

In Memory of Rose Feitelson /Rose Feitelson - Hannah Arendt, Two Letters

Rose Feitelson died on March 1, 2001, at the age of 86, at her home in New York City. Born and raised in New York with a younger brother, she was the daughter of a Jewish family of Russian descent. After a college education (M.A.), she worked at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and at the American Jewish Committee. A friend to Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, whom she met during World War II, she became particularly known as one of Arendt's "Englishers" – "our closest friend" who "arranges my English". Rose – or "Röschen," as in the Arendt-Blücher correspondence – belonged *ganz zur Familie*, "totally" to the family (Arendt to Kurt Blumenfeld, cf. below).

Arendt and Feitelson saw each other frequently in New York, professionally and socially, and they travelled together. In 1951, Hannah acknowledged Rose's help publicly in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "My greatest thanks are due to Rose Feitelson who has been of invaluable assistance to me in editing the manuscript." And in 1965, in a letter of recommendation, she wrote about her friend: "I have known Miss Feitelson for over twenty years; for more than fifteen years, she edited and sometimes re-wrote my books and articles, and I have always valued highly her intelligence, her great sensitivity for language and style, her ability to grasp and assimilate all kinds of information and knowledge." A copy of this letter is preserved in the Hannah Arendt Collection at the Library of Congress, where it is filed among the letters exchanged between the two friends. Rose Feitelson's vivid spirit, her sharp and witty mind speak from her letters. Unfortunately, hardly any correspondence from Arendt's hand is preserved, but after Feitelson's death, one letter surfaced. It was written on April 29, 1957, when Hannah was in New York and Rose in Israel. This letter was given to the Oldenburg Hannah Arendt-Zentrum and the *Hannah-Arendt.net* editors by Lotte Köhler, who found it among Feitelson's papers after her death. We publish it to remember Rose Feitelson and her friendship with Hannah Arendt, together with Feitelson's letter of April 20, 1957, which preceded it.

In the spring of 1957, Rose Feitelson travelled to Israel as an American delegate of the International Council of Jewish Women to attend a Congress of this organization in Jerusalem. We know about this from the correspondence between Hannah Arendt and her long-term friend Kurt Blumenfeld. Arendt had announced Feitelson's coming in her letter of December 12, 1956: "*Rose ist eigentlich unsere engste Freundin hier; sie bringt mir seit 10 Jahren mein Englisch in Ordnung und gehört ganz zur Familie.*" (Cf. Hannah Arendt and Kurt Blumenfeld, "*... in keinem Besitz verwurzelt*": *Die Korrespondenz*, ed. by Ingeborg Nordmann and Iris Pilling [Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995], pp. 169, 173f.) Rose stayed in Jerusalem for several weeks. On April 20, 1957, she wrote a long letter to Hannah, reporting on her experiences. Apparently, this letter was mailed together with a manuscript which she had edited for Arendt, who at the time was preparing her Walgreen Lectures for publication under the title *The Human Condition*.

In *The Human Condition* (first published in 1958), Hannah Arendt wrote in her acknowledgments: “Rose Feitelson, who has helped me ever since I began to publish in this country, was again of great assistance in the preparation of manuscript and index. If I had to be grateful for what she has done over a period of twelve years, I would be altogether helpless.” Rose, on her part, preferred to remain in the background and not talk or write publicly about her relationship with Arendt and Blücher. But from her correspondence with Hannah, e.g., the letter printed below, it is clear that she enjoyed working for her friend.

Some information on the persons mentioned in the letters may be helpful.

"Kurt" or "Kurtchen" is Kurt Blumenfeld, **"Jenny"** his wife, who was responsible for organizing the Jerusalem conference. **"Lilli"** is Lilli Mendelsohn, who worked with the Jewish Agency in London; she died in 1950.

"Sebba" is an "old friend" from Königsberg. He studied law and fleeing the Nazis, emigrated to Haifa where he set up a business (information from Käthe Fürst, who could not remember his full name).

"Mary" is Mary McCarthy. **Roger Straus, Jr.** founded the New York publishing house Farrar, Straus, later Farrar Straus Giroux. **"Philip"** is Philip Rahv, co-editor, with William Phillips, of *Partisan Review*. **"Nathalie"**, née Swan, a Vassar classmate of Mary McCarthy, was then married to Philip Rahv. **"Dwight"** is Dwight Macdonald, political writer, and at the time, like McCarthy, Arendt, Rahv, and **Diana Trilling**, he was well-known as a New York “public intellectual.” They all were so-called “Partisans,” i.e., members of a group gathered around the journal *Partisan Review* (cf. David Laskin, *Partisans: Marriage, Politics, and Betrayal Among the New York Intellectuals* [New York, etc.: Simon & Schuster, 2000]).

The letters are published here unedited, but concerning some proper names, spelling errors were corrected.

Ursula Ludz

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Rose Feitelson to Hannah Arendt

April 20, 1957

Dear Hannah --

With the help of God, which in this country means an out of the ordinary efficiency of the mail services, it is now before May 1st, as I promised. I said the other day that this paper is a glory, but it will bear repeating.

A month in Israel, spent, I confess, working on the same kind of garbage as I do in New York, has served only to confirm what I thought before: a state made up only of Jews is the closest thing to my conception of hell that could have been created on earth. Imagine, nearly two million *Rechthaber*! Even those who criticize are that way. And it has been my misfortune to need the office facilities and help of some of the worst, Foreign Office personnel, etc., people in whose big-shot company I wouldn't be seen dead in New York.

Kurt was a blessing. What a wonder he must have been. Now, of course, he's declining fast and, I'm afraid, growing a little resentful, although heaven knows he has cause. Jenny, whom, as you predicted, I don't like, was nevertheless almost too kind to me. She included me in the family Seder in Haifa and saw to it that I have a good time between periods of slavery. But she's "getting even" with Kurt, playing the more important one while he withers, and never failing to point out the difference. She made it almost impossible for me to see him alone, but we managed sometimes nevertheless. Kurtchen fell in love with me, poor thing, trying to do it in the style of thirty years ago, which must have been not bad. He told me the whole story of his meeting with Lilli, how she fell in love with him at once, how when he asked her whom she loved she answered "*Sie*." The next day he arrived here at Ascher's, early in the morning, and repeated the question to me. Evidently "*keinen*" was not the right answer. Well, the details of this story will wait for home. I still don't know whether to laugh or cry.

For the first few weeks, the country was on an austerity basis, which meant really that one was always cold. The idea of having our Convention meetings at the University was sheer insanity, because in order to get to the Sessions we had to trek knee-deep in mud twice a day. And the expenses were fierce. At the slightest complaint, Jenny used to tell me that the Wizo [Women's International Zionist Organisation] spent £ 20,000 for their conference. There is no such thing here as a promise -- I waited two weeks longer than agreed for the tape-recorded protocol from which to write the minutes, for example. When I tell you that compared with the people one must work with here, Mrs. Willen is an angel of rectitude, you will get the idea. It takes four days for a message to get to Tel Aviv if you send it by mail; if you place a call to someone in a hotel in Haifa, for example, you get the hotel soon enough, relatively, but then the switchboard operator forgets about you for the next half hour and the only way to reach your party is to hang up and place the call all over again; and so on ad infinitum. The real danger for me here is that I shall become a 150% American.

The most startling thing now is the francophilia. The French Ambassador has become the most important man in the country. One day during the conference, when we were discussing the fact that we have no affiliate in France (the chief reason is that the Zionist groups won't allow it) one important Israeli woman, the Deputy Speaker of the Knesseth, said this was a piece of gross neglect on the part of the American officials since France is, after all, the most important country in the world today. I told her later that the only thing to do now was to convince the French of it, so she said I was a Sabra. However, in case you are worried, I have not been a bad girl and really shot my mouth off, not even when a high Foreign Office official tried to explain to me what public opinion in America was after the Sinai campaign and during the UN discussions (it seems that everyone in America "knew" that Israel policy was both noble, and word some of the more spiritual characters like to use, and brilliant – only Abba Eban [Israel's delegate to the UN and Ambassador in Washington] made mistakes), or when another sujet told me how courageous I and the other six women from the States had been to "defy" State Department regulations and come to Israel (I only answered that we came here legally, without comment on where I should go first if the law stood in my way).

By the way, some Americans did indeed come illegally, and the border officials here did not stamp their passports. When I arrived, I had to assure them that it was perfectly all right to stamp mine.

You have seen long since that none of my impressions is exactly clear right now, so this letter must be a bore. Just one thing: although it's true that the withdrawal was very unpopular, there is no itching at the moment to start again, as far as I can see, although practically everybody takes it for granted that it's only a matter of prudence and cleverness that prevents the Israeli army from moving into Trans-Jordan, which doesn't belong there anyway (an unnatural state, which of course Israel is not). The only question, when they do it, is whether they should take both sides of the Jordan. "We could be in Amman in 24 hours."

I think I shall leave Israel about May 1, depending on what kind of boat I can get, either to Piraeus or Istanbul. I have decided to do the rest of this trip by boat, for I am really sick and tired of plane travel and I'm really not in a terrible hurry.

I miss both you and Heinrich terribly, especially here. Being so busy is exciting, and it would be a bare-faced lie to say I am unhappy, but there are times when I would give anything to say what I please about whatever I please and to be with those about whom I never bother to make judgments. My attitude toward nearly everyone here I see is tinged, I confess, with more or less contempt, justly or not. Well, Europe is not far away now.

And one last word about the manuscript. In one or two places – I noted it in the margin – I may have made improper revisions because I was not sure what you meant. Otherwise, this section was thrilling to work on. Have you ever stopped to think how much I've learned from working on your stuff?

[handritten]

Love

Rose

Hannah Arendt to Rose Feitelson

April 29, 1957

Dearest Rose –

the ms. just arrived and I drop everything to write. Not out of *Ruehrung* that you did it despite everything, but because I miss you so much and because your letter reminded me how much I miss you. And then, before I got your letter, I was worried, somehow in the back of my mind all the time, because your mother had not telephoned and I did not want to call her. Telling myself that I should surely know if anything had not gone as it should. (By the way, I am *geruehrt*, all the same.) Your description of Israel – precisely; but I was glad to read it. When I was there, I was in a bad mood – Sebba (an old friend, age of Kurtchen) with Parkinson disease, my family, Kurtchen, whom I had seen before in the same dilapidated state you know, with Jenny, who certainly got more than even with him – briefly so many purely personal factors that I was afraid I was no longer able to judge objectively, but was spreading my unhappiness all over the damned country. I was never sure whether the country got on my nerves, or if I was nervous. – Kurt once was quite somebody and the story with Lilli gives you probably an inkling. Still – when she lay dying in London, he did not go. The usual pretexts – it would have been bad for her, he did not have money. True reason probably Jenny. But difficult to overlook all the same. He does not know it, but one of his oldest friends, Martin Rosenblueth, never forgave him. – As to his mistakes, he made only one that proved to be crucial: he left Germany in 1933, ran away – from Hitler and Lilli – because Jenny demanded it, had taken herself and the children to Israel and set up in state and luxury. That was scandalous. At the time, he knew it was the mistake of his life. Later he forgot.

Here – chiefly that you are not there, so nobody with whom I can for instance “discuss” lengthily and deliciously one of Mary’s more phantastic messes – a farewell party she had persuaded Roger Straus to give in his house for Rahv, with 65 people or so, each of them supposedly armed with a gift (not more than \$ 2.-, so that he would have walked away with the inventory of a 5 & 10 shop) and a verse, in evening dress to walk into the house on a gangplank (from Macy’s) – the perfect dream of a Riviera millionaire – with Russian Eastern delicacies (only to remember that Rahv was not only Russian but Jewish too, so that this part of refreshments might look antisemitic – New York’s version of the Jewish question). And then, how first Nathalie in one of her sober moments thought that this surely was impossible, and called Philip in the country, whereupon both got drunk (I suppose) and full of persecution complexes (Philip to Mary: “You and your lousy party” when they finally had to be consoled by me at our place) and Nathalie firmly convinced that Mary had done it out of spite or some secret devilry, how then – partly in consequence, partly upon reflection – Roger acquired a persecution complex (everybody will come and make fun of me in my own house, they will whisper in the corners and eat my food and drink my wine or rather Mary’s food, I suppose), but unfortunately at the moment when Rahv had gotten over his [this], so that when he proposed to cancel the party at the last moment, it was clear: “This will kill Philip.” But cancelled it was, we all

received telegrams, and Philip survived, but badly, and Mary, not for the life of her, could she understand what had been wrong – Hannah, you are in the camp of the enemy, when I told her that I had no intention to come –; all she wanted was to have for once a real nice party, not such a boring one ... And as for the gifts: but all real respectable middleclass people do it – I said, for brides, and Philip is not a bride. Nothing doing. Meanwhile, Diana Trilling is expecting already that Mary's next book will be called *The Party*.

Heinrich is in Bard. Gives a wonderful course, one of the best he ever gave at the New School. Let me know from Greece. I almost envy you ---

Love – Hannah [not signed]

[PS] See what you miss? I suppose the story of the death of Dwight's mother occurred when you were still here. Let me know how long you are staying in Greece. I am somewhat delayed with the last chapter, shall be in Chicago for two weeks in May, will probably be ready by the end of May. Where shall I send it?

Source and copyright note:

Feitelson's letter is filed with the Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, Box 8 Folder "Feitelson, Rose, 1957-1963, and undated"; Arendt's letter was given to the Hannah Arendt-Zentrum at the University of Oldenburg in 2001. Permission to print the letters in Hannah-Arendt.net by The Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust, New York (for Arendt's letter); by Lotte Köhler, New York (for Feitelson's letter).