

On 1 September 1939 Emilie Braach from Frankfurt writes to her émigré daughter in Britain, describing how everyday life is changing with the start of war¹

Letter from Emilie Braach,² Frankfurt am Main, to her daughter Bergit³ in Britain, dated 1 January 1939

My dear Bergit,

Today I want to begin a series of letters, though I have no idea when, if ever, you will read them.⁴ I can only hope that one day they reach you, so that you hear about the events, both big and small, that move us, that on the one hand concern and worry us, and on the other hand make us happy in small ways. Today, however, it seems like a miracle or, rather, a dream that only the evening before last Imme⁵ and I were sitting together playing music. And it is no less unbelievable that only yesterday we were sitting comfortably on Mother and Father's⁶ veranda enjoying the cool evening air.

Today? The war has started. There is a blackout in Frankfurt and all the towns and villages in the country. I'm sitting in the dining room, which I've fitted out with all the most necessary precautions, and have resolved to have a faultlessly blacked-out room ready by Sunday, in which there is a shimmer of light *more* than half a metre in diameter. Today I'm satisfied with that. What wouldn't one be satisfied with today? I've even reconciled myself to my cup of reheated tea, after heavily depleting my coffee quota due to all the anxiety of late. However, I also have to be careful with the tea ration of 20 grams a month.⁷ But that's all trivial compared to world affairs and the bloodshed. And anyway, I'm lucky this evening because I can sit at home. I almost had 'air-raid duty' already at our shop on Kaiserstraße today. How that's supposed to work is still unclear to me. Four people are supposed to keep watch all night every night. Well, we will see what chores

1 ISG Frankfurt, S1/379, Nr. 1. Published in Emilie Braach, *Wenn meine Briefe Dich erreichen könnten: Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1939–1945*, ed. Bergit Forchhammer (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987), pp. 15–17. This document has been translated from German.

2 Emilie (Mile) Braach, née Hirschfeld (1898–1998), author; wrote for various magazines from 1927; banned from publishing in 1935 because she was classified as a so-called *Mischung* of the first degree; branch manager at the Kalasiris corset shop, 1935–1945; co-owner and manager of a leather wholesaler's, 1946–1988; gave talks in schools and elsewhere about her experiences under National Socialism; awarded the Federal Cross of Merit (*Bundesverdienstkreuz*) in 1990 and the Johanna-Kirchner Medal in 1994.

3 Bergit Forchhammer, née Braach (1921–2011), teacher and journalist; emigrated to Britain, 1939; returned to Germany with the US Civil Censorship Division in 1945, and was in American employment until 1948; teacher in Denmark, 1961–1967; lived in the US until 1969, and in Tanzania, 1969–1974; subsequently worked as a teacher at the Danish International School in Copenhagen and as a correspondent.

4 See Doc. 1, fn. 6.

5 Imogen (Imme) Werkhäuser (1926–1981) was the daughter of Emilie Braach's sister Erna Werkhäuser, née Hirschfeld (1902–1995).

6 Otto Hirschfeld (1866–1952), leather goods manufacturer, and Marianne Hirschfeld, née Köntzner (1872–1952), were evicted from their apartment in Sept. 1941 and subsequently moved in with their daughter Emilie Braach. Otto Hirschfeld was registered at her address without the affix 'Israel' to his name, which was compulsory for Jews. Following his summons by the Gestapo in March 1945, Emilie Braach found a hiding place for her parents with an acquaintance in Bad Homburg; she also went into hiding until the liberation.

7 Rationing on staple foods was imposed on 27 August 1939: *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1939, I, pp. 1498–1505.

await. Above all, I'm curious to see how the mostly very young and inexperienced girls master their task, and if they are able to do watch duty at all. I myself am such a night owl that I won't feel it that much. Last night I was up listening to the radio until three o'clock and was still up very punctually this morning, in order to see as caretaker that everything was shipshape. But now I absolutely must get myself relieved of this function. After all, I'm not here in the daytime. And if I do ever visit Erna⁸ or Mother and Father in the evening, I'll sleep there, because a completely blacked-out city has something really spooky about it. Particularly now, with such a storm raging outside that the paper I've put up as an imperfect blackout on the windows is almost coming away.

At work there's constantly something to do. All the questions about [ration] coupons have been especially stressful. Hopefully that's now over, because I heard earlier that bras and corsets are now freely available again. [Other] underwear, on the other hand, can only be obtained in exchange for coupons. And then there are all the questions and above all the gossip. Everyone has their own opinion, everyone knows something different, has heard something or other, clings, or rather clung, to another hope. Now there's no longer even the smallest of branches to cling to. You've no idea how many people lately I've had to console, how many people try on their new corset in tears. As you know, I'm quite unsympathetic in such situations. If you really are that upset and tearful, then the last thing on your mind is shopping and the like. That's how I'd feel at least, and in the last few days it certainly wouldn't have occurred to me to buy a hat or pair of gloves. With or without coupons. I'm more impressed by people who try on corsets stark naked in peaked caps and knee-high boots. How we used to laugh. One day not long ago I had to listen to three stories about people dying! All in minute detail, with all the stages repeated. Not even the [deathbed] confessions were left out. I was completely exhausted. I'd almost rather have someone who spends three hours trying on corsets and then says it's a relief she doesn't have to buy one every day. –

Today the whole of Frankfurt was occupied with the blackout. Every other person was carrying a roll of black paper under their arm, and in the shops people were starting to queue up for it. I'd sent Anneliese⁹ shopping three days ago, hoping that the expense would turn out to be unnecessary. Anneliese is coming along well, by the way, and is a good companion and decent sort. In the last three weeks during Mrs M.'s absence she's developed very nicely in lots of ways and has come to be a real support. Let's hope she doesn't fall back into her old sloppiness. I've had to provisionally let our good housekeeper Mrs Jäger go, because I just can't predict how the business is going to develop.

Twenty past ten: I've just heard the news, although it wasn't very exhaustive. There will probably be bulletins later, like last night. The only interesting thing was the ban on listening to foreign radio stations.¹⁰ But that's no doubt the same in every country. By the way, I'm so tired that if I had to speak I'd only be able to babble. So tonight I definitely would've been no good for keeping watch, and I'm soon going to turn in for the night. I'll let Fuchschen and Klettchen¹¹ come too, as an exception. Last night they were allowed to as well. In tense and extraordinary times like these one can allow oneself such things.

8 Erna Werkhäuser.

9 Anneliese was an apprentice at the corset shop.

10 Regulation on Extraordinary Radio Measures, 1 Sept. 1939: *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1939, I, p. 1683.

11 Emilie Braach's two cats.