

Mildred Focht: Student in Berlin at the Time of the Rise of the Nazis

by Samantha Moyer

"Here you see the swastika formation," Mildred Focht wrote on the back of a postcard to her sister, Elizabeth, dated September 15, 1933. Taken in Berlin's Stadium, built to host the 1916 Olympic games, the photo shows people assembled to form the infamous Nazi symbol. This short message was one of a series that Mildred, a young woman later to become a graduate of Susquehanna University, sent from Germany to her younger sister between September 1933 and January 1934. These postcards were part of a group that also included correspondence from Vienna and London in 1930. Lewisburg resident Betty McClure and her late husband, James Focht McClure, Jr., inherited the postcards from James McClure's grandmother Anna Focht, Elizabeth's cousin.

The fascinating set of cards indicate that Mildred made two trips to Europe, one in 1930 spanning several weeks and cities: London, Belgium, Vienna, Cracow, Moscow, and Leningrad. One of Mildred's first cards is of the young Queen Elizabeth.

A second set of postcards indicate an extended stay in Berlin beginning in September 1933 and lasting five months. Mildred studied at Humboldt University in Berlin, when Hitler was accumulating the momentum which would lead to the catastrophe of the Second World War. In late 1933, just months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Nazi propaganda was prominent. Most of the postcards Mildred sent to her sister feature images of prominent Nazi officials or symbols, some taken by Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's official photographer. Hoffman is remembered for taking photos of the Führer practicing gestures for a speech (and preserving the prints even after they were ordered to be destroyed) indicating Hitler partook in such rehearsals and obsessed over how he portrayed himself to the public.

Mildred studied in Berlin just as the Nazis were gaining velocity. Just four months prior to her arrival, on May 10, 1933, twenty thousand volumes from Humboldt University's library were burned as part of a Nazi demonstration accompanied by a speech by Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. In a postcard where Mildred describes the university and her lectures, she does not mention the event, but is nearly impossible that she would not have known about this act of censorship.

In contrast to the sinister actions of the Nazis, their public image was fostered in such a way as to win them favor with the German public. Among Mildred's postcards are portraits of Hitler, Herman Goering, and Paul von Hindenburg, appearing caring and compassionate: Hitler feeding two fawns, with the caption "The Leader as Animal-Friend;" Goering and Hitler with Goering's grandchildren. One of the more chilling photos is one taken by Hoffmann of Adolf Hitler with a young girl. Mildred wrote,

"The young lady does not seem at all frightened! She is just a little peasant girl - no one in particular. The picture is very popular - with good reason, I think. Berlin, Jan. 1934"

Mildred seemed wise to the workings of propaganda images such as this, but she was never explicit in her feelings toward the Nazi regime. In a postcard sent in November, she writes somewhat cryptically, "I don't exactly want to stay, but I think it might be wise."

In the months that Mildred was in Berlin, Europe was dealing with the failure of the post-WWI Versailles system, and with disappointment in the League of Nations. Neither system succeeded in preserving the balance of power: the Versailles settlement proved too harsh, while the League was too weak to handle the threats of the 1930s. In October of 1933, Hitler withdrew from the League of Nations and left the Geneva Disarmament Convention, stating that Germany was not being treated fairly in the negotiations. These actions would prove catalytic steps on Hitler's path to war, resulting in one of the largest and most destructive conflicts in human history.

In contemplating these events, which to us seem significant, yet also distant, it is remarkable that Mildred Focht, a student from our own Susquehanna valley, was there to witness history.



Formation at Berlin Stadium, 1933



Hitler feeding a fawn



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