

The Letters Stop

ARNOLD DOES NOT WRITE AGAIN until July 21, 1940. Surprisingly, he mentions neither the Fränkels' situation nor the affidavit. Instead, he maintains a studied calm that masks the upheavals that are transforming life in Prague. Street names are being changed to honour German heroes. Vera's medical practice has come to an enforced end. They will soon be moving out of their apartment. Arnold does not dwell upon these changes. Instead, he draws attention to the progress that we have made, and to the stability of the family. His letter reminds me again that the letters travelled from person to person on both sides of the Atlantic.

My dear ones,

Great joy reigns in the family whenever your written lines reach us, and every letter wanders from hand to hand. Then we all give thanks to God who has guided your fate along such peaceful paths. We rejoice at every little step forward that you are able to record.

Our joy was especially great when we gathered from your letter of June 28, dear Hertha, that our brother Otto is also in good

health and doing well. If we aren't as diligent about writing as you might perhaps wish, please don't take it amiss. Circumstances do not always make it possible to write. Nonetheless, our thoughts are constantly with you, and we follow every phase of your existence, from your work to your home life, which we can easily picture thanks to your descriptions.

In contrast to all the progress that you have to report, I can say only that as far as we are concerned, things are unchanged or almost unchanged. The old circle of family and relatives is still the same. At Else's, who somehow has a special knack for making guests feel welcome and where the uncommonly sweet little Dorly becomes the centre of attraction, we all get together, often by chance.

Mama is also there. She is living with Else and will stay for quite a while. She has a mild weakness of the heart, so we would rather have her in the care and control of family. Dear Vera will be closing her practice in a few days. We will keep our apartment for another three months and then we will probably move to a smaller one in the same house. Our street, by the way, is now called Schwerinova (Schwerinstrasse).

And now, one little favour that I ask of you, dear Edi. Please add a few lines in your own hand to Gretl's letters, and address these specifically to our parents who derive pleasure from every word. Now, be well, my dear ones, and may God be with you!

Your Arnold.

I marvel at how smoothly Arnold has slipped in the new development that would give my father cause for concern: his mother's health. Clearly, Arnold is trying to be truthful while avoiding unnecessary upset. Still, the suggestion that my father not leave letter writing in the hands of my mother is a sharp reminder of how carefully the family reads each letter, searching, as do I, for those small but revealing differences that characterize each individual.

ON AUGUST 25, WHEN HE writes again, Arnold no longer minimizes the seriousness of Fanny's condition. While he tries to put a positive spin on events, even going so far as to pretend that Vera has stopped practicing medicine in order to learn to cook and clean the house, his humour is transparent.

My dear ones,

Our thoughts are often with you, much more often than it is possible for us to write. This time, dear Edi, it is the occasion of your birthday that gives rise in even stronger measure to our best wishes for your well-being.

Everything here is more or less okay. It is only the health of dear Mama that unfortunately leaves a bit to be desired. She has a weakness of the heart and has lost a lot of weight. Else and Martha and Vera are caring for her as best they can, and a competent heart specialist is treating her, so that we hope, now that she is feeling better, she will soon recover.

Vera is now running the household alone, which is greatly to her credit under the existing circumstances. Above all, she wants to get some practice in the domestic arts. So far, my stomach pronounces it good.

I have lots of work in the factory, especially since the old boss died and his son took over the firm. The number of orders has doubled. I have not yet taken my holidays this year because of the continuing bad weather. However, we usually go for nice bike rides on Sunday, often 70-80 km.

Now my dear ones, be well, write soon and more often than we do. Hugs and kisses to every one of you from your Arnold.

On September 26, Arnold and Vera write again. Their letter provides me with a date that I quickly entered into my book of birthdays. Martha, the youngest of my father's siblings was born on September 26, the same day as her mother Fanny's birthday.

For 34 years, there would have been great rejoicing as the family celebrated the joint event. This year, Arnold makes no mention of even a simple family dinner. The omission startles me.

My dear ones,

Today, on Mama and Martha's birthday, our thoughts are especially intensively with you in the distance. We received your last letter and read it with pleasure. God grant that you continue to prosper, that your labour bear fruit, and that contentment be granted to you.

About the state of Mama's health, I can report joyful progress. A great improvement has taken place. She is already spending several hours a day out of bed, although she is, of course, still very weak and thin. She has gained some weight, and she is able to walk about in the room. Naturally, she is still under doctor's care and gets injections and medication, though not as frequently. The symptoms of heart trouble only occur now and then. Dear Vera takes care of her as much as ever and Else does her best to brighten her spirits. So we hope that dear Mama will soon be in full possession of her strength, and I think we need no longer be so concerned.

About us, I can report that, considering the circumstances, we are doing well, especially given that we are fairly modest people. You need not worry about us in this regard.

Dear Vera is bravely running the household, even though it is often beyond her capacity. She is often held up elsewhere. In a few weeks, the Fränkels will move in with us. We have reserved the two rooms upstairs that are not being used at the moment. Papa will move in with Else and the Fränkels will then use his furniture.

I continue to work hard in the factory, and although we have orders and enough raw materials, there have been some administrative changes. As a result, we must count on my leaving the firm in the next few weeks. Well, no panic, somehow we'll manage.

*As I kiss you and embrace you from the heart, I remain your old
Arnold*

As I analyse Arnold's letter, I note that although Fanny may be on the mend, all else in Arnold's world is crumbling. Despite the fact that his skills as an engineer are in demand, his work life is ending. Ever conscious of the all-seeing censors, Arnold attempts to make his dismissal seem plausible. However, the "administrative changes" at the factory that will terminate Arnold's employment can only be a metaphor for the Nazi takeover and for the new laws that exclude Jews from the world of gainful employment.

The fact that Vera is "bravely" running the household appears to be a veiled reference to the long line-ups for Jews in Prague who were allowed to shop only between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. They were also denied ration cards for a range of goods, including vegetables, fruits (fresh, dried, or canned), sugar, nuts, cheese, fish, poultry, and more.¹⁰ Plans for the Fränkels to move in with Arnold and Vera, and for my grandfather to move in with Elsa are evidence that Jews are being compelled to live in ever more cramped quarters.

ARNOLD'S NEXT LETTER dated October 26, 1940, mentions the word "war" for the first and only time. It is a very strange letter in which the truth is veiled. Arnold chooses his words so carefully that he does not even use his brother Otto's name. Instead, Arnold refers to "Ingwa," as if this were a woman's name. I know that Ingwa is an abbreviation of Ingenieur Waldstein, and that Ingwa is the name Otto used as his knitwear label. Arnold uses a similar code for others. He refers to an uncle whose improbable Hungarian name "Fekete" I have never heard. This "uncle" has received news that two women for whom Arnold uses only first names are with Otto in an unspecified safe place.

Arnold reports, "*Mama can almost be called well again.*" Sobering news, however, is the fact that the Fränkels will be moving out of the home they have been sharing with the Urbachs, yet they will not be allowed to move in with Arnold and Vera. Clearly, as the Nazis tightened every loophole, the decision of where to live is no longer a matter of personal choice.

My dear ones,

As always, we were delighted with your lines, and these are now making the rounds of the whole family both in the original and in a copy.

From Ingwa too we had the first news in a long time. Together with Dita and Liselotte, she (sic) telegraphed Uncle Fekete that they are all doing well. From us too, I can report that we are all doing relatively well. Above all, we are pleased to be in good health, and of course, that is what matters most. Dear Mama is now also sufficiently restored that one could almost call her well. She now spends most of her time out of bed, has a good appetite and is gaining a bit in weight and strength.

Meanwhile Papa is living alone in Budweis, though he will probably move to the Urbachs' in the new year when the Fränkels will move away from there. Because they are not allowed to move in with us, they will have to try to find a furnished place somewhere. Dorly is very cute now. She is starting to talk, chattering equally well in German and Czech.

In the factory, circumstances have improved to the extent that I'm staying for now, presumably to the end of the year. Vera bravely runs the household but at noon, we go to a lunch table because she is short of time. We eat very well there, and for a while, one forgets that there is war.

Now, my dear ones, accept all my best wishes for your further well-being and the assurance that our thoughts abide steadfastly with you.

I kiss and embrace you from the heart. Your Arnold.

My dear ones,

If I have been somewhat monosyllabic in my latest letters, my thoughts are nonetheless with you in all the old love and fondness. I am always so happy at the reports of your well-being and the successful progress of your work. I have moved into my new duty circle in quite good spirits, all the more so because my

*old duty circle still continues in part. Best regards and kisses.
Your Vera.*

LINE BY LINE, I HAVE PORED over this letter from Arnold and Vera, seeking to move beyond the words and to grasp all that they were trying to convey. I still have more questions than answers.

Only a month ago, the Fränkels had been planning to move in with Arnold and Vera. Why did they now have to look for a furnished place instead of using Papa's furniture? Why would they have been moving in the first place? Had the Nazis first turned the spotlight on the "less desirable" Eastern Jews, those from Poland, Russia, and Romania, and only later focussed attention on the more integrated Czech, German, and Austrian Jews?

Since first encountering Emil Fränkel's letters, I have done considerable research to learn more about this uncle by marriage. On impulse, I Googled his birthplace of Lemberg in Galicia, and found that Wikipedia lists Galicia as the largest province of Austria until 1918 and that its full official title was "Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria with the Duchies of Zator and Auschwitz." My body shuddered involuntarily as I saw the dreaded word *Auschwitz* that I only knew in its more sinister context.

Vera is still "bravely" running the house, but because she is short of time, they eat their noon meal at a *Mittagstisch*—*lunch table*.

I pictured the "lunch table" as a soup kitchen, the next step down for Jews who have been denied access to shops and food supplies. My research confirms that these soup kitchens set up by Jewish welfare agencies distributed not only meals but also clothing, coal, potatoes, medicine, and whatever they could to the growing number of destitute Jews.

I forced my thoughts back to Arnold's letter. "*We eat very well there,*" he says, "*and for a while, one forgets that there is war.*" It is the first and only direct mention of the war in any of the letters.

For me, whenever I immerse myself in books or distractions to hide from the daily headlines, I think of the Jews of Europe who had nowhere to hide. How was it possible, even momentarily, to forget the war? For Arnold, the fact that he was still working must have provided consolation and hope.

It also leads me to believe that his factory produced goods essential to the German war effort.

Arnold's closing words draw my attention: "*Now, my dear ones, accept the assurance... that our thoughts abide steadfastly with you.*" Increasingly, his language has a biblical ring, as if each letter to us might be his last.

Vera's greetings tell me that she too feared that the exchange of letters might end. She hints that she is still seeing some of her old circle of patients. I assume that these would all have been Jews. Aryans would not have dared to continue to visit a Jewish doctor, no matter how attached they had become to her in earlier years. Examples abound in the literature of Aryans dragged through the streets in disgrace for having patronized a Jewish place of business.

Still, I had trouble picturing the scenario. Too much coming and going in a private residence would have alerted the neighbours. Did Vera only do house calls at this time? Sometimes, this must have been in violation of the strict curfews. Did she dare to carry a bag containing supplies? How would she have obtained even the most basic of medications after they closed down her practice? Did people only call if they thought the illness was life threatening?

THE NEXT LETTER IS AN undated one from my Grandfather Josef. He says very little beyond expressing his love and his nostalgia for carefree days when he played with me.

*My dear Edi, dear Gretl, and my dearest Helly-child,
After a long silence, I want to send you a few lines again. I am in good health and doing well and your letters are always a joyful day for me. Dear Edi, we thank the dear Lord that you are doing so well. I think of you every day. Everyone asks about you and sends regards.*

How are you, dear Gretl, and our cute Helly? Where are the days when we played together in the park? Remember, Helly, you

and Opi? I have a single wish left, to play one more time with Helly. May the dear Lord grant our wishes.

Dear Mama and the sisters probably are writing everything to you and keeping you up to date, so I close my letter today and hug and kiss you all in spirit. Stay well and write soon again.

Your faithful Papa

Attached to my grandfather's handwritten words is a typed and factual letter that is unmistakably from Emil Urbach. What puzzles me is that Emil, who has never signed his letters and whose typing has always been accurate, appears to be giving a false name.

We really liked the little picture of you and we look forward to the next ones. We read your reports with great pleasure. All our friends and relatives are doing well, thank God, and send you best regards. We hope that in the coming year that you will have a really good harvest as the crowning point of all your hard work.

To you, dear Gretl, we wish all the best for your coming birthday in January. May you remain in good health, and above all, may you experience great joy from Helly.

Dear Mama is feeling better, thank God. She is darning socks these days, and thinking of you a lot. She always wishes that she could help you in your work. Our Otto is tutoring children in a large town nearby. He is doing well and likes it there. Our Mancie is learning to become a seamstress. She leaves the house very early and gets home returns very late. Nevertheless, she feels lucky.

Anny's humorous way of writing always makes us smile. With best regards to every one of you, we remain the family who loves you

Auerbach

Following closely upon the typed words are a few lines in Martha's handwriting.

Perhaps you will still get some results. What a joy that would be for us all! Again, dear sister-in-law, all the best. We greet and kiss you all. Your Martha and Emil.

THE NEXT LETTER IS FROM my grandparents Fanny and Josef. Several things in the letter puzzle me. Why has my grandfather signed it as “Josef” rather than his usual “Papa”? Why didn’t he move in with the Urbachs as projected in Arnold’s letter of September 26? Most of all, if my grandparents are now living with Arnold and Vera, then what has happened to the Fränkels? Where and how are they living?

I was very pleased to receive your letter and the little photo. You all look great. As to my health, I feel stronger already. My heart suffered from weakness. We live at Arnold’s where we use Vera’s old waiting room. Because I cook separately for us, I am busy every morning. I spend the afternoons darning stockings for the Urbachs because dear Elsa is busy enough as it is. Thank goodness we are all well and busy. Dorly is a delightful child and Ilserl is a good student. Emil works at the office.

My thoughts have been with you constantly, and all the cousins send their regards. I often spend time with the in-laws and we go for walks together. Resl is much recovered.

Now, my dear ones, accept from all of us our best regards and kisses. Please write again soon. We very much look forward to your letters.

Your faithful mother Fanny.

P.S. I beg you to pardon my bad handwriting. That’s what remains from the weakness.

And from me too, sincerest regards and kisses. Write to us again soon. Your Josef

ONCE A MONTH, DEPENDABLY, Arnold sends a letter. On November 28, 1940, he writes that despite Germany's need for technicians and engineers, his work at the factory has been terminated. He refers to his "old evil" and to his "defect," words that are clearly euphemisms for being a Jew.

My dear ones,

Today your September letter arrived, so of course, there was great joy here. I'm sure you have some idea of what your letters mean for us at this time, especially when they bring us good news of your well-being and also calm us about Otto's welfare. I thank every one of you for your best regards and at the same time, I beg you to continue to write to us at least once a month.

Here, everyone is in good health, and except for professional changes, everything is as it was. Dear Mama has now almost totally recovered. She is out of bed all day, is gaining weight, and is feeling generally stronger, so that one can virtually consider her healthy. The doctor, who really performed a miracle on her—he himself never doubted her recovery, but we all did and she herself had deep-seated fears—just comes once in a while now, leaving routine caretaking to Vera.

As indicated earlier, for me there has been a major professional change. Recently, because of my old evil, I couldn't manage the difficult demands of my job and had to leave the company.

Fortunately, I immediately found work again. I'm not working in my old capacity but rather as controller in a small metal manufacturing company in Smichov. The pay is modest but otherwise it's quite nice and I am totally satisfied. I do have to get up at 5:30 because it's the early shift. For lunch, there is just a cold snack, but it means that I'm home after 3 o'clock, in time for afternoon tea, which has not been the case for me in years.

Vera goes to a lunch table and brings my lunch home, which we then share for supper.

You see how well I hit it by choosing a technical profession—technicians are in great demand these days and are also well paid.

If I didn't have this defect, I could easily earn 5-6000 Kronen and even more in Germany.

Now I want to close for today and I send to each of you my sincerest regards and kisses. I am always with you in my thoughts, and I remain

Your Old Arnold

Again and again, I pore over Arnold's words. His Jewish birth means that the job he had hoped to keep till the end of the year has been terminated. Still, his expertise as a metals engineer in wartime means that he is snapped up by another firm that is clearly working around the clock. Although it is painfully evident that he had no choice, Arnold minimizes the deprivations involved in his new position.

Meanwhile, Vera has given up all pretense of wanting to be a homemaker. She no longer hides behind a curtain of sociability as she draws to the lunch table. She brings home Arnold's lunch and they share it for their evening meal.

IN DECEMBER 1940, Fanny has recovered sufficiently to write a few lines to wish my mother well on her birthday, January 5. Fanny's few words are but the prelude to another desperate plea from my father's sister Martha. In her dreams Martha is talking to my father, longing for the day when fate will bring them together again:

My dear ones,

We were very pleased with your little picture. Dear sister-in-law, you look fabulous and your sweet little child is precious. Today I dreamt of you, my darling little brother, and in my dream, I told you all kinds of things. We'd have so many true tales to tell one another... if only we could!

Little Helly-child is probably your best source of distraction with all the work you have. Dear sister-in-law, your sister Anny is

really a brilliant businesswoman; we admire her cleverness. Best and sincerest regards to her and to her husband from us all.

Ilserl is a big girl now. She has to study privately because there are no schools for our kind of people. She is being very reasonable about it.

Maybe fate will want us to see one another again after all. Please, dear little brother, contact Bella directly. If she has already filled out the form, then she could really do the good deed.

THERE ARE NO MORE LETTERS until March 10, 1941. Like the other wartime letters, this one has handwritten numbers at the top. The mark of the censor. The letter is from Arnold who says very little this time. Still, I sense his loneliness for family.

My dear ones,

Lately there was an occasion for great joy as your letter of January 10 arrived. In the meantime, a letter from Otto has also arrived, so that we again feel reassured for a while. We live through your reports and in our imagination, we see every single one of you at work, including sweet little Helly who is watching whatever is happening.

In the meantime, little Dorly has gotten as big as Helly was when you left us. She is exceptionally dear and bright and babbles in both languages. Thank God, I can report that we are well, and that we have survived this whole time better than you probably imagine. I perform my work diligently and Vera is working hard too.

I send you our best wishes for your well-being, and remain with the sincerest of hugs and kisses, Your Arnold

Abruptly, the wartime letters end. “Wait!” I call out. “Do not disappear! It is only March. Pearl Harbour will not happen until December 1941. Why have you stopped writing? Where are you? What is happening?”

