Finding aid for the Hermine Speier papers 6078

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2015 August
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Abstract: Correspondence of German Jewish archaeologist Dr. Hermine Speier (1898-1989), the first woman employed by the Vatican, who converted to Catholicism and worked under Church protection. The majority of the correspondence is with Speier's lover, Italian airship navigator General Umberto Nobile, who lived in America in exile due to personal conflicts with Mussolini. The collection includes many photographs of Nobile and some of Speier, and a photograph album of Nobile, compiled and dedicated by Ulrich Mundt, an officer in the German Air Force. Speier was an archaeologist who was hired by Pope Pius XI to work in the Vatican Museum's photographic archive after she was fired from her position with the German Archaeological Institute in Rome for being a Jew. Speier converted to Catholicism in 1939. She continued to work for the Vatican Museum until her retirement in 1967. General Umberto Nobile (1885-1978) was an Italian general, airship designer and navigator, and professor of aeronautical science. He is best remembered for his two Arctic expeditions in 1926 and 1928.

Language of Material: Italian.

Biographical note
Dr. Hermine Speier (1898-1989) worked as a director in the German Archaeological Institute in Rome. She was fired from this position in 1934 for being a Jew. Her supervisor and mentor, Ludwig Curtius, recommended her to the Vatican Museum for a job. Although there was no job, Pope Pius XI created a position for her within the Vatican Museum's photographic archives. Speier converted to Catholicism in 1939, and thus severed all ties with her family in Germany. When the Germans accelerated their persecution of Jews in Rome in 1943, Speier was moved to the convent of St. Priscilla, along with other Jewish families. Speier continued to work for the Vatican Museum until her retirement in 1967. She continued her work in the photographic archive, and also worked with archaeologists on Etruscan, Roman, and Greek exhibitions; she also published a number of scholarly works on antiquities.

General Umberto Nobile (1885-1978) was an Italian general, airship designer and navigator, and professor of aeronautical science. He is best remembered for his two Arctic expeditions. In the first, the Norge in 1926, Nobile was sought out by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen who asked him to pilot one of Nobile's airships over the polar ice cap from Europe to America. Disagreement erupted between Amundsen and Nobile after the flight as to who deserved greater credit. The controversy was exacerbated by Mussolini's government, which publicly endorsed Nobile's role, thus further alienating Amundsen and Nobile. In the second, the Italia, Nobile, who served as both pilot and expedition leader, flew his airship to the Pole and on the way back ran into a storm. The ship crashed onto the ice pack and 7 crew members died. Six nations got involved in the search and rescue efforts, and after the rescue was completed, Nobile became outspoken in his complaints about the lack of efforts on the part of the Italian government. He eventually resigned from the Air Force in protest (1929). In 1931 he left Italy to work in the Soviet Union, but returned to Italy in 1936 to teach aeronautics. In 1939 he went to the United States to teach at Lewis University in Illinois. He was offered American citizenship when the war broke out, but declined and returned to Rome. After the war, Nobile taught at the University of Naples until his death.

Scope and Content
Correspondence (1937-1941) of German Jewish archaeologist Hermine Speier, the first woman employed by the Vatican, who converted to Catholicism, and worked under church protection. The majority of the correspondence is with Speier's lover, Italian airship navigator General Umberto Nobile, who lived in America in exile due to personal conflicts with Mussolini. Speier's letters, in draft form, were all penned while she lived in Geneva and Rome. Also included is a letter from Robert Boehringer, a German industrialist and poet who denounced his German citizenship and became a Swiss citizen at the beginning of the war. The collection includes many photographs of Nobile and some of Speier, as well as a photograph album of Nobile, compiled and dedicated by Ulrich Mundt, an officer in the German Air Force.

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Preferred Citation
[Box/folder# or item name], Hermine Speier papers, Collection no. 6078, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California

Acquisition
Purchased from The Bookshop, May 7, 2014.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Jews -- Persecutions -- Italy -- 20th century -- Archival resources
Jews, German -- Vatican City -- 20th century -- Archival resources
Vatican City -- History -- 20th century -- Archival resources
Correspondence
Photographs
Speier, Hermine
Speier, Hermine -- Archives
Nobile, Umberto -- Archives
Pius, Pope, XI -- Archives

Box 1, Folder 1     Correspondence: Nobile to Speier 1937
Scope and Contents
This is a series of letters (and some postcards) written by Umberto Nobile in Italy to Hermine Speier during her extended stay in Frankfurt in 1937. Nobile frequently visits Speier’s home on Salita Sant’Onofrio in Rome during her absence to check on her affairs and to collect her mail, visits of which he keeps her well apprised. Nobile himself reports having done a fair amount of travel during the period - trips to Milan (and to nearby Uggiate to visit one General Morris), to Augsburg, and to Monaco with his daughter Maria are mentioned. He also mentions having accepted a number of visitors at his home in Rome. Nobile does not hesitate to share with Speier his feelings of anxiety, heavy-heartedness, and loneliness during this period.
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Correspondence: Nobile to Speier April 1938 - May 1938

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Italy to Hermine Speier during her time in Geneva, Basel, and Frankfurt in April and May of 1938. During this period, Nobile is regularly commuting by train between Rome, where he lives, and Naples, where he is working as a professor of aeronautical engineering at the University of Naples. He tells Speier when new engineering possibilities occur to him, and he expresses nostalgia for the days in which, immediately upon conceiving a new idea, he had at his disposal the means to realize it – presumably in reference to his career prior to his resignation from the air force in 1929. (The air force had indeed afforded him the opportunity to oversee airship construction and realize new airship designs, which led him to design and pilot the two polar airships Norge and Italia, which flew in 1926 and 1928 respectively.) Also during these months, he repeatedly mentions developments in the publication and subsequent translation of his book (whose title he does not mention, but he presumably refers to La preparazione e i risultati scientifici della spedizione polare dell’”Italia”, published in 1938). Nobile complains often of the rheumatism in his leg and the stomach problems caused by colitis that perpetually plague him and even cause him to remain bedridden on a number of occasions during this period. It is clear that his doctors know very little about his maladies and, as such, can offer him little relief beyond shots to reduce pain, which he reports help marginally. He continues to keep Speier apprised of the goings-on at her home - the mail she receives, the health of her plants, etc. - and he gives her frequent updates on weather changes in her home city of Rome. Nobile’s brother Donato and his family visit him in Rome in May. Nobile expresses a bout of particular anxiety and sadness at the end of May that coincides with the ten-year anniversary of his infamously failed Italia expedition. It is clear based on Nobile’s letters that Speier, who by this time has been living in Rome for ten years, is on her annual trip to visit her family in Frankfurt but has this year decided to first stop in Geneva for a relaxing stay with friends at their country home. Speier and Nobile intend to meet up for a visit somewhere in between Rome and Frankfurt at the end of May, and much of their correspondence during the weeks prior attempts to work out the precise dates and location of their meeting.

Correspondence: Nobile to Speier June 1938 - October 1938

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile to Hermine Speier during June through October of 1938. Nobile spends much of the month of June in Stockholm, where he stays with a former colleague from his time in the air force, before flying to Berlin for a short time. The absence of correspondence in July and August indicates that the couple were both in Rome during those months. In September, Speier takes leave of Rome, traveling to the Tuscan town of Chianciano. In his letters to her, Nobile expresses his hope that her retreat to the countryside will be beneficial for her apparently poor health. His own poor health, visits paid to him by family and acquaintances, and the Roman weather continue to be recurring topics of his discussion. In October, Nobile’s letters suggest that he has become increasingly concerned with Speier’s worsening dental problems, as he repeatedly urges her to seek out a dentist. Nobile visits Bologna for work in October.
Box 1, Folder 4  Correspondence: Nobile to Speier June 1939 - July 1939

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome during June and July of 1939. The contents of this folder mark the beginning of Nobile’s employment as an aeronautics professor at Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois and the start of the lengthy separation that necessitated the couple’s incessant epistolary correspondence between 1939 and 1942. In his letters, Nobile paints this period as an especially emotionally tumultuous one: he continually tells Speier of the restlessness he feels as a result of the fact that there is no foreseeable end or solution to his separation from his country and his loved ones, and of the utter loneliness he is experiencing in his new life in America. He reports that he spends his time alone – either walking his beloved dog Totosca, reading, or going to the movies. During this period, Speier and Nobile begin to read the same books simultaneously, a trend that will continue throughout his time in the U.S. Many of his letters in this folder, as in all subsequent folders, include his reaction to the books that they read and updates on how much progress he has made in the book at hand since the time of the preceding letter. He visits New York (for which he expresses his extreme hatred), Chicago, South Bend, IN, and Lake Forest, IL during this period. The majority of this time, however, he spends at a hotel in Joliet, IL called Hotel Lincoln where he resides in a small room. After apartment searching briefly, he ultimately decides to stay long-term in the hotel, as it is cheaper, but in his correspondence he repeatedly complains to Speier that it is too small. Though he says he is wary to burden her with his sadness during these early days in America, he rarely spares her detailed accounts of his unhappiness: he laments the publicity-obsessed American culture that apparently causes him to be bombarded by interviewers and photographers, the disorganization of the university for which he works and his confusion as to his professional role there, his nervousness due to the uncertainty of his future, his distaste for living in a hotel, his disappointment that he is not receiving more mail from Hermine and his daughter Maria despite their knowledge that he is all alone in a foreign country, and his longing for his Italian countryside and countrymen. During this period, he begins to socialize with members of the local Italian American Society and attend the group’s functions, which will continue to include him and, often, to feature him as a speaker of honor throughout his time in America. Included with one letter is a photograph of Nobile and his dog.
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Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Joliet, Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome during August and September of 1939. Nobile’s letters continue to feature the weather in Illinois and the books that he and Speier read together as recurrent themes. Also in this period, another recurrent theme arises, one that will consume the initial paragraphs of almost every letter Nobile writes from here on out: that is, a discussion of which of Speier’s letters he’s received, as well as the means by which they arrived and the relative cost/efficacy of the various postal systems (steamship vs. aircraft). In early August, Nobile shares that his mental state is considerably calmer than it had been in months prior, a shift that he attributes largely to the influx of letters that have finally begun to arrive from Speier and his daughter Maria. It is also evident based on the content of his letters that the overwhelming solitude during his first months in America gets abated in this period by an inundation of offers to join university colleagues, clergymen, and members of the Italian American Society on various social outings – offers which he tells Speier he often has trouble declining. Examples include taking a trip by plane to Chicago with a flight instructor from the university, attending a nearby air show, taking a weekend trip to the countryside with an Italian doctor, going to Notre Dame as a visiting professor, dining and playing bocce with fellow Italians at one Alpine Club, visiting a nearby Benedictine abbey with a fellow instructor, going to a grape harvest on a nearby farm, attending parties thrown by the Italian American society, and dining at the home of an Italian photographer. He begins to invite new acquaintances to his hotel for meals, as well. Nobile shares with Speier more than once his impression that the nice Italians in his area are the simple, working-class ones, while the wealthier ones strike him as generally haughty and money-obsessed. He makes a brief trip in mid-August to Akron, OH, where he had apparently spent time 17 years prior, to visit old acquaintances. During this time, Nobile is disillusioned by the lack of responsibility that his university has relegated to him, often expressing to Speier uncertainty as to how to fill all his free time and a sense that he lacks purpose professionally. He does, however, express to her how much he enjoys the kindness and openness of his students. His dog Totosca is perpetually by his side – and is mentioned in nearly all his letters. In August, he begins teaching astronomy to high school students to fill his time. At the end of August, however, Nobile’s agitated and nervous mental state returns as mail from Italy ceases to arrive with regularity, a delay he attributes to the threat of war. He tells Speier that he passes the hours anxiously waiting for news via radio and newspapers, desperately hoping to learn of developments at home in Italy. He questions how he can continue to write about the trivialities of his own life in America when all of his thoughts are with Hermine, Maria, and his homeland. In his letters to Speier, he makes it clear that Maria writes to him very infrequently, a fact that causes him to be not only annoyed but also constantly worried about her wellbeing. He expresses hope the Mussolini will be able to continue eschewing Italian involvement in the war. Though his worry over the war evidently consumes him, reminding Speier that her health is the most important thing of all becomes a trope of Nobile’s, and he is constantly urging her to go see doctors and dentists. Newspaper clippings are included in some letters.
Correspondence: Nobile to Speier October 1939

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Joliet, Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome in October, 1939. Nobile continues to express feeling very alone in his new life in America, and he seems to have lost all faith in the postal service’s ability to deliver the mail from Italy that he views as his only solace. In addition to his debilitated mental state, he reports a decline in his physical health. He is invited to attend and make a speech at the annual meeting of a post of the American Legion in early October, in the suburbs of Chicago. Mid-month, he is the main speaker and honored guest at a Columbus Day celebration in Aurora, IL. He also reports having traveled to Chicago for various reasons, two being to see performances of Aida and La traviata. He reports that his high school teaching has proven rather time-consuming, since he is often having to look up astronomy-related vocabulary in order to adequately prepare his lesson plans in English. Navigating the unreliable postal systems continues to be a popular topic of discussion in these letters: Nobile is constantly oscillating between favorable and critical opinions of airmail and mail by steamship, so he alerts Speier as he switches between the two methods in hopes of achieving more efficient correspondence. Explaining to Speier prices of commodities and correspondence, as well as cost of living, is another prominent feature of Nobile’s letters. During this period, the couple simultaneously reads The Betrothed by Manzoni.

Correspondence: Nobile to Speier November 1939 - December 1939

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (as well as postcards and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Joliet, Illinois and in Lockport, Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome during November and December of 1939. Nobile frequently travels during this period to attend various functions: he goes to Chicago to speak at an aviation post of the American Legion, goes to Springfield, IL for a celebration of Abraham Lincoln at his tomb, represents the Consul General at a meeting of the Italian American society, attends a conference at Loyola University Chicago, visits Wabash College, and goes to an exhibition of Italian artworks in Chicago. His beloved dog Totosca has puppies in November. Nobile visits Speier’s cousin in Chicago on various occasions – he is a guest of Speier’s cousin and his wife for Thanksgiving. By this time, Nobile has begun to express that his work is gratifying him somewhat and that, though living in a state of perpetual uncertainty about the looming war and his own future plans is unpleasant, he is less consumed by anxiety. He does, however, maintain that his solitude remains unassuaged; he tells Speier that forming substantial friendships with Americans is nearly impossible, and that it is wise to steer clear of the coarse, uncultured Italian-Americans who retain little allegiance to their patria. At one point, he tells Speier that, were it not for their epistolary correspondence, his life in America would be an embarrassment. His political opinions appear in his letters only occasionally and tangentially, as when he remarks that in such calamitous times as these, Italy is lucky to be guarded by a man like Mussolini. He continues to bemoan the amount of journalistic attention he is attracting, which he views as excessive, and he complains of his misrepresentation in the media. For the holidays, Nobile travels to his cousin’s home in Rochester, NY. Newspaper clippings are included in some letters.
Correspondence: Nobile to Speier January 1940 - April 1940

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (as well as postcards and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile in Joliet, Illinois and in Lockport, Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome from January, 1940 to April, 1940. Having left two of Totosca’s puppies in Rochester with his cousin and his wife, Nobile is left with Totosca and one male puppy, both of whom he continues to portray as his preferred company during his stay in the States. In these letters, Nobile continues to keep Speier apprised of his social and professional outings, and he continues to discuss the topics that have so far featured prominently in his letters: Speier’s health, the weather, the books he and Speier are reading, and most of all postal delays and the extreme frustration and desperation they incite in him. It is evident that the postal delays are causing a great deal of insecurity in Speier during this period, as he spends a number of letters reassuring her that he is still writing to her as consistently as ever, and that he should not be faulted for the inability of the post to deliver those letters to her in a timely fashion. He continues to inquire about Maria, about whom he worries since she apparently does not contact him often. Totosca dies in April, much to Nobile’s sadness. In this folder, we see the first instances in which letters are beginning to be opened and read by censors – an indication of their censorship can be found on a strip of tape on the envelopes.

Correspondence: Nobile to Speier May 1940 - June 1940

Scope and Contents
This is a collection of letters (as well as postcards and telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile largely in Joliet, Illinois to Hermine Speier in Rome during May and June of 1940. During this period, Nobile travels to a conference hosted by Sicilian residents of Milwaukee, and he continues to make quick jaunts to Chicago and other nearby towns for social and professional outings – as always, he keeps Speier well informed of his itinerary. He expresses the lingering difficulty of having lost his beloved companion Totosca. Interestingly, in one letter he spends a number of pages discussing current events having to do with the war, only to immediately apologize to Speier for having digressed from "cose nostre" – which, in a sense, retroactively explains why all letters up until this point remain so doggedly personal as to err on the side of the trivial, rather than ever venturing too far into the realm of world events. It is during these weeks, however, that Nobile for the first time expresses having difficulty talking about the particularities of his everyday life when there are such grander issues at stake on the international stage. On Speier’s birthday in late May, the effects of the war on Nobile’s status in America can be seen when he assures her that his not having telephoned her to wish her a happy birthday had nothing to do with the cost, but rather was a result of his hesitation to draw attention to himself given the general air of agitation with foreigners – particularly with Germans and Italians- during the period. Nobile explains that they are often suspected of engaging in propaganda or espionage, and he predicts that Italians’ plight in America will only worsen if the U.S. decides to join the war. Other effects of the war that place further strain on the pair’s relationship include the fact that, in June, steamships cease to directly travel from New York to Naples, making postal correspondence even less efficient. Nobile is attempting to plan a trip back to Italy at this time, and he pays numerous visits to the consulate in Chicago to assess scheduling and prices. He doubts that any of his requests to leave the country will be pushed through, given the unfavorable opinion of foreigners, and he expresses little hope that he will see Speier at all that year. He tries desperately to understand how the war might be affecting Speier’s everyday life, asking her questions such as whether she is still working at the Vatican Museum regularly or if they are shut down, and whether they are still paying her regularly. At the end of the month, he leaves for an extended stay in Rochester with his cousin. Newspaper clippings are included with some letters. One is about the United States police being on high guard against Italian Fascist activity.
Box 2, Folder 3  
**Correspondence: Nobile to Speier July 1940 - December 1940**

**Scope and Contents**
This is a collection of letters (as well as telegrams) written by Umberto Nobile largely in Rochester, NY to Hermine Speier in Rome during July through December of 1940. The majority of the envelopes in this folder bear indications that their contents have been censored. During this period, Nobile is enjoying the peacefulness of the countryside at his cousin’s home in Rochester; rather than doing the work he intended to accomplish during his vacation, he admits to passing his days reading, writing, going for long walks in nature with the dogs, and playing chess. The couple reads Orlando furioso together during this period. Nobile is evidently extremely concerned for Speier’s health at this time, so he is pleased to hear that she decides to take one of her trips to the countryside in Chianciano for some rest and relaxation; he is continually requesting updates on her health and her doctor visits, and when he doesn’t receive a steady stream of letters from her he begins to express an overwhelming sense of anxiety and an inkling that all is not well with his loved ones in Rome. In September he once again reminds Speier of the precarious situation of surveillance in which foreigners in America find themselves, which is the reason why he neglects to telephone her. Nobile travels to Washington D.C. for a conference in late September, after which time he begins a period of travel between Rochester, Chicago, and Joliet. In his letters, he apologizes for not providing Speier with more detailed updates on his life, but he assures her that there is nothing good to tell of his nomadic existence. He spends much of his time in Rochester cataloging the books in his cousin’s library. He travels to Niagara Falls in November. By the final months of 1940, it is clear that there is such a massive delay in the postal service that epistolary correspondence between the two has become an erratic and impractical undertaking. Nobile also suspects that some letters are being intercepted and not delivered at all, based on the fact that Speier reported not having received articles he sent her about the plight of the Italians in the U.S. Nobile continues to await news from Chicago regarding the potential for his departure, but he receives none. Newspaper clippings are included with some letters. One is an interview with Nobile in which he is asked to comment on the status of military aviation in the United States. His response is that it has the most advanced civil aviation of any country, and it is prescient in that he says the use of plastics in aviation may lead to mass airplane production and the accessibility of airplanes to the common man.

Box 2, Folder 4  
**Correspondence: Nobile to Speier 1941**

**Scope and Contents**
The very few letters from Umberto Nobile to Hermine Speier in 1941 indicate that he is once again living in Joliet, IL at this time. He shares that, during his time in Joliet, his workload is exceptionally heavy (he mentions publishing and presenting a new work) and his solitude, unremitting. The delay in the postal service continues to be problematic for the couple’s communication. Nobile describes this period as the worst time in America he’s endured so far. In one letter, Nobile explains that - between the delay in mail’s arrival and his conviction that the trivialities of one’s life don’t matter when so many lives are at stake and the world is ravaged by war – he has lost the will to write. In one typewritten letter, he expresses his hope that having typed it will decrease the time that it takes for the English censors to process it and send it along; it is evident that censorship has become the norm by this time. Nobile continues to await news from Chicago regarding the status of his departure.

Box 2, Folder 5  
**Correspondence: Nobile to Speier Undated**

**Scope and Contents**
This folder contains undated correspondence from Umberto Nobile to Hermine Speier. Included are postcards from Bolzano, Joliet, and Notre Dame; letters from the years in which Nobile lived in Italy as well as from those in which he lived in America; and telegrams from Milan and Augsburg on which the dates are illegible.
Box 2, Folder 6  
**Correspondence: Others to Speier 1939, 1947**

**Scope and Contents**
This folder contains a letter in German from one Robert Boehringer (German industrialist and poet) to Speier, another letter in German from one L. Lichnowsky to Speier, and a telegram from the Pope congratulating Speier on her conversion to Catholicism.

Box 2, Folder 7  
**Correspondence: Speier to Nobile 1937 - 1940**

**Scope and Contents**
This folder contains dated letters, telegrams, and letter drafts written by Hermine Speier to Umberto Nobile between 1937 and 1940. It contains one letter from 1937, 9 letters from 1938, 12 letters and a telegram from 1939, and 15 letters from 1940. Most recurrently, Speier discusses her concern for Nobile’s health, her desire to receive more frequent and detailed updates on his life, her concern for the trajectory of their relationship as they spend increasingly long spans of time apart, and her frustration with the unpredictability of the post.

Box 2, Folder 8  
**Letter Fragments: Speier to Nobile**

**Scope and Contents**
This folder contains undated and/or incomplete letters and letter drafts written by Hermine Speier to Umberto Nobile. The contents of this folder are in no particular order, as many of the documents are too fragmentary to group together into cohesive units.

Box 2, Folder 9  
**Ephemera**

**Scope and Contents**
Ephemera include newspaper clippings (many of which are articles about Nobile lifted from American papers during his time in Illinois), postcards that have not been postmarked, and programs from events Nobile attended.

Box 3  
**Photographs**

**Scope and Contents**
This box includes numerous photographs (candids and portraits) of Umberto Nobile and very few of Hermine Speier. Many photographs of Nobile feature his dogs and his aircrafts. Included is a photograph album of Nobile, compiled and dedicated by Ulrich Mundt, an officer in the German Air Force.