

**When Howard Met Gisèle**  
by Hannah Dhonau '14 (January 2011)

*This report is based on letters on deposit in Colby College Special Collections, made available by the Miller family. An index of letters that relate to Howard's relationship with Gisèle appears at the conclusion of this report.*

Howard Miller was just a young man stationed with the United States Army in Oran, Algeria in 1943 when two young women walked into his office, one of whom seeking a job. Those two women were Gisèle Baroukel and her cousin Henriette. Henriette was applying for a job as an interpreter in the Army offices, and Gisèle was there for support. Howard immediately noticed her beauty, as did everyone who saw her, and asked why she wasn't applying for the job (her English was much better than her cousin's). Gisèle already had a job lined up, but when that fell through, she went back to the handsome corporal to ask about getting a job anyway. Writing to his mother in early January of 1943, Howard says, "Speaking very frankly, mother, you may as well write me a nice letter of good wishes, etc, because being that I am sure of what I want, I know that I shall marry Gisèle." (2) They had known each other for only a short while, and already he was certain of his love for Gisèle.

In Howard's letters to Frieda throughout much of 1943, he makes only vague mention of Gisèle, saying things like, "Yesterday I went walking with one of the girls in office. Walking here means that you walk up and down the main street and then up and down some more. She is a very nice girl and, as is the custom here, had to be in at eight o'clock." (6) This trend continues until the end of the year when his pleas for permission to marry Gisèle increase. Howard wrote a very lengthy letter, as opposed to the V-Mail he usually used, to his mother asking for permission to marry Gisèle before the end of the war. Frieda wanted Howard to wait until after the war was over, so that she could meet Gisèle and the whole affair would be, in her eyes, less stressful. Howard was completely opposed to this solution.

All of Howard's letters from January are filled with begs for Frieda and his grandfather's permission to marry Gisèle. Now. Each letter has almost the same sentence, "So, mother dear, have confidence in me and tell yourself and grandpa that you know that I

am right, and open you heart and write me a nice letter of consent and congratulations.” (13) Howard says, time and time again, that he does not want to do anything against his mother and grandfather’s wishes, yet he repeats his commands for a letter of consent with every mention of Gisèle. By February, Howard’s growing frustration is evident in the increasing number of exclamation points at the end of all commands to his mother. Then, towards the end of the month, he stops mentioning it altogether. In one letter from February 11, 1944, he only talks about his need for new glasses. Perhaps the most quotable phrase from Howard’s letters is this from his letter to Frieda from February 3, 1944, “Love isn’t something you that you can put on a shelf until after the war!”(21)

Eventually, Frieda did consent to Howard’s marrying Gisèle while they were in Oran. Gisèle began writing to Frieda not long after the wedding. In her letter from June 18, 1944, Gisèle says, “At first, I want to thank you for the way you consider me. I appreciate it very much, because I know that I will need a mother in the states and I am happy to find one.” (26) Expressing her gratitude for Frieda, Gisèle thanks her for being considered a daughter in most every correspondence. Although Howard may have told Frieda earlier, Gisèle mentions to Frieda that she and Howard are expecting their first child, Sara. “Do you like pictures? You can see that I like them very much. Howard could have some films but now we kept 4 for later (for the baby). It is the first time I speak of it. Dear mother, I feel happy now.” (29)

Howard wanted Gisèle to stop working—it is unclear if this is because of the baby, or if it is unrelated—but she was quite adamant in her decision to continue working well into the pregnancy. By February 22, 1945, Howard had received word that he would be transferred to Casablanca. Gisèle was, understandably, disheartened by this news. Howard had been stationed in Oran for over two years by this point, and the thought that when she needed him most he would be miles away was quite the thought for the young bride.

Howard was transferred to Casablanca as the letters mentioned. Howard says to Frieda, “This is the first time that we have been separated since being married, and I don’t think that I like it.” On Friday, April 13, 1945, Sara Helyette Miller was born in Oran, Algeria. Howard wrote to Frieda to tell her the good news telling her that surely Sara will

be lucky, having been born on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. In later letters, Howard sometimes refers to Sara just as “Lucky,” as a tribute to her birth date. By the middle of October, Gisèle is on board the *Pittsburgh Seam* to America. She wrote to Frieda while aboard to tell her of the journey and of her hopes for the future with Howard’s extended family in Maine.

The most apparent theme in all of these letters is Gisèle’s appreciation and honest compassion for her new family in Maine. In each and every letter she asks, “How is Grandpa? Fine, I hope.” She signs each letter with “Love and kisses/ Your loving daughter.” Her letters take on a much calmer tone than Howard’s, and not just because Howard is begging for permission to marry her for much of 1943’s letters. Howard’s letters always seem much more like commands and inquiries than Gisèle’s narratives of her life. Perhaps it is just the difference between an army man and a young bride, but it is apparent by reading letters from the two of them. Reading these letters was an incredible glimpse into the lives of these two exceptional people. No other form is more intimate than the written letter. It is like our voicemail I think: meant for one person, but when it heard by many can be all the more meaningful.

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