Correspondence of Bracha Fuld (Berlin, 1926 - Tel Aviv, 1946) in the Netzorg Family Papers Collection at the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library

Mordoch, Gabriel; Gertel, Elliot H.

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Introduction

A considerable number of women had left their mark in the Jewish community’s struggle for independence in British Mandate Palestine. The most famous example is probably Hannah Senesh (1921-1944), who left Hungary for British Mandate Palestine in 1939. Others, like Bracha Fuld (1926-1946), remain relatively unknown. Who was Bracha Fuld? Why was she important? The goal of this paper is to familiarize the audience with the history of Bracha Fuld and to share our preliminary assessment of her correspondence housed in the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.¹

Bracha Fuld was born in Berlin on December 26, 1926 and arrived in British Palestine in the summer of 1939, at age twelve. Her mother Charlotte (also known as Lotte) arrived in British Palestine a couple of months before Bracha. Both had spent about one year in London before moving to Palestine. Bracha’s older sister, Petra, born in 1923, arrived in the United States in September 1938, at the age of fifteen. Their father, Lothar, who was very patriotic, served in the German army during World War I. He apparently committed suicide a couple of days after Kristallnacht (the wave of violent anti-Jewish attacks that took place on November 9 and 10, 1938 in Germany).² Lotte’s mother (Bracha’s grandmother) settled in British Palestine in 1934.

¹ We should thank Olga Virakhovskaya, Archivist at Bentley Historical Library, for encouraging us to engage with the Netzorg Family Papers.
² Lothar Fuld was born on July 27, 1886 and died on November 20, 1938 (according to correspondence between Petra with Sari Gal, Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box 12).
Bracha’s original name was Barbara, but it was changed to Bracha (a less Diasporic name) when she arrived in Palestine. Bracha became a member of the Palmach (the elite fighting
force of the *Haganah*, the underground army of the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine). She was killed on March 26, 1946, during what was later called Wingate Night, an operation designed to assist illegal Jewish immigrants on the vessel Wingate to disembark on the coast of Tel Aviv.3


The vessel sailed from the small island of Palestrina, Italy, (not far from Venice), carrying 238 *ma’apilim* (Jews who immigrated illegally to Palestine during British control in the 1930s and 1940s). The plan was for this vessel to rendezvous with the vessel “Tel Hai” and transfer her passengers to that vessel. That rendezvous did not occur, and the Wingate, sailing on a very rough sea, continued on her route to Palestine (Ben-Tzur, date of publication not provided). The illegal ship Wingate was seized by the British at sea, and the operation was canceled. In one of the few clashes between the British and the *Palmach*, Fuld was killed. As pointed out by researchers like Nir Mann (2011) and others, she immediately came to symbolize female fighters in the campaign for independence. Some months after Bracha was killed, another ship of illegal Jewish immigrants was named after her.4 The famous Israeli poet Natan Alterman, for example, wrote poems dedicated to Bracha in his column *ha-Tur ha-shevi‘i* (later published in his book *Yir ha-Yonah*). Kurt Singer (1951) included Bracha among the “greatest women spies” in the world (because of her supposed affair with a British officer), and Sari Gal (1995) wrote a kind of historical novel about her (in Hebrew).5

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3 This vessel was named in honor of the British Major, Orde Charles Wingate, who, while on tour of duty in Palestine during the years of the riots of 1936-1939, helped the Yishuv (Jewish community) in defending itself against Arab groups.
4 About the vessel Bracha Fuld see Yarkoni (51-52).
FIGURE 5. News of Bracha’s death in Tel Aviv’s Hebrew press. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 2, Newspaper clippings. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.

It is worth pointing out that both Kurt Singer and Sari Gal tend to transit between fiction and reality. These authors usually do not mention their sources and deliberately fill gaps without documented evidence. Therefore, both can be read as a kind of historical fiction. Sari Gal had access to some of the letters Bracha and her mother wrote, but does not mention them in an academic fashion. A more scholarly portrait of Bracha Fuld appears in an article written by Judith Baumel in 2004 (in Hebrew). None of these writers, however, had full access to the correspondence written by Bracha Fuld and her mother, housed at the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library since 2012.

The correspondence of Bracha Fuld

Let us now turn our attention to Bracha’s correspondence. The letters she exchanged with her sister Petra are housed in the Bentley Historical Library, which is one of the twenty-two campus libraries in the University of Michigan system. The Bentley Historical Library “collects the materials for and promotes the study of the histories of two great, intertwined institutions, the State of Michigan and the University of Michigan” (Bentley Library’s website).6

We visited the Bentley Library to prepare this AJL conference paper, which offers just a brief overview of the materials related to Bracha Fuld that are housed there. These materials are part of the Netzorg Family Papers, a collection that includes thirty linear feet of materials distributed in thirty-seven boxes of which boxes one and two contain the Fuld Family Papers series. The collection also contains hundreds of pictures of the Fuld family, including many pictures of Bracha (visual material series, box 35). The collection was donated by David M. Netzorg in 2011. David is the son of Bracha’s sister, Petra. Petra and her husband Jock Netzorg owned the Cellar Book Shop, a bookshop located at 18090 Wyoming Avenue in Detroit, Michigan, which specialized in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. They supplied books for the University of Michigan Library and many other universities in the United States. Jock Netzorg’s father,

6 http://bentley.umich.edu/
Morton Isadore Netzorg, was a University of Michigan alumnus who for decades lived in the Philippines with his wife Katherine.⁷


FIGURE 9. Box number one, Fuld family correspondence, Bentley Historical Library Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library

⁷ More information is located in the finding aid available at: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-2012143?view=text.
Box number one contains part of the Fuld Family Papers (shown above). The folders are divided by month and year, starting with 1937 and finishing with 1959. Sometimes, more than one month is combined in the same folder. In addition, sometimes there is one folder for the entire year. Between 1937 and March 1946, there are twenty-six folders. Each folder contains an average of approximately fifteen letters, so we calculate that there may be around four hundred letters written during the period Bracha was alive.⁸

Lotte Fuld, mother of Bracha and Petra, wrote the majority of these 400 letters. Almost all of the letters were sent to Petra, who moved from Berlin to the United States in 1938 and settled in Detroit before 1944. Therefore, on one hand, we have Bracha, her mother Lotte, and her grandmother, all living in Palestine, and on the other hand, Petra in the United States. We have the letters Petra received, but we do not have the letters sent by Petra to the family in Palestine (at least not those letters sent during the period in which Bracha was alive). Some of the letters are written in German, some in English. Sometimes the language switches in the middle of the letter. Some letters are typed, others handwritten.

It is worth mentioning that the letters not only tell us about the Fuld family, but also contain vivid descriptions of life in Tel Aviv in the 1940s. These letters are therefore an important document for researchers of the Yishuv, the Jewish community of Palestine prior to the founding of the State of Israel. There are also many linguistic aspects worth studying in the correspondence. The few letters written in Europe are documents about Jewish life on that continent on the eve of World War II.

As previously mentioned, Lotte Fuld (Bracha’s mother) wrote the majority of the letters. Sometimes, however, Bracha and her grandmother also participated.⁹ We see it for example in two letters written in English, from May 16, 1942 and September 5, 1942, and in one letter in German, from July 7, 1942, where Bracha added just one line. She usually used her nickname “Babs” to sign the letters.

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⁸ The Netzorg Family Papers collection is briefly described at the series and subseries level, and a possible project would be to describe it at the folder level, or even at the item level. It would be, however, a huge undertaking. Instead, a more modest task would be to describe, at the item level, the few letters written by Bracha.

⁹ Lotte resided in Israel until around 1960, then moved to California. She was born around 1907 died in 1968. Petra Fuld died in 2008.
FIGURE 10. Letter by Lotte and Bracha Fuld from May 16, 1942. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1942
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library

FIGURE 11. Letter #31, by Lotte and Bracha Fuld, from September 5, 1942. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1942
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library
FIGURE 12. Letter by Lotte Fuld with Bracha Fuld’s inscription, July 7, 1942.
Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1942
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library

The collection also contains letters in German written entirely by Bracha prior to her arrival in Palestine. For example, two letters from Berlin (October 17 and November 17, 1938) and one letter from Lausanne (December 14, 1938):
FIGURE 13. Letter by Bracha Fuld from Berlin, October 17, 1938. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1938. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.
Berlin, den 17.11.1938

My dearest good sister,

I thank you very much for your nice long letter. It was such a fun to read it. I am very angry that I have aw my letter from you at home, so I can’t answer your questions. I am all right living with Tietz. It is very funny. I am very glad that I can have Joachim the whole day. We play table-tennis or we play gramophone. The last week our school was not open. Have you read the new-papers? Now my English letter is ready.


Ich wurde M.X. nämlich danach gefragt. Ich glaube ja. Ich kann mir denken,

Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1938
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library

FIGURE 15. Letter by Bracha Fuld from Lausanne, December 12, 1938.
Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1938
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library
In the following letter, from October 1939, Bracha writes sentences in German, Hebrew, and Arabic in what seems to be a translation exercise.

**FIGURE 16.** Letter by Bracha Fuld and other family members, October 1939. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1939. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library
In the following letter, from 1941, Bracha writes sentences in German and Hebrew. In the Hebrew sentence, she explains that now Hebrew is her preferred language. Bracha’s grandmother apparently wrote the second part of the letter.

FIGURE 17. Letter by Bracha Fuld and her grandmother [?], 1941. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1941. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.
Let us take a closer look at this letter, written by Bracha on December 22, 1941.

FIGURE 18. Letter by Bracha Fuld from December 22, 1941
Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box number 1, folder 1941
Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library
In this letter (December 22, 1941), Bracha thanks Petra for her birthday letter, and takes the opportunity to wish Petra happy birthday as well. Bracha was then about to turn fifteen years old. She shows enthusiasm for the fact that her sister got married. Bracha always expressed interest in her brother-in-law, Jock Netzorg. From the letter we learn that at that point Petra Fuld was living in Jackson, Michigan, a city located around seventy miles west of Detroit. Bracha says that although Tel Aviv is not a big town, life there “is going on like at New York. Telephone is ringing more than in ‘Reichsstrasse 4’. I would like to show our seashore. Everybody cries: ‘Just like the Riviera’. I do not know the Riviera but I think in spite of it that they are right”. In the following paragraph, Bracha discusses the possibility of going to America. She explains to her sister that she is not going there: “I think that you should know already that I shall not leave Palestine!!” On the verso, she tells the following: “I have two years till finishing school. Preliminary I am working in our ‘BUND’, (I do not know how you would call it in English). When I finished school, I shall leave the town for a year and shall work agricultural work. What will be after that I cannot imagine now. The Bund will show me the right way.” It is worth noticing Bracha’s use of the German word “Bund”. Most probably, she is not referring to the Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Litle, Poyln un Rusland, the famous secular Jewish socialist party, because the Bund was opposed to the Zionist movement. She may just be using the German word for “group” or “league,” without any special connotations in mind. On the other hand, her use of the word bund may be implicitly referring to a social and ideological environment that had led her to enlist in the Palmach in 1944. Bracha apparently is hiding something from both her family as well as from British authorities who could potentially read her letters. A letter written by her mother Lotte to Petra five days later (Dec. 27, 1941) supports this hypothesis.

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10 This is where they lived in Berlin (according to correspondence between Petra with Sari Gal, Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box #12).
11 According to Baumel (135), Bracha Fuld enlisted in the Palmach in 1944 after completing her high school studies.
Lotte writes,

I always thought that I have a good knowledge of human soul and not a too bad way to treat somebody psychologically. But as to Babs I don’t always succeed. I don’t worry too much therefore, for I know that this age is always a very precarious one and the relation to one’s mother, even if one is on the most friendly and confidential term together, is subdued in special periods of development to many up and downs. She considers me as a ‘non-Bund-member’ and therefore as somebody who doesn’t understand its goal and efforts thereto.
from the bottom of my heart. She is not yet mature enough to realize that this is not a question of membership or generation. For the time being she mostly makes a mystery of her meetings, discussions and lectures, she scarcely answers my questions and talks only superficially about the themes. Further research perhaps will show (or not) that Bracha eventually informed her mother about her underground military activity.

FIGURE 20. Bracha and her mother Lotte Fuld, probably in Tel Aviv, January 1943. Netzorg Family Papers Collection, box 35, Petra and Bracha Fuld, 1920s-early 1940s. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library
Concluding remarks

Although there are currently five streets named after Bracha Fuld in the State of Israel, her truly fascinating story is still a little-known chapter, either in Israel or abroad. One may feel sadness over Bracha’s untimely death and the great sacrifice she made to help her fellow Jews in their struggle to reach a new home in the ancient land of their ancestors. Within this sadness, however, one can find comfort in the fact that we are able to hear her voice and passion coming from the letters she wrote. These letters have not yet been studied in depth, and could shed new light on Israel’s pre-state years, in general, and on Bracha Fuld’s history in particular. We hope to keep researching the Fuld family correspondence housed at the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, and we invite students, scholars, and librarians to join us.

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