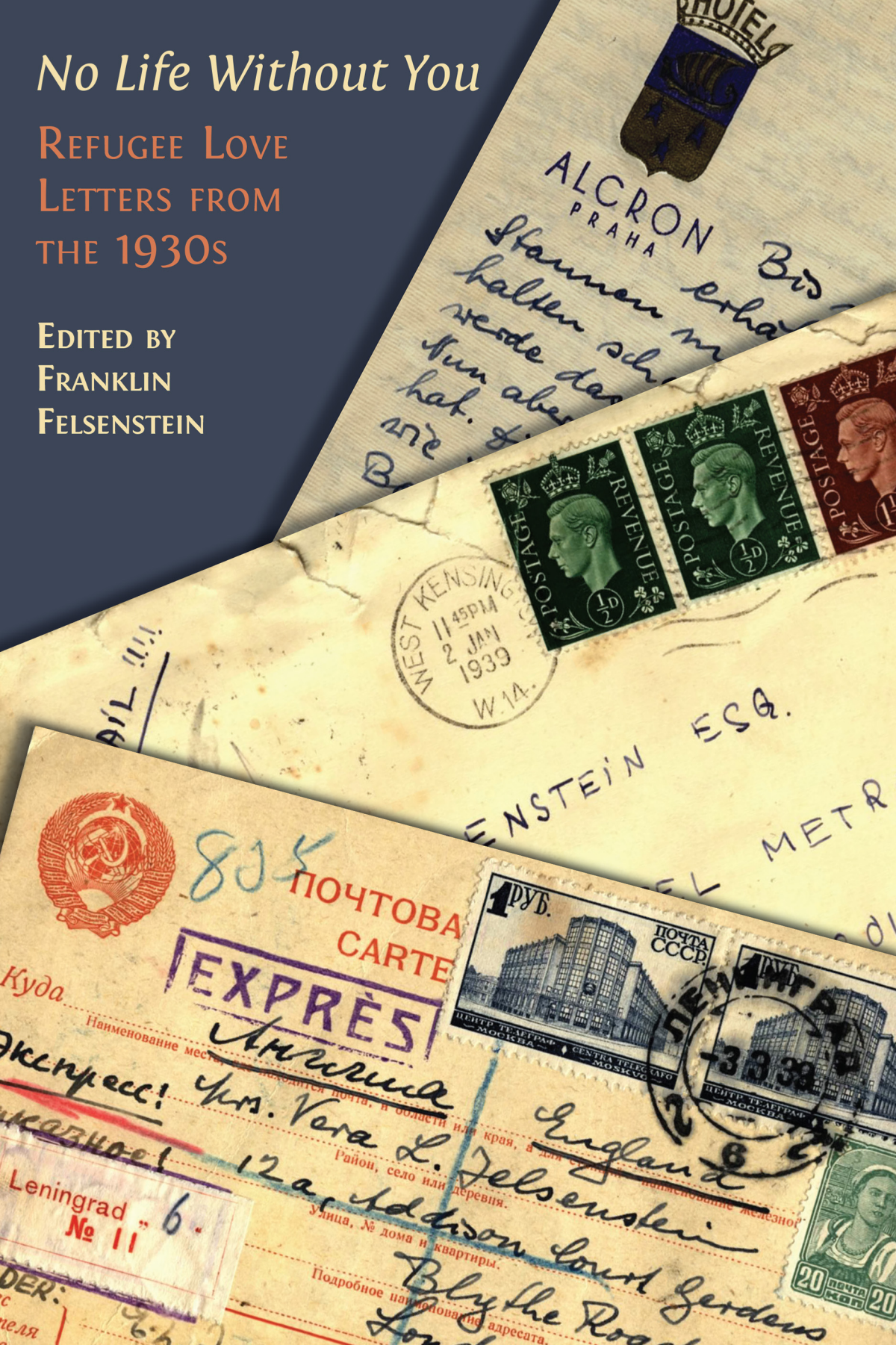


No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2024 Franklin Felsenstein (ed.)

©2024 Rachel Pistol (Introduction)



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Franklin Felsenstein (ed.), *No Life Without You: Refugee Love Letters from the 1930s. Based on the Correspondence of Ernst Moritz ("Mope") Felsenstein and Vera Hirsch Felsenstein, 1936-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0334>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0334#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-945-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-946-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-947-7

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-948-4

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-951-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0334

Front cover original images provided by Franklin Felsenstein.
Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

Four: “And so What?”

MOPE

In Leipzig, I remain hospitalized for more than nine months. I owe it to my mother’s constant attentiveness that I am receiving the finest available medical treatment in recovering from the severe injuries that I sustained in the trenches. My innermost relationship with my mother has become an enduring compass point in my life. In many ways, my closeness to her acts as a counterbalance to the often-strained relationship that I have with my father.



Fig. 23 Mope’s mother, Helene Felsenstein (1874-1963), known in the family as Oma Lenchen.

Of the two, my father was certainly inferior to my dear mother intellectually as well as educationally, though he still possessed her

full love and affection. In the patriarchal world in which they lived, she was anything but the master in their marriage. However, she always understood in the most exquisite way how to balance everything and to be a wonderful and trusted friend to her husband as well as her children. Yet, I am sure that she was fully aware of her intellectual superiority after the marriage, or even before.

Mope's mother, known in the family as Oma Lenchen, grew up in a household that greatly valued intellectual pursuits. Two of her brothers, who emigrated to America, became eminent Judaic scholars. A sister was a pioneering Zionist, moving in 1910 to Palestine, where she and her husband turned mosquito-infested swamp into rich farmland. Another sister married a writer who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Oma Lenchen and her siblings exuded the charm and unassuming sophistication that came from a vibrant German-Jewish intellectual culture. Not for nothing, the great Judaic scholar Gershom Scholem extolled them as "one of the most aristocratic Orthodox Jewish families of Germany." From his mother's side, Mope inherited a natural love of learning and an almost intuitive appreciation of the importance of the life of the mind.

MOPE

During my prolonged hospital stay and recovery, I used my time to prepare myself for the baccalaureate exam, that I had been unable to take prior to my military service. I passed in May 1919. After the baccalaureate, I began to study first year Chemistry at Leipzig University, all that time remaining under supervised medical care at the military hospital until the spring of 1920. Even before my discharge, my father urged me to rejoin the Gebrüder Felsenstein, and, but for the intervention of my mother, would have succeeded in his object.

When I was near to a full recovery from my injuries, I had what was to prove for me a highly consequential one-to-one meeting with my father in the family home in Leipzig. My father held long-term grudges against me, the chief one stemming from his resentment at being excluded from the decision that I had taken at the age of seventeen to enlist. In our increasingly acrimonious exchange, he invoked his own authority, and virtually blamed my injuries on my having neglected to ask for paternal blessing prior to joining up.

Filial disobedience, my father maintained, did not make me a good Jew. Rather, in his opinion, I had shown myself a discredit to the family. Ignoring that I was in hospital and for a long period unable to attend

synagogue, he invoked a malicious rumor that, as I had failed to keep Kashrut while in the trenches, it had disbarred me from being called up to read from the Torah. I was totally incensed by my father's attitude and misconstruction. I responded by recounting how, through the whole of my ordeal in the trenches, I had clung to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism that he had taught me, and, despite the privations I underwent—which I spelled out in some detail—I had adhered as far as I was capable to a kosher diet and observance.

My father's abrupt and unfeeling response was "And So What?" The heartlessness of the retort and the lack of understanding that went with it had a devastating effect upon me. The painful experience of war had already made me question the tenets of my belief system even as I clung to it as a matter of pride and for the sake of my family. My father's response was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Though I was to remain a committed Jew and a passionate Zionist, it was the beginning of my permanent falling-out with Orthodoxy.

Mope's successful completion of his freshman year at Leipzig and his desire to continue with his academic studies caused further friction with Isidor who still insisted that his son's place was in the fur trade. Rather than allow the situation to become ever more volatile, his mother used her diplomatic skills to coax Isidor into assenting to the continuation of Mope's studies, though he made his own position clear by denying him financial support.

The Felsenstein family's prominence in the Leipzig Orthodox Community and his own estrangement from its practices persuaded Mope that he must move elsewhere. In 1921, he was to leave Leipzig and enroll at the University of Erlangen in Bavaria. From there, he was accepted at the prestigious Technische Hochschule in Karlsruhe to pursue graduate work developing new uses of plastics. Mope soon became an integral part of a highly motivated research team.

In Karlsruhe, he befriended cousins of his, Karl and Lies Rosenfeld, whom he had previously known but distantly. During the Great War, Karl, who was sixteen years older than my father, had fought in the German army, and was a decorated war veteran. Severely wounded in battle, he had been far less fortunate than Mope, and had suffered the amputation of one of his legs beneath the knee. His first wife had been a victim of the great flu epidemic in 1918, and, shortly after the war, he had taken as his second wife, Elisabeth ("Lies") Willstater, who was fourteen years his junior. By the time Mope moved to Karlsruhe, the couple were blessed with a two-year old son, Georg. Another son, Benjamin, was born to them in 1924 during my father's stay in the city. The Rosenfelds showed unstinting hospitality to him.

MOPE

My cousins, Karl and Lies, were always more than willing to give me any assistance necessary and to receive me into their home at any time. In the absence of financial support from my father, I had to earn my own money to pay for my studies and if I ran short, Carlchen always helped me out until I was able to pay the money back. At one time, I owed him over 600 Reichsmarks—and back then, that was a huge fortune to me! Of course, I paid him back.

It was a debt of gratitude that Mope never forgot, particularly so when the Rosenfelds strove to escape from Germany in the following decade. We shall return to their story.

Receiving no financial help from Isidor and with gathering hyperinflation in Germany, Mope ran short of funds. Mounting obligations forced him to approach his father in hope that he might underwrite his research. Instead, Isidor saw this as the golden opportunity to recruit his younger son into the family business. He offered to pay off his son's debts, but with an ultimatum that he must relinquish his graduate work and re-join the family business in Leipzig. An emotional appeal from Helene to her husband to allow their son to complete his doctoral work fell on deaf ears. Even the visit of two of Mope's professors, who (recognizing the potential of his research and his promise as a young physicist) traveled the considerable distance from Karlsruhe to Leipzig in order to persuade my grandfather to reconsider his decision, had no effect. Isidor had made up his mind and nothing could shift that. In the age before regular student loans, Mope was left with very little option other than to comply. In February 1925, he began once again working for the family business. For Mope, it rankled with him in later years that his academic career in the Sciences was cut short by his father's recalcitrance.

MOPE

My father was fixed in his outlook on life since his youth and, through that, in some way outdated and without understanding of modern developments and the non-patriarchal position that I had, and with his unshakeable maxims managed to undermine and destroy the development I had planned for myself.