

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
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Thirteen: Marks and Mitja

VERA

Selective journal entries, December 1933 through December 1934

Life—what is it?

At the moment, I am going through one of the most difficult periods in my life, no doubt.

We have never been in such a material bind, dependence, and uncertainty before. It is difficult to say how this will end. I am saying this today so that I will be more balanced and calmer this evening. I have seen that in myself before, that I waste away when I close myself off for too long.

I want to have *courage*, that is the most important thing in life. I want to take everything as valuable experience.

What a time of complete stagnancy and idle running this is for me! Why does one become such a slave to things, to stuff? How lonely every single human being is! Where are the positive things in life? Why are people so dishonest? Maybe Oscar Spengler in Germany is right when he calls social emotional impulses degenerative events: only the strong=intelligent=clever one can live. What is life? And if you feel too much pity for others and too many emotions, you will drown in them. If others are more awkward or less talented, will they have to be stepped on by your foot or at least be kicked to the side? Where is the value in life?

I worry about work. Will it be possible to find a new and more challenging position? Or must I stay forever on minimal pay at Eve Valère? How does one endure such a completely monotonous and numbingly stressful job?

A matter that is important at work is to make sure that I never look as if I have lapsed into inefficiency. Also, another observation:

I should become more tolerant, lenient, and friendly to the poor people behind the counter; these people who have no outlook in their life, with no prospect of a promotion. In this bleakest monotony, I feel a certain obligation to them, but how can they get ahead in life if they are always as undemanding as ever with their impromptu decisions, superficial friendliness, and cheerful incomprehension? Will continuing like this help with my medical studies? Maybe it's just worth it to keep my eyes open and to look for every new experience in order to learn as much as possible. It isn't altogether a bad thing that I haven't learned everything yet: with medicine, millinery, languages, etc., etc. But I have nothing, absolutely nothing that I can show for myself and declare to be my specialty.

Maybe all of this is only long-term training so that I will one day be able to give good advice to my children. What a colorful and eventful story I will be able to tell these children!

Through the recommendation of Otto Schiff and support from Ray Braham, Vera was selected as one of a cadre of a dozen individuals to be trained as staff managers in the newly established Welfare Department at Marks & Spencer, Britain's leading chain store. Schiff had received government approval to allow a hand-picked group of skilled refugees to enter the work force, though with the proviso that this did not constitute a right to permanent settlement. Vera's experience at Eve Valère, her fluency in English, and the fact that she had had a university education—at that time rare among women—all spoke in her favor. With an application in hand for working papers, she commenced what was to prove an absorbing new career as a staff manageress in the retail trade. Her enthusiasm is palpable.



Fig. 60 Marks & Spencer, store front of North End Road Branch, London, 1930s
(<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/422001427562112641/>).

VERA

Selective journal entries, 3 June through 9 October 1935

Today I received my definite acceptance at Marks and Spencer with a salary of 3 pounds per week. How blessed I am to have such a job: I want to apply all of my strength and energy, dreading no toil, and do everything to the best of my ability and be happy in the knowledge that I could accomplish something. People who work so stressfully in a store must be able to unburden their lives. What a wonderful, encouraging endeavor.

I have been working in the Welfare department of Marks and Spencer on Oxford Street since Monday the 8th of July. I am thankful for this position. I believe that this new occupation will give me a new perspective on life. In these first six days I have learned

1. How important it is to be exact (especially with the monotonous bookwork!);
2. What a huge influence consistent friendliness, thoughtfulness, and politeness can have on the atmosphere of a business;
3. How important it is to take seriously every single person's concern, no matter how small. I want to encourage others daily and employ all my strength, without looking stressed and without pitying myself.

I am so happy at the moment that I am so much more independent. I want to find fulfillment in this work, and really take it seriously, and not as if it were just an inescapable way to make money while one cannot wait to get off work.

I have found myself falling into the practical life of the very ordinary, little average, working girl. But I am not unhappy. It has excited something in me. Maybe it's just the novelty of the adventure! This whole time of my life I am aware that I am in a transitioning period.... What next?

I strive to be a person whose existence is at least a little bit justified. I have the feeling that for the first time in my life I have found *the* occupation that speaks to my disposition and truly fits who I am.

As her professional life took a major step forward through her new career in personnel management, Vera's private life was nearly upended by an ill-starred love affair with a thirty-year old emigré from Russia whose name was Mitja

Simonoff. From the beginning, Vera recognized that Mitja was a charming lothario who enjoyed playing the field, but, from when they first met, she persuaded herself that she could alter his ways and that he was the one for her. It was love at first sight, and she was head over heels from day one.

VERA

Selective journal entries, 8 December 1934 through 27 March 1935

Is the positive in life only to be sought in the relationship between a male and a female? How long can such a relationship remain ideal? Just a short summary of the past week: eight days ago, Saturday, I was with Mitja, and he is the one that I want to marry.

The more I learn the more I like Mitja; he is the man for whom I have waited all these years. He is my final love. He is everything, *everything* that I have ever dreamed of in my ideal man. He is good, so kind, and has character. He is intelligent, energetic, and quickly resolute. He has tact, and is amusing and perceptive.

And what does he think of me?

Do I believe that he enjoys and keeps up his conversations *only* with me, since he has asked again and again for my company alone! I am sure that he can only know how much I treasure him, and there is nothing else to say. I cannot hide it from him, and yet in our last conversation he had said to me how he had these desires that only I could satisfy.

I made the suggestion that tomorrow, instead of going out, he should come over to my place. I told him by way of excuse how much I would love that he meet my angel of a mother. How shy we both are about this! Naturally, this is awfully awkward, but Mitja, I love you because I am convinced that we are both right for each other. For such a love there can and must be a wonderful and rich life's journey ahead of us!

Sunday, Mitja was at tea until 10.30, and he told me how much he liked my mother!

At the door upon leaving the house—he spoke in English because he said it was easier to say it in English!—he whispered, “Don’t forget me”, and then he put both arms around me, and that is as easy to say as anything else. He told me today that he is always so bashful when we are together.

Maybe Mitja only likes how I look externally. He told me today that I have good looking legs; finally a compliment, oh you child!

My dear mother always wants to remind me of the truism that after he has been with her a man will lose his interest in a woman. Well, if this happens, then it must be true! Anyone looking at this situation from the outside would say that I should prove my thankfulness for her by not taking this next step, but life is not so easy. Schooling may come easily, but life does not.

Am I aware of the consequences for me as a woman? (and, more than once, Mitja asked if it would be my first time and I didn't answer this). I told him that I am old enough to know what I am doing.

Do I really value my virginity so much? Honestly, no, I don't. And I know now for sure that I will go away with Mitja for the weekend. He asked me, and I said how much I would love to come along, but I didn't give him *any* final answer until I had a whole night to think about it. It will only be for one weekend. Yes, I know that I am definitely doing the right thing!

* * *

I almost expected this to be the first time and that I would not enjoy it; maybe that comes after many repetitions, but I am not so keen on that. I am completely calm, and not as "stirred up" as I was four weeks ago after the first unresolved time together. I feel sore, something physical hurts and I hope it will let up in the next three or four days, and that the entire matter will hopefully continue without any other side effects.

The act didn't seem so radical but there were various other things about him that were odd. I am not cold, everything on my side was really already prepared, except for the fact that the hymen was not yet broken. I hope I don't have any kind of physical defect, because my medical knowledge doesn't quite extend so far in this matter. I judged from his behavior that maybe it is abnormal, maybe it is only because my twenty-five-year-old tissue is not as flexible now. I don't know.

After our experience he didn't find it necessary to call me today to find out how I am. I don't blame him for his behavior. I am the gratified one. But a person with so little empathy cannot be my friend, much less my lover or even my husband. It's good that I've figured this out relatively early. I regret nothing. This matter has wonderfully rounded out as if it was in a cheesy novel; that is *not* my fault. I have enormously enjoyed our time together, but I intend to break up with Mitja.

I am not ashamed that I am just one of many women, many *things*, on Mitja's list. It doesn't matter because I knew what I was doing at every moment. But someone with such a shortcoming of sensitivity is

unbearable to me. I am, let it be noted here, completely calm and level-headed, and I have no heartache.

For my part, everything that I gave that first time was meant to be evidence of my complete love and affection. But for him it was totally different and thus he could never understand! He said that to break up would only be better for me, but for him to never see me again would be painful and horrible.

What do I like about Mitja? It's hard to say today, he is empty! He has spent his life sleeping around with amazingly beautiful women! Why did he even befriend me? If I had the opportunity to marry a man who will even somewhat fit what I would like, I would do it and say goodbye to Mitja once and for all. It wouldn't affect him much. And despite all this, I do not regret anything, I have enjoyed our friendship and I will continue on with my life!

For three weeks now (almost to the day), I have heard *nothing* more from Mitja. Without any particular reason that I know of. It was, almost to the day, the sixth month of our friendship. And it seems that half a year is the usual amount of time he gives to a relationship. I only wish that he had stopped contact because of a mutual and honest break up, but it seems that men are this way. Externally I am opposed to him. I *cannot* give him the triumph of telling his next girlfriend how the woman he abandoned pursued him, and that he therefore had a right to completely arrest the relationship, because the abandoned girlfriend had loved him too much and had reckoned that he should marry her, and so he broke it off with her. That would indeed be about what he'd say; but by not hearing from me maybe his vanity will be a bit hurt!

It is terrifying how many men are cowards. He dared not say anything to me about breaking up, but instead decided to break contact and completely dump me. Maybe he thought he would hear from me, and through my questioning, or even better through my accusation, that I would be the one to facilitate everything. No, Mitja, that will *never* happen with me. I regret *nothing* that has happened in the course of our friendship but I will tell my next boyfriend the following: I have a tendency to be unfaithful. One day I will just dump you as if nothing happened. I'll even make this clear at the beginning of the relationship. Maybe that's the right method!!!

Is it vanity, that despite all of this my opinion of Mitja has not changed? Is it stupid that I don't want to acknowledge that I met a bad person and that I've been had? I believe that this isn't the case, and my

opinion is that he is also hurting at the moment; probably completely out of vanity that this was such an unworthy departure.

I want to try and pick up the threads again. First: I believe that I am a bit better from the experience. I really am trying to give more of myself and I am working on shaking off my inhibitions.

At the beginning of last year, I was unemployed and unhappy about it, but I was mentally content and fulfilled through a friendship that grew into a romantic love, one that was cherished up to the very last moment. I have never regretted it.

Then I found myself a job, and I lost the friend and the lover without much heartbreak.

Vera's brief entanglement with Mitja made her far more circumspect in thinking about entering into a relationship with another man, though it also signaled to her that, given the right circumstances, she would most likely be emotionally ready for that. For much of the remainder of 1935, she immersed herself in her work as a staff manageress at Marks & Spencer, finding considerable satisfaction there.

