Raymond H. Thompson, ed.; Werner S. Zimmt and Robert E. Dahlquist, trans.

A Jesuit Missionary in Eighteenth-Century Sonora: The Family Correspondence of Philipp Segesser. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. Pp. 376. Hb, \$75.

There is something reassuringly familiar about the letters written by the Jesuit missionary Philipp Segesser to his family back in Lucerne. What is remarkable about this collection, however, is that they allow a reader to follow one individual throughout the entirety of his Jesuit life, from a young and energetic novice shortly before his ordination in 1719, to an experienced, aged, yet still remarkably energetic missionary in Sonora (the northern frontiers of New Spain, now Mexico and the USA) eighteen months before his death in 1762. The letters cover a whole range of experiences, anxieties, trials, and tribulations over this forty-year period as he waited for the call to join the missions, journeyed from Ingolstadt in the Holy Roman Empire to Genoa via Munich, took ship to southern Spain, waited again and almost despaired of receiving the order to join the flotilla to Havana, then Vera Cruz, and then, finally reached the missions in Sonora where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

As with many Jesuit writings of the period, the letters reveal a man of intelligence, a keen observer who sends back information based on his experiences on all sorts of topics to his family. In these pages, interested readers can find ethnographic information about the peoples Segesser encountered, lived and worked with (whether in German-speaking lands, Spain, Cuba or New Spain), about flora and fauna, local and global politics, and everyday life. What is especially useful (and also enjoyable) about these letters, is that because they were private letters to his family and were not for wider circulation amongst fellow Jesuits or for publication, they allow the reader to get much closer to the real Jesuit (Philipp Segesser) than, say, the famous annual letters written by the superiors to Rome. As such, Segesser's letters were relatively free of constraint and, notwithstanding the contemporaneous formality of the terms of address he used to and about his parents, uncle and siblings, he showed regular flashes of humor in his descriptions, and also very candid and sometimes witty critiques of figures of authority who frustrated his work: "Generous Fr. Philipp," he wrote in a letter to his uncle and brother in 1737 when describing the cost of a Pima uprising, "the corn bins will be emptied, the cattle will be slaughtered, what is to be done? Does it make a difference if it is consumed by the soldiers or by the Pima?" (245). In other letters he criticises the procurators in Mexico for sending poor equipment to the missions: "They feel that anything is good enough for us out here. They think that anything that goes to Sonora might as well fall into hell" (279). As his health begins to fail, he complains that his own

provincial has overloaded him with work: "May God provide me with patience and strength," he writes, "The provincial has contributed much to my load. [...], once he was named provincial, he increased my workload again" (286). He does dryly add, however, "May God reward him for this distinction that he bestowed upon me and that was meant to honor me" (287).

As one might expect of letters written in the course of the eighteenth century, Segesser's descriptions play up to the European stereotypes common to the period. What is refreshing about these letters, however, is that Segesser's perplexity and frustration at cultural difference is not limited to misinterpretations and misunderstandings of indigenous American culture, but also include his fellow Europeans—in this case the Spaniards. As a young man waiting to take ship in Seville he is scathing about the state of the city streets and is astounded at the peoples' rich damask clothing being ruined by the sewage and rubbish lying around. He adds: "The craftsmen here are all foreigners, because no Spaniard would deign to perform such services or work himself" (57). Many years later in Sonora (Tecoripa), he describes an exchange between himself and a Pima orphan boy named Nicolas, who lived together with other orphans in the missionary's house. Nicolas questions Segesser's insistence on using cutlery saying: "The Spaniards do not use forks or knives, they eat with their fingers. They need no spoons, they sop up the soup with bread." Segesser replied with a flash of temper: "I am not a Spaniard, no! I do not follow their customs or manners. [...] It is bad enough that the food is cooked in the Spanish manner" (238).

This particular letter is, in fact, the treasure of the collection. Written to his brother and uncle in 1737, it contains a mine of information about mission life: observations about the flora, the fauna, the people, the landscape, the silver mines of the area, his (negative) experiences with local shamans who were believed to and confessed to trying to poison the missionaries, including himself, before he continues with a narrative of a major rebellion that left his mission and the surrounding villages deserted. He then recounts how the rebellion was resolved (largely through persuasion rather than violence). What makes this letter so enjoyable, however, apart from the page-turning content, is a narrative device that highlights his own pragmatic approach to life, while also demonstrating the complex and affectionate relationship he had with his household (and in particular the orphan boys for whom he cared). Unusually, he engages in direct dialogue with these boys in the letter, as well as the cook, the gardener, the stock-keeper, and the catechist in order to demonstrate to his family the frustrations of day-to-day mission life in which everyday demands took him away from the spiritual reflection and prayer that was so important to a Jesuit priest. Whilst giving the impression of a somewhat cranky priest

trying to keep a tight ship in conditions wholly unsuited to running a mission like Swiss clockwork, the cheeky responses of the boys and the subsequent humor in the dialogue give the impression of a loving and familial (rather than a distant and authoritarian) household: “Nicolas: ‘How much chocolate will I need to prepare for the guests?’ Father: ‘I have to do the prayers now.’ Nicolas: ‘The Father should not complain then if all is not ready’” (234); “Father: [...] ‘Wash everything clean [...]. I now have to answer letters. In the meantime, you may do as the Spaniards do and take an afternoon rest.’ Nicolas: ‘the birds also sleep during this time.’ Father: ‘I guess that is why you are such a bird brain’” (238). These delightful exchanges lull the reader into a false sense of security and happy domesticity until we are brought up short with the shock that all but one of the boys were led away by the sexton to participate in the rebellion and Nicolas, along with so many others, died shortly afterwards of a pandemic that swept the region.

These letters are contextualized by a short, yet useful introductory essay by the editor. The letters themselves are collated chronologically and according to where Segesser sent them from. They are briefly annotated, providing some further contextual information about Segesser’s family and also about the missions in New Spain. Arguably, there appeared to be many missed opportunities to provide additional information, not just about specific (and sometimes bizarre) details that cried out for more explanation (such as the murder of the Jesuit confessor to the viceroy in Mexico City (270) or the attempt by a Dominican friar to assassinate the king in Granada (87)—but also about the geo-politics of the time. This book is almost unique in being an eighteenth-century primary source that links events in the Holy Roman Empire with those in Spain, the Atlantic World, and New Spain. Letter 65 even makes oblique mention of bad news received from the “eastern Indies” (265), yet no note satisfies the readers’ curiosity as to what that news might have been. There was an opportunity here to produce a work that tied together all these regions in a tightly interwoven and colourful tapestry of local custom and global political affairs making it even more valuable than it already is. As it is, the richness of the letters themselves, together with the useful, yet minimal contextualization from the editor, leave a whole host of interesting questions for a scholar to explore further. This book is one I will certainly be using in future teaching and research.

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