The Katz Family’s Escape: Leaving Vienna after the Anschluss

by

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The story of the Katz family is not unique among stories of Austrian Jewish families in the 1930s and 1940s. Like thousands of other families, they vigorously pursued every avenue to escape violent anti-Semitism before and during the beginning of the Holocaust. What is unique about the Katz family is that its extraordinary correspondence over a three year period has survived—over nine hundred pages of letters. These letters provide scholars with an intense look at one family and its desperate attempts to flee Hitler’s Germany. In the letters we see the daily lives and struggles of four individuals: Grete Katz; her adult children, Lena Isaacson and Philip Katz; and her son-in-law, Rudolf Isaacson. These letters tell three immigration stories. They convey a range of emotion from joy to heartbreak and provide the gritty details of how lives were reshaped in a changing world. The family members were always anxious to hear from each other, since silence raised so many unanswerable questions. Grete Katz wrote to her children in March 1940, “I have not gotten news from you [for 10 weeks], and I am quite desperate. I hope from one day to the next that I will finally get mail…. I am fine, but only wish to be together with you and have a home with my children. I already have a nice traveling valise, even bigger than the one Lena had…. I am curious when it will be my turn.” These types of letters were fairly typical of Grete’s correspondence. In this piece, I will briefly be sharing with you the story of the Katz family, but I also want to examine some of the challenges of doing research in a large letter collection. Collections of this type convey considerable information to researchers:
from family dynamics to political changes, from efforts to emigrate to the struggles of resettling, from changes in daily life to changes in worldview.

Philip Katz was the first in his family to flee Vienna. This letter collection does not provide us with the specifics, but when the correspondence began in November 1938, Philip was already in Paris, and he did not intend to remain there permanently. While the letter collection provides plenty of information about the immigration plans of Grete and Lena, it only provides the basic contours of Philip’s plans and later journey. In late May 1938, Philip had filled out the immigration questionnaire with the Jewish community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde or IKG) in Vienna. Therein he stated that his preferences for immigration were to the United States or Australia, and that the family preferred that he and his sister emigrate first and that their parents could follow later, once he and Lena were established. On November 8, the letters reveal that Philip was pursuing a Bolivian visa, but it is never mentioned again. By January 1939, it appeared that he would ultimately like to go to Britain and remain there until he could proceed to the United States or Australia. Philip’s sister, Lena, began her immigration journey to Canada in February 1939. Lena desperately wanted to take Philip, but the “fixer” who was arranging her entry into Canada would not allow her to wait for him and delay her own departure. By mid-February it appeared that the prospects for Philip’s immigration to Australia had fallen through. In the March correspondence, it seems that Philip had also applied for immigration to Montevideo, Uruguay. By October, Philip had made it to the United States, stopping first in New York, and then proceeding on to Greenwood, South Carolina. Philip’s journey is difficult to trace, in part because the collection contains only letters to Philip from his mother and sister, not letters from Philip. Nevertheless, from the evidence available we can see that Philip’s immigration story is not atypical. Of his immediate family members, Philip left first, which
would have fit the norms given his age and gender. He pursued a host of immigration options, exploring immigration possibilities on four different continents. Philip’s story is the story of many young, German-speaking Jewish men seeking to escape.

The story of Philip’s sister, Lena, is equally typical. After Philip’s departure, Lena remained in Vienna, during which time her father passed away. She pursued immigration and cared for her mother. After her father’s death, Lena initially hesitated to leave her mother. In November 1938, she pleaded with Philip to write to her before he made an immigration decision; she did not want the entire family to be strewn about the world. By December, Lena planned to go to South America, but later wrote that she would prefer Australia. At the end of December, she had obtained visas for Costa Rica, but was still pursuing visas for Canada as well. In January 1939, while still attesting that Costa Rica was the ultimate “goal,” Lena wrote to Philip that she and Rudolf would attempt to disembark in Vancouver. In February 1939 she married Rudolf Isaacson, and ten days thereafter the two of them departed for Canada. Lena’s immigration to Canada is a bit veiled in the correspondence. Canada’s immigration during this period was quite restrictive and it is unclear whether she and Rudolf ultimately entered legally. By working through a “fixer,” a friend of Rudolf’s, they hoped to have someone loan them the landing fee—20,000 Canadian dollars—and provide a guarantor. It is clear from the correspondence that they were uncertain that this would work, but they were willing to take the risk. The day before their departure, they received a telegram from their “fixer” telling them not to proceed. Lena and Rudolf disregarded the advice, and they eventually made it to Vancouver. In April, they wrote to Philip expressing unending gratitude for all that their “fixer” had done to facilitate their trip and arrival. Grete wrote to Philip explaining the contents of a telegram she had received from Lena, which indicated that someone had provided the substantial
landing fee necessary for the Isaacsons to enter Canada and a guarantor had vouched for them. Lena’s immigration story, like Philip’s, is typical. Like Philip, she was willing to search the world for refuge and pursue multiple options, including illegal entry. She was willing to take substantial risks—such as going to Canada after being told not to and without a visa or any guarantee that she could enter. In her estimation, what did she have to lose? Her decision illustrates how desperate the situation in Vienna must have been if she determined that proceeding after having been told not to was worth taking the risk. Lena’s story is also a gendered story: Lena initially was unwilling to leave her mother. Additionally, she made all of the preparations for emigration (legal and logistical preparations, in addition to practical preparations), which was also typical of women during this period. As a family’s young men were often the first to escape, the young women who remained behind were often pulled in a variety of directions by competing concerns influenced most often by family and safety. For many young women, like Lena, this was the beginning of a change in family dynamics and potential role reversals.

Grete’s immigration story shares many similarities to those of her children, but is also distinctly different, because she never made the emigration journey. Grete’s husband passed away in October 1938 after suffering a stroke. No immigration plans were made prior to his death, although that is somewhat surprising given that his death was described as sudden and other family members had begun making emigration preparations as early as May 1938. Thus, in November 1938 Grete began to make plans for immigration. Her daughter assisted her with the process, registering her as a “cook” for immigration to Australia, where she could seek employment as a domestic worker. Grete also filed her visa application at the American consulate general. While Grete must have been making some of her own plans, it appears from
the letters that initially Lena, and later Philip, were the most proactive in seeking immigration for their mother, even after they left Austria. The children planned that Grete would join one of them once they were settled.

Grete had the possibility to go to England in March 1939, but she hesitated to do so alone. She wrote to Philip, “There is no point in my going alone to England. I better wait for something definite. Although I would very much like a change of climate. But I must be patient. If you had been in London, I would have gone.” Later that month, she wrote again, “People say I should not have missed such a chance such as London. But I didn’t want to go alone to a strange country especially since I don’t know the language.” It is quite clear that Grete could not fathom being in an unknown country by herself. Given that immigration is especially hard and has different implications for older adults, such as learning a new language and culture, forgoing a pension, and leaving a community, her age of 57 has to be regarded as a factor in her decision-making process. What is especially sad is that from her letters, it was quite clear that all Grete wanted was to be reunited with her children. Had she realized that this was her single opportunity for reunification, her decision in all likelihood would have been different.

By late 1939, Grete understood more clearly that she needed to leave, even if she had to make the journey by herself. She wrote to Philip, “My staying here is limited, and I ask you to do everything possible to get me an affidavit as soon as possible.” In January 1940, Philip’s employer, Mr. Rosenberg, provided Grete with the much-needed affidavit of support. By February 1941, it appears that emigration might have soon been a reality. Grete decided to proceed to Shanghai, a potential transit country, where she could await her American visa. Shanghai was one of the few possibilities still available. Not long after having made that
decision, Grete was informed that she needed to book a ticket to the United States. This request would have been made only shortly before an American visa would be issued, because the ticket would only be valid for a limited amount of time.29 In April, Grete received her departure date—January 1942—from the shipping company.30 Grete eventually managed to have it rescheduled to September 1941 by booking through a different company. Unfortunately Grete could not have known that after the American consulate general closed in July 1941, it would be much more difficult for her to receive her visa.

After the closing of the consulate general in Vienna, an inquiry was made regarding Grete’s case with the Department of State. In response, the Department of State said that Grete’s case could not be acted upon as long as she was still residing in Greater Germany. She would have to proceed to a country that had an American consulate.31 In December 1941, the Isaacsons prepaid for a Cuban visa, which they hoped would serve as a transit country for Grete. Three weeks later they received a refund on that deposit, per their request.32 It is unclear what transpired in those three weeks to change the situation. Despite the heroic efforts made by her family, Grete was never able to emigrate from Vienna. She was deported to Minsk on 2 May 1942.33

Grete’s story, unfortunately, is also typical. In many instances, families would split apart, sending their younger members abroad to settle, and assuming that the older parents could follow later. Such a plan assumes that policy will remain static, and yet neither American immigration policy nor German policy regarding the Jews was unchanging. Rather, each became more and more complex as time progressed. As a result, many of the parents who were left behind never had the opportunity to follow. Additionally, Grete’s story illustrates the shift that transpired in familial roles. Her children took on the primary role, increasingly worrying about the future and
making more and more decisions. It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly this took place, but at its earliest, it was probably at the time of the *Anschluss* (March 1938), when the Katz family’s lives were thrown into upheaval with Austria’s annexation to Germany. At its latest point, it was probably at Lena’s father’s death in October 1938. In the story of the Katz family, as seen through this letter collection, Lena has largely fulfilled the dominant role, primarily because her brother and fiancé were absent, and her mother was unable to do so. As Grete begins to navigate the emigration process, readers increasingly see Lena adopting the “adult” or “parental” role that traditionally would have been held by Grete.34

As a reader, I continue to be disturbed by the tone of one specific letter from Lena to Grete. It is pleading, reasoning, chiding, and berating all in one. In June 1941, Lena wrote to her mother:

I infer from your last letter that you are afraid. I do not know why. Eighty year old people travel alone to the United States. It comes from the small European circumstances: here [in the United States] a trip of five to six hours is nothing, whereas I remember when we were going to Ischl [in the Salzkammergut region of Austria] you preferred to be at the train station at least three hours prior to the departure of the train. The whole thing is now far more complicated than if you had received the [American] visa in Vienna. We have the intention of bringing you to us, and you also want to come, so put your nervousness aside. You can speak with each consul just as you would speak to any other person; no one will bite you. While I hope that in the mean time you have undertaken something, I want to again write down everything exactly for you. In the contemporary times one must use five senses and one’s elbows, and again, don’t have any fear, but consider everything exactly and objectively. We can only do so much for you. We cannot do everything; you also have to help.35

To be sure, a different reader might infer a different tone.36 But since I have examined the entire collection, I feel that the tone I have read is accurate. The tone in this one letter is stronger and more urgent than any of the others. Lena must be desperate, and the tone indicates that she is clearly trying to motivate her mother. Here, Lena also demonstrates how completely she has
taken over the role of adult protector. In the strongest possible terms, she implores her mother to actively engage in the process and not give up.

This letter collection is unique in many ways, but chiefly because it contains several sides of the correspondence, enabling researchers to glean a more complete story. The letters are essentially a family dialogue, providing an intimate microcosm of what was happening to so many Jewish families in Greater Germany. The immigration stories are certainly most prominent here, but especially in Grete’s letters, readers also learn how Jews in Vienna responded to changing conditions. Grete accepted renters, which was probably both a financial necessity for her, but also a result of the extreme Aryanization in the wake of the annexation of Austria to Germany. When Jews had their property confiscated by the Nazi regime, they would have sought a new and temporary residence while awaiting their immigration prospects. Grete was savvy to augment the income from her pension by renting her extra space. She described selling personal effects from her house in preparation for her departure, and she alluded to the fact that this was common. In addition, Grete discussed the classes she was taking, both English language courses and courses to make the leather flowers she hoped to sell. These classes were offered by the IKG, and participation in them was quite common for those who were awaiting visas or immigration possibilities. Tragically, Grete also briefly mentioned the first deportations to Poland, although it remains unclear if she was fully cognizant of what was transpiring.

From Philip and Lena we learn about efforts to maintain or establish normalcy in their new locations. And Grete worried about this too. Philip swam competitively, clearly a hobby he brought from Vienna. Lena discussed establishing her new business, knitting wares, in Canada. Grete worried about the day to day practicalities—who was darning Philip’s socks?
This was a question she posed more than once. Grete wanted nothing more than to join her children, and it is for that reason that I believe she would have gone to London without them if she had known it was her only chance of escape. The example I shared at the beginning of the paper was typical of most of Grete’s letters, essentially inquiring when she could come, thanking her children for their hard work toward her immigration, and expressing both her love for them and her loneliness. In her children’s absence, the letters were Grete’s only connection to them. It is clear that as more and more of her friends emigrated from Vienna, she was desperately awaiting letters from her children. Grete coped with the challenges; she was not deterred by the English lessons. In a moment of either self-realization or utter desperation, she articulated that she knew no one would understand her with her accent, but she remained determined to learn the language—a language she would never use on a daily basis. The determination and commitment to immigration was further illustrated in that Lena included English vocabulary words in one of her letters. In efforts toward normalcy or to occupy her time, Grete made a tablecloth with multicolored flowers for the kitchen in South Carolina. She worried about her children maintaining an Austrian culture in their new environments, especially in the form of food. Each year at their birthdays, she promised that next year, once she had arrived, she would make a Gugelhupf, an Austrian cake, for the celebration.

Yet, the letters are an incomplete dialogue. First, Philip’s letters to his mother and sister are absent. Second, it is clear that some letters never made it to their destination. Third, it is clear in many regards that there are omissions, probably to avoid the redactions of the censors. For instance, Lena wrote Philip a lengthy letter from the Panama Canal which she never could have sent from Vienna. In it she described in detail what took place to them and their friends during Kristallnacht, and Rudolf’s initial incarceration in Vienna and later deportation to
Dachau. Rudolf’s absence had certainly been alluded to in other letters, but this letter provides the contextualization and much of the previously missing information. Lena implored Philip to burn the letter after reading it, in order to protect their family still living in Greater Germany.

Fourth, as readers of these letters, we are entering into a family dialogue with incomplete information. We do not know the friends who are referred to and we certainly do not know the family dynamic. How did Lena, Philip, Rudolf, and Grete get along under normal circumstances when they were not trying to flee their homeland? We simply do not know.

This collection differs from another traditional Holocaust source, oral history. In contrast to oral histories, letter collections provide a different and more immediate perspective. Letter collections are documents from the moment, whereas many oral histories are done years after the fact. Additionally, letter collections are meant to convey information, perhaps private or at least personal information, to a few select individuals. An oral history is often conducted as a legacy piece—to tell one’s story—lest we forget. Letter collections are usually not written to be saved or shared, and as a result, provide a unique and different perspective than oral histories, as their objectives were different from the outset. A collection, such as this, with multiple lines of communication and hundreds of pages, is indeed exceptional. A letter collection of the size of this one is rich with detail and can be invaluable in historical research.

Rarely in a tragedy that affected millions of people across Europe and the world, do we, as scholars, have the ability to essentially witness a family dialogue, but this letter collection provides that opportunity. In this essay, I sought to describe some of the day-to-day challenges and struggles for this family, but also for so many other families like this one in Greater Germany. The story of the Katzes is one of perseverance: in the face of the Nazi regime, a changing society, and difficult relocations. It is both a tragedy and a triumph. It requires
scholars to ask tough questions, use the collection wisely, and explore what it means to examine in close detail the lives of a few in order to better understand the lives of the whole. This story is less about reams of statistics or the weighty enormity of sweeping issues. Instead, this story, drawn from the Katz letter collection, has given the horrible events of the Holocaust names and stories: Lena, Rudolf, Philip, and Grete. It has shown us three distinct emigration stories, with all of their anxieties, apprehensions, and uncertainties. It has illustrated changes in Vienna and new beginnings in North America. As a result, this letter collection has provided us with a complex and exceedingly personal story of a single ordinary family. In this instance, the story of the Holocaust and the efforts to flee Europe transcend numbers and abstractions to become personal and real. Moreover, it has given us insight into the shifts in gender and familial dynamics in addition to the details of the daily struggles, the successes, the failures, and the changes that took place for so many Austrian Jews who sought to escape.

1 This paper is the work of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the United States government, the U.S. Department of State, or the Office of the Historian. Thanks to the participants of the “Exploring the Micro History of the Holocaust” conference, hosted by École normale supérieure, December 2012 for their comments on a shorter version of this essay. Additional thanks to both Josh Botts and Aaron W. Marrs who provided helpful feedback and comments on earlier drafts.

2 Lena Katz Isaacson is the pseudonym given to the individual who donated the collection. Per her request, all the members of the family have been given pseudonyms. Lena Isaacson Papers, AR 7173 (hereafter AR7173), Leo Baeck Institute, New York, New York (hereafter LBI). The collection has been digitized and is located at this address: http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=482035 (accessed 17 September 2012). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

3 Grete Katz to her children, 31 March 1940, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

4 Philip Katz, Grete's son, registered himself, his sister, and his parents with the IKG in May 1938. Philip Katz's Emigration Questionnaire, #21747a, Reel 993, RG-17.017M, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC (hereafter USHMM).

5 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 8 November 1938, Folder 3, AR 7173, LBI. It is unclear from the language used whether Philip simply applied, or had already received a visa, but it is best to assume that Lena is referring to his application here.

6 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 1 February 1939, Folder 3, AR 7173, LBI.

7 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 30 March 1939, Folder 1, AR 7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

8 Grete Katz to Lena and Rudolf Isaacson, 27 October 1939, Folder 1, AR 7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.
12 It is clear from the correspondence that Philip wrote to his mother. Perhaps he did not make carbon copies of his letters before sending them off. It is clear that his mother’s letters were often addressed to both him and his sister and must have been passed from one to the other once the letters made it to North America. It is fair to assume that since two lines of the correspondence were maintained, that had a third line been available, it too would have been retained.


14 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 27 December 1938, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

15 It is unclear at this point which route they were taking, although this seems to imply that they would taken an eastern route and have gone through Siberia and then proceeded down the western coast of North America. However, the Isaacsons ultimately went through the Panama Canal, which causes readers to ask how you can have a “goal” of Costa Rica and disembark in Vancouver, unless Costa Rica would have been a landing stop on the return route.

16 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 7 January 1939, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

17 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 11 March 1939, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

18 Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 15 April 1939, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

19 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 11 April 1939, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

20 Maurer, 357-358.


22 Lena Isaacson to Herr Neuron, 11 November 1938, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

23 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 3 March [1939], Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

24 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 16 March 1939, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

25 While many of these changes are the same for all émigrés, the ability for someone to adjust and the implications of the adjustment are different for individuals as they age. See Melissa Jane Taylor, “Family Matters: The Emigration of Elderly Jews from Vienna to the United States, 1938-1941,” Journal of Social History 45:1 (Fall 2011): 238–260.

26 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 30 October 1939, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

27 An affidavit of support was needed for an American visa application if an émigré could not provide substantial enough sums to be deemed self-sufficient. The likely to become a public charge clause (LPC clause) of the Immigration Act of 1924 was often used by restrictionist American officials to deny immigration visas. An affidavit of support assured the government that the émigré would not become a public charge. However, the strength of the affidavit had to be determined by the American consular official. Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 15 January 1940, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

28 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 15 February 1941, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

29 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 24 February 1941, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

30 Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 20 April 1941, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

31 Department of State to Hatton Summers, 17 July 1941; and Department of State to Hatton Summers, 7 October 1941, both in Folder 4, AR7173, LBI.

32 Refugee and Immigration Division of Agudath Israel Youth Council, Brooklyn, to Rudolf Isaacson, 1 December 1941; and Refugee and Immigration Division of Agudath Israel Youth Council, Brooklyn, to Rudolf Isaacson, 22 December 1941, both in Folder 4, AR7173, LBI.

33 National Refugee Service to Lena Isaacson, 31 July 1946, Folder 4, AR7173, LBI.

Lena Isaacson to Grete Katz, 13 June 1941, Folder 2, AR7173, LBI. By this time Lena and Rudolf have settled in New York City.


Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 18 January [1939]; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 28 January 1939; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 18 February 1939; all in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. These are not the only mentions of sub-renters, but just a few of the first. Information on the sub-renters is interspersed throughout 1939 and 1940. Translated by Kurt Heinrich. See Martin Dean, Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84-131.

Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 24 February 1939; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 10 March [1939]; both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to Lena Isaacson, 27 October 1939, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich. For more on the Jewish expulsions from Vienna, see Florian Fruend and Hans Safrian, Expulsion and Extermination: The Fate of the Austrian Jews, 1938-1945 (Vienna: Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, 1997), 13. While Grete may very well have known what “going to Poland” meant, she certainly would not have elaborated on it in a letter for fear of censorship, at the very least. It is quite clear from the letter that she does not want to go to Poland.

Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 16 March 1939; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 18 June 1939; both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 27 April 1939; Grete Katz to her children, 6 July 1939; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 12 July 1939; all in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 4 April 1939; Grete Katz to her children 22 July 1940; both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 5 April 1940; Grete Katz to her children, 12 April 1940; both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Lena Isaacson to Grete Katz, 18 March [1940?], Folder 2, AR7173, LBI.

Grete Katz to her children, 23 April 1940, Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to her children, 5 April 1941; Grete Katz to Philip Katz, 20 April 1941; both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Grete Katz to her children, 31 March 1940 and 28 January 1941, both in Folder 1, AR7173, LBI. Translated by Kurt Heinrich.

Lena Isaacson to Philip Katz, 11 March 1939, Folder 3, AR7173, LBI.

Oral histories, here, refers specifically to those of Holocaust survivors and refugees. David Boder’s 1946 oral histories of Holocaust survivors are clearly the exception. Given that oral histories of Holocaust survivors or refugees became most prevalent decades after the events (primarily beginning in the 1980s and 1990s and continuing to today), the role of memory becomes increasingly important. Naturally, memory is less of a factor in letter collections addressing contemporary events.
Short bio. of the author

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