



Letter To His Father

DEAREST FATHER,

You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid

of you, and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking.

And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very incomplete, because, even in writing, this fear and its consequences hamper me in relation to you

and because the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning.

To you the matter always seemed very simple, at least in so far as you talked about it in front of me, and indiscriminately in front of many other people. It looked to you

more or less as follows: you have worked hard all your life, have sacrificed everything for your children, above all for me, consequently I have lived high and handsome,

have been completely at liberty to learn whatever I wanted, and have had no cause for material worries, which means worries of any kind at all. You

have not expected

any gratitude for this, knowing what "children's gratitude" is like, but have expected at least some sort of obligingness, some sign of sympathy. Instead I have always

hidden from you, in my room, among my books, with crazy friends, or with crackpot ideas. I have never talked to you frankly; I have never come to you when you were

in the synagogue, never visited you at Franzensbad, nor indeed ever shown any family feeling; I have never taken any interest in the business or your other concerns; I

saddled you with the factory and walked off; I encouraged Ottla in her obstinacy, and never lifted a finger for you (never even got you a theater ticket), while I do

everything for my friends. If you sum up your judgment of me, the result you get is that, although you don't charge me with anything downright improper or wicked (with

the exception perhaps of my latest marriage plan), you do charge me with coldness, estrangements and ingratitude. And, what is more, you charge me with it in such a

way as to make it seem my fault, as though I might have been able, with something like a touch on the steering wheel, to make everything quite different, while you

aren't in the slightest to blame, unless it be for having been too good to me.

This, your usual way of representing it, I regard as accurate only in so far as I too believe you are entirely blameless in the matter of our estrangement. But I am equally

entirely blameless. If I could get you to acknowledge this, then what would be possible is—not, I think, a new life, we are both much too old for that—but still, a kind of

peace; no cessation, but still, a diminution of your unceasing reproaches.

Oddly enough you have some sort of notion of what I mean. For instance, a short time ago you said to me: "I have always been fond of you, even though outwardly I

didn't act toward you as other fathers generally do, and this precisely because I can't pretend as other people can." Now, Father, on the whole I have never doubted your

goodness toward me, but this remark I consider wrong. You can't pretend, that is true, but merely for that reason to maintain that other fathers pretend is either mere

opinionatedness, and as such beyond discussion, or on the other hand—and this in my view is what it really is—a veiled expression of the fact that something is wrong in

our relationship and that you have played your part in causing it to be so, but without its being your fault. If you really mean that, then we are in agreement.

I'm not going to say, of course, that I have become what I am only as a result of your influence. That would be very much exaggerated (and I am indeed inclined to this

exaggeration). It is indeed quite possible that even if I had grown up entirely free from your influence I still could not have become a person

after your own heart. I

should probably have still become a weakly, timid, hesitant, restless person, neither Robert Kafka nor Karl Hermann, but yet quite different from what I really am, and

we might have got on with each other excellently. I should have been happy to have you as a friend, as a boss, an uncle, a grandfather, even (though rather more

hesitantly) as a father-in-law. Only as a father you have been too strong for me, particularly since my brothers died when they were small and my sisters came along

only much later, so that I alone had to bear the brunt of it—and for that I was much too weak.

Compare the two of us: I, to put it in a very much abbreviated form, a Löwy with a certain Kafka component, which, however, is not set in motion by the Kafka will to

life, business, and conquest, but by a Löwyish spur that impels more secretly, more diffidently, and in another direction, and which often fails to work entirely. You, on

the other hand, a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance, presence of mind, knowledge of

human nature, a certain way of doing things on a grand scale, of course also with all the defects and weaknesses that go with these advantages and into which your

temperament and sometimes your hot temper drive you. You are perhaps not wholly a Kafka in your general outlook, in so far as I can compare you

with Uncle Philipp,

Ludwig, and Heinrich. That is odd, and here I don't see quite clear either. After all, they were all more cheerful, fresher, more informal, more easygoing, less severe than

you. (In this, by the way, I have inherited a great deal from you and taken much too good care of my inheritance, without, admittedly, having the necessary

counterweights in my own nature, as you have.) Yet you too, on the other hand, have in this respect gone through various phases. You were perhaps more cheerful

before you were disappointed by your children, especially by me, and were depressed at home (when other people came in, you were quite different); perhaps you have

become more cheerful again since then, now that your grandchildren and your son-in-law again give you something of that warmth which your children, except perhaps

Valli, could not give you. In any case, we were so different and in our difference so dangerous to each other that if anyone had tried to calculate in advance how I, the

slowly developing child, and you, the full-grown man, would behave toward one another, he could have assumed that you would simply trample me underfoot so that

nothing was left of me. Well, that did not happen. Nothing alive can be calculated. But perhaps something worse happened. And in saying this I would all the time beg of

you not to forget that I never, and not even for a single moment believe any guilt to be on your side. The effect you had on me was the effect you could not help having.

But you should stop considering it some particular malice on my part that I succumbed to that effect.

I was a timid child. For all that, I am sure I was also obstinate, as children are. I am sure that Mother spoiled me too, but I cannot believe I was particularly difficult to

manage; I cannot believe that a kindly word, a quiet taking by the hand, a friendly look, could not have got me to do anything that was wanted of me. Now you are, after

all, basically a charitable and kindhearted person (what follows will not be in contradiction to this, I am speaking only of the impression you made on the child), but not

every child has the endurance and fearlessness to go on searching until it comes to the kindliness that lies beneath the surface. You can treat a child only in the way you

yourself are constituted, with vigor, noise, and hot temper, and in this case such behavior seemed to you to be also most appropriate because you wanted to bring me up

to be a strong, brave boy.

Your educational methods in the very early years I can't, of course, directly describe today, but I can more or less imagine them by drawing conclusions from the later

years and from your treatment of Felix. What must be considered as heightening the effect is that you were then younger and hence more energetic, wilder, more

primitive, and still more reckless than you are today and that you were, besides, completely tied to the business, scarcely able to be with me even once a day, and

therefore made all the more profound impression on me, one that never really leveled out to the flatness of habit.

There is only one episode in the early years of which I have a direct memory. You may remember it, too. One night I kept on whimpering for water, not, I am certain,

because I was thirsty, but probably partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After several vigorous threats had failed to have any effect, you took me out of bed,

carried me out onto the pavlatche,* and left me there alone for a while in my nightshirt, outside the shut door. I am not going to say that this was wrong—perhaps there

was really no other way of getting peace and quiet that night—but I mention it as typical of your methods of bringing up a child and their effect on me. I dare say I was

quite obedient afterward at that period, but it did me inner harm. What was for me a matter of course, that senseless asking for water, and then the extraordinary terror

of being carried outside were two things that I, my nature being what it was, could never properly connect with each other. Even years afterward I suffered from the

tormenting fancy that the huge man, my father, the ultimate authority, would come almost for no reason at all and take me out of bed in the night and carry me out onto

the pavlatche, and that consequently I meant absolutely nothing as far as he was concerned.

*Pavlatche is the Czech word for the long balcony in the inner courtyard of old houses in Prague. (Ed.)

That was only a small beginning, but this feeling of being nothing that often dominates me (a feeling that is in another respect, admittedly, also a noble and fruitful one)

comes largely from your influence. What I would have needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little keeping open of my road, instead of which you

blocked it for me, though of course with the good intention of making me take another road. But I was not fit for that. You encouraged me, for instance, when I saluted

and marched smartly, but I was no future soldier, or you encouraged me when I was able to eat heartily or even drink beer with my meals, or when I was able to repeat

songs, singing what I had not understood, or prattle to you using your own favorite expressions, imitating you, but nothing of this had anything to do with my future. And it

is characteristic that even today you really only encourage me in anything when you yourself are involved in it, when what is at stake is your own sense of

self-importance, which I damage (for instance by my intended marriage) or which is damaged in me (for instance when Pepa is abusive to me). Then I

receive

encouragement, I am reminded of my worth, the matches I would be entitled to make are pointed out to me, and Pepa is condemned utterly. But apart from the fact that

at my age I am already nearly unsusceptible to encouragement, what help could it be to me anyway, if it only comes when it isn't primarily a matter of myself at all?

At that time, and at that time in every way, I would have needed encouragement. I was, after all, weighed down by your mere physical presence. I remember, for

instance, how we often undressed in the same bathing hut. There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad. Even inside the hut I felt a miserable specimen,

and what's more, not only in your eyes but in the eyes of the whole world, for you were for me the measure of all things. But then when we stepped out of the bathing

hut before the people, you holding me by my hand, a little skeleton, unsteady, barefoot on the boards, frightened of the water, incapable of copying your swimming

strokes, which you, with the best of intentions, but actually to my profound humiliation, kept on demonstrating, then I was frantic with desperation and at such moments

all my bad experiences in all areas, fitted magnificently together. I felt best when you sometimes undressed first and I was able to stay behind in the hut alone and put

off the disgrace of showing myself in public until at last you came to see what I was doing and drove me out of the hut. I was grateful to you for not seeming to notice

my anguish, and besides, I was proud of my father's body. By the way, this difference between us remains much the same to this very day.

In keeping, furthermore, was your intellectual domination. You had worked your way so far up by your own energies alone, and as a result you had unbounded

confidence in your opinion. That was not yet so dazzling for me, a child as later for the boy growing up. From your armchair you ruled the world. Your opinion was

correct, every other was mad, wild, meshugge, not normal. Your self-confidence indeed was so great that you had no need to be consistent at all and yet never ceased

to be in the right. It did sometimes happen that you had no opinions whatsoever about a matter and as a result every conceivable opinion with respect to the matter was

necessarily wrong, without exception. You were capable, for instance, of running down the Czechs, and then the Germans, and then the Jews, and what is more, not

only selectively but in every respect, and finally nobody was left except yourself. For me you took on the enigmatic quality that all tyrants have whose rights are based

on their person and not on reason. At least so it seemed to me.

Now, when I was the subject you were actually astonishingly often right; which in conversation was not surprising, for there was hardly ever any conversation between

us, but also in reality. Yet this was nothing particularly incomprehensible, either; in all my thinking I was, after all, under the heavy pressure of your personality, even in

that part of it—and particularly in that—which was not in accord with yours. All these thoughts, seemingly independent of you, were from the beginning burdened with

your belittling judgments; it was almost impossible to endure this and still work out a thought with any measure of completeness and permanence. I am not here speaking

of any sublime thoughts, but of every little childhood enterprise. It was only necessary to be happy about something or other, to be filled with the thought of it, to come

home and speak of it, and the answer was an ironic sigh, a shaking of the head, a tapping on the table with a finger: "Is that all you're so worked up about?" or "Such

worries I'd like to have!" or "The things some people have time to think about!" or "Where is that going to get you?" or "What a song and dance about nothing!" Of

course, you couldn't be expected to be enthusiastic about every childish triviality when you were in a state of vexation and worry. But that was not the point. Rather, by

virtue of your antagonistic nature, you could not help but always and inevitably cause the child such disappointments; and further, this antagonism, accumulating material,

was constantly intensified; eventually the pattern expressed itself even if, for once, you were of the same opinion as I; finally, these disappointments

of the child were not

the ordinary disappointments of life but, since they involved you, the all-important personage, they struck to the very core. Courage, resolution, confidence, delight in this

and that, could not last when you were against it or even if your opposition was merely to be assumed; and it was to be assumed in almost everything I did.

This applied to people as well as to thoughts. It was enough that I should take a little interest in a person—which in any case did not happen often, as a result of my

nature—for you, without any consideration for my feelings or respect for my judgment, to move in with abuse, defamation, and denigration. Innocent, childlike people,

such as, for instance, the Yiddish actor Löwy, had to pay for that. Without knowing him you compared him, in some dreadful way that I have now forgotten, to vermin

and, as was so often the case with people I was fond of, you were automatically ready with the proverb of the dog and its fleas. Here I particularly recall the actor

because at that time I made a note of your pronouncements about him, with the comment: "This is how my father speaks of my friend (whom he does not even know),

simply because he is my friend. I shall always be able to bring this up against him whenever he reproaches me with the lack of a child's affection and gratitude." What

was always incomprehensible to me was your total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments. It was as though

you had no notion of your power. I too, I am sure, often hurt you with what I said, but then I always knew, and it pained me, but I could not control myself, could not

keep the words back, I was sorry even while I was saying them. But you struck out with your words without much ado, you weren't sorry for anyone, either during or

afterward, one was utterly defenseless against you.

But your whole method of upbringing was like that. You have, I think, a gift for bringing up children; you could, I am sure, have been of help to a human being of your

own kind with your methods; such a person would have seen the reasonableness of what you told him, would not have troubled about anything else, and would quietly

have done things the way he was told. But for me as a child everything you called out to me was positively a heavenly commandment, I never forgot it, it remained for

me the most important means of forming a judgment of the world, above all of forming a judgment of you yourself, and there you failed entirely. Since as a child I was

with you chiefly during meals, your teaching was to a large extent the teaching of proper behavior at table. What was brought to the table had to be eaten, the quality of

the food was not to be discussed—but you yourself often found the food inedible, called it "this swill," said "that cow" (the cook) had ruined it. Because in accordance

with your strong appetite and your particular predilection you ate everything fast, hot, and in big mouthfuls, the child had to hurry; there was a somber silence at table,

interrupted by admonitions: "Eat first, talk afterward," or "faster, faster, faster," or "There you are, you see, I finished ages ago." Bones mustn't be cracked with the

teeth, but you could. Vinegar must not be sipped noisily, but you could. The main thing was that the bread should be cut straight. But it didn't matter that you did it with a

knife dripping with gravy. Care had to be taken that no scraps fell on the floor. In the end it was under your chair that there were the most scraps. At table one wasn't

allowed to do anything but eat, but you cleaned and cut your fingernails, sharpened pencils, cleaned your ears with a toothpick. Please, Father, understand me correctly:

in themselves these would have been utterly insignificant details, they only became depressing for me because you, so tremendously the authoritative man, did not keep

the commandments you imposed on me. Hence the world was for me divided into three parts: one in which I, the slave, lived under laws that had been invented only for

me and which I could, I did not know why, never completely comply with; then a second world, which was infinitely remote from mine, in which you lived, concerned

with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed; and finally a third world where everybody else lived

happily and free

from orders and from having to obey. I was continually in disgrace; either I obeyed your orders, and that was a disgrace, for they applied, after all, only to me; or I was

defiant, and that was a disgrace too, for how could I presume to defy you; or I could not obey because I did not, for instance, have your strength, your appetite, your skill,

although you expected it of me as a matter of course; this was the greatest disgrace of all. This was not the course of the child's reflections, but of his feelings.

My situation at that time becomes clearer, perhaps, if I compare it with that of Felix. You do, of course, treat him in a similar way, even indeed employing a particularly

terrible method against him in his upbringing: whenever at meals he does anything that is in your opinion unclean, you are not content to say to him, as you used to say to

me: "You are a pig," but add: "a real Hermann" or "just like your father." Now this may perhaps—one can't say more than "perhaps"—not really harm Felix in any

essential way, because you are only a grandfather to him, an especially important one, of course, but still not everything as you were for me; and besides, Felix is of a

quiet, even at this stage to a certain extent manly character, one who may perhaps be disconcerted by a great voice thundering at him, but not permanently conditioned

by it. But above all he is, of course, only comparatively seldom with you, and besides, he is also under other influences; you are for him a rather endearing curiosity from

which he can pick and choose whatever he likes. For me you were nothing in the least like a curiosity, I couldn't pick and choose, I had to take everything.

And this without being able to produce any arguments against any of it, for it is fundamentally impossible for you to talk calmly about a subject you don't approve of or

even one that was not suggested by you; your imperious temperament does not permit it. In recent years you have been explaining this as due to your nervous heart

condition. I don't know that you were ever essentially different. Rather, the nervous heart condition is a means by which you exert your domination more strongly, since

the thought of it necessarily chokes off the least opposition from others. This is, of course, not a reproach, only a statement of fact. As in Ottla's case, when you say:

"You simply can't talk to her at all, she flies straight in your face," but in reality she does not begin by flying out at all. You mistake the person for the thing. The thing

under discussion is what flies in your face and you immediately made up your mind about it without listening to the person; whatever is brought forward afterward

merely serves to irritate you further, never to convince you. Then all one gets from you is: "Do whatever you like. So far as I'm concerned you have a free hand. You're

of age, I've no advice to give you," and all this with that frightful, hoarse undertone of anger and utter condemnation that makes me tremble less today than in my

childhood only because the child's exclusive sense of guilt has been partly replaced by insight into our helplessness, yours and mine.

The impossibility of getting on calmly together had one more result, actually a very natural one: I lost the capacity to talk. I daresay I would not have become a very

eloquent person in any case, but I would, after all, have acquired the usual fluency of human language. But at a very early stage you forbade me to speak. Your threat,

"Not a word of contradiction!" and the raised hand that accompanied it have been with me ever since. What I got from you—and you are, whenever it is a matter of

your own affairs, an excellent talker—was a hesitant, stammering mode of speech, and even that was still too much for you, and finally I kept silent, at first perhaps out

of defiance, and then because I could neither think nor speak in your presence. And because you were the person who really brought me up, this has had its

repercussions throughout my life. It is altogether a remarkable mistake for you to believe I never complied with your wishes. "Always contrary" was really not my basic

principle where you were concerned, as you believe and as you reproach me. On the contrary: if I had obeyed you less, I am sure you would have been much better

pleased with me. As it is, all your educational measures hit the mark exactly. There was no hold I tried to escape. As I now am, I am (apart, of course, from the

fundamentals and the influence of life itself) the result of your upbringing and of my obedience. That this result is nevertheless distressing to you, indeed that you

unconsciously refuse to acknowledge it as the result of your methods of upbringing, is due to the fact that your hand and the material I offered were so alien to each

other. You would say: "Not a word of contradiction!" thinking that that was a way of silencing the oppositional forces in me that were disagreeable to you, but the effect

of it was too strong for me, I was too docile, I became completely dumb, cringed away from you, hid from you, and only dared to stir when I was so far away from you

that your power could no longer reach me—at least not directly. But you were faced with all that, and it all seemed to you to be "contrary," whereas it was only the

inevitable consequence of your strength and my weakness.

Your extremely effective rhetorical methods in bringing me up, which never failed to work with me, were: abuse, threats, irony, spiteful laughter, and—oddly

enough—self-pity. I cannot recall your ever having abused me directly and in downright abusive terms. Nor was that necessary; you had so many other methods, and

besides, in talk at home and particularly at the shop the words of abuse went flying around me in such swarms, as they were flung at other people's heads, that as a little

boy I was sometimes almost stunned and had no reason not to apply them to myself too, for the people you were abusing were certainly no worse than I was and you

were certainly not more displeased with them than with me. And here again was your enigmatic innocence and inviolability; you cursed and swore without the slightest

scruple; yet you condemned cursing and swearing in other people and would not have it.

You reinforced abusiveness with threats and this applied to me too. How terrible for me was, for instance, that "I'll tear you apart like a fish," although I knew, of course,

that nothing worse was to follow (admittedly, as a little child I didn't know that), but it was almost exactly in accord with my notions of your power, and I saw you as

being capable of doing this too. It was also terrible when you ran around the table, shouting, grabbing at one, obviously not really trying to grab, yet pretending to, and

Mother (finally) had to rescue one, as it seemed. Once again one had, so it seemed to the child, remained alive through your mercy and bore one's life henceforth as an

undeserved gift from you. This is also the place to mention the threats about the consequences of disobedience. When I began to do something you did not like and you

threatened me with the prospect of failure, my veneration for your opinion was so great that the failure became inevitable, even though perhaps it happened only at some

later time. I lost confidence in my own actions. I was wavering, doubtful. The older I became, the more material there was for you to bring up against me as evidence of

my worthlessness; gradually you began really to be right in a certain respect. Once again, I am careful not to assert that I became like this solely through you; you only

intensified what was already there, but you intensified it greatly, simply because where I was concerned you were very powerful and you employed all your power to

that end.

You put special trust in bringing up children by means of irony, and this was most in keeping with your superiority over me. An admonition from you generally took this

form: "Can't you do it in such-and-such a way? That's too hard for you, I suppose. You haven't the time, of course?" and so on. And each such question would be

accompanied by malicious laughter and a malicious face. One was, so to speak, already punished before one even knew that one had done something bad. Maddening

were also those rebukes in which one was treated as a third person, in other words, considered not worthy even to be spoken to angrily; that is to say, when you would

speaking ostensibly to Mother but actually to me, who was sitting right there. For instance: "Of course, that's too much to expect of our worthy son," and the like. (This

produced a corollary in that, for instance, I did not dare to ask you, and later from habit did not even really much think of asking, anything directly when Mother was

there. It was much less dangerous for the child to put questions to Mother, sitting there beside you, and to ask Mother: "How is Father?"—so guarding oneself against

surprises.) There were, of course, also cases when one was entirely in agreement with even the worst irony, namely, when it referred to someone else, such as Elli, with

whom I was on bad terms for years. There was an orgy of malice and spiteful delight for me when such things were said of her, as they were at almost every meal:

"She has to sit ten feet back from the table, the big fat lump," and when you, morosely sitting on your chair without the slightest trace of pleasantness or good humor, a

bitter enemy, would exaggeratedly imitate the way she sat, which you found utterly loathsome. How often such things happened, over and over again, and how little you

really achieved as a result of them! I think the reason was that the expenditure of anger and malice seemed to be in no proper relation to the subject itself, one did not

have the feeling that the anger was caused by this trifle of sitting some way back from the table, but that the whole bulk of it had already been present to begin with,

then, only by chance, happened to settle on this matter as a pretext for breaking out. Since one was convinced that a pretext would be found

anyway, one did not try

very hard, and one's feelings became dulled by these continued threats. One had gradually become pretty sure of not getting a beating, anyway. One became a glum,

inattentive, disobedient child, always intent on escape, mainly within one's own self. So you suffered, and so we suffered. From your own point of view you were quite

right when, clenching your teeth and with that gurgling laughter that gave the child its first notions of hell, you used to say bitterly (as you did only just recently in

connection with a letter from Constantinople): "A nice crowd that is!"

What seemed to be quite incompatible with this attitude toward your children was, and it happened very often, that you openly lamented your situation. I confess that as

a child (though probably somewhat later) I was completely callous about this and could not understand how you could possibly expect to get any sympathy from anyone.

You were such a giant in every respect. What could you care for our pity or even our help? Our help, indeed, you could not but despise, as you so often despised us

ourselves. Hence, I did not take these laments at their face value and looked for some hidden motive behind them. Only later did I come to understand that you really

suffered a great deal because of your children; but at that time, when these laments might under different circumstances still have met with a childish, candid sympathy,

unhesitatingly ready to offer any help it could, to me they had to seem like overemphatic means of disciplining me and humiliating me, as such not in themselves very

intense, but with the harmful side effect that the child became conditioned not to take very seriously the very things it should have taken seriously.

Fortunately, there were exceptions to all this, mostly when you suffered in silence, and affection and kindness by their own strength overcame all obstacles, and moved

me immediately. Rare as this was, it was wonderful. For instance, in earlier years, in hot summers, when you were tired after lunch, I saw you having a nap at the

office, your elbow on the desk; or you joined us in the country, in the summer holidays, on Sundays, worn out from work; or the time Mother was gravely ill and you

stood holding on to the bookcase, shaking with sobs; or when, during my last illness, you came tiptoeing to Ottla's room to see me, stopping in the doorway, craning your

neck to see me, and out of consideration only waved to me with your hand. At such times one would lie back and weep for happiness, and one weeps again now, writing

it down.

You have a particularly beautiful, very rare way of quietly, contentedly, approvingly smiling, a way of smiling that can make the person for whom it is meant entirely

happy. I can't recall its ever having expressly been my lot in my childhood, but I dare say it may have happened, for why should you have refused it to me at a time

when I still seemed blameless to you and was your great hope? Yet in the long run even such friendly impressions brought about nothing but an increased sense of guilt,

making the world still more incomprehensible to me.

I would rather keep to the practical and permanent. In order to assert myself even a little in relation to you, and partly too from a kind of vengefulness, I soon began to

observe little ridiculous things about you, to collect them and to exaggerate them. For instance, how easily you let yourself be dazzled by people who were only seemingly

above you, how you would keep on talking about them, as of some Imperial Councilor or some such (on the other hand, such things also pained me, to see you, my

father, believing you had any need of such trifling confirmations of your own value, and boasting about them), or I would note your taste for indecent expressions, which

you would produce in the loudest possible voice, laughing about them as though you had said something particularly good, while in point of fact it was only a banal little

obscurity (at the same time this again was for me a humiliating manifestation of your vitality). There were, of course, plenty of such observations. I was happy about

them; they gave me occasion for whispering and joking; you sometimes noticed it and were angry about it, took it for malice and lack of respect, but believe me, it was

for me nothing other than a means—moreover, a useless one—of attempted self-preservation; they were jokes of the kind that are made about gods and kings, jokes

that are not only compatible with the profoundest respect but are indeed part and parcel of it.

Incidentally, you too, in keeping with your similar position where I was concerned, tried a similar form of self-defense. You were in the habit of pointing out how

exaggeratedly well off I was and how well I had in fact been treated. That is correct but I don't believe it was of any real use to me under the prevailing circumstances.

It is true that Mother was endlessly good to me, but for me all that was in relation to you, that is to say, in no good relation. Mother unconsciously played the part of a

beater during a hunt. Even if your method of upbringing might in some unlikely case have set me on my own feet by means of producing defiance, dislike, or even hate in

me, Mother canceled that out again by kindness, by talking sensibly (in the confusion of my childhood she was the very prototype of good sense and reasonableness), by

pleading for me; and I was again driven back into your orbit, which I might perhaps otherwise have broken out of, to your advantage and to my own. Or it happened that

no real reconciliation came about, that Mother merely shielded me from you in secret, secretly gave me something, or allowed me to do something, and then where you

were concerned I was again the furtive creature, the cheat, the guilty one, who in his worthlessness could only pursue sneaky methods even to get the things he

regarded as his right. Of course, I became used to taking such a course also in quest of things to which, even in my own view, I had no right. This again meant an

increase in the sense of guilt. It is also true that you hardly ever really gave me a beating. But the shouting, the way your face got red, the hasty undoing of the

suspenders and laying them ready over the back of the chair, all that was almost worse for me. It is as if someone is going to be hanged. If he really is hanged, then he is

dead and it is all over. But if he has to go through all the preliminaries to being hanged and he learns of his reprieve only when the noose is dangling before his face, he

may suffer from it all his life. Besides, from the many occasions on which I had, according to your clearly expressed opinion, deserved a beating but was let off at the

last moment by your grace, I again accumulated only a huge sense of guilt. On every side I was to blame, I was in your debt.

You have always reproached me (either alone or in front of others, since you have no feeling for the humiliation of the latter, and your children's affairs were always

public) for living in peace and quiet, warmth and abundance, lacking nothing, thanks to your hard work. I think of remarks that must positively have worn grooves in my

brain, such as: "When I was only seven I had to push a handcart from village to village." "We all had to sleep in one room." "We were glad when we got potatoes." "For

years I had open sores on my legs because I did not have enough warm clothes." "I was only a little boy when I was sent to Pisek to work in a store." "I got nothing

from home, not even when I was in the army, but still I managed to send money home." "But for all that, for all that—Father was always Father to me. Ah, nobody

knows what that means these days! What do these children know? Nobody's been through that! Does any child understand such things today?" Under other conditions

such stories might have been very educational, they might have been a way in encouraging one and strengthening one to endure torments and deprivations similar to

those one's father had undergone. But that wasn't what you wanted at all; the situation had, after all, become quite different as a result of all your efforts, and there was

no opportunity to distinguish oneself as you had done. Such an opportunity would first of all have had to be created by violence and revolutions, it would have meant

breaking away from home (assuming one had had the resolution and strength to do so and that Mother wouldn't have worked against it, for her part, with other means)

But that was not what you wanted at all, that you termed ingratitude, extravagance, disobedience, treachery, madness. And so, while on the one

hand you tempted me to

it by means of example, story, and humiliation, on the other hand you forbade it with the utmost severity. Otherwise, for instance you ought to have been delighted with

Ottla's Zürau escapade*—apart from the accompanying circumstances. She wanted to get back to the country from which you had come, she wanted work and

hardship such as you had had, she did not want to depend on the fruits of your labor, just as you yourself were independent of your father. Were those such dreadful

intentions? Was that so remote from your example and your precept? Well, Ottla's intentions finally came to nothing in practice, were indeed perhaps carried out in a

somewhat ridiculous way, with too much fuss, and she did not have enough consideration for her parents. But was that exclusively her fault and not also the fault of the

circumstances and, above all, of the fact that you were so estranged from her? Was she any less estranged from you (as you later tried to convince yourself) in the

business than afterward at Zürau? And would you not quite certainly have had the power (assuming you could have brought yourself to do so) to turn that escapade into

something very good by means of encouragement, advice, and supervision, perhaps even merely by means of toleration?

*Refers to his sister Ottla's taking over the management of a farm in the German-Bohemian town of Zürau. Kafka spent time with her there during his illness

in 1917-18. (Ed.)

In connection with such experiences you used to say, in bitter jest, that we were too well off. But that joke is, in a sense, no joke at all. What you had to fight for we

received from your hand, but the fight for external life, a fight that was instantly open to you and which we are, of course, not spared either, we now have to fight for

only late in life, in our maturity but with only childish strength. I do not say that our situation is therefore inevitably less favorable than yours was, on the contrary, it is

probably no better and no worse (although this is said without reference to our different natures), only we have the disadvantage of not being able to boast of our

wretchedness and not being able to humiliate anyone with it as you have done with your wretchedness. Nor do I deny that it might have been possible for me to really

enjoy the fruits of your great and successful work; that I could have turned them to good account and, to your joy, continued to work with them; but here again, our

estrangement stood in the way. I could enjoy what you gave, but only in humiliation, weariness, weakness, and with a sense of guilt. That was why I could be grateful to

you for everything only as a beggar is, and could never show it by doing the right things.

The next external result of this whole method of upbringing was that I fled everything that even remotely reminded me of you. First, the business. In itself, especially in

my childhood, so long as it was still a simple shop, I ought to have liked it very much, it was so full of life, lit up in the evening, there was so much to see and hear; one

was able to help now and then, to distinguish oneself, and, above all, to admire you for your magnificent commercial talents, for the way you sold things, managed people,

made jokes, were untiring, in case of doubt knew how to make the right decision immediately, and so forth; even the way you wrapped a parcel or opened a crate was a

spectacle worth watching; all this was certainly not the worst school for a child. But since you gradually began to terrify me on all sides and the business and you

became one thing for me, the business too made me feel uneasy. Things that had at first been a matter of course for me there now began to torment and shame me,

particularly the way you treated the staff. I don't know, perhaps it was the same in most businesses (in the Assicurazioni Generali, for instance, in my time it was really

similar, and the explanation I gave the director for my resignation was, though not strictly in accordance with the truth, still not entirely a lie: my not being able to bear the

cursing and swearing, which incidentally had not actually been directed at me; it was something to which I had become too painfully sensitive from home), but in my

childhood other businesses did not concern me. But you I heard and saw shouting, cursing, and raging in the shop, in a way that in my opinion at that

time had no equal

anywhere in the world. And not only cursing, but other sorts of tyrannizing. For instance, the way you pushed goods you did not want to have mixed up with others off

the counter—only the thoughtlessness of your rage was some slight excuse—and how the clerk had to pick them up. Or your constant comment about a clerk who had

TB: "The sooner that sick dog croaks the better." You called the employees "paid enemies," and that was what they were, but even before they became that, you

seemed to me to be their "paying enemy." There, too, I learned the great lesson that you could be unjust; in my own case I would not have noticed it so soon, for there

was too much accumulated sense of guilt in me ready to admit that you were right; but in the shop, in my childish view—which later, of course, became somewhat

modified, although not too much so—were strangers, who were after all, working for us and for that reason had to live in constant dread of you. Of course I

exaggerated, because I simply assumed you had as terrible an effect on these people as on me. If it had been so, they could not have lived at all; since, however they

were grown-up people, most of them with excellent nerves, they shook off this abuse without any trouble and in the end it did you much more harm than it did them. But

it made the business insufferable to me, reminding me far too much of my relations with you; quite apart from your proprietary interest and apart from your mania for

domination even as a businessman, you were so greatly superior to all those who ever came to learn the business from you that nothing they ever did could satisfy you,

and you must, as I assumed, in the same way be forever dissatisfied with me too. That was why I could not help siding with the staff; I did it also, by the way, because

from sheer nervousness I could not understand how anyone could be so abusive to a stranger, and therefore—from sheer nervousness and for no other reason than my

own security—I tried to reconcile the staff, which must, I thought, be in a terrible state of indignation, with you and with our family. To this end it was not enough for me

to behave in an ordinary decent way toward the staff, or even modestly; more than that, I had to be humble, not only be first to say "good morning" or "good evening,"

but if at all possible I had to forestall any return of the greeting. And even if I, insignificant creature that I was, down below, had licked their feet it would still have been

no compensation for the way that you, the master, were lashing out at them up above. This relationship that I came to have toward my fellow man extended beyond the

limits of the business and on into the future (something similar, but not so dangerous and deep—going as in my case, is for instance Ottla's taste for associating with poor

people, sitting together with the maids, which annoys you so much, and the like). In the end I was almost afraid of the business and, in any case, it had long ceased to be

any concern of mine even before I went to the Gymnasium and hence was taken even further away from it. Besides, it seemed to be entirely beyond

my resources and

capacities since, as you said, it exhausted even yours. You then tried (today this seems to me both touching and shaming) to extract, nevertheless, some little sweetness

for yourself from my dislike of the business, of your world—a dislike that was after all very distressing to you—by asserting that I had no business sense, that I had

loftier ideas in my head, and the like. Mother was, of course, delighted with this explanation that you wrung from yourself, and I too, in my vanity and wretchedness, let

myself be influenced by it. But if it had really been only or mainly "loftier ideas" that turned me against the business (which I now, but only now, have come really and

honestly to hate), they would have had to express themselves differently, instead of letting me float quickly and timidly through my schooling and my law studies until I

finally landed at a clerk's desk.

If I was to escape from you, I had to escape from the family as well, even from Mother. True, one could always get protection from her, but only in relation to you. She

loved you too much and was too devoted and loyal to you to have been for long an independent spiritual force in the child's struggle. This was, incidentally, a correct

instinct of the child, for with the passing of the years Mother became ever more closely allied to you; while, where she herself was concerned, she always kept her

independence, within the narrowest limits, delicately and beautifully, and without ever essentially hurting you, still, with the passing of the years she more and more

completely, emotionally rather than intellectually, blindly adopted your judgments and your condemnations with regard to the children, particularly in the case—certainly a

grave one—of Ottla. Of course, it must always be borne in mind how tormenting and utterly wearing Mother's position in the family was. She toiled in the business and

in the house, and doubly suffered all the family illnesses, but the culmination of all this was what she suffered in her position between us and you. You were always

affectionate and considerate toward her, but in this respect, you spared her just as little as we spared her. We all hammered ruthlessly away at her, you from your side,

we from ours. It was a diversion, nobody meant any harm, thinking of the battle that you were waging with us and that we were waging with you, and it was Mother

who got the brunt of all our wild feelings. Nor was it at all a good contribution to the children's upbringing the way you—of course, without being in the slightest to blame

for it yourself—tormented her on our account. It even seemed to justify our otherwise unjustifiable behavior toward her. How she suffered from us on your accounts

and from you on our account, even without counting those cases in which you were in the right because she was spoiling us, even though this "spoiling" may sometimes

have been only a quiet, unconscious counterdemonstration against your system. Of course, Mother could not have borne all this if she had not

drawn the strength to bear

it from her love for us all and her happiness in that love.

My sisters were only partly on my side. The one who was happiest in her relation to you was Valli. Being closest to Mother, she fell in with your wishes in a similar way,

without much effort and without suffering much harm. And because she reminded you of Mother, you did accept her in a more friendly spirit, although there was little

Kafka material in her. But perhaps that was precisely what you wanted; where there was nothing of the Kafka's, even you could not demand anything of the sort, nor

did you feel, as with the rest of us, that something was getting lost which had to be saved by force. Besides, it may be that you were never particularly fond of the Kafka

element as it manifested itself in women. Valli's relationship to you would perhaps have become even friendlier if the rest of us had not disturbed it somewhat.

Elli is the only example of the almost complete success of a breaking away from your orbit. When she was a child she was the last person I should have expected it of.

For she was such a clumsy, tired, timid, bad-tempered, guilt-ridden, overmeek, malicious, lazy, greedy, miserly child, I could hardly bring myself to look at her, certainly

not to speak to her, so much did she remind me of myself, in so very much the same way was she under the same spell of our upbringing. Her miserliness was especially

abhorrent to me, since I had it to an, if possible, even greater extent. Miserliness is, after all, one of the most reliable signs of profound unhappiness; I was so unsure of

everything that, in fact, I possessed only what I actually had in my hands or in my mouth or what was at least on the way there, and this was precisely what she, being in

a similar situation, most enjoyed taking away from me. But all this changed when, at an early age—this is the most important thing—she left home, married, had children,

and became cheerful, carefree, brave, generous, unselfish, and hopeful. It is almost incredible how you did not really notice this change at all, or at any rate did not give it

its due, blinded as you were by the grudge you have always borne Elli and fundamentally still bear her to this day; only this grudge matters much less now, since Elli no

longer lives with us and, besides, your love for Felix and your affection for Karl have made it less important. Only Gerti sometimes has to suffer for it still.

I scarcely dare write of Ottla; I know that by doing so I jeopardize the whole effect I hope for from this letter. In ordinary circumstances, that is, so long as she is not in

particular need or danger, all you feel is only hatred for her; you yourself have confessed to me that in your opinion she is always intentionally causing you suffering and

annoyance and that while you are suffering on her account she is satisfied and pleased. In other words, a sort of fiend. What an immense estrangement, greater still than

that between you and me, must have come about between you and her, for such an immense misunderstanding to be possible. She is so remote from you that you

scarcely see her any more, instead, you put a specter in the place where you suppose her to be. I grant you that you have had a particularly difficult time with her. I

don't, of course, quite see to the bottom of this very complicated case, but at any rate here was something like a kind of Löwy, equipped with the best Kafka weapons.

Between us there was no real struggle; I was soon finished off; what remained was flight, embitterment, melancholy, and inner struggle. But you two were always in a

fighting position, always fresh, always energetic. A sight as magnificent as it was desperate. At the very beginning you were, I am sure, very close to each other,

because of the four of us Ottla is even today perhaps the purest representation of the marriage between you and Mother and of the forces it combined. I don't know

what it was that deprived you both of the happiness of the harmony between father and child, but I can't help believing that the development in this case was similar to

that in mine. On your side there was the tyranny of your own nature, on her side the Löwy defiance, touchiness, sense of justice, restlessness, and all that backed by the

consciousness of the Kafka vigor. Doubtless I too influenced her, but scarcely of my own doing, simply through the fact of my existence.

Besides, as the last to arrive,

she found herself in a situation in which the balance of power was already established, and was able to form her own judgment from the large amount of material at her

disposal. I can even imagine that she may, in her inmost being, have wavered for some time as to whether she should fling herself into your arms or into those of the

adversaries; and it is obvious that at that time there was something you failed to do and that you rebuffed her, but if it had been possible, the two of you would have

become a magnificently harmonious pair. That way I should have lost an ally, but the sight of you two would have richly compensated me; besides, the incredible

happiness of finding complete contentment at least in one child would have changed you much to my advantage. All this, however, is today only a dream. Ottila has no

contact with her father and has to seek her way alone, like me, and the degree of confidence, self-confidence, health, and ruthlessness by which she surpasses me

makes her in your eyes more wicked and treacherous than I seem to you. I understand that. From your point of view she can't be different. Indeed, she herself is

capable of regarding herself with your eyes, of feeling what you suffer and of being—not desperate (despair is my business) but very sad. You do see us together often

enough, in apparent contradiction to this, whispering and laughing, and now and then you hear us mentioning you. The impression you get is that of impudent

conspirators. Strange conspirators. You are, admittedly, a chief subject of our conversations, as of our thoughts ever since we can remember, but truly, not in order to

plot against you do we sit together, but in order to discuss—with all our might and main, jokingly and seriously, in affection, defiance, anger, revulsion, submission,

consciousness of guilt, with all the resources of our heads and hearts—this terrible trial that is pending between us and you, to examine it in all its details, from all sides,

on all occasions, from far and near—a trial in which you keep on claiming to be the judge, whereas, at least in the main (here I leave a margin for all the mistakes I may

naturally make) you are a party too, just as weak and deluded as we are. An example of the effect of your methods of upbringing, one that is very instructive in the

context of the whole situation, is the case of Irma. On the one hand, she was, after all, a stranger, already grown up when she entered your business, and had to deal

with you mainly as her employer, so that she was only partially exposed to your influence, and this at an age when she had already developed powers of resistance; yet,

on the other hand, she was also a blood relation, venerating you as her father's brother, and the power you had over her was far greater than that of a mere employer.

And despite all this she, who, with her frail body, was so efficient, intelligent, hard-working, modest, trustworthy, unselfish, and loyal, who loved you as her uncle and

admired you as her employer, she who proved herself in previous and in subsequent positions, was not a very good clerk to you. Her relationship

with you was, in fact,

nearly that of one of your children—pushed into that role, naturally, by us, too—and the power of your personality to bend others was, even in her case, so great that

(admittedly only in relation to you and, it is to be hoped, without the deeper suffering of a child) she developed forgetfulness, carelessness, a sort of gallows humor, and

perhaps even a shade of defiance, in so far as she was capable of that at all. And I do not even take into account that she was ailing, and not very happy in other

respects either, and that she was burdened by a bleak home life. What was so illuminating to me in your relation to her, you yourself summed up in a remark that

became classical for us, one that was almost blasphemous, but at the same time extraordinary evidence of the naïveté of your way of treating people: "The late lamented

has left me quite a mess."

I might go on to describe further orbits of your influence and of the struggle against it, but there I would be entering uncertain ground and would have to construct things

and, apart from that, the farther you are away from your business and your family, the pleasanter you have always become, easier to get on with, better mannered, more

considerate, and more sympathetic (I mean outwardly, too), in exactly the same way as for instance an autocrat, when he happens to be outside the frontiers of his own

country, has no reason to go on being tyrannical and is able to associate good-humoredly even with the lowest of the low. In fact, in the group photographs taken at

Franzensbad, for instance, you always looked as big and jolly, among those sulky little people, as a king on his travels. This was something, I grant you, from which your

children might have benefited too, if they had been capable of recognizing this even as little children, which was impossible; and if I, for one, had not had to live

constantly within the inmost, strictest, binding ring of your influence, as, in fact, I did.

Not only did I lose my family feeling, as you say; on the contrary, I did indeed have a feeling about the family, mostly in a negative sense, concerned with the breaking

away from you (which, of course could never be done completely). Relations with people outside the family, however, suffered possibly still more under your influence.

You are entirely mistaken if you believe I do everything for other people out of affection and loyalty, and for you and the family nothing, out of coldness and betrayal. I

repeat for the tenth time: Even in other circumstances I should probably have become a shy and nervous person, but it is a long dark road from there to where I have

really come. (Up to now I have intentionally passed over in silence relatively little in this letter, but now and later I shall have to keep silent about some things that are still

too hard for me to confess—to you and to myself. I say this in order that if the picture as a whole should be somewhat blurred here and there, you should not believe

that this is due to lack of evidence; on the contrary, there is evidence that might well make the picture unbearably stark. It is not easy to find a middle way.) Here, it is

enough to remind you of early days. I had lost my self-confidence where you were concerned, and in its place had developed a boundless sense of guilt. (In recollection

of this boundlessness I once wrote of someone, accurately: "He is afraid the shame will outlive him.") I could not suddenly change when I was with other people; rather,

I came to feel an even deeper sense of guilt with them, for, as I have already said, I had to make up to them for the wrongs you had done them in your business, wrongs

in which I too had my share of responsibility. Besides, you always had some objection to make, frankly or covertly, about everyone I associated with, and for this too I

had to atone. The mistrust that you tried to instill into me toward most people, at business and at home (name a single person who was of importance to me in my

childhood whom you didn't at least once tear to shreds with your criticism), was, oddly enough, of no particular burden to you (you were strong enough to bear it;

besides, it was perhaps really only a token of the autocrat). This mistrust (which was nowhere confirmed in the eyes of the little boy, since everywhere I saw only

people excellent beyond any hope of emulation) turned in me to mistrust of myself and perpetual anxiety about everything else. There, then, I was in

general certain of

not being able to escape from you. That you were mistaken on this point was perhaps due to your actually never learning anything about my association with other

people; and mistrustfully and jealously (I don't deny, do I, that you are fond of me?) you assumed that I had to compensate elsewhere for the lack of a family life, since it

must be impossible that away from home I should live in the same way. Incidentally, in this respect, it was precisely in my childhood that I did find a certain comfort in

my very mistrust of my own judgment. I would say to myself: "Oh, you're exaggerating, you tend too much to feel trivialities as great exceptions, the way young people

always do." But this comfort I later lost almost entirely, when I gained a clearer perspective of the world.

I found just as little escape from you in Judaism. Here some measure of escape would have been thinkable in principle, moreover, it would have been thinkable that we

might both have found each other in Judaism or that we even might have begun from there in harmony. But what sort of Judaism was it that I got from you? In the

course of the years, I have taken roughly three different attitudes to it. As a child I reproached myself, in accord with you, for not going to the synagogue often enough,

for not fasting, and so on. I thought that in this way I was doing a wrong not to myself but to you, and I was penetrated by a sense of guilt, which was, of

course, always

near at hand.

Later, as a young man, I could not understand how, with the insignificant scrap of Judaism you yourself possessed, you could reproach me for not making an effort (for

the sake of piety at least, as you put it) to cling to a similar, insignificant scrap. It was indeed, so far as I could see, a mere nothing, a joke—not even a joke. Four days a

year you went to the synagogue, where you were, to say the least, closer to the indifferent than to those who took it seriously, patiently went through the prayers as a

formality, sometimes amazed me by being able to show me in the prayer book the passage that was being said at the moment, and for the rest, so long as I was present

in the synagogue (and this was the main thing) I was allowed to hang around wherever I liked. And so I yawned and dozed through the many hours (I don't think I was

ever again so bored, except later at dancing lessons) and did my best to enjoy the few little bits of variety there were, as for instance when the Ark of the Covenant was

opened, which always reminded me of the shooting galleries where a cupboard door would open in the same way whenever one hit a bull's-eye; except that there

something interesting always came out and here it was always just the same old dolls without heads. Incidentally, it was also very frightening for me there, not only, as

goes without saying, because of all the people one came into close contact with, but also because you once mentioned in passing that I too might be called to the Torah.

That was something I dreaded for years. But otherwise I was not fundamentally disturbed in my boredom, unless it was by the bar mitzvah, but that demanded no more

than some ridiculous memorizing, in other words, it led to nothing but some ridiculous passing of an examination; and, so far as you were concerned, by little, not very

significant incidents, as when you were called to the Torah and passed, in what to my way of feeling was a purely social event, or when you stayed on in the synagogue

for the prayers for the dead, and I was sent away, which for a long time—obviously because of the being sent away and the lack of any deeper interest—aroused in me

the more or less unconscious feeling that something indecent was about to take place.—That's how it was in the synagogue; at home it was, if possible, even poorer,

being confined to the first Seder, which more and more developed into a farce, with fits of hysterical laughter, admittedly under the influence of the growing children.

(Why did you have to give way to that influence? Because you had brought it about.) This was the religious material that was handed on to me, to which may be added

at most the outstretched hand pointing to "the sons of the millionaire Fuchs," who attended the synagogue with their father on the High Holy Days. How one could do

anything better with that material than get rid of it as fast as possible, I could not understand; precisely the getting rid of it seemed to me to be the

devoutest action.

Still later, I did see it again differently and realized why it was possible for you to think that in this respect too I was malevolently betraying you. You really had brought

some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village community; it was not much and it dwindled a little more in the city and during your military service; but still,

the impressions and memories of your youth did just about suffice for some sort of Jewish life, especially since you did not need much help of that kind, but came of

robust stock and could personally scarcely be shaken by religious scruples unless they were strongly mixed with social scruples. Basically the faith that ruled your life

consisted in your believing in the unconditional rightness of the opinions of a certain class of Jewish society, and hence actually, since these opinions were part and parcel

of your own nature, in believing in yourself. Even in this there was still Judaism enough, but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you

were passing it on. In part, it was youthful memories that could not be passed on to others; in part, it was your dreaded personality. It was also impossible to make a

child, overacutely observant from sheer nervousness, understand that the few flimsy gestures you performed in the name of Judaism, and with an indifference in keeping

with their flimsiness, could have any higher meaning. For you they had meaning as little souvenirs of earlier times, and that was why you wanted to pass them on to me,

but since they no longer had any intrinsic value even for you you could do this only through persuasion or threat; on the one hand, this could not be successful, and on the

other, it had to make you very angry with me on account of my apparent obstinacy, since you did not recognize the weakness of your position in this.

The whole thing is, of course, no isolated phenomenon. It was much the same with a large section of this transitional generation of Jews, which had migrated from the

still comparatively devout countryside to the cities. It happened automatically; only, it added to our relationship, which certainly did not lack in acrimony, one more

sufficiently painful source for it. Although you ought to believe, as I do, in your guiltlessness in this matter too, you ought to explain this guiltlessness by your nature and

by the conditions of the times, not merely by external circumstances; that is, not by saying, for instance, that you had too much work and too many other worries to be

able to bother with such things as well. In this manner you tend to twist your undoubted guiltlessness into an unjust reproach to others. That can be very easily refuted

everywhere and here too. It was not a matter of any sort of instruction you ought to have given your children, but of an exemplary life. Had your Judaism been stronger,

your example would have been more compelling too; this goes without saying and is, again, by no means a reproach, but only a refutation of your reproaches. You have

recently been reading Franklin's memoirs of his youth. I really did purposely give you this book to read, though not, as you ironically commented, because of a little

passage on vegetarianism, but because of the relationship between the author and his father, as it is there described, and of the relationship between the author and his

son, as it is spontaneously revealed in these memoirs written for that son. I do not wish to dwell here on matters of detail.

I have received a certain retrospective confirmation of this view of your Judaism from your attitude in recent years, when it seemed to you that I was taking more

interest in Jewish matters. As you have in advance an aversion to every one of my activities and especially to the nature of my interest, so you have had it here too. But

in spite of this, one could have expected that in this case you would make a little exception. It was, after all, Judaism of your Judaism that was coming to life here, and

with it also the possibility of entering into a new relationship between us. I do not deny that, had you shown interest in them, these things might, for that very reason, have

become suspect in my eyes. I do not even dream of asserting that I am in this respect any better than you are. But it never came to the test. Through my intervention

Judaism became abhorrent to you, Jewish writings unreadable; they "nauseated" you.—This may have meant you insisted that only that Judaism which you had shown

me in my childhood was the right one, and beyond it there was nothing. Yet that you should insist on it was really hardly thinkable. But then the "nausea" (apart from the

fact that it was directed primarily not against Judaism but against me personally) could only mean that unconsciously you did acknowledge the weakness of your Judaism

and of my Jewish upbringing, did not wish to be reminded of it in any way, and reacted to any reminder with frank hatred. Incidentally, your negative high esteem of my

new Judaism was much exaggerated; first of all, it bore your curse within it, and secondly in its development the fundamental relationship to one's fellow men was

decisive, in my case that is to say fatal.

You struck closer to home with your aversion to my writing and to everything that, unknown to you, was connected with it. Here I had, in fact, got some distance away

from you by my own efforts, even if it was slightly reminiscent of the worm that, when a foot treads on its tail end, breaks loose with its front part and drags itself aside.

To a certain extent I was in safety; there was a chance to breathe freely. The aversion you naturally and immediately took to my writing was, for once, welcome to me.

My vanity, my ambition did suffer under your soon proverbial way of hailing the arrival of my books: "Put it on my bedside table!" (usually you were playing cards when

a book came), but I was really quite glad of it, not only out of rebellious malice, not only out of delight at a new confirmation of my view of our relationship, but quite

spontaneously, because to me that formula sounded something like: "Now you are free!" Of course it was a delusion; I was not, or, to put it most optimistically, was not

yet, free. My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast. It was an intentionally long and drawn-out

leave-taking from you, yet, although it was enforced by you, it did take its course in the direction determined by me. But how little all this amounted to! It is only worth

talking about because it happened in my life, otherwise it would not even be noted; and also because in my childhood it ruled my life as a premonition, later as a hope,

and still later often as despair, and it dictated—yet again in your shape, it may be said—my few small decisions.

For instance, the choice of a career. True, here you gave me complete freedom, in your magnanimous and, in this regard, even indulgent manner. Although here again

you were conforming to the general method of treating sons in the Jewish middle class, which was the standard for you, or at least to the values of that class. Finally,

one of your misunderstandings concerning my person played a part in this too. In fact, out of paternal pride, ignorance of my real life, and conclusions drawn from my

feebleness, you have always regarded me as particularly diligent. As a child I was, in your view, always studying, and later always writing. This does not even remotely

correspond to the facts. It would be more correct, and much less exaggerated, to say that I studied little and learned nothing; that something did stick in my mind after

those many years is, after all, not very remarkable, since I did have a moderately good memory and a not too inferior capacity for learning; but the sum total of

knowledge and especially of a solid grounding of knowledge is extremely pitiable in comparison with the expenditure of time and money in the course of an outwardly

untroubled, calm life, particularly also in comparison with almost all the people I know. It is pitiable, but to me understandable. Ever since I could think, I have had such

profound anxieties about asserting my spiritual and intellectual existence that I was indifferent to everything else. Jewish schoolboys in our country often tend to be odd;

among them one finds the most unlikely things; but something like my cold indifference, scarcely disguised, indestructible, childishly helpless, approaching the ridiculous,

and brutishly complacent, the indifference of a self-sufficient but coldly imaginative child, I have never found anywhere else; to be sure, it was the sole defense against

destruction of the nerves by fear and by a sense of guilt. All that occupied my mind was worry about myself, and this in various ways. There was, for

instance, the

worry about my health; it began imperceptibly enough, with now and then a little anxiety about digestion, hair falling out, a spinal curvature, and so on; intensifying in

innumerable gradations, it finally ended with a real illness. But since there was nothing at all I was certain of, since I needed to be provided at every instant with a new

confirmation of my existence, since nothing was in my very own, undoubted, sole possession, determined unequivocally only by me—in sober truth a disinherited

son—naturally I became unsure even to the thing nearest to me, my own body. I shot up, tall and lanky, without knowing what to do with my lankiness, the burden was

too heavy, the back became bent; I scarcely dared to move, certainly not to exercise, I remained weakly; I was amazed by everything I could still command as by a

miracle, for instance, my good digestion; that sufficed to lose it, and now the way was open to every sort of hypochondria; until finally under the strain of the superhuman

effort of wanting to marry (of this I shall speak later), blood came from the lung, something in which the apartment in the Schönbornpalais—which, however, I needed

only because I believed I needed it for my writing, so that even this belongs here under the same heading—may have had a fair share. So all this did not come from

excessive work, as you always imagine. There were years in which, in perfectly good health, I lazed away more time on the sofa than you in all your life, including all

your illnesses. When I rushed away from you, frightfully busy, it was generally in order to lie down in my room. My total achievement in work done, both at the office

(where laziness is, of course, not particularly striking, and besides, mine was kept in bounds by my anxiety) and at home, is minute; if you had any real idea of it, you

would be aghast. Probably I am constitutionally not lazy at all, but there was nothing for me to do. In the place where I lived I was spurned, condemned, fought to a

standstill; and to escape to some other place was an enormous exertion, but that was not work, for it was something impossible, something that was, with small

exceptions, unattainable for me.

This was the state in which I was given the freedom of choice of a career. But was I still capable of making any use of such freedom? Had I still any confidence in my

own capacity to achieve a real career? My valuation of myself was much more dependent on you than on anything else, such as some external success. That was

strengthening for a moment, nothing more, but on the other side your weight always dragged me down much more strongly. Never shall I pass the first grade in grammar

school, I thought, but I succeeded, I even got a prize; but I shall certainly not pass the entrance exam for the Gymnasium, but I succeeded; but now I shall certainly fail

in the first year at the Gymnasium; no, I did not fail, and I went on and on succeeding. This did not produce any confidence, however; on the contrary, I was always

convinced—and I had positive proof of it in your forbidding expression—that the more I achieved, the worse the final outcome would inevitably be. Often in my mind's

eye I saw the terrible assembly of the teachers (the Gymnasium is only the most obvious example, but it was the same all around me), as they would meet, when I had

passed the first class, and then in the second class, when I had passed that, and then in the third, and so on, meeting in order to examine this unique, outrageous case, to

discover how I, the most incapable, or at least the most ignorant of all, had succeeded in creeping up so far as this class, which now, when everybody's attention had at

last been focused on me, would of course instantly spew me out, to the jubilation of all the righteous liberated from this nightmare. To live with such fantasies is not easy

for a child. In these circumstances, what could I care about my lessons? Who was able to strike a spark of real interest in me? Lessons, and not only lessons but

everything around me, interested me as much, at that decisive age, as an embezzling bank clerk, still holding his job and trembling at the thought of discovery, is

interested in the petty ongoing business of the bank, which he still has to deal with as a clerk. That was how small and faraway everything was in comparison to the

main thing. So it went on up to the qualifying exams which I really passed partly only through cheating, and then everything came to a standstill, for

now I was free. If I

had been concerned only with myself up to now, despite the discipline of the Gymnasium, how much more so now that I was free. So there was actually no such thing

for me as freedom to choose my career, for I knew: compared to the main thing everything would be exactly as much a matter of indifference to me as all the subjects

taught at school, and so it was a matter of finding a profession that would let me indulge this indifference without injuring my vanity too much. Law was the obvious

choice. Little contrary attempts on the part of vanity, of senseless hope, such as a fortnight's study of chemistry, or six months' German studies, only reinforced that

fundamental conviction. So I studied law. This meant that in the few months before the exams, and in a way that told severely on my nerves, I was positively living in an

intellectual sense, on sawdust, which had moreover already been chewed for me in thousands of other people's mouths. But in a certain sense this was exactly to my

taste, as in a certain sense the Gymnasium had been earlier, and later my job as a clerk, for it all suited my situation. At any rate, I did show astonishing foresight; even

as a small child I had had fairly clear premonitions about my studies and my career. From this side I did not expect rescue; here I had given up long ago.

But I showed no foresight at all concerning the significance and possibility of a marriage for me; this up to now greatest terror of my life has come upon me almost

completely unexpectedly. The child had developed so slowly, these things were outwardly all too remote; now and then the necessity of thinking of them did arise; but

the fact that here a permanent, decisive and indeed the most grimly bitter ordeal loomed was impossible to recognize. In reality, however, the marriage plans turned out

to be the most grandiose and hopeful attempts at escape, and, consequently their failure was correspondingly grandiose.

I am afraid that because in this sphere everything I try is a failure, I shall also fail to make these attempts to marry comprehensible to you. And yet the success of this

whole letter depends on it, for in these attempts there was, on the one hand, concentrated everything I had at my disposal in the way of positive forces, and, on the other

hand, there also accumulated, and with downright fury, all the negative forces that I have described as being the result in part of your method of upbringing, that is to say,

the weakness, the lack of self-confidence, the sense of guilt, and they positively drew a cordon between myself and marriage. The explanation will be hard for me also

because I have spent so many days and nights thinking and burrowing through the whole thing over and over again that now even I myself am bewildered by the mere

sight of it. The only thing that makes the explanation easier for me is your—in my opinion—complete misunderstanding of the matter; to correct slightly so complete a

misunderstanding does not seem excessively difficult.

First of all you rank the failure of the marriages with the rest of my failures; I should have nothing against this provided you accepted my previous explanation of my

failure as a whole. It does, in fact, form part of the same series, only you underrate the importance of the matter, underrating it to such an extent that whenever we talk

of it we are actually talking about quite different things. I venture to say that nothing has happened to you in your whole life that had such importance for you as the

attempts at marriage have had for me. By this I do not mean that you have not experienced anything in itself as important; on the contrary, your life was much richer

and more care-laden and more concentrated than mine, but for that very reason nothing of this sort has happened to you. It is as if one person had to climb five low

steps and another person only one step, but one that is, at least for him, as high as all the other five put together; the first person will not only manage the five, but

hundreds and thousands more as well, he will have led a great and very strenuous life, but none of the steps he has climbed will have been of such importance to him as

for the second person that one, firstly high step, that step which it is impossible for him to climb even by exerting all his strength, that step which he cannot get up on and

which he naturally cannot get past either.

Marrying, founding a family, accepting all the children that come, supporting them in this insecure world and perhaps even guiding them a little, is, I am convinced, the

utmost a human being can succeed in doing at all. That so many seem to succeed in this is no evidence to the contrary; first of all, there are not many who do succeed,

and second, these not-many usually don't "do" it, it merely "happens" to them; although this is not that utmost, it is still very great and very honorable (particularly since

"doing" and "happening" cannot be kept clearly distinct). And finally, it is not a matter of this utmost at all, anyway, but only of some distant but decent approximation; it

is, after all, not necessary to fly right into the middle of the sun, but it is necessary to crawl to a clean little spot on Earth where the sun sometimes shines and one can

warm oneself a little.

How was I prepared for this? As badly as possible. This is apparent from what has been said up to now. In so far as any direct preparation of the individual and any

direct creation of the general basic conditions exist, you did not intervene much outwardly. And it could not be otherwise; what is decisive here are the general sexual

customs of class, nation, and time. Yet you did intervene here too—not much, for such intervention must presuppose great mutual trust, and both of us had been lacking

in this even long before the decisive time came—and not very happily, because our needs were quite different; what grips me need hardly touch you at all, and vice

versa; what is innocence in you may be guilt in me, and vice versa; what has no consequences for you may be the last nail in my coffin.

I remember going for a walk one evening with you and Mother; it was on Josephsplatz near where the Landerbank is today; and I began talking about these interesting

things, in a stupidly boastful, superior, proud, detached (that was spurious), cold (that was genuine), and stammering manner, as indeed I usually talked to you,

reproaching the two of you with having left me uninstructed; with the fact that my schoolmates first had to take me in hand, that I had been close to great dangers (here

I was brazenly lying, as was my way, in order to show myself brave, for as a consequence of my timidity I had, except for the usual sexual misdemeanors of city

children, no very exact notion of these "great dangers"); but finally I hinted that now, fortunately, I knew everything, no longer needed any advice, and that everything

was all right. I had begun talking about all this mainly because it gave me pleasure at least to talk about it, and also out of curiosity, and finally to avenge myself

somehow on the two of you for something or other. In keeping with your nature you took it quite simply, only saying something to the effect that you could give me

advice about how I could go in for these things without danger. Perhaps I did want to lure just such an answer out of you; it was in keeping with the prurience of a child

overfed with meat and all good things, physically inactive, everlastingly occupied with himself; but still, my outward sense of shame was so hurt by this—or I believed it

ought to be so hurt—that against my will I could not go on talking to you about it and, with arrogant impudence, cut the conversation short.

It is not easy to judge the answer you gave me then; on the one hand, it had something staggeringly frank, sort of primeval, about it; on the other hand, as far as the

lesson itself is concerned, it was uninhibited in a very modern way. I don't know how old I was at the time, certainly not much over sixteen. It was, nevertheless, a very

remarkable answer for such a boy, and the distance between the two of us is also shown in the fact that it was actually the first direct instruction bearing on real life I

ever received from you. Its real meaning, however, which sank into my mind even then, but which came partly to the surface of my consciousness only much later, was

this: what you advised me to do was in your opinion and even more in my opinion at that time, the filthiest thing possible. That you wanted to see to it that I should not

bring any of the physical filth home with me was unimportant, for you were only protecting yourself, your house. The important thing was rather that you yourself

remained outside your own advice, a married man, a pure man, above such things; this was probably intensified for me at the time by the fact that even marriage seemed

to me shameless; and hence it was impossible for me to apply to my parents the general information I had picked up about marriage. Thus you became still purer, rose

still higher. The thought that you might have given yourself similar advice before your marriage was to me utterly unthinkable. So there was hardly any smudge of

earthly filth on you at all. And it was you who pushed me down into this filth—just as though I were predestined to it with a few frank words. And so, if the world

consisted only of me and you (a notion I was much inclined to have), then this purity of the world came to an end with you and, by virtue of your advice, the filth began

with me. In itself it was, of course, incomprehensible that you should thus condemn me; only old guilt, and profoundest contempt on your side, could explain it to me. And

so again I was seized in my innermost being—and very hard indeed.

Here perhaps both our guiltlessness becomes most evident. A gives B a piece of advice that is frank, in keeping with his attitude to life, not very lovely but still, even

today perfectly usual in the city, a piece of advice that might prevent damage to health. This piece of advice is for B morally not very invigorating—but why should he

not be able to work his way out of it, and repair the damage in the course of the years? Besides, he does not even have to take the advice; and there is no reason why

the advice itself should cause B's whole future world to come tumbling down. And yet something of this kind does happen, but only for the very reason that A is you and

B is myself. This guiltlessness on both sides I can judge especially well because a similar clash between us occurred some twenty years later, in quite different

circumstances—horrible in itself but much less damaging—for what was there in me, the thirty-six-year-old, that could still be damaged? I am referring to a brief

discussion on one of those few tumultuous days that followed the announcement of my latest marriage plans. You said to me something like this: "She probably put on a

fancy blouse, something these Prague Jewesses are good at, and right away, of course, you decided to marry her. And that as fast as possible, in a week, tomorrow,

today. I can't understand you: after all, you're a grown man, you live in the city, and you don't know what to do but marry the first girl who comes along. Isn't there

anything else you can do? If you're frightened, I'll go with you." You put it in more detail and more plainly, but I can no longer recall the details,

perhaps too things

became a little vague before my eyes, I paid almost more attention to Mother who, though in complete agreement with you, took something from the table and left the

room with it.

You have hardly ever humiliated me more deeply with words and shown me your contempt more clearly. When you spoke to me in a similar way twenty years earlier,

one night, looking at it through your eyes, have seen in it some respect for the precocious city boy, who in your opinion could already be initiated into life without more

ado. Today this consideration could only intensify the contempt, for the boy who was about to make his first start got stuck halfway and today does not seem richer by

any experience, only more pitiable by twenty years. My choice of a girl meant nothing at all to you. You had (unconsciously) always suppressed my power of decision

and now believed (unconsciously) that you knew what it was worth. Of my attempts at escape in other directions you knew nothing, thus you could not know anything

either of the thought processes that had led me to this attempt to marry, and had to try to guess at them, and in keeping with your general opinion of me, you interpreted

them in the most abominable, crude, and ridiculous light. And you did not for a moment hesitate to tell me this in just such a manner. The shame you inflicted on me with

this was nothing to you in comparison to the shame that I would, in your opinion, inflict on your name by this marriage.

Now, regarding my attempts at marriage there is much you can say in reply, and you have indeed done so: you could not have much respect for my decision since I had

twice broken the engagement with F. and had twice renewed it, since I had needlessly dragged you and Mother to Berlin to celebrate the engagement, and the like. All

this is true—but how did it come about?

The fundamental thought behind both attempts at marriage was quite sound: to set up house, to become independent.

An idea that does appeal to you, only in reality it always turns out like the children's game in which one holds and even grips the other's hand, calling out: "Oh, go away,

go away, why don't you go away?" Which in our case happens to be complicated by the fact that you have always honestly meant this "go away!" and have always

unknowingly held me, or rather held me down, only by the strength of your personality.

Although both girls were chosen by chance, they were extraordinarily well chosen. Again a sign of your complete misunderstanding, that you can believe that I—timid,

hesitant, suspicious—can decide to marry in a flash, out of delight over a blouse. Both marriages would rather have been commonsense marriages, in so far as that

means that day and night—the first time for years, the second time for months—all my power of thought was concentrated on the plan. Neither of the girls disappointed

me, only I disappointed both of them. My opinion of them is today exactly the same as when I wanted to marry them.

It is not true either that in my second marriage attempt I disregarded the experience gained from the first attempt, that I was rash and careless. The cases were quite

different; precisely the earlier experience held out a hope for the second case, which was altogether much more promising. I do not want to go into details here.

Why then did I not marry? There were certainly obstacles, as there always are, but then, life consists in confronting such obstacles. The essential obstacle, however,

which is, unfortunately, independent of the individual case, is that obviously I am mentally incapable of marrying. This manifests itself in the fact that from the moment I

make up my mind to marry I can no longer sleep, my head burns day and night, life can no longer be called life, I stagger about in despair. It is not actually worries that

bring this about; true, in keeping with my sluggishness and pedantry countless worries are involved in all this, but they are not decisive; they do, like worms, complete the

work on the corpse, but the decisive blow has come from elsewhere. It is the general pressure of anxiety, of weakness, of self-contempt.

I will try to explain it in more detail. Here, in the attempt to marry, two seemingly antagonistic elements in my relations with you unite more intensely than anywhere else.

Marriage certainly is the pledge of the most acute form of self-liberation and independence. I would have a family, in my opinion the highest one can achieve, and so too

the highest you have achieved; I would be your equal; all old and even new shame and tyranny would be mere history. It would be like a fairy tale, but precisely there

lies the questionable element. It is too much; so much cannot be achieved. It is as if a person were a prisoner, and he had not only the intention to escape, which would

perhaps be attainable, but also, and indeed simultaneously, the intention to rebuild the prison as a pleasure dome for himself. But if he escapes, he cannot rebuild, and if

he rebuilds, he cannot escape. If I, in the particular unhappy relationship in which I stand to you, want to become independent, I must do something that will have, if

possible, no connection with you at all; though marrying is the greatest thing of all and provides the most honorable independence, it also stands at the same time in the

closest relation to you. To try to get out of this quandary has therefore a touch of madness about it, and every attempt is punished by being driven almost mad.

It is precisely this close relation that partly lures me toward marrying. I picture the equality which would then arise between us—and which you would be able to

understand better than any other form of equality—as so beautiful because then I could be a free, grateful, guiltless, upright son, and you could be an untroubled

untyrannical, sympathetic, contented father. But to this end everything that ever happened would have to be undone, that is, we ourselves should have to be canceled

out.

But we being what we are, marrying is barred to me because it is your very own domain. Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched

diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that either are not covered by you or are not within your reach. And, in keeping with the

conception I have of your magnitude, these are not many and not very comforting regions—and marriage is not among them.

This very comparison proves that I certainly do not mean to say that you drove me away from marriage by your example, as you had driven me away from your

business. Quite the contrary, despite the remote similarity. In your marriage I had before me what was, in many ways, a model marriage, a model in constancy, mutual

help, number of children; and even when the children grew up and increasingly disturbed the peace, the marriage as such remained undisturbed. Perhaps I formed my

high idea of marriage on this model; the desire for marriage was powerless for other reasons. Those lay in your relation to your children, which is, after all, what this

whole letter is about.

There is a view according to which fear of marriage sometimes has its source in a fear that one's children would some day pay one back for the sins one has committed

against one's own parents. This, I believe, has no very great significance in my case, for my sense of guilt actually originates in you, and is filled with such conviction of

its uniqueness—indeed, this feeling of uniqueness is an essential part of its tormenting nature—that any repetition is unthinkable. All the same, I must say that I would

find such a mute, glum, dry, doomed son unbearable; I daresay that, if there were no other possibility, I would flee from him, emigrate, as you had planned to do if I had

married. And this may also have had some influence on my incapacity to marry.

What is much more important in all this, however, is the anxiety about myself. This has to be understood as follows: I have already indicated that in my writing, and in

everything connected with it, I have made some attempts at independence, attempts at escape, with the very smallest of success; they will scarcely lead any farther;

much confirms this for me. Nevertheless it is my duty or, rather, the essence of my life, to watch over them, to let no danger that I can avert, indeed no possibility of

such a danger, approach them. Marriage bears the possibility of such a danger, though also the possibility of the greatest help; for me, however, it is enough that there is

the possibility of a danger. What should I do if it did turn out to be a danger! How could I continue living in matrimony with the perhaps unprovable, but nevertheless

irrefutable feeling that this danger existed? Faced with this I may waver, but the final outcome is certain: I must renounce. The simile of the bird in the hand and the two

in the bush has only a fiery remote application here. In my hand I have nothing, in the bush is everything, and yet—so it is decided by the conditions of battle and the

exigency of life—I must choose the nothing. I had to make a similar choice when I chose my profession.

The most important obstacle to marriage, however, is the no longer eradicable conviction that what is essential to the support of a family and especially to its guidance, is

what I have recognized in you; and indeed everything rolled into one, good and bad, as it is organically combined in you—strength, and scorn of others, health, and a

certain immoderation, eloquence and inadequacy, self-confidence and dissatisfaction with everyone else, a worldly wisdom and tyranny, knowledge of human nature and

mistrust of most people; then also good qualities without any drawback, such as industry, endurance, presence of mind, and fearlessness. By comparison I had almost

nothing or very little of all this; and was it on this basis that I wanted to risk marrying, when I could see for myself that even you had to fight hard in marriage and, where

the children were concerned, had even failed? Of course, I did not put this question to myself in so many words and I did not answer it in so many words; otherwise

everyday thinking would have taken over and shown me other men who are different from you (to name one, near at hand, who is very different from you: Uncle

Richard) and yet have married and have at least not collapsed under the strain, which is in itself a great deal and would have been quite enough for me. But I did not ask

this question, I lived it from childhood on. I tested myself not only when faced with marriage, but in the face of every trifle; in the face of every trifle you by your

example and your method of upbringing convinced me, as I have tried to describe, of my incapacity; and what turned out to be true of every trifle and proved you right,

had to be fearfully true of the greatest thing of all: of marriage. Up to the time of my marriage attempts I grew up more or less like a businessman who lives from day to

day, with worries and forebodings, but without keeping proper accounts. He makes a few small profits—which he constantly pampers and exaggerates in his imagination

because of their rarity—but otherwise he has daily losses. Everything is entered, but never balanced. Now comes the necessity of drawing a balance, that is, the attempt

at marriage. And with the large sums that have to be taken into account here it is as though there had never been even the smallest profit, everything one single great

liability. And now marry without going mad!

That is what my life with you has been like up to now, and these are the prospects inherent in it for the future.

If you look at the reasons I offer for the fear I have of you, you might answer: "You maintain I make things easy for myself by explaining my relation to you simply as

being your fault, but I believe that despite your outward effort, you do not make things more difficult for yourself, but much more profitable. At first you too repudiate all

guilt and responsibility; in this our methods are the same. But whereas I then attribute the sole guilt to you as frankly as I mean it, you want to be 'overly clever' and

'overly affectionate' at the same time and acquit me also of all guilt. Of course, in the latter you only seem to succeed (and more you do not even want), and what

appears between the lines, in spite of all the 'turns of phrase' about character and nature and antagonism and helplessness, is that actually I have been the aggressor,

while everything you were up to was self-defense. By now you would have achieved enough by your very insincerity, for you have proved three things: first, that you

are not guilty; second, that I am the guilty one; and third, that out of sheer magnanimity you are ready not only to forgive me but (what is both more and less) also to

prove and be willing to believe yourself that—contrary to the truth—I also am not guilty. That ought to be enough for you now, but it is still not enough. You have put it

into your head to live entirely off me. I admit that we fight with each other, but there are two kinds of combat. The chivalrous combat, in which independent opponents

pit their strength against each other, each on his own, each losing on his own, each winning on his own. And there is the combat of vermin, which not only sting but, on

top of it, suck your blood in order to sustain their own life. That's what the real professional soldier is, and that's what you are. You are unfit for life; to make life

comfortable for yourself, without worries and without self-reproaches, you prove that I have taken your fitness for life away from you and put it in my

own pocket. Why

should it bother you that you are unfit for life, since I have the responsibility for it, while you calmly stretch out and let yourself be hauled through life, physically and

mentally, by me. For example: when you recently wanted to marry, you wanted—and this you do, after all, admit in this letter—at the same time not to marry, but in

order not to have to exert yourself you wanted me to help you with this not-marrying, by forbidding this marriage because of the 'disgrace' this union would bring upon

my name. I did not dream of it. First, in this as in everything else I never wanted to be 'an obstacle to your happiness,' and second, I never want to have to hear such a

reproach from my child. But did the self-restraint with which I left the marriage up to you do me any good? Not in the least. My aversion to your marriage would not

have prevented it; on the contrary, it would have been an added incentive for you to marry the girl, for it would have made the 'attempt at escape,' as you put it,

complete. And my consent to your marriage did not prevent your reproaches, for you prove that I am in any case to blame for your not marrying. Basically, however, in

this as in everything else you have only proved to me that all my reproaches were justified, and that one especially justified charge was still missing: namely, the charge

of insincerity, obsequiousness and parasitism. If I am not very much mistaken, you are preying on me even with this letter itself."

My answer to this is that, after all, this whole rejoinder— which can partly also be turned against you—does not come from you, but from me. Not even your mistrust of

others is as great as my self-mistrust, which you have bred in me. I do not deny a certain justification for this rejoinder, which in itself contributes new material to the

characterization of our relationship. Naturally things cannot in reality fit together the way the evidence does in my letter; life is more than a Chinese puzzle. But with the

correction made by this rejoinder—a correction I neither can nor will elaborate in detail—in my opinion something has been achieved which so closely approximates the

truth that it might reassure us both a little and make our living and our dying easier.

Translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins; revised by
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