

“Dear Mutti...”

Last Letters Between a Mother and Her Children Donated to the Yad Vashem Archives

Lital Beer

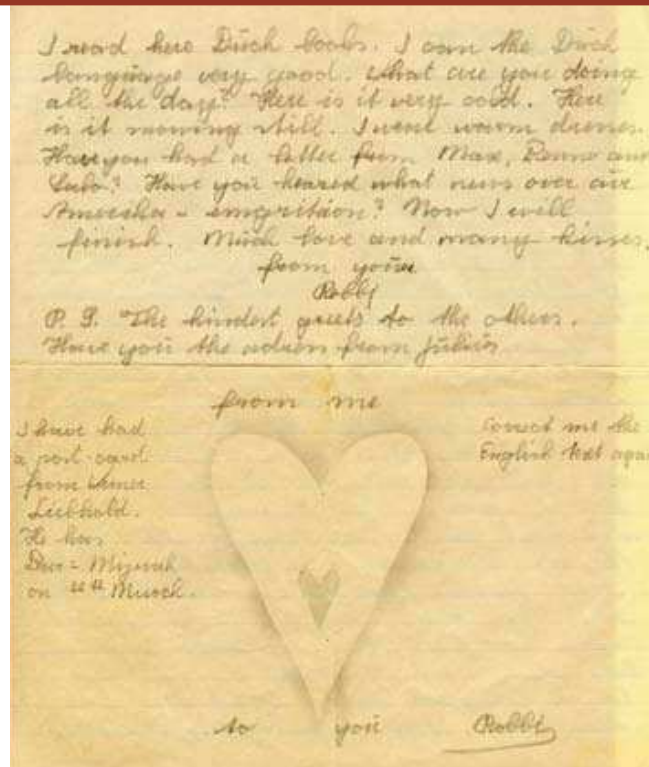
■ Before the Second World War, the Weil family lived in Manheim, Germany. The father, Eugene, was taken to the Dachau concentration camp the day after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, in November 1938, where he died after six weeks. Immediately following their weeklong period of mourning, their children – Marianne (Nanna), 16 and Robert (Robbi), 11 – were sent by *Kindertransport* to Holland. Selma also managed to leave Germany, ending up in the UK.

While the children were in Holland, shunted from one institution to another, they made sure to maintain contact with their mother. The letters they wrote describe the ongoing events, along with their troubles and hopes, and repeatedly express their desire for all three to receive immigration papers to the US where they could all be together once again.

The letters vividly reflect the personalities of the two children. After Robbi, a gentle, considerate boy, comes down with diphtheria, he is concerned that he is still carrying the disease: “Dear Mother, Happy birthday! I wish you all the best and that in the future you will not be beset by so many worries [...] We’re all hoping that by your next birthday I’ll be ‘negative [disease-free].’ That would certainly be the best birthday present you could hope for.” (6 February 1940)

Robbi’s illness meant isolation from other healthy children. Over and over he describes doctors’ visits, his quarantine, and the various treatments he undergoes. Despite the fact that his sister, grandmother and uncles are in Holland, essentially he struggles alone to regain his health.

Marianne seems like a lively young woman, with an appetite for life and a well-developed sense of humor. When telling her mother of the hepatitis she has contracted, she adds: “When the yellow reached its peak (I felt like a butterfly or a canary) I started to get better.” (24 April 1940). In a letter a month earlier, she describes with great zest the spring cleaning that took place at the institution: “... And so the great battle begins. The enemy is the dirt, already advanced to the most secret, hard-to-reach corners. We crawl after it on all fours, and are able to catch it... by 3.30 pm we are done, the dining room is sparkling and we are pitch



■ Letter from Robbi Weil to his mother Selma, 20 February 1940. Robbi wrote in English in preparation for emigration to the US. He was murdered at Sobibor.

black. The ‘sister’ in charge inspects our work, though she needs four or five pairs of spectacles to find anything!” (17 March 1940)

At first, Marianne and Robbi include a few sentences in English at the end of every letter. They ask Selma to help them improve by correcting them, thus preparing for the reunification that will surely take place in the US. The English seems to be part of the children’s effort to maintain their mother’s status as a figure of authority. It is also an expression of the optimism they feel in the early stages of their life in Holland. However, as time passes, the sentences in English cease, and the subject of emigration is dropped. In most of the letters, the children and their Aunt Rosel focus on descriptions of the daily struggle to survive, and the attempt to maintain contact with other family members. Their concern for relatives and friends grows ever more frantic.

The last correspondence between Selma and her relatives in Holland are telegrams sent

through the Red Cross, in which Rosel Elk reports on the children’s condition to her sister. Some of these telegrams reach Selma after Marianne has died in Auschwitz. In the final one Rosel writes, “Robert is learning how to print and writes beautiful cards.” Shortly after writing this message, Robbi and the other relatives are murdered in Sobibor.

Selma, who lost her husband and children, her mother, sister and two of her brothers in the Holocaust, emigrated to Israel in 1949, living at first in her brother’s home. Her niece, Hannah Meyuhas (née Elk), recalls her aunt crying a lot. Hannah received Marianne and Robbi’s letters, and translated them with the help of a family friend. A year ago, a Dutch researcher, Miriam Mijatovich-Keesing,

made contact with Hannah and Oded Meyuhas, and with her assistance they were able to piece together a clearer picture of the children’s lives in Holland until their tragic deaths.

Hannah and Oded Meyuhas recently donated the completed research, as well as the letters, photographs and translations to the Yad Vashem Archives. “I had a desperate need to know these children,” said Oded. “I wanted to commemorate them, to give their names a human form, with all their wishes, talents and aspirations. I feel I have performed a *mitzvah*; anyone with the will and ability must do the same, so that the victims’ stories will never be forgotten.”

Members of staff at the Yad Vashem Archives seek any kind of document, photograph or original Holocaust-related artifact, so that these objects – and the stories behind them – are preserved for generations to come. Please contact the Registrar, tel: +972-2-6443702/3.

The author is Head of the Outreach Section in the Archives Division.