



# War Orphan in San Francisco: Letters Link a Family Scattered by World War II

*Phyllis Helene Mattson*

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## **War Orphan in San Francisco: Letters Link a Family Scattered by World War II** Phyllis Helene Mattson

In March of 1940, as a result of Hitler's plans to eradicate Jews, 10-year-old Lizzi left Vienna by joining a small transport of children seeking refuge in America. Two weeks later she began her new life in San Francisco, getting a new name, Phyllis, and having to learn a new language. Her family is scattered on three continents, but linked by letters. This coming-of-age story is told through the letters in a poignant memoir. Phyllis wrote her parents details of her new life as she grew into adolescence and became an American, while they tried to parent her long-distance. During the next six years she moved in and out of foster homes and an orphanage due to her rebellious behavior, but as she defended herself stoutly in her letters, she gained self-confidence and skills to become an independent, responsible adult. Her parents tried desperately to join her, but were stopped by incredible red tape and war hysteria. Her mother's letters are unbearably painful, but despite her hard labors in German slave camps, she never gave up hope. Her father's letters show his resignation to the bureaucracy that has him erroneously incarcerated in Australia as a prisoner of war. The moods, hope, fears, and accomplishments are all recounted in the details of the letters, thereby authenticating one family's experiences during World War II, and the love that sustained hopes of a reunion. Interwoven between the letters is a narrative that depicts the times and places of that era.

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