

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN





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Ten: “Did I Do the Right Thing?”

POLITICAL TIMELINE 1935

- 30 April 1935: Jews may no longer display the German flag.
- 31 May 1935: Jews are banned from the German armed forces.
- 15 September 1935: First Nuremberg Laws: Jews can no longer exist as German citizens or marry non-Jews. Sexual intercourse between Aryans and non-Aryans made a punishable crime.
- September 1935: The Reich Flag Law defines the official flag of Germany as a black swastika in a white circle on a red field.
- 1 November 1935: Law disqualifying Jews from German citizenship.
- 14 November 1935: National Law of Citizenship defining “Jew” as anyone with two Jewish grandparents, and quantifying “Mischlinge” (mixed race) individuals as non-German.

For most Jewish refugees arriving in London between 1933 and 1939, the brief window during which escape from Germany was viable, first impressions would have been those of confusion and bewilderment. From early on in its existence, the newly formed Jewish Refugees Committee under the guidance of Otto Schiff made it one of its principal duties to meet arriving trains from the Continent, and to provide the inflow of refugees, most of whom had no contacts or family in Britain, with a personal welcome, some basic start-up money, and short-term housing.

In contrast, because of the friendship going back to their schooldays between Alice Hirsch and Otto Schiff, Vera enjoyed the softest landing. Instead of being lodged in the most basic rooming house, she was welcomed into the opulent Schiff abode in Mayfair where she was treated as a privileged guest rather than an indigent refugee. From her arrival in England through to the emigration of

her parents in early 1934, Vera wrote letters to Alice on a day-to-day basis out of which much of what follows is extracted.

VERA

8 May 1933

At the train station, they picked me up by private car and the servant took my luggage in a taxi. I arrived at the most fabulous apartment you can imagine and a dazzling room for me with roses on the table. When I came back upstairs after tea, the maid was already busy unpacking my suitcases. The bathroom is right next door to my room and I am being served like a Princess. Sometimes, I really cannot believe after all the things over there in Germany that something like this can really exist here. And I can hardly believe that I could be so lucky!!! It sounds like a wonderland, but it is real! And tomorrow, my new life will begin!

9 May 1933

First things first, I made my way this morning to London University and showed them the letter of recommendation compiled by Volhard. The man there was very nice and told me that I should turn to the three London medical schools that admit women and, because they only take a certain number, ask if they have any openings. He said that, in any case, I would need to work as a clinical resident for three years, but I would have needed to work for two and a half years back home too. Of course, if they do not agree to count the prelims, the whole process would take much longer. I called one of the medical schools and they told me that they had no more room, so I came to the unhappy conclusion this morning that I will have to give up medicine altogether, although I will make inquiries at the respective schools tomorrow anyway.

Among the circle of well-to-do women whom Vera met during her first few days in London were several who had previously been boarders at her parents' home in Frankfurt where they had gone to improve their skills in German. One of these Hirsch alumnae was an American, Betty Lawson-Johnston, a onetime salesgirl and clothes model from Albany, New York, who was married to the wealthy former husband of Barbara Guggenheim.

VERA

Also today, I was invited to join Betty Lawson-Johnston for tea. She had spent time in Frankfurt studying German with us. She told me on the telephone this morning that she would be hosting an enormous tea party at her residence after a charity event and she invited me to join and meet people.

I dressed in a brown ensemble and made myself look *smart*, which was a good thing, because just about the *smartest* ladies of London were there, simply fantastic that such things still exist (I was completely enthralled). Mrs. Lawson-Johnston was charming and took me by the hand after she had kissed me which made quite an impression!!!!!! and introduced me as *her dear friend* from Frankfurt. Among others, I met a Mrs. Brown who immediately offered to let me move in with her whenever I wanted to. The ladies decided to hold a Bridge tournament or something like that and the money gained would be for my continuing studies, and that they would help me in some way. So, tomorrow, I will ask if any of the *medical schools* still have room for me.

Looking back, it is poignant that high society women were willing to club together to support Vera's studies by organizing a bridge tournament, though the story also illustrates the lack of comprehension among such people in 1933 of the enormity of what was happening in Germany.

VERA

Even if I found people here willing to finance my education, I would not like that because it makes no sense to me to have to depend on that for years before I could even start to work.

I find it completely inconceivable that there are still so many rich people who have nothing on their minds but their parties, their clothes, and their society gossip.

As far as I can judge, I still think the following: Even if I do get the funds in such a marvelous manner, what it comes down to is that it will be futile to continue my schooling if I cannot get a position as a doctor afterwards, because there are so many already here and more continue coming over. I will make further enquiries tomorrow.

10 May 1933

This morning, I went to one of the medical schools—they said they were going to take four more girls, but I would have to register for the exam before July (the four best results of all the exams will be accepted). So, today, in order to pacify my conscience, I wrote to all three medical schools that accept girls to find out if they have any openings and I will wait for their answers. If so—and this is the best-case scenario—they will transfer my work up to the prelims and I will *only* !!! have to pass the exams in anatomy and physiology, but I will not have to attend the lectures for those exams.

First of all, I will have to take an entrance exam in English, mathematics, and one other subject (that is supposed to be quite easy). Once I have passed all of that, there will be a three-year clinical, and they will *not* budge on that despite the one and a half years' experience I had back home. I think it would make no sense, because I am sure that by the time I will be prepared to take the entrance exam and then go to the physiology and anatomy exams, another year will have passed. However, I will get the information just to quiet my conscience.

Vera realized that protracting her studies would stand in the way of her ability to help her parents and sister escape from Germany. In England, she would need to be the breadwinner for all of them, and continuing with her studies would prevent her from earning money.

VERA

11 May 1933

I went to an *examining board* again this morning—they paid me great compliments about my English, but there is nothing to be done short of four years, at best, but probably more like five, provided, of course, that an open place can even be found for a *girl-student*.

Now, I will see what new things there are for me to do and I am looking forward to it and I am satisfied with my decision. Really, about 1,000 German Marks for university studies here per year without room and board! So much charity can only be accepted if one is *absolutely* certain that something special will be achieved, but since all of it is so uncertain, it would be complete insanity.

When I think about it, if I were still at university in Frankfurt right now, I would be very unhappy. I would not be able to stand that.

12 May 1933



Fig. 51 Otto Schiff (1875-1952); photograph taken from *AJR* [Association of Jewish Refugees] *Journal*, 14, no. 6, June 2014.

I find Otto Schiff simply indescribable. He is *the* person on the refugee committee to get things done around here and he helps so many people all day long. He has not set foot in his business for three weeks now, just to help everyone and to arrange things, and that is so wonderful. He works on behalf of the refugees on Saturday and Sunday as well.

Yesterday afternoon, I went on a visit to the East End of London—that is where the building is where all the people who come over are brought to stay for a while, or rather brought through and taken care of. They have a man there for every profession, to provide information. The director and sponsor is Otto Schiff, and when the people there heard that I live in his house, all the doors opened immediately and I was the *first* one to be seen, although many people were waiting. I thought I saw two familiar faces there from Frankfurt, a boy and a girl, but since they were people I had never spoken to before and might have been people who were not too nice anyway, I did not speak to them. In confidence, Otto told me that, if he finds work for me, I cannot tell anyone, because thousands would come to him.

13 May 1933

Otto is simply charming and tells me whenever he sees me that I should act as if it were my home. The whole world and everyone in Frankfurt writes to him asking him to place their sons and daughters somewhere and he rejects many and he invites *me* into his own home!

When I talked to Otto about continuing with my medical studies, he said if I were his daughter, he would advise against it most strenuously, because the future prospects are poor. In fact, he does not even want to hear about my medical studies, since he says that it would be *completely* out of the question to open a medical practice later on.

Otto thinks that he would like to place me in a fashion shop. He asked if I can draw modern clothes—maybe I could learn! He knows the owner of Eve Valère, a high-end millinery and dress design boutique.

Schiff's paramount commitment was to the broader question of how to accommodate the influx of German refugees, a task that was beyond the capability of any single individual to accomplish. Still, as many as twelve thousand German-Jewish refugees were rescued through the efforts of Otto Schiff who is regarded by some as Britain's Oskar Schindler. There are many people alive today, the descendants of German-Jewish refugees, who unknowingly owe a debt of gratitude to the efforts of Schiff and Ernest Napier Cooper (1883-1948), the Principal of the Aliens Department and Schiff's main contact in the British Home Office.

In order to avoid any perception that she might be a burden to Schiff and also to familiarize herself with her new environment, Vera employed her leisure hours exploring London. After Germany, London in May 1933 had for her an aura of magic.

VERA

Here in England, everything is unchanged, the people look fabulous and laugh and take it easy. *I am a different girl here.* This morning, I took a walk through Hyde Park after it rained. You can simply not imagine how beautiful everything is. A rich green, and behind that red chestnut trees and green herons and rabbits, like in a fairy tale, and a few perfectly beautiful *ladies* who came riding along on horseback, just the way you see it in your dreams.

17 May 1933

Around midday, I went to Hyde Park. All of a sudden, someone calls out "Miss Hirsch!" and it was that Dr. Rothschild I met at Volhard's. The world is small, isn't it? He told me that he is going to continue at the Leverhulme Institute where he has a position doing scientific research. He wants to get his *English* degree on the side, but since he has been working in physiology for many years now and knows all the professors who will test him personally, it will not be a big deal for him, or so he said.

We wrote a postcard to Volhard together in the park; Rothschild is really very pleasant and he also said that, if I was given the great chance of actually finding work, which is supposed to be horribly difficult, I should definitely do it. Getting work at a hospital here seems to be almost out of the question, but for a woman, and a German one at that, it is a thousand times more difficult.



Fig. 52 Dr. Paul Rothschild (1901-1965).

Until a few months before, Dr. Paul Rothschild had been senior research assistant to Vera's teacher, Professor Volhard, in Frankfurt. As with other Jewish physicians, his position had been axed after the Nazis came to power, and he was now in London in order to attempt to piece together his career. In this he was successful. When I was a child, Dr. Rothschild was our family physician and his family became close friends of ours.

VERA

19 May 1933

On Wednesday, I was once again at the home of Betty Lawson-Johnston who called yesterday morning to invite me for tea. There were about eighty people there and once more Betty announced to everyone that *I am her very good friend*. Mrs. Brown, who was at Betty's again, told me I should not forget that there would always be a bed for me at her place! I really think that I am taking advantage of Otto's hospitality for much too long a time. I think I will ask Betty about this Mrs. Brown.

4 June 1933

In any case, I had Mrs. Braham's address given to me (not Brown, like I thought), since Betty said that she had talked to her recently and I decided to write to her myself. She seemed extremely likable to me, has no children and told me repeatedly that the room would always be ready for me. She has a husband—both of them are quite elderly and she is in so many social service committees that her poor husband spends a lot of time by himself and she would be happy to have someone there to keep him company in the evening.



Fig. 53 (a) Studio photograph of Ray Rockman Braham.



Fig. 53 (b) Photograph of Frank Braham.

"Mrs. Brown" turned out to be American-born Ray Rockman Braham, a one-time stage actress who had studied under Sarah Bernhardt, and was now a well-known London charity organizer. She subsequently persuaded Vera to become her house guest at Paultons Square in fashionable Chelsea. Diagnosing at once the predicament and financial uncertainties of a newly arrived refugee from Nazi Germany, Frank and Ray Braham made it an unqualified commitment to assist Vera in whatever manner they could. A childless couple, both she and her husband, the retired general manager of a British-owned rubber plantation in Liberia, took a quasi-parental interest in Vera during the first year of her residence in England. In gratitude many years later, she incorporated their names within those that she gave to her children.

VERA

7 June 1933

Around noon today, Mrs. Braham met with me. She said she had received my letter and that she would take me in to her home at any time with the greatest pleasure. However, she wanted to tell me in advance (and if I would not mind) that she and her husband are *busy* all day long, never at home for lunch, and did not *entertain* guests there. Would I mind regarding her house as my home and a hotel at the same time? In the evening, whenever I am home and they are gone, I could order whatever I like. Every Friday, she goes to the country until Sunday evening and I would have to run the house by myself and could invite friends over, etc. Have you ever heard anything that ideal before???

16 June 1933

My *new* abode is *fabulous*. Today, I talked to Mrs. Braham for a few minutes for the first time. Until our conversation this evening, Mrs. Braham did not know anything about me, not even what city I am from. I think Mr. Braham is very nice too (he is about 64 and she is around 62). She has snow-white hair, but quite young in her ways and the absolute master of the house and little Frank is not allowed to open his mouth or he will get doused by her. It seems that the car is hers and has *nothing* to do with him. She keeps telling me I should regard her house as my London hotel.

She is always slipping me little things when she sees me, apples, etc., etc., and she gets mad when I don't eat there. She is terribly anxious—that is her one *weak point*—she always thinks she is dying when she so much as stubs her toe. In all actuality, I have not been able to do anything for her, but, as Mr. Braham assures me, having me here is very good for Mrs. Braham's nerves because I succeed in calming her down with my medical advice.

7 August 1933

I am so completely happy here that I have to be ashamed and ask myself why I am so lucky, me of all people when I am so egotistical and unkind. This evening, I finally found the little door to Ray Braham and I found deep down such a lonely, such a horribly afraid and lonesome human being. Her haste and overwrought nerves are only used to make her forget, that hunger for a little bit of love, the kind of love she gives with full hands and she receives so little reward for it. I think that is the reason for having children, because a childless marriage leads to even more loneliness than the one all of us carry inside already.

The close friendship that developed between the Brahams and Vera lasted well into my own childhood. Frank, after whom I was named, passed away in the late 1950s, whereas Granny Ray (as she was known to me) survived until 1967 and, despite her hypochondria, had reached 102 when she died.

While happy that she had been so generously welcomed into a comfortable home, Otto Schiff continued to discourage Vera from pursuing a medical career, believing that, as a woman, it would be more than difficult for her to re-establish herself in her chosen profession. Instead, he used his connections to find work

*for her in the world of fashion. On Otto's recommendation, she was hired as a salesgirl in the millinery department of Eve Valère.*³

VERA

15 May 1933

Otto Schiff knows Mr. Koski, the owner of Eve Valère very well, and, on his recommendation, I introduced myself to him this morning, and he said that he wanted to talk to Otto again and then, I am supposed to come in for a probationary period of fourteen days starting next Monday at 10 o'clock, and now, I would like to jump to the ceiling for joy. Just think, Otto went with me personally on Saturday, his only day off. That is, at the moment, he works for the refugees on Saturday and Sunday as well and that is why it is doubly and triply sweet of him to go there with me himself.

21 May 1933

I have a free hour from one to two o'clock, and have just had lunch. So, I am in the hat department!!! Mr. Koski introduced me to a Miss Eva, said this is Miss Vera and that was that; and she showed me *all* the *work-rooms*—oh so many—and then we went into the *show room*. A really sweet little girl showed me how all the hats have to be cleaned with a brush every morning and fresh tissue paper has to be placed between them, and I will have to take care of six drawers on my own starting tomorrow. I began working on that immediately and I was laughing on the inside and felt like I was in a film. Then, they told me, that, as soon as customers came in, I was supposed to listen, etc. During the course of the morning, I sold two panama hats to a lady at thirty shillings each (*that is considered to be frightfully cheap, they are reduced!!!!*).

I am wearing my brown suit and a checkered blouse. In the store, however, everyone has to wear black and so, beginning tomorrow, I will be in black *crêpe de chine*. I am curious to see how this will develop. You know, the most wonderful thing about England is, no one asks where do you come from, what were you doing before, why, etc., etc. That is wonderful and would probably be completely unthinkable back home.

3 A photograph of a hatbox and hats designed by Eve Valère can be found in the online resources to this book, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0334#resources>

Even so, there was one lady who asked for a particular kind of hat. I did not know what kind—it was such an odd word—and I did not find out until later that she meant something especially *smart*. A shame that I do not remember the expression! The cheapest hat at Eve Valère costs two guineas!!! There are some fabulously *smart* people who come into the store, but also such unbelievable English shriveled up ones, that you want to burst out laughing when they turn back and forth in front of the mirror for hours, wearing the smartest hats on their impossible heads.

31 May 1933

Mr. Koski whom I saw today and who wished me *Good Yom Tov* (I did not understand until one hour later what he meant by that—it is the Jewish Pentecost) and I asked him if he was satisfied with my work and he said *you are awful, dreadful*, and laughed at me mischievously. I hope that he will not say *goodbye* after the holiday.

18 June 1933

You ask if this is something for the long run. This is the start of my fifth week and if Mr. Koski did not want to keep me, I am sure he would have said something. If I cannot take up my medical studies again in the autumn and stay here for longer, the pocket money he hands me over the counter—a pound every week—will not be sufficient in the long run, but I think, I am in no position to say anything after just four weeks.

A good number of people tell me a hundred times how extraordinarily lucky I am to have a job and that it is impossible to imagine how many highly qualified fellow German emigrés are running around only to become *lift-boys*, if they even have a chance to work in the first place.

I do now think that Otto was right—I will stay here with my hats for the time being and I will sink medicine into an anesthetics sleep which could wake from that sleep later. I do not know if that is the right thing to do! It is difficult to make a decision, but a sparrow in the hand is certainly worth more than a dove that flies over the roof.

Sometimes, when there is not so much to do, around 10 o'clock, I think, right now, Schmieden or Volhard are lecturing and I am standing in a fashion salon with lips painted red. Did I do the right thing?