

No Life Without You

REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

EDITED BY
FRANKLIN
FELSENSTEIN





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Twenty-one: “The Letter Writing Last Guest”

21 February through 22 March 1937

Worried that she lacked permission to remain a permanent resident in England, Vera was concerned that to announce that she was engaged to a Jew residing in Germany might jeopardize her position at Marks & Spencer. Contrary to this, Mope felt that her secrecy at work about their engagement was both compromising and counter-productive. To resolve lingering doubts, they decided to postpone their wedding date to the summer.

In Leipzig, Mope remained involved with the Jewish Cultural Committee, while also pursuing plans to emigrate. In the spring of 1937, though confiscation of his passport was a constant fear, he still enjoyed relatively unrestricted travel, and, coinciding with Passover, was able to visit Vera in London at the latter end of March.

Many of Mope's letters were written late at night while he sat over coffee at Zellner's or Felsche's, at which Jewish-owned café-restaurants he had become well known as the midnight penman or (as he later describes himself) “the letter-writing last guest.” Inevitably, he was observed with pen in hand by Nazi informers. In his post-war curriculum vitae, Mope writes chillingly that “on one of those occasions, I was arrested by SS men who alleged that I was a spy. They beat me and wanted to transport me to jail. Fortunately, the main train station was still in the hands of the regular police, and a police officer who knew me (our company's building was located about 100 meters away from the train station) forced the SS men to go with me to the police post in the train station, where the police inspector released me.” Rather than scaring Vera, he excludes reference to such encounters in his letters to her. In Nazi Germany, the brutalization of Jews was not something that could be written about in a letter that might too easily find its way into the wrong hands.

MOPE TO VERA

Amsterdam, 22 February 1937

In Amsterdam, which did not put down its rainy mantle for a short time until the afternoon, I called Wolffs'⁴⁰ and they invited me for breakfast. After, I followed the old motto "Make the best of it" and went to the Rijksmuseum in the morning where all the wonderful Rembrandts, Hals, Ruisdaels etc. can be seen. I was strongly impressed by the painting of Rembrandt's bible-reading mother. His most famous painting, "The Night Watch," also hangs in Amsterdam. That is a painting whose beauty goes beyond the possibilities of imagination. I sat in front of it for a long time and for the first time in many years felt what painting can be.

I went back to Wolffs' for lunch and Aunt Rahel showed me Amsterdam afterwards. The city with its many canals and the many picturesque corners and places is especially beautiful. We also went to the Jewish quarter where we toured the immense Sephardic synagogue (Sephardim are the Jews who were expelled from Spain around 1495, while the ones from Germany and from the East are called the Ashkenazim).

There are approximately 70,000 Jews among the 800,000 residents. Whole streets that used to be the former ghetto are now just part of the Jewish quarter. Around ten per cent of the Jews here are Sephardim. There is also an extraordinarily large number of German emigrants here who can lead relatively decent lives, although the economy is not as good due to the non-armament than in Belgium, England and also in France, of late.⁴¹

Though she does not know you, your Aunt Rahel sends her kindest regard.

40 Mope's aunt, Rahel Marx (1882-1942), had married Solomon ("Sally") Wolff in 1903. In common with many others, the Wolff family had fled Germany in the early 1930s, and were rebuilding their lives in Amsterdam. Sally died in February 1940, a few months before German forces occupied Holland. Accompanied by a son and daughter-in-law, Rahel escaped to Paris. All three fell victim to Dr. Marcel Petiot (1897-1946), a Nazi collaborator, known as "Dr. Eugène", who promised to smuggle them out of France in the trunk of his car, but, because of the dangers involved, insisted that they were anaesthetized for the journey out of Paris. He then injected them with cyanide, killing them instantly. At least sixty escapees were killed by him during the war. Petiot was found guilty of heinous war crimes and executed in 1946. See also David King, *Death in the City of Light: The Serial Killer of Nazi-Occupied Paris* (New York: Crown, 2011).

41 The Netherlands remained neutral during World War I, and maintained this policy through the 1930s. It did not prevent the Nazis from invading Holland in 1940.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 23 February 1937

Neither Semy nor the others said even one word about my prolonged absence. The staff told me that the company had been rather unusually quiet. Some customers did come in at different times and asked for me first and then for Semy, and after acknowledging our absence, they had disappeared again quietly and without saying a word. During the day today, I bought five hundred rabbit skins, and Semy remarked rather pointedly in front of the other partners that the purchase was a sound one.

Tomorrow is the Fast of Esther and Purim the day after tomorrow. If you read the book of Esther in the great Doré bible—it is not very long—you will know the reason for that.⁴² At the end, it says that all Jews sent each other presents and that is still the custom on this day. Since Purim is a celebration of joy, they have a good frame of mind and—against all the present norms here—are cheerful and drink and dress up and whatever other happy customs there are. I am missing a home as much as my dear mother does in which we can celebrate with invited guests.

I just read in the "Ketty poems" of my grandmother that I actually intended to send to your dear mother. But I think that the mourning for the first child was completely different for her and do not know if it is right to show her the comparison with the loss of such a hopeful child.⁴³

42 Incapable of reading Hebrew, many assimilated Jewish families in Germany owned the large folio bible (*Die Heilige Schrift*) in Ludwig Phillipson's translation, which was decorated with the celebrated illustrations of Gustave Doré (1832-1883).

43 After the early death from diphtheria of her oldest daughter, Ketty, in 1893, Gertrud Marx (Mope's grandmother) wrote a series of poems in her memory. These were privately printed by her surviving children in 1928 to commemorate the first anniversary of the death of Gertrud's husband, Georg Marx. It was a copy of this volume that Mope planned to send to his prospective mother-in-law, Alice Hirsch, who had lost her own first daughter in 1935, almost two years before this letter was written.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 28 February 1937

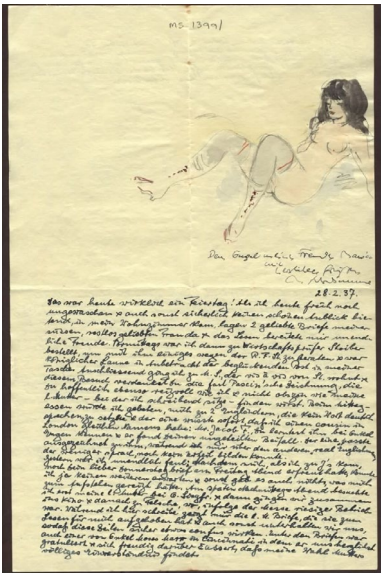


Fig. 69 Erotic watercolor by Max Schwimmer at head of letter from Mope to Vera, 28 February 1937.

As I came into my living room, unwashed and certainly not presenting a beautiful sight, two beloved letters of my sweet and completely beloved wife lay there, and reading them gave me unending pleasure. In the morning, I had an appointment with our auditor in order to consult with him on some things concerning taxes but was in such a royal mood because of that pleasurable mail in my pocket. Afterwards, I went to Max Schwimmer who lives across the street and you have to thank this visit for the drawing that I hope you will find as charming as I did and not obscene as my dear mother thinks—whom I am sitting next to while writing this. While I am writing, my mother is showing me letters that she saved for me to read and we are also talking so that these lines might appear a little confused!

I am very happy that you took pleasure in the Megillath-Esther, and even though it only repeats things you already know, the content is worth being refreshed in your memory. The Hebrew lettering is often more stylized and because of that, not as beautifully printed as in the edition I sent to you that also gave me pleasure when I saw it. Generally, I look at

Hebrew printings very critically because I love it when the beauty of the letter forms from old writings is preserved in reproduction.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 1 March 1937

The First of March. A year ago on this day, I was in the land of my constant longing and I was happy. Now I am sitting at Felsche's which is packed with people because of the Leipzig Trade Fair. As I write, an uninterrupted stream of coming and going guests sweeps alongside my arm. You will find the same picture at Zellner's from early until late. Until now, 11.45 p.m., I was at my mother's who picked me up from the store. I had to check a number of bank statements at her place (all the way back to 1934) and send part of them to the auditor with a commentary. We ate dinner at her place again.

Now to your dear letter! Are you really still thinking about spending the summer far away from London and extending our waiting period even more? I would really like it if we could get married in the registry office at Easter if you can arrange everything necessary in time. Or would you like to wait a while longer? We can move the real and most important wedding ceremony to any convenient point in time. Have you in the meantime been to the Hammersmith borough registry office? What papers will they need from me?

Although the clock is at 12.30 a.m., the traffic here has really not let up. Something like this would be impossible in solid London. But here, even the streetcars are going all night long during the trade fair. Now I have to close because work is awaiting me at home and Morpheus also has a few rights to me that I already shortened for him last night. Sleep well too, my sweet beloved. Dream only beautiful dreams and let me be with you in them at least, Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 3 March 1937

This evening, I went to a newly opened Jewish coffeehouse with my dear mother. This coffeehouse smelled strongly of new paint, was not very comfortable, but very clean and a new harbor for us, besides Zellner's. We had a very stimulating conversation—as usual, and I will miss her a

lot, since she will travel to Hamburg via Berlin on Sunday. She is keeping her room here, and that gives me the hope that she will come back in the not so distant future.

Tomorrow, I will inspect another batch of rabbits, and if I like them and we can agree on a price, I will take them on. Today, I took the opportunity to complain to Semy that our telephone conversations are often monitored by one of the partners. I also told him that the monitoring of private telephone conversations proves dislikable curiosity, but that of business conversations distasteful mistrust. I am curious to find out about the result.

Everyone who finds out that I will leave the Gebrüder Felsenstein in the not-too-distant future declares that they probably will no longer deal with us and a few whom I talked to about my reasons, i.e. bad pay, are beside themselves about the pure meanness. I have already received several offers at a much higher salary because of that.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 4 March 1937

You will not believe how happy I am that you are trying to find out where you can learn Hebrew. It proves to me how hard you are trying to draw nearer to my inside feelings and interests and I thank you so very much for that. It also makes me happy that you are having Zionist thoughts. What progress that is for Vera Hirsch from Frankfurt who was equipped with a Jewish vacuum. Such considerations just have to contribute directly to your inner equilibrium. People who are missing an arm or a leg also create a balance, but if one replaced it for them, they would realize what they had been missing.

VERA

Journal entry, 7 March 1937

Morning. A slow morning in bed. I know that I have neglected my journal in the last few weeks. Whenever I have time, I write to my man. Nevertheless, the reason why I write so little in here lately probably lies somewhere else: this book always served to help me get clarity concerning my thoughts, or should we say problems, my innermost

personal problems and to deal with them. At this time, I feel so well-balanced that it might be one of the reasons for my rare entries.

I am so happy and glad in the knowledge of Mope, this man whose finely tuned instincts—his sweetness and kindness—are of the greatest. His way of dealing with the problems of this world, his sense of beauty and his joy in it is so akin to mine. His generosity and his way of loving me, just what I always wished for in my husband!—

The one thing I still am not clear about is the ability to be a daredevil in business and if he possesses the practical commercial sobriety you need to get ahead, but I guess I will have to help with that and I hope that the two of us will accomplish that together. I am happy and glad: I love Mope, not with a burning, consuming love, nor led by any kind of cold reasoning nor as an adventurer for the sake of the adventure, but deeply and steadily and growing from the inside and out of a feeling of the most beautiful and harmonious belonging.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 9 March 1937

Semy said yesterday that it was not right that I would go on another trip. He did understand that we want to get married over Easter, but that I could not be gone one half of every month. I answered that it had been agreed upon specifically that I had every freedom to travel in my own affairs and he could not expect that I would stay here over Pesach with the numerous invitations I had received from my relatives. He replied that I would have to come back right after the holidays. I pointed out to him that the registry clerks would not work just for us during the holidays, something that made sense to him.

By the way, the fur trade show is starting here on Sunday after Easter. So I have to be back here Monday at the latest and will have to leave Saturday evening. My arrival in London on Thursday before Easter has already been announced in all the newspapers—as a great event in world history. Did you not read about it? On the trip back, I will probably stay in Amsterdam for a few hours where my dear mother will be and she might travel back with me.

Now I am Felsche's last guest once again and that is why I have to say adieu to you. They are opening the windows and if I did not feel your lovely loving warmth while we are chatting I would certainly feel cold.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 10 March 1937

Because of a silly tooth that has disturbed my sleep for a few nights, I am a little tired today and was only able to follow the lecture of a Mrs. Mahler about the work of the women in Palestine through a conscious effort. Afterwards, there is another, smaller session of the board of directors of the local Zionist group which I shirked in favor of writing, because otherwise, I won't get to it or won't get any sleep. Both of those things are more important to me today.

This afternoon, I spent an hour with Annelie and she asked me to tell you about her sorrow or the reasons for it, since it was too hard for her to write about it. After many years of fighting with her parents, she finally received their permission to go to New York to be with Fetz, and he had already procured a visa for her and had given her all the information necessary. Three days after this letter, an airmail letter arrived with the message that, in the afternoon of the day he wrote the letter he would be married in a civil ceremony to Alice Lewin (formerly of Leipzig). The reason is that the girl is expecting his child, something no one can do anything about, and after all of his relatives, friends and otherwise interested people had worked on him, he had to give in. Annelie had constantly warned him in writing about the girl who was in love with Fetz (without having been able to awaken like feelings in him). Fetz is supposed to be just as unhappy as Annelie and regards his life as messed up. In any case, that is what she took from his letter. He had already written to her on January 30 that he had committed an unforgivable stupidity and that it had taken just one hour of his life, an hour he will never forgive himself. It seems that, ever since then, everyone was kneeling on his seams and finally managed to soften him up. Annelie sent him another letter in which she asks him to go to bed with ten street prostitutes but not with the whore Alice Lewin. Now she is afraid that the newly married wife will read it.⁴⁴

44 Annelie's account corroborates but differs in significant details from Mani Feniger's award-winning exposé of the life of her Leipzig-born mother, Alice Lewin (*The Woman in the Photograph: The Search for My Mother's Past* (2012)). When researching the memoir, Feniger approached Annelie for information but was firmly rebutted.

Annelie is in a lot of pain, her face has changed completely and unfortunately, she can't laugh anymore—something that looked so good on her. But usually, people will get over even such sad experiences; it only takes a longer or shorter time depending on the depth of the person. She seems to have felt that I would understand her, because she would like to see me again if she stays for a few more days. It is such a shame that, at times, the most lively temperament is removed from the wine in the process of pressing, and many times has to be replaced artificially.

Early today, I had dear company in my bath once again. I went and got the blue envelope and read it in the tub and let drops fall on it that let the writing which was still fresh run all over the page. If I could cry I would be able to consider the spots tears after the fact, but there was no reason for that, or do you think so?

Today, I received my dear mother's first report from Hamburg. She had a good trip and went from a soaking wet Berlin to a snow-covered Hamburg where it is 6 ° [Celsius] cold. Unfortunately, although I talked to her about it, she did not take along her fur coat and thinks that if I sent it now the weather would turn warmer and melt the snow.

In terms of our own wedding plans, I have now made the firm decision that we need to postpone the civil marriage ceremony. Why should you let your conscience bother you if your papers have to be altered and you feel embarrassed to let the head office at Marks & Spencer know? Why should I put you into an odd situation with your friends, if the civil ceremony and the religious ceremony are far apart chronologically? Why should you be placed into the embarrassing situation of having to tell everyone something that is obviously mortifying for you? These questions are absolutely not meant to be *ironic*, but I can see that I will have to get used to your idiosyncrasies in this regard and since I love you, I am prepared to do so. I read that part of your letter to Annelie and she thought that I would have shown my respect for you with this premature wedding. However, I have great respect for you without the wedding and don't have to prove it through that. But she did not understand you and I was not able to make her understand you. By the way, today's decision, as already mentioned above, is unshakable.

The weather here is awful, rain mixed with snow, and that contributes to everyone feeling tired. Hopefully, the sun will be shining on Good Friday for a little while, just like it did last year. I kiss you with all my love and am happy in my knowledge of you. I won't feel my real bliss until I am with you completely and we can talk about everything

without forty-eight hours lying between the question and the answer. My arms embrace you and I yearn for you as if we had been separated for months. Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 12-13 March 1937

1.30 a.m. in the 3rd class waiting room at the train station. Just a little while ago, I took Annelie home after I spent the evening with her at Felsche's. She has calmed down quite a bit, even if she is still quite apathetic and does not feel like doing anything. Until now, she was always on the sunny side of life and the cold shadow of her recent experience has taken away so much of her courage. Once she is a little more removed from it, she will be able to feel that the experience brought her forward. Annelie is at an age at which experiences of a mental nature grow deeply into a person and create a very vulnerable web of scars.

When we said goodbye, she promised me that she would not take a sleeping pill tonight. Her former man's birthday is on the 30th of the month and she wanted to send him a birthday present, but I advised her against it. Since she still loves him, she should write him a happy birthday letter that does not contain any kind of "regardless." That will do him good and give him pain, both of which he deserves.

The station waiting room is filling up again. Friday night is moving forward and my bed is starting to call me to sleep—like the muezzin in the minaret calling the faithful to prayer. I still wish to send off my Friday evening letter to you, my beloved, and I hope that it will await you tomorrow, after you come home from work. Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 14 March 1937

I have to return to your inquiry concerning the wedding postponement one more time. I see girls who got engaged and whose feelings which prompted the connection are so much shallower than ours, talk about their engagement happily and let friends, acquaintances and bosses know about it. With you, I keep getting the feeling as if it scares you when someone finds out about this "secret." The fact that you did not let

Annelie know for almost half a year was making me wonder back then, but I thought to trace it back to your feelings of insecurity, and so I tried to be considerate.

When one day you expect a child, will you lace yourself up so tightly that no one will be able to see it, because your private business is none of anyone's concern? If everyone knows in advance that you are getting married, they will not wonder about the child that comes from it. If you keep your marriage secret, people will gossip about you when you become pregnant. I already wrote to you once that the degree of our love is a private matter, but the marriage is not and that is why—I have so tried to overcome your inhibitions in the most reasonable way. I won't be kept a secret. I am much too self-confident for that. There are males in the animal world who get eaten by the female after mating successfully (some species of spiders, etc.), and no one needs to talk about males like that, but I belong to a completely different category. You may consider me conceited, but I expect that you be proud of me, and that is not shown if you want to keep quiet about me. It is unimaginable to me that no opportunity has come up during the last eight weeks to mention the question in principle and to fix a final date.

No, my beloved girl, I did not understand the point of view that you represented in your letter, because it touches the same area once again upon which our difference rests. You keep giving me reasons to feel that you are not only not content with me, but that I embarrass you and that is something at which everything in me bristles. Of course, I know exactly that the reason lies in completely different sentiments, but those I have to fight against, because they are capable of constantly carrying new differences into our usually harmonious togetherness.

If you want to get married to me because we belong together, then you don't have to feel embarrassed in front of anybody if you explain that the religious ceremony will only take place when we can start our life together. These are abnormal times which also pose abnormal conditions. Very often, the so-called honeymoon takes place later than the wedding, so that no one will find anything wrong with it. You would only have to let the head office at Marks & Spencer know about the registry office wedding and the trip which is projected for a later time. However, as I already told you on the telephone, I have another concern that I would like to talk out with you, and I want to do that and make the final decision dependent on it and not persist on the categorical "no" that I declared in my Wednesday letter and that I regretted later.

I don't have to assure you again—but I really love doing it—that you and *only you* are “the” woman for me with whom I will be and want to be completely happy, and that no one will ever be able to change my mind. Most likely—I don't know Fetz—I am a much more strong-willed person than he and not as easily influenced if it concerns questions of conviction. You are right, that I hurt you, because I talked about Annelie's matter and our wedding at the same time, and although it was a coincidence that both came together, I am very sorry to have burdened your thoughts like that. That is why I bow to your “scolding” and realize that you are entitled to it. Please forgive me for the fact that this letter is so ugly, but I had to talk about what I am thinking.

I love you soooooo much, my sweet girl, that I talk to you this openly and I would be unbelievably happy if I could tell you all of this in person, because it would seem much less harsh and the sounds die away in the ether, while writing remains. Tear up the letter so that it won't make you sad any longer, but please try to understand me at least. Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 15 March 1937

Now I did get a letter from you and such a sweet one, too, that I am almost ashamed of my nasty tone of yesterday. But it had to be talked about once, something that cannot be silenced inside of me, because I have the feeling that these deliberations are right. If they had been talked about in person, they would probably have sounded much milder and much more understandable, because a voice can be modulated, but on paper, they sound cold and mean when they are read. However, I do hope that you know nothing is further from my intentions than torturing you and that is why you need to give my words the desired tone.

They will throw me out at Felsche's in a minute and I want to tell you quickly that I never expect you to use excuses with me. Why should you anyway? You do know that I—despite yesterday's letter—am always trying to comprehend your intentions and deliberations and to bring about a togetherness of mutual conviction, just like you do.

I am looking forward to seeing you so very much and am exceedingly happy and content in the knowledge of you so that all ugliness along my way seems unimportant. Feel my kisses and let me put my arms around you. I will give them to you in person soon and will want them back from you so that you can start looking forward to me. Your Mope

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 17 March 1937

Now, I am sitting here and my conscience is bothering me even more than before. I took all the joy from my beloved girl with that all too serious, all too dissecting letter that I thought I had to write, because that was how my heart felt, as if it had to be told.

Your loving understanding for my gruffness shames me, since it is not necessary—even if it seemed necessary to me to address these questions again—it was not necessary to do it in this form. Your letter from last Monday was written in such a way that I should have noticed that you worded the question with a certain insecurity concerning me, because you were probably afraid of my lack of restraint. Now I feel even more dim-witted and share your opinion one hundred per cent that it is high time for us to see each other again.

In the meantime, the former concert master (violinist) Schwarz from the *Gewandhaus* has sat down at my table and I showed him the new photos of you. He is always very thrilled with your pictures—how thrilled he would be if he met you in person—and begs me almost every time when we see each other to show him your picture. Schwarz is a very nice guy and a real artist who now has to try to live on an extremely small pension and the income from a few concerts that the "Mendelssohn-Trio" gives for cultural events outside of Leipzig as well. To offer such a man a real life as an artist or pedagogue would be a marvelous deed. But how and where?⁴⁵

Tomorrow evening, I am invited to a tea of the Keren-Kajemeth Lejisrael (Eternal Funds of Israel that serves the land purchase in Palestine. The land is only passed on as an inherited lease and is the property of the Jewish people), during which the leader of the KKL will speak. Presumably, it will be an interesting evening, since one always hears about new things during such occasions. I have another date with

45 Leo Schwarz was the lead violinist of the famous *Gewandhaus* Orchestra in Leipzig, which, until the advent of the Nazis in 1933, had been under the direction of the legendary Bruno Walter. In common with other Jewish musicians, Schwarz was dismissed from his position, and could only perform before Jewish audiences, under the auspices of the *Reichsverband der Juedischen Kuturbende in Deutschland* on which Mope served as an elected representative. Musical compositions such as the works of Mendelssohn and Mahler were banned under the Nazis but could still be performed by Jewish groups. Although arrested after Kristallnacht, Schwarz was able to leave for the United States in 1939.

Annelie for Friday. She seems to enjoy spending time with me, and I am very glad that I can help her even a little.

Now, it is abominably late once again and I am really tired and so filled with longing for you that I do not know what nice things I should write to even express just a small part of it.

MOPE TO VERA

Leipzig, 22 March 1937

Well now, the solemn moment has arrived during which I will write the last letter before I come to you. Another and another long day has gone by slowly, and the period of time that separates us now has become shorter, although, at times, I believe that the decrease won't ever come to an end.

I am leaving on Wednesday and will, should I arrive earlier than you return home from work, wait for you and use the time to flirt with your dear mother. Of course, you cannot disturb us too early! Please, just take your time for the way home! Shockingly, I neglected to ask you if I can stay with you again, or if you sold out on me. It could also be that such a frequent guest will soon become unwelcome! Well, I will hang myself from a rope at Liverpool Street Station after my arrival and listen to what people say about that. (You could have invited me?).

I am looking forward to Thursday like an imbecile, after we have not seen each other for such a terribly long time. You see I am completely beside myself because I love you excessively and with unauthorized passion, Your Mope