

CELEBRATING OUR SILVER JUBILEE

Proms at St Jude's

Presents the World Première of

LETTERS FROM LONY



WEDNESDAY 28 JUNE 2017

RAISING FUNDS FOR TOYNBEE HALL AND NORTH LONDON HOSPICE

Letters from Lony



Lony and Ludwig Rabl



Lony with daughters, Ruth and baby Annemarie

Lony's Story

L^{eonie} (Lony) Fraenkel was born in Berlin in 1878. At the age of 26 she married Dr Ludwig Rabl from Karlsbad (now Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic) and they divided their time between the two cities. In 1906 their first daughter, Ruth, was born in Berlin; another daughter, Annemarie, was born in Karlsbad in 1908. Ludwig Rabl died in Berlin in 1925 and in 1933, Lony, still in Berlin, became manager of the Kaffee Trumpf; a year later, Annemarie married Hans Lobbenberg. By 1938 Lony had moved to Amsterdam where she set up the Café de Paris catering to the expatriate German-Jewish community. Annemarie and her husband Hans succeeded in leaving Germany, and settled in Edgware, North London.

On 1 September 1939 Hitler attacked Poland; Britain and France declared war on 3 September; Lony's grandson Peter Lobbenberg was born in Edgware on 12 September. The following day Lony wrote a postcard in halting English to her new grandson, baby Peter, 'Welcoming my sweet little boy'. A few months later, Dutch Nazi gangs patrolled the streets of Amsterdam; the Café de Paris was attacked and wrecked but Lony's letters remained silent about this act of violence. Nor did they mention the German invasion and occupation of France, Belgium and the Netherlands in May-June 1940.

In 1942 Lony was imprisoned at Westerbork transit camp near the German border, and there wrote her final known letters. On 25 February 1944 the Germans deported Lony from Westerbork to Theresienstadt Ghetto in occupied Czechoslovakia. As the German



Peter Lobbenberg as a baby and below, a letter from Lony



Reich crumbled under attack from east, west and the skies, on 12 October 1944 she was sent onward to Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in German-annexed Poland, and murdered on 14 October.

This is an all too familiar tragic story of the fate of the Jews of Europe under German occupation – a story that might never have been told had it not been for that ‘sweet little boy’, Peter, who grew up to graduate from Oxford, became a chartered accountant, a trustee of the PG Wodehouse Estate, a husband, father, grandfather and music lover.

Peter's Story

Speaking to *The Sunday Times* writer Sue Fox, Peter said, “I knew my grandmother was called Lony, but my mother never talked about her and obviously I never met her.

Knowing now what I have learned about the family, it must have been much too painful for my mother who, with my father, got on with their lives and built a very successful business.”

When the bombing started in London, Peter's parents relocated to Shrewsbury where they moved the family corset factory. Ladies, cast your minds back to *Silhouette* and the *Little X* classic girdle, which was designed by Peter's mother, and has featured in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Peter's father, Hans, died when Peter was fifteen. After his mother's death in 1971, Peter was sorting out the family home and opened a rather beautiful bureau, which now stands in the living room of the Lobbenberg home in Hampstead Garden Suburb.

“I was going through the desk when I came across a bundle of 22 old letters from Holland. I wasn't particularly interested in them, but I was fairly passionate about stamps so I decided to keep them.”

When Peter eventually got around to translating and reading the letters – only two of which were in English – he admits to not really taking them in. “My emotional connection came much later when I re-read them and realised Lony was literally pouring out her heart to me. She was also keeping in touch with the family, addressing them as ‘My dear ones.’” Peter wanted to find out more about Lony and what had happened to her. A Dutch website, *joodsmonument.nl*, proved crucial and three years ago via some press cuttings and Google, he contacted a man in Amsterdam who was an expert on the Beethovenstraat where Lony had her café at number 9b. “My wife and I went on a pilgrimage to the café, which is now a quite fashionable ladies wear shop.”

The Music

The subsequent transformation of the letters into music, *Letters from Lony* is, on one level, a memorial to Peter’s grandmother. It is also a poignant memorial to the many people who perished in the Holocaust. “There are so many stories like this. Mine is just one of them.”

The man responsible for composing the music for mezzo-soprano, string quartet and piano is celebrated composer and conductor Ronald Corp, who has been a friend of Peter’s for over thirty years. He is Musical Director of the Highgate Choral Society where Peter’s wife, Naomi, sings.

For Corp, one of the biggest challenges of the commission, which took him two years, was editing down the letters:

They needed to be conversational; I didn’t want it to sound like recitative, which would be boring. It had to have a melody – a melodic style which would bring Lony alive and make her accessible

to an audience. I also wanted a leitmotif and to break up the song cycle with orchestration and colour. That’s where the Chilingirian Quartet comes into it. They add so much more than just a piano accompanying a singer. For a long time I played the piano – very badly – to accompany the songs, whilst I was working. Having decided on the quartet, I had to find a way of writing music which wouldn’t drown out Lony’s voice. She was a strong, mature woman but one who I felt was best supported by strings.

Internationally renowned pianist, Andrew Brownell, accompanies the Chilingirian Quartet. Mezzo-soprano Sarah Pring, who is Lony’s voice, has been given a lullaby completely invented for her by Corp – both words and music.

“I was discussing the project with singer Ann Murray whilst I was composing. Ann suggested that it would be completely natural for Lony to sing a lullaby to her grandson. So that’s what I included in the second movement. It repeats again at the end. It’s been an enormous creative privilege to work with Peter on what I hope will move the audience and at the same time celebrate a life.”

As a long-time supporter and member of the Proms community, it was natural for Peter to bring *Letters from Lony* to Proms at St Jude’s. We are proud to include this moving new composition as part of our Silver Jubilee. We hope that through this special work we will help remind and educate our audience and future generations of the tragedy of refugees, missed relationships and families left behind or lost forever.

Amsterdam Under German Occupation, 1940-45

The German assault of 10 May 1940 crushed the neutral Netherlands and Belgium along with France. The *Luftwaffe* levelled the centre of Rotterdam, killing 800 civilians. The Dutch army duly capitulated on 15 May; Queen and government fled to London; bureaucracy and police remained in place. Adolf Hitler sent his SS Bodyguard Regiment and tanks from the 9th Panzer Division to parade across Amsterdam and strike awe into the population. He also sent a trusted Austrian Nazi, Arthur Seyss-Inquardt, to serve as viceroy: the Dutch were potential candidates for incorporation into the Greater German Reich. Another Austrian, Hanns Albin Rauter, took responsibility as Heinrich Himmler's chief of SS and Police in the Netherlands for controlling the population of 9 million, of which 800,000 – including roughly 80,000 Jews – lived in Amsterdam.

The people of Amsterdam reacted with relief to the apparent mildness of the occupation in its first months. But Seyss-Inquardt, knowing or sensing the Führer's wishes, swiftly imposed increasingly harsh measures upon the Jews who had fallen under German domination. The vital first step was their identification: whether Dutch or foreign citizens, 'full Jews' or of mixed ancestry. To that exacting task the Dutch interior ministry brought a technocratic fanaticism that inspired the keen admiration of its German masters. The bureaucrats had in previous years devised a universal population registry that sorted all Netherlands residents by categories that included religion. The quest for bureaucratic perfection soon linked that registry data to forgery-proof photo-ID cards and food-ration cards. All that remained was

to stamp the files and ID cards of those whose religion was listed as Judaism with a large 'J' – which the Dutch authorities did from June 1941 onward.

The occupation's turning point was by then long past. In February 1941 the thugs of the disreputable Dutch National Socialist movement had attacked Amsterdam's Jewish quarter. Rauter's police thereupon sealed the area off and deported almost 400 Amsterdam Jews to camps in Germany and eventual death. The population of Amsterdam and north Holland reacted with a spontaneous three-day general strike, the first in any country as yet occupied by the Reich. The German army in full combat gear restored 'order'.

In April-May 1942 the German authorities imposed upon Netherland's Jews the wearing of the yellow star, as decreed in the Reich in September 1941. And once the machinery of the Reich's programmed extermination of European Jewry was in place, deportations duly began in July 1942. The Dutch police played an indispensable role throughout 1942-43 in the mass round-ups and manhunts that doomed the Jews of Amsterdam. The Germans assembled most deportees at the Westerbork transit camp near the German border, where Leonie Fraenkel was first imprisoned. Then the Dutch and German railways forwarded them across Germany, usually to death by gassing at Auschwitz or Sobibór. The Netherlands – highly urbanised, open, and flat – offered few places to hide. It was the only country in occupied Western Europe in which Jews had a less than even chance of escaping death; and only one in four of Amsterdam's Jews survived.

*MacGregor Knox, Stevenson Professor of International History emeritus
The London School of Economics and Political Science*

Lony in Rehearsal



Libretto

Letters from Lony

By Ronald Corp

Based on the words of Lony Rabl-Fraenkel (1878-1944)

Sarah Pring *mezzo-soprano*

Chilingirian String Quartet:

Levon Chilingirian *violin*

Ronald Birks *violin*

Susie Mészáros *viola*

Stephen Orton *cello*

Andrew Brownell *piano*

Commissioned by Proms at St Jude's

Libretto

No. 1

13 September 1939 (written in halting English and addressed to 'Johnnie')

Welcome, my sweet little boy. I am anxious to see you as soon as possible, and I hope you are all right and your little mother is very happy with you. I think of you day and night and I am so happy to know you are here. How is father? And your great brother? I am sure they all are so fond of you, the same as I am! Now I have a wish, answer as soon as possible to your grandmother Lony.

No. 1a - Lullaby

Schlaf Kindlein, schlaf Kindlein, d'Äuglein mach zu,

Schlaf Kindlein süß Kindlein, geh nun zur Ruh.

Schlaf Kindlein, schlaf Kindlein, d'Äuglein mach zu,

Schlaf Kindlein süß Kindlein, schlaf Kindlein süß Kindlein, geh nun zur Ruh.

No. 2

28 September 1939

My beloved little boy, today I received your first sweet letter, when you were just a week old. I was so thrilled to get it, and will keep it safely, and when you can read you can have it back. How I'd love to see you, and take you on my arm and watch you feeding or sleeping, or being bathed. But who knows whether your first and maybe your second birthday will pass before we make personal acquaintance.

Now something else that will interest you quite terribly. We managed to let two rooms of the flat upstairs to a ping-pong club, and the three others we've nearly let. But now I have to buy provisions, because everything's more and more expensive and sometimes not to be had at all, like pineapples and peaches. You'll probably say that's not all that important, and in my view you'd be right, but customers all want that kind of stuff, even when it's wartime and they should all be glad to have anything at all.

Well now, Granny has to go to bed, and you too, although I could chat with you for hours, but it's midnight and high time.

No. 3

16 November 1939

My only beloved boy, you know, my little treasure, your mummy always used to write very interesting and nice letters, but never a one as charming as yours. Tomorrow you'll be 5 weeks old, your Mummy should enjoy each day with you, and not wish the time away. You'll grow up much quicker than she can imagine today. But when you grow up, then hopefully there'll be no war any more. And they'll just tell you about it, because boys like to hear that kind of thing, especially if they were never there.

I'm going back to the embassy, but I think there's no chance of my getting a visa. But I'll keep trying.



Lony in Amsterdam in the 1930s

No. 4

3 December 1939

If your Mummy can't write, at least you could. I get such pleasure out of your letters. I've got a sweet romper suit here for you and don't know how I can send it to you, because of customs and shipwreck and things like that. So for the time being I play with it. I do up the buttons and undo them again and have fun with it. Does Daddy know we're sitting on a powder keg here? But I behave as if there were nothing going on. Got a little dress made for myself, and am very pleased with it. If you see your parents give them my love.

No. 5

18 December 1939

My beloved boy, I thank you very much for your long and adorable letter, which I read over and over again morning and night. Of course it's a terrible shame that we can't get to know each other, you and I, and let's just hope that one day it will be possible.

Well, what do you think of the Graf Spee? I sat at the wireless till midnight and followed every phrase. Do you understand why they sank that beautiful ship? Just you wait, the people will take that like a hole in the head, but sadly they aren't allowed to squeak.

No. 5a – Interlude

No. 6

11 February 1940

My beloved boy, well really, it's been so long since you wrote to me that I was beginning to think you can't write any more, because you've got so much else to do, like kicking, and knee rides, and drinking, and guzzling orange juice, and all that kind of stuff. Your picture is in a little frame on my bedside table and I keep looking at it. Now I'd like to have another one soon, but I guess that won't be easy. Can you imagine how much I'd like to get to know you, but at the moment I don't see any possibility at all. And if things turn out as I believe, namely that the Allies come to the help of the Finns, go into Sweden, from there against the Russians and then through Poland and Czechoslovakia against the Germans, then it could be quite a while before the war is over. And what's to become of us here, nobody knows either, we'll have to wait and see. Most wealthy Dutch and also Germans who had money have left here and continue to leave, naturally we suffer too as a result of that, although for the time being new customers are still coming to replace them. But there's simply less money being spent, and that's such a shame. Just think, people drink so much orange juice here, and now I'll always be thinking that Mummy doesn't give you enough, at least for your appetite. Has my letter to Mummy not yet arrived? It should be there by now. Bachmanns' cheque hasn't been cleared either. Young Rusy is said to have been seriously wounded, and I hear Doctor Fleischmann died in London. I'm buying lots of little parcels, it's almost beyond my means. Did my letter to Otto Leberhart arrive, and the one to Grandma Fanny? Martin shouldn't worry, everyone's well. Today was your great-grandmother's birthday, but it's good that she doesn't have to live through these

times. You will come into good times one day, of that I am certain. I would like to experience them too. And I'm so curious what will turn out, and how, and how the new beginning will be, and how we can get rid of all the criminals. I hope they're already racking their brains about that. Thank God that you, my little Englishman, won't have anything to do with it. Kiss your parents, and Grandma Fanny and Auntie Resi, and your big brother and, well, everyone.

No. 7

5 May 1940 to Annemarie

Things don't look very safe. You'll be aware that the whole country is in a state of emergency, of which we only hear, but otherwise don't notice it much, that our minister's speech was not reassuring, that there have been so many arrests of respected Dutchmen, well, and so on. We don't know what's happening from one day to the next. It is of course a tragedy that the many sacrifices for Scandinavia were in vain. Tell Heidi I got her letter and showed it to her father straightaway. I was delighted and interested in what she writes about Peter, it's such a shame that I can't even see him, not even hear him squeak on the telephone. Write me every bit about him, he'll be advancing every day now and every day will bring new surprises. The photos are very sweet, I look at them again and again. He's nearly eight months old now. A strapping and discriminating man. Alice is still worried that we might be invaded. What's the mood like in England? Here in general it's not very good. Such a pity I can't get a visa, otherwise I'd like to come for a holiday. I'll try again. Even if it's difficult and costs lots of money. I would so much like to bring Hans some cigars, and Otsch a cheesecake, and you a kiss, and Peter something nice.

No. 7a – Interlude

10 May 1940 (Just five days after the last letter, Germany invaded the Netherlands)

No. 8

26 September 1940 to the family

My dear ones all together, now it's already two weeks since our little boy's birthday, and I'm still waiting longingly for his joyous description of all the presents he got and what he thought of the birthday. I was so terribly pleased to get your last letter, firstly anyway and secondly because after the long wait there was such heartwarming news. I'm not complaining that I can't take part in the boy's development, just happy at every sign of it and the good times that he has. And that his parents get so much joy out of him. May it stay that way.

No. 9

Undated 1940 to the family

On Monday we're planning to pay all the rent arrears, not because we have to but because we think it's right. Detta is well, she writes regularly. It's a pity I can't see your Mummy. The monthly turnover is astonishing but we get little from it, despite that I'm satisfied, we have a monopoly. Kiss our boy. When I come I'll bring him a bike, then he can come here with Daddy. How did my tender girl come to have such an enormous boy? Many many heartfelt kisses.

Your Lony.

No. 10

Undated, probably about 9 November 1940 to Annemarie

My only beloved treasure, in a week's time it will be my birthday and so I'm naturally thinking of you twofold and threefold, the dearest people I have left in the world. And if it weren't for the terrible longing for you all, I'd be quite calm and at peace no matter what happens. But I've much to do, I've a lot of self-control and try to picture the future. I just hope Peter hasn't grown a moustache by then. I rearrange your pictures every day, I've just put Peter's picture in front of the radio so that I can always see it, and Hans and you and Martin next to Vati on the little dresser. Then I've been taking care at home of all the wilting flowers at the office, bought myself a sweet little writing table quite cheap because my room was overflowing with books, and papers and writing utensils, and that's the way I spend my leisure time. I have been making so many enquiries to Otto and Trude, but still no answer, and I don't know if George is with them yet. My visa to Brazil is not to be had either, there's no point now anyway, because no ships are travelling there.

No. 11

**Undated, probably later in November 1940
to the family**

I haven't heard anything from anyone, it's as though we were living on a desert island. Business is OK and for now I haven't got any financial worries. I'd have so many questions, but you know yourselves what I'd like the answers to. Little Peter should write to me again sometime. Your pictures are all on my grandmother's sewing table next to my big chair and are a feast for my eyes every day.

I send you many hugs and kisses.

Your Lony.

No. 11a – Interlude

No. 12

11 February 1941 to Peter

My darling Peterkin, today is your great-grandmother's birthday, and to commemorate it Auntie Acka brought me flowers, the first lilies of the valley; and here comes your lovely letter and words can't express my happiness. I've been looking in every pram to see if there might be a little boy in it like you, but now I'm looking at every plane, because I imagine my little Peter is sitting in it and coming to visit his Granny Lony. And now I'm racking my brains to think of all the lovely things I can show him here. Above all there'll be chocolate with whipped cream, and a big piece of cheesecake, and a big window with new curtains looking out on to the street, and lots of people walking and driving past, big and small, and we'll wave to them and they'll wave back and be happy to see my fair-haired boy. And in the evening when we're tired, I'll put the boy in my little

bath and there'll be a little boat and a crocodile that squirts water when you squeeze its tummy, and then the boy can let the water out all by himself, and when he's dried he can run barefoot into bed on great-grandmother's hand-worked rug, and then he'll get told a lovely story, about his mummy when she was a little girl.

I'm looking forward to all that quite awfully. You too? It makes me so happy that Daddy is content and that Mummy is happy with her two men. May it stay that way. I'm still well, we're still getting trade, even a lot, and no financial worries at least for the time being. It's a lot of work of course, but I enjoy that. The Hugos have a thousand plans and never carry them out. They're still in their big house which of course is standing empty. I had my hair done today, since I have gone grey. It needs a lot of care so that I look smart. And tomorrow I'm off to the dentist, unfortunately, but my bridge no longer fits and needs renewing. But he's only a few steps away, so I'll just have to get along with it. There'd be so much more to tell and to ask, but nothing pleasurable, and one shouldn't even think about all the sad stuff, otherwise you lose the energy to live. You're quite right there. Only I'd like to read Hans's letters again.

Now write again very soon, give my warmest thanks to our friends for all their love which makes me so happy. And they shouldn't forget me. I embrace you all and am with dearest love.

Your Lony.

No. 13

Unknown date, first believed to be late September/early October 1941, now believed to be 7 December 1940 to Annemarie.

Have you heard anything from my brother Gustav and his children? Their mother is terribly worried, for herself and the grandmother. Hilde, who used to look after the children, has had a major operation in New York. Other than that I know nothing. Hugo comes to me daily, they're having a tough time too, so many clients are falling away, some because they close so early, some because they've left, some because they've died. Tomorrow would have been Erwin's birthday. Now he's been dead so long, nearly as long as Vati. But this year I'm thinking of your birthday, even though I didn't write in time, but you know anyway. Love to my Hans, kiss our boy, love to all our other dear ones, and hugs and kisses with so much love you can't imagine from your Lony.

No. 14

1 October 1941 to Bachmann (in Switzerland)

Dear Mister Bachmann, my grateful thanks for your kind letter, which gave me such pleasure and informed me about the well-being of my children. If I know they're all well, I can be brave and keep my head held high. I had letters from Trude and George with the shattering news that Grandma Fanny died before our little boy's birthday, and I'm greatly saddened. It only comforts me that despite all cares she was able to spend a couple of good years with her children. I too would wish myself such a gentle death after a long happy life surrounded by my family.

For myself I'm well, only I yearn terribly for my dear ones, and I find that hard to cope with.

My aunt writes regularly, lives in her own home, and gets what she needs to live, she has even saved a bit.

I myself have a great deal to do, business is still going well, but there's a lot more work than there used to be because of the changed circumstances, but I hope to be able to continue. The small debts are largely paid off, despite a serious setback in summer last year. Sadly I haven't saved anything, but can manage to meet my obligations. I look well, just a bit thinner, but otherwise have everything I need. Only I'm short of shoes, but if things get really bad I'll just wear clogs like the others do. I get enormous pleasure from our little boy's picture, there in front of my table on grandmother's sewing desk next to me, and on that there is everything I need to write and make notes. So when I look up I watch him, eating his bread, picking flowers, and he looks just like his mummy.

No. 15

6 January 1942 card addressed to Hans from Bachmann in Lony's name

Warmest greetings to you and the children. It's so long since I had any news and I am concerned that you are all well, and would ask you earnestly to write to me by return that things with you are as I would hope and wish. I am well, I have much to do, and business is running. I would lack for nothing if I could hear that the children are well. Fondest wishes for the New Year and for Annemarie's birthday.

Ever your Lony Rabl.

No. 15a - Interlude

No. 16

30 December 1943 from Westerbork Camp to Josef Blum

Hopefully all is well and in order with you. I am very worried about the brothers and sisters. Myself I am healthy for the moment, and hope I don't get an attack, though with this illness you can never be sure. Could you ask sometime whether it's possible to send clothes without the label, if so I would like the black woollen dress that was offered and the silk costume, both with white collars, it could be that I need them. I could do with a suitcase as well. Otherwise I have received everything, the gloves too of course. Everything is very good. With much love I am your Lony.

No. 17

23 February 1944 from Westerbork Camp to Josef Blum

My dears, today again my first greetings, and perhaps also the last for the time being, my address is going to be Theresienstadt, and I would earnestly ask you to keep on sending me parcels and money, as you promised me in the old days. Please also tell Liesje and Ludwig, and my doctor.

I heard nothing from the brothers and sisters, but I hope you have some news. I am worried about them.

I could really do with a black woollen dress, but nothing has arrived.

I have a letter from Acka here, which she wrote before she left, and which I couldn't send. I gave her everything I had left, and she asks that you reimburse me. So write as soon as you can, you know how you can find that out. Again thanks in advance and arrears and keep thinking of your very loving Lony.

Translation by Peter Lobbenberg

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