

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2024 Franklin Felsenstein (ed.)

©2024 Rachel Pistol (Introduction)



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

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>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

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.

Fifteen: Mope in Palestine

21 February through 3 April 1936

Mope's ambition to emigrate to Palestine filled him with excitement as he set off in mid-February on an exploratory visit during which he would advance plans with his brother Adolf, and sister Alice—both already settled there—to get their mother out of Germany. He too had every intention to relocate to Palestine. However, he was so smitten by his new relationship with Vera that he was already hoping beyond hope that he could persuade her to join him in moving to Palestine. That aspiration is semi-concealed in his letters to her in which he describes his journey, fully aware that after Palestine he will travel on to London.

MOPE TO VERA

Adria, northern Italy, 21 February 1936

Jugoslavenski Lloyd JL
S/S Kraljica Marija



Fig. 63 Photograph of steam ship Kraljica Marija.

Off to my side, a five-man band is playing Hungarian dances. Not even two meters away from me is the cello whose constant strum is meant to

provide inspiration for writing. Should I refrain from writing or should I dare to let loose a letter that will be confused by too much noise?

My dear, beautiful Lilongo, I was very pleased with your letter and the card that reached me on the morning of my departure from Leipzig. The awareness alone that a human being who stands outside my immediate circle thinks in friendship of the old bachelor makes me happy!⁷

The last few days—departure—night in Munich—the drive through the Austrian Alps—sun and rain—snowy landscapes and blooming heather—eternal tunnels—psychological studies of other Palestine-bound travelers—fulfillment of 25 years of longing to come to Palestine —and so overwhelmed by an infinite number of impressions that cannot be regulated by brain functions, so that this writ is probably quite addled, even without the music right next to me. The piece that is playing now is called “A Trip to Santiago.” The musicians certainly have no idea what *Erez Yisrael* [the land of Israel] means to their listeners, otherwise they would not play such kitsch. But that is neither here nor there. It is much more important that the ship, as a means of transport, seems to offer every amenity, also does not let you sense in any way that this is an emigration ship en route to Palestine. Unfortunately, travel agencies only inform you about comfort and not at all about ambience, because payment cannot be demanded for that and the agencies do not get any ambience commission—which, since Jewish, would be forbidden in Nazi Germany anyway.

I will be very happy to find mail from you on my arrival in Haifa. Will I?....

Your Mope who asks for pardon for his confusion!

VERA

Journal entry, Saturday, 8 March 1936

Just a few words to recognize, with the deepest appreciation, a fate that led us here to London; work that interests me and that makes me happy; gave me people who are good to me or led them to cross my path; let me meet Mope who seems to have many of the character traits that I had

7 The difference in age between Mope and Vera—almost eleven years—caused him (“the old bachelor”) to be a little self-conscious at the beginning of their relationship.

hoped to find in a boyfriend. I am grateful and full of expectation in the thought of the near future, Mope's visit at the beginning of next month.

I wonder how we will get along! I will not be disappointed, but will anticipate it in the knowledge to have had these last few fulfilling weeks, filled with jubilant excitement and thankfulness. I will endeavor to let my surroundings feel my happiness!

MOPE TO VERA

Jerusalem, 9 March 1936

Yesterday was a beautiful day, the sun was shining gloriously and was blown into my face by a pleasant, fresh wind, and then, on top of it all, I received your sweet letter which is friendly and almost a little motherly—and that made the receiver feel really good.

Now you want to know a little about my travel impressions. They are still in a mess and very incomplete, because I still have to see an infinite number of things before I can give a final judgment—if that is even possible. The sea voyage was wonderful, despite partly choppy seas. As we saw the coast appear on the morning before our arrival, I was completely overwhelmed. Apart from a sentimental reaction, even when viewed from a distance, the country makes a much more grandiose impression than any other that I have come to know so far.

Mountains and valleys—Hermon and Lebanon, bright white covered with snow and shining in the sun that burnishes from a firmament that is so blue that it could never be described in a letter. The Carmel (in German "wine mountain of God"), which is green again, reaches far into the sea and behind that the hills which are becoming more fertile through Jewish labor—these hills let you understand at first sight the reason why this land was called the granary of Rome and why it was coveted by everyone who saw it.

Haifa: horrible customs control. Everything was touched, appraised, the body searched for weapons—disgusting. Outside of the customs area which they were not allowed to set foot on, my brother and my sister-in-law waited for two hours until I arrived.⁸ We drove up into the city that is expanding in a hyper-American fashion. A brand-new house,

8 Mope's older brother, Adolf, and his wife, Gretl, who emigrated from Germany to Palestine in 1935, had settled in the port city of Haifa.

one next to the other. The roadwork cannot keep up at the same speed. And the view of the sea and the mountains, and, for the first time in many years, merry, happy, laughing human beings who don't exist in Germany any longer. Wherever I went, in the countryside and in the city, Jews who are dancing in the street after work, happy with their lives and their freedom.

They work terribly hard. The battle for survival is bitterly hard, but they laugh when work is done and that is magnificent. Besides cafes and movie theatres, I have seen no places for amusement so far. Of course there are often concerts and visiting theatre plays—even in the villages—because the people here are hungry for culture, but cabarets and variety shows are not needed here; if the joy is too much they dance on the street at night.

And the buses and cars have to get by them quietly and furtively so that they don't disrupt things. The bus drivers often sing Hebrew songs while they maneuver the difficult mountain roads in the cities up and down and are artists in their profession without any nervousness. You cannot imagine more heterogeneous elements than the ones that have come together here in the last fifteen years and still, the harmony is great and amazing—even with all the ruling political and cultural differences. The will to be free from the ghetto, to be a free human being in our own country, shines from every eye.

Here I am witness as to how quickly the people adapt to new ways of living. The ones from relatively uncivilized countries would hardly be able to exist anymore without bathtubs, shower stalls and similar comforts—even in the countryside, and they really do look like they make much use of them; and the initially over-civilized ones, especially well-to-do women who had three to six servants back there, feel happy without help, cook, fry, bake on Neft (Petroleum) and wonder why they lived differently once upon a time.

And all of these impressions are optically interwoven with the Orient in the most concentrated form. Arabs and Bedouins with donkeys and camels and in the Arabic parts of the cities the colorful, loud marketplaces where everything produced in the Orient and the Occident is traded. On the country roads large herds of goats, camel caravans and by the wells Rebekkahs with jugs, everything from clothes to forms of living and movement is like it was four thousand years ago, when our forefathers

cheated their fathers-in-law out of herds of cattle because they were cheated with the women.⁹

On Saturday evening, I was asked to a surprise party. Most people wore costumes to celebrate the Purimfest¹⁰ and spirits were high. Mope was a non-dancer, as usual, but had a wonderful time anyway. He would have danced with Lilongo: such a shame that she was not there.

I am invited tonight as well and it is already almost 9.30, so I have to go. Since I hope to receive another letter from you at my brother's address before my departure on the 27th, this report had to be written today despite the invitation.

Lilongo, I think of you all the time; I think some people call that "love." Unfortunately, I can only give you a written kiss in thanks for your letter. But I will personally retrieve it in London and am looking forward to that a lot. Your Mope



Fig. 64 Watercolor of shore at Lake Tiberias, 1934. Later, the picture hung on the wall of Mope's bedroom in London as a cherished memento of his earlier desire to settle in Palestine. Artist's signature indecipherable.

9 In the biblical story, Jacob was tricked by his uncle, Laban, into marrying Leah before he could marry her younger sister, Rachel. In turn, Jacob greatly increased his flocks and herds to the cost of Laban and his sons (Genesis, chs. 29-30).

10 The Feast of Purim, marking the deliverance of the Jews from genocide in Persia at the time of King Ahasuerus in the fourth century B.C.E., is celebrated with merrymaking and the wearing of masks and costumes. The event is the subject of the Book of Esther. In 1936, the first night of Purim fell on Saturday, 7 March.

MOPE TO VERA

Haifa, Hotel Villa Migdal, 27 March 1936

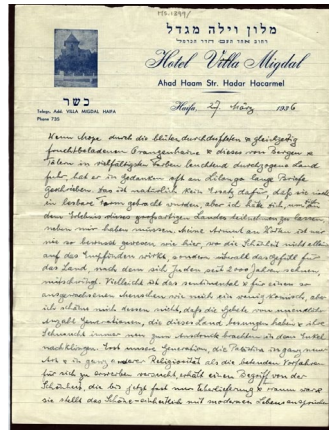


Fig. 65 Front page of Mope's letter to Vera, Haifa, 27 March 1936.

As Mope was driving through the blossoming, fragrant orange groves which were laden with fruit at the same time, and through this country crossed by mountains and valleys glowing in multihued colors, in his thoughts he often wrote long letters to Lilongo. Of course, that is no excuse for the fact that they were not put into readable form, but I would have had to have you next to me in order to let you participate in experiencing this magnificent country. I have never been so aware of my lack of words as I am here, where the beauty not only affects your own sensations, but where the overall feeling for the land that Jews have longed for these two thousand years resonates. Maybe that is sentimental and for a grown man like me a little funny, but I am not ashamed of it, that the prayers of an infinite number of generations who sang about this land and gave expression to their longing again and again, should linger in their grandchildren. Not until our generation, which is attempting to acquire Palestine for itself in a completely new way and in a completely different form of religion than our praying forefathers, have we been able to envision the true beauty that, until now, was only the stuff of stories and dreams. It reconstitutes the beautiful, consistent with modern demands of life harmonizing through plantings, irrigation and construction, what had been dried out and atrophied by "prayers only."

My dear, sweet girl, after I returned to Haifa from a trip across Palestine that lasted several days, I received your letter and I was so happy that I would have loved to have come to you via airmail in order to shorten your understandable anxiety. Now I hope that this letter reaches you before me, especially since I will be there presumably on Sunday and not, as originally intended, on Friday. Since I cannot, out of decency, arrive at my Orthodox family's home on Shabbat (Saturday), I will probably have to spend a day in Paris. I would be very grateful to you if you could let my siblings know about this because I will not write to them at this time.

The ship leaves around 6 o'clock and we home comers will take our dinner in the open Mediterranean!

Dearest Lilongo—Your Mope

VERA

Journal entry, London, Friday, 3 April 1936

Actually, I am expecting Mope today. I have not had any news for the last two and a half weeks, but such is life.

I still enjoy my work tremendously; I feel that I can achieve something and I am actually building something.

When will Mope arrive? How kind time is as a foundation. In earlier times, I would have suffered today, and how do I look at it today—as a thrilling performance. The older one gets, the more impersonal or of two minds one becomes to oneself.

