

# No Life Without You

## REFUGEE LOVE LETTERS FROM THE 1930s

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# Thirty-two: Afterword

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*Mope's precipitous flight from the Soviet Union had undoubtedly saved his life. In the early years of the war, before Hitler attacked Russia in June 1941, many Jewish refugees who had found asylum from the Nazis in the Soviet Union and some (like him) who had been there for business reasons were dispatched to certain death in Germany following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.*

*But, even in England, Mope's fate still hung in the balance. There was much that was suspicious for the British authorities when they considered that he had been allowed to leave Moscow on a stateless passport so soon before hostilities began. Within days of his arrival, he was arrested and hauled before a tribunal set up to ascertain whether he had been assigned to London as a Soviet undercover agent. It was within the latitude of the tribunal to ship him abroad or to incarcerate him as a suspected spy. Fortunately, he was able to give a convincing account of himself and he was released.*

*The war brought Vera and Mope together at last but it did not release them from the everyday responsibility of making sufficient income to sustain themselves and their immediate family. During most of the war, the couple's primary source of income was through Mope who established himself in the London fur trade. As well as also providing for Alice and Pepper, who had almost no assets, they needed to contribute on a regular basis to aid Mope's sister, Grete Moschytz, with her four young children. Additionally, along with Fred Rau who carried the lion's share, they helped with financial support for the four children of Ketty and David Goldschmidt, escapees from Germany under the Kindertransport scheme.*

*Widespread fear in Great Britain during 1940 that German refugees might harbor a "fifth column" led to mass detentions. On Wednesday, 17 July 1940, Mope was arrested for the second time since his return to England and held as Internee No. 80321 at Kempton Park Internment Camp (Sunbury, Middlesex) for more than a month, moved to Sutton Coldfield (outside Birmingham) during August 1940, and transferred once again to a camp at York Race Course from the end of August through September.*

Surviving letters between husband and wife from this time (written exclusively in English rather than German and often labeled with a sticker, "OPENED BY CENSOR") indicate that conditions in these camps were bearable, Vera being permitted to visit her husband on several occasions. Because he spoke English rather better than many others, Internee No. 80321 was elevated to the position of "Clerk" with the task of acting as a liaison between the British officers and their prisoners. At York, he was entrusted among other things with the possession of a key, which (as he later expressed it) "I was charged to guard with my life until I would be ordered to relinquish it." A wooden tag on the chain shows that the key fitted the lock to "H.M. QUEEN'S W.C.," the royal family having been avid racing fans and regular visitors to the track during peacetime. Mope was never bidden to return the key, and to this day it remains under the close and rigorous guard of his descendants! The anecdote confirms his remark in one of his letters to Vera from Kempton Park that his time of internment seemed to him like "an unwanted but rather pleasant summer-holiday" (30 July 1940), reminding him not a little of her camping experiences for Marks & Spencer.



Fig. 86 Key to Her Majesty the Queen's W.C., York Race Course, entrusted to internee 80321 E. M. Felsenstein, appointed Clerk, September 1940.

In discussions with them many years later, they would express admiration both for the humanity shown for the most part by the soldiers that guarded the internees, and for what seemed to them the scrupulous fairness with which the British authorities in a time of war were disposed to study each individual case before deciding upon the possibility of release. For them as refugees, it was a significant marker of the difference between a vibrant democracy and a totalitarian state. During the period of his internment, Vera assembled numerous personal affidavits attesting to Mope's good character, his visceral hatred of Nazism, and loyalty to Great Britain. Among these, Otto Schiff, the



*influential Chairman of the Jewish Refugees Committee and early patron to Vera, emphasized that Ernst Moritz Felsenstein's "one wish is to remain in this country as a permanent resident and to help this country in its present struggle" (5 August 1940). Their friend, Frank Braham remarked of the couple that "as Jews their sense of appreciation of the freedom accorded them here is probably greater than that of refugees of other denominations" (5 August 1940). Several commented on Mope's capacity as a fur buyer to augment trade.*

*Upon his release, and no longer suspected of being an enemy alien, Mope was recruited into the Home Guard (an equivalent to the US National Guard) in which command he served until shortly after the end of the war, receiving a British Defense Medal for his service. Although awarded in different wars, he must have been among a small minority of soldiers to have been decorated both by the Germans and the British. As his unit was based in London, he was also able to combine his military duties with the pursuit of his fur-trade activities, having secured a position as a part-time buyer of pelts for a clothing company.*



Fig. 87 Mope (middle row, third from left) with his Home Guard unit, in which he served from November 1941 through to November 1944.

*Uncertainty over the course of the war and fear of a possible German invasion had led Mope and Vera to postpone their plans to start a family until they could be more confident of an allied victory. Entries in Vera's journal capture their decision-making. Significantly for one who had once shunned her ethnicity, her aspiration was that their child should be raised to be consciously Jewish.*

## VERA

Journal entry, 8 June 1943

Mope and I decided that we should try again to have a baby. We did not discuss it beforehand, but we both agreed and felt it was the right thing.

I am happy that we at last consider it right to produce a child. There are no signs of one yet, but I hope there will be soon. I feel though that I am hardly fit to bring up a child in the right way. I do not have the necessary self-discipline nor do I know anything of the meaning of life. But I just have the great desire to have a child. I want to try my best to care for it as well as possible; not to make it dependent on me; to bring it up to be a conscious Jew(ess) and not ashamed of its origin as I am.

Journal entry, 4 December 1943

It was a week yesterday since I have had some reason to believe that I am expecting a baby. I dared not write in here during the past week. Since 30 November I have been in a state of doubtful nervousness and apprehension and then of grateful joy. I was afraid it might not be true. In October I waited three days and then was terribly disappointed. Since June I have cried every month with disappointment and grief. I am happy now, pleased, grateful, hopeful! I don't mind at all whether it will be a boy or a girl nor does Mope. I would like twins best, as I think we should as a minimum have two children. I will try my very best to become a good mother and at the same time to continue to be a devoted wife. I have already told Mope that I do not know whether I am primarily a wife or a mother but that I hope to be both. I think of the coming child and the fact of its development with great happiness continuously. It is lovely to be expecting a child.

Journal entry, Westminster Hospital, 26 July 1944

Our first baby is to come! We expected the date of arrival to be August 8<sup>th</sup>. Actually, I was sure it would be two or three weeks later than that, and now I am in here two weeks earlier than I had expected.

*I was born two days later on Friday, 28 July 1944 to the echoing of German flying bombs dropping on London. Vera's journal records my birth weight (6 lbs. 4 ounces), and daily feeding schedule –*

"On first day, Friday 28<sup>th</sup> inst., had him 3 times: he only nibbled";

"On second day, Saturday, feeding most painful, also on Sunday. Used zinc breast shields (tin hats) to heal soreness.";

"On 2<sup>nd</sup> August as milk did not flow properly (ducts were blocked) breasts massaged and milk forced away with pumps, most painful";

"On 7<sup>th</sup> August, weight went down to 6 lbs. 1 ounce";

“On 8<sup>th</sup> day, i.e. 4<sup>th</sup> August regained birth weight”;

“Circumcision at 11 a.m. on 10<sup>th</sup> August, gave him a 4 minute feed on each side directly afterwards; went to sleep with some stroking and patting; all other feeds perfectly normal; good night”, etc.

—and, “On 3<sup>rd</sup> September, first smile.”

*Vera describes these as “Just a few facts”, though I doubt that many people of my generation will have so much recorded detail of their first days out of the womb. Perhaps we should see these entries as a late echo of her medical training that had been so cruelly cut short, though I am vain enough to interpret them as markers of a long-held aspiration finally fulfilled.*

*There was another significant episode that my parents recounted to me with some regularity. Mope’s reserve duties in the Home Guard, and limited visiting hours at the hospital where I was born, obliged him to wait until the afternoon of my day of birth before he could gain access to the maternity ward. During the morning, he booked himself in for an early afternoon celebratory lunch at the Wooden Horse Restaurant on Kensington High Street, not far from their home. He also used the morning to telephone friends with the news that he had become a father.*

*Ray and Frank Braham, who had first succored Vera on her arrival in England some eleven years before, were ecstatic with the good news. Ray immediately invited Mope to join them for lunch at their home. With a confirmed reservation elsewhere, Mope refused. In addition, with the Brahams living on the eighth floor of a block of flats in Maida Vale, and flying bombs dropping indiscriminately on London, Mope considered it a far greater risk to be in their building. Ray was nothing but persistent, calling Mope numerous times, and insisting that he lunch with them. With reluctance, Mope agreed to join them.*

*As they sat down to eat at 1.30 in the afternoon, air raid sirens were sounded warning of another flying bomb attack. Mope was in trepidation that the Braham’s tall building would be hit. Instead, they heard explosions coming from a distance before the “All Clear.” Shortly after, he set off for the Westminster Hospital where he was able to visit Vera and meet their long awaited newborn for the first time.*

*On the journey home, he caught the Number 9 bus that connected through to Kensington. Looking out from the window, he was dismayed when he noticed that it was traveling a different route. When he enquired, the bus conductor told him that they had been diverted, and showed surprise that he hadn’t heard that a flying bomb had fallen on Kensington High Street outside the Wooden Horse Restaurant and that everyone inside had been killed. I owe my father’s life to*

*Frank and Ray Braham. In recognition, I was named after Frank and my sister after Ray.*

*It was on his initiative that, parents at last, Mope and Vera created their first child's birthday journal that they maintained each July 28 for the first four years of my life with the intention that "maybe, it will give you some pleasure later on; maybe some knowledge of your parents, and their thoughts; maybe some knowledge about yourself." Here are several extracts that capture their thought processes as they grappled with the realities of parenthood.*

VERA

28 July 1945

This last year has been full of great events in the world. At last, peace in Europe came; will it be a lasting one this time? Will it? It is not possible to express how anxiously we wish and hope for it. If only you will be spared the experience of this most inhuman of all human doings.

Many thoughts have crossed our minds prior to your and since your arrival, centering about you, and also our relationship to you.

The problem wife/mother seemed to have worried me before you were born. It has solved itself quite easily during the past year. Let me try and explain how:

My husband is my trusted friend, partner of my life, lover. You have been given to us both on trust. We have to look after you to the best of our ability, to aim on making you independent of us, and be ready to let you fly off one day. You are an individual of your own, and of another generation with perhaps different ideas to our own. May we be able to help you develop your personality to its fullest capacity. Let us hope that your fundamental outlook on life will not be entirely different from our own.

28 July 1946

On your 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday my sweetheart, I want to put on record the part you play in our life: that of a common source of love, and of interest, and pleasure, and an object of deep, mutual responsibility.

As to the outside world, it has probably become even more politically unstable, and economically insecure than before. The position of the Jews in the world in general is most difficult, and their lot most deplorable. How deeply, we wish you to become a happy, considerate, imaginative, and active citizen of the world, and a well-balanced Jew.



*Mope's gestation into fatherhood as witnessed in this first and only shared journal measures his first offspring's intelligence vis-à-vis his own. It is impossible to read these extracts without recognizing that his prognoses for his son are no less a reflection of his own struggles to confront and overcome the adversities with which he had had to contend.*

## MOPE

28 July 1945

You have got a very ambitious father, Franklin! More ambitious still for those next to him than for himself. His main concern since you have been on this world was—next to your health—the thought that you might or might not be intelligent. Feeling the back of your head was a good reassurance of the former! Really of much greater importance would have been to wish you to have the happiness to own a good character. Your parents hope to be sensible enough to help you retain such a disposition for all your long and happy life which I wish you on your first birthday.

28 July 1946

It is always a great event for me to see you when I wake up in the morning and when I come home at night. It is an event because you seem to enjoy seeing me just as much as I, seeing your laughing welcome. Very often I wonder whether, besides your charm, your intelligence will help you be on top of life when you are a grown-up man. I wish it for you, as intelligence in the right boundaries makes life so much more enjoyable. Intelligence will help you to understand and be grown up to the difficulties life is bound to throw on to your path. They will look like landslides, unsurmountable rocks blocking your way. But well administered brains will make obstacles shrink to nothing and let you overcome them stronger and with more self-confidence, and you will be proud of what you are and, even more so, of what you have made of yourself.

*With the allied victory marking the end of the war, the physical and psychological strain that Mope had for so long endured caught up with him, taking its toll through excruciating pains caused by stomach ulcers, which forced him to interrupt work. That was to culminate at the end of 1946 with a total physical*

collapse and hospitalization. As had happened at the end of the Great War in 1918 when he was still a teenager, Mope found himself poised between invalidity and recuperation. Convalescence was slow. Approaching his late forties, it would take him at least six months to recover sufficiently to be able to contemplate a return to work. Even then, given his still precarious health and his stateless circumstances, the options before him remained uncertain.

It was only after the war that Vera and Mope became eligible for naturalization, first applying for British citizenship in 1945. These processes were slow, and they both had to wait approximately two years before that was granted. New citizenship seems to have given Mope a new lease of life and new hope. He simultaneously anglicized his first names from "Ernst Moritz" to "Ernest Maurice," while retaining the family surname which he felt his offspring should carry with pride. Starting again almost from scratch, he rebuilt his career as an independent fur trader, attracting back several pre-war clients of the long defunct Gebrüder Felsenstein and many new ones. With his increasing success, Vera eventually left personnel management and joined him as his office manager, and (as she put it) chauffeur, cook, wife, and sweetheart.

In the spring of 1948, looking to expand his business, Mope traveled to France, Switzerland, and Italy, visiting potential clients and returning with contracts to represent them at Sojuzpushnina's newly reconstituted fur auction in Leningrad that July. For a dozen years or more after that, Leningrad in late July became an annual event, Mope's mimeographed end-of-auction reports circulating widely and valued greatly by members of the international fur trade community. With his newly acquired British passport, travel to the Soviet Union was at once far easier. While a visa was still required, Sojuzpushnina made that a formality, though perhaps also harboring a secret agenda. During one of his first post-war visits to the USSR, the KGB attempted to bribe Mope into becoming a spy for Russia, and, upon learning of this after he returned to London, the British secret service urged him to enlist as a counterspy. Respectfully but firmly, he declined both invitations.

Shortly before this, Mope and Vera had purchased their own family home in an outer London suburb. My sister, my only sibling, was born there in September 1947. As parents, their paramount aim was to bring up their children in a happy and normal environment. In that, they succeeded brilliantly. Amid the joyful hullabaloo of everyday family life, the traumatic experiences that Ernst Moritz and Vera Hirsch Felsenstein had undergone and shared together as refugees were but rarely mentioned. To be able to look forward with confidence and hope rather than to dwell on the upsets and dislocations of the past was how they envisioned our lives.

*In a new millennium, as I assembled and edited my parents' letters, I came at last to understand that their story and experience was—and is—a large portion of my birthright and who I am today. The realization is humbling, yet also a source of fulfilment in that I find myself uniquely positioned to convey their incomparable love story and refugee experience to the next generation. Vera and Mope, my dear parents, I thank you and wish you to know (if you don't already!) that I think of you every single day. At the very heart of my own being I have come to appreciate that, in far more than one sense, there would be no life without you.*



Fig. 88 Photograph of Mope and Vera, undated but early 1950s.



Fig. 89 Post-war photograph of Mope and Vera at a family celebration in 1960.

