



# Family letters as a source I: From grandfather to grandson

**Peter Theodore Landsberg was born in Berlin on 8 August 1922 into an educated secular Jewish family. His father passed away in 1930, and after the Nazi rise to power he realized that he could not fulfill his ambition to study in Germany.** In his letter to John he explains: "I will not tell you here much about the effect of the Nazi-Jewish culture clash on a school boy in Berlin; it is fairly well documented." In January 1939, at the age of 16, he left for Britain to join his elder brother Rolf. At the beginning of the war Landsberg was regarded as an enemy alien and a security risk and interned on the Isle of Man. After completing an external degree in Physics at London University, he studied for an MSc in 1946 and was awarded a PhD from Imperial College in 1949.

In 1959, aged only 37, he was appointed Professor of Applied Mathematics at University College Cardiff, where he was deputy principal from 1968 to 1971. In 1972 he moved to the chair of Applied Mathematics at the University of Southampton, retiring in 1987. He died in February 2010. In his letter to John, Landsberg makes an attempt to reconstruct, and to explain, the changes and the continuities in this life, and to make his grandson aware of the "complicated" family history of which he is a part. Becoming "a Britisher", as he puts it, seemed easy at first; it was only when he realized how German his accent in the English language sounded (and that people kept asking him "where he came from") that he decided to write – for himself no less than for John – about the specific questions of identity and belonging that characterized the mind-sets of thousands of German Jews who had arrived in Britain as refugees. While he regarded himself as British, he could still identify with the sentence pronounced by President John F. Kennedy on 26 June 1963

Dear John,

You will be surprised to receive a letter from me, since we rarely write to each other. A grandfather is not a likely penfriend. But a systematic story is best set down in writing: it is then easier to see the structure of it all.

Your family name is rather foreign-sounding. You will find others of that name in the telephone directory, of course, but they are probably not related to you, or only distantly so, or else I would know of them. No, for our particular family group it was I who introduced this name to this country by coming here in the late 1930s. I was what people called a "refugee from Nazi oppression". My family were all Germans: father, mother, uncles, aunts. Some of them fought in the 1914 war for Germany and were killed or wounded. From your point of view they were on the "wrong side" in that great and bloody clash in which Germany battled against the USA, Britain, France and other countries. For me, too, they were on the "wrong side", but I cannot judge them harshly on that account. After all, they were not great nationalists or marching types; they merely did what, along with everyone else, they thought was their duty. Also I knew many of them personally, but only after that war. (Remember, I was born in the early 1920s.) Anyway, I liked most members of the family who I met; they were kind to me, gave me presents on birthdays, laughed and joked – just as it is in most families. Thus, though they were on the "wrong side", I understood them. How can I, or anyone else, reproach them for living in Germany? Or even fighting for Germany? My position in this matter is in no way disloyal to Britain. Why? All you need to remember is that in the second world war it was made clear beyond all doubt that we in Britain had no quarrel with the German people, but only with their cruel and inhuman government which had brought untold misery to the rest of the world. It was somewhat similar in the first world war, and in the "cold war" between East and West during the period 1950–1990.

The additional complication, which flushed me out from one side of this divide to the other, was that all my family were Jewish: father, mother, uncles, aunts. There were one or two exceptions of mixed marriages, as one would expect from the rules of probability which govern the question of when and where which boy meets what girl. They were all liberal Jews: free thinkers, more or less well-educated, who would not worry about kosher food or the sabbath and who would visit the synagogue perhaps once a year, or so. Of course, all of them would regard Jesus Christ only as an important figure in history, but nothing more. A Jew is, after all, someone who does not believe in Jesus and has forgotten the Hebrew he learnt at school!! But other religious groups share this reservation about Christ's divinity. As an example of this rather broadminded approach to life, you might note that my mother was one of the first medical women graduates in Germany when she graduated about 1900. Women had only just been allowed to complete degrees in German universities

Thus at the age of sixteen I found myself in England with the financial support of my mother's brother, who had emigrated earlier to Brazil. My older brother was studying in London. But I was essentially alone: an insignificant seedling of German-Jewish culture had dropped onto the green pastures of England. Would it take? Actually, you, John, lucky fellow, are one of the fruits.

Peter Theodore Landsberg, Letter to his grandson John (July, 1993)

from the balcony of the Schöneberg town hall: „Ich bin ein Berliner.“ This heritage remained important for him, and he wanted to pass it on to his grandson.

## Notes

[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/7741783/Professor-Peter-Landsberg.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/7741783/Professor-Peter-Landsberg.html), 19.05.2010. Joachim Schlör, *Liebes Berlin! Stadtgefühle in der Korrespondenz zwischen Berliner Emigranten und ihrer Heimatstadt*. Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg 2020 (forthcoming).



## Source commentary provided by:

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