

In a poem dated 31 August 1939, Wilhelm Halberstam describes the life of Jewish refugees in the Netherlands¹

Handwritten poem sent by Wilhelm Halberstam,² Amsterdam, 14 Jan van Eijckstraat, to his daughter Käthe Hepner,³ 13 054 Casilla, Santiago, Chile, dated 31 August 1939

In Amsterdam, the Netherlands, its south part most of all,⁴
 You find our folk in massive bands, their means be great or small!
 You often see a cheerful face, but mostly they're fartsoret,⁵
 For Holland's not a pleasant place for migrants opting for it.
 For many, it is much too near penates⁶ from old times.
 Quite soon the Nazis may be here, along with all their crimes.
 So Rosenbaum, the fat man, mopes to Silberstein,⁷ the old:
 'Nehmones⁸ on us, I've no hopes our safety here will hold.
 To England I would go, if I'd a permit⁹ to get in;
 An old umbrella by my side for Mr Chamberlain.'¹⁰
 'I'm New York bound,' boasts Mr Cohn. 'I've got an affidavit¹¹
 supplied by my friend's brother's son, the Tarnopoler Levit.'
 'For me, those just aren't far enough. Chile's my destination.'
 The blond named Kornfeld says this stuff, with real exhilaration.
 'You're all still here, how's that make sense?' asks Itzigsohn the wise.
 'If I possessed such documents, I'd say my prompt goodbyes.'
 'Why, Itzigsohn, you chochem,¹² you,' replies come ringing back.
 'We would have long ago shot through; a visa's what we lack.'

1 The original is privately owned. Published in Irmlud Wojak and Lore Hepner (eds.), *'Geliebte Kinder ...' Briefe aus dem Amsterdamer Exil in die Neue Welt 1939–1943* (Essen: Klartext, 1995), pp. 84–85. This document has been translated from German.

2 Wilhelm Max Halberstam (1866–1943), retailer; in 1939 emigrated with his wife from Berlin to Amsterdam, and from there made unsuccessful attempts to emigrate to Chile and join his daughter; deported in June 1943 to Westerbork, where he died of heart failure. The Yiddish expressions and names in the poem reveal his eastern European origins.

3 Käthe Hepner, née Halberstam (1898–1982), chemical lab technician; worked at the Mampe distillery in Leipzig from 1920; married Heinrich Hepner in 1921; emigrated, with various stopovers, to Chile in 1939.

4 A great many German-Jewish émigrés lived in the southern part of Amsterdam, in a neighbourhood that was newly constructed from 1920.

5 Yiddish form of the Hebrew word *tzarot*: 'woe, cares, trouble'.

6 Roman household gods (official term 'Di Penates').

7 The names mentioned were thought to be typical for German or East European Jews.

8 Yiddish, misspelling of *nehomes*, plural of *nehomeh* (Hebrew: *nehamah*): 'consolation'.

9 Entry permit.

10 Arthur Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940), politician; prime minister of Britain, 1937–1940; nicknamed 'umbrella man' because he often carried an umbrella in public and was invariably depicted with it in cartoons.

11 Correctly: affidavit.

12 Yiddish form of the Hebrew word *hacham*: 'genius, very clever person, scholar', here 'smart aleck'.

'You have no visa? Such cruel fate! You're nebich¹³ Jews – it's clear!
You won't get that from any state. Nu! Be content right here!'
'For ages now that's what we've done; what does the future hide?
With eytses,¹⁴ dearest Itzigsohn, we're plentifully supplied.'

¹³ From Yiddish: term expressing pity, 'you poor things'.

¹⁴ Yiddish form of the Hebrew word *etsot* (singular *etsah*): 'advice'.