No Life Without You

Refugee Love Letters from the 1930s

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Refugees: A Contextual Introduction

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Discourse regarding refugees is an ever-present part of society and is multifaceted, invariably emotive, and always highly political. Sometimes the humanitarian side wins, focusing on welcoming beleaguered strangers into a country and providing hope for the future. Other times economic migrants become the focus, especially when they claim refugee status, and this is used as an excuse to whip up xenophobic hysteria against all foreigners. There is, of course, a fine line between fleeing poverty and seeking asylum because of persecution. Conflicts, natural disasters, and political, religious and ethnic persecution force people to flee from their homes and their native country into the unenviable position of attempting to find a generous nation who will take pity on their plight. Often the hardest part of this process is the stripping of identity, the loss of all that is familiar, the loss of autonomy, the ability to be self-sufficient, and the loss of dignity caused by displacement.

Terminology is important; particularly when individuals are described as economic migrants as opposed to refugees, allowing governments to pander to xenophobia. Additionally, economic migrants masquerading as refugees provide governments with the excuse to treat all refugees with suspicion. The need to consider the individual beyond the collective identity of race, gender, religion, politics, or nationality is essential if one is to respond with compassion; it is easy to become apathetic or hostile about a particular people or group when considering them *en masse*, but much harder to treat an individual with the same lack of empathy when you know their particular circumstances. The course of history demonstrates how the tide of popular opinion can ebb and

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flow very quickly between sympathy and xenophobia. Consequently, it is imperative to keep telling refugee stories, giving a voice to those unfortunate enough to suffer persecution and the loss of all they love, whilst reminding the modern reader of the humanity of these individuals and of all the similarities they share with the reader.

There are many differences between the refugee situation of the 1930s and that of the modern day, particularly as there was no international agreement regarding the offering of asylum in the 1930s. In July 1938, in response to the growing refugee crisis due to Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany and Austria, a conference was held in Evian-les-Bains, France at which delegates from thirty-two countries and representatives from aid organizations discussed possible solutions. Sadly, the only thing the delegates agreed on was that they feared an influx of foreigners would create unacceptable economic hardship for their citizens, and therefore, although everyone present decried the treatment of Jews within Germany, only the Dominican Republic was willing to open its doors to more refugees. The conference did, however, result in the creation of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR), which was designed to continue considering international responses to refugees from Germany and Austria and expanded in 1943 to cover all European refugees, although it never truly achieved its goals. In 1947, the role of the ICR was taken over the by the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), who assumed responsibility for the legal protection and resettlement of refugees until 1952, when it was succeeded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The biggest change came in the creation of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which remains the central tenet of international refugee protection to this day. It has been updated since 1951, removing the geographic barriers to provide universal coverage, but the basic principles of the agreement still provide for the needs of refugees globally. According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who is unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin for fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, or politics. There are also protections for refugees including that none should be forcibly returned to a country where they fear for their lives.

In the 1930s, Britain did take many more refugees than planned and proportionately more than many other countries despite its obligation being moral rather than legal. However, in recent years there has been a backlash against admitting migrants to Great Britain, and successive

Home Secretaries under the Conservative Party have created a hostile environment for immigration. It has become popular to label all asylum seekers as 'illegal immigrants', even though it is not illegal to seek asylum if it is done in a country that has signed the 1951 Convention, which includes Great Britain. While the world's population has increased around three-and-a-half-fold since 1940, the number of refugees has increased more than tenfold in the same period. This means there are many more millions of refugees globally in the twenty-first century than in the twentieth, which brings huge challenges in terms of dealing with the number of those seeking permanent residency in countries not of their birth. Only around a quarter of those emigrating to Britain are considered by the government to be refugees or asylum seekers, making it all the more important to ensure these individuals can be correctly identified and protected.

The protagonists of this story, Vera and Mope, had not expected to become refugees when they grew up in Germany. Vera was born in 1910, the second daughter of an assimilated Jewish family who lived in a large apartment in Frankfurt. By contrast, Mope was born in 1899 in Leipzig, one of seven children in an Orthodox family who lived only a short walk from the local synagogue. Vera was only a young child during the First World War, whereas by 1917 Mope was old enough to serve in the German army in France and Belgium. Almost 100,000 Jewish men served in the German military during World War I, fighting for the Fatherland despite experiencing anti-Semitism in the trenches. Around 18,000 of these men received an Iron Cross for their bravery in combat and were lauded as heroes. A special version of the Iron Cross, known as the Honour Cross, was created by President Hindenburg and bestowed on many veterans of the First World War from 1934, and these were still being awarded to Jews even after Adolf Hitler had become chancellor. Initially these medals provided some protection against persecution for those who had been awarded them, but little could anyone have imagined how worthless these medals would become in the years that followed.

Hitler's rise to power can be directly linked to the outcome of the First World War. The harsh and punitive reparations inflicted on Germany by the victors of World War I had a crippling effect on the German nation, leading to economically disastrous hyperinflation, with which the National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party) justified their anti-Semitic policies by blaming Jewish bankers for the country's

financial woes. However, before the Nazis took control, Vera and Mope lived through the 1920s in Germany, from the lows of hyperinflation to the highs of flourishing German culture under the Weimar Republic. The uncertainty and unpredictability of 1922-3, when German currency was completely devalued and thousands of Germans lost their life savings, or were bankrupted, formed the foundation for the rise of radical politics and the ultimate challenge to German democracy. Food riots and despair were a part of everyday life until a new currency, the Rentenmark, was introduced in 1924. Vera's relationship with her father was permanently affected as he all but lost the family fortune during this time, whereas Mope's father managed to successfully navigate the crisis and not suffer any major financial setbacks. No German was immune from the effects of this crisis, no matter their religious, social, or economic status, and although property and landowners were much less affected, the psychological effects of the crash were long-lasting.

Despite the economic disaster that Germany experienced in 1923, the Weimar Republic also fostered a German Renaissance where intellectual and cultural life flourished. The Bauhaus movement, in existence from 1919 to 1933, focused on crafts and the fine arts; the movement promoted artistry and function whilst emphasising the importance of mass production. These were the years of luminary scientists such as Max Plank and Albert Einstein; German philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger studied in Germany at this time; jazz and cabaret clubs were popular, the German cinema and film industry flourished, and new forms of modernist art were explored. Despite the privations that had been inflicted on Germany because of its defeat in 1918, the 1920s seemed full of possibilities. Creativity in all its forms was encouraged. This was the backdrop to Vera and Mope's formative years, when they developed their interests and education. Life was not perfect, and the association of the Weimar Republic with decadence and immorality caused concern for some, but no one could have anticipated the severity of the backlash that was to be unleashed in the 1930s.

1933 marked the turning point for not only Germany, but also Vera and Mope. As soon as Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany by President Paul von Hindenburg, the clock was ticking down for Jews and other minority groups in Germany and beyond. By the early 1930s the German government was seen as weak, ineffectual, unable to govern or meet the needs of the nation in response to the crippling effects of the Great Depression. Dissatisfaction caused growth in political parties at

both ends of the political spectrum – from the Communists on the left to the NSDAP on the right. The Nazis had come to national attention a decade before when, in November 1923, they attempted to overthrow the Bavarian government in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. This armed insurrection by Hitler and hundreds of stormtroopers was inspired by Mussolini's seizure of political power after the March on Rome in 1922; Hitler thought that perhaps he could achieve similar results by harnessing the discontent caused by the Weimar Republic's mishandling of the German economy. His plan backfired and led to his arrest, imprisonment, and the banning of the Nazi party. However, despite being tried for high treason, Hitler was sentenced to a mere five years in prison, and then served less than nine months in a relatively comfortable jail, which suggested that some of those in authority sympathised with his political goals. The trial was a great opportunity for spreading Nazi propaganda and gave Hitler a national platform, something previously not available to him. Hitler also made the most of his time in prison to write *Mein Kampf*, fully exploring Nazi anti-Semitic policies, racist views and aggressive foreign policy in the desire to create *Lebensraum*, extra living space for Germans through annexing parts of eastern Europe. *Mein Kampf* was not an instant bestseller, but the more recognition Hitler and the Nazis gained, the more copies were sold. The failed putsch also marked a change in Nazi policy, with an emphasis on seeking power through more legitimate methods. The years 1924 to 1929 were marked by a growth in the numbers who joined the Nazi party but a decreasing representation of the party in the Reichstag (German Parliament). It was not until the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and subsequent Great Depression that the Nazis started to see an increase in their political power. During the elections in 1930, the Nazi Party managed to attract eighteen percent of the vote, riding on a platform promising to fix the economy, create jobs, regain territory lost in the First World War, and unify the country. Hitler was campaigning on the idea of returning Germany to being a great nation. Building on the foundation of the 1930 election, the Nazi Party increased their percentage of the vote to thirty-seven percent in 1932, making it almost impossible to govern Germany without their cooperation. Hitler's appointment as chancellor did not automatically lead to dictatorship, but the position enabled him to manipulate the democratic process until, in August 1934, Hindenburg died and German democracy died with him as Hitler declared himself Führer.

It certainly cannot be said that Hitler was not clear in his manifesto as to exactly what he would do if and when he gained power. Hitler could not have been more explicit regarding his grotesque beliefs, but many people were willing to overlook the more unsavoury aspects of Nazism because they liked the sound of policies such as creating jobs, blaming others for Germany's ills, restoring Germany's economic fortunes and being led by a 'strong' leader. It is always easier to blame others for misfortune and this is a frequent rallying cry of political parties at both extremities of the political spectrum. Hitler was unashamed of lying and manipulating reality in order to orchestrate events to his benefit; one such example being the arson attack that destroyed the Reichstag and was blamed on the Communists, enabling Hitler to declare a state of emergency and suspend civil liberties. Another was using the assassination of Ernst von Rath in November 1938, a minor German diplomat posted to the German embassy in Paris, as an excuse for the outright assault on the Jewish population in the November pogrom otherwise known as *Kristallnacht*. The lenient treatment Hitler had been given at his trial and subsequent imprisonment did little to punish him for his treasonable acts, instead it inspired a culture of celebrity and intrigue around him. This should serve as a warning to all, that when an individual craving power is willing to manipulate the system, lie, and commit treason as a means of gaining power, power is the last thing they should be given. Here there are many similarities that can be drawn between the 1930s and the modern day. Once again, society is willing to accept an individual for some of their policies but willing to ignore the same individual's incitements to violence and an excessive thirst for power.

Hitler was appointed chancellor as a way of offering a concession to the far right in the expectation that his excesses could be controlled by the president and other political parties. However, once the door had been opened to the Nazis, they were not going to settle for anything less than total control. After the staged fire at the Reichstag building, the Nazi leadership passed the Law against the Founding of New Parties on 14 July 1933. All political parties and trade unions were dissolved or disbanded and their members harassed or arrested, precipitating significant emigration of these political refugees in the second half of 1933. Those who remained in Germany hoped conditions would improve and that Hitler's reign would be short-lived; however, conditions gradually deteriorated for Jews who began to be squeezed out of public life. The 1935 Nuremburg Race Laws were the first in a series of laws that

sought to exclude Jews, Roma, people of colour and their descendants from an Aryan society. The Nazis wanted to create a society of white, non-Jewish people of northern European descent, typically with blonde hair and blue eyes; attributes the Nazis considered to be superior to all other races. By defining groups by racial, religious and ethnic characteristics, the Nazis created a tier of lower-class citizens, their legal and human rights stripped away, as well as actively encouraging acts of degradation, verbal abuse and violence towards those considered non-Aryan. Jews were stripped of their jobs in the civil service, medical and legal professions, which affected Vera during her medical training as she experienced the Nazification of former friends and ultimately the university system itself. Forced out of her studies, Vera had a series of tough decisions to make which ultimately led her to Britain in the hope of completing her studies there. There was opposition in Britain during the 1930s by professional bodies such as the British Medical Association (BMA) to the immigration of doctors, the British Dental Association (BDA) to dentists, and by other professions and industries in which it was felt that immigration would pose a threat to British employment, such as the retail industry. Like so many others, Vera was forced to abandon her dreams and find an alternative living in order to have the best chance of helping other family members find refuge in England.

After the Nuremburg Laws were enacted, the need for escape became apparent to many, though it was clear that leaving Germany would be challenging given the apprehension in so many countries towards the prospect of an influx of foreigners. The United States of America, for example, had strict immigration laws which they were unwilling to relax for those fleeing Germany, and other countries grew increasingly concerned about accepting refugees. Britain was not always considered to be welcoming – Germans were still aware of the way their compatriots had been treated at the end of the First World War, when they had been banished from the country because of the intensity of anti-German feeling – and immigration rules remained tight. Therefore, Britain was not usually the first choice of emigration for Jews and other refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. In the earliest waves of emigration, individuals often fled to countries bordering Germany, and sadly, those who escaped to Czechoslovakia, France, Belgium and The Netherlands were often swept up in the Nazi occupation of these countries in 1940. Vera and Mope themselves found themselves traveling away from Germany, and members of both of their families were dispersed across

a wide geographic area, as was often common for those with the means and contacts to escape the deteriorating conditions at home.

There had been a growth in Zionism through the early years of the twentieth century and Mope's writings provide an important contemporary insight into the ideological attraction of the movement before the need for such a homeland became such a pressing priority. The growth of anti-Semitism in Germany after the First World War and the subsequent persecution of Jews made Zionist organisations particularly popular during the 1920s and 1930s, and Mope was no exception to the allure of such politics. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the 1923 Mandate of Palestine gave hope to the Zionist cause, although emigration to Palestine was not guaranteed. Many Jews tried to emigrate to British Mandated Palestine during the 1930s but it was not always possible, as the British government sought to limit the numbers arriving in Palestine to avoid aggravating political tensions with the pre-existing Arab population. Consequently, schemes were set up in Britain to train individuals with agricultural skills, which were greatly needed in Palestine. Agricultural training visas were generally available for entry to Britain provided a space was available on a suitable programme. Jewish charitable organisations such as the Central British Fund for German Jewry (CBF), under the directorship of Otto Schiff, set these schemes up from 1933 onwards with a view that the refugees, once trained, could gain entry to Palestine as experienced agricultural workers.

The letters of Vera and Mope revolve around Britain as a place of refuge; a place of hope but also of hope deferred. Upon the Nazi accession of power in Germany, leaders of the British Jewish community met with Members of Parliament to create the CBF. Like Mope, they too believed that the most effective way to provide security for German Jews was to help them to emigrate to Palestine. However, it soon became apparent it would be necessary to direct efforts at training individuals in Britain with the hope that further emigration could be organised at a later date. Refugees only arrived in Britain in relatively small numbers from 1933 to 1937. In 1938, two events changed the situation significantly: firstly the Anschluss on 12-13 March when Germany was welcomed into Austria and the two countries were declared as one, and secondly, the November pogrom, Kristallnacht, on 9 November and 10 November 1938, where Jewish shops and homes were destroyed, synagogues defiled and set on fire, and hundreds of deaths caused through injuries sustained in vicious attacks on the Jewish population. The significant deterioration of

conditions within Germany and Austria hugely increased the numbers seeking to escape Nazi persecution. As part of the November pogrom, some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. Not yet extermination camps, these camps were incredibly hostile environments where harsh interrogations were undertaken and brutal punishments were meted out for the smallest of offenses, resulting in many deaths. Most of those arrested at this time were released after a few weeks or months provided they relinquished their claim on property in Germany and promised to emigrate. The CBF was an essential part of this emigration plan, creating multiple rescue schemes including the one that helped almost 4,000 of these men and some of their families to leave Germany and be accepted to Britain through the Kitchener Refugee Camp near Sandwich in Kent. Other schemes included placing individuals in domestic service, as maids or as gardeners in British households, where there was a shortage of British workers willing to carry out menial roles. The CBF was not the only charity to assist refugees from Nazi oppression during the 1930s and 1940s – the Quakers and the Church of England, for example, also helped many refugees – but the CBF was the largest and it encompassed a myriad of smaller charities who focused on assisting specific groups. Perhaps the most well-known of the refugee rescue schemes organised under their auspices was the Kindertransport. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, when it became clear within Germany and beyond that Jews were in extreme danger, the British government agreed that an uncapped number of children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia would be given visas to come temporarily to the UK, provided each child was guaranteed not to become a charge on the British taxpayer. Guarantors, foster homes and other accommodation was found for almost 10,000 minors by the outbreak of war, although more would have followed had hostilities not intervened. The anguish of parents and the desperation they must have felt to send their children into the arms of strangers can only be imagined. Mope's sister, Ketty, in Hamburg was desperate enough to use this method of escape for her four children, with no guarantee of their ever being reunited. The Kindertransport is lauded as a golden example of British charity to refugees and of humanitarianism for the thousands of lives saved, but consideration should also be given to the great emotional costs and sacrifices involved.

Vera and Mope's letters traverse this challenging and ever evolving time in Europe. Fascism and Communism in ideology and practice

had taken – or were taking – hold in many countries including Spain, Russia, Germany, Austria and Italy. In response to the rise of the Nazi Party, many Jews had sought solace in Communism, and nothing could have been a bigger shock than the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, which saw many Jews who had fled Germany for safety in Russia returned to Germany in a terrible betrayal. Mope's work as a furrier took him across Europe, which undoubtedly helped spare his life. His travels for business took him across country boundaries and his experiences of Russia between the years of 1937 and 1939 make for a fascinating personal insight into Russian business practices and culture. Thankfully both Vera and Mope's stories had a happy ending, but it was a particularly close call for Mope, and we now know around six million others were not so lucky. What could be more intimate than sharing the journey of two lovers through their most personal correspondence, combining matters of the heart with the complex politics and realities of the world they inhabited?

The Nazis and their Fascist regime did not spring up overnight. The road to concentration and death camps was paved with thousands of small steps of dehumanisation, as highlighted in this moving collection of letters. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Jews made up less than one percent of the German population yet were scapegoated and blamed for almost all of the ills in society. The barbaric persecution of the Holocaust did not happen in a vacuum. The Führer did not impose his will on a completely reluctant people and although not everyone supported Hitler and his thugs, many embraced the Nazi ideology and the feelings of superiority it brought with it. Blaming others serves as a convenient distraction from more serious issues that are harder to resolve in society, and it is much easier to blame someone than to take responsibility. If Mope and Vera's story teaches us anything it is the human cost of such terrifying politics. The slogan 'Never Again' is often used today in the context of preventing another genocide such as the Holocaust. Every time a politician incites hatred of a people or group and is cheered for such comments, a fundamental step against the concept of 'Never Again' has been taken. Nobody chooses to be a refugee, to uproot their lives as a result of persecution and travel to a country where they are often mistrusted and misunderstood, but those who have suffered remind us of how fragile society is, and how careful we must be to protect not only our rights, but the rights of our neighbour, no matter what his or her nationality, religion, skin colour or ethnic background might be.