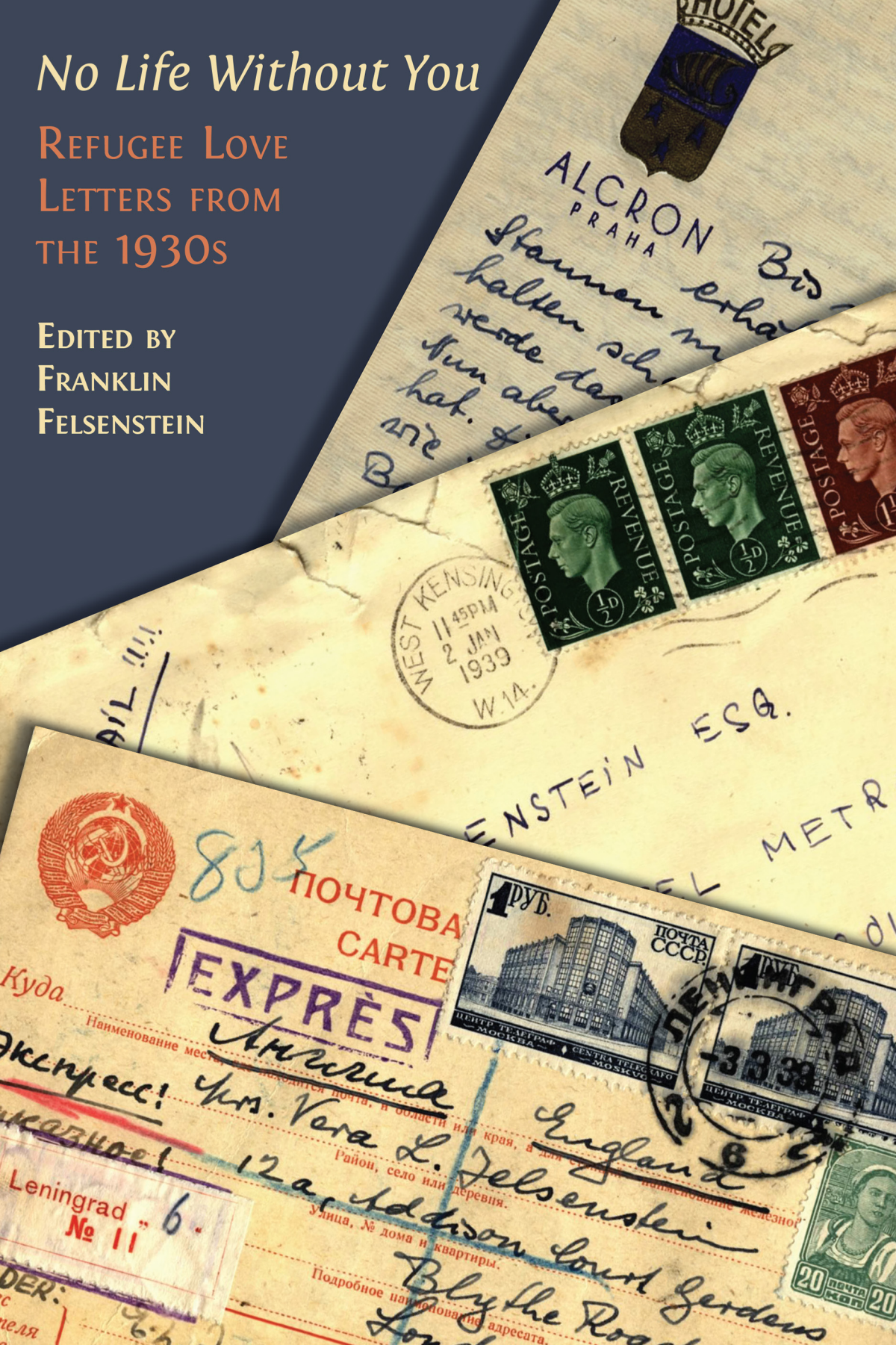


No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN





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One: Familien Hirsch



Fig. 1 Photograph of VH (rubber stamped on verso, 6 July 1930).

Vera Lotte Hirsch (Felsenstein) “Lilongo”

Born Frankfurt, January 23, 1910

Died London, September 18, 1992

In her adult life, even into her final years, my mother was always more than sensitive about disclosing how old she was. Were she to find me posting her age, particularly at the very beginning of this book, she would make idle threats to do away with me, or at the very least—so she would half-jokingly declare—have me incarcerated without remission in the Tower of London. She would swear me to secrecy, insisting that I was never to reveal to the world one of life’s most guarded secrets! She would consider that to be a complete and utter invasion of privacy. It at once begs the question whether publishing my mother’s intimate letters and journals, alongside those of my father, is a further breach of confidentiality and an egregious step. It may come as a surprise that my mother would not have thought so.

Memorably, Leo Tolstoy began *Anna Karenina* with the line that “all happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I grew up in a very happy family—as well as my parents I did have a younger sister—in suburban London. In their interaction with their children, I cannot think of a single time when my mother and father opened any kind of sustained discussion of the events that had so deeply affected the early years of their relationship. Rather, it was important for them to bring us up resembling those Tolstoyan happy families, in other words as normally as possible, with almost no sense of the trauma that had beset them only a few years before. In outline, I only knew that my parents had escaped Germany and that several of their close relatives had perished. In the England in which I grew up during the late 1940s and 1950s adults constantly spoke to their children about the experience of the war but about the Holocaust they were silent.

In everyday conversation, my parents’ intonation revealed that London was not their place of birth as it was for me. Both of them spoke correct, if accented, English. That was more evident with my father who had been taught Latin as a living language, in accordance with the practice at his gymnasium or high school in Leipzig. I was quietly amused when he would pronounce “Cicero” as “Kikero” or when he would enunciate a word like “victim” as “wictim.” Such occasional oddities apart, Mope spoke at least six different languages, most of them well.

The greatest linguistic compliment that my mother ever received was when a Marks & Spencer shop girl who had heard her, their personnel manager, speak with an accented English asked her without a trace of mockery whether she too hailed from the northern industrial city of Sunderland. She would often repeat that story, in jest adopting Sunderland rather than Frankfurt as her hometown! Because they wished to distance themselves from the country of their birth, at home my parents would never converse with us in German. The only time when we might hear them speaking that other language between themselves would be when they did not want us to understand what they were saying. And, in postwar England it would have marked them out as “the enemy” if they had gone around “spraching” in German.

During her nineteen years of widowhood, following Mope’s death through lung cancer in 1973, Vera often found respite from her loss in re-reading the letters he had penned to her when she was in England, and he in Nazi Germany, and later, in the Soviet Union. The letters—all handwritten and occasionally typed in German—were stashed into two leather valises that she preserved on the floor of a built-in wardrobe in the main bedroom of her flat in northwest London. Every so often, when visiting her, I would find Vera perched on her bed,

poring over a random selection of Mope's letters. Her bitter-sweet pleasure was in re-reading these letters, and recalling their immediacy and circumstances. She had already become inured to separation during the times when he had been abroad but by this time, so many years later, natural attrition had made that separation permanent. Reading his daily letters was her way of inviting Mope to communicate to her from beyond the grave, and for her to continue to experience the endurance of his love.

After the death of Vera, their correspondence came to me, and, given my ignorance of German, I arranged for its translation into English. Reading it, I was transfixed, appreciating that I had inherited a personal conduit through which my parents had unknowingly found a way to communicate with me after they were no longer there. Given that Vera had done everything to preserve their correspondence, I felt there was nothing preternatural or even voyeuristic about their doing that. In fact, she had more than once indicated to me a desire to have Mope's letters published, and I found her own writings no less compelling. Delving into their lives and inner thought processes was enriching to my own. Here was material that refused to remain silent. I was impelled to find out more.

Because her own letters and journals stretched back to well before she knew my father, it was easier to trace my mother's early life.



Fig. 2 Photograph of the Hirsch family (hand dated 4 May 1913).

Vera was the younger of the two girls of Hermann and Alice Hirsch. There is already tragedy in speaking about her sister. Gretel was Vera's senior by about nine years. At her delivery, an over-zealous obstetrician had clamped his forceps too tightly on to her cranium, and had irreversibly damaged her brain. Vera would describe her sister as looking perfectly normal but mentally severely impaired. Nowadays, her condition would probably be diagnosed, correctly or

otherwise, as acute autism. It was only when Gretel tried to speak that you became aware of the gravity of her disability.



Fig. 3 Photograph of Alice Hirsch, née Ettlinger (undated but late 1890s); probably shot in Frankfurt.

An illustrative story is of Vera's first visit to the elegant Frankfurt Opera House, within easy walking distance of their home, when she herself will have been no more than ten years old. My grandmother was able to reserve a prime box alongside one of the balconies for the performance, and it was agreed to take Gretel too. The excitement for a young girl of Vera's age was palpable, especially so when the evening of the opera arrived. Exquisitely attired and made up for the occasion, they were ushered to their seats. Everything began accordingly, and Vera was absorbed in the beauty of the music and the novelty of the experience. However, at the height of the performance, in the middle of one of the most emotive arias, Gretel stood up and began screaming at the top of her voice, wildly gesticulating with her hands in the direction of the soprano singer. The attention of the audience was at once diverted to their box, and Gretel in company with her family had to be escorted out of the theatre. At her tender age, all that Vera could feel was complete mortification at the disturbance rather than sorrow for her sister. Given her condition, Gretel was to be institutionalized for much of her life to the extent that Vera often spoke of herself as an only child. Perhaps because my mother found it embarrassing to talk about her, I don't think I even knew that she had once had a sister until I was into my teens. It has to be said that attitudes to disability have progressed over the past hundred years.

Following her experience with Gretel, it took the advocacy, over several years, of the family doctor to persuade Alice that she should try for a second child. The real closeness of the relationship that was to develop between Alice and her younger daughter may be attributed to these circumstances. All through her journals, Vera is gushing in praise of her mother.

VERA

My life is good, and undeservedly so, and I am so lucky to have such an angel for a mother. Isn't it the happiest feeling to have that one person who loves you infinitely, admires you and worships you? If only I could pay her back somehow, even a little, but I am so self-centered.

My mother is goodness personified with an intuitive intelligence, capable, artistic—she paints very well. She is very musical and has a good and trained voice. Apart from German, she speaks a very good English, French, and a reasonably good Italian. She is immensely courageous, quick in making decisions, has a lively and keen sense of humor, is very loyal, has a natural social conscience, and literally idolizes me.

When I was about seventeen, she took me aside, and this is what she said: "Whatever may happen to you in your life, whether you will get married or not, whether you will achieve what you may set out to do, you will always be able to look back and know that you have achieved one thing to perfection. You have been the child your mother dreamt of, and you have given her all the happiness an offspring can possibly produce."

She showed me some kind of ironic aphorism that she had read in a Frankfurt newspaper: "Love is like the measles—we can only let it overwhelm us once and the later in life we find it, the worse it will be."

From the moment of her birth, Vera unwittingly displaced her sister as the focus of attention in the Hirsch household. She could easily have grown up into a very spoiled child. As a young girl, she appears to have become accustomed to getting her own way. Her habitual answer to any kind of request was a peremptory "Nein." Her mother and others tried to get her out of this awkward habit by inventing the jingle "Die Veralein sagt immer 'Nein', sagt immer 'Nein'", sagt immer 'Nein'" ("Vera always says 'No', always says 'No', always says 'No'"). It must have had some corrective effect since, in later days, my mother would often invoke it.

I never met my grandfather Hermann. He was always known as "Pepper," though I don't know where that name came from. He died three weeks to the day before I was born. I would have been his first grandchild. Hermann was five years older than Alice, having been born in Hanau, about ten miles from Frankfurt, in 1870 on the very day that the French army invaded the city during the ill-fated Franco-Prussian War. Vera's description of her father verges on the hostile.



Fig 4. Cabinet photograph of Hermann Hirsch (taken by the firm of Thiele in Hanau, undated but c. late 1890s).

VERA

Pepper grew up an only child. In appearance, he is good looking with a moustache twisted at both ends. He was a pupil at a boarding school in Friedrichsdorf near Bad Homburg because he was not up to the standard of the demands of a day school. What training he had had I do not know, probably some commercial one, and his prospective father-in-law proposed to take him into his flourishing textile business.

My mother objected strongly to the marriage. She told her father that she could not even think clearly, certainly not make such a decision as to getting married. Her father continued urging her, and pointed out that Hermann Hirsch was a kindly man, and even if he were to prove

unsuccessful in making a living, it really did *not* matter, as there was more than enough wherewithal to last for their lives as well as for any children and grandchildren.



Fig. 5 Cabinet photograph of Alice (1875-1956) and Hermann Hirsch (1870-1944) shortly after their marriage (taken by the firm of J.B. Ciolina, Frankfurt, c. 1900).

My grandparents were married in April 1900 and Gretel was born in November 1901. With the dowry of a partnership in his father-in-law's wholesale cloth business and the ample wealth of the Hirsch family behind him, Hermann set up their family home in a spacious apartment on the Oberlindau in Frankfurt's fashionable West End.

When hyperinflation gripped Germany in 1923, Hermann's financial ineptitude led to the near total wipe-out of the family fortune. Vera was thirteen at the time when hyperinflation struck. It would be mistaken to ascribe her almost pathological disdain for her father as stemming from his mishandling of his business affairs. In 1923, there were countless German families who suffered a similar fate, so that the notion of placing personal blame on him alone is disproportionate. It also gives a false picture of Vera as a vindictive, spoiled child, who could never get over the loss of the family fortune. Yet, her scorn for her father remained with her throughout her life. At best, I can suggest that Vera's disdain for her father stemmed from her sense that her parents' marriage was an intellectual mismatch, that Hermann's lack of intelligence made him a hopeless and insufferable partner for his highly capable and intellectually gifted wife. She particularly objected to his obduracy.

VERA

Nothing is worse than lacking the ability to adjust. I wonder if that is a question of age. Nervousness? Lack of intelligence? Is it innate, this readiness to adjust to any given situation!!? It is completely impossible to negotiate with Papa in a kind manner: immediate screaming, stubbornness, fear of having to do something different from what he had planned. Not even the most giant strength can do anything against this kind of mountain of immovable iron, you just have to walk around it.



Fig. 6 Color photograph of Oberlindau 51, Frankfurt (taken in 2017).

In Frankfurt, we live in a large flat made up of eight rooms. Our house is situated opposite the Villa Rothschild, and five minutes from the Opera. My mother insisted on the importance of language learning, and as a young girl, we would have French or English companions lodging with us over extended periods, so as to improve our spoken knowledge of these languages. To help make ends meet following the inflation, my mother has now been taking paying guests into our household. Her fluency in English—and, more recently, my own—qualify us to give German lessons and we always give a daily lesson to our guests and of course talk only German to them all the day. We charge our lodgers a weekly rate of four guineas that includes four meals, daily German lessons, baths, etc.

Recently, I was in touch with a lady in London from a traditional English family whose seventeen-year-old daughter wants to come to Frankfurt to learn German. The charge of four guineas seemed to be no problem. The daughter wants to come over towards the end of August or the beginning of September and I expect she means to stay for six months, because she talked about Christmas and I said *all English girls are so delighted with our Christmas that they never want to go home*, and she replied how nice that would be.

I am bemused here by the irony of a Jewish family regaling gentile guests at a sumptuous dinner celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, but the Hirsch family, like so many other German Jews of their upbringing, were very assimilated in their ways. I still possess a couple of recipe books that were compiled by my grandmother, and among the recipes is one for Christmas pudding followed by another for Passover Matzos dumplings. Both are written in Alice's almost faultless English. My grandmother was a consummate kitchen connoisseur, and what better indicator of the level of the family's pre-Nazi integration than the food that they prepared and served.

During the Second World War, Frankfurt was heavily bombed by Allied planes. Oberlindau was flattened. Miraculously, only a single house along the street was left standing, and that was the one containing my grandparents' apartment. Its survival against the odds strikes me as highly symbolic because the endurance of its bricks and mortar is the sole witness to the destruction that surrounded it. Since the war, Oberlindau has been rebuilt but, with the exception of this one building, the reality of its past history has been all but obliterated. We may wish to view the house as the sole representative of those many vanished homes, a good number of which had been inhabited by Frankfurt's former Jewish population. By extension, my parents' correspondence—and through it the story of their survival—may serve as evocative of the broader experience of so many other German-Jewish refugees from a similar social milieu.

