

The Family Copes

*T*HE YEAR 1940 BEGINS WITH A LETTER from my Grandmother Fanny, who hungers for news about us and the farm.

I want to end the old year and start the new by writing to you, my dear children. My thoughts dwell constantly upon you and I cannot hide from you how lonely we are for you. We received a copy of the letter that you, dear Anny and Gretl, wrote to your parents, but we were doubly pleased with the letter you addressed directly to us, especially since it was quite detailed. We long to know everything about your new life.

Still, one cannot change things. You are fortunate that work is all you have to worry about and that you are adapting so well. Especially you, dear Gretl and Anny. Who would have believed you'd have the strength for hard labour? I beg you to eat heartily, for that makes quite a difference.

We've had severe frost for several days now, which again makes me think of you often in regards to having to get up early. But it

has to be done, doesn't it, my dear Edmund. You've no other choice. If you don't do it, the animals will do you in.

Fanny shows our photos at every opportunity, including to the visitors from back home in Strobnitz.

I've been asked to send best regards from Mr. and Mrs. Chief Postmaster and from Mrs. Head Watchman who visited us from Strobnitz. They were delighted with your pictures. "O Boze! Helenka!" they exclaimed.

The Czech words bring me a smile. Although Ludwig and his cousins were fluent speakers of Czech, the language was spoken only occasionally by visitors to our house. My mother revered Goethe and Schiller and the greats of German culture. For her, Czech was a lesser tongue. During the first year of her marriage, my mother had been the belle of the annual Fireman's Ball in Strobnitz. Fanny warned her to learn Czech if she wanted to retain that position. With faith that her beauty would carry the day, my mother had refused to stoop so low. Sadly, the issue was never put to the test. The next year, my mother was pregnant. The following year, as Jews, my parents were no longer welcome at the village ball.

I smile also to see that my grandmother carries no grudges. She welcomes everyone from Strobnitz who comes to visit her. Clearly, Aryans could easily cross the border to Budweis, but for Jews, this was impossible. Fanny's letter with its professional appellatives in the place of family names reminds me of the German cemetery that I visited in 1998 on my trip to meet Tini, our former family nanny. Tini took me to the cemetery to "introduce me" to her late husband. As her spoken words morphed into silent communing with the deceased, I wandered off. I was surprised to see that many of the tombstones were engraved with reminders of the professional status of the dead, and that many of these titles seemed less than noble callings. Chief Accountant. Director of Sanitation. Municipal Maintenance Controller.

Later, I asked Tini about immortalizing such titles in stone. Did she not view death as the great equalizer who makes all earthly titles null and void? Tini's response was simple: a man is forever defined by what he makes of himself.

FOR MY GRANDFATHER JOSEF, the inability to work threads its way through all of his letters. Despite the clear mark of the censor across the page, he slips in the comment that "*much has changed in the business world.*" It has been more than a year since he and my father had been forced to leave Strobnitz and the store that had been their livelihood, yet my grandfather is still smarting from the wound.

Aside from that single comment, my grandfather's letter is uncharacteristically flat and somewhat disjointed.

My dear Children

After a lengthy silence we are coming again to send you a sign of life. Thank God we are all in good health and doing relatively well. Gretl's parents wrote to us last week that everything is okay with you. We are happy to know that you are safe.

How is my little Helly-child, I long so much for you. If only I could see you, even for five minutes!

As far as business goes, much has changed here. Now in the winter you will also have a chance to recover a little, although there is lots to do even in the winter on a farm. I also have the happy hope that within a few years, you will get ahead through your hard work.

Otherwise, we don't hear anything; everything is as it was. Write us another detailed letter, for it is always a joyful day when we hear from you. Best regards to you all.

Your faithful Papa

IN THE MARGIN ARE A few lines from Arnold and Vera. The date indicates that Fanny and Josef had forwarded their letter of January 2 to Arnold and Vera in Prague. Perhaps this was because they were unable to purchase foreign stamps in Budweis. More likely, Arnold had advised against sending mail to countries hostile to Nazi interests. For a Jew to write frequently to France and the United States may well have been a risk that he chose to reserve only for himself.

January 8, 1940

My dear ones, reporting to you that everything is as it was. Without exception, we are all doing well, thank God, so that you need in no way be concerned for us. Unfortunately, we don't get mail from you often enough, and I especially haven't seen so much as a line from you for months, dear Edi. Best regards and kisses to you all from Vera and Arnold.

IN A LETTER TO THEIR SON Otto who forwarded it to my father, Fanny and Josef openly confess their loneliness. In addition to being deprived of their children, they are in the grip of a severe winter that is chaining them indoors.

Dear child, are you often homesick for us? I think of you so much, and many nights I even dream of you. Still, everything must be borne calmly and patiently.

After a very long interval, we received your card. Was this the mail's fault or yours? Well, we thank God that you are okay, which is all that matters. We too are well, but having a very severe winter that is keeping us shackled up in our room.

Is Fanny's unnecessarily strong terminology of imprisonment another example of communication in a time of censorship? With increasingly

restrictive curfews for Jews, it is more than the cold, in all likelihood, that confines them to their quarters.

Fanny asks questions about Otto's life in Paris and also makes observations about "the Canadian contingent":

I remain amazed by the hard work of the dear children. Who would have sought such strengths in Gretl? The zeal with which she tackles her work is unbelievable. Indeed, she wrote that they would like to expand if only they had the money.

Apparently little Helen is growing into a sturdy little girl. She consumes her meals with a great appetite. Back home in Strobnitz we would have said she is laying the groundwork for becoming a farm wife.

Josef expresses regret that his family is no longer together, but he reveals no personal fear of what the future will bring.

So pleased that you are okay. That's all we need to know. We are in good health, thank God, and hoping for sunshine. But there you are, all of you scattered about again. At least you are in a nice place. I have so much to ask you, but I must tame my curiosity for now and wait for better times. Please write to us soon again. Your faithful Papa.

ON JANUARY 29, 1940, Martha Fränkel also writes to her brother Otto. The Fränkel's situation is grim. Emigrating to Canada is no longer a possibility. She and Emil have decided that their only option is emigration to Palestine, an illegal and uncertain venture.

My dear husband is at the office daily until ten o'clock. Our goal is to go to Israel illegally as soon as possible, even though it will take two or three months and will be very hard on the children.

Unfortunately, it looks like there is no other way.

Ilserl was nine years old yesterday. She is a quiet, dear little girl, and she studies hard. Dorothy is a dear. She runs and shouts and cries aloud, and she totally brightens our existence.

I picture my little cousins, Dorly the toddler and Ilserl, the “*quiet, dear little girl*” whose birthday Martha and Emil have managed to celebrate. My mind flits back to reports I’ve read about ships that arrived in Palestine with no landing permit. Their passengers were simply told to swim ashore.

All of Martha’s letters have been emotionally intense, but the final paragraph of this one is uncharacteristically effusive. Her words border on the mawkish as she pleads with Otto to write to cousin Hertha in pursuit of an affidavit, a letter from an American citizen indicating that the Fränkels will request no government handouts if the United States will allow them to emigrate.

I still want to try one more thing. When you were still resident in Vienna, you had us registered as of June 1938. Since other Austrians who were registered in May 1938 are now getting visas, my husband made some inquiries. A reliable source told him that if we were in possession of an affidavit, there would be a possibility of getting a visa in two or three months.

The affidavit originally intended for Edi has been signed over to Arnold, and it’s good for him to have something in hand too. I’m writing to Hertha again today. Perhaps helping us will be in her power after all, and perhaps some noble soul will be found to issue us an affidavit. So I wanted to ask you, Otto-kins, whether it is in the scope of your possibilities to write to Hertha in this regard. You know our dates.

Not a single day goes by without my heart being with you. How I beg God each day for your health, Otto-kins, my dear, good, sweet honey. How long it’s been since we saw each other, and even worse, it’s your dear birthday, I think so-o-o-o often of you. The older you get, the more ardent my wishes for you become. I feel

such a deep, devoted love for you that truly, words fail me in order to convey my wishes to you. May it be, beloved little Otto, that you stay in good health (our souls cry out for it), and may God grant you the strength to bear all that lies ahead. A friend told us that you got a new suit for your birthday, and so I say to you, beloved Otto-kins, God grant that you wear it in good health. Whenever you send us a few lines, we are happy, and we always thank you very much.

Emil Fränkel sends only a few lines, but his condensed words are all the more powerful.

Dearest Brother-in-law

Above all, the best of everything for your birthday. May God keep you in good health to bear the difficult times ahead. Do us the favour and write to Hertha. I'd be very happy if there were any hope for us. Things are going well for me in the office, but being occupied only helps distract me for ten minutes. Many kisses Emil

IN HER NEXT LETTER DATED March 3, my grandmother Fanny indicates that sending and receiving mail has become problematic. She writes that letters now take at least three months, and that the last letter they received from us is dated December 1939. Because no one wants to part with original letters, Emil Fränkel has assumed the role of scribe. He copies by hand our letters to the family in Prague and forwards them to Fanny and Josef who are still in Budweis. Fanny's letter suggests that conditions in Europe are deteriorating, and that it has been a harsh winter.

I have been waiting from week to week for news. It probably seems exactly the same to you. My dear children, I would very much like to ask you to try to write to us again, but I don't know to which address. I must leave that to Arnold.

I thought of you every morning during the winter. We stayed under the covers until 9 o'clock because there was a dreadful cold spell and we had to be frugal with our fuel.

My grandfather Josef fills his part of the letter with pertinent questions about the farm.

What is the state of your cattle population? Has it expanded? Write everything, even how many cows, horses, pigs, and chickens you have. How I'd love to see them and feed them! I have always hankered for life on a country estate. The exercise and being in nature all day long is very good for you. Besides, it helps you forget your troubles.

Now it will soon be your busy season again. We are all overjoyed that you are there and that you can go to bed in peace and get up in peace. Let us pray to God that there will be sunshine for all of us again someday.

New handwriting in that same letter plus the date of March 10, 1940 indicate that Arnold has once again taken responsibility for mailing his parents' letter. His brief words must have brought comfort to my parents.

Although I just wrote to you a week ago c/o Hertha in N.Y., I am sending you this letter so that you can see that your dear parents in Budweis are also are doing well.

Nothing has changed for us, thank God, and work is our greatest joy. We think of you often and we are happy to know that you are safe. You need not worry about us. We are not in need and we are satisfied.

INITIALLY, I TOO WAS reassured by Arnold's words. However, the constant presence of the censor gives me pause. Arnold's "work is our greatest joy"

now rings false, like an echo of the Nazi dictum “*Arbeit Macht Frei*—work is liberation.” As an engineer, Arnold’s expertise would have been in demand as the Nazi war machine moved into high gear, but Vera? How can work have been her greatest source of joy if she had been forbidden to practice medicine since 1939 when the offices of Jewish doctors in Prague had been shut down?

For my grandfather Josef, the enforced idleness has become intolerable. The contrast between Arnold’s note of March 10 and Josef’s next letter dated April 29, 1940 is remarkable. Josef yearns to be useful, and his letter is laden with irony. For him, useful work is the mark of a human being. The days drag by as he contemplates the waste unfolding before his eyes. He watches as younger Jews shift piles of sand from one place to another, and then shift them back again. Education and talent wasted.

If only I had something to do! Idling away my time is too boring. Send me your piglets and your chickens so that I can feed them! Dear Edi, your colleagues go to work daily. Flood control, they call it. I would like to write you many interesting things, but another time. Meier is working too. His task is a healthy one, with pickaxe and shovel, one that makes your back strong.

So many people wish they could trade with you now. I have just spent a week in Prague where I attended services with Gretl’s father, Papa Grünhut. At the Urbach’s, Else organized a big afternoon gathering to welcome me. She invited at least thirty people, the whole assembly of relatives. Everyone is in good health and trusts God concerning the future.

In this letter, Fanny does not reveal her own feelings about the changes that have stripped her husband of purpose. Instead, she diverts attention to us, asking whether my mother has managed to gain a few kilos (she had not, and despite a penchant for sweets, remained fashionably thin to the end of her days), and whether my father has help with the milking (he did, for as our livestock increased, my mother hand-milked all forty cows).

What is striking, however, is the frequency with which Fanny and all my non-religious relatives have begun to insert the word “God” into their letters.

There can be no greater joy than to read your reports. We are amazed at the zeal with which you tackle this huge job, but then you have no choice. We pray to God that the rewards for all your diligence will continue to flow.

FANNY ALSO MENTIONS WRITING numerous letters that apparently did not arrive in Canada. This led me to assume that letters had been lost en route, including perhaps one from Else and Emil Urbach. However, Emil’s next letter suggests that he had held back from communicating since December 6, 1939, because of my father’s unexplained (and to me, inexplicable) failure to express his thanks for a book Emil had sent.

April 21, 1940

My dear ones

In his last letter, dear Edi is justified in complaining that it has been a long while since he heard from us.

Last time we sent a book on raising cattle or pigs. Because the shipment has not been acknowledged, a further book on horticulture has not been mailed. Perhaps I can send it along at some time or other.

Your interesting letters to Gretl’s parents are being sent to all the brothers and sisters and to Josef and Fanny. Everyone feeds on their content and is delighted with the success you’ve had. Judging by the letter numbers, there are still several en route. We all longingly await news from you.

It brings us pleasure to note that, although your work has been undertaken with a huge expenditure of energy, it is connected to a

gradual but measurable degree of progress. We wish you the best of continuing good luck.

For Gretl's parents Max and Resl, it would be the greatest stroke of good fortune if they could already be with you. They have a nice apartment in the neighbourhood now, and we will be able to visit back and forth more often. They live simply, they are not suffering from any lack, and they go for walks, visit relatives, or go to church (sic). You must not worry on their account. If only you could be successful in prevailing on the authorities to finally ensure their departure!

Martha and Emil are waiting impatiently for the chance to leave. They are wavering between Palestine and the USA. They've been registered to leave since 1938. If their affidavit were to arrive in time, then they might soon get their visa. Maybe Hertha or Trude in N.Y. could do something for them. Ilse is learning English. Dorly is a bright and a good child, and she is growing rapidly.

Josef Waldstein is living in Budweis with his dear wife Fanny. They are happy to have news periodically from their dear ones. You need not have the least bit of anxiety on their account either, even if they don't write. They think of their children regularly, and wish each of them every success.

Arnold along with his wife are busy with their professions and report everything to you from time to time. Our son Otto is matriculating this year. We are not racking our brains about his future nor about that of our daughter Mancie who is sewing dresses and mastering languages.

We are happy about the reports concerning your child; is she Americanized now? You are wished lots of continuing successes and greeted by

Your

Emil's typed and unsigned letters are so formal in tone that somehow, they seem more factual to me than some of the other letters.

I am especially interested in Emil's comments about Martha and Emil Fränkel for whom the sands of time are running out. Emil and Martha must leave Prague, yet there is not a single country prepared to admit them. They cannot stay, but there is nowhere to go.

Was there not one person in the entire United States of America willing to sponsor this capable, hard-working man and his little family? Aside from the mysterious "Bella," did neither my father nor Hertha have any contacts? Even if Hertha's first line of responsibility was her own mother and sister, did no one have "a friend of a friend" who might have helped?

ONLY A FEW DAYS LATER, a letter written by Arnold reveals that Vera's work is indeed ending. Strangely, Arnold does not even mention the urgency of the Fränkels' situation.

May 1, 1940

My Dear Ones,

After an unusually long time, a letter of yours has arrived again. You can imagine the joy released by your words of February 8 that arrived here last week. We are often with you in our thoughts, picturing your life and your doings. We are absolutely delighted at the progress you are making, and are happy knowing that you can peacefully pursue your work. I am convinced that, slowly but surely, you will reach a reasonable level of prosperity.

About our fate, please continue not to worry. Like every human fate, it rests in God's hands. So far, we have done well in every respect, and we hope that this will be equally true in the future. We are not suffering from any particular need. We earn a reasonable amount, and so far, there has been no problem getting food. One change that does await us is that in the summer, Vera will resume private life. To compensate for the resulting drop in income, we plan to rent out the second room, let the maid go, and dissolve the household. Every morning, Vera will go to her mother's to help

with the cooking, and we will eat lunch there. Besides, my salary has risen so dramatically lately (almost 3000 Kronen) that we will manage, barring the unforeseen. Generally, we are hopeful, so please don't worry about us.

I greet and kiss each one of you from my heart. Your Arnold

Days later, Emil Fränkel sends a typed letter addressed primarily to Hertha. He is losing hope. They must leave Prague, but they have nowhere to go.

Arnold and Vera have stepped forward. They will relinquish my father's affidavit in order to save the Fränkels. How or why this affidavit was originally issued to my father is a puzzle. To my knowledge, he had no friends or relatives in the U.S. except Hertha. Given that we were already in Canada, given that Emil Fränkel was my father's closest friend, and given that initially, Arnold showed little interest in emigrating, I have no idea why the "Bella affidavit" was not immediately transferred to the Fränkels. Instead, the affidavit expired, and Emil must beg Hertha to ask Bella to issue a new one.

May 7, 1940

Regarding your inquiries about us, dear Hertha, we were very sad. Since we were registered on April 6, 1938, and the local weekly paper stated that those who had been registered by the above date are now being summoned for the purpose of emigrating, we are prompted to ask you again for the affidavit.

Because of your last communication, dear Hertha, I went to the American Consulate to get information. To our utter amazement, they told us that our waiting time on the Polish quota has been exceeded and that we can be allowed to leave immediately if we are in possession of an affidavit. Now, dear Hertha, you can well imagine my situation, to see the goal so near and not to possess the fervently longed for affidavit.

On the very same evening, I spoke to Arnold who immediately pronounced himself ready to give us his affidavit. Now it's in your hands to help us, and we beg you, from the bottom of our hearts, to

come immediately to an understanding with Bella. The affidavit that was issued to Edi in 1938 has now expired. Bella would have to issue a whole new affidavit for us and we give you our dates as follows:

Emil, born February 6, 1894 in Lemberg, resident of Linz on the Danube.

Martha /Waldstein/, born September 26, 1908 in Strobnitz, resident of Linz on the Danube.

Ilse, born January 23, 1931 in Linz on the Danube, resident of Linz on the Danube.

Dorothea, born July 10, 1938 in Linz on the Danube, resident of Linz on the Danube.

Dear Hertha, since you have had the experience of filling out affidavits for your mother and your sister, please help Bella so that no unnecessary delays will occur. Especially these days, the slightest obstacle could cause months of delay.

Please reassure Bella that, as much as it is in our power, we will not become a burden on her, and we will always be grateful to her for her kindness.

Since we know from what you wrote that Bella always goes on her summer holidays very early, please don't be angry with us, dear Hertha, if we remind you once again of the urgency of this situation. Besides, no matter how fast we do the documentation, things still take a long time.

Should you be successful in this good and noble deed, be assured that you will have our undying gratitude. May God reward you upon the head of your dear child!

Perhaps it would be possible for you to convey the contents of this letter to Edi. This time, we finally hope for the best. Many sincere thanks in advance.

Yours
Emil

Re-reading this letter, I was enraged by the unknown Bella who contemplated the luxury of an extended summer vacation. How could she have ignored the desperation of Emil's words? Until the fall of 1941, Germany's policy was one of extrusion, and any Jew could leave if he had a place to go. It was mainly because the rest of the world would not take them in that relatively few Jews got out.⁸

Even though he had no answers and no power to change Canadian policy, I wonder if Emil's words left my father feeling that he had not done enough? Given the reality of a Canadian Immigration Act that "ranked would-be settlers by their racial characteristics, that distinguished Jews from non-Jews of the same citizenship, and that pre-dated Hitler's Nuremberg laws by more than ten years,"⁹ is there anything my father could have done?

At the end of Emil's impassioned letter to Hertha, Martha adds only a few lines. She makes no pretence at lighthearted news.

Well dear Hertha, the great undertaking will have to be accomplished after all. Although we would like to have sheltered you from it, the hard "we must" and the saying "only to the valiant belongs the world" is now our password.

