



Hermann Kafka (1852–1931)

FRANZ KAFKA  
LETTER TO FATHER



VITALIS

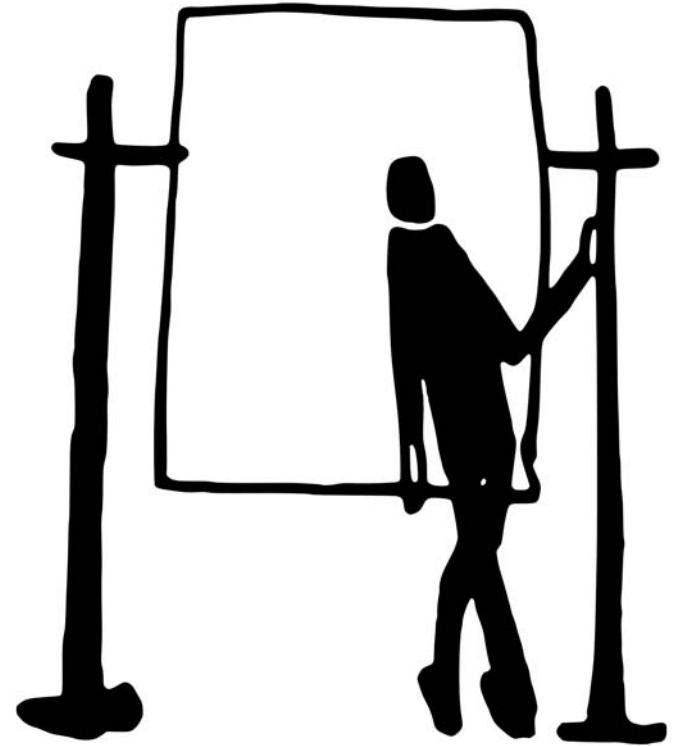
associate good-naturedly even with the most common people. Indeed, in the group photos from Franzensbad, for example, you always looked as big and cheerful among the sullen, little people as a king on his travels. As a matter of fact, this was something that could have been an advantage to the children, too, only they would have had to be able to recognize it already as children, which was impossible, and I, for example, would not have had to live constantly in the innermost, strictest, binding circle of your influence as, in fact, I did.

I lost not only, as you say, my sense of family because of this; on the contrary, I still had a sense of family, albeit mainly a negative one, concerned with my emancipation from you (which, of course, was never to be achieved). But relations with people outside the family suffered possibly even more under your influence. You are completely mistaken if you think I do everything for other people out of love and loyalty and, out of coldness and treachery, nothing for you and the family. I repeat for the tenth time: I would probably have become a shy and anxious person in any case, but it is still a long, dark road from there to where I have really come. (Until now I have intentionally concealed relatively little in this letter, but now and later I am going to have to keep silent about some things that are still too difficult for me to admit to you and to myself. I am saying this so that if the overall picture should here and there become somewhat blurred, you won't believe it is for lack of evidence; there is much more evidence available that could make the picture unbearably harsh. It is not easy to find a middle way). Here, in any case, it is enough to remember earlier times: I had lost my self-confidence where you were concerned, had traded it for a boundless sense of guilt.



on this basis I dared to want to marry when I saw for myself that even you had to struggle hard in marriage and, where the children were concerned, even failed? Of course, I didn't expressly ask myself this question and didn't answer it expressly, otherwise the usual thinking about the matter would have taken over and shown me other men who are different from you (to name one close at hand who is very different from you: Uncle Richard<sup>25</sup>) and yet have married and have at least not collapsed under the strain, which is in itself quite something and would have been quite enough for me. But I didn't ask this question, rather I experienced it from childhood on. I tested myself not with respect to marriage, but with respect to every trifle; with respect to every trifle you convinced me by your example and your method of upbringing, as I have tried to describe, of my incompetence, and if it were true of every trifle, putting you in the right, it had, of course, to be true of the greatest thing of all, 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 anxieties and forebodings but without keeping precise accounts. He makes a few small profits, which he constantly fondles and exaggerates in his imagination because of their rarity, but otherwise he has only daily losses. Everything is recorded but never balanced. Now comes the necessity for balance, that is, the attempt at marriage. And with the large sums that he has to account for here, it is as if there had never been even the smallest profit, everything a single, great liability. And now marry without going mad!

<sup>25</sup> Almost all Kafka's mother's brothers and half-brothers remained unmarried and were regarded as unworldly eccentrics; the exception was Richard Löwy, who was equally successful as a father and a businessman.



"You know how I hate letters," Kafka writes at the end of March 1922 to Milena Jesenská. "All the misfortune of my life – and I don't mean to complain, rather to make a general didactic observation – comes, if you will, from letters, or from the possibility of writing letters [...]. It is, after all, a communication with ghosts, and one not even limited to the ghost of the addressee, but also with one's own ghost, which develops in one on the quiet in the letter one writes."<sup>1</sup> Astonishing words from a man whose personal correspondence fills entire volumes: approximately 1,500 of Kafka's letters are known, often many pages long. He wrote many more in the forty-one short years of his life, but the fates of many of his correspondents during the Second World War mean that numerous letters have been lost, probably for ever.

Kafka, a hater of letters? The opposite would seem to be true: during his engagement to Felice Bauer, Kafka developed a positive addiction to letters. He wrote them in the office, wrote them at three in the morning, and if



Above: Franz Kafka at thirty-one.  
Right: Julie Wohryzek, with whom Kafka entered into an engagement in 1919.

he went for more than a few days without an answer, he panicked, sent telegrams or was unable to get out of bed at all.

However, it appears that at some point Kafka became aware that he was corresponding with people who bore a greater resemblance to figments of his imagination than to the actual recipients of his letters.

The longest letter that Kafka ever wrote is the *Letter to Father*, a unique text with over a hundred manuscript pages, which betrays a great deal about Kafka himself and is linguistically equal to his literary works in every way.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1919, the thirty-six-year-old Franz Kafka travelled to the Pension Stüdl in Schelesen in Northern Bohemia. He had visited this sleepy little village, a few kilometres to the north of Prague, twice previously to recuperate since his doctor, Dr Mühlstein, had diagnosed him with pulmonary tuberculosis in the autumn of 1917. But a great deal had happened since his previous visit at the beginning of the year! Back then in early spring, Kafka had met Julie Wohryzek there at the Pension Stüdl, a little Jewish office-worker, whose father worked as a sexton in a synagogue in Prague. Kafka probably celebrated Julie's twenty-eighth birthday with her on the 28<sup>th</sup> February in the Pension Stüdl – almost certainly not a big party, just a few weeks after the end of the First World War, but perhaps they had some little luxury, as befitted the young woman. As Kafka wrote to his friend Max Brod: "an ordinary but astonishing creature. Not a Jewess, not a non-Jewess, not a German, not a non-German, loves the cinema,

operettas and comedies, powder and veils, possessor of an inexhaustible and unstoppable collection of the sauciest slang expressions, in general very inexperienced, more cheerful than sad – she is something along these lines. To describe her ethnic origin exactly, one would have to say that she belongs to the race of clerks. And at heart, she is brave, honest, absent-minded, – such great characteristics within a creature that is certainly not without physical beauty, but is as trivial as the gnats, for example, that are drawn towards the light of my lamp."<sup>2</sup>

