Home Front and War Front in World War II: the correspondence of Jill Oppenheim de Grazia and Alfred de Grazia (1942-1945)

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Preface

TO THE WAR CORRESPONDENCE OF

JILL OPPENHEIM DE GRAZIA AND ALFRED DE GRAZIA

The correspondence of Jill Oppenheim de Grazia and Alfred de Grazia, first lovers and then married, conducted between February 1942 and September 1945, has been almost entirely preserved and constitutes some 1200 letters and 775,000 words. The Chief Archivist at Carlisle Barracks, Pa, where personal documents relating to the Army are stored, thinks that it may be the largest extant collection of correspondence between a soldier and a person on the home front: his opinion is shared by other persons at the Hoover Library at Stanford University, the Army Historical Section in Washington, and archivists elsewhere. It may be the last of its species, too, because the revolution in tele-communications that lets the front line talk to anyone in the world, because the great airplanes of today can carry troops everywhere including home, and because so long a war, and, hopefully, perhaps a great war itself, is not foreseeable.

Al was inducted into the Army as a private on February 19, 1942, a cloudy, freezing morning, as his autobiography, "The Taste of War" tells us. Jill's letters were addressed from Chicago, with a few exceptions mainly from San Francisco and New York City. A Smith College Graduate and University of Chicago Student in the years before the war and when she met Al, she was during the War a "swinging single," a housewife, a publicity writer for the Kelly-Nash Political Machine, a war worker, then a mother, and a habitue' of the University of Chicago circles of the time.

Al was a private, corporal, cadet, lieutenant and captain, in the artillery and then in intelligence and combat propaganda. His letters come from Tennessee, North Carolina, Texas, the California-Arizona Mohave, Virginia, aboard ship, and further from dozens of locations in North Africa and Europe, representing seven military campaigns in Africa, Sicily, Italy, Rome, Southern France, and the Rhineland to Munich at War's end. His last post was as commander of combat propaganda operations of the American Seventh Army.

His experiences ranged from soldier's barracks to Washington OSS and on to all forms of uses and control of media (press, film, leaflet, loud-speakers, and infiltration over the front lines), prisoner interrogation, intelligence and counter-intelligence, and the command of troops. He was involved at critical turns of the campaigns, several early landings, the seizure of Bari, the Cassino fiascos, the liberation of Rome, the failure of the Montelimar trap, and the opening of the death camp at Dachau. He worked directly with British, French, Italian, and German troops, with civilians of several countries, with prisoners of war and displaced persons from the Soviet Union and other countries.

The collection of letters narrowly escaped loss on several occasions. It was enhanced by periods of separation during which telephone calls were impossible or too expensive; the longest separation endured for two and a half years, and the baby Kathy was two years old when she awakened howling at the first appearance of her father. The invention of V-mail permitted reliable, fast interchange, and what was important, the conservation of the packets of letters by the soldier.

The letters of Jill are more explicit and frank than those of her man, in good part because she is a superb writer with a biting wit and a knack for keen detailed observation. Too, an American officer writing to his wife from the war zone could not write freely. It must be borne in mind that the first person to read the letters of Al was his Army censor. His mail was censored by another officer of superior rank or by a special censor, often the same person for months on end. The writer must not mention

any incident or attitude that would be of value were it to be known to the enemy. Poor morale, weapons functioning, casualties, specific locations, forthcoming operations, and even the numbers of facing enemy units were not to be told. The writer could not for other reasons describe hostile relations among officers and men, mistakes of judgement, embarrassing incidents of many kinds, and the heroism of the enemy when it might occur, nor could he criticize the leaders of the war effort.

The censor also keeps an eye peeled for material that might be exploited by an unfriendly newspaper back home, and thence, indirectly, lend aid and comfort to the enemy. If not the enemy, then one's generals and other officers, the Congress, the Department of War, the President. An everyday question of the marketplace, the workplace, the home, the telephones of friends, is "What do you hear from Al?" and the answer becomes fleet-footed gossip. Therefore, a "safe" letter would be devoid of larger interest, flattering to one's authorities and comrades, non-military, non-political, non-critical.

These encumbrances upon the soldier are legal and formal, and backed by recognized and vague sanctions both, beginning with the excision of material deemed "illegal," "offensive," or "irresponsible," proceeding through to the reporting to superior quarters a "dangerous" penchant of the writer, to reprimand, to removal from a position or even discharge from the service. But censorship also means that another person is reading one's mail, often a known person. Lovers' quarrels, gambling, confessions of fear, reflections upon one's timidities and fears, reflections upon life and death, expressions of intimate love, and financial difficulties are self-censored to avoid the anticipated invasion of privacy by the censor.

Nor was frankness of personal expression typically American; on the contrary, the soldier, like his censors and comrades, was more embarrassed, prudish, and restrained than his descendents fighting in the wars of Korea and Vietnam. There came later a remarkable opening of soldierly expression among themselves, in the press, and generally.

Besides, the soldier is often worried to express his feelings to a

loved one, because he cannot control their effects. He cannot appear in person or via telephone or fax to make amends for his own failures in communicating fully and satisfactorily his feelings. (It is noteworthy how the immense correspondence at hand verily begins with a pathetic misunderstanding as the soldier enters the army.) He is afraid to picture conditions as bad as they are or to be pessimistic about the duration of his situation or of the campaign or war.

The faithfulness of a lover may be put to trial should the soldier estimate the duration of the war and his absence as long as he really thinks that it will be. Nor does he reveal much if any of the sexuality that may be occurring, whether homosexual or heterosexual or onanistic, whether of himself or of the people around him. The commission of illegal or embarrassing or immoral acts such as the killing or abuse of prisoners, cruelties to civilians, the useless destruction of property, and dereliction of duty, this so common, are hardly mentionable. Nor does the soldier typically describe how poor are his conditions of life or the danger he may be in, for he wishes to preserve his loved one from anguish or sorrow. Probably frankness is most evident in letters among peers, but these are least likely to be saved; and even these suffer from many of the described restraints.

With all of this, the personal letters of American soldiers of World War II hardly tell their story. Nor were their literary ability, powers of observation, and scope of experience sufficient to enhance the record. Additional peculiarities of war correspondence are frequently not understood. In the totalitarian condition of the Army in the field, and even with the best of morale, the soldier thinks of food and drink extensively. And when he writes from below the scissors of the censor he chatters excessively of food, drink, and of love if he has a love to address and in any event longing, interminably, so it seems, food and nostalgia. Nor is it true that such a soldier is a better soldier; rather, the censoring authority cannot very well call such feelings dangerous and strike them out. They may very well be dangerous, but bathos is the sweet pudding of the masses in war.

Perhaps the censorship of soldiers' mail should never have occurred. The nasty direct effects extend into remote effects such that the soldier becomes a reluctant character, remote from civics, who lacks belief in the war and ties at home. Then he may wish only to save himself, which is against the will of his generals. We are here in the realm of supposition, and had best retreat from it.

As author of half these letters, I should go through them to excise a few entries unnecessarily harmful to individuals and to correct errors arising from hearsay reports, mostly slanders passed along by others. These are quite rare, perhaps a score of lines in the total corpus of correspondence of the two authors. Strong opinions and hyperbole may be kept even when proven wrong by events or contradicted by a later change of mind. Indeed, it would be well to indicate the point wherever a word is changed or excised.

The author, more importantly, can go through the text to insert place-names wherever possible (in scores of cases), and in many places by a line or two can indicate the reason for vagueness of detail and what the detail was (as, for example, that he was waiting to invade Southern France, at a peculiar location that did not make sense in his letters). A phrase, a sentence, can often make a passage or letter jump out and become vibrant. It will help, too, if the letters are published as his and hers in the order in which they hear from each other, even though the events of which they speak thereupon become disjointed in time. In fact, the psychology of temporality may find of interest this double and triple-faceted time, and other embedded facets of time as well, for they speak of old times, times to come, what has been reported in the press, what will be the verdict of history on events, and give the tenses of grammar every possible kind of exercise.

The alpha and omega of the letters is love. The challenge that the lovers set for themselves, imperiously and yet unconsciously, is to express their love in every last letter in a different special way, while, at the same time, according due

attention to the vast storm of history through which they are driven, and to the exigencies of their daily lives.

Alfred de Grazia
Princeton, New Jersey
1998

Foreword
by the Editor

When Alfred, my husband, asked me to edit the war letters of Jill Oppenheim de Grazia and himself, I was surprised at my own complaisance. I had loved Jill and she me, from the time I came off the plane from France. And as time passed and the letters began luminously to cross our threshold, I began to grasp that something as large as life was pulsing in the beyond. Alfred had managed through half a century to hold onto it, carrying it as it grew large through all manner of tribulation, fighting off the encroachments of dozens of moves upon dispensable property. Now here it was, and, with Jill's permission, he was now setting this massive cornucopia down before me. I, of course, accepted. And, with the acceptance, came a deep gratitude on the part of Alfred and myself to Julia Bernheim, who word-processed the whole of the writing over a period of several years, and to Krishna and Syamala Jonnalagadda, who undertook to present the letters serially on the Web: < http://www.grazian-archive.com, > and thereafter formatted and manufactured the master CD-Rom that contains them.

The size is astonishing, more so when one considers its quality. Professor Stephanie Neuman, then of West Point and Columbia University, spoke of Al de Grazia as "a soldier who seems to have gotten into nearly everything." Much of this derring-do has entered into his letters, much more into his book on *The Taste of War*, and I was fortunate enough to be able to use as much as I needed of that extensive work to illuminate and document the letters. As he himself explains in his introduction that follows, there were many reasons, apart from his imperfections as a writer, that kept his letters less grisly, rambunctious and scandalous than they might otherwise have been.

Such was not the case with Jill. I am French and know the famous French literature of letters well, but even speaking of them, and certainly of what I have read of American and British letters, I must claim Jill for the top masters of the idiom. She showers us with continuously brilliant and innumerable facets of

America at home at war – the society from New York to San Francisco, the workers from the housewife to the assembler, the ribaldry of Chicago machine politics, the total incredible hustling about of the myriads trying to find their place in the Armageddon against fascist evil. And perhaps the most striking of all, when you think of it, the day by day portrayal of conception, pregnancy, birth and upbringing of the faraway father's child. And for such as I who was not yet born either, but learned of such literature later, there were the solid and harsh reviews of countless books and the spectacle of intellectual controversy such as lit up the atmosphere of the great University of Chicago on the Midway.

I have tried to arrange the letters as close as possible to the dreamed conversation that the young lovers gamely strove to achieve over a period of four agonizingly long years. I could not, in many cases, undo what the Army postal service had done in delivering several letters of different times at the same moment, or what the movements along the front and Al's erratic missions had done to make letters come limping after him. Still, everything catches up with everything else, finally, and it all comes out well, I am happy to say.

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