

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN



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<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

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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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Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at <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.

Fourteen: “I Stole a Kiss From You at the Train Station”

21 January through 16 February 1936

POLITICAL TIMELINE 1936

- 20 January 1936: Death of King George V of Great Britain (funeral 28 January).
- 6–16 February 1936: Winter Olympics staged at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria.
- 3 March 1936: Jewish doctors officially barred from practicing in German hospitals.
- 7 March 1936: German troops occupy the Rhineland which had been demilitarized after World War I.
- March 1936: Anti-Semitic pogroms in Poland.
- April 1936: Widespread riots by Arabs in mandatory Palestine against Jewish immigration.
- 17 June 1936: Heinrich Himmler, Reichführer of the SS, made chief of all German police forces. Anti-Semitic road signs temporarily removed from Germany in anticipation of the summer games
- 17 July 1936: Beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Hitler supplies troops in support of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.
- 31 July 1936: Nazi decree classifying mixed-race children as Jews.
- 1-16 August 1936: Summer Olympics staged in Berlin.

- 7 September 1936: Twenty-five per cent tax on all Jewish assets in Germany.
- 23 September 1936: Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp opened.
- 15 October 1936: Decree that “Non Aryans” are prohibited from teaching in German public schools.
- 25 October 1936: Rome-Berlin Axis formed by Mussolini and Hitler.
- 14 November 1936: Statue of Felix Mendelssohn before the Gewandhaus in Leipzig destroyed.
- 27 November 1936: Film criticism banned in Germany.

In the autumn of 1935, more than a year after they left Germany, the Hirsch family hosted a visit to London by Annelie Freimann, a distant cousin whose home was in Leipzig. Vera had never met her before. From the moment she arrived, Annelie turned out to be a delight.⁵ She was young, energetic, full of fun, and with a most agreeable personality. Despite being Jewish, she had not been expelled from Leipzig University where she was enrolled as a dental student, and she still expected to qualify the following year. Yet, Annelie was also realistic about the situation. She told of one particular professor who had dared to speak out in the classroom against the new regime, and how she had witnessed his physical removal by Nazi thugs, adding that the poor man was never heard of or seen again. Her visit was an opportunity for Annelie to explore whether there may be options open to her in England once she graduated. On her departure, she asked Vera to visit her in Leipzig, hardly expecting that her offer would be taken up.

The open invitation that she had received from Annelie played on Vera’s mind during those rare moments in which she was not engrossed in the intricacies of her new job or trying to care for the immediate wants of her parents. With her first short vacation from M&S slated for the start of 1936, she began to envision albeit wild plans. When she raised with her mother the idea of visiting Annelie in Leipzig, she inevitably received an extremely negative response. With some justification, my grandmother lectured to her on the foolishness of returning to Nazi Germany and the risks that that incurred. For whatever reason, Vera was

5 A torn photograph of Annelie Herzberg (née Freimann), reproduced from the Holocaust Memorial Education Center website, can be viewed in the online resources for this book, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0334#resources>. An extensive interview with Annelie can be found on the Holocaust Memorial Education Center website: <https://www.ssbjchec.org/survivor/anneliese-herzberg/>

not prepared to listen. The more that her mother objected the more determined she was to make the journey.

In common with many other emigrants, some of whom even gave up their uncertain status as refugees in order to return to Germany at that time, Vera was perhaps lulled into a false sense of security by reports that things were really not that bad there. Indeed, during the latter part of 1935 and into 1936, with preparations well advanced for the upcoming Olympic Games, the Nazi regime temporarily relaxed its more virulent displays of anti-Semitism. Ominously, however, the first of the so-called "Nuremberg Laws," defining German citizenship by race and reducing Jews to mere "subjects," had been enunciated by Hitler as recently as mid-September 1935. The lull in the more strident propaganda against the Jews, while Germany made itself ready for the Winter Games that would take place at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps in early February, was but a passing interlude. In retrospect, if there was a brief moment in time to revisit Germany it was then.



Fig. 61 Front of postcard from Mope to Vera, dated 15 March 1936, advertising the recent Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany; postage stamp removed by Hermann Hirsch, Vera's father.

Nevertheless, with her broader percipience and acumen, my grandmother was beside herself and full of fear for the safety of her daughter. When, toward the start of the fourth week of January, Vera left the relative security of London for her short holiday with Annelie in Leipzig, the parting maternal exhortation that she received was at all costs not to become romantically involved with anyone there, and, given the fluctuating political situation, above all not to become involved with a young man of the Jewish faith. There must have been intuitive angels of a higher order that guided Vera as she embarked on what was to prove the most consequential journey of her life!

VERA

Journal entry, 23 August 1935

I want to apply myself completely to my new job; avoid no effort and always keep mentally active with a goal in mind. I want to attempt to build up my position here.

Currently, every day I go to work at 7 in the morning and I return home in the evenings, and I work at home helping my mother until about 10 or 10.30, and then I am more than exhausted. I don't get out of the house at all. I don't see anyone else. I have no admirer or boyfriend. Currently the only positive thing I can find is that I can financially help my sweet mother through my work, and that I have been able to use my strengths and imagination at my job.

Recently I have discovered that it is seriously hard for me to better myself when I am at home; Mother spoils me, everything is centered around and on me; and the most essential thing—contact with other people—is difficult for me to find. Although it's my own responsibility and if I really wanted to I could figure out a way to be around others and not close myself off.

Why am I so uptight?! My heart is seemingly forced to be at a standstill: I have no friends, no lovers or suitors, and it must be my fault. I need a boyfriend! I mean a lover; but as much as I could actually fall in love I could also receive just as much pain. I don't really want to be reeling from pain like that anymore.

I want to try my best to find a new man with whom I might begin a relationship. I want to reveal little to him, if anything, of what I do. I want to be coy, and if I like someone I want to flirt, laugh, dance, and be generally light-hearted. I want to amuse a man, who I might, for example, ask if he likes it when someone wears makeup, or if he thinks it is right for a woman to go to work. I have always believed and hoped that at twenty-five years I might find myself a man whom I could marry. If I find someone I like I want to challenge him.

I am now almost 26 years old. For a woman that isn't considered young anymore. I am still too dependent. Recently I have been so horribly undisciplined, and compared with how I used to be I am weak. Have I made any steps forward in the past year?

Journal entry, 21 January 1936

Tomorrow I will travel to Leipzig for my vacation. Despite her opposition, my sweet mother helped to make the arrangements for me. To be completely honest, I am a bit worried today about this trip to Germany, but I wouldn't say this to anyone! I am excited about being in such a different environment—the general conditions in Germany—and I look forward to changing and leaving my everyday life for a while. I like my job now, and I do look forward to coming back to England and seeing my mother again.

It will be interesting to see how the old ways have changed in just two and a half years.

On Wednesday, 22 January, the day prior to her twenty-sixth birthday, Vera travelled to Germany for the first time since 1933, planning to return home to London at the end of the weekend in time to go to work the following morning. A hidden part of Annelie Freimann's agenda for the visit to Leipzig of her attractive cousin was at odds with the expectations of that same cousin's mother. Certainly, she wished to return her obligation to the Hirsches by welcoming Vera within her own family and to celebrate her birthday. But Annelie had other plans too. Although her circle of Jewish friends had drastically diminished since the advent of Nazi power, there were still a number of eligible bachelors to whom Annelie sought to introduce her cousin. Restrictions on Jewish life already made it hard for friends to congregate in public places, and so, on the Friday evening of 24 January, Annelie opted to invite some of them to a bridge soirée at her home. Vera had only rarely played bridge and so was a little concerned that her presence would be supernumerary.

When Annelie's friends arrived and the bridge fours sat down at their separate tables, Vera found herself placed next to a tall, debonair, well-spoken man with fine features, a light complexion and curly blond hair. One of the first things that she noticed about him was the peculiar manner with which he held his cards, denoting that he too was less than familiar with the intricacies of bridge. That turned out to be so, and, in a comparatively short time, they withdrew from the game, and engaged themselves in animated conversation. His name, she learned, was Moritz Felsenstein, and he had grown up here in Leipzig, where his family was in the fur trade, but he was planning to emigrate to Palestine.

As their individual stories began to unfold, they soon became engrossed in each other, and found themselves at the beginning of a lifelong love affair that

affirms its freshness for us through their correspondence. Writing from far-away Russia three years later, Mope's recollection of their first meeting in Leipzig (on the banks of the River Pleisse) captures the intimacy of their relationship from its earliest moment.

MOPE TO VERA

Moscow, 16 January 1939

Should these lines arrive on the 24th, they have a further task to fulfill, because they are meant to express my joy concerning this day when I saw you for the very first time and my happiness and gratitude for all the infinitely many beautiful things that I have experienced in these last three years because of you. Back then, I had the feeling that I was supposed to be presented to you as a pleasing option during your visit and, prior to that, I was lacking any kind of positive sensation. Now, I know that you came to the Pleisse with the strictest prohibition against catching one from Leipzig, and you have no idea how good that little forbidden fruit tastes to me, what burning longing I feel to finally taste it again and to be allowed to lick it to taste all of its sweetness.

Writing to Mope in a more discreet recollection of their first meeting, Vera also recalls the timelessness of that moment.

VERA TO MOPE

London, 24 January 1939

Today is the 24th—three years ago, we were playing bridge although neither one of us knew how. Three years ago today, the two of us had our first rendezvous—if you could call it that. Do you know that it seems completely unimaginable to me that I am supposed to have known my beloved for only three years? And if someone asked me again today, everything I can say is that I am very grateful to a benevolent fate that gave me a 24 January 1936 with everything that goes along with it. I have the feeling that we have belonged together since time immemorial.

Shortly before Vera was to return home, a telegram arrived from her mother in London, informing that, as a mark of respect following the death of King George V, shops and businesses in England would remain closed for several days, and it would not be essential for her to go back to work until later in the week. If she

was having a fine time, she could stay on with Annelie beyond the weekend. The timing of the telegram could not have been more favorable to their budding relationship.

However, as Vera was in Leipzig as a guest, most of the happenings over the additional three days of her visit involved not just Mope but Annelie and her group of friends. There was very little time for privacy. Their later correspondence is sprinkled with descriptive snapshots of those first days, including a visit to the cinema where they watched Zoltan Korda's new movie *Bosambo* (released in the English-speaking world as *Sanders of the River*), starring Paul Robeson in the title role and Nina Mae McKinney as his wife, Lilongo.



Fig. 62 German film poster for *Bosambo* (1935), starring Paul Robeson with Nina Mae McKinney playing his wife, Lilongo.

"Lilongo" became a particular and affectionate name with which Mope addressed Vera in his letters to her. For them, it was an instant link to those first days of their relationship with "the memory of the first film we watched together and the first intense holding of hands that took place then."

At the time of Vera's visit, Mope already had tickets and visas for an exploratory visit the following month to Palestine, then under British mandatory rule. After knowing Vera for fewer than four days, he found himself promising that, before his return to Leipzig, he would stop over in London. Four days earlier, he would never have imagined in his wildest dreams that he would be making such arrangements. Mope's recollection of the moment of departure and their first kiss is amusingly captured in a letter of January 1939.

MOPE TO VERA

Moscow, 22 January 1939

It has been three years now since I stole a kiss from you at the train station, a kiss I have returned to you a thousand-fold without ever giving that first one back. Its taste, which was soooo good still lies sweetly on my lips and was the beginning of my happiness. Can anyone wish for anything more beautiful? How wonderful it would be if I could spend these days with my sweetheart once again. I think I would go to a train station with you just to steal another such kiss. Do you still remember how hard Annelie was trying to be discreet and showed an enormous interest in other acquaintances who were leaving at the same time? That hussy had realized what was going on and wanted to be an unintentional matchmaker so badly and that was terribly nice of her, don't you agree?

The advancement of their relationship now depended upon correspondence. The emotional frisson brought about by their first encounter and their deepening emotions are well captured in Mope's letters. Unfortunately, all of Vera's letters to him went missing after the SS raided his Leipzig apartment in June 1937, so that their surviving correspondence remains one-sided until shortly before that date. As if to compensate, Vera continued to maintain a lively diary or journal out of which we can glean some sense of her own emergent feelings. Likely, her diary entries from this time contain inner thoughts and details that may not have been chronicled so explicitly in her missing letters. In several of their early letters to each other, when addressing one another in German, Mope and (by intimation) Vera struggle between the more intimate "Du" and the more formal "Sie". Even with only one side of the correspondence, we can sense that they are both seeking a common idiom. From the beginning, they realize too that, given Nazi censorship, discretion in what they write is essential.

MOPE TO VERA

Postcard, Leipzig, 27/28 January 1936

Dear Vera—that sounds a little less affectionate than "liebe Vera," but Annelie thinks—this will be read.... Dear reader, please stop reading. —

We are still sitting in the Café Merkur.... I hope you are sleeping well while I am writing. My heartfelt greetings to you and I will greet you in London soon, Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 29 January 1936

I am writing to you, Veralein, in order to thank you for your lines.⁶ They include, wafted by expressions of gratitude—not deserved by me—your address—is it meant to encourage me to write?

Such a shame that your stay was too short for us to get to know each other sufficiently. I am constantly trying to form an image of you—not an external one, a photographic surrogate helps me with that, but an internal one. I am lacking impressions concerning the things you think about, and I would like to know how much of what you think you also talk about—and how strongly you regulate that. Maybe your intelligence or inner deliberations—I do not consider them repression—prevent you from thinking out loud in an easy manner. In all probability, a little more spontaneity would make the sparks fly easier from pole to pole. I am writing this—and maybe you will think it strange, at the beginning of our correspondence—in order to find a catalyst so as to make you react more easily.

In my thoughts of you, I have given you a different name—"Lilongo"—not for lack of thought or imagination, but can there be an expression of emotion that you can imbue phonetically with more feelings than this one? Even its consonants make sounds when you speak it, and it is full of tenderness that you can only feel as light that suddenly begins to shine in a lot of darkness.

Lilongo—most affectionately—Mope

VERA

Journal entry, 29 January 1936

Today, I took up my London life again!

I came back yesterday evening around 9 o'clock (Tuesday). Wednesday morning, I left London; I spent five days in Leipzig.

They admired me, and I met a human being whom I like, and I have a true and good friend in Annelie. I will continue writing another day.

6 Prior to leaving Leipzig, Vera must have mailed or given to Annelie Friemann a now lost first letter to Mope.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 4 February 1936

Lilongo—no, I won't be miserly with the expression of my feelings—

My beautiful, dear Lilongo! Thank you for not rejecting the name for you that maybe does not say the same thing to your ear as it does to mine, and for your letter.

“Not even a week ago, we hardly knew anything about each other,” you write. Human or creature experiences cannot be measured with time pieces. They are much too rare for that, and in just a few seconds, we can experience such infinite things in happiness or pain that many years—maybe an entire life—cannot capture comparable moments with the same sense of destiny. We have known each other for one week—Lilongo—we know each other very little and still, we know each other in an immeasurably infinite place in time, as I carry you and what I feel through you inside me. And I would not write this to you if I was not sure that the feeling is mutual. We are not able to see the future and do not know what will result from our experience, but it is beautiful and full of strong emotions.

I have ordered a ticket to London and will arrive there on Friday, April 3—to visit my sister Hanna. In the long time until then, I hope to hear more about you and your well-being and wish that Lilongo will always be pleased with Mope's letters. About this one, too.

I wish you everything beautiful, Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 10 February 1936

My dear friend Lilongo, many thanks for your letter with “Du,” that brought to me an advancement in the frame of your emotions, although that “little word” was paid out more by force than free will. As we sat together two weeks ago in the station restaurant in Leipzig, suddenly, I could not say “Sie” anymore. For me, it is an awakening feeling of tenderness—a desire to caress another human being—to worry about that person and to be good to her. Don't you agree that this “Du” is full of meaning?

Next Wednesday, I intend to depart from here and would like to ask you to send me a good photograph of you by then, one in which you

are laughing. I can then imagine, according to my mood, that you are laughing with me or at me. If you are laughing at me, I will tell myself that you are right and that the bad mood needs to make room for a better softer one. Lilongo, if you are laughing with me, I am in a good mood and send you my heartfelt greetings, because that is what I hope.

Your friend Mope

VERA

Journal entry, London, 16 February 1936

Just a few words to say: I am feeling completely balanced in the knowledge that I have a boyfriend, a human being who is intelligent and kind. What more do you really want?

My work makes me happy; I am much more on top of the matter now and have a better overview.

My Muttilein is an angel, so full of intelligence. How she uncovered an indecisiveness resting in my subconscious during a simple conversation yesterday evening and made the right decision when we talked about the course of my life. If I should marry in the near future, I should keep working in my current profession.

