

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
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Five: Heising

In a back drawer at home in London when I was a boy, my parents had preserved a scattering of banknotes issued at the height of the financial crisis that wrecked the German economy in 1923. They would mention the hyperinflation that struck when Vera was thirteen and Mope twenty-four. What they remembered was the immediate impact. They recounted that a loaf of bread which had cost a single Mark in 1919 was priced at one hundred billion Marks in 1923. People filled wheelbarrows with Notgelds in order to pay bills. What you earned in the morning, you spent immediately because it would have lost its value by close of day. A few years later, it was expedient for Hitler and the Nazis to put blame for the hyperinflation on the Jews.



Fig. 24 Hyperinflationary bank note, dated 1922.

My mother spelled out to me how her father, Pepper, exhausted what remained of the Hirsch family assets by honoring established agreements through selling goods at their original list price instead of renegotiating to take account of inflation. At a stroke, his honesty in business affairs—she would venture “utter naïveté”—impoverished the family.

VERA

At home the monetary situation became grim, and with it came the fear that I couldn't participate with others whose families were less affected by the hyperinflation. From our situation, there developed a constraining and insincere behavior in myself, a desire to want to be more than I was. That began when I was thirteen years old. At fifteen, I figured out that one can only enjoy life's privileges if one is willing and ready to be completely engaged in every aspect of it. In the winter of that year Fraulein Albrecht introduced a dance hour at school, and for the first time in my life I was together with the opposite sex, unbounded, shy, and excessively hurt by vanity.

Monetary pressure forced me into second guessing and self-deprecation about the choice of studies that were not so costly or time consuming, but were still practical. What followed was a zeal for work that redoubled and increased tenfold. There was no time for anything else, except to cut everything else out of my life. In between were admirers and boyfriends out of whom I didn't really form anything serious.

The incipient anti-Semitism during the era of the Weimar Republic manifested itself in less than subtle ways in the classrooms and corridors of many German universities.

VERA

As a core requirement of the university curriculum, I enrolled in a Zoology *Praktikum für Mediziner* led by a professor who had a reputation among the Jewish students for holding anti-Semitic views and being an early supporter of Adolf Hitler. I remained wary throughout the class, maintaining a low profile and expressing myself minimally. At first, this tactic seemed to work in my favor for the professor never once addressed me directly and did not appear even to know my name.

However, at the start of a class in which we were each to perform an animal dissection, he instructed us on what was expected, but ended his comments with the following: "As we all know, this is the element of the *Praktikum* for which Miss Hirsch has been awaiting so eagerly. No doubt her attention is on the rabbit fur coat that she will make for herself once you have all completed the dissection." Perhaps the remark did not

go beyond the tactless, reflecting the misogyny of a male professor at a time when there were few female students of medicine. But, if it was intended to embarrass me, it surely did, though it also succeeded in provoking raucous laughter among certain of the students.

At worst, the incident, trivial as it may have been, was one more reflection of the simmering anti-Semitism which after 1933 was to become so much more barefaced and brutal. The dilemma for a Jewish student in the precarious years before the Nazis gained power was in the paranoiac uncertainty as to how to interpret such incidents.

During that period, it was not uncommon to find Jewish and non-Jewish students engaged in social pursuits that were not subject to racial segregation or prohibition in the way that they were to become from 1933. Vera was an enthusiastic sportswoman, playing tennis over the summer months, and, when her studies allowed, skiing in the nearby Taunus Mountains during the winter, the last time in 1932.

VERA

It's two days after Christmas. We spent the entire day at the meadow hut where we were surrounded by blinding snow and we went for a wonderful walk. This year, I am skiing noticeably *better*—I am sure that the reason for that are my new skis and shoes. We have decided to go there and practice every day. The sun was shining the entire time and afterwards we witnessed the Alpen-glow, absolutely indescribably beautiful. I am enjoying myself completely!!!! I am glad, aside from the fact that it is so wonderful, that I went on this trip, because one really does not get to know one's companions with all their small weaknesses and maybe great virtues until one spends an extended period of time with them.

In any case, I am feeling very well, and I feel completely *safe* and that is most precious. I am glad that I have a few reliable friends here, and they are *really* trustworthy. I think that things are really going well for me.

Photos that survive from the early 1930s show Vera amid an athletic throng of smiling young students enjoying the halcyon pleasures of winter sports. Among the medical students in the group is Heising, an Aryan-looking tall blond-haired young man, initially in thrall to his girlfriend, Edith.



Fig. 25 Vera with Heising on the ski slopes, hand inscribed "1930-31 Taunus"
[Mountains].

VERA

I heard something today that made such an impression on me. From Heising, completely unknowingly. He told me how indescribably and infinitely he had loved Edith and how he had thought that he could only be happy with her. He is a young man with intense feelings. But Heising also said something that seems very true to me: He thinks—he was talking about Edith—that a man loses interest in a woman the moment he realizes that he is the only one who exists for that woman.

Six weeks later, I went walking in the *Palmen Garten* with Heising. Conscious that there had been a shift in his emotions, I told him in quick succession that I would rather not accompany him, that my presence would create a wedge between him and his girlfriend. He denied that and then said: "If both you and she were set on fire, I would rescue you first!" Something like that *is* flattering to hear! It even makes me happy, although I do *not* harbor any tender feelings toward him. As he told me (since he knows how completely out of reach I am for him), he is not interested for the moment anyway. At least that is what he said.

Now, being honest to myself, I like to see him—he is good-looking—I am glad that I have someone and I know that he is completely honest and decent. I like having someone who will carry things for me—I have

lugged around tennis and swimming equipment and it is nice to have an honest and funny human being around.

In the perpetual calendar of praktika and examinations that were required to become a medical doctor in Germany, Vera found it helpful to prepare before these exams by testing her knowledge with Heising. The result was that she came through nearly always with outstanding grades, while Heising limped behind. His devotion to her became almost dog-like to the extent that when others saw them together, they mistakenly considered them to be a couple. The truth was more complex.

VERA

This evening, I went to the theater with Heising to see a nonsensical new play. Then on to dinner at the Ratskeller with him. He revealed to me today that he is really deeply in love with me, but (he says) he knows that I am much more mature and finished than he is, etc. (*oh, I am so vain!*), and I really like hearing things like that, of course. However, I can only feel love for someone who gives me the overwhelming feeling that he is *significantly* more intelligent than I am, at least where pure knowledge is concerned. I think Heising would have enjoyed the play, had I not been there, but after he heard me talking or rather listened to my judgment, he adjusted his to match my opinion, probably because he realized that I was right. Once I notice something like that, I tend to lean towards wistful disdain.

I did not want to tell him at first that he has been getting on my nerves quite terribly of late—I thought that he was just not worth it, but I learned something from it. No human being is so inferior that you can consider him or her as unworthy of attention and it is very stupid of me to drop such a human being without so much as an afterthought, especially one who holds me in such high esteem.

I learned that you can only ensnare a man if you always let him feel that he does not have unlimited chances with you. I should remember that for a life lesson, and if ever I should fall in love I will take that advice and use it.

I wish—not that I would like to get married right now, my studies make me much too happy for that—I would meet another human being, who will captivate me to fall in love with him! I can hardly wait to see how my life will develop. There is something delightful in not knowing your future!

Heising would frequently drop by to study alongside Vera. He was made welcome in the Hirsch household by my always hospitable grandmother. Then, from one day to the next in 1932 and with no explanation, his visits to my grandparents' home ceased. However, after a gap of several weeks, Heising unexpectedly showed up to announce to the Hirsch family that, given that they were Jewish, he was sorry that he could no longer socialize with them as he had joined the Nazi party. He considered it a patriotic duty that overrode whatever acquaintance or even friendship they may once have had.

When Vera saw him again in the medical school, he was sporting a swastika armband. His membership of the Nazi party, rather than any intellectual brilliance, would have ensured his qualification as a medical practitioner. She was never to hear from him again.

VERA

I would like to know how Heising imagines he will be able to continue his studies and for what practical purpose??? He really is reprehensible, to be so blind to everything.

In many respects, Heising's Nazification anticipates that of the medical school at Frankfurt, which was among the first to dismiss its Jewish doctors and professors in 1933, and in the following year became the home of the notorious Institut für Erbbiologie und Rassenforschung (Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene). The Institute's most notorious alumnus was Dr. Josef Mengele, Auschwitz's wicked "Angel of Death." Heising's wholesale disengagement from any contact with Jews was all too typical.

VERA

I was close with some cousins of mine, the Jacobsons, who lived in Fulda. There were three daughters, and a younger adopted son, Richard, with whom, when we were children, I used to play. I knew Richard as a boy. He was a few years older than I, fair, blue-eyed, tall and an unbelievably cruel and unpleasant playmate, and terribly spoilt by his parents. He was connected with a Jazz band when grown-up, and when Hitler came, he announced that he was of pure Aryan descent and only adopted by his Jewish "parents," and he abandoned them.

That abandonment placed Vera's cousins in peril. At least one of Richard's former sisters and her husband were to be murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.