

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
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Sixteen: Palestine or Vera?

4 through 24 April 1936

The essence of Mope's ten-day stopover in England, from Saturday, 4 April, through Wednesday, 15 April 1936, coinciding both with Passover and Easter, is preserved through Vera's private journal. In one of her longest journal entries, Vera captures every joyful moment as well as the comic pathos and uncertainty of their situation.

On the Monday evening following his arrival, Vera was a guest at the home of Mope's sister and brother-in-law, Hanna and Fred Rau, for the traditional Seder evening, marking the first night of Passover. Her anxieties and fear of faux-pas are well captured in her journal. Her total lack of experience of Jewish ritual observance is evident in her misspelling of "Seda" and her incorrect dowsing of a lighted match that should have been left to burn itself out.

Because of the demands of her working day at Marks & Spencer, she and Mope could spend only their evenings together, though these hours in each other's company served to strengthen their mutual feelings.

On Friday, 10 April (Good Friday), Mope proposed marriage with the goal that they should settle together in Palestine. Two days later, on Easter Sunday, they took a day trip to Canterbury. In the romantic setting of the grounds of the cathedral, Mope proposed again. Despite harboring serious reservations brought about by her hardly knowing him and doubts about Palestine, Vera tentatively consented to marry him. Three days later, Mope had to return to Leipzig. For the moment, they agreed to keep their engagement a secret.

VERA

Journal entries, London, 14 April through Saturday 18 April 1936

Actually, I meant to write in here for the last few days, but I was just too tired, too exhausted in the evening and much too absorbed and occupied with myself to put pen to paper.

I would like to recapitulate the facts, short and quick, completely objectively!

So, on Saturday, April 4, at night, Mope arrived in London.

Saturday evening, late, around 10.00 p.m., I came home from the store to find his letter in which he announced his arrival and asked me to let his siblings know; diffidently, I did so at that very late hour and found out that Fred Rau would make his way to the train station, and I declined his invitation to accompany him.

Sunday, after lunch, I met Mope at Marble Arch and found him looking better than I remembered, thinner and more tanned. He told me that he intends to emigrate to Palestine to give his mother the opportunity to pull her money from Germany and to go to the land, shall we say, of his dreams himself.

He told me about his sister Ruth and her attitude again in detail, told me that he had not seen his mother yet. To our house around 8.00 p.m., too many people at dinner.

General conversation, several unintentional, somewhat tactless remarks from one of our house guests that did not disconcert Mope at all; allusions to being a bachelor and a marriage, etc., etc., and he responded that he will be going back to Germany. Mutti's impression: a very likable man, a nice face, nothing more.

To Raus' for Seda Monday evening. I experienced a rather strange evening. To be perfectly honest, it was disappointing, but that was probably, because I had been looking forward to it way too much. I was invited to Mope's sister's for Seda, which Mope explained to me could be literally translated as "Orderliness." I dressed up as decently as was humanly possible in the greatest hurry and took a taxi to arrive on time, but when I got there no one was around. Something like that does ruin the mood just a little. It took until shortly before 7.30 p.m. when Mope and his mother arrived. Before that, Mr. Rau, whom I like very much, by the way, walked around the room praying loudly, while Hannah and I talked.

Then, as I said, Mope and his mother, who was also visiting London, joined us. The latter looks more like a distinguished officer's widow, anything, anything but a Jewish woman, especially a pious one. Another guest arrived and we sat down to dinner.

Then came the long, long rite of the Seda evening; before that, another little embarrassing scene: Mope's mother lit the candles on the table and then threw the blazing match into the flowerpot standing next

to the candles and cried, "Well, burn out this instant!" and I, just to be of assistance, blew it out. Then Mope said to me in the most charming way that was an action that was forbidden, but added immediately that he would have done the same thing. However, his mother was certainly a little paralyzed by it.

I was disappointed with the evening, did not exchange a single word with Mope's mother before the rite, and only recall that she said to me, she was unfamiliar with the ritual circle in Frankfurt, but that she understood things to be very strange, especially there, and, on the other hand, much more liberal. Then good-bye.

Mope accompanied me home. Fred Rau's friend was there as well, and so, there was no opportunity to exchange even one private word. A kiss in front of the door, nothing that touched me deeply.

Wednesday: In the black coat and black dress, extremely punctual to the Regent Palace—no Mope there. To Piccadilly Circus—no Mope. Back to the Regent Palace, and there he came, twenty minutes late, since he had had a meeting with his brother-in-law and had to wait until Fred Rau's mother left.

Wandered to a small café-restaurant in Oxford Street for dinner, where we could sit without being disturbed, and I mainly told him about my work, and he asked if I was emphasizing the love for my work on purpose and that I was doing the same thing in my letters. I explained to him how this work was finally the solution to the ever so difficult choice of a profession, and that this was the reason and the explanation for that.

Then, we went on to the Ariston Café in Oxford Circus, where he told me about the corners, the hard ones, of life, on which sensitive people hurt themselves so often and so unavoidably, which makes them shy away from everything after a while.

Then he took me home with the underground, and I quickly put him on a bus here in Blythe Road. From the upper deck, he called down to ask me for another date for Thursday. Since that is the day before Good Friday, my work will continue through the afternoon, so he agreed to pick me up around 8.00 p.m. here at home.

I raced home from the store to clean up and freshen up a little, and there he was already, was led in by grinning people, and then, as fast as possible—once I was ready—I extracted him—good-bye—and off to High Street Kensington to the Majestic Restaurant for dinner.

Then a café on Earl's Court Road, where he told me about the contrariness in his company, the spite and the nitpicking of the business owners, his interrupted university studies, the suspicion of a theft from these co-partners; his obligations towards his obviously pigheaded father, who demanded he take his contractual place in the business, his need to assure that place for himself in order to avoid becoming that constantly changing, anchorless, and unstable man, and then his obligation to his mother who had lost her husband and only had him as the one single son still in Leipzig, and her expectation that he pave the way for her.

A walk home through Addison Road and back alleys, walked into a dead-end street and declined a kiss, since one does not want the other to think that one led him there for that purpose.

Nothing agreed on for the following Good Friday morning. Arranged a call between 1 and 2.

He called around 3 o'clock, and asked if I thought it would be worth it to see him for an hour. I said yes. To Marble Arch again, 12 minutes late again. First a little walk through Hyde Park, then suggested the café in the park. The main tearoom was full, but there was a small table free in the lounge. Me in the blue Trieste skirt, beige jumper, tweed coat, and a small blue cap.

He said—No, I forgot something important. Talked to Muttilein in the evening about all of my doubts, and Muttilein's good advice to tell Mope in no uncertain terms that we do not own a single penny, and wondering if he would still be so keen on me.

So back now to what Mope said: he had been plagued all that time by a very grave consideration; if he had the right to ask another human being, a girl, to come with him to a foreign country, to which he was also going with his mother's money, a girl that he supposed did not have anything herself either.

He would not demand an immediate answer, since something like that deserved some consideration. He said: to build something with two people could mean ease or burden, and I said that would of course depend on how much or little trust one had in the other.

Saturday, Easter Saturday very busy at work and no time to think. I promised to call him towards evening to make arrangements for a meeting on Sunday.

Suggested Canterbury. He would call me again at home after 10.00 p.m. to talk about an exact time, etc.

He called around 10.30 p.m. We will meet shortly before 10.00 a.m. on Easter Sunday.

He met me walking from the train station, had arranged for seats, and we found an empty compartment. We had been invited to spend the evening at Raus'.

Muttilein had impressed upon me: whatever you do, do not commit to anything, for God's sake!

On the train, after some time, I still owed him an answer and me, that really was not necessary yet and would need some more deliberation. How long until he would have to leave for Palestine? No answer.

Canterbury in the sun, after it had been hailing while we were on the train. Wandered around the city wall, then through the streets, and I told him I was glad that he had come to London. He: he hoped that I would be just as happy about it in 50 years.

Then, into the wonderful front garden of the Cathedral. Met a priest that Mope was convinced was the Archbishop—maybe it was really him—who said, "A happy Easter to you!" and I, "Thank you so much, the same to you", and both of us happy that he wished that for us of all people.¹¹ The Cathedral beautiful, enjoyed it together, decorated with the most precious flowers and harmoniously balanced crypt vaults. Trip back during which he talked as if I had agreed, which I had not done at all, ate in the Pullman dining car that was empty except for an old, sleepy uncle.

Then back home for tea, changed, and off to Raus'. Asked him on the train to make *no* official announcements this evening.

Him on the bus: if I would be alright that he told his mother something, and I said No, and why not, because I wanted to talk to my own mother about it first; he had assumed that I had already done so, and I said no, I had to come to my own decision first in order to be able to talk to her about it. He would not say anything. That was understood. I appreciate that very much!!!!

A very harmonious and enjoyable evening at Raus', spent time with his mother, told him about that, made him happy, and asked that I talk to Muttilein. Made arrangements to meet the next day, Monday, at 11 o'clock in the Strand Palace Hotel.

11 The priest was Dr. Hewlett Johnson (1874-1966), the notorious "Red Dean", known for his left-wing ideological views. Mope was to catch sight of him again in Moscow in 1937 (28 September).

Talked to my sweet one in the evening, said that I had made my decision and only made it dependent on her final judgment. She was stunned at first, the distance, Palestine, me there, with a man without money, whom she did not know, a man she did not even believe or was sure was competent. Both of us a little anchorless and, shall we say, hysterical.

Into Muttilein's bedroom at 8 Monday morning, told Pepper that I was serious, and still a little shaky.

Then, 10 minutes late (I will have to do something about that in the future), met Mope. Asked immediately if I said anything about it, me affirmative and told him, Mutti said that she could not judge yet, she hardly knew him at all, and that he looked likable, *voilà tout!* Then home for lunch—I had never before gone home feeling so fearful.

Introduced Mope to Muttilein once again. Told him before that, how funny I felt, and him: Yes, but not yesterday at Canterbury, right? Me: That had been different circumstances from the ones at my home. I have not been that excited or have never before been excited in that way. Mutti openly off towards her goal to ask him about everything clearly and succinctly. Here until 5.

(I forgot something: on Easter Sunday, I made a decision for myself while I was in my bedroom, and the following became clear to me, "Well, what do you want? Here is a kind and nice man, and why won't you give him an answer to the question he keeps asking you, what or who are you waiting for?")

Until it was finally 5 o'clock. I felt like a slaughtered sacrificial animal, that exhausted, x times because of excitement to get to a certain place, and tried to support Mope's arguments. Changed to go to his sister Ruth in Mill Hill. Found it after hours of searching around 7.30 p.m.

Then, when we finally left, it was so late and I was so exhausted that I only wanted to go home. Mope harrying: I should come to Raus' as a favor to him. I agreed, although we were not able to announce our visit by telephone, and it was close to 9 o'clock.

Had his mother called away from dinner and only told her that Vera will go with me to Palestine. I said immediately that I do not want anyone else to hear about it, then burst in on an almost finished dinner, a matter that went completely *contre coeur* for me.

The gentlemen retired, and I had the first opportunity to talk to Mope's mother alone, and it alienated me when, after I said how difficult it was to leave my Muttilein and to have to give up my beloved job, she

replied, "Well, you won't be giving up that job for the time being, will you?"

So, I went home dissatisfied, quite agitated, filled with doubts, transferring several times, all alone the entire way. And just as I was getting on, we made arrangements for me to come out to him tomorrow (Tuesday) after the store, if possible, shortly after 5.00 p.m., in order to pick him up from packing for his departure and have dinner at my house. Muttilein told me she wanted to get to know Mope and talk to him. That was quite alright with me, but I insisted on this: That I would pick up Mope out there in Golder's Green, and I did not regret it. I did not get away from the store until 5.30 and did not reach there until 6.30, and I tried to imagine what kind of a dingy digs it would be, and I was very pleasantly surprised to find a prettily furnished room.

I heard from Mope that Mutti had met his mother at lunch with the Raus and that Mutti had told her that it would be much more important for Mope to marry a rich girl, and if he insisted on going to Palestine, he should go there by himself first and try to establish an existence, before he would ask me to join him. Then Mope had come into the room, had heard that last suggestion and had refused most energetically. He would want to build something together with me and according to my wishes there.

I asked him if he was sure that we were doing the right thing, and that I did not believe that I would fit in in Palestine, and that, in my mindset, I might be thought of as an anti-Semite; and he said that I would feel at home there and that they would welcome one who was returning to Judaism with doubled joy; and I replied that I would have an easier time in America than in Palestine, and that I did know I was able to fit in anywhere in the world, but Palestine of all places!

Then he suggested to me that we should see the land together, because he could understand and appreciate that I would feel more responsibility towards Palestine compared to any other country after visiting there. I explained to him again how much I like England, my job, and everything else, and how much more I can earn here, I have relationships with people here, etc., and he responded: He would not allow me to feed him, and that his money would be worth much less here than in Palestine.

Then he said, he wanted to confess something to me that he had never told anyone else, something which he had discounted decidedly

on his trip here. Should I decide to doom everything to failure because of that, he would rather do without Palestine than without me.

I thanked him, and said I was completely clear on the fact that nowadays, you could not talk Jews out of exchanging Palestine for Europe in all good conscience.

He explained to me that he was of the firm opinion that you had full responsibility for your future children and that they were put into the world for your own joy and out of your own love, and you should raise them in a country where they were not considered outsiders, and that in Palestine, children were taken care of especially well.

I told him, among other things, that I appreciate him, because I know that he is kind, but at the same time that I knew it would take him quite some time, until a thought process is executed, or better, until it had found its way down the long circuit to a full understanding between us.

I called Mutti to tell her that we would get there later and was completely blissful about how well she had liked Mrs. Felsenstein. Then I felt completely happy. Then here for dinner, and Fred Rau came around 11.00 p.m. to pick him up for his journey, and we spent a harmonious and nice evening.

MOPE TO VERA

En route from Dover to Ostend, 15 April 1936

Just now the boat was set in motion and I have to write. I am very happy that I was able to talk to you for just a bit early today and sad that we will not see each other again for quite a time. Communicating through letters is really only makeshift, and if you only knew how happy it makes me to walk arm in arm with you and to feel you with and next to me, you would understand how frozen this hand that is writing to you feels.

Dear, beautiful, tall Lilongo, I hope that our separation does not last too long and I am looking forward to a reunion, albeit when unknown to me at this time but which I hope does not keep us waiting for too long. I send my most ardent greetings and kiss your hand and your lovely beautiful mouth in my thoughts.

Now for real—Your Mope

VERA

Journal entry, Sunday, 24 April 1936

I am looking forward to a life together with Mope. Will it be here in London, when will it come to be? How will it be fashioned?

