"Dear Hannah Arendt..."

Correspondence between Leni Yahil and Hannah Arendt, 1961-1971

Hannah Arendt, Leni Yahil
24 September 2010

When Hannah Arendt went to Jerusalem in the spring of 1961 to observe the Eichmann trial, she befriended Leni Yahil, a German-born historian and Holocaust researcher. They began a correspondence that alternates between personal, philosophical and political issues. In 1963, after the publication of Arendt's articles on the Eichmann trials, it ended abruptly. Yahil's attempt to revive the correspondence eight years later failed: their friendship did not withstand the "Arendt controversy".

1 Yahil to Arendt, May 5, 1961
[originally in German, handwritten]
Jerusalem, 5/5/61
Dear Hannah Arendt,

I would be so pleased if this ancient Yemenite “good luck hand” [hamsa] were not only to accompany you as a happy reminder of the days you spent here and as a [catalyst][1] for your work, but would also occasionally point out to you that this country and the State in their current form have grown out of the Jewish people’s reality as it has developed historically – however revolutionary the paths taken may have been. This reality – factual, intellectual, and institutional – constitutes the roots, and nothing would be more disastrous than to violently separate us from these roots – even if it were done in the name of general principles, [which are] important or valid in many parts of the modern world.

But this is really all by the by. I hope that you’ll quite simply like this ancient piece and will be happy to take it with you. With warm regards and my best wishes for your trip and work,
2 Arendt to Yahil, May 8, 1961

[Originally in German, typewritten]

Hotel Krafft am Rhein, Basel

Basel, May 8, 1961

Dear Leni Jachil,

When your hand, freed from its packaging, fell into my hand, I got quite a shock. Together with the pleasure of being given something so exquisitely beautiful. Apart from this, it is of course that very hand that this country held out to me at this time and which I sometimes took and sometimes pushed away and to which you now wish to make me obliged. With the right that the reader has over the author, above all if the author has once – as is rarely the case – had so much luck with his reader. In this sense it should also be a good luck hand for me too. What you write about it I understand, I believe, only too well. I too am afraid of the almost inevitable decline in essence, which does of course occur and which you think you can reduce, or at least delay, by clinging to certain things, until a new essence has formed out of the reality of the country and the emergence of the people. I’m not in the mood to write a long letter, and I also think that I can say what I really have to say in one or two sentences. What terrifies me is simply that this people, which when all is said and done has after all believed for several thousand years in the God of justice, is starting now to cling to what in its religion Heine rightly called the unhealthy faith of ancient Egypt, because it helps them “believe in the Jewish People,” in other words, in itself. And this, if I may say so, is real idol worship. However pleasant the idol worshipers may be, as your friend is and was. Perhaps we’ll talk about this again when (if and when) I come back. The plane, which is, after all, only the magic carpet come true, managed to get me to Basel in 5 hours – where it looks so very different. [Karl] Jaspers is giving his last lecture here, for one hour, in a lecture theater in front of a breathless audience; for some reason more impressive and livelier than ever before. More unrestrained. I’ve moved into the hotel because anyhow they have house-guests there. And I’m happy that nobody here knows me and I’ve just come back from a stroll through the town. Be well and thank you and my best to your husband and children, and hopefully we’ll see each other again!

Yours,

Hannah Arendt

3 Yahil to Arendt, May 18, 1961

[originally in German, typewritten]
Since I’ve received your letter from Basel, I haven’t been able to get out of my head the answer to it that I want to send you, so there’s basically nothing that I can do other than to actually write you in order to get rid of it in this way. I can perhaps even understand your shock (although that was certainly not my intention). It is perhaps part of the nature of this – to quote [Werner] Best who, to the Danes’ indignation, talking about their country, once referred to it in anger as a – “ridiculously little country,” and when people somehow get involved with it, it does not let them disentangle entirely unscathed, because one way or the other it puts them under an obligation, and if one is a “freelancer”, not just in respect of studying the intellect, like yourself, that can indeed cause one a shock. But I do hope that notwithstanding, you might come here again at least once this summer? In the meanwhile, I suppose you’re enjoying European private life, and hopefully also finding the necessary time to work. I believe that originally you intended to still stay in Switzerland? In any case I don’t believe that you’re going to spend too long in Basel, so I’ll send my letter to Munich. By the way, how do you manage with the German [mental] climate, as it were? Personally speaking, I really find being in Germany extremely disagreeable; I simply cannot stand the style anymore. In addition, my family is now getting together there again, since my mother has also recently returned from S.A. [South Africa] and together with the sister who will be following her, I will now have 3 sisters living there. But I always was the family cuckoo’s egg, as it were. The comments that I want to make regarding your two sentences about “idol worship” are situated on different levels, and I would like to lace them side by side with only the sketchiest of connections between them, simply as topics or theses, as it were, for the talk that we intend to have between ourselves. I’m afraid, however, that I won’t be able to do this in just two sentences.

1) It is the nature of idol worship – if I am not mistaken in my view – for man to project externally certain spiritual-mental realities [gegebene geistig-seelische Realitäten] which exist in him and in doing so make them absolute, in order in this way, as you also say, to achieve the desired self-affirmation. In this fashion the idol worshipper increases his self-confidence to the extent that he feels necessary in order to ensure that his actions will succeed (the “blessing of the gods”). It is precisely this undertaking that is taken ad absurdum in the famous scene between Elijah and the priests of Baal (I Kings 18). Just as the next chapter portrays the real relationship between the one that you call the “God of Justice” and man.

2) The danger of such idol worship exists on every level of human ideas. In our modern world, it is no less present in any “belief in the Jewish People” than, say, the postulate of abstract, intellectual or material values. This in no way detracts from the reality-based content and legitimacy of each of them, as long as they are not “idolized”. In other words, the decisive thing is not the “what”, but the “how” (see also the example of Elijah: the two bullocks which are sacrificed are exactly the same; in one case we have idolatry [Götzendienst], in the other case divine worship [Gottesdienst]).

3) If there is a single person (among those whom I know in this category) who does not cross this boundary, it is this very woman [Golda Meir] to whom you referred as my
friend, a term I would not presume to use. In my opinion it is precisely this fact— the
ability not to exceed the area of the powers laid down for an individual in his actions and
thoughts—that explains this woman’s special and unvarying effect on people, irrespective
of their skin color, culture or intellectuality. I do not agree with you that it’s her
“Americanism,” because it’s something that is too universal, and demonstrates its power
with such different creatures, such as Negroes in new African states and sophisticated
people like the Swedes, or a simple Yemenite woman, and Hannah Arendt. The attitude
that she defended that evening when she was with us is a direct upshot of her desire not
to coin new rules arbitrarily.

4) The problem, that the role that has been played by the “God of Justice” (or the merciful
[God]) in the Western world has been shattered, is not a specifically Jewish problem,
although—due to the special religious and historical circumstances—it does admittedly
have a specifically Jewish expression. Everywhere the strange question is asked, about
man no longer being created in God’s image, but God in the image of man. I don’t really
think that I need to explain to you that in this situation, there is little that we can do other
than to delve into man’s situation—The Human Condition[6]—as faithfully and
dispassionately as possible, without anyone today probably being able to give a
satisfactory intellectual, let alone a religious answer. I cannot think of a single example
where in any other religion consequently part of its rules or institutions were given up—
without anybody taking this amiss… I admit, that with us [the Jews], things are more
complicated. But the fact that for thousands of years religion was a substitute for a State
and as such created institutions which are now coming into conflict with the modern
institutions of restored State-level life—this fact alone does not yet entitle us to introduce
new rules by force. One cannot leap over one’s past, or alternatively doing so is normally
punished very harshly. In addition, it seems to me that Heine of all people is a
questionable authority in this area. (Don’t misunderstand me: I agree with you that there
are things in this area that make one’s hair stand on end, and we have recently had
several examples of this. But force won’t work. As has been said—there is also idol
worship of principle.)

I apologize for the length of my comments. Apparently, I didn’t have enough time to
formulate them in brief. I do hope that the photostats will be sent off to you some time
soon. As far as the “guide” is concerned, so far it hasn’t been possible to set the price (!).
In this dreadful institute, the only way to get something done is to keep bugging the
people, and since I didn’t feel so well, I was only up there from time to time, and every
time I was there the right man wasn’t. However, I do hope that I’ll manage to sort this
difficult thing out as well so that the book will go off to you next week.[7] By the way, are
you aware that the “Third World Congress of Jewish Studies” will take place here in
Jerusalem at the end of July? I have the honor of lecturing there on “The rescue of the
Danish Jews—its place in the history of the holocaust [sic],” a 20-minute presentation,
a more detailed paper on the subject might be distributed. This is now the most urgent
thing I have to tackle. In the meanwhile, my husband is off to America with B.G. [Ben-
Gurion]. Nothing else noteworthy to report. All the best! The trial is developing fairly
fast; make sure you don’t arrive too late! (Please excuse my bad

[The last page of the letter is missing.]

4 Yahil to Arendt, June 24, 1961
Jerusalem, 24/6/61

Dear Hannah,

It seems strange to me that when I go to “Beit Ha’am” in the next few days, I won’t meet you there... First of all, today, Shabbat, I’ve been looking at your book (once again: thank you so much!), and that was enjoyable and helpful - but definitely no substitute. The 2 added chapters are extremely instructive, not only in the parts where you have used the new material; not only are things a great deal clearer and more detailed, but there’s also a great deal of material as such. In fact, one of the special things about your work is the way that you make the connection between the overarching line of thought and the precise, diverse knowledge of details. Talking of details: are you familiar with the interpretation which our joint good acquaintance, [Werner] Best (to whom I am really very grateful for putting me in touch with you!) gave during his testimony in Nuremberg of the sentence that you quoted (p. 383)? IMT [International Military Tribunal], [vol.] XX [doc.] 138 (the English edition). He makes himself the advocate of the “fundamental human rights of the individual and of nations.” For Sir [David] Maxwell-Fyfe this polished answer does not particularly jibe with his earlier theoretical remarks (let alone his actions). Are you familiar with his [Best’s] articles about “Grossraumordnung”? (One of them is in [Léon] Poliakov: Das 3. Reich und seine Denker, p. 480, from the Ztschr. F. Politik [actually: The Journal of Politics], June 1942, p. 406-412). In them he goes so far as to recommend genocide. He clearly did what Eichmann was unable to do: he “fell in line” backwards, and began to implement the scale of values and basic legal concepts of the victorious opponents both as an accused in Copenhagen and also as a witness in Nuremberg. In fact, what you discuss in the chapter on ideology and terror is really what I meant when I said that the argumentation of the prosecution (in actual fact it is only one exponent) and that of Eichmann proceed on two completely separate levels (and it is the judges’ difficult task to establish the link between them). Here, it seems to me, lies the cause of Eichmann’s calm and imperturbability. As you yourself put it: “Totalitarian lawfulness .... executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior.” For subordinate creatures - such as he was (or is), when all is said and done – this law manifested itself in the “Führer’s will.” And if this will stated: “Final Solution,” then there was to be a Final Solution - right down to the last detail. It could not be revoked by proven facts – at most, only by a new statement of will by the Führer. And another thing: you asked me about my opinion with regard to [William] Shirer’s book. I’m sure you’re familiar with the parallel German work – Bracher-Sauer-Schulz: Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung While it lacks unity in terms of ideas and implementation, it is very rich in information and material. As far as the problem of Soviet imperialism is concerned, it seems to me that the behavior outside the European sphere requires special analysis. I have far too little concrete knowledge of Asiatic circumstances under the menacing shadow of China. I'm a little more familiar with those in Africa and the Middle East. For example, the relations with Egypt with Nasser’s systematic suppression of Communism. The latest “incident” and its settlement were extremely instructive. There are parallel phenomena in Iran, to some extent even in Persia. Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Congo, the failed uprising in Abyssinia [Ethiopia] – here a new tactic is being used for what is undoubtedly a crazy ultimate goal. I have a good excuse for writing such a long
letter to you today. I have to go to “Hadassah” [Hospital in Jerusalem] for a few days this week, to have my innards poked around. This is referred to as a “procedure,” rather than an operation – and that’s not the sort of thing that makes one particularly talkative. Probably to convince myself of the necessity for it, yesterday afternoon and into the night I had a fairly substantial attack, so that today most of the time I’m just lying about (and have preferred not to use the typewriter). Perhaps such announcements really are superfluous – you asked for it... The memory of the days that you spent here is very vivid, not just because of the book. Many thanks and warmest regards.

Best, Leni Yahil

5 Arendt to Yahil, July 23, 1961

[This letter from Yahil’s personal papers is a typed version of Arendt’s handwritten original, which was not kept. As the original was not available, it was not possible to guess at what the typed words in parentheses with question marks, or the (sic) (?), refer to.]

Freiburg, 23.VII.61

Dear Leni,

Despite my travels, I would have long since written if I didn’t so dreadfully hate writing by hand. And for weeks now, I’ve been without a typewriter! Above all, I hope the “procedure” wasn’t too unpleasant! Drop me a line to let me know - to New York. Because today I’m leaving here for Paris and will be home again next week - around August 1. With a great deal (to do?). Basel ([Karl] Jaspers) was especially wonderful! But then I did the really stupid thing of getting involved with Germany again. Students – discussions. And now there’s nothing I want so much as to get out of here. Incidentally, despite my (initiation?): not a hint of antisemitism! But I’m practically certain that this so-called “federal democracy” will come to grief. Without external influences, there will be a kind of military dictatorship. And I wouldn’t trust this bad lot [Herrschaften] with atomic weapons, even in the framework of NATO, not even for 5 minutes. But all of this is, of course, strictly between us. It’s the old story: the “goodies” haven’t the faintest idea about anything, are utterly stupid and also, without knowing as much, have been corrupted by the good life. The others keep their mouths shut, but they are noticed. Yesterday, somebody told me about an opinion poll at Frankfurt University, 9% of the students were in favor of a dictatorship, 7% for democracy. Everyone else: no opinion! We know only too well what this means. The intellectuals, with their left leanings, are in my opinion still preparing themselves, semi-consciously, for the Russians, of whom they are of course afraid. I do not believe that the Russians will come, but that is another question. Eichmann has in fact become really interesting since the judges intervened. What is your opinion now? Here there is almost wall-to-wall lack of interest; (in ……?). At heart, people have again become too delicate and refined to be seriously interested. I spoke to [Dr. Fritz] Bauer, director of public prosecutions in Frankfurt, who would have most happily asked for Eichmann. He’s different, of course, but even so, not exceptionally intelligent and apart from that, he’s Jewish. So he doesn’t count. I’m not familiar with the Best article. I might have a look at it. The Nuremberg story is delightful.
I know about Bracher etc., but haven’t read it. I’ve been out of these things for years, you know. (sic!!)

It was lovely to have [met] you in Jerusalem. When are you coming to New York? All the very best!
And my regards to your husband and children.

Enclosed a very beautiful relief from Paestum[^22] – indescribably wonderful and the height of the trip.

[no signature in this typed version]

6 Yahil to Arendt, August 3, 1961

[originally in German, handwritten]

Jerusalem, 3/8/61

Dear Hannah,

Heartiest thanks for your letter! Personally speaking, I love receiving handwritten letters – from time to time, at least – but if you don’t like writing, then you deserve double thanks! (And your handwriting doesn’t look as if writing is especially bothersome for you.) As far as I’m concerned, this time I’m writing once again in a horizontal position and hence by hand – basically in order to somewhat atone for the “sins” of the last 3 weeks. The “procedure” in question + a couple of tricks which I’ve tried out for myself have considerably improved my condition, so that as far as the congress and all the trappings were concerned, I didn’t go overboard in following my doctor’s orders. But I must be a bit careful again, or let’s say, act according to what is generally accepted as the maximum that is reasonable. The real turning point was the moment when preparing my paper for the congress just couldn’t be postponed any longer, and I no longer had any choice other than like Münchhausen to pull myself out of the morass of the lethargic unproductivity of the last few months with my own two hands. When I managed to do this – albeit with a considerable effort – I knew that I was out of the woods. Unfortunately, the abstracts of the papers, which were published in Hebrew and English, were produced in such small numbers that I was able to get hold of only one copy. Perhaps I can simply have the English typed out again and then send it to you. I structured the paper itself (20 min!) in a different form, but the conceptual frame was the same. As far as I can tell from the reactions, it was good. I tried to bring out the main point through a comparison of Denmark and Slovakia.[^23] In any case, I’ll send you by regular mail the documents that I distributed by way of illustration: 2 from Slovakia and a report by Six,[^24] for the purpose of Best’s “whitewash” (!), which presents an outstanding summary (at the time he was no longer in the RSHA, but in the AA).[^25] Eichmann – did you in fact get my article, which I sent to Jaspers’ address? I’ll also send you under separate cover a couple of newspaper comments which I put aside over time in the assumption that they might interest you, including a letter to the editor by Kempner,[^26] who does in fact – indirectly – criticize [Gideon] Hausner,[^27] but unexpectedly confirms my view.
And how about you? What are you actually working on now? And what about your articles on Eichmann? I’d love to have a permanent subscription to your productions – with advance notice! [Fritz] Bauer is currently working a great deal with our authorities; he’s a good man and there’s more to him than one might assume from the surface. What you also write about Grmny [Germany] isn’t surprising other than perhaps its dimensions (the Frankfurt University figures!), but depressing enough. By the way I knew that you were in Grmny! Chaim [Yahil; Leni’s husband] spent a few days in Europe in the meanwhile, and when he was waiting in Düsseldorf for his plane to Paris, Alitalia put out a call for “Frau Prof. Hannah Ahrendt” ….. but he didn’t manage to see you yourself. What do you think about my private “intelligence”?! When he told me, I thought to myself: aha, she couldn’t resist…..

I was in Paestum in 1932 when my grandfather treated my sister, who at the time had taken her state exam in medicine, and me after my (absolutely lousy) matriculation to a trip to Italy. I don’t remember this wonderful relief, but I do have a very distinct memory of the temple’s perfect proportions. I still have old photos that we took at the time, I must look and see whether they’re still any good and then I’ll send you some of them.

For the moment, I don’t see how I can get to N.Y. I also have 2 main aims for this year: to get well and to finish writing my book. But it’s a good feeling to know a few human islands in this ocean of stones and people where one can save himself if hopefully one day one manages to get there. Incidentally, apart from Uri Tal,[29] about whom I told you here, I’d like to lumber you with another Israeli. Esther Appelberg (who happens to be a niece of Agnon’s), but she did her Dr. in Social Sciences in Cleveland (if I’m not mistaken) and is starting out as Assistant Professor for Case Work at Yeshiva University. Since she probably doesn’t know too many people in N.Y., I promised her (she’s been here on a visit just now) some “Aryanization” through yourself. She was in Munich with us during the DP camps period. As you will see for yourself, she’s fairly intelligent, but for some reason that’s not quite clear to me, she hasn’t managed to solve the personal problems in her life, and as a result she attaches more weight (not to say excess weight) to her professional successes.

She’s very attached to us, and is really a very loyal person. I got to know her on the indescribably ghastly trip to Marseille, where I was going with my 2 children who were very young at the time for 9 days on a dirty Greek cockleshell (summer ’47) in order to meet my husband, who had already been in Mn [Munich] for 11/2 years. Most of the time I was hopelessly seasick, and at the time she helped me look after the children.[30] Amos,[31] has finished his exams with a great deal of composure and elegance, and following a couple of short trips to the Negev and the Galilee, next week he’s going off to the army. That means that for the next 5 years I’ll have to get used to the role of “soldier’s mother,” [Soldatenmutter] a duty that doesn’t exactly enchant me, but it must be performed in a dignified fashion [mit Anstand]. By the way, what do you think my mathematical sabra son bought himself after his matriculation? A Hebrew edition of Buber’s Zwiesprache [Dialogue].[32] Sometimes life gives you a kind of extra bonus on capital that you have invested and comes up trumps……

Chaim and I are going to Cyprus on 23/8 for 14 days. Hopefully nothing will go wrong! This is the only way of getting some rest and recreation for him. He really does need it urgently. Please don’t think that I always write such long letters – in any case, I send my
warmest regards, from the men of the family as well.

Yours, Leni

7 Arendt to Yahil, August 10, 1961


8 Yahil to Arendt, August 29, 1961


9 Yahil to Arendt, December 12, 1961

[originally in German, handwritten]

Jerusalem 12/12/61

Dear Hannah,

The verdict in the Eichmann trial, which has again brought back all of the atmosphere of the trial in the summer (apart from the fact that this time, instead of air conditioning, we have heating), has made the memory of you so vivid that I finally resolved to write to you once again. I can’t really explain your protracted silence, unless in your professional or (and) private life such drastic things have happened that they have left you speechless, as it were. Quite apart from everything else, I’d just like to know what’s really going on in your life – the distance N.Y. – Jerusalem is apparently too great....

People say that articles by you about the trial have appeared in the “New Yorker“? When? I haven’t received the new book that you told me about earlier. When did it come out? Did you receive the things I sent you? (Verdicts in the Kafr Kassem trial, the book about Slovakia.)

In the meanwhile, here we’re dealing with general and personal problems as usual.

I’d like to wish you all the best; I have a feeling that you need it. I apologize for saying this: if I’m so reckless as to let my heart become attached to somebody, that person will generally not get rid of me so soon. On that note, I send my warmest regards!

Yours, Leni

10 Arendt to Yahil, December 19, 1961
19.12.61

Dear Leni

Just [got] your letter, I am writing immediately (in so doing christening a brand-new little Hermes [typewriter]), would have written in any case, but probably not today. Of course you’re right to assume that something happened to me. I am indeed, as a friend says about me, the world’s worst correspondent,\(^{40}\) but not that bad. So – to make a not too long story even shorter – my husband was very ill, recovered a few weeks ago and was yesterday discharged by the doctor as healthy. So, as you can imagine, for part of the semester I just wasn’t at Wesleyan\(^{41}\) but at home, and therefore then had to catch up with all and everything, and the day before yesterday I came home, fairly shattered, for the Christmas vacation. I haven’t written because on the one hand I didn’t want to write about it, and on the other hand I could hardly write something without at least mentioning it.

And now – where in fact should I begin? First of all, everything [that you] sent has arrived: I got the publishers to send you the book and will inquire tomorrow what they’ve done with it. If they haven’t sent it, I’ll have it dispatched immediately; otherwise, perhaps we should wait a bit longer. It was, however, the end of September when I gave the instruction!

(In the meanwhile, I’ve been in the kitchen to render down some lard, which undoubtedly sounds pretty abominable to your ears, which in the meanwhile have become so kosher. But much appreciated here in the shape of “bread and dripping.”) So – back to Eichmann.

What did you think of the verdict? The NY Times published very long excerpts, so that one could form a picture, I believe, even though I haven’t yet read it in full. I was somewhat disappointed, not because of the result, of course; but they didn’t really go into any of the salient and burning points. The comparison between Eichmann’s *Befehlsstand* [the obligation to follow orders] and the curfew business in Israel is utterly inadequate, after all; of course this can be referred to, but only in order to continue from it: but here we are dealing with a case where it was not one officer who gave a criminal order, but where the entire State had become criminal, [in other words] where there was no longer any law to which one could have turned. Moreover, there’s this hopeless confusion of crime against humanity\(^{42}\) – [in what sense] against Mankind [*Menschheit*] or [against] being humane [*Menschlichkeit*]? The former, of course. The mistake that Hausner made was that he really believed naively that he was dealing with a murderer, and this mistake was not disposed of by the court. In such cases (the plural is offensive), even jurists should have realized that from time to time it is necessary to dispense justice even when a draft bill has not been tabled. Very painful, but in this case there was no avoiding it because this was in fact the only real justification for the kidnapping. Which is why this 1950 law\(^{43}\) is so inadequate: clearly, the assumption was that it would apply only to Jews who had rendered services to the Nazis. Because otherwise – crime against the Jewish people\(^{44}\) death penalty (that’s OK), but crime against the gypsies\(^{45}\) – falls under another heading. But of course it’s exactly the same thing. Eichmann’s final statement [is] absolutely typical: he is disappointed – which is really a chutzpah;\(^{46}\) everything is going wrong for him, the little guys are being hanged, the big shots are allowed to walk.
All along the lines of: We’ve been let down by foreigners once again. Then finally the satiric drama with the gentleman’s memoirs that’ll be flogged off and

20th...[47]

Couldn’t carry on writing yesterday; our phone has now gone down with telephonitis, it never stops ringing. That was El Al from the airport: I was supposed to get the Eichmann material through customs. So now I’m soon going to know things pretty accurately, but first I want to get this letter off without rushing.

One more thing: perhaps when you have a chance you could let me know how the Blumenfelds are...[48] I heard here that Jenny is much worse, but then I didn’t hear any more. He would appear to be clearly better.

And how are you? What has happened with the get-well programme? What’s up with work? All the very best to you and warmest regards to the entire family.

Yours,
Hannah

11 Yahil to Arendt, June 7, 1962

[originally in German, typewritten copy]

Jerusalem-Katamon, 7/6/62
Hamaapilim St. 4

Dear Hannah,

Perhaps you haven’t entirely written me off yet, although I neither replied to your letter of 19.12 nor thanked you for your book, which arrived just at Erev Pesach [the eve of Passover]. Both made me very happy. Why haven’t I written you? As usual, there are many reasons, as well as none. In the winter I had more or less the same thing as you earlier when your husband was sick. [Three sentences dealing with personal matters relating to Yahil’s younger son Jonathan have been omitted here at the request of the family.] He did all right in a final exam, in history, which they already had this year.

He had just emerged from the worst of it when in February I went off to Europe for 6 weeks because it turned out that there is new material for me in various places, including with [Fritz] Bauer in Frkft [Frankfurt], whom I thus had the pleasure of getting to know. In addition I was in Munich, Bonn, and fairly extensively in Copenhagen. In 2 days in Berlin I didn’t manage to do what I wanted to (see the files of the last trial against [Werner] Best), but it was in and of itself a very interesting and instructive time. I was able to fit in a couple of days in London before I came home in order to prepare for Pesach. In May Chaim went to Eastern Europe for 6 weeks, and it’s only now that life is beginning to get back to normal.

I now have the best of intentions about finishing writing my book in the coming months.
The new material also forces me to rewrite part of what I’ve already written (a particularly pleasant task!). I’ve learned a great deal more, both general and special. Today I even see Best him self in a somewhat different light. Things are far less unambiguous than I thought. I also contacted a few people from the former AA [German Foreign Ministry] after making sure that they weren’t Nazis. This was also very instructive.

It’s now almost a year since you were here the second time, Eichmann has finally, thank the Lord, been hanged, and the new sensations have somewhat pushed this discussion also into the background. Incidentally, unfortunately, I never read what you wrote about it. If you would tell me at some point the issue numbers of the “Newyorker,” [sic] I’ll try to find them here.

And what are you doing now, and how are you? I have no idea whether this letter will actually find you at home. I went to the Blumenfelds once after I came back from Europe. Jenny died while I was away. The circumstances seemed to me not much changed. Intellectually he was up to scratch, as always, but rather touchingly he told me about his son who left his family in order to spend Seder evening with him, and as he told me the tears ran down his cheeks. If I remember correctly, he [the son] must in fact be in America. Have you seen him? I haven’t yet managed to keep my promise to return. There is very great pressure on the part of official commitments. Hopefully there will soon be no more presidents of the new African states who haven’t yet visited Israel.....

In Germany I thought a lot about you and your descriptions. Although (or perhaps inter alia also because) today I have practically my entire family there, I was happy when I left the country again. Berlin is still the most bearable place; Frankfirt [sic] is frightening. I did however see a good political cabaret there.

As far as we are concerned, as you know there’s always something happening, and I suppose the echo of the most recent scandals makes its way to you too. In general there is great regret about the Baror Affair - if you’ve heard about it - [and] the fight between [Attorney-General Gideon] Hausner, who’s become publicity-hungry, and [Justice Minister] Dov Joseph, about the powers of the Attorney-General is also one of these unpleasant chapters. Incidentally, in this business [former Justice Minister Pinchas] Rosen is supporting Hausner. In the meanwhile, the Jordanians are shooting into Jerusalem and in addition they are managing to present this as our aggression, although the people killed are on our side. Unfortunately, they are better at dealing with the UN people than we are. We can only hope that things will remain on the level of these so-called “minor incidents.”

Our private interest in the military relates above all to the rare leave that Amos gets. He’s in the officers’ course, which he actually didn’t want to do. Here too his ambition doesn’t let him down, of course, but he is far from being an enthusiastic soldier. When he comes home, in addition to detective novels, he reads Buber, Berl Katznelson and Shelley..... A funny mixture, isn’t it? All the best and warmest regards from the entire family, and if you would treat me better than I treated you, I would be very happy!

Yours, Leni
12 Yahil to Arendt, March 7, 1963

[originally in German, typewritten copy]

370 Riverside Drive, New York 25, N.Y.53

Jerusalem-Katamon,
4 Hamaapilim St.

7/3/63

Dear Hannah Arendt,

The bond between us has been broken or has petered out – whatever you want to call it, and for my part I haven’t done anything to re-establish it. Now your articles are forcing me – I’m almost tempted to say against my better judgment – to ask you a question. So far, I’ve read only 4 articles, I haven’t got hold of the 5th one yet, but it is a matter of days only and it won’t in principle provide anything new, just the conclusions from all the previous material. I don’t want here to give you a description of the impression your attacks and portrayals are making here – I’m sure that – if you’re not informed of this – you will probably be able to imagine this yourself. Nor do I want to give you my opinion, analysis, general and personal reactions – I don’t know how far you’re interested in that, and there’s not really space for that in a letter. Nor do I want to go into your presentation of the Scandinavian events in general, and the Danish ones in particular – although I could say a great deal about this.

As I’ve said, I’d like to ask you a question: what was or is your own innermost intention that you were pursuing? Whom do you think you are serving in this way: Historical truth? Justice? The present or the future of the German or the Jewish people? Or do you wish to prove specifically to the latter that it isn’t worthy or doesn’t have the right to exist as a nation among the nations? I am asking you seriously, not polemically, I just don’t understand.

I am one of the few commentators who comes out of things with a good mark, as it were, from you. I don’t really know what I’ve done to deserve this, after all, I haven’t yet submitted anything definitive, and you must be aware that my overall attitude and basic approach is not so different from the one that you denounced so harshly.

You are of course free to answer my question – or not. The whole problematic protrudes so greatly from the personal area that I wouldn’t take a non-reaction on your part personally. I do hope this letter will reach you some time in the not too distant future. I haven’t the faintest idea whether you are currently in N.Y. or somewhere else. Best wishes.

13 Arendt to Yahil, April 10, 1963

[originally in German, typewritten]
14 Yahil to Arendt, April 30, 1963

[originally in German, typewritten copy]

Jerusalem-Katamon, 30/4/63

4 Hamaapilim Street

[Salutation omitted]

Unfortunately, Hannah, things are not as simple as you, surrounded by beauty and classical harmony, seem to think they are. As far as “messed up” is concerned – why should you do that? Messing up is something that children do (and quite often, so-called adults as well), when they know that they’re wrong but cannot or don’t want to admit as much. However, you, I’m sure, not only think that you’re right, but also that you have the right to say everything that you expressed there in your articles.
Before I received your answer, I had resolved to conduct the discussion where it belongs, i.e., in the public sphere. In the meanwhile, I have already written a goodly part of the article. It appears to be very difficult to avoid it becoming fairly long. I don’t yet know who’s going to print it for me, but I’m sure I’ll find someone.

So the dispute [between us] has been ensured. Whether we can still remain friends after this or, more accurately, whether we can become friends again, well, time will tell. I do not believe that the melody that I am “typing away with my five intelligent fingers” will be excessively pleasant to your ears, but that is not my intention. I don’t know whether you remember that when you left here for the first time, I sent you one of those old Yemenite amulets, a hand [hamsa]. At the time you wrote to me: “….. Apart from this, it is of course that very hand that this country held out to me at this time and which I sometimes took and sometimes pushed away and to which you now wish to make me obliged.” I cannot but imagine that it is clear to you that you have now very violently pushed away this hand. It is hard to predict whether it will ever again be offered to you, even if you were again interested in it, and at the moment at least it can scarcely be credited that this might happen – despite the publications from the [i.e. your] articles and book all over Haaretz.

That’s all for today. I hope that you will be able to read the rest in printed form, even there not everything, but nevertheless a considerable part. I trust you believe me when I say that I deeply regret this development from all points of view, both general and personal. And if nothing else can convince you of this, perhaps the harshness of my reply will. Perhaps one day you will discover that while you did not have any unspoken intentions in coming up with this indictment, what about unconscious ones? How deep does your self-criticism reach?

For the time being…….

15 Yahil to Arendt, October 27, 1971

[originally in German, typewritten copy]

P.O.B. 4058

27/10/71

Dear Hannah,

When it has been 8 years since an unanswered letter, it may perhaps be odd to write again. I basically always regretted the breaking off of our relationship, but since you never sent me a sign of life – I just left things as they stood.

In the meanwhile much has happened – in the world, in this country, in one’s personal life. This further increases the distance from the things and reactions that were predominant 10 years ago. What I wrote at the time about your Eichmann book was never published, the reason why is not important at the moment, and I don’t intend to reopen this discussion now. Today, the addressing of all these problems here has
basically become more systematic and, I believe, overall more honest. There is more confrontation of the questions that are posed. A great deal could be said about this, but I want to keep it short. Perhaps one of the decisive elements is the fact that a new generation with a more relaxed approach has begun to engage in research, under the supervision of a few really academically trained researchers.

Which is also the specific reason for this letter. A student came to me who’s doing his master’s and has chosen the discussion about the evaluation of the Nazi period from the Jewish point of view, i.e., Hilberg and Bettelheim, but above all your book, as the subject for his thesis. He’s from Montreal, his name is Richard Cohen, he did his B.A. here and recently got married here. I had a long talk with him and was favorably impressed by him and his approach to the problems. Among other things, he asked me for your address because he wanted to contact you personally, probably in order to hear more about the discussion that didn’t take place in public. If you were to give him a positive response, I believe that you would not regret it. As I said, this is the specific reason for this letter. If it were to provide a reason for further contact, I would be happy.

With kindest regards,  

References:

• [1] The word is largely unreadable; we have done our best to decipher it.
• [2] The “friend” referred to is Golda Meir, whom she met at my place. (Note added in Yahil’s handwriting.)
• [3] “(if and when)” is written in English.
• [4] In the German original Yahil wrote “um sie (klein geschrieben! [i.e., with a lower case “s”]) auf dies Weise loszuwerden”, in order to emphasize that she wants to get rid of the answer she thinks about, not to get rid of “Sie”, i.e., of Hannah Arendt.
• [5] Werner Best (1903-1989) was a jurist and senior SS legal expert who served as the Reich’s Plenipotentiary in Denmark from November 1942. His role was a major issue in Yahil’s study of the rescue of Danish Jewry.
• [7] It is not clear to what “guide” (i.e., book) and what institute Yahil refers.
• [8] Beit Ha’am (“The People’s Hall”), an auditorium in the center of Jerusalem, served as the courtroom during the Eichmann Trial.
This sentence is meant sarcastically, of course.

The quotation is in English.

David Patrick Maxwell-Fyfe (1900-1967), the British Deputy Chief prosecutor in the Nuremberg Trial.

Grossraumordnung – literally “large area planning.” The term was used in Nazi vocabulary for the demographic restructuring of occupied Europe, especially Eastern Europe, and the settlement of Germans in these areas.

Léon Poliakov and Joseph Wulf, Das Dritte Reich und seine Denker: Dokumente (Berlin: Arani-Verlag, 1959).

This sentence is quoted in English.

The term “Final Solution” is written both times in English.

Karl Dietrich Bracher, Gerhard Schulz and Wolfgang Sauer, Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung, vols. I-III (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960), and later editions.

Probably an error, and should be Iraq, as Iran and Persia are the same.

Yahil uses here the loaded term “Endziel” (final goal), a term used by Reinhard Heydrich in his Schnellbrief of 21 September 1939 to the Commanders of the Einsatzgruppen in Poland.

Fritz Bauer (1903-1968) actually was the driving force behind the Israeli effort to capture Eichmann. See: Irmtrud Wojak, Eichmanns Memoiren: ein kritischer Essay (Frankfurt: Campus, 2001), p. 29.

Paestum is the classical Roman name of a major Graeco-Roman city in the Campania region of Italy; it is located near the coast, about 85km southeast of Naples in the province of Salerno.

This paper, which marked Yahil’s first attempt to apply a comparative method in Holocaust historiography, was never published. Several years later she published two other comparative studies: “Methods of Persecution: A Comparison of the ‘Final Solution’ in Holland and Denmark”, Scripta Hierosolomytana (1972), pp. 279-300; and “The Netherlands and Romania during the Holocaust – Aspects of Comparative Research” (Hebrew), in Pinchas Peli, ed., Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1972), pp. 195-200.

Dr. Franz Alfred Six (1909-1975) was both an academic who taught at the University of Berlin, and, after joining the SS in 1935, a senior officer in the SD and later the RSHA, dealing especially with ideological affairs. On Six see: Lutz Hachmeister, Der Gegnerforscher. Die Karriere des SS-Führers Franz Alfred Six (Munich: Beck, 1998)

Acronym of the Auswärtiges Amt (German Foreign Office).

Robert Kempner (1899-1993) was a German-born American-Jewish lawyer who served as Assistant US Chief Counsel during the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. He appeared as an expert witness at the Eichmann trial, and during
the trial published *Eichmann und Komplizen* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1961). We could not retrace the "letter to the editor" to which Yahil alludes.


* [28] “intelligence” is written in English.

* [29] Uriel Tal (originally Taubes) (1926-1984), a scholar who specialized in Jewish thought, modern antisemitism and the Holocaust, was Professor of Modern Jewish History at Tel Aviv University from 1972. At the time of this letter, he was still a doctoral student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His PhD thesis was later published as *Christians and Jews in the Second Reich* (1870-1914): A Study in the Rise of German Totalitarianism (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1969); English edition – *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich*, 1870-1914 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).


* [31] Yahil’s older son, b. 1943.


* [33] The killing of 49 residents of the Arab village Kfar Kassem and the area, all agricultural workers, who had been unaware of an imposed curfew, by Israeli Border Guard soldiers on October 29, 1956, the first day of the Suez Campaign.

* [34] Moshe Landau (1912-), born in Germany, fifth President of the Israeli Supreme Court. At the time, he was the judge who presided over the Eichmann trial.

* [35] Pinchas Rosen (1887-1978; formerly Felix Rosenblüth), German Zionist who emigrated to Eretz-Israel in 1926, became a politician and statesman, and was Israel’s

* [36] Benjamin Halevy (1910-1996), born in Germany, migrated to Eretz-Israel after Hitler’s ascendance to power; served as a District Judge and the President of the Jerusalem District Court until 1963 when he was appointed to the Supreme Court. He resigned in 1969, joined the Gahal party (which later became the Likud) and served as a Member of the Knesset for several years.

* [37] Yahil alludes to the many visits of African presidents and leaders in Israel in the beginning of the 1960s, when Israel pursued an intensive policy of developing relations with Black African countries.


* [40] The clause “the world’s worst correspondent” is in English.

* [41] Arendt was a fellow at the faculty of Wesleyan University in 1962-1963.
The term “crime against humanity” is in English.  
Israel’s Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law, 5710/1950.  
The term “crime against the Jewish people” is in English.  
The term “crime against the gypsies” is in English.  
Arendt actually wrote “Chutzbe”.  
Arendt stopped in the middle of the sentence and continued writing the letter on December 20.  
Kurt Blumenfeld (1884-1963) was a German-born Zionist who served as the secretary general of the World Zionist Organization (1911-1914), as secretary of the German Federation of Zionists (1909-1911) and later as president of that organization (1924-1933). He emigrated to Eretz-Israel after Hitler’s rise to power, lived afterwards in New York for several years and finally settled in Eretz-Israel in 1945, where he was among the leaders of the Leo Baeck Institute, established in 1956. Blumenfeld became acquainted with Arendt in Germany in the early 1930s and got her interested in Zionism.  
It is not exactly clear what “sensations” Yahil alluded to. Perhaps she was referring to some revelations in the fierce public debate around the so-called Lavon Affair, which raged from 1961 to 1963.  
Yaakov Bar-Or, who served many years successfully in the State Attorney’s office and had been a deputy prosecutor in the Eichmann Trial was removed from office in May 1962 following revelations that he did not have a proper license to practice law.  
A bitter dispute arose between Hausner and Justice Minister, Dov Joseph, regarding the powers of the attorney general. The government appointed a commission of inquiry into the matter in June 1962, headed by Supreme Court Vice President Shimon Agranat. The commission sided with Hausner’s interpretation of the attorney general’s powers, but he resigned in December 1962.  
“minor incidents” is written in English.  
This was Arendt’s address, added in handwriting by Yahil.  
As this is a copy kept by Yahil herself, it is unsigned.  
This sentence is extremely difficult to translate accurately; in German it reads: “Entweder es war ‘gut fuer’ die Gerechtigkeit, damit Recht in einer wichtigen Sache gesprochen werde, oder man haette es bleiben lassen sollen.”  
In German: “Für das Streiten ist also gesorgt.”  
Haaretz is the leading Israeli liberal newspaper.  
As this is a copy kept by Yahil herself, it is unsigned.  
Yerachmiel (Richard) Cohen is currently a Professor of Modern Jewish History at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. His MA thesis was published as: “The Individual in the Face of Totalitarianism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt”, (Hebrew) “Yalkut Moreshet”, 16 (April 1973), pp. 107-132. A reworked and expanded version in English: “Breaking the Code: Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem and the Public Polemic: Myth, Memory and Historical Imagination,”
Michael XIII (1993), pp. 29-86.

* [60] As this is a copy kept by Yahil herself, it is unsigned.

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