

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

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Seventeen: Dover

18 April through 1 June 1936

Mope and Vera's next rendezvous would not be until the Whitsun break at the end of May when she could take time off work. After some back and forth in their correspondence, they agreed to meet for a hurried two days in the English coastal town of Dover. None of Vera's letters from this period survive, though the journals she kept bring to light her innermost thoughts.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 23 April 1936

I am looking forward to your news and have now been sad about its absence for four evenings. Sometimes, I see Annelie and then we always talk a little of Vera, not much, because then I would have to betray what you will reveal to her before too long—that we are to be married.

Dear, dear Lilongo, do you think of me and our togetherness, of thought and feeling and everyday things that, despite the harshness of life, we want to shape into days of celebration? I think of it a lot and of you and sometimes I start brooding: Do you feel inwardly connected to me? Can you take on so many difficulties as the creation of a new existence will bring out? It is part and parcel of thinking human beings that they are racked by doubt, and they can only become closer if they write or talk about it openly, because they will come to love each other more and more through mutual understanding.

I embrace you and kiss you in my thoughts and stroke your beautiful black hair that is darker than the nights I spend dreaming about you.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 30 April 1936

My weekend was a bit soured by the embarrassing message that I would have to secure a new domicile per June 1. After three sleepless nights, my landlady has come to the heroic decision to give me notice to vacate.

I have not talked to anyone here about our plans for the future. They concern the "how." The "what" is not a problem anymore, since I know that we will do it together and I not only have the necessary will and courage, but also the urgency, because I don't want us to wait for each other for too long. Tomorrow is the first of May that reminds people of the spring and the sun one can only see as a blurred shape in this cold land.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 6 May 1936

When I arrived home late last night, I found your dear letter there. It is difficult to answer all your questions about personal strength of character, but I am glad that you ask me so openly. They show me that you have trust in me and that makes me happy (although I would have considered that understood if someone had asked me if you trusted me).

I have spent the last twenty-four hours in philosophical contemplation concerning your questions to me. There are many opportunities to prove that one is resolute and I deliberately start with the answers at a point where I show no willpower at all, that is smoking. However, you are wrong in assuming that it is contrary to my nature to have no control over my cigarette consumption. For the last few days, I have been smoking 17 cigarettes per day and I had wanted to lower that number a little more before I told you about it!

I have told you a few things about my life, and I am convinced that willpower was essential in order to emerge not only as non-debilitated, but surely as an even stronger human being. The chances to show willpower are not that numerous in a life lived in a middle-class existence, but I believe that I have fought unconditionally for everything that I believed in, even if there was strong opposition. The question whether I am resolute or not I believe I can answer with yes in all good conscience.

During my Palestine trip, I made a very far-reaching decision for the life of my dear mother as well as mine, without letting others advise me concerning the fundamental idea—the decision is known to you—and I planned to conduct the implementation of the idea regardless of all consequences. But, to complicate that, I asked Lilongo in London, if she wants to unite her life with mine. The circumstances of our situation are unusual. I am anything but a frivolous man and was fully aware of the difficulties when I asked you.

If you build a new life together with someone, the normal habits you had before undergo a big adjustment, and then both have to help each other in order to create new ways of living. The most radical change in moving to Palestine is to go into the trenches in the frame of a life led in civilization with all its comforts, in contrast to a life reclaiming land as a laborer and living in tents. The likelihood of merging that kind of life with a middle-class one is impossible. But to sink from one level of middle-class life to a lower one is hard to bear, especially if you are alone when you do it.

The unrest in Palestine has disquieted you. We old Zionists are unfortunately aware, through earlier events of the Jewish-Arabic problem, that the settlement work, like any other settlement by the way, cannot be accomplished without sacrifice. However, up to this point, it was always shown, fortunately, that such tragic events have contributed to unity and firmness in our own ranks and, in the end, aided the accomplishment of the idea. This evening, I read an editorial in *The Times* entitled "Arab and Jew," that affirmed to me that the English people will carry on with the realization of their promise to create an official and legal homestead for the Jews in Palestine. Sadly, sadly, we are not far enough to make a final decision on where we can build our tents and until it is that time, a lot of things will have to have been resolved.

If I can change and adjust, is the hardest question to answer, because it cannot be thought through to the end without given facts. Please don't be alarmed over the "where" of our future. You still have my greatest declaration of love that I could give to you, Lilongo, that I will not make our togetherness conditional on the promise that we can live in my most longed-for home country.

VERA

Journal entry, 10 May 1936

It has been quite a while now since I wrote anything in here: In the meantime, I have come to the unshakable decision to establish my marriage with Mope here in England, and judging by his last letter, he is really prepared to make that sacrifice.

This time, his words have calmed my worries and given me clarity. And I asked him openly if he has the energy, initiative, and ability to adjust. He did not misunderstand the questions, and the way in which he answered them and commented on them, made me so deeply happy. Now I hope that we will be able to spend Whitsuntide together, and I hope that many things will become clearer during those days, as far as our plans for the future are concerned. I am looking forward to seeing him, I really like him, I trust him and we understand each other.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 10 May 1936

This evening, I was in the movie theater with my mother. Marlene Dietrich movie "Desire"; very well acted and amusing. Then I accompanied her home and—with the exception of a break for a cup of coffee—went home myself. Now I am—after I finished reading a book—most definitely ready for bed. But I have two very sweet letters from you in front of me and for me not to write you back would probably not be good for the peace of my sleep, so I want to write a few lines to you and thank you, because the letters gave me a lot of joy.

The first one already told me that your doubts apparently did not become a chronic condition, and the second one told me that you want to see me over Whitsun, and I think that is so wonderful, even in my thoughts, that the reality—which I am not allowed to even imagine concretely, especially for want of housing—will surely have to be amazing.

Your reasons against Palestine that my dear mother explained to me I understand, of course. However, I intend to win you over to my way of thinking insofar as we two people are the most important people of all. Of course, that is not to say that we will forget or neglect those people to whom we are attached and spiritually connected. But the

younger generation always has the right to itself and we, too, will have to understand that one day.

VERA

Journal entry, 12 May 1936

Apparently, I am much more closely connected to Mope than I wanted to admit to myself. Every time when something happens to me now that unsettles me and I just want to have a good cry about it—of course not in the literal sense—and would like to have someone to console me and talk to me, I wish for Mope and his strong embrace.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 17 May 1936

I have to and want to assume that the wish you expressed, namely that we will spend the holidays together, was meant seriously. It is very sad that you have to stay at work so late on the Saturday before the Whitsun holiday. Don't you have a few hours of overtime that you could use to set off a few hours on that day? I have to be back at the office early Tuesday morning, just like you, and if I travelled to England, we would only have Sunday in order for me to get back in time. Apart from everything else, the journey would be very exhausting, because we would hardly be able to tell each other everything and report everything in one day that two people like us have to tell each other. I am afraid that we will hardly have been able to dispel the psychological distance created by separation when we will have to say good-bye again, and that is a spiritual strain that might adversely affect our relationship, because too much will be left unsaid.

My housing situation is still in limbo, i.e. I will look at a room tomorrow at noon and will decide then which one I will take.

VERA

Journal entry, 18 May 1936

Life really does not offer too many breaks for me to take a deep breath.

So—for the moment: I do not know where or when I will be able to settle down with Mope nor what he is going to be able to do workwise. And things do not look too good where my career is concerned either. Life does ask a lot of a person and it takes a great amount of schooling in order not to become indifferent, hard, and tired of it all. However, I have now found compensation—my Mope. I wonder how our next meeting will go.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 21 May 1936

Today was Ascension Day and the rain poured down from morning till night so that many of the projected men's games were probably washed away.¹² This morning, my breakfast table had the loveliest decoration that I could possibly desire—your blue letter. The foreign exchange inspectors had opened it, but it did not suffer any delay and that made me very happy.



Fig. 66 (a) and (b) Envelope with German Censors stamps indicating that the correspondence between Vera and Mope was frequently vetted by the Nazi authorities.

Today too, my mother and I told my cousin Semy, the Senior Partner at the Gebrüder Felsenstein that I have a girl I want to marry. When he saw your picture, he said you were not only beautiful but extremely beautiful. He will probably be grateful to me because I procured such a cousin for him, whose excellent attributes my dear mother rightly praised very highly. The guy had tears in his eyes because my decision caught him unprepared, but he cannot object in all good conscience and only understand it. I authorized him to tell the other cousins, as far as he thinks it necessary.

12 Mope seems to be referring to German track and field trials prior to the Olympic Games that were to be held in Berlin in August 1936.

I was also very happy about Annelie's success with her doctoral thesis and admire her for the drive with which she asserted herself.¹³ By the way, she asked me today, in a very resolute manner, if I was meeting you over Whitsun, or maybe someone else. Did you maybe tell her about us? She does not know anything from me, other than that we write back and forth.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 28 May 1936

Today is the 28th of May. A critical day for my family. The twins Grete and Alice were born thirty-five years ago and two years ago my blessed father died.

Unfortunately, I have to cause you a little trouble, because I do not know anything at all about hotels in Dover. Please make room reservations for us in a good hotel, and let me know the name of the hotel by telegraph. The address for a telegram, since Semy is the only other person here besides me, is: "Felsenstein, Leipzig." Now, here is the most important point. Please have Fred Rau give you enough money. As you know, I can only take out ten Reichsmark which won't get me very far, and I don't want to run into problems.¹⁴ What we don't spend, you can give back to him, but the good old boy should, just for once, bleed for his brother-in-law.

By the way, don't forget your bathing suit, because I hope that the weather will be nice and the ocean warm enough for bathing.

VERA

Journal Entry, 29 May 1936

Just a few lines: tomorrow evening, I am going to meet Mope in Dover. These next few days will give me a perfectly clear picture, I hope, of whether he is the right one, if he is a man who can be a daredevil but who can also be trusted in practical things. How I want this trip to be

¹³ Annelie had just received her diploma as a dentist from the University of Leipzig.

¹⁴ A law had been passed as early as 1932, limiting the export of currency from Germany to 10 Reichmarks (equivalent to less than one Pound Sterling). The law was strictly enforced by the Nazis when they came to power with frequent censoring of letters sent abroad as an ostensible means of currency control.

a *success*! I have to tell him that I really do not want to go to Palestine and talk to him about career opportunities here, and be with the man in person. I hope this will be a satisfying, confirming, and worthwhile trip.

VERA

Journal Entry, 7 June 1936

Last Sunday, I was in Dover. I hurried there Saturday night after the store closed. Mope was waiting for me at the train station—it was after midnight when I arrived. Even that late at night, right after we arrived in our Brown House Hotel, I told him that I do not want nor was able to go to Palestine right now and he acknowledged that without argument, and he was willing to try to establish an existence here by my side and he assured me that his happiness depends on mine and not on the country.

Nevertheless, I was not completely satisfied with things that evening—and it was still resonating in my ears, even after I had been back in my room for quite some time, and then, towards morning, I dreamed about Mope behaving badly in the dining room where we were sitting at ugly tables, of bad table manners, and the surprise I was experiencing. However, that turned out to be only a dream.

Sunday morning, I got up and waited in the lobby until Mope appeared for breakfast. I told him about the ugly dream, and then, we spent the rest of the day lying on the dunes, talking and happy in the awareness of each other's closeness. We had coffee in one of the beach cafés, then a walk out to the pier, him talking about earlier friendships and experiences. I had seriously intended to tell him during this meeting that I have been with a man once before, but when he said that he did not know very much or almost nothing about me, I did not want to say anything. And when he said: In twenty-six years, you have actually never loved anyone, I only replied with a surprised question: Did he really believe that I have never really liked anyone? But I did not say anything else. At first, he misunderstood and thought I said I had never really liked anyone—how vain human beings are!

On the pier, during the course of our conversation, I mentioned that I find it dreadful when a girl offers herself to a man, but that I did not think it immoral if you did the latter in the awareness that it was the right thing to do and that every person has to decide that for him—or

herself, and I think that it would be better for a future marriage if the woman went into it knowing what to expect, in most cases.

Resumé: we should always try to be just like that, so we will like each other, and with our mutually high expectations, that should be more than enough! Do I agree with that?

He probably tried to express the same thing I did, basically: energy, agility, kindness, deftness.

The last day just as agreeable and harmonious: I am looking forward to a life spent together and if I saw in him just a little ability to cope, endure, and be tough in life's battles, I will be *completely* happy.

MOPE TO VERA

Ostend and Brussels, 1 June 1936

The sea trip is already approaching its end. Until now, 7.30, I sat in the sun and, aside from turning my face to it with my eyes closed, did not do anything. She definitely used the good opportunity to give my face a new coat of paint, after the Palestine one had to give way to the city air so quickly. My eyes are still quite dazzled which you will see by the handwriting. But they are not only dazzled by the sun, but also by you. I am so happy about the two days that we were able to be together. They brought us so much closer together because they belonged only to us. They definitely belong to the most beautiful days that I have ever experienced, and I thank for the harmony and unanimity that pervaded them through your insight, intelligence and friendship.

Most passionately in love, Lilongo, Your Mope

In the meantime, I have reached Brussels where I will have a delay of about two hours. If nothing unexpected happens, I will enclose to you the last British pound note. After the exchange of my last shilling and purchase of stamps, I have almost 10.20 Belgian Francs, and I don't think the coffee will cost that much. I am telling you in such detail in order to characterize the idiotic conditions under which we live and suffer.

