

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
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Nine: Under the Swastika

POLITICAL TIMELINE 1934

- 1 January 1934: Jewish religious holidays removed from the official Nazi calendar.
- April 1934: Establishment of the Volksgericht (People's Court) to deal with enemies of the state; no trial by jury and no right of appeal.
- June 1934: Beginning of Nazi persecution of homosexuals.
- 2 August 1934: Death of German President Paul von Hindenburg; Hitler declares himself Führer of the German state and commander-in-chief of armed forces.
- 19 August 1934: Public plebiscite approves of Hitler's expanded powers by 89.9 per cent.
- 4-10 September 1934: Nazi Party Congress at Nuremberg.

In the early 1930s, the atmosphere in Leipzig was no less poisonous than in Frankfurt. Both cities contained sizeable Jewish communities, which became the targets of anti-Semitic intimidation. Even before Hitler had come to power, my grandfather Isidor had been the recipient of threats against his life. In the weeks following the Nazi takeover, similar threats led to the precipitous departure from Leipzig of most of the partners of the Gebrüder Felsenstein. Isidor stayed on until the boycott of 1 April 1933 before fleeing to Prague.

The boycott forced Jews to adopt a low profile. It was the day Mope was to attend the Bar Mitzvah of his cousin Wolfgang Felsenstein. The Bar Mitzvah had been scheduled at the orthodox Keilstrasse Synagogue, but given the dangerous situation, Wolfgang's family opted for a private ceremony at their home. Twenty-two family members had accepted the invitation to attend, but only Mope and his brother, Adolf, were willing to brave the mobs that were filling the streets with anti-Semitic signs, demonstrations, and beatings.



Fig. 42 Boycott of Jewish businesses, 1 April 1933 (United States Holocaust Museum at <https://newspapers.ushmm.org/images/nazi-boycott.jpeg>).

What should have been a day of joy for the young Bar Mitzvah celebrant was instead a subdued occasion with the few guests nervously voicing their anxieties and fears. The one-day boycott marked the beginning of the destruction of Jewish life in Germany. In 1938, because it had Aryan tenants in its upper stories, the Keilstrasse Synagogue, though ransacked, was the sole synagogue in Leipzig to survive the fury of Kristallnacht.

Of the members of the Gebrüder Felsenstein, until so recently a magnet of the fur trade, my father writes:

MOPE

All other members of the company had already fled to foreign countries, and Adolf and I stayed on in Leipzig as the sole family representatives in order to protect our family's interests.

My beloved father had tried to persuade his various nephews in the business to recognize the necessity of relocating the headquarters of Gebrüder Felsenstein to London or to New York while it was still possible to do so, but they showed little inclination to think strategically about the future of the company or about anybody else but themselves. In an effort to preserve the business, my father returned to Leipzig after an absence of about five or six months. Other family members followed.

Sadly, the exertions and anxiety brought on by the Nazis and other factors proved too much for my father. He was diagnosed shortly after his return with subacute bacterial endocarditis, a heart condition that was deemed untreatable and terminal. Despite our earlier differences, I felt for him very deeply. Once a father who is not as perfect as he could

be becomes ill, the realization dawns on you that you are attached to him anyway. Even if he did not always think or do the right thing, my father was a completely decent man whose single concern, beyond the business, was the wellbeing of his family. He was to die on 28 May 1934, about a half year after his return to Leipzig. I am convinced that his death was exacerbated by all the agitation.

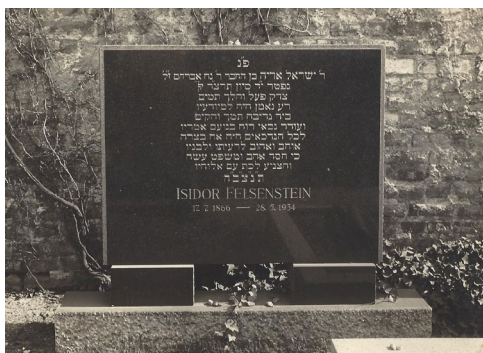


Fig. 43 Grave of Isidor Felsenstein, Alter Israelischer Friedhof, Leipzig; photograph taken in the summer of 1947.

Mope had been brought into the Gebrüder Felsenstein with the view that he and his brother would succeed to Isidor's share of the business. To help pay for the dowries of his five daughters, all of whom were married during the final years of his life, Isidor had mortgaged to his brothers and nephews part of his private stock in the business, so that, at the time of his death, his widow (Helene) was entitled to a substantially smaller percentage of the firm's assets and profits. By some dubious sleight of hand, the surviving partners manipulated this following Isidor's death so that the amount was further decreased. Both his brother Adolf and my father were mortified by this hijacking, which limited their ability to influence the future direction of the Gebrüder Felsenstein. Adolf's response was to resign his share in the partnership, and to emigrate with his wife and family to Palestine, which he did in 1935. In Haifa, where they settled, there was no demand for furriers, and, in his late thirties, Adolf showed his pioneering spirit by retraining as a plumber, a less lucrative though more essential profession.

MOPE

I receive very satisfactory reports from my brother. He is fully occupied and is as successful in his work as he could possibly wish for. My sister-in-law is also happy, despite the great adjustment there, although the idea to go to Palestine was unbelievably strange to her in the beginning. By the way, my brother writes to me about professions with which, in his opinion, I might be able to create an existence over there. These recommendations might be combined for the most part, in all likelihood. They are: chrome-plating, brass-polishing, the manufacture of aluminum signs and enameling. Whether the necessary schooling possibilities for these professions are still offered to Jews here [in Nazi Germany] appears pretty doubtful. They are occupations I could practice without much demand on my legs and a certain use of my chemical knowledge. These are practical occupations one can practice anywhere and would provide for the building of an existence—with the ability necessary in any profession.



Fig. 44 Photograph of Adolf Felsenstein (1897-1977) outside his plumbing shop in Haifa, Palestine; undated but mid to late 1930s.

A friend who recently visited Palestine met with Adolf and came back with a very satisfactory report, the one proviso being that, though he had been regarded as a “fine gentleman” in Leipzig, he had descended significantly in social rank and had to work much harder in a much less luxurious environment than when he was at the Gebrüder Felsenstein. I myself do not see any kind of downgrading in the different occupation or loss of personal worth which was only inherited anyway. Anyone who

succeeds on his own to build a new existence for himself is definitely worth much more than one who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Adolf is objective proof for the fact that a person's cultural standing remains untouched by his profession, and the term "downgrade" may only be considered if a lowering of the cultural disposition occurs. In Palestine, where so many academicians have taken on trade and farming professions, a guarantee is assured for the maintenance of the cultural milieu by their sheer numbers and any kind of decline won't even enter the realm of possibility until the next generation at the earliest.

Adolf's younger sister, Alice, who had married Julius Homburger, a physician, followed him by making Aliyah later the same year, also settling in Haifa. Fulfilling her own Zionist ideals, she had qualified as a nurse with the aim of going to Palestine despite objections by some family members who regarded her chosen profession as beneath her social status. They questioned how a member of the Felsenstein family could sully her hands by cleaning bed pans and wiping babies' bottoms? In Palestine, she mainly worked with typhoid cases as a private nurse, though it was becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Mope felt that her husband, Julius, lacked sufficient initiative.



Fig. 45 Alice Homburger, née Felsenstein (1901-1993), in nurse's uniform.

MOPE

Alice runs around every day in order to find a chance to build an existence for her husband, herself, and her children. Sadly, they cannot seem to get ahead in Palestine. As a doctor, it should actually be her husband's job to take care of the relocation, but it is Alice who is forced to take the lead. Had Julius gone to the countryside instead of Haifa, he would probably have been more successful, but he did not pursue that option as his wife had brought out enough initial money to allow them to live in comfort, but her savings did not last.

Two of Mope's siblings—his youngest sister, Hanna, who had married an Englishman, Fred Rau, in 1932, and his second youngest sister, Ruth, with her husband Heinz, another fur man who had liquidated his business and quit Leipzig—were now living in London.



Fig. 46 Post-war photograph Fred (1906-1956) and Hanna (1910-1957) Rau entertaining at Sabbath in London.

Hanna's marriage to Fred was welcomed by all the family. He came from an Orthodox Jewish family that shared similar spiritual and ethical values. He was distinguished-looking, young and vigorous, an enthusiastic skier and mountaineer, and a knowledgeable world traveler. In London, where he and Hanna settled and started their own family, he was made partner in a lucrative metal brokerage business. In the years leading up to the war, he was to use his influence to aid the escape from Germany of an untold number of relatives and other refugees.

About Ruth, Mope admired his sister's intelligence and the breadth of her cultural interests. She had been his early confidante in many matters, but he was taken aback when, in her late twenties, she announced her engagement to Heinz Littauer, also a fur trader with a small business in Leipzig. Heinz carried

with him a questionable reputation as a roué and a spendthrift. Outside his work and womanizing, his main interest was in motor cars and driving. He and Mope had spent a touring vacation together in France and Italy.



Fig. 47 Heinz Littauer at the wheel and EMF touring in the Dolomites, 1927.

Heinz did not seem to be an intellectual match for Ruth, and, although Jewish by birth, his religious knowledge was non-existent. As a condition to consenting to their marriage, Isidor insisted that Heinz, by then in his mid-thirties, should submit to a circumcision. When Mope was informed of his sister's engagement, he wept openly, and regretted that he had ever brought Heinz into their household. I suspect that he and others may have made indiscreet remarks concerning Heinz. The consequence was that the closeness that he and his sister had previously enjoyed was permanently broken. Although Heinz was unable to control his finances—it was rumored that he exhausted Ruth's dowry to pay off a former mistress—he turned out to be a loyal husband and loving father to their two children.



Fig. 48 Ruth (1902-1971) and Heinz (1893-1973) Littauer; undated photograph.

Several years before he met Vera, Mope himself had become engaged, likely through an arrangement made by his parents, to a woman who came from a similar religious background. As payback against Mope who had demurred at her own marriage to Heinz, Ruth intervened. She wrote poison-pen letters to the family of his then fiancée, imputing terrible things about him. The fiancée's family was shocked at these contemptible allegations, and called off the engagement. In later years, after my parents were happily married, Ruth claimed that what she had done was for the ultimate good of her brother, but the consequence of her action was that Mope stood wary of his sister and would never again trust her on matters of personal significance.

Three of his siblings had moved abroad. However, Ketty, his oldest sister, and her husband, David Goldschmidt, an insurance agent, with their four children, were still in Hamburg many miles to the north of Leipzig, and Grete's husband, Norbert Moschytz, a doctor, had found a situation in Freiburg im Breisgau, on the south-west tip of Germany, settling his family there.

Ketty was always very attached to Mope but living so far from Leipzig and with a young family to rear, they were only occasionally able to see one another.



Fig. 49 David (1890-1944) and Ketty (1896-1944) Goldschmidt; undated photograph.

Grete, the other twin sister, a beautiful but introverted young woman, was sensitive to the fact that she had suffered ear infections during her childhood which had caused her some hearing loss. Her impending marriage to Norbert in December 1928 came close to being called off after he demanded a twenty per cent addition to her dowry to compensate for her impairment. Isidor was afraid that Grete would stay unmarried, and reluctantly agreed to the increase, hoping

that she would never find out about the brokering that had taken place. Others knew, and Norbert, who often came across as overbearing and self-important, was not well liked by his new in-laws.



Fig. 50 Grete (1901-1975) and Norbert (1895-1974) Moschytz; undated photograph.

Mope was of the opinion that the unfortunate and expensive upsets that Isidor had had to endure in his dealings with the husbands of Grete and Ruth had contributed to his death in 1934. He was now the only one of his mother's seven children not yet married and without children. He was also the only one still resident in Leipzig, and enjoyed a special closeness with her.

MOPE

There are precisely seven little children who long for her who are mommies and pappies themselves, except for me. My mother is a very special friend to all of her children and she is able to give everyone the impression that she is especially close to them so that none of us can feel jealous of the other, and to succeed in that takes a lot of sensibility and even more intelligence.

Despite increasingly vocal and urgent appeals from Hanna for her to follow her to England, Oma Lenchen was loath to leave Germany while three of her children were still living there. She also shared with Mope the belief that it was important to remain in Leipzig to protect her financial share in the Gebrüder Felsenstein and the family home.

Mope was as eager as his older brother Adolf to release himself from the clutches of the Gebrüder Felsenstein from which he felt more and more estranged following his father's death, and alienated by the mendacious jockeying of his cousins. Although he thought well of the decency of his cousin, Semy, who became senior partner following Isidor's death, the conflict with the other cousins, who were jealous of his ability, was a constant irritant.

In the face of Nazi oppression, it begs the question why the partners did not see fit to take greater collective steps to protect the assets of the company rather than acting entirely self-interestedly. By 1939, each of them had escaped from Germany but with negligible involvement in helping other family members. The criminal bent of the Nazi regime clearly brought out both the best and the worst in those they persecuted.

MOPE

I was left in Leipzig as the only representative of my direct family who could still try to protect the business interests of my mother. You cannot believe how much trouble my elbowing has caused me in the company. If I were an unimposing, inactive man, I would most likely have advanced further than I have in safeguarding my mother's share in the Gebrüder Felsenstein, because it would have been less likely to be perceived as pursuing my personal ambitions. But first of all, that is not me, and other than that, this so-called advance would have only been of a superficial nature.

A further blow to Mope was that his lease was nullified as he was living in a section of the city that was now barred to Jews. He was compelled to move at least twice more, each time to less salubrious quarters. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 led to the rapid "Aryanization" of towns and cities across Germany.

MOPE

Because of race law threats, I was forced to give up my bachelor apartment on Empress Augusta Street and move into a sublet room on Beethoven Street; however, I also had to move on from there, since my landlady was an "Aryan." I then found lodging with Dr Jacobson, a retired Jewish attorney on Ferdinand Rhode Street, a barely comfortable situation. More worrying, I am being constantly harassed and bombarded with state-sponsored mandates to report in person again and again to the police.