope is N. will not drag this campaign deep into Russia for my own selfish reasons, that of keeping me far away from your slender, giving arms for any longer than absolutely needed for the great of the Republic.

It is you that is important to me!

Yours,  
Henri

April 25, 1812  
Somewhere in Austria, en route to Prussia

My Sweet Genevieve,

When the corporal told me of a letter from Paris, I was overjoyed! Ah, to read the first words from you since that morning which now seems so long ago. I remember you in daisy yellow dress blowing me kisses all way until disappeared. Me standing atop the carriage 'til you faded from view.

Now I see you in my dreams and in my waking hours, chestnuts the color of your hair, the deep endless lake blues of your eyes, you pouting lips breaking easily into laughter. Oh for those days to come again an soon! Our love will snap us together over so many muddy miles. I, if you'll allow me, must admit that I value you as a friend as much as a woman, my lover, my wife to-be, you are my confidant, my gentle lover & rambunctious friend. You are my comforting presence and make me feel loved and mighty. You, the memory of you, the dreams of you - remembering you each time I smell fresh lemons or see the daffodils growing by each stream we cross. You offer me reason to come home, you are my source of hope in those tumultuous times.

Oh, but life is not so bad as we travel. I ride in the wagon with Maurice and Eugenio. We know we are fortunate and work hard, even en route. The wagon has heavy cloth sides & canopy to protect our supplies and we often stop away from most of the other troops so to enjoy the countryside. I've taken to sketching and using E.'s watercolors. He paints in oils but allows me to watch him with my good natured (I hope) ramblings. I'll enclose a few of my attempts to give you a sense of the local environs.

We move quickly through villages of only a few shops and houses, across fields of wheat with farmers looking much the same as home. A couple of oxen, a small barn, chickens vegetables. They look on ~ deciding how to feel, it seems. Their home and environs are important to them, no matter who sits in power. It their surroundings and 'home', more than 'homeland' or king, they would fight for. Let us hope that they are allowed in peace. We should all be so lucky - all of us I mean - to have a piece of land that we reap the whole of our labors from. Free to exchange our efforts for a result of our choice without encumbrance or malice. I hope this is what our revolution brings to Russia.

Always,  
H.

May 25, 1912  
Somewhere in Poland, en route to Warsaw

Cher Genevieve,

Today is the third rainy day in a row & heaviest yet. You know, I tend to like the overcast days with promise of rain and the smells that follow and even these days, I quite like the pattern & drama of nature. The troops grumble and I don't share my comfort as unlike most, of course I ride in the wagon assigned to our small unit. In fact, as I write I ride on the frontboard with Maurice who I mentioned earlier, he drives the horses and I hunker down trying to keep my notes to you dry - aside from my tears!

I am kidding somewhat, but I admit my longing to be entwined with your long white fingers, watching your tiny, almost round ears bounce as you laugh. You are to me the essence of the modern woman, free to be, strong and taken the effort to educate yourself rather than idly gossiping in salons with boorish and trite crones who act as though they alone run the Republic! But you, my sweet, not only do you thrill me with your beauty but also your humor, the way you make me laugh no matter my malaise. The way you instinctively know how to make me whole in spirit, to believe in our chances - ours and our world's, France's and our corner of Paris, my shop, your school, the museums, the theatres, the libraries, the cafes.

As promised - per your request - I will include more observations of the day to day routine of military life. As you know, my role is unique and my duty not typical of these men. But it being what I know - and for that matter, no one else knows my experiences - I'll put forth a few notes to try to show you my moving world while the images are still fairly fresh ~ like blank paper.

First, I am surprised by the quick pace and progress by which we move across the countryside. The marches are long but the soldiers and the supply caravans et al seem to move as a single unit with a sort of collective consciousness moving the head. Of course, there are orders and officers and marshals directing the flow on a specific schedule, but to my vantage point, I feel the army would move on its own volition and end up in the same place at about the appointed time, without any direction. You could conjecture a comparison to water finding a mountain drainage, or the heart pumping blood, but will have such consideration to you.

Next, the sheer size of moving this many men to do battle elsewhere seems like an unproductive effort considering the expenses and effort. I can't help but wonder how this vast number of men will be needed for a battle and how no other option was devised of that eliminate this parade of lost potential. How could this massive swarm be put to better use building some device or method to better humankind? Do such advances in science or design of mechanism not spirit liberal reforms the way a revolution might? I think that leisure and time to learn begets the seeds of revolutionary thought. The method of the revolutionary action however, must be chosen with a sense of what is best for a greater number of people. With this in mind, we should seek to enter as friends if we hope to benefit from the great cost of lives already expended.

This leads to a third brief topic of the wisdom of the blockades of British goods at ports in the greater French Empire. Any parent will tell you that as soon as you instruct a child not to do something, immediately they wonder how they might do this condemned action. When ports are closed, several things occur, ... 1) a black-market develops for English goods whether brought in English boats in quasi-secrecy on exchanged offshore on local ships, and 2) the closer of the ports (N. in this case) leaves a gaping hole in which his resolve & power can be tested. The moral sentiment can erode & change flow quickly when people are denied items to which they are accustomed or are denied the freedom to exchange their labor (in form of goods) which whom they choose.

The point I don't mention is the boost to the sanctioned economy, providers in France and its environs may well sell an increase in demand. But this is a panacea and as artificial supported, will collapse. To close my observations, I suggest that open trade in goods results in increased knowledge, understanding, communication & trade, ultimately resulting in (hopefully) peaceful progressive reform.

As ever,  
Henri

June 24, 1812  
Bivouacked near the Neiman River, border of Prussia and Russia

Mon Sweet Genevieve,

At last I have a chance to drop you a note which will have a chance to find you. I am fortunate in that I am able to gain a few favors for delivery that would be unavailable to most. The news does seem to travel fast in general. Indeed, a lame horseman can travel faster than this huge mass of humanity. We have met with the rest of the Army and Napoleon himself has arrived. He ensures everyone know that he is here & here to lead. He rides the ranks as we camp making final preparations to go into Russia.

Once we cross the Neiman into Russia, I expect the day-to-day of traveling and repairing boots will change, I just don't know how. Though this is the military, I don't carry a gun despite teasing from Maurice, Eugenio and the others. Honestly, I think they (the guns) are more for a show of power and makes them feel that they are in-stead with the other fighting men despite that we are in a non-combative role. "Self preservation," they said, but honestly I just am not sure we would have the presence of mind to shoot another even under the direst of circumstances. Could I look in someone's eyes as his fears flash through and pull a trigger to implant a hard orb of metal into his being with the aim of finality to his existence? But, is his life more important than my own?

In reality, I hope that I can avoid such circumstances, as well as staying out of harms way in general. I can also hope that diplomacy can carry the day and we return across this River with nary a shot fired. I cannot honestly say I expect such a simple resolution. Now you'll pardon my treasonous speech for a moment but ... while fixing boots for some General of such and such, ... he was discussing the Treaty at Tilsit signed by N. and Czar Alexander last year.

Of course, when France heard the news of Russia's concessions, we thought it had been inevitable and even our privilege to bring our Empire to them by their compromise. We lauded N. as 'great' and 'brilliant' for the advantages he took. But, in listening to the General recount this event, I thought about the Russians and how such talks would strengthen their resolve to fight for pride, as it would ours if the role of history were reversed.

The monarch and generals agitate one another to frenzy then, send in innocent pawns as food for a hungry bear or lion. I applaud the role of diplomacy to resolve disputes but such negotiations must not take advantage of a simpler, or daresay less sophisticated thinker. If you are espousing a virtuous and honest republic where equality reigns, you must start at the highest levels.

We must espouse a virtuous republic where honesty and virtue is held higher than expansionist desires, or even the love of one's country and the pride of culture. A republic where administrative efficiency trumps royal excess where we have both the right to own land and a responsibility to pay debts.

For my part, I attempt to undertake my daily affairs in a fair and honest manner, giving my entire effort into all I do, despite the humbleness of my tasks.

Honestly,  
Henri

July 28, 1812  
Near Drissa, Russia

Cher Genevieve,

Last night, at the fire with Eugenio, I asked, "Where will the battle be?" The air was anxiously quiet, - crackling fire and restless horses louder than still air.

"Here," he said. "It cannot be here, this is too peaceful a place for so many to die," I thought. I was wrong.

They call them small battles but I see now the method of war and am awake to the pain and embarrassed by the honor of countries who care so little for their sons that they would ever subject them to this reckless risk of death. This action, while merely counted numbers of units to a general or king, mean the everything for the counted, their families, their children ~ they and we are all victims.

Such waste is unforgivable; a moral travesty and make mockery of our (alleged) ability to reason as civilized humans. I fear the killing and the dying, I do not want to kill and go so far as to say I am incoherent as to why anyone would - save for the immediate attack to one's family or self.

I fear that in this expansionist campaign, we may lose our freedoms - both mentally and politically, if even are able to save our lives.

Continually yours,  
H.

August 12, 1812  
Smolensk, Russia

C. Genevieve,

Frightful days! We pursued the Russians as far as Smolensk where I witnessed a horrific sight, one hitherto unimaginable to my eyes or mind.

The sudden burst of activity coming closer, more focused, & our expressions turning maniacal with fear, resolve, and dare said - bloodlust. Oh the killing! While I expected (and thought I had steeled myself for), the battles, and the last week since crossing the River, I've seen several incidents, I underestimated we human's ability for waste and intolerable agony. The brutality stunned me raw and left an empty sickness, both physically and mentally. My basic human sensibilities are overwhelmed by how humans can ever consider, no matter the feud, to resolve to kill enough others to force submission and an acceptance of terms - a lifetime of dominance, no matter the form?

While the valley was wide, in the early morning when the troops thundered down and artillery resonated from hilltops and redoubts, the wide valley filled with bodies like milk poured from a pitcher. The dying! The dying is not gallant, nor precise. Bodies slashed, skewered and pummeled into capitulation, laid to suffer in muddy earth, hoping for horse hooves or errant cannonballs to end their writhing.

In the end the stills & quiet penetrated only by groans of these suffered through the day, the serious murmur of medics sorting bodies into ones that are left to die, and those carried by litter to live a little longer. No injury is small or slight. For most there is no surgery, those that are operated are fortunate to survive the cleavers and blinding pain of repair.

The dead lay everywhere like a mess to clean tomorrow, organs chopped like horsemeat, flesh oozing into revulsion. Lives flooding into nonexistence with a flash of metal. Each one, a life completed before a happy end. I should not presume other's sense of happiness but I contend that duty or honor is not a fair exchange for a life lost on a battlefield. No prestige is high enough a price. I resolve to be care with my every step and return to you whole in body and mind.

Yours completely,  
Henri

September 8, 1812  
Borodino, Russia

Cher Genevieve,

Comment ca va? For me, I am well as I could expect after the carnage I've witnessed the past weeks, but yesterday, the battle went on as waves of men met death as a flood, a race to escape this uncertainty. We continued further into Russia, the villages burned by the time we arrive, the looters scavenge like stray dogs. We meet no one they isn't killed or dying already. The Grand Army (of almost 600,000) of just a few weeks ago bears little resemblance to the haggard troops marching today. Each of these small skirmishes cost of a few thousand lives, each night's bivouac costs dozens more with disease or succumbing to injury. So many troops disappear I don't believe anyone really knows if their absence is desertion, sickness or lost in battle. This rhythm of death exploded yesterday and today each side has the audacity to claim victory. What vile victory do they claim when 40,000 Russians lay dead? Corpses yet to be collected, already rotting and mutilated - they fought, then they retreated towards Moscow. Some say we shouldn't chase further in the heart of Russia. I am inclined to agree but my reasons are selfishly personal rather than strategic. What good is a fight when 20,000 of my own French compatriots died in scant hours today?

'My' Army is half the size to the most optimistic eyes, but you; you are still so far away. I wonder what you are doing this moment? What will you do today, tomorrow? I see you going to your classes at the University - the mahogany wisps of your short-cropped hair catching sun as you move past the bright cafes, waving to a friend. I don't dare think of life at home much, the people, the places. Too much is so painful. Just, and only, of you.

"This separation somehow will make our life better and love stronger," I tell myself, though each day makes a bigger task to convince myself. Despite the constant rhythm of death, the soldiers keep up a remarkable spirit of obedience to the campaign. Indeed there is little doubt of the reasons for the invasion discussed (though murmurs of dissatisfaction more often arise about the rations!), nor the wisdom of Napoleon's motives. N. knows his regiments like children; he rides the lines greeting old soldiers like school chums. Part friend, part father, counseling, supporting with gilded words of honor at home - the rewards of victory, the respect & awe of the world, the supplication of the Russians, the praise in family. "I was at the battle at Borodino of Shervadino," "I defeated the monarchs." I've no regard for those who rule due to wealth & greed - stockpiling wealth over generations while the laborers of the country are relegated to poverty and scorn. These same farmers who now populate the infantry & are dying by hundreds and thousands. Beggars before but now equal - though, in that they are the poorest, only somewhat equal. But the democracy I dream of, benefits those most who understand it least, those who feel it the most, and are the very origins of democracy. Plato the Greek says, "democracy emerges when the poor win, kill or exile their opponents & give the rest civil rights and opportunities of office." Of these uneducated, 'salt of France,' Plato says "the mass of the people who earn their own living, take little interest in politics & aren't very well off. They are the largest class in a democracy and once assembled are supreme. I don't mean disrespect when speaking of their lack of

education. Indeed they are the impetus for change & the choke against democracy turning into tyranny.

For my part, I don't want to fight for freedom; I simply want to be free to be. While it seems all men at war would feel the abhorrence of fighting, the routine of waiting for orders & following orders provides a comfortable routine that appeals to a primal instinct in some soldiers. You can tell the one who live for the love of the fight. The confident exuberance they carry themselves with. The same as anyone might when going into an arena in which they know they can dominate. But I do not wish to be them nor do they wish to be me. I am here with the aim of returning safely to greedily savor the life in the New France, strolling with you, hand in hand, your cheek curling against my shoulder. You soul unguarded, sharing your secrets.

I want to live in a republic where we don't have time for war because we are too occupied celebrating love, spreading charity for kindness sake, creating music, making the cities beautiful & countryside spotted with healthy farms. Liberty to speak, to choose your vocation, religion & attain any station in life are the hallmarks of democracy.

I am not so naïve to think that greed will not creep in to undermine the benefits of all for the advancement of a few. It is clear that some humans will always proceed at a quicker pace, accumulating wealth & subsequent powers through skill, cunning, or random chance, or alas, from ill-gotten means from robbing to corruption - but a rule of law based on the will of the people is the best remedy I've heard. The challenge is how to effectuate a democracy without bloodshed? How to bring revolution without drawing sword & summoning cannon, sacrificing the dreams & limbs of thousands or millions. How to organize peasants & merchants with the collective interest leading the way over greed? Is it the job of our Army to bring this curriculum to a sovereign dominion?

Though I hold the ideals of the revolution in a lofty place, I would suggest that a republic refines & demonstrates a sublime model as a beacon and a lesson rather than delivering precepts by force. Such action is tyranny & corruption of the ethos of equality & liberty.

Should I feel guilty that I do not wish to fight? That I wish to bring change in a peaceful manner? Is it greedy that I desire these simple things? How is it that a hot bath or a cup of buttermilk is more important to me than the annexation of yet another country? Do I care more about 'us' than I care about the Poles, the Prussians, the Austrians, Russians, Italians? Must well all be homogenized to instill peace? Are we building tolerance & mutual dependence by installing Frenchmen to serve as administrators to be scorned by the people they are charged to lead?

When I think of freedom, I do not think of the groaning, bloody bodies strewn across a moist valley. No, I think of quiet mornings, tea outdoors, I think of 3 milk goats, a small vineyard. I dream of a small family of children who will never taste war but instead only joy & respect for the republic they live in. I imagine a hog each year, named but butchered for bacon through the winter. I imagine walks in the hills, a picnic lunch next to a field of cornflowers. Head to head, walking slowly together, the comfort of

companionship. Rousseau says 'Friendship, confidence, intimacy, tranquility of mind, how delicious are your seasonings!'

Like Jean Jacques, and most any other, I have always felt & declared that is impossible to describe true enjoyment. I feel I may find the words when at last I see you, your twinkling eyes and hair pushed back loosely waiting for me - the passage of time lost as I find you as I left you. Vibrant, triumphant & fond of me just for being me - and 'we' being able to be 'us' - alone and together. I will send this now as we are heading east tomorrow.

J'aime toi,  
Henri

Sept 11, 1812  
Near Fily, outside of Moscow

Oh my sweet Genevieve,

This dangerous wager with lives and spoils continues and the revulsion in me festers. After the hideous cruelty at Borodino, the army has reached a fever pitch as momentum pulls us to Moscow like a stormy outgoing tide - the deeper we move into Russia, the farther away I am from return to you. Oh why did we not stop in Smolensk or at the Neiman and call upon the strongest from each side to fight to decide the victor! Of course this folly of being strongest and 'most right' fills the armies (both I assume) or else there would be no reason to fight. It goes beyond the love of motherland, a love of victory, to a desire of belonging to something strong as though belonging to something 'right' as a vindication of one's existence and ability. The reward for them is not the institutions that bring order, culture & equality to a land, but rather the thirst for the revelry that follows a battle.

The dead are quickly forgotten, and understandably so, as is respect and decency in the thick & moist aftermath of battle - they (the fallen) are forgotten in the pillage, the rape, the murder & these spoils of our war which entice the most hitherto most-principled man - officer or soldier. Yet no thought is given to the humans their actions affect. The shock and rage that will burrow in each witness - each victim - as these allegedly civilized men loose themselves in pandemonium.

These decent French men - who at home may walk a mile to help a friend or bounce the most delicate baby on a knee while laughing - loose all thought of kindness, mercy, or respect for life. The villagers' lives or livelihoods are sacrificed simply because they were brave enough to abandon their homes to fire, or even stay and defend their small tract against a foreign country. For me, if I loose my kindness towards others, I shall be dead myself.

Though I sit here cold and alone, I am free. I can look at another person in the eyes and know, despite my army's power over them, I do not feel a conqueror and I will not harm them for they have done nothing to me. I am embarrassed of my nation, gluttonous on victory as we approach Moscow - the domes of cathedrals gleaming like a secret. What joy is being an uninvited guest, forcing a way in after killing thousands? I for my own self reject this violence if for no reason other than empathy for the thousands who flee even now into the night - the children & the old, lame, sick, insane. Even the sanest and most brutal of enemy soldiers does not deserve my wrath but my help ~ which I am rather helpless to give. I did give my coat to a wounded young man I found in the woods. He was shaking violently, his muddy clothing torn from explosion - I covered him with my wool coat before running to get a doctor or a litter. When I returned, my coat was stolen (as were his boots), and I was derided for my efforts by the staff as the boy was Russian.

Fervently,  
Henri

Sept. 30, 1812  
Moscow, French Russia

Cher Genevieve,

As you probably know, we are ensconced in Moscow, or what is left of it. The city of domes sits in a sooty wet pile of ash and destruction. I am still stunned at the results of the campaign and can only dream of seeing you again.

I pass the days avoiding disturbances and fending for my health and safety along with Maurice who continues to surprise me with his quick mind even more than his capable skills. People of all kinds are attracted to him and he seems to possess a natural ability towards leadership and decision making. He listens and makes choices that seem to please everyone without ever compromising his own judgement or ethics. He appears rough and his first comments upon meeting are usually terse and offhand - even insulting - yet somehow he draws people in. They want to know him. For me, he is a fortune. He gives me much needed grounding and a touchstone for the realities of this ordeal. He indulges my conversation - despite my lofty ideals or the idealistic chatter - and challenges my thinking with his point of view, the voice of the 'common man.' For one to think he can understand a social quandary in solitary state is foolish assumption. M's conversation helps me understand a contrary viewpoint - and to better collect my own reasoning so to express myself clearly.

But the most remarkable feature about Maurice is his refusal to take advantage of his skills & erstwhile power or influence, or at least in my presence. In this campaign I have seen so many drunk on power - earned or assumed - and wallowing in self-importance. The privileges of ranks and class, while abolished by the civil code, seem to live on in this military realm like some glue holding the masses together. The men gravitate towards the natural leaders - not the assigned ones - the brave lead, the appointed give orders and pontificate as to who distinguished himself the most, or best. But I do wonder if any are immune from the majestic influence of power to corrupt as I see even the most earnest submit to the easy treachery of opportunity. Is any man so uncommon that they can resist the temptation to manipulate? To wield their sword of power so often that at last they expose their great weakness? To go to the well one more time only to come up dry at the moment of greatest need? At what point does every man surrender himself into decadence? Succumb to injustice - turning pettiness into grounds for war? At what point does one move from liberator to tyrant?

I hesitate to say what I see happening here as such admittance will steal my last hopes.

Fondly,  
Henri

Oct. 11, 1812  
Moscow, Russian France

Cher Genevieve,

Again I write to you in haste after too long a month. The situation found here in Moscow has worsened greatly and we continue to live as captives rather than conquerors. I have scant reason to hope, but if only to hang onto my senses and precious sanity which has been abandoned so many here. The 'Grand Armie' looting, destroying, pillaging - decimated and surrendered to their basest, barest traits. Greed and fear rule this city of ashes, destroyed as a desperate hope for some, but fueled by the debauchery of ours. More than shaming themselves, they risk the common ability for survival as these winds & clouds grow in strength each day.

The Russians' Alexander continues to ignore N.'s letters of surrender, etc. How can he be blamed in mistrusting N.'s advances since the public scorn he felt after Tilsit and now the surrender of Moscow? Meanwhile, N. issues decrees to mitigate the suffering of the stragglers left here who aren't already shot or starved. Promises of kindness & benefit to any that come out of hiding & bring their vegetables or butter to market. What! Would anyone bring their labors to benefit a usurper of their lands? To them, he is no liberator or revolutionary. To them, he is not a brilliant general & able to fair administrator - he is a tyrant to them & to others, many of which serve in his army.

Save for famine or plague, there is no greater evil than occupation by an enemy, no matter how well mannered, jovial, cordial or able the enemy is. To spread a revolution or reform must be accomplished as a friend & with openness, sincerity and not at the sacrifice of so many lives. So many thousands of lives around me, reduced to animals - smashing greedily into each cellar, reducing grandeur into rubble. The discipline is gone - Napoleon does not command these hoarders. They are controlled only by their overwhelming desires for self-preservation regardless of means.

I however my love am determined to survive. I am cautiously preparing for the inevitable cold as I await a chance to simply live in peace again - but I fear there is no escape if not soon.

Anxiously,  
Henri

Oct. 20, 1812  
Leaving Moscow

Cher Genevieve,

I write with haste (tucked under a rug for a tarp) so I can send this note straight by messenger to you in Paris. We, since yesterday, have been ordered into retreat and as such are retracing (I assume) our route and trust only to hope that we survive. When it became clear we would not stay over winter in Moscow, the looting, pillaging & other monstrosities in the name of spoils erupted as these scavengers made away with every shiny trifle they could seize from anyone weaker - no matter their standing. I loathe the disgusting manner of how we humans can treat each other when exposed to the harsh certainty that death has eluded you so far and your chances may be up soon.

I will spare you details but will assure you of my preparedness I have made. I managed to cobble together the best pair of boots I could manage. I made two pairs giving one set to Maurice who obtained scraps of luxurious fur which I carefully sewed inside. The soles are double thickness and, in mine I placed some felt to prop and protect my limping leg somewhat. The outside leather is sealed with candle wax, I scuffed the leather to hide the quality lest some drunkard attempt to steal them - though it would require great force for me to surrender my boots - without which would mean certain peril in these treacherous conditions. I also have a warm coat (the heaviest I could find) and a supply of candles and dry tinder.

Now my sweet, please do not concern yourself unduly, but in seeing the savagery of death around me for so many months & knowing the inhospitable lands ahead, I must tell you two things and request one of you, in event I am unable to return.

To you, please know that no one has ever been loved more by anyone than I love you. You are fantastically adored & amazingly admired. You stir the very nature of my soul & fulfill me as a man and as a person. If I do not return to sit with you on the veranda drinking wine in the afternoon, please allow yourself to find someone else to spend glorious days with. Please do not settle! Any suitor must be worthy and aware of your refinements, intelligent and vigorous spirit.

For me, please bind these letters and store them somewhere safe in hopes that one day my discourse may help another generation avoid such madness.

Forever yours,  
Henri

November 27, 1812  
Near Berezin Bridge, Russia

My sweet Genevieve,

It has been a journey of horrific proportions since I last was able to chance a letter.

The cold is equaled only by the depravity of desperate humans in its numbing pain. And yesterday, my friend Maurice joined the untold thousands of dead - scattered, abandoned aside the muddy cart path, deep-rutted in the frozen earth. Littered with wreckage - dead horses, men frozen solid, eyes gaping, boots taken. Many stumble barefoot roasting frostbitten toes by their final fire. Pillages of war dumped - no weight or relic worthy of any carrying. Golden candle sticks, Persian rugs - objects of decadence, objects of art, holy relics - deserted now.

One must survive by wits and cunning and in that, my dear Maurice helped me along so much. He appeared one morning (though there is little difference between day & night - just walking and not-walking), with a sturdy walking cane for me! He was the one who coaxed me each dreadful day as we trudge into uncertain horizons. Oh the peace he feels now, free of this madness!

As I sit looking down from the hilltop, watching as thousands fall dead - by bullet, by Cossack sword, or pushed into the icy river with the mob pushing across. For me, there is little chance of me making my way across the bridge, not alone, not without help from my friend.

Surely when the officers have crossed, the bridge will be destroyed like so many broken dreams - leaving the Russians and French separated as we began. I will not rush to death, rather for me, I will have the courage to determine my own fate to stride purposefully and resolutely, free of heart, clean of conscience, ruling only my sovereign self.

For you - for the days we missed together & the years in which we'll never part - I will find a way to survive. For the thousands of dead faces I have seen, and for Maurice, I renounce this war but pledge that I will not let this tragic madness defeat me.

My dear Genevieve, look for me in the spring, my return will be later than hoped.

With love, freedom and conviction,  
Henri

## My Declaration

As for me, I choose to forge my own place in history, to determine by own ends rather than subject my precious life for the exclusive use of any man – monarch or otherwise. Without my freedom to be what, and who, I choose, I have lost all! No matter how insignificant my life's work, at least it is at my choosing and my labors, at my own volition. My action, my loves, my thoughts will determine my life's significance, and I will not surrender to fate's whims. I alone will live this life and this value I will not compromise.

Henri Lafleur, Russia 1812