Just a single set of letters, dated April 2, 1939 and sent to us in Antwerp, had restored each aunt and uncle to me. I seemed to hear them speak and watch them act. In 1996, with those letters in my lap, the family I had not known began to take shape.

I trembled with my father’s sister Martha as she contemplated an uncertain future for herself and her children. I agonized with her husband Emil Fränkel as he hesitated, not knowing which way to turn to escape the Nazi net. Stretching across the miles and through the years, their longing to be with us reached deep into my heart.

I shared my Aunt Else’s hopes as she smiled in the face of adversity. Her efforts seemed to parallel my own struggle to smooth life’s bumpy road with food and cheerful conversation. I felt comfortable with her husband Emil Urbach, and saw the parallel between his directness and the abruptness of which I often stand accused. Even Emil’s unsolicited advice to my parents seemed to echo my misguided efforts to be helpful. All too often, without being asked, I propose solutions to the problems of others.
However, it was in my Uncle Arnold that I most clearly recognized myself: fundamentally optimistic but rooted in reality and alert to human possibility. It was with great eagerness, therefore, that I opened the next letter in his handwriting. The letter is dated June 25, 1939. Much had transpired since that first letter from all six of my aunts and uncles in Prague to my parents in an Antwerp hotel. As of April 16, 1939, my parents had become Canadian farmers. How eagerly my father would have seized the letter, seeking some reassurance that the sky was not falling upon his family.

Arnold’s letter does not disappoint. Its tone is newsy and chipper. There are many comings and goings. My grandmother Fanny had been to Prague, to visit the family and to check on the progress of her youngest grandchild, the “uncommonly cute” Dorly. Arnold paints life as warm, familial, and comfortably normal.

As always, there were many visitors at Else’s and the conversation was lively. Of course, we talked about everything under the sun, but the main topic of conversation was you. Repeatedly, we discussed your new living conditions and there were great debates ranging from coping with your lack of drinking water to what you should plant in the fields. Well, these days we who are “left-behinders” must become more multi-faceted than ever and learn to understand much that is new.

Still, if this was a normal family visit, why did my grandfather Josef not accompany Fanny? Did she go alone to start the search for accommodation? In March of 1939, Hitler had declared Bohemia to be a “protectorate” of Germany, and by August, Jews living in the provinces of the protectorate had been ordered to resettle in Prague within the year. Fanny and Josef would soon be forced to move.

Arnold avoids troubling my parents with matters they could not change. However, he points out that Emil Fränkel has resisted all pressure to sell his house and his business premises in Linz, despite the new laws in Austria that bar Jews from owning property. In desperation, the man who assumed
interim control of Emil’s business affairs had come all the way to Prague to persuade Emil to sign over the property to him.

In 1996, safely under my own roof, I began to rethink what my parents meant when they said, “When we fled, we lost everything.” Because I have been both fortunate and frugal, I own my home and do not wake up wondering if someone will take it away from me. Yet in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, that is precisely what happened. The government simply changed the law. Jews could no longer own property. Whatever they owned was simply taken by the state, and the state signed over to Aryan citizens any property that it did not keep. That is how we “lost” our home and the store in Strobnitz, how my mother’s parents “lost” their home and their store in Germany, and how the Fränkels “lost” everything in Austria.

Some Jews hastily sold their property for very little, but Emil Fränkel refused to give up. If the man who took over the business came from Linz to Prague to pressure Emil, is it not because that very same man expects to be the new owner?

Arnold describes his own work situation in a surprisingly open manner.

I need some rest and relaxation, and am actually overdue for holiday time, but I shall have to be patient until early August. Because several of our employees have now been given permanent vacation time, the weeks ahead promise to be sour and work-intensive. Of course, we have no holiday plans, since it’s impossible to plan very far into the future. Still, I’d at least like to go to Taus for a week to get my teeth fixed.

The German that Arnold uses is somewhat unusual, compelling me to read between the lines. I conclude that the “permanent vacation” granted to certain employees is a euphemism for Jews who have been fired in accordance with new regulations excluding them from medicine, the law, and other professions. I note too that conditions are so unstable that even a month ahead is considered “long-range” planning. Given the uncertain future, Arnold urges my parents to write more often.
I had counted on a letter this week from you, my dear Canadians, but on the other hand, we do understand that you are preoccupied with concerns beyond keeping up a correspondence, and that your hand is perhaps too tired at day’s end to pick up pen and paper.

Arnold adds one more paragraph to reassure my parents that the bonds of family transcend distance.

Our thoughts are always with you and I visualize your situation with all its difficulties and shortages as if I really knew it. Vera is often caught up in her thoughts by your description of the natural surroundings. Every little creek that we come to, she wonders if it looks like yours. On the other hand, I often wonder if the weather there is as miserable as what we have been having here. Does it make you frantic and is there anyone who will help you if it suddenly starts to rain when the ripened hay is in the field?

Arnold’s letter is followed by a few paragraphs from his wife Vera who has mailed us a book on naturopathic healing. She apologizes for having been unsuccessful in finding the up-to-date health lexicon that my parents had requested.

I wonder why Vera does not have access to recent books and publications. She does not spell out the answer, but her letter suggests that life is changing for her and for all European Jews. Everyone is under stress.

I always read your letters with great pleasure and await them impatiently, but please do not be angry with me if I just attach good wishes or even nothing to Arnold’s letters. We know each other well enough that surely you will not take it as indifference if I am sometimes simply not able to write. The inner unease and a certain restlessness that now characterize each day cause such an emptiness in my brain that I am sometimes incapable of putting two sentences together. It is a well-known fact that great stress usually attacks the human organ that is by nature inclined to be the
weakest. In some, that organ is the stomach, in some the intestines, and in my case, the brain.

Vera’s struggle leads her to speak twice in a row of the need for God’s help. Calamity and uncertainty are cruel reminders of our own limitations.

Perhaps God will not abandon His own. I hope that this will be true for you, my dear Canadians. We are very aware of all the hardships that you will have to endure. We know how all the harsh, demanding labour will sap your limited strength. God will really have to help.

Unlike his sister-in-law Vera, Emil Urbach trusts his own powers of rational thought. Having spent hours poring over books, his typed letters are treasure-troves of information and well-intentioned advice.

We always read your letters with great interest, but unfortunately we have not so far been able to imagine clearly your present life and circumstances. Even the dominant climatic conditions there will be markedly different from ours.

It is hard to give you advice from a distance, because many things aren’t clear to us. Given the proximity of a larger city (Hamilton), you have a good market for agricultural products, and you are in the best part of Canada. Soil there consists of sand mixed with clay; the terrain is level and can easily be worked. Unfortunately, you don’t have coal, but you do have water power there. In the summer you won’t be too hot but in the winter it will be rather cold. The temperature in Toronto, for example, ranges from -20 in January to +33 or higher in July. The Great Lakes don’t freeze, but winter lasts 5 months.

It is perhaps also advisable to proceed from small to large, getting a smaller farm next and managing it well and then undertaking
something larger with the money earned and saved. For sure, a small landowner can’t do much; farming on a small scale isn’t worthwhile anywhere, and certainly not in Canada. Even before the present crisis, farming was already unprofitable here in Czechoslovakia. A small landowner was only able to survive by taking advantage of by-products like pig manure or by raising bees alongside profitable plants (poppies, mustard, sunflowers for oil, crops that attract bees while also providing fodder for animals.)

Since you have a very real shortage of money, the best solution would be to build (under very strict conditions) a collective with people who have a stronger base of capital. You would get paid for your labour and in this way, you could obtain some capital. Of course this means slaving away. A large farm also involves greater management demands, whereas your part in a collective would be easier to manage.

Even on the topic of location, Emil has advice to offer. He points out that land on the prairies is cheap in part because the weather is brutal, and that tracts of land on the Gaspé Peninsula could lead to sudden riches if they were to contain mineral deposits. The outraged voice of my father still echoes in my head. “Wie stellt er sich denn das vor? How does he expect us to follow these preposterous suggestions?”

Emil’s well-meant words might have encouraged a more self-confident man. My father’s goal was modest: survival in this alien environment for which he was so woefully unprepared. Emil must have known this to be true, for the books that he sent are reminders of how little my father knew about farming.

In the same mail, I’m sending you three books:
1. Introduction to Vegetable Gardening by Friederich Huck
2. The Practical Vegetable Gardener by Fr. Saftenberg
3. The Garden Book for Beginners by Johann Boettner.
Wishing you good results, we remain with best regards
Yours
I smile at the end of another letter that Emil Urbach does not sign. His letters are indeed so unique that he need not identify himself. Still, there was nothing in Emil’s world to help him conceptualize the physical demands of life on the farm. He pictured my parents as sitting about on Sundays, eagerly reading horticultural books. The reality was that they worked from darkness to darkness, seven days a week. We ate our evening meal in the kitchen by the thin light of a coal oil lantern. Then, exhausted, my parents fell into bed.

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By July of 1939, my parents had progressed from communal living in Mount Hope to farm ownership with Ludwig and Anny as partners. In a letter from Emil Urbach dated June 11, 1939, Emil sends “a wish that, with God’s help and your own diligence, you become mega-agriculturalists and millionaires.” Along with congratulations, Emil sends a myriad of new suggestions that might have merit in a modern context. For my overwhelmed parents, it was all too much. They were barely coping, and Emil kept sending suggestions that they could not imagine implementing.

Dear Gretel and dear Edi,

Your letter really satisfied us this time because it was very descriptive and contained lots of details that we welcomed. We send you our sincerest congratulations on the advantageous acquisition of the new farm, and wish with God’s help and your own diligence, that you become mega-agriculturalists and millionaires. Of course this is hard when you start small, but slowly but surely it happens, especially if one has the necessary luck in addition and clear-minded determination, with perseverance to last out the setbacks of all beginnings.

Before the onset of the rainy season, it would be important to have the roof repaired so that the rain won’t damage the foundations of the interior of the barn. Ask the local authorities whether you can have the water from your well definitively tested. I’m
sending you (albeit for lack of a German translation) a copy of the Czech regulations regarding wells, so that you will have some points of reference as to how a well should be constituted. The water must not have any aftertaste. If it does, it contains abnormal ingredients (perhaps epsom salts or sulphate of magnesia.) This can easily be determined in an apothecary in Hamilton. You then might have “mineral water” to draw off in the house.

Perhaps you will succeed after all in planting cabbage in the good sandy soil near the little brook. Maybe a small attempt at planting rye in the incipient garden, so that you can find out whether and why it won’t grow there. According to the data in the books on Canada available to me, almost all of our plants grow there, and even several kinds of some plants. Maybe rye too can thrive there, although it is not listed in the kinds of grains that were harvested there in the year 1891.

If the women do not have to work in the fields, they could occupy themselves with the raising of bees. Then you would have healthful honey in the house. The care and raising of poultry should also be their lot. Maybe you could connect with a veterinarian whose only job would be to supervise the fattening of poultry using kitchen waste. Just make sure to get varieties of poultry that lay lots and that lay early on, so that you can be the first to reach the market with fresh eggs. Whoever brings new or rare things can charge more for them and makes a greater profit on everything. It would be thus for early flowers in spring!

Unable to grasp the conditions under which we lived, Emil continued urging my parents to install both plumbing and electricity.

It would be a wonderful thing to get electric lights first, then some sort of reservoir in the top corner of the roof as plumbing for the house and rinsing for the toilet so that you could create some kind of bathroom facility.
His timing could not have been worse. During that first uncertain season of coaxing the soil to yield a viable harvest, during that long hot summer of scanning the skies for sun and rain in due measure, my penniless parents were not concerned with creature comforts. Although we did eventually install electricity, indoor plumbing was a luxury we never achieved on the farm.

Meanwhile, a very different kind of letter had been sent by Martha and Emil Fränkel. They are desperate to join us on the farm my parents now owned with Anny and Ludwig as partners. Their eagerness is as palpable as their awareness of impending events.

Martha writes first, and seesaws between hope and despair.

*How gladly we would already be helping you with everything.*
*When we join you in Canada, there will be no lack of good will and love of work, but I suspect we are still far away from it.*

Martha does her best to make allowances for my father’s predicament, but her desperation seeps through.

*Because of your move to the farm and all the work you have now, you probably will not have much time left to speed up the matter of getting us into Canada. We know that things cannot be done in a day, but try to imagine yourself in our situation. We have been waiting just as long as you and we have not even the tiniest glimmer of light ahead.*

*Dear Edi, your efforts do not seem to be falling on fertile soil. If your time permits, we would be happy to pay for a trip to Ottawa. If there is not enough room on your farm for us, do not worry. We will find a way to earn our daily bread. Just give us the possibility of immigrating, for the constantly unclear picture of our future is really crushing us down.*
My father surely went to his grave with Martha’s words etched on his heart. He knew that others in the small immigrant community had gone to Toronto and Ottawa, or like Mimi, to Montreal, and had failed to gain an entry visa for their loved ones. When he received Martha’s letter, my father would have obsessed over what he could do:

How can I go all the way to Ottawa? Could I hitchhike? Is there a bus? Who would know if there is a bus from Hamilton? Who could go with me to the bus station to ask? How much will it cost? Will it be money well spent or should the money go toward a new plough? Or maybe toward another cow and a few chickens so that there will be food for our first winter in Canada? And will it be time well spent? Would it be better to plant the swampy back field that is just starting to dry out? Even supposing I go to Ottawa, what will I do there? Wander from office to office, being mocked as a greenhorn?

My father never lost the sense of having been a failure. Thanks to the urging of Emil Fränkel, we were safely in Canada, but my father had not managed to return the favour.

The days and weeks pass, and dear Emil is mostly very sad and lost in thought. To make matters worse, this week there was a man here from Linz. We probably have to sell our house, although he did promise “perhaps” to help us emigrate.

I shudder at the bait and switch tactics of this nameless man from Linz, the Austrian city renowned worldwide for its raspberry torte but, in an act of global amnesia, forgotten as Hitler’s hometown. Did this unnamed man have connections within the Nazi party? How else would he have been able to extend the ultimate carrot on the stick? Did he really intend to help the Fränkels leave Europe or did he simply want to get his hands on their property?
My dear ones, I’m forcing myself to write these few lines, and I’d rather be helping you than adding to your sorrows, but I beg you again from the bottom of my heart, pour us some clear wine and tell us the truth. Should it be impossible to help us despite your good intentions, then we will somehow have to find some other way, because with the children, I cannot go through another winter. We have become quite toughened already, but the autumn is not supposed to bring anything good.

Did my parents pour that clear wine? Did they tell the Fränkels that the situation in Canada was hopeless? Did they tell them it was the official policy of the Canadian government to prevent Jews from entering the country? The autumn that Martha so dreads, the autumn that lurks so ominously, is the autumn of 1939, the outbreak of World War II.

Now, I want to focus on the sweeter part, and that is our dear Helly-child. In my imagination, I see her clearly, toddling about and babbling and throwing herself at Aunt Anny saying, “I’m hungry.” It is really so joyous that the child is thriving there. We all send her many thousands of kisses.

Dear Anny, you will certainly be very happy to have your little sister with you and Edi likewise to have found in Ludwig such a kind partner. When you get everything in order, things will give you even more pleasure. Our little Dorothy is as brown as a berry already and has three teeth. Everyone is delighted with her, especially dear Else. Ilserl now speaks Czech to her friends. Emil visits your parents daily.

I note with pleasure that Ludwig’s kindness was mentioned in the first letter my parents wrote from Canada. I also note that Baby Dorly has three teeth already, a sharp reminder of the passage of time, as is the fact that Ilserl has learned to speak Czech. Involuntarily, I wonder if she had already forgotten me. When this letter was written, I still had no new playmates and spoke not a word of English.
Now you will soon be in receipt of the lift containing your furniture and possessions, including a good clothes brush and a horse-hair broom. These are of the top quality, so take good care of them.

From deep in the recesses of memory springs the smell and the sound of dozens of baby chicks. My parents converted that lift into a chicken coop. I also remember the special clothes brush my father always used before hanging his good suit in the wardrobe. I wonder what happened to the brush? I still have the wardrobe. It sits, unused, its panels piled in a corner of my garage. Modern closets and low ceilings have rendered it useless, yet I cannot part with this bit of history that came to live in my house along with my aging mother.

Our dear little Mama is supposed to come here soon. We will be very pleased if only our dear parents stay in good health.

For a long time, my thoughts linger on the words “Our dear little Mama.” This is the first time Martha has mentioned her mother. Why would Martha have used these words for my grandmother, a strong, capable woman who raised three sons and two daughters?

In his portion of the letter, Emil Fränkel makes few concessions to sociability. He congratulates us on the acquisition of the farm but our progress only seems to highlight his own frustration. Dealing with my mother’s parents on a daily basis is clearly not easy. My grandmother Resl remains in a state of apathy and deep depression. My grandfather listens to no one and believes that he alone knows best. Everywhere he looks, Emil finds only locked doors and blocked avenues.

Regarding our coming to Canada, I gather from your brief reports that it is hopeless. I have been waiting since March to be called up, but no news to date. People in other categories at least have
approval from the local branch of The Canadian and are waiting for the travel permit. If only I were far enough ahead to have something in my hands, I would be less fearful of the future. My dear Edi, words are not enough in such times. Actions alone are what matters.

“I’m sorry isn’t good enough. Apologies don’t solve anything. Only your actions matter.” The very words my father had used to teach me right from wrong. Had Emil’s words congealed into a stick with which my father guided me but lashed himself?

From the reports I get from my friends, I gather that eventually everyone over there will find a way to earn his daily bread in peace and freedom. Circumstances are very different here for those who have absolutely no hope of getting out. Here, one day resembles the next and fear about the future keeps growing stronger.

I visit your dear parents every day, but there is little that I can do for them. As soon as they get the exit permit, they will be allowed to leave and I will send their possessions in a lift. Your dear mother’s condition has not improved. Two months ago, I told them that they should consult a specialist about the medical treatment that she has received to date, but they refuse to hear of it. There are many days when your dear mother does not want to cook, which sorely vexes your father. Nor do they want to eat in a restaurant. Even if I were to spend the entire day there, I cannot change the situation.

It is not difficult to imagine the effect of this letter on my father. He was not a man given to shrugging things off. He would have consulted all the self-anointed experts among the handful of immigrants that constituted his world, asking everyone he knew whether anything could be done to expedite the Fränkels’ immigration to Canada. When everyone replied in the negative, my father would have flogged himself inwardly for all that lay beyond his control. And because my mother clung to the hope that her
parents would soon be arriving, my father would not have revealed to her his own despair.

At the end of Martha’s letter, there is a single line in a child’s irregular handwriting that triggers my tears.

*My dear Hely I think of you often and send you kisses. Ilse.*