Josef and Fanny Waldstein surrounded by the family
Back row: Edmund Waldstein, Emil Urbach, Emil Fränkel, unknown, Else Urbach, Arnold Waldstein
Middle row: Martha Fränkel, unknown, Josef Waldstein, Fanny Waldstein, Vera Waldstein, unknown
Front row: Ilserl Fränkel, Otto Urbach, Marianne Urbach
As my mother and my aunt Anny waited anxiously for the arrival of Max and Resl, the first letter arrived from my father’s parents, Josef and Fanny. My own excitement shot up when I found that letter in my father’s box.

Although my mother had often spoken of her own parents, whose picture hung in a gold frame over her bed, I knew nothing about my father’s parents. My father never spoke of them and my mother rarely did.

My mother recalled Fanny Waldstein primarily as a mother-in-law prone to doling out unwanted advice and Papa Josef as a storekeeper with little to say except to his customers. As grandparents, they had no reality for me, and such was my mother’s unacknowledged aversion that she pronounced their handwriting “unreadable.” It was only after I called upon the help of a former university colleague with a specialty in German that Fanny and Josef swam into focus.

What emerged were two warm-hearted people with a lively intelligence. Their pet names for me give clear voice to their love. Equally unmistakable is their selfless concern for others. It is from their deep pool of caring that
Ilserl with her grandmother Fanny
my father had drunk deeply. Like him, they saw the goodness in people, and they chose to err on the side of generosity.

Remarkably, they were not only aware, they were quite willing to express their feelings of sorrow and outrage at what was happening. Their world was not just the family circle but also their community of friends and neighbours, people amongst whom they had lived for a lifetime. It is their compassionate observations about a society crumbling before their very eyes that have provided me with the most compelling images.

Among the mysteries of their first letter is the date. The handwriting is perfectly legible: July 27, 1938. However, the fact that the letter is addressed to us in Canada means that the letter can only have been written in 1939. Perhaps my grandfather subconsciously wanted time to stand still.

Another mystery is the fact that Papa Waldstein not only omits their exact address, he omits the city itself. The letter is addressed from “near Budweis.” The latter is a name I know well, for Budweis is the city where I was born. I had often heard the story of my mother’s refusal to give birth in the family bed attended in the normal way by a local midwife and the old village doctor. After much deliberation, it was decided that my mother would spend the last days of her confinement in Budweis with friends of the family who would take her to hospital at the appropriate time.

I wonder whether it was with these same “friends of the family” that my grandparents stayed after Hitler took over the Sudetenland. My research at the library has produced a map showing the border of the Sudetenland as an extremely jagged line that zigzagged its way around the country. After September 1938, Strobnitz lay in the Nazi-occupied Sudetenland, but only a stone’s throw away, Budweis remained in Czechoslovakia, a free and independent country.

My grandfather’s letter is direct and to the point.

*Nothing new from Strobnitz. The borders are closed now. I have no hopes left of getting anything for the house or the fields.*

The letter contains numerous references to people whose names are unknown to me. Nonetheless, the words and actions of these people give
shape to my reality. Although none has set sail voluntarily, I see them as bobbing helplessly on a sea of relentless change. A family torn apart when a husband lands a job in Calcutta that enables him to send his wife and children to London. Competent businessmen sent into “retirement” by their Aryan employers. Able young men, including my father’s friends, eager to work but forced into idleness. My grandfather names these people who constitute a moving tableau at a time of ever-growing uncertainty.

We recently received your letter forwarded from Prague, and your lines brought us great pleasure. Mama has probably read it at least ten times to herself and she has read it to Goldschmied and to Katz etc. etc. Everyone is delighted to hear that you are doing well, and everyone wants to go to Canada. Everyone also wants to fall under the umbrella of my protection, thinking that because you succeeded in getting to Canada, I can somehow help them. They don’t understand how complicated things are. They don’t believe me when I tell them that I cannot even protect my own family.

We are in good health, thank God, and so far, we are doing well. One just has to adjust to the new circumstances. Today it says in the newspapers that people up to age 35 can emigrate to England, but people over 35 have to be professionals, engineers, master builders, etc. They want artisans, not people in business.

We are waiting longingly for better times? Everyone wants to emigrate, but unfortunately, the opportunities are absolutely zero.

Here the harvesting has already begun and the fields are studded with wheat stooks. When does the harvesting start there? There are also many cherries here this year. Do you have some fruit on the farm too? How are you doing, Gretl dear? Do you have calluses on your hands yet, and do they hurt? And what’s my Helly-child up to? I’m very lonely for her. Has she stopped speaking of her grandparents, her Opi and Omi? With the passing of time, she will forget us.

You will be sweating a lot now in the great summer heat. Don’t worry about it, dear Edi. If you were here, you would also have to
work. It’s just that it’s easier to work for yourself than for strangers.

Now I don’t know anything further to report. For today, I greet and kiss you all from my heart. Your Papa.

As if reluctant to end his letter, he adds a postscript.

Don’t let all the work overwhelm you. In time everything will get better, and every beginning is hard. Regards to Anny and Ludwig and especially to my dear Helly.

I find myself dwelling on the smallest details of Papa Josef’s letter, including the fact that he adds a postscript that specifically mentions me. My hunger for love from a grandparent takes me by surprise. I am also taken aback by his honesty. In their letters, whether they believe it or not, all other members of the family maintain the pretense that there is still hope. My grandfather alone calls it as he sees it: absolutely hopeless. Everyone wants to emigrate, but the opportunities are absolutely zero. For good measure, he draws a line through the numeral. He also eliminates both himself and Emil Fränkel from admission to England by underlining that people over 35 must not be in business. He cancels out even his one hopeful statement, that “we are waiting longingly for better times” by placing a question mark at its end, as if to cast doubt upon the likelihood of better times ahead.

Fanny’s letter contains no salutation. She plunges directly to the heart of matters, and her words are like an interrupted conversation, filled with names that I do not recognize.

I want to add a few lines regarding the letter which Mrs. Goldberger sent to Mr. Ornstein. She got the address from Mr. Klein. I think they might be capable people, but there can be no thought of moving forward on it.

Engineer Fritz Teller of Krumau is going to Calcutta, India. The climate there is supposed to be very mild. His wife and child will be staying in London for the time being. Mr. Rind from Velenic asked me to send you his regards.
I want to ask you, dear Gretl whether you have to cook the food for the pigs on the kitchen stove. In that case you will need numerous pots every day. I also want to ask how your hands are doing and whether they are still raw and split open. As a precautionary measure, you should rub them every night with something fatty.

I also can’t imagine, dear Edmund, how come you are getting wet feet. Aren’t you being careful? That would not happen here.

Be well, be kissed by your Mother Fanny

Fanny’s words are a harsh reminder of how unprepared my mother was for life on a farm. From my childhood, I remember my mother’s hands as chronically red and sore, but in the last year her life, friends often commented on her lovely hands. Her fingers were long and straight, and the rings she loved to wear slipped easily over unswollen knuckles. She filed her own nails and polished them beautifully. Her touch was soft and smooth.

Fanny’s words also make me realize what a shock it must have been for my mother who was raised in a kosher home, to find herself now using her pots to prepare slop for the pigs.

Although the other siblings have lauded my mother for adapting so quickly to farm life, Fanny is slow to see her as other than pampered. In a letter to Otto that he must have forwarded to my father, Fanny empathizes only with my father’s pain.

The photos of the children arrived today. I cannot get enough of looking at them and I must confess that the first sight of them brought tears to my eyes. Thank God, they are safely provided for, living in their own home and eating their own bread, something that thousands of people today cannot afford.

I feel very sorry for Edmund. How many rays of sun has the poor man endured for his face to have turned so brown? How much sweat has the hard work cost him? Gretl, on the other hand, looks remarkably bright and happy. The hard work has not hurt her a bit.
Although she still has her reservations where my mother is concerned, Fanny expresses compassion for others.

Dear Otto, there are many sorrows here. People are running about like chickens with their heads cut off. No one knows what the morrow will bring. Many from our village of Strobnitz had to move out of their homes. It is rumoured that the Jews here will have to move to Prague in stages, but they will first take young people under 35 who plan to emigrate.

My sister Jetty also had a summons in Prague, but whether she will emigrate is in doubt. The poor family has suffered so much and they did not plan ahead enough for emigration. The little bit of money that they have is dwindling away, and nothing can be done about it. Like us, everyone is thinking of the future with dread.

If God will only grant that Arnold and Vera can stay here! That would be such a comfort for us. My dear Fränkel children must unfortunately leave the country. This is bringing me hours of grief, but I must get used to it.

I puzzled long and hard about why only the Fränkels had to leave Czechoslovakia. The answer lay in the documents that I had found in the archives in Linz. Emil Fränkel was born in Lemberg, which was then the capital of Galicia and part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When new borders were drawn in 1918, Lemberg became part of Poland. Because Emil had settled in Linz, he had to re-apply for the Austrian citizenship that had been his birthright prior to 1918. When the Austrians welcomed Hitler in 1938, they stripped all Jews of their citizenship. The Fränkels had fled to Prague in hopes of finding a safe haven, but when Hitler took Czechoslovakia, Emil became stateless.

There was no country to issue him and his family an exit visa and no border that he and his family could openly cross. At every train station, harbour, or airport, they would be risking seizure and arrest. If Emil could not find a country to accept them immediately (all but impossible), he
risked being sent to a concentration camp like Dachau in Germany. In a letter to Otto, my grandfather sums up the situation.

Our dear ones in Canada are doing well. They still have to work hard, but they are in good health. If only the Fränkels were that far ahead. Arnold and Vera will certainly do their best to make sure that they leave here, and that they get to go somewhere.

Josef grieves for others, but aside from missing his loved ones, he shows not a gram of self-pity for his own lot.

We are in good health and doing well except for our spirits. To see such misery on a daily basis, to know that there are thousands with no homeland and no means of earning a living is wretched. Thus, all of you are scattered to the four winds. Who would ever have thought that day would come to pass? Man proposes, God disposes.

Fanny and Josef had written to us in July. In August, Arnold sent several pages of densely written script. His words underline the importance of the letters from my parents and from my father’s brother Otto who had also reached safety in Paris.

Your letter of the May 27th was forwarded to us along with a letter of Otto’s. It was a double holiday for us because both of your letters are so comforting, confident, and full of results that one is simply pulled along by this optimism, this trust in God’s support, and in a happy, free future.

I need not stress how often and how thoroughly we studied your letter. Even our more distant relatives share our interest in your letters, and feel equal pride and joy in your accomplishments.

Just now, your last letter has returned, having twice been
forwarded to our parents, most recently from Trebitsch by our cousin Martha. She also sent our parents a parcel full of good things and has steadily demonstrated her caring for them, and for you too.

We thank you sincerely for your pictures. They are very good and little Helly is especially cute. We look at the pictures very carefully with a magnifying glass, and our imagination soars and fills in everything that is missing. In this way, we see your whole life before us.

We really are honoured that despite all the work and the intense summer heat, you are taking the time to write in such detail. In this considerable sacrifice, we perceive again and again the proof of your deep attachment, and the deep inner feeling of belonging together that is occasioned by the ties of blood and soul.

Much as I have the urge to do so, there is no way to follow up on all the thoughts that arise when I read your letters, on all the questions that pop into my mind, nor to pick up in writing on all the allusions and interesting things, just as it is impossible for you to portray fully all your impressions, experiences, opinions, and discoveries. But although we can share with each other only the external and the transitory, we still understand each other. Unwritten thoughts enter our consciousness of their own accord.

For this reason, I want to save myself the trouble of entering into each detail of your so very interesting report, but try instead to express my admiration for the way that you are facing up to the powerful demands being made upon you.

Everything in our immediate family circle is all right so far. Everyone is in good health and that is what matters most. Papa wants to come here in the next while to say goodbye to Gretl’s parents.

I am surprised that Arnold, a man not given to believing idle rumours, writes definitively that my mother’s parents will be coming to Canada. Even more surprising is that Arnold, who thus far has shown not the slightest trace of anxiety over worsening conditions in Europe, has made up his mind to leave.
When he had last written to us on June 25, Arnold had mentioned wanting to spend holidays in Taus. In this letter, Arnold reveals that it was not just a vacation that he sought in Taus, but a series of appointments with his dentist.

*I did suffer a lot with my teeth. Alfred made me a whole new set of teeth with four bridges, but now my teeth are “fit for overseas” and I hope to have them at least ten years.*

Because of his qualifications as an engineer, Arnold is confident that some country will welcome his skills. One of his friends is urging him to emigrate to Australia and to send all his diplomas and qualifications (translated into English and notarized) within the week. Although Arnold knows people who are doing well there, Australia just doesn’t draw him. It is in Canada that he wants to make his home.

*I would just be terribly sorry if fate were to drive me to another continent. In my fondest dreams, I do see us all together again somewhere, and to this end, you have already made a beginning in Canada. We are counting on it that eventually not only Martha with her family but also our dear parents will be with you.*

*Besides, from an economic and geographic perspective, I can think of no country that seems more propitious than Canada. I consider it a piece of good luck that that Canada is precisely where fate has driven you.*

Unlike the Fränkels, Arnold does not press my father. He recognizes the limitations of what my father can do, and has already begun to make his own inquiries.

*Both Vera and I can see clearly that it is not so easy to get an entry permit, especially as non-farmers, and that it will scarcely be possible for you to have the opportunity, let alone the time to undertake something in this regard. Our request is rather that you make*
inquiries, as time permits, and that you let no opportunity go by to ask whether there exists any interest in our special training and capabilities, and under what conditions an entry visa gets issued.

Since I must give serious thought to getting in somewhere with all my nice little degrees and diplomas, I went to the Canadian Railway yesterday, especially because I heard that with their help, a lumber merchant from Saaz is going to set up a woodchip industry there. Of course, I got nowhere near Herr Hornath, but I did spend quite a while talking to a clerk who gave me all the desired information.

You will be interested in the opinion of the clerk of the Canadian Railway. When I asked him how he could send me as a farmer when he knows I’m an engineer, he replied, “Oh, that doesn’t matter. You will learn farming soon enough over there.” When I said it would be a shame to waste my expertise, he just shrugged.

There are three possibilities at your end. The first is that you try to arouse the interest of the government in me as an expert (which seems rather problematic to me). The second is that you find a wealthy entrepreneur who would like to set up a manufacturing plant. The third is that you could simply put in a claim for me as your brother to come and farm.

I would not like to say anything about the third possibility until I have heard your considered opinion. Aside from the fact that you cannot bombard Mr. Colley with new requests before Gretl’s parents and the Fränkels have even arrived in Canada, I would like to give the advantage to our parents and to the Urbachs (minus the children whom Otto is planning to take). If the Urbachs should have to leave here, they will not have the good prospects that Vera and I have.

You will certainly agree that good advice is priceless, and that under the circumstances here, a decision with lifelong consequences must be taken.

It is only at the end of Arnold’s letter that I begin to understand the bigger picture. Although he and Vera are eager to be with us in Canada and are
willing to come as farmers, they recognize that my parents must first sponsor my mother’s parents, the Fränkels, the Urbachs, and my father’s parents. Arnold and Vera will step aside to give immediate priority to the rest of the family who will not have the same good prospects of gaining admission based on their professional qualifications.

Arnold’s vision sweeps me along as I imagine my parents’ excitement. Soon the entire family will join us in Canada. The plan is that my mother’s parents will arrive first. Because their departure is imminent, Arnold’s father is coming to Prague specifically to say goodbye to Max and Resl before they leave for Canada. Emil and Martha Fränkel have already packed; they and the children are ready to leave immediately. After that, my father’s parents will be coming, as will the Urbachs. Arnold and Vera have decided to join them so that everyone will be together once again.

Buoyed by our letters, Arnold and Vera soak up the pleasures of their last holiday in Europe.

Now, my dear ones, I want to report a bit about our holiday from which we returned yesterday. It was nice in every way. The weather was good to us, the surrounding countryside was most inviting, and we gave in to our longing for nature and fresh air. We took long hikes from which we returned tired out, we lay in the grass and the hay, we witnessed all phases of the harvest and of country life, we rejoiced in the unspoiled nature and honesty of people who know nothing of discrimination. We had good accommodations and good food and just totally let ourselves enjoy it.

Arnold encloses copies of his professional qualifications to make sure that he gets a suitable job offer. He urges my father to show them to as many people as possible, especially to those who either have influence or could approach those who do.

Vera adds a few lines to express delight in the fact that all remaining obstacles have been removed, and that my mother’s parents are finally on their way to Canada.
My maternal grandparents, Resl née Langschur and Max Grünhut
Yesterday there was another family gathering at Elsa’s to celebrate our return from holidays. With what great joy we heard that Max and Resl will soon be allowed to leave after all.

Still, there is a hint that Vera has few illusions about what lies ahead.

I can well imagine your impatience to see your parents again, dear Gretl and Anny, but be patient! It will all come to pass if God wills it and nothing interferes. Be patient even if sometimes, it seems to take a long time.

LESS THAN A WEEK LATER, whatever hope Arnold and Vera’s positive attitude may have inspired is dealt a blow. In a letter ostensibly written for my father’s birthday, and belatedly for mine, Martha is strangely distant.

On September 15, your birthday, dear Edi, we will be intensely thinking of you, pleading that the dear Lord keep you in very, very good health. May you be allowed to dwell with your loved ones in peace and freedom!

My dear husband often says that our Dorly reminds him so much of Helly’s chatter. She will surely be a charming young girl already. These would be nice playmates now under the supervision of my big daughter.

You are heartily embraced and kissed by your Martha and family.

Else’s penmanship follows closely upon Martha’s handwritten words. Else’s letter is even more remote.

To our dear brother Edi on his birthday we wish every imaginable good thing and love. May he stay in good health and spend the day
happily in the circle of his family. His girl must be quite big now and must be bringing lots of life and joy into the house.

At the bottom is a single, rather formal, line in Fanny’s handwriting.

I too can send my sincerest regards to congratulate Edi, and Helynka too.

Strangely, it is the only time she signs not as “Fanny,” but as “Your Mama.” Only the date of the letter provides a clue to its detachment. August 31, 1939. The next day, Germany will invade Poland and trigger the war.