

Dearest Father

Franz Kafka

Translated by

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Introduction

Like much of Kafka's work, *Brief an den Vater* (*Dearest Father*) provides interesting insight into the author's attitudes to law and order. Kafka often described his relationship with his father, Hermann Kafka, as a "*Prozess*" ("trial"), and legal terms such as "*Urteil*" ("judgment" or "sentence") and "*Schuld*" ("guilt") feature repeatedly in the letter. When he sent it to his mistress, Milena Jesenská, Kafka himself wrote: "*Und verstehe beim Lesen alle advokatorischen Kniffe, es ist ein Advokatenbrief.*"* ("As you read it, try to understand all the lawyerly tricks, after all it is a lawyer's letter"). Kafka was interested in systems of social control, and in the *Brief* he criticizes his father as ruler and judge of the family. Kafka finds fault with the inconsistency of Hermann's system: "*Du [musstest] gar nicht konsequent sein und doch nicht aufhörtest Recht zu haben.*"* ("You did not even have to be at all consistent, and could still never be wrong"). In so doing he usurps the judicial role and gains intellectual supremacy over his father. If his argument appears aggressive, however, we are reminded by its written medium that Kafka was too timid

to address his father face to face – in direct confrontation, Hermann would interrupt and throw him off course. Even in writing, Kafka confesses not entirely to have been able to express his argument, which is as inconsistent as the system it attacks. He admits (whether or not in earnest) to deliberately angering his father and at times defends Hermann: “*Du wirktest so auf mich, wie Du wirken musstest,*”^{*} (“Your effect on me was the effect you could not help having”). Kafka’s tone changes as often as his standpoint: a sober description of the son’s banishment to a distant world of subservience is directly preceded by a comically grotesque depiction of the father digging in his ears with a toothpick and sending scraps of food flying. These oscillations of argument and tone, combined with a highly idiosyncratic approach to punctuation (discussed below), undermine any assertion that the letter is an “*Advokatenbrief*”. It lacks the requisite persuasion and reasonableness.

And so the letter presents systems of law and order in a chaotic way. Thomas Anz appears to notice this fusion of order and chaos when he distinguishes between the two thematic levels of the letter. Its surface structure is controlled. Themes are dealt with one by one and include “upbringing, business, Judaism, [Kafka’s] existence as a writer, occupation, sexuality and marriage”.^{*} In the former three of these sections, Kafka criticizes the examples that his father set:

hypocritically subjecting others to rules that he himself never followed; treating his employees appallingly; and neglecting the religious traditions that were important to his son.* In the latter four sections, Kafka explores his own self-loathing, which stems from his inability to equal his father either by succeeding financially or by founding his own family. Try as he might to impose structure on his thoughts, however, he does not fully confront, analyse or communicate certain underlying issues identified by Anz (“anxiety and guilt, accusations and condemnations, freedom and power, artistry and profession, sexuality”).* These unresolved issues dominate much of Kafka’s literary output and day-to-day correspondence. They bleed into each of the letter’s seven proposed thematic sections, subtly undermining the author’s superficial assertion of structure and rationality.

At first glance the letter may appear to document Kafka’s exploration of his own insecurities, and his finding their origins in his relationship with his domineering father. As already mentioned, however, the conclusions he draws are not entirely reliable. He wrote the *Brief* in November 1919 at a sanatorium in Schelesen, while recovering from tuberculosis, which had been diagnosed the previous year. At thirty-six, he was just four years away from death. Kafka’s illness, coupled with the recent breakdown of his relationship with Julie Wohryzek (his second significant lover), may well have

agitated his mind and increased his self-confessed tendency to exaggerate.

It is unclear whether the letter was ever truly intended for the eyes of Hermann Kafka. After writing it by hand, Kafka made a second typed copy (minus the last few pages). He later annotated it in places, with the intention of having it proofread by Milena. Kafka asked his mother to forward one copy to his father – but she could not bring herself to deliver it, and this may have been exactly what the son had hoped for. The *Brief* was part of the bundle of fragments and letters that Kafka entrusted to Max Brod on his death. The instruction was to burn everything; of course, the friend famously published it all, and the whole letter first appeared in 1953.

Kafka's insecurities and motives for writing the letter seem very real. But the work's thematic stylization, its duplication and proofreading, and its failure to reach its addressee are not reminiscent of usual letter-writing practice. Perhaps this is why Brod published the letter with a collection of fictional short stories,* and not with Kafka's autobiographical material. Interestingly, the letter bears many similarities to Kafka's earlier fictional work, *Das Urteil* (1912). This story describes a confrontation between its protagonist Georg Bendemann and his father, triggered when the father reads a letter written by the son. The story begins with the son poised to acquire a

wife and enter adulthood, the father ready to die. The father prevents this natural handover of familial power, however, by forbidding Georg to marry (“*Ich fege sie dir von der Seite weg*”^{*} (“I’ll sweep her away from your side”)), and using his last vestige of paternal authority to sentence Georg to death. Some of this occurs in the *Brief an den Vater*. Kafka holds his father in part responsible for his own failure to marry and enter true adulthood. Meanwhile, Bendemann Senior’s disapproval of Georg’s fiancée – “*weil sie die Röcke so gehoben hat, die widerliche Gans*”^{*} (“because she hitched up her skirts, like this, the disgusting cow”) – is reminiscent of Hermann’s comment about Kafka’s fiancée (Felice Bauer) in the *Brief*: “*Sie hat wahrscheinlich irgendeine ausgesuchte Bluse angezogen, wie das die Prager Jüdinnen verstehen*”^{*} (“She probably put on some sort of fancy blouse, as only those Prague Jewesses know how”). Like Georg, furthermore, Franz falls to pieces in face-to-face conflict with his father. And so in writing about Georg’s death, Kafka was perhaps anticipating his own father’s reaction to the real-life *Brief*. He admitted the autobiographical significance of *Das Urteil* in a private diary entry: “*Georg hat so viele Buchstaben wie Franz... Bende aber hat ebenso viele Buchstaben wie Kafka...*”^{*} (“Georg has the same number of letters as Franz... Bende has exactly as many letters as Kafka”). Even if the letter’s narrative is true, much of it was first rehearsed in fiction.

The letter's ambiguous position between fact and fiction, order and chaos, makes it a fascinating subject for translation. Here it is worth considering two questions: How far can *any* piece of writing be purely factual and objective? And how far should translators seek to impose order on a text whose chaos is integral to its meaning? First, the question of objectivity. No "factual" writing is without an element of fiction. Even if Kafka had intended the letter to be a true representation of events, its composition would have involved some interpretation and translation – the author first forming a biased and retrospective view of his childhood, then ordering his thoughts and emotions, and then converting them into words on paper. Much information would have been lost and created in these transformations, and what appears on the page could not be a purely factual reproduction of original events. By confessing to indulge in further creative exaggeration, Kafka is arguably embracing the fictional element of his writing and encouraging the reader to acknowledge his identity as a writer (an identity with which he struggled, according to Anz).^{*} Translators in turn must be aware that, although they attempt to recapture the original text accurately, they will inevitably transform it further. How much transformation is desirable here? This leads to the second question: that of orderliness. The *Brief* contains awkward patterns of syntax and repetition, idiosyncratic use of punctuation and numerous

other irregularities. Although Kafka uses only the simplest of words, he arranges them in complex ways to create obscure linguistic effects and produce a text that is often ambiguous. Perhaps these effects are deliberate and intended to put the reader ill at ease. Or perhaps Kafka meant to express himself clearly but was prevented by his illness and emotional instability. Whatever their cause or purpose, the irregularities leave translators in a quandary: should they tidy up Kafka's awkwardness and gloss it for the reader, or rather attempt to preserve it in translation? It is commonly held that a good translation should read smoothly and idiomatically, as if the text were written in English originally. A reader should not expect to have to stumble through a clumsy translation. But where that clumsiness is crucial to the essence of the original, surely it would be insensitive to remove it? Rewriting the *Brief* in refined, consistent or idiomatic English will undermine the awkwardness of Kafka's fevered, fermented German original and do an injustice to its emotional content. In this instance we must therefore break some of the laws of translation, in an attempt to satisfy the demands of the text.

– Hannah and Richard Stokes, 2008

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Dearest Father

Schelesen

Dearest Father,

You asked me recently why I claim to be afraid of you. I did not know, as usual, how to answer, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, partly because an explanation of my fear would require more details than I could even begin to make coherent in speech. And if I now try to answer in writing it will still be nowhere near complete, because even in writing my fear and its consequences raise a barrier between us and because the magnitude of material far exceeds my memory and my understanding.

To you the matter always seemed very simple, at least in as far as you spoke about it in front of me and, indiscriminately, in front of many others. To you it seemed like this: you had worked hard your whole life, sacrificed everything for your children, particularly me, as a result I lived “like a lord”, had complete freedom to study whatever I wanted, knew where my next meal was coming from and therefore had no reason to worry about anything; for this you asked no gratitude, you know how children show their gratitude, but at least some kind

of cooperation, a sign of sympathy; instead I would always hide away from you in my room, buried in books, with crazy friends and eccentric ideas; we never spoke openly, I never came up to you in the synagogue, I never visited you in Franzensbad,* nor otherwise had any sense of family, I never took an interest in the business or your other concerns, I saddled you with the factory and then left you in the lurch, I encouraged Ottla's* obstinacy and while I have never to this day lifted a finger to help you (I never even buy you the occasional theatre ticket), I do all I can for perfect strangers. If you summarize your judgment of me, it is clear that you do not actually reproach me with anything really indecent or malicious (with the exception, perhaps, of my latest marriage plans), but rather with coldness, alienation, ingratitude. And, what is more, you reproach me as if it were my fault, as if I might have been able to arrange everything differently with one simple change of direction, while you are not in the slightest to blame, except perhaps for having been too good to me.

This, your usual analysis, I agree with only in so far as I also believe you to be entirely blameless for our estrangement. But I too am equally and utterly blameless. If I could bring you to acknowledge this, then – although a new life would not be possible, for that we are both much too old – there could yet be a sort of peace, not an end to your unrelenting reproaches, but at least a mitigation of them.

Strangely enough, you seem to have some idea of what I mean. This might have been why you recently said to me, “I have always been fond of you; if, on the outside, I have not treated you as fathers usually treat their children, it is just because I cannot pretend as others can.” Now, Father, I have on the whole never doubted your goodness towards me, but this statement I consider wrong. You cannot pretend, that is true, but purely for this reason to claim that other fathers pretend was either sheer indisputable bigotry, or – and this, in my view, is more plausible – a veiled way of saying that something is wrong between us, and that you are partly responsible for it, albeit through no fault of your own. If this is what you really meant, then we are agreed.

I am not saying, of course, that I have become what I am purely under your influence. That would be a very great exaggeration (although I do have a tendency to exaggerate). It is very possible that, had I grown up entirely free of your influence, I still could not have become a person after your own heart. I would probably still have become a weak, anxious, hesitant, restless person, neither Robert Kafka nor Karl Hermann,* yet still very different from what I am today, and we would have been able to get on very well. I would have been happy to have you as a friend, a boss, an uncle, a grandfather, even indeed (though rather more hesitantly) as a father-in-law. It is only as a father that you

were too strong for me, particularly since my brothers died young and my sisters did not come along until much later, so I had to endure the initial conflicts all alone, for which I was far too weak.

Compare the two of us: me, to put it very briefly, a Löwy* with a certain Kafka core that is simply not driven by the Kafka will to live, prosper and conquer, but by a Löwy-like force that moves more secretly, more timidly, in a different direction, and which often breaks down completely. You, by contrast, a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly superiority, stamina, presence of mind, understanding of human nature, a certain generosity, of course with all the faults and weaknesses that go with these advantages, into which you are driven by your natural disposition and sometimes your hot temper. Perhaps you are not wholly a Kafka in your general worldly outlook, in as far as I can compare you with Uncles Philipp, Ludwig and Heinrich.* That is odd, and here the picture is no clearer. However, they were all cheerier, fresher, more casual, more relaxed, less strict than you. (In this respect, incidentally, I have inherited much from you and have taken far too great a care of that inheritance, admittedly without having the necessary counter-qualities that you do.) Yet on the other hand, you too have gone through various phases in this respect, you were perhaps cheerier before your children

(I especially) disappointed and depressed you at home (you were quite different when visitors came), and you have perhaps become cheerier again, now that your grandchildren and your son-in-law show you some of the warmth that your own children, except perhaps Valli,* never could.

In any case, we were so different, and in our differences such a danger to each other that, had anyone wanted to predict how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the fully-grown man, would behave towards one another, they could have presumed that you would simply trample me underfoot until nothing of me remained. Well, that did not happen, what happens in life cannot be predicted, but maybe something even worse happened. In saying this, I ask you not to forget that I in no way find you guilty. Your effect on me was the effect you could not help having, but you should stop considering it some particular perversity on my part that I succumbed to that effect.

I was an anxious child, and yet I am sure I was also disobedient, as children are, I am sure that Mother spoilt me too, but I cannot believe that I was particularly difficult to handle, I cannot believe that you, by directing a friendly word my way, by quietly taking my hand or by giving me a kind look, could not have got everything you wanted from me. And you are fundamentally a kind and tender person (what follows does not contradict that, after all it refers

only to how I saw you as a child) but not every child has the tenacity and fearlessness to search until he finds the kindness within. You, Father, are only capable of treating a child with the same means by which you were moulded, with vigour, noise and fits of rage, and in my case you found these means especially appropriate because you wanted to bring me up to be a strong, courageous boy.

Of course, I cannot accurately recall and describe your way of bringing me up in the very early years, but I can form some idea of it, drawing on my more recent experience and on your treatment of Felix. In doing this I am increasingly aware that you were younger then, therefore fresher, wilder, more natural and carefree than you are today, and that in addition you were largely occupied with the business, meaning you barely had time to see me once a day, so the impression you made on me would have been all the greater, and virtually impossible for me to become accustomed to.

There is only one episode from those early years that I remember directly, perhaps you remember it too. I was whining persistently for water one night, certainly not because I was thirsty, but in all probability partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After a number of fierce threats had failed, you lifted me out of my bed, carried me out onto the *pavlatche** and left me awhile all alone, standing outside the locked door in my nightshirt. I do not mean to say that this