

Lohmann: Throughout her long, sometimes sorrowful life, letters kept Frances Nunnally in touch

Some people paint, some sculpt. Frances Nunnally wrote letters. Sweet, thoughtful, meaningful letters. Handwritten letters. To loved ones, friends, the editors of newspapers. Me.

Nunnally, who died last week at age 101 after a brief illness, grew up in an era when letter-writing was pretty much the only means of long-distance communication. But for her, the medium was even more personal and poignant.

Frances (Franziska) Huppert Nunnally, who grew up in Vienna, Austria, survived the Holocaust because her parents, soon after Hitler annexed Austria, sent her to England as a teen to work as an au pair for a British family. She never saw them or her only sibling, her brother, again, but before their deaths — her father died of a heart condition shortly before he was to be deported, her mother was herded onto a train with other Jews, taken into a forest and shot by a firing squad, and her brother was captured and never heard from again after being sent to a series of Nazi concentration camps — she kept in touch with them by letters. Each correspondence was a precious gift, a fragile, fleeting lifeline to her family, and later, treasured keepsakes.

It seemed appropriate then that a few years ago I received a letter from Nunnally about a Christmas column I wrote about a child's letter to Santa that had been written in the 1940s and had resurfaced 70 years later in a coins-and-collectibles shop and was reunited with its author.

Nunnally wrote that my column inspired her to dig into boxes of her own letters and reread ones that meant so much to her — letters her mother had written to her in England

around the same time, in 1940, and smuggled out of Nazi-occupied Vienna, letting her know what their days were like and how much she loved her.

Nunnally's letter was accompanied by a second letter written on the most delicate and thinnest, almost transparent, paper. The words were in German.

It was one of the letters from her mother.

I was astounded and touched — and, most of all, knew I shouldn't have it. So, I got in touch with Nunnally and made arrangements to stop by and return the letter.

I knew of Nunnally, having read many of her letters over the years that had appeared on the editorial page of The Times-Dispatch (she was frequently honored as "Correspondent of the Day"). Her letters often served as mini history lessons, educating and enlightening, frequently from her vantage point as a survivor of the Holocaust who had known great loss and great sadness, sharing her hard-earned wisdom.

But this was the first time I would meet her.

We had a [lovely visit](#) in March 2020, just before COVID-19 hit and sent us all into our respective corners. I learned, among other things, that after working as an au pair, she joined the British Army, serving in the Auxiliary Territorial Service during World War II, later decoded telephone calls in Germany for the U.S. Army, arrived in the United States on St. Patrick's Day in 1950, met Aubrey Nunnally at a Saturday night dance and later married him, had three children and worked as an editorial assistant at Christian Children's Fund (now ChildFund).

She recalled what happened in November 1938 during what has become known as Kristallnacht.

Synagogues were burned, windows smashed, houses ransacked. She watched from her family's apartment as Nazi storm troopers trashed the Jewish-owned grocery across the street and dragged the proprietors from their home. Nunnally's mother was cooking lunch when the men wearing swastika armbands knocked on their door, rousting her family from their apartment. Her family fled to the homes of a grandmother and an aunt, where they stayed for a few weeks before they were able to return home, which had been looted in their absence. Everything of value was gone, but there on the table were the dumplings her mother had prepared for lunch weeks earlier, untouched and "hard as rocks," Nunnally said.

I did not conduct another in-person interview until more than a year later, in the spring of 2021, when I went back to see Nunnally as she neared her 100th birthday. That afternoon proved to be the first assignment photographer Bob Brown and I collaborated on in-person since early 2020, and we couldn't have picked a more enjoyable subject. [As I wrote then](#), Nunnally was delightful and insightful yet incredibly humble.

Because she had been through so much in her life, I asked if she could offer advice to generations who can only imagine such experiences. She hesitated, saying not everyone welcomes such advice, but she offered some anyway:

"Just live each day and be thankful [to be] alive," she said. "There are situations in life that are beyond what some people can even envision. I know the world is full of danger and full of things that we wish would never occur. However, just try and make the best of it."

She also talked about how things had recently changed “radically” in her life because of her fading vision.

“I can see your face, but the pictures on the wall are very blurry,” she said. “And I cannot read the newspaper, and that’s a blow.”

She had learned she had a condition that affected the optic nerve. Despite that, she continued to write letters. I know because I received some in the months that followed.

“I have this vision of her sitting at the table in her chair, with her pen and paper, and writing her letters,” said her youngest child, Heidi, who was her mother’s caregiver in the final years of her life. “She would put a lot of thought into them. Sometimes [the letter] would sit there, and she would pick it back up the next day and finish it.”

(And she didn’t just write letters. Years ago, she wrote an essay that was included in a book: “100 Wonderful Women: 100 Stories of Women’s Service in the British Army Since 1917.”)

Toward the end, it took her longer to write, and Heidi would read behind her and help her out, but it remained an important part of her life.

“I think that was what connected her,” Heidi said of her mother’s lifelong letter-writing.

And her collection of old letters kept her connected to the family she lost so long ago.

She spoke particularly about letters from her brother, Heidi said, in part because there were so few. In one, he wrote from an internment camp, describing the harsh conditions and asking her to send him food because they had nothing.

After the internment camp, he was sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. Decades later, Nunnally shared the letter with an Austrian professor writing a contribution for a book to be used by teachers to educate children about the history of Austria.

"It was one of his last letters, and it was so dear to her," Heidi said. "To not be able to reach out and touch your brother, and you just have these pieces of paper that they've put ink on, and it just develops into this ... it's almost like a love letter, in a way, between siblings. I'm sure she felt pretty helpless not being able to do anything."

Among the correspondence smuggled out from Vienna to Nunnally were [postcards](#) from her mother. Nunnally donated three of the postcards to the [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#), along with a copy of her brother's last letter.

There are other letters that in recent times Heidi had her mother help translate for her before her vision became so poor she could hardly make out the writing at all. Heidi also has journals her mother kept while she was in England, and she looks forward to going through everything and "getting to know my mother again when she was a young woman."

Even toward the end, Heidi said, her mother loved keeping up her daily routine: hearing what was in the newspaper, doing her laundry, drying dishes in the kitchen after dinner as Heidi washed.

"Then we'd have a little cup of tea when we sat down to watch TV," Heidi said. Her mother often would doze in her recliner and then wake up with a start, her eyes unable to clearly focus in the evening light, and say, "Is anybody there?" Heidi would wave and say, "I'm here," and a relieved look would cross her face.

“Then she would take a sip of her tea,” Heidi said, “and say, ‘Good tea!’”

Reaching an advanced age is certainly a cause for joy, but it often requires enduring a heavy weight of grief and sorrow. Nunnally not only had her parents and brother taken from her early in life, but in recent years she also lost Aubrey, her husband of 64 years, and one of her two sons, and a sense of loneliness set in.

At the end, Heidi said, she whispered in her mother’s ear that she would soon be playing again with her best friend from her childhood in Vienna, riding on the back of her brother’s motorcycle and hugging her mama and papa.

“Instead of feeling sadness for her leaving me, I was feeling happiness for her,” Heidi said. “That helped me get through it a little bit. I was just happy with tears that she was finally going to be with them again.”