

“I AM LIKE GREEN FIREWOOD – NOT GOING OUT, NOT CATCHING FIRE!” A PRISONER’S SELF-PORTRAIT IN LETTERS

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of letters written by Fromhold Veidenberg (1906), a communist who entered the Republic of Estonia from the Soviet Union in secret in December 1932, to his relative from Võru, Johanna Eisen (1910–2002). Veidenberg’s intelligence mission failed: he was caught at the border and detained. The suspect’s interview revealed he was a student at The Communist University of the National Minorities of the West in Leningrad, and was sent across the border for a secret mission. After capturing, he was sentenced to six years at the Central Prison in Tallinn. Over four years in prison, in the period 1934–1938, he exchanged letters with several people, including Eisen, who initiated the correspondence. This article is based on 22 letters sent by Veidenberg from prison – he destroyed most of Eisen’s letters before being released in 1938. I will regard Veidenberg’s letters as biographical material, shedding light on the person writing them, to find out how Veidenberg depicts himself in his letters and which strategies he uses to create emotional intimacy with the addressee.

Keywords: communists, intelligence mission, private letters, romantic feelings, the Republic of Estonia, the Soviet Union

A short article titled “Communists Captured” was published in the newspaper *Vaba Maa* in October 1933 about two young men, one of whom was caught sneaking across the border in Narva on 18 December 1932, and detained. The other man managed to escape the border guard. The newspaper covered the story as follows: “At around 10 pm on the evening of 18 December last year, border guard Sirkel was riding his bicycle from Narva towards the border. Near the former Komarovka request stop a man came up to him from the opposite direction. The border guard jumped off his bicycle to ask where the man was coming from. At this moment he happened to look towards the border. Then he

saw a black shape escape into a bush and found a young man squatting behind it. He explained that he had come from Russia, crossed the border over the bog. But who was the other man? The young man who was caught explained that he didn't know him but said the guard would not catch the stranger as he had been across the border several times" ("Sissekukkunud Kommunistid" 1933). The suspect's interview revealed that the captured man mentioned in the article was a citizen of the Soviet Union, Fromhold Veidenberg who arrived in Estonia to fulfil a secret mission.

This article will give an overview of Veidenberg's letters sent from Tallinn Central Prison to his relative Johanna Eisen in Võru, who had initiated the correspondence. The letters were handed over to the Estonian Literary Museum by Eisen's daughter during the letter collection competition *Kirjad minu elus* ("Letters in my life"), organised by the Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum and the Estonian Life Histories Association in October 2020.

Veidenberg's letters are unique in the context of the mentioned competition, as well as in the context of research into letters and feelings. They are also an important addition to archival sources on Veidenberg available at the National Archives, which shed light on the thoughts and feelings of a communist and his daily life in prison. As Eisen's letters to Veidenberg have not been preserved, the research is based on a fragment of a larger full picture that can only be imagined. Hence, we cannot say anything of the addressee as a person, or the reason why she decided to write to Veidenberg, a person she did not know and had never met.

Other articles have been published in Estonia about different aspects of private letters (see Kalkun 2015; Kurvet-Käosaar 2015; Raudsepp 2018; Ojamaa 2022), but none have been focussed on the person sending the letters. In this article I will regard the private letters as biographical sources, which is why the posed research questions are connected to the writer's person. The first aim of this article is to explore how Veidenberg presents himself in his letters, i.e., how he portrays himself. Secondly, based on his letters, I will study which strategies Veidenberg uses to create a sense of intimacy with the addressee, which allows one to consider his letters as love letters.

FROMHOLD VEIDENBERG'S FAILED MISSION

Veidenberg's case was not special among other instances of espionage between the two world wars: historian Reigo Rosenthal has estimated that in the 1920–1940 period the Republic of Estonia brought over ca. 500 people suspected of

crimes of espionage to trial, with a judgment pronounced in 393 cases and the accused found guilty in 315 cases (Rosenthal 2013: 57). In the early 1930s Soviet intelligence became more active, especially in the 4th department of the Leningrad Military District, which organised intelligence missions in Finland, Estonia and Latvia. In 1932, 16 cases of espionage were filed in Estonia, and 19 in the following year, for which 40 people were convicted. The majority, 70% of people engaged with the cases from 1932 to 1933, had ties to the 4th department of the Leningrad Military District (ibid.: 231). The number of people recruited and sent over the border to Estonia with an intelligence task increased. At the beginning of the 1930s many Estonian communists were recruited by the Leningrad Military District Intelligence Department as well, with the hope that they “could organise intelligence activities more successfully owing to their knowledge of the Estonian language and acquaintances in Estonia” (ibid.: 231). Moreover, Estonian communists were recruited all over the USSR and sent to Estonia, tasked with recruitment or as couriers. They were often students of the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West in Leningrad. The university was founded in 1922 to educate future ‘revolutionaries’ and political officers.

The book *Sõda enne sõda. Nõukogude eriteenistuste tegevusest Eestis kuni 1940. aastani* (The War Before The War: The Activities of the Soviet Special Services in Estonia until 1940) mentions Veidenberg and his failed intelligence mission in Estonia, among other Estonian communists from the Soviet Union. According to Veidenberg, he was born in 1906 in Novgorod Governorate. In 1930, he began his studies at the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West. In December 1932 he was sent to Estonia on a secret mission, and detained. During interrogation in Narva Veidenberg claimed that he intended to move to Estonia and was helped by a person he had met by chance in Leningrad, who gave him money, new clothes, an Estonian ID by the name of Richard Aug, and sent him to the train station in Kingissepp, where he was supposed to meet a man who would help him over the border (Rosenthal 2013: 336). The order committing Veidenberg to custody reveals that he first introduced himself as Herbert Aaman, citizen of the Soviet Union.

As this story was not believable, Veidenberg later changed his testimony, revealing his real name and membership of the communist party, as well as the fact that he had been a student at the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West in Leningrad since 1930. He also held the position of secretary of the university party community. Veidenberg admitted to having met Heinrich Ross, who worked for the intelligence department of the Leningrad Military District, in his first year of study (ibid.: 337). Ross gave Veidenberg the task of travelling to Tartu and meeting up with a young man, from whom he

would receive some information or materials (*ibid.*). Ross also gave Veidenberg money, clothes and an ID. In the autumn of 1933, the military district court sentenced Veidenberg to six years of penal labour in accordance with § 102 and clause 2 of § 273. The military district court documents reveal that the convict was accused of joining the Estonian Communist Party and promising to find collaborators for underground activity with the aim of overthrowing the Republic of Estonia at the party's request. Veidenberg started serving the sentence on 5 October 1933 at the Narva prison, and on 22 November of the same year he was transferred to Tallinn Central Prison. Veidenberg was released in May 1938 in accordance with the Amnesty Act, which covered most cases of political prisoners, including 79 members of the Estonian league of freedom fighters and 104 people sentenced for communist activity, including Veidenberg (Kuuli 1999: 64).

PRISONER AT TALLINN CENTRAL PRISON

In prison people are given minimal privacy, and their lives are subject to countless rules; they are stripped of almost everything. This is why prison has been compared to an operation room in hospital or a mental institution: “The processes which in regular life develop slowly, and usually away from prying eyes, are visible to all in here” (Maiste & Vseviiov 2011: 16). Michel Foucault has stressed the importance of the instructional function of a prison, describing it as an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus which “must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind”, to impose a new form on the perverted individual (Foucault 2014: 339). Foucault emphasises that the main principles by which to achieve this goal are isolation, work, and the tendency of prison as an institution to assume the right to set a penalty (*ibid.*: 351).

The Tallinn Central Prison, or Patarei Prison, where Veidenberg served his sentence, was opened in 1920 and was supposed to house ca. 1,000 inmates (Saueaak & Maripuu 2007: 297). In the 1930s the prison was overhauled, but the inmates' living conditions remained poor. William Tomingas, who was arrested in the summer of 1934 for supporting the Estonian league of freedom fighters, started serving his sentence in the autumn of the same year. In his memoir he reminisces about how the budget to maintain each prisoner was 18 cents per day, for which the inmate received half a pound of bread, 12 grams of sugar, 2–3 potatoes, a few salted Baltic herring, coffee, half a litre of soup for

lunch and tea for dinner (Tomingas 1961: 321). Moreover, the prisoners' time for exercise was limited, it was supposed to be half an hour, but was cut down to ten minutes, and the inmates were only taken to the sauna once a month instead of once a week, as regulated (*ibid.*: 337). The main events of the day were roll-call, meals and exercise (walking), recalls Tomingas, which allowed prisoners to tell what time of day it was (*ibid.*: 338). To maintain a spiritual balance, Tomingas adhered to a strict schedule in prison: before lunch he did physical exercises three times, and walked the length of his cell 120 times, then read a few chapters of a book; after lunch, he held up a dialogue for an hour, and then played with fleas (*ibid.*). In 1934, prison life changed due to the start of the Era of Silence. Communists, who until then had been paired up in cells in a separate block, were moved to cells along the 5th corridor, which had 12–15 bunk beds per room (Maiste & Vseviiov 2011: 142).

Veidenberg's file, kept at the National Archives, sheds some light on how his re-education at the Tallinn Central Prison went. The file contains documents about taking him into custody and his time in prison from 19 December 1932 until 7 May 1938. Conclusions about Veidenberg's behaviour in prison may be drawn from an evaluation document, which reveals that every inmate was to pass two stages, a probationary stage and an improvement stage (which in turn, had three sub-stages), until they reached the stage of excellence. By the time Veidenberg was released, he had reached the second level of the improvement stage, which offered more freedom and benefits compared to the probationary period. A document called "A Description of the Everyday Behaviour of Persons in Custody" also describes Veidenberg as an inmate and reveals that his behaviour in the first year of imprisonment was good, although every year on 1 May he acted in a disorderly manner and sang, for which he received a 7-day disciplinary punishment. On 9 September 1934 he sent a letter to the Minister of Courts with a complaint about poor food and demanded "the food ration to be increased to a level sufficient for people to live on and the full ration of food to be delivered" (ERA.1868.1.1285). Veidenberg wrote his next complaint to the prison warden on 15 July 1935, accusing prison officials of brutality towards a fellow prisoner, Teodor Okk. On 19 May 1936 Veidenberg addressed a protest letter to the Minister of Courts, protesting against forcing political prisoners to work: "I will emphasise again that work in the prison has turned to a remarkable exploitation of the inmate workforce, as the hours are extremely long and the pay so low it's nearly non-existent. [---] To draw attention to my protest, I will not accept food today, on 19 May" (ERA.1868.1.1285). His eagerness to learn is illustrated by his request to the prison warden from 22 June 1937, asking to allow triangle rulers, a pair of compasses and a protractor into his cell for studying

mathematics, for which he received permission. The documents on Veidenberg's time in prison show that he was an active prisoner, aware of his rights, that he stood up for himself and did not hesitate to step up to help his fellow inmates.

VEIDENBERG'S LETTERS TO JOHANNA EISEN

The portrait that Veidenberg painted of himself can be viewed in the letters to his relative Johanna Eisen (1910–2002), from Võru, who was 24 when the correspondence started. Veidenberg's first letter to Eisen reveals that she initiated the correspondence, sending the first letter to Veidenberg in the spring of 1934. Veidenberg committed his first letter to paper on 5 June the same year. Altogether, 22 letters from Veidenberg to Eisen have been preserved, having been sent from the Tallinn Central Prison in the years between 1934 and 1938. Although Veidenberg ended the first letter with the hope of meeting the girl someday, his later letters reveal that this wish did not come true. Before his expulsion from Estonia in the spring of 1938 Veidenberg wrote to Eisen that he had destroyed most of her letters, but she carefully kept all of Veidenberg's letters, which indicates that they were important to her for some reason. In the case of Veidenberg's letters, one must emphasise the fact that they were thoroughly read before they were allowed to exit prison. Therefore, self-censorship is one of the main keywords in handling such letters.

According to Anita Wilson, an ethnographer who has researched life in prison, reading and writing are significant aspects of prisoners' routine social practices, and various forms of correspondence play a central role in maintaining modes of communication in prison (Wilson 2000: 179). A prisoner, who has many letters and cards to prove his wide social networks, is considered to have higher status in the eyes of his fellow prisoners compared to a prisoner with no outside connections (*ibid.*: 192). A prison is a place of extremes, hence, according to Wilson, prisoners' letters may be characterised by excessive language, heightened emotionality and various forms of exaggeration, including the visual side dominating in most letters, and inordinate length (*ibid.*: 194).

Janet Maybin, a scholar researching the correspondence of death row prisoners, identifies social isolation as the main reason for writing letters, although her subjects also saw penfriends as potential sources for funds, romance, or sex (Maybin 2000: 158). For some prisoners, exchanging letters was important to emotionally overcome the death sentence and keep them sane. The most important aspects in the prisoners' relationship with their penfriends were trust and honesty. Creating trusting relationships with their penfriends al-

lowed the inmates to express emotional attachment, affection and care, which were absent from their daily life in prison (ibid.: 160). Exchanging letters was undoubtedly one of the main outlets for creating and expressing emotional ties for Veidenberg as well, who, being a man in an unregistered marriage, found Eisen to be a trustworthy penfriend, but also a woman to whom he could express his romantic feelings, sometimes implicitly, sometimes expressly.

LETTERS IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE WRITING

Letters have been characterised as small stories or episodes forming part of a bigger story (Eiranen 2015: 82) – a life story or biography. Letters and other autobiographical texts, such as diaries and memories, can be viewed as a form of telling a person's story, often containing elements of other genres. Letters in which the writer's acknowledged aim is to create a portrait or an image to the addressee whom he has not met, have many similarities to confessional novels, in which the author's aim is to explain thoroughly their life and place the most intricate details and secret feelings of their inner life in the spotlight for the reader. However, the process of self-creation is still different in letters compared to confessional writing, the reason being that letters are dialogical (Stanley 2004: 202): the writer directly depends on the addressee's response in their previous letter. Hence, in correspondence life is not "a singular, static, one-sided entity, but is rather dialogically-constructed at the intersection of where the perspectives of the writer and the anticipated perspective of the reader meet" (Salter 2013: 102).

An interesting question to ask upon considering letters as a form of self-portrayal concerns the role of relayed feelings, emotions and self-interpretations. The letters may form a kind of an archive of feelings, to borrow Ann Cvetkovich's term, which she has used for cultural texts that can be studied as sources of feelings and emotions (Cvetkovich 2003: 7). Letter researchers have, however, underlined that letters are not factual accounts of how people used to live or live now, but rather are "evidence of how they represent changes in how they understand their lives and their relationships with their addressees, with 'how' here recognising changing conventions about letter-writing and also of the material means available for engaging in it" (Stanley 2013: 69).

As any other author of an autobiographical text, a person writing letters analyses their own life, creating a story comprehensible for them and the addressee of what they have experienced (Lahtinen et al. 2011: 21). This process may be conscious in part, but it can be directed by random circumstances, the

writer's feelings, unacknowledged wishes and conventions related to letter-writing (ibid.). Comparing Veidenberg's letters to other documents from his time in prison clearly shows that the manner in which he depicts his life in prison to the recipient of his letters is the result of a careful process of choice. For example, in several letters he writes of working at the prison shoemaking workshop, first mentioning it in a letter from January 1938 as a great way of killing time. Meanwhile, he stays silent about protesting against working in prison with the other communists. Such choices are characteristic of the construction process of an autobiographical subject. People tend to portray themselves in a better manner and ignore the more unpleasant characteristics and experiences. Comparing Veidenberg's letters to Tomingas's memories of prison leaves the impression that Veidenberg ignored many uncomfortable everyday details of prison life, such as poor bathing facilities, as well as the fleas and bed bugs which were ubiquitous in prison. Since Veidenberg's letters contain many discussions and thoughts about the writer himself, they provide great material to study how he presents himself to the addressee and what kind of image he creates of himself in writing.

VEIDENBERG'S SELF-PORTRAIT IN LETTERS

Veidenberg writes about himself a lot, which leads to the conclusion that he is the central topic of his letters. He regularly writes of his physical well-being, as well as his current mood, hopes and dreams. In his first letter he introduces himself to Eisen as a simple, mundane person who is not fluent in Estonian, and "who has the lowest expectations in life, in terms of personal gain" (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). This is followed by a confession: "In my life I have been through fire, water and copper pipes, which have certainly left their mark on my character. I must say, I am a bad person by nature, I am stubborn, principled, I hold a grudge, I seek revenge, I am jealous, etc. But I must say, I have striven to be fair, direct and 100% abstinent" (ibid.). Veidenberg repeatedly emphasises honesty in his later letters, declaring that he detests lies, which is why he never lies to his friends and comrades, and interprets ending up in prison as an accident of fate.

In addition to honesty Veidenberg emphasises his love for nature in his letters. In December 1934 he reminisces about a Christmas eve from his childhood, segueing from a memory of a Christmas tree to his love for nature: "I love nature, even its smallest, most insignificant phenomena. Since childhood I have spent many an hour dreaming in wild nature, building castles in the air in my

youth like everyone else, imagining my future. I like the Northern nature most for its subtle colours, quiet lakes, waterfalls and ancient forests” (ibid.). On 17 July 1936 he writes “I love to row somewhere on a river or a lake on a quiet summer night, all alone” (ibid.).

Another important component of Veidenberg’s self-portrait is his intellectuality. He often writes of reading or books he had just read or wanted to read, mentioning, for example, that he prefers philosophical literature but would gladly read Heinrich Heine’s and Henrik Visnapuu’s poetry as well. In a letter written at the beginning of 1938, he recollects his early passion for reading: “...my youth revolved around books. Oh, the battles I had to wage with my mother! I would read through the night, during meals, my mother would hide and threaten to burn them. I would carry books home from the local library 13 km away, everything available nearer I had already read” (ibid.). He often asked people to send him books – he was interested in the *Elav teadus* (The Living Science, a popular science series), and *Eesti rahvuslikud suurmehed* (Remarkable Estonian National Figures, a series of biographies) series. In his letters he also portrays himself as a big theatre lover, nostalgically reminiscing about the plays he had seen: “I was a frequent visitor to the academic theatres in Moscow and Leningrad. Operas, operettas, dramas, comedies, ballet – all are of great quality in Russia” (ibid.). In one of his letters, he mentions his great interest in cinema: “... I would go to the cinema a lot, to both silent and talking pictures, but when my head was heavy with work, I would go there to rest, I was not picky and watched whatever was shown. There were days when I would indulge – I watched 3–4 movies, one right after the other” (ibid.).

Veidenberg admitted to Eisen that as a student he had a thirst for knowledge, but acquiring it was hindered by the lack of necessary books. Nevertheless, he managed to learn some German and English from books written in these languages. In the later letters he writes of attempts to learn mathematics, in which he has “fallen behind greatly”, from Russian textbooks, as well as physics and economics.

In his letters Veidenberg briefly mentions life in prison as well. In his words it is monotonous and promotes unhealthy egoism, and he is afraid this sentiment has been carried over to his letters as well. To bring meaning into his life in prison, he spends a lot of time reading, for example, in one letter he claims to have read 260 books in one year, and he passes the time playing chess, dominoes and novuss. The letters reveal that taking care of his physique is as important for Veidenberg as feeding his soul. Already in the first letter he informs the addressee that when he was free, he would “play many kinds of sport”, but in prison he could only do exercises in the morning and wash himself with cold

water. He found exercises to be of great importance for “future life”. In August 1937 he admits that prison has affected his physical condition and health:

My health is not at all coming up roses, objectively, there are not many healthy parts left to my body. But my spirit is strong. [...] My breathing organs are not working, many teeth are missing, the ones that are not, are broken and ache, etc., but I'm not planning on complaining to anyone, to whom would I complain? (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70)

Among other issues, bad health was caused by poor prison food, which he complains about in several letters, next to shabby clothing and isolation from the outside world. In spring of 1935 he writes “It would be great if you would send a few words about some news in your letters every now and then, that would be awfully nice of you. Would you be so kind?” (ibid.). As a prisoner in the probationary stage, Veidenberg could not send more than one letter every two months, and the inmates were not allowed to read newspapers or magazines. Relationships between inmates are important in prison life. Veidenberg’s letters reveal that he was happy with his cell mates, characterising them as great comrades with whom he could share all the joys and troubles of prison life.

In 1937, Veidenberg started working at the prison shoemaking workshop, where he was to work eight hours a day, six days a week. Working prisoners received slightly better food, and they were allowed to take a walk for one hour every day. In his letters, Veidenberg announces his new job with some self-irony: “Dear Hanni, just do not start calling me a ‘bootblack’. Do you promise? I will make you a pair of stomps if you don’t” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). In 1938 Veidenberg was moved to the first level of the improvement stage, and he could be sent 4 kg of food from the outside every six weeks, he could write one letter every month, see his relatives once a month and read month-old magazines, which he considered the most important changes in his prison life.

In his second letter to Eisen Veidenberg admits to being in an unregistered marriage and feeling guilty for “ruining her chance of happiness in life” (ibid.). He claims to have asked the woman to forget him and leave him up to fate so she would not spend her best years lonely, waiting for him. This confession calls for an explanation of why he was writing to Eisen at all. Veidenberg explains he needs to “talk to someone of my struggles” (ibid.). He hopes to find a friend in this girl “to whom [I can] trust anything and ease [my] heart” (ibid.). In a subsequent letter the same year Veidenberg admits that exchanging letters with Eisen and other relatives offers moral support and helps to cope mentally in prison.

Although Veidenberg repeatedly confirms he is bold and optimistic by character and “has never built castles in the air” (ibid.), his letters take on more pessimistic tones every now and then. For example, in the autumn of 1934 he writes:

You can imagine how time drags on for me, compared to life in freedom, hence the occasional bitterness. I hope you understand me! You are the only one who still writes to me more or less regularly, but how long this will last, I do not know, I suppose you cannot predict this either. (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70)

A letter written at the beginning of 1938 relays a more optimistic mood: “Sad thoughts emerge every once in a while – but leave them behind, life’s tough, truth must be accepted boldly, without despair” (ibid.). Veidenberg is often the one to encourage his addressee to be more optimistic: “Yes, Hanny, more optimism! One must not only be strong and cheerful in all misfortunes on the outside, but keep up inner conviction, certainty, backbone!” (ibid.). Then, in another letter he admits: “I have developed such immunity that it does not allow for my mood to drop too low” (ibid.). Consistently assuring his addressee and himself to remain optimistic was undoubtedly a way for Veidenberg to make life in prison more tolerable. It is indeed possible that it was specifically writing letters that helped Veidenberg to survive the years in prison, far from his family and friends. In addition to Eisen, he corresponded with his mother, wife and friends in the Soviet Union, as well as other relatives in Estonia. Even so, writing letters does not fulfil his need for self-expression entirely – for example, in a letter from 1934 he regrets that keeping a diary is not allowed in prison, as he loved keeping one when he was free. In February 1937, he complains that he only received 30 letters the previous year, 10 of those from Eisen, while admitting that most of the letters he sent were for her.

CREATING INTIMACY IN LETTERS

Veidenberg and Eisen’s relationship gets closer with every letter, which is, among other things, characterised by the way Veidenberg addresses her: in the first four letters he calls the addressee by her first name, Johanna, but from the fifth letter onwards, Johanna has turned into Hanny or dear Hanny; he even uses a diminutive “little Hanny, good girl”. His longing for close relations is manifested in Veidenberg’s plea for her to write of “everything, even

the most trivial things” to get to know her better. Leena Kurvet-Käosaar – who has studied the correspondence between her maternal grandmother, who lived in the Estonian SSR, and her sister, who first fled to England during the Great Escape to the West in 1944, and later moved to the US – brought out the three main strategies of creating intimacy in their correspondence: reliance on shared memories, verbal confirmation of closeness, and various ways of familiarising each other with the details of their everyday lives (Kurvet-Käosaar 2015: 167).

The last strategy is the most prevalent in Veidenberg’s letters to Eisen. By writing about the details of his everyday life, he creates an intimate space into which he invites the addressee; in one of his last letters, he even calls sending a letter “visiting by letter” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). These mundane things mainly involve health and food. Veidenberg writes about missing fruit, which was only available to exemplary inmates, as well as vegetables, especially tomatoes, and dairy and oils, which were not made available to the prisoners. In January 1938 he admits: “Sometimes I’d like some vegetables, milk, cheese, etc., but let’s try and satisfy those and other earthly needs in 1939” (ibid.).

The second strategy of creating intimacy in Veidenberg’s letters involves imagined discussions with the addressee. Usually such an imaginary conversation begins by recalling a question posed in the addressee’s previous letter. For example, in his second letter Veidenberg describes how he imagines the addressee, first asking: “By the way, you would like to know how I imagined you? I think you are girl full of the joy of life, energetic, looking for activities; a girl who tries to bring herself into consonance with her environment, despite the fact that it cannot satisfy her demands and the scope of her vision. Indeed, isn’t everything narrow, petty, all those small everyday worries. But perhaps I am mistaken – and I imagine myself instead of you” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). In another letter he ponders why the girl does not trust him enough, and concludes it is because he is of the opposite sex: “Although I am your friend in the most earnest sense, you are hesitant towards me. You are not like me, who has confessed to you all the twists and turns of my life, all my little and large secrets that interested you, except the secrets of the party and my profession. But I guess the difference lies in our sexes – I am a man, but you must make exceptions for some men: doctor, teacher, prisoner, right? Or not? Oh, Hanny-Hanny, I have put together my own picture of you, Hanny” (ibid.).

Another way for Veidenberg to create intimacy in his letters is to mention an emotional connection to certain places. In his first letter from 6 June 1934, he nostalgically recalls Eisen’s hometown Võru, which he visited in his childhood, mainly lake Tamula: “I, too, remember the beautiful lake in Võru, and the bog next to the road leading from the station into town. And the great old

pear tree growing in Aunt Anna's garden I remember clearly as well" (ibid.). In his letters he also recalls the village of Urvaste, where he was taken to visit his paternal relatives as a child.

The fourth strategy to create intimacy in Veidenberg's letters, although marginal compared to others, is to comment on the addressee's photos and ask questions about them. The photos, which on the one hand are a way "to imagine a reality", deepen the longing to meet face to face (Kurvet-Käosaar 2015: 169). Already in his first letter Veidenberg asks Eisen to send a photo of herself, comments on it in later letters and asks for more detail about the addressee's appearance. He writes about one photo which he especially likes: "Great *sposibo* for the photos. You look especially sweet in the one with the stone steps, you sitting in the foreground, smiling. You weren't sad in that moment, were you? I wouldn't think so" (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70).



Figure 1. Trade workers in front of the store of Aleksander Sibul in Võru, Tartu str. 11, in 1937. The first from the right is Johanna Eisen. VKF 1363:24 F/n, Võrumaa Museum. <http://www.muis.ee/museaalview/1099823>.

In another letter he asks again: “Could you pinch your family’s photograph and send it to me; that way I can also get acquainted with your family. When will you send me your copy, perhaps you have one? You won’t come to Tallinn anyway, so it would be a good thing to see you in a picture” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). Veidenberg is also interested in whether Eisen herself has a camera, which would enable her to send photographs of herself and her family more often. Nevertheless, Veidenberg did not take much care for the addressee’s photos, as his letters show. In one letter he asks for “the same or even a different picture”, as “an accident” (ibid.) happened with the one sent with the previous letter, upon which he does not elaborate.

LETTERS AS AN ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS

Love letters have a special position among other correspondence, although they have been considered the least original type of letter, as the vocabulary to express love is limited (Bray 2001: 552). Veidenberg often expresses his feelings, connecting them with reflections on nature. In February 1937, he writes: “Spring is coming, the days are getting longer, there is excitement in the air, new life emerging, new hope in human hearts. Only I must experience it all in my mind in the prison cell, which is a miserable reflection of real life, real spring. I hope you can instil some sense of spring in me through your letters. It would be great for my soul, which would otherwise get very very hoarse” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). A letter from May 1938 highlights the writer’s conflict between the necessity of expressing romantic feelings and defining himself as a rational man: “I am bound to you with invisible ties – you have done this with your attitude towards me! But no, I cannot, I do not have the courage to commit my feelings to paper, as this might be a temporary, passing feeling – I belong to a race of ‘rational people’” (ibid.).

In addition to his longing for freedom, Veidenberg’s letters reflect his hope to meet the addressee. He often ends a letter with a message of hoping to see the girl soon. Longing is also the main topic of Veidenberg’s last letter. He writes: “Just now I finished reading an article titled ‘Quiet summer in Võru’ published in the newspaper *Rahvaleht*, and if you only knew how that small town is calling me! I want to swim in lake Tamula, walk in Võru park, but most of all I want to see you in your home and in the neighbourhood, see your family and the famous Võru ice cream manufacturer” (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). However, the dream to meet Eisen in her hometown did not come true: in accordance with the Amnesty Act passed in May 1938 Veidenberg was released

from prison and, in August the same year, he was taken to Narva-Jõesuu with seven other communists and sent to the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

Veidenberg's letters are a fragment of a larger, merely imagined whole: sadly, Eisen's letters to Veidenberg are lost. In addition to meeting relatives, exchanging letters was a means for Veidenberg as a prisoner to keep in touch with the free world and relieve the tediousness and mentally oppressive atmosphere of the prison. The importance of the correspondence is well characterised by a request at the end of one of the letters, to write "about everything more often", as her letters bring "great joy" (EKM EKLA, reg 2022/70). Exchanging letters allowed Veidenberg to form a close relationship with a woman whom he never met in person, but to whom he could express his thoughts, confessions, and moods, and, in the end, his romantic feelings. This private space created in letters offered an alternative to the fully controlled prison, a space where the writer seemed to turn into the protagonist of a confessional novel, whose self-image was at the same time influenced by constant self-censorship.

Veidenberg's letters to Eisen are a valuable biographical source that allow the researcher to peek into the thoughts and feelings of an Estonian communist and his everyday life in prison. As Veidenberg mainly writes about himself, in his letters he creates the portrait of an almost perfect man – honest, brave and optimistic, a person who believes that "life is a battle and only the strongest win" (ibid.). Eagerness to learn and intellectual interests, including reading, theatre and cinema take pride of place in his self-portrait. He also describes himself to the addressee as a young active man who loves nature. His self-portrait in letters places equal importance on bodily experience and feelings, thoughts and confessions, the latter often turn into an imagined conversation with the addressee. Interestingly, Veidenberg tries to instil optimism in his addressee, although he admits that "sometimes this life gets tedious" (ibid.). Veidenberg's letters can also be thought of as an archive of feelings, reflecting ways of expressing romantic feelings and strategies for creating intimacy in his era.

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

National Archives of Estonia, ERA.1868.1.1285

EKM EKLA – Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, reg 2022/70

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