

16 November 1983

Dear Esther

I expect you have been having harsh thoughts about me, for not writing and letting you know what I think of your book. (Or maybe you don't really mind anyway.) Well, first it took me ages to get down to reading it because I had so much else to do and to finish. Then, as I told you, I'm a slow reader, so it took a long time to finish. That, in fact, is one of my main criticisms - the book should have been cut by about one third; it would have been a much better book, and much more readable.

Not that it wasn't readable. It bounded along with a great deal of impetus, and all the time I felt it was you who was talking to me - as, of course it was, but I mean sitting next to me and talking. It has all the forthright vitality and enthusiasm, the spontaneity and ability to reach out and grab at passing life that is so much part of your personality. And the courage. I am also lost in admiration at the power of your memory - I can't remember anything, never have been able to, and your book was full of details of times and places. Anyway, at the end, one feels: Hm, not a bad life, in spite of the bad bits; you lived it with great zest and spirit, and it was an accomplishment to have written it as you did.

My main criticism is that (unavoidably, because of the circumstances of its publication) you did not have an editor. The book cries out for a good editor. Every writer, even experienced ones (unless they've written dozens and reached the top) but most particularly new ones, need(s) an editor, and the book suffers because of that. I have other criticisms, but rather than raising silly disputes by letter, these can wait until we meet. But be proud of having written it, and seeing it in print. Too many such books lie unseen in drawers.

I don't seem to have any other news for you - which is one reason I've put off writing, nothing to write about. We chug along, Rusty and I, each pottering around, he with the conservatory (gradually getting finished) and all his painting, building, constructing tasks; me with bits of writing, a book review, this and that, and trying to start painting. We went to London on Saturday to a party for Ronnie Kasrils - have you seen his book? Haven't read it yet, of course, but it's selling like hot cakes, to coin a phrase. It was in someone's house in one of those streets you can't find and when you do you can't get into them, and when you have driven round ten blocks and entered from the other end you can't find parking. About a thousand people in a terraced house. But it was lovely to see Ronnie and Eleanor, and other friends. We also spent the afternoon with Keith, who had been to the borders of Rwanda and Burundi to photograph refugees, and said it was horrific beyond description - total barbarity. He's been to so many 'disturbed' places recently, he wants to stay put for a while. Had the proofs of my book - that was another thing that held me up from reading yours and writing to you. It took a couple of weeks, getting everything write, checking on names, dates, all sorts of things quite apart from the literals. But at least it's on its way and with any luck I will have copies by the end of December (publication is beginning of February.)

You should know, winter in England is very depressing. It's brighter today, but we had a fortnight of that deadly grey, light-limited weather, when there isn't any sky - not even cloud shapes - just a total

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So that's about all. We had a visit to our old house at Dorstone a couple of weeks ago, when a niece of mine had an exhibition in Hereford. Nice and nostalgic to see it, and lots of beautiful country that I miss very much. And quite happy to come back to Oxford.

Much love

Tuesday, Dec 18

My dearest Hilda

This too is going to be just "a quickie" - the phrase is yours (your letter Nov 6) not because, like you, I'm flying and jetting around the world, but because I have set myself a deadline to finish the extra chapter which my publisher wants about my life in Israel before I leave for SA on January 17 (my God, only a month!) or at latest end February (will be in SA until beginning February). Don't know why I impose these pressures on myself - can't imagine anything earthshattering will happen if I don't finish it by March, but that's me. And the brief experience I've had with the publishers leads me to believe that they are messers about which makes my rushing to finish either useless (because they'll still mess about) or important (because it might nudge them to get on with it).

I shall tell you the story of how I got on to the publisher, etc, next summer - it's a long story and can wait and I'll tell it better than write it.

I want to hear about how YOUR book is coming along. Have you finished the interviews and the preparatory work, and so on. But I can't understand if you do not want to write long letters because I ~~xxx~~ resent having to stop writing to do ANYTHING. Have cut my widespread correspondence to my children and people back home to arrange my visit and someone special like Hilda Bernstein. I even resent having to do the work for which I'm paid. I just work - at the office, I type my clean draft, at home I write the first rough one and then type the next rough one which is brought to the office and then typed clean. Still, can't say no to invitations.

So last weekend I was in Haifa - addressed the feminist organization there - started speaking at 8:30 and finished at 12:30 - wouldn't let me go, finally I said I was going ~~xxx~~ home and they could continue talking for as long as they liked. Next morning one of them came to visit - worked all day, reading and editing; family dinner that evening; next morning two former South Africans came for tea and got into argument with them about SA today; afternoon went to Arab town Shakhin in the Galilee for gathering of Jews and Arabs - loved it and felt no ~~xi~~ guilt until I came home about not having worked the whole day. I'm sure you understand what I mean.

Did I tell you about my tremendous triumph at Um El Fahum - remind me to tell you when we meet. Will say only that I got a standing ovation before I opened my mouth - wonder what the chairperson said when he introduced me to account for such a reception. Have no doubt that 80% was intended for ANC and not Esther L. Met a guy there - works for association of prisoners welfare - has a dream that Mandela should come to Israel to meet with 30,000 prisoners and wants me to get Mandela to make his dream come true! I asked him whether authorities would release all those thousands to enable them to gather in one place for the occasion or would Mandela travel from prison to prison to meet them. But he is giving me a letter which he wants me to hand to Mandela and bring back a reply.

I'm going to say something to you that I wouldn't say to anyone else. I have a horrible feeling that South Africa is going to be another Mozambique, another Angola, another Nicaragua, Chile - with N Inkatha substituting for MNR, Unita, Contras, Pinochet, respectively. Nevertheless, one of the main reasons for my going back home on January 17 is to try to arrange to go back to live there permanently. I have had enough of exile, no matter how comfortable it is. Although with people being murdered almost daily, not very comfortable here either. But, no matter, I want to go home.

And this was supposed to be a 'quickie'?

Much love to you and Rusty

Esther



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SENDER

השולח הערשל

ADDRESS

מען ענוואן

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PLACE נייקוד רש

יישוב מכל האקאמא פו

אין לשוים דבר באיגרת אוויר. איגרת שהושם בה דבר תישלח בדרך היס
AN AEROGRAMME CONTAINING ANY ENCLOSURE WILL BE SENT BY SURFACE MAIL
אזא וזע אי שני'בדאחל הדה רסאלא פאנהא תרסל באלבריד העאדי

איגרת אוויר
AEROGRAMME
رسالة جوية مطروقة

דואר אוויר
BY AIR MAIL
بالبريد الجوي

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اسرائيل

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Tuesday, December 24 - Xmas Eve

"Do you celebrate Xmas?" you ask. Im prepared to celebrate Xmas or anything else, if I have someone with whom to celebrate. Here, its just another day. In fact, Ive just finished the last of my Christmas greetings, written on aerogrammes because while Im sure there ARE Christmas greetings cards here, Ive no idea where to find them and the effort involved is ^{just} too much to contemplate.

Actually, Ive really no one to celebrate anything with. I wanted to rejoice with someone about the latest news from SA - imagine, actually on the road to a BILL OF RIGHTS! in South Africa, universal franchise, et al. So I rejoiced on my own and put a little rum into my cococola - ~~the~~ depths of my degeneracy.

Do you believe in ... no not Santa Clause, but ESP. On the Saturday night, as I lay buried beneath blankets, lying on a heating pad and snuggled around a hot water bottle (for want of anything better) it occurred to me that by now ~~you~~ you should have reached the end of your magnum opus and that one day/week soon, I would be hearing from you (Xmas never entered my mind living here). And the very next day's post brought our Christmas card, which incidentally is the same you sent last year (or maybe the year before) but lovely nonetheless. Actually arrived just in time because the one like it which adorns my refrigerator is looking a little tatty and will now be replaced by the new one. I think I have one of the most picturesque refrigerators - all kinds of cards displayed on it which depict my life - including a lovely card of the Freedom Charter.

Anyway Im glad that our relationship which was placed in cold storage has now emerged to take its rightful place in my life at any rate.

And what are my plans for tomorrow - Xmas day - after work, am going to the office of "Workers Hot Line" which helps Palestinian migrant workers who come to Israel ~~xxx~~ and are the victims of exploitation and discrimination- to the extent that they have to fight for payment for work they have done; pay towards workers funds but receive no benefits from them, and have very little recourse to obtain what is rightfully theirs. I wrote a newsletter for them and they want an update. From there, I am going to a meeting of the local Communist Party to hear the former leader of the party report on his attendance at the CPSA congress ^{in South Africa} earlier this month. He will of course speak Hebrew, but Im sure he'll give me a half hour and tell me all about it in English.

This weekend Im off to Jerusalem - winds, freezing cold, rain forecast BRRRR!!! I shall defy ecologist disapproval and wear my fur coat. There are all kinds of doings arranged for Friday - all of them ~~out~~ out of doors, which I may or may not join. But I shall certainly join a visit to the occupied territories to meet with Palestinian women which, hopefully, will be indoors.

I have been working flat out because Wizo k is having an international conference mid January and although everyone knew about it for two years, they have only just now become conscious of all that has to be done. In fact, because everyone who has even one sentence - and silly one at that - that has to be written in English, is beating a path to my door and I have ruthlessly refused to do it. So complaints have been made about me and I told madam president that I was employed to write speeches in English and anything else in English for HER and not for the whole organization and if people employed to do a job were qualified to do it, I would not have to (I mean, publicity has to write something for the Jerusalem Post, and they can't so, it comes to me) And if they can't, they should be fired and someone who can should be employed. Also, if I am doing everyone's work, I should be paid all their salaries. It worked. And the pressure is off.

Having said that, I'd better get back to the grindstone. But first the Jerusalem Post crossword (junior is all I can manage).

I do hope that now that the pressure is off you, I shall hear from you as of yore (what on earth is "yore"). As I didn't see you and Rusty last summer, why don't we try to plan to spend a few days together next summer, in England or elsewhere.- where its WARM

Much love to you both. I wish you good health, peace and contentment for the new year and many more years to come.

Much Love
Esther



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The following names were suggested to me by Barbara Masekela, who for many years was head of the ANC's Cultural department in exile in Lusaka. She has now returned to South Africa..

~~Private information~~

Mrs Esther Levitan

APT. ~~XXXXXX~~ 42

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Robyn Slovo is doing some research for me for the book - dates and lists of various episodes, which I have to use to explain what some people are talking about. Helluva lot of interviews will land on the cutting floor, so's to speak, because they're dull, or repetitive, or I didnt ask the right questions. Troubles with my publisher - conglomerates keep on buying up all the smaller more independent firms, whole publishing business is getting to the stage where only Jackie Collins et al can hope to be published. Hope you have a good contract, and keep me posted about what is happening to your book - and to you.

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