

My Dear Good Rosi: Letters from Nazi-Occupied Holland, 1940–1943

Book Review by Beth Galletto

My Dear Good Rosi: Letters from Nazi-Occupied Holland, 1940–1943 by Judy Vasos. Oakland, California: Pen Stroke Press, 2018. 321 pages. Paperback, ISBN-10 0999742523, ISBN-13 978-0999742525, \$16.95; Kindle, ASIN B07KJRHH9G, \$6.99.

Like Watching a Train Wreck in Slow Motion

Judy Vasos' book *My Dear Good Rosi* consists almost entirely of translations of more than 200 letters Judy's mother-in-law, Rosi Baczewski, received from her parents, Hugo and Clemy Mossbacher, while they tried desperately to assemble the exit papers that would allow them to immigrate to the United States. It's not an easy read because we know how the story ends—information of which they were mercifully ignorant.

The letters begin in September 1935. Rosi had been able to travel to England, but her parents were still in Nuremberg, Germany, where the family had lived for generations. They inquire about friends and relatives and discuss their daily lives. The letters might even seem boring if we did not have inside information about their situation. It's not a spoiler to say that, after living in ever-worsening conditions in Germany and Holland, Hugo and Clemy were murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. This fact is mentioned in the first paragraph of the book's introduction.

The letters are mostly addressed to "My dear good Rosi." Some letters, addressed to "My dear ones", are written to other members of the family and then sent to Rosi. Family trees at the beginning of the book, as well as sometimes voluminous footnotes, explain how all the family members are connected. As unrelated readers we may not care specifically who they are, but we do form a clear impression that Hugo and Clemy were important parts of a large, close family.

Hugo and Clemy are seen through the letters as down-to-earth, good people who are dealing as well as they can with the difficult situation in which they find themselves. They rarely complain or express their frustration. Whether this is because they want to be as optimistic as possible, or because their letters have to pass before the censors before being sent out, we don't know. It is perhaps their very ordinariness that makes the letters so poignant to read now.

After Kristallnacht in November 1938, Hugo was imprisoned for several months in Dachau, but he was released

on condition that he leave Germany. Several months later Hugo and Clemy fled to (then neutral) Holland. They had painstakingly applied for and assembled all their necessary exit documents and were booked on a ship to leave for America on 12 May 1940. Then the Nazis marched into Holland on 10 May, deepening their peril and forcing them to start all over again.

As the years went by, the letters took longer and longer to be delivered, and they diminished in number. Rosi, who was able to immigrate to America in 1940, received only four letters in 1942. In January 1943 Hugo and Clemy were sent to Westerbork transit camp and in February they were deported to Auschwitz, where they were gassed.

The book's introduction, written by Jacob Boas, Ph.D., a historian, writer, and translator—and a Holocaust survivor who was born in a concentration camp—contains a chilling quote from U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long from 26 June 1940: "We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative advices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."

Among the book's supplemental materials and footnotes is a list of the four documents required to leave Germany and the nine documents (many with several subparts, some in multiple copies and/or notarized) required to enter the United States at the time. As readers we can't help comparing the Mossbachers' situation with today's world, in which so many desperate refugees are trying to reach asylum in the United States and Europe.

Rosi Baczewski kept the letters without speaking about them until late in her life, when she began to show them to her son Tony Baczewski and his wife, Judy. Rosi was happy when they expressed a desire to publish them. She died in 2009 at the age of 88.

