

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
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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>

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<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.

Twelve: Gretel

Vera was settled and in work. Although she still held out lingering hope that, come the Autumn, she would resume her medical training, her primary goal was to bring her parents and sister out of Germany. Once again, she approached Otto Schiff for advice. Between them, they developed a scheme for her parents to rent a property in London which would include temporary accommodation for arriving refugees who would pay room and board. My grandmother had already had substantial experience of a similar kind by hosting British visitors to Frankfurt. She undertook two exploratory visits to England, by the end of which she laid a deposit on a five-bedroom flat at 12A Addison Court Gardens in Kensington to which they were to move in early 1934, leaving behind the Oberlindau residence in Frankfurt. Vera left the Brahams in order to reunite with her parents under a single roof.

Two problems remained. The first concerned Pepper, my grandfather, who was reluctant to leave familiar territory and complained that he would not be understood in England. Given her low opinion of her father, Vera tried to be upbeat and not just cynical.

VERA

Pepper should be happy when he comes to England, because no one has ever achieved anything by feeling depressed and hanging their heads. Of course, he will have good prospects here. He can either help Mutti with the chores or maybe follow his hobby and buy and sell stamps. *But* he has to speak English, otherwise everything will be much too difficult here! There is no other choice. We need to give him some easy children's books to read so he can get used to the language as such and then have him translate some of it every day. I cannot repeat often enough *how* important that is. I know that it is difficult for him, but it has to be done. He needs to be a little more reasonable and not be allowed to go

screaming that he cannot do something like that. For all our sakes, he must not keep walking in the same boots he wore a hundred years ago!

Far more problematic was how to accommodate Gretel in their home in London, given the severity of her mental debilities. When my grandparents were on the point of following their younger daughter out of Germany, it became apparent that, at least in the short term, they would have to leave without Gretel. If today such an outcome seems both cruel and improper, for a Jewish family living under the Nazis harsh necessity often dictated what in normal circumstances would have been unthinkable.

Initially, Vera anticipated that she would share a bedroom in London with her sister in order to open up three rooms in the new flat for the expected influx of guests. But, it did not take long for her to acknowledge how easily her sister's presence could impede her ability to support her immediate family. Gretel had been in and out of mental institutions for much of her life, and, even before the advent of the Nazi regime, her physical health had been a cause for concern. Until her parents were fully settled in England, it was expedient to return Gretel to an asylum. Their chosen locale was the Kalmenhof at Idstein in the scenic Taunus mountains not far from Frankfurt, a retreat that had been created in the late nineteenth century with support from the Jewish community.

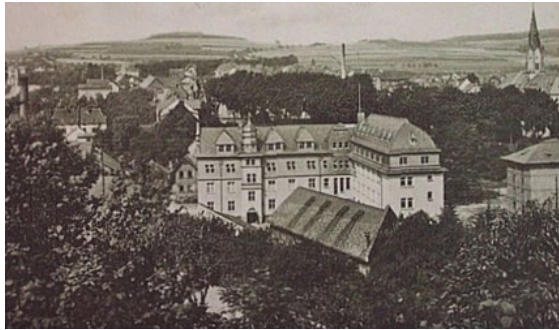


Fig. 57 View of the Kalmenhof, Idstein (taken from https://alt-idstein.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Haupthaus_2.jpg).

VERA

I think we have to find the space to accommodate *three* outside guests in our London flat. In an ideal world, Gretel and I would share a room quite well, freeing up the one originally meant for her. But, if we took Gretel along with us, it would actually be much worse for her. The situation in London would not be good for her nerves, and as we really

need to make ends meet, we will need to be unhampered. Gretel's being here would restrict me and all of us terribly. Placing her at Idstein would be best by far. I hope that Gretel will settle in well there. I am certain it is the best thing for her and for all of us. Then, after a year, it might be possible to bring her here.

Alice traveled with her elder daughter to Idstein, and was met with a warm reception by the director and staff at the Kalmenhof. Satisfied that Gretel would be well looked after, she left her in their temporary care.

VERA

I am glad that the director in Idstein is so nice and that Gretel seems to have settled in well. I think it is the best for her. You will see how independent she will become there and how at home she will feel there and how good the air and the quiet will be for her. I am sure that London would have been the absolute worst for her.

Days later, in the middle of January 1934, my grandparents crossed over to London, bringing with them items from their old home to furnish their new flat. Vera had used whatever spare time she could find to prepare things for them. Her attention for Gretel was almost an afterthought.

VERA

12a Addison Court Gardens looks so delightful that my heart was in my throat. We have never had such a luxurious bathroom, simply wonderful!!! The kitchen is charming and everything is so bright and beautiful. There is a brand-new beautiful cabinet to replace the old broom closet. I measured the drapes in the dining room again and the width and length of the hall in inches and at the beginning of next week, I will find out what the carpet for the hall will cost, because Otto wants to know.

Other repair work on it was only finished yesterday morning. The porter already gave me the keys. He promised that he will look through everything with care, the windows, lighting fixtures, etc. It is absolutely beautiful! I have to repeat again and again how indescribably I am looking forward to having a real home again and how much I need that. I hope as much that Gretel will settle in well at Idstein. I am certain it is the best thing for her and for all of us.

Perhaps Vera was right that Gretel would feel more secure at the Kalmenhof than in London. That was likely wishful thinking. Sources since made available show that the “nice” director at Idstein was ejected from the institution by an SS squad and replaced by a gun-toting Nazi. The subsequent brutalization of the Kalmenhof was rapid, the new director issuing an order that “unsuitable national comrades will be reduced to an absolute minimum.”

Though we do not have the details, we know that Gretel’s life after her parents’ departure was short. When she entered the Kalmenhof in January 1934, her health was already poor. Little over fourteen months later, on 26 March 1935, my grandfather, by then settled in London, received a telegram from the Kalmenhof with the following short notice: “= MARGARETHE HIRSCH HEUTE FRUEH LUNGENZUENDUNG UND GRIPPE VERSTORBEN = ” (“Margarethe Hirsch died early today from pneumonia and influenza”).



Fig. 58 Telegram from the Kalmenhof at Idstein recording the death of Vera’s older sister, Gretel Hirsch, 26 March 1935.

Gretel was thirty-three years old when she died. The survival of similar telegrams from the Kalmenhof informing of the death of individual patients by natural causes such as influenza, when in fact they had been killed by lethal injection, casts a terrible shadow of suspicion over the cause of Gretel’s death. Those other telegrams are of a later date.

Many years later, when I first learned that the Nazis used the Kalmenhof as an epicenter for the involuntary euthanasia of patients with chronic disabilities, I asked my mother whether she thought that Gretel may have been murdered. Vera was visibly shocked at my question, and was categorical that that was not the case. I believe that she was right since the policy of involuntary euthanasia was only instituted after Gretel’s death.

It is likely, though, that Gretel was maltreated under the new regime at the Kalmenhof, which may have expedited her death. Unlike later victims who were cast into a mass grave, she was accorded individual burial in the Jewish cemetery at Idstein.



Fig. 59 (a) Studio photograph of Alice Hirsch with Gretel as a toddler; Atelier Blum, Frankfurt.



Fig. 59 (b) Grave of Margarethe ("Gretel") Hirsch at Idstein; colour photograph taken by Colin Watts, 2018.

Because she was so distant from her sister, Vera frequently identified herself as an "only child." Nevertheless, I think there remained throughout her life an undercurrent of residual guilt in her mind whenever she thought back to her unfortunate sister. For my grandmother, the loss must have been far harsher as she thought back to Gretel's childhood and mourned the passing of her first born.

