

**OTTO, FRANZ, GEORG:  
AN EXERCISE IN THE PSYCHO - HISTORY  
OF WEININGER, KAFKA, AND LUKÁCS**

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I want to treat three extraordinary figures of the Austro-Hungarian *fin de siècle*, as if they had been ordinary figures. All three of them were Jewish. Keeping in mind that Hungarian culture of the period, no less than Austrian and Czech culture, was heavily marked by a versatile Jewish contribution, I will explore what was typical in the respective backgrounds of Otto Weininger, Franz Kafka, and Georg Lukács.

To begin with, all three figures were rebellious prisoners of their familial and social situation, and in surprisingly similar ways. In fact, many thousands of Jewish-born men of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy could have given comparable testimony about the waning power of the traditional father-figure, the changed meaning of Jewishness, friendship and eroticism as well as new definitions of art and creativity in society at large.

Otto Weininger's father was the son of a small tradesman, Franz Kafka's the son of a country butcher, while Georg Lukács' father was the son of an eiderdown-maker. The fathers had all accomplished sizable upward social mobility by becoming, in turn, an internationally acknowledged goldsmith in Vienna, a major fashion-dealer in Prague, and a banker and patron of the arts in Budapest. While Otto's father had not gained Austrian citizenship until his famous son reached the age of nine, Georg's father even acquired nobility. Incidentally, not only the fathers, but their wives, too, had come from the Hungarian-ruled territories of what was later to become the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

By the eighties, the disturbing news of pogroms and anti-Semitic government measures in Russia had convinced the three fathers that the road of assimilation and urbanization on which they had started out should be travelled by their offspring. The Weiningers' social situation being the most fragile, it was here that the greatest number of children, seven were born, while in the Lukács family only three children were to sustain an already well-established family status. The Kafkas occupied a middle position with four offspring.

Now, I want to explore a family conflict also occurring in contemporary British and American upper-middle-class settings.

Fathers with well-established businesses expected their sons to go into partnership with them and, in time, take over. On the other hand, they could afford to give their sons a better-than-average education. (Incidentally, all three sons discussed here had visited non-Jewish secondary schools, the best in their respective home-cities.) Thus, there arose a generation of sons so liberally educated that they were destined to shy away from the "materialistic", "money-minded" occupations of their fathers – with life-plans entirely focussed on universalistic disciplines like philosophy, poetry, music, mathematics, theoretical physics and the like. Practically all Jewish-Hungarian celebrities listed in McCagg's pioneering study of Jewish-Hungarian "nobles and geniuses" came from first-generation upper-middle-class backgrounds.

The fathers usually put up some fight but soon realized they were better off leaving their sons to their high-flung studies while marrying their daughters to some up-and-coming business partners.

There was conflict here, but one with a built-in resolution. Gone were the stern, merciless patriarchs of Old Testament stature, only to yield their places to fathers with a growing amount of leniency and understanding.

Although tyrannical to every other member of his family, Otto's father accepted his son's rebellious choice of university without much quarrel. Far from being a tyrant, Georg's father behaved like an enlightened monarch even when Georg made it clear he only cared for his father's financial support. He even accepted without reproach Georg's marrying a Ukrainian terrorist, a scandalous wedlock by bourgeois standards. Franz's father, however, the only one of the three to have kept up some formal religion, was an extremely intolerant man, ridiculing his son constantly for his idealistic distance from the real world. In addition, while Mrs. Weininger was extremely weak and subservient to Mr. Weininger, and Mrs. Lukács was by all means the stricter parent, Mrs. Kafka was both strong and co-operative with her husband, so much so, in fact, that during his abortive attempt at a showdown with his father, Franz could call her a "baiter" for Mr. Kafka in their common hunting campaign against their son.

From among the three families discussed, it was only in the Kafka family that its head was overwhelmingly to blame for a poor father-son relation. No wonder Franz's process of breaking away from his father was the most difficult and the most prolonged. Franz had the impossible task of leaving the parental household while being simultaneously pushed away from it. The classical Oedipal situation, however, involves a wilful filial rebellion against a father who excels in many respects and tries to bind the son to himself and to all that he represents.

For the son of an excellent father it is imperative to kill the father symbolically if he is to rise in excellence himself. Georg accomplished this symbolic murder at a relatively late stage simply by transposing it onto a

public, political plane: by joining a worldwide rebellion, that of the Communists, aimed at breaking the patriarchal power of capitalism.

In Franz's hand the symbolic dagger aimed at his father was bound to tremble. Remember, if you will, Hamlet's hesitation on the brink of murdering his stepfather so eloquently analyzed in a little-known paper of 1954 by Karl Polányi. Franz's symbolic dagger also stopped in mid-air – perhaps because there would have been reason for real murder rather than just a symbolic one.

No son of a petty tyrant whose power is entirely illegitimate can bring himself to patricide: it would not establish him as a successful rival. Instead, he must thrust the dagger into himself for one cannot go on living in a world in which one is deprived of paternal dignity and guidance and thus, the chance for hard-won independence.

Suicidal entries in Franz's diary abound. But even to Milena, an outside observer, it was clear that "Franz cannot live... He is like a naked person among the fully dressed." At an earlier stage even Georg came very close to self-inflicted death but, as he noted in his diary, the mental image of his father put a brake on his suicidal drives. It reminded him of his as yet unaccomplished task: symbolic patricide.

Otto's case was different. He did enjoy a lot of paternal dignity and guidance all through his short life. His principal work, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Gender and Character) reproduced his father's antagonistic views on women and Jews completely. Without fully realizing it, he had backed out of a decisive clash with his father, missing a chance for independence. Worse still, with his work published, he had gotten himself on record as being not only an obedient son but also a mere mouthpiece for his father. His only chance remaining was accomplishing an act he knew would be, for once, absolutely against his father's will, i.e. his own suicide, remembered for years in Viennese circles.

I want now to point out a few other common features of the growth of Weininger, Kafka, and Lukács both as men-of-the world and as men of letters. All three cultivated a close set of very intimate male friends not without traces of homosexual leanings. Weininger's deep attachment to Hermann Swoboda and, later, to Artur Gerber is no less telling than Kafka's intensive affiliation with Jizchack Lowy, a member of the Yiddish theatre company touring Prague and Budapest. Lukács was clearly shattered by the loss of his close friend, Leo Popper. For all three the accepted routines of a bourgeois marriage seemed quite as revolting as did their shameful encounters with prostitutes. Kafka's colossal inability to enjoy sex was no less characteristic than Weininger's angry rebuttals of coitus as a sin committed against the idea of mankind.

Their devastating critique of sexuality as part and parcel of the general chaos of ordinary living is, of course, anchored in Kierkegaard's philosophy

of resignation, arising in its turn from an unfulfilled love-affair the Danish thinker had had with Regine Olsen. When Lukács postulated that a voluntary poverty of the soul (*Armut an Seele*) is the inevitable pre-requisite of creating, Gand when Kafka in his diary spoke of his “fear of happiness, a leaning, nay, a command, to torment myself in the service of higher goals” – the two young men did not merely offer justifications for abstaining from sex. Rather, they formulated sophisticated principles culled from aesthetics and then raised them to the order of all-embracing ethical guidelines.

To put it simply, the Maker of art as well as of philosophy must preserve his whole being for the sake of his Oeuvre. True, Life can bring happiness but that cannot, by definition, add anything to the Oeuvre. Life, therefore, must be shunned by the Maker at all costs since, Life and Oeuvre being two spheres completely cut off from each other, by indulging in Life the Maker is inevitably leaving his Oeuvre – a prominent theme of Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger*. During the creation of an Oeuvre the common notion of happiness does not even emerge. The purposes of the Oeuvre even allow for sins committed amid the general mess of ordinary living. “And if God had set sin between me and the deed I must do – who am I to shirk from it?” – this much-quoted line of Hebbel’s Judith had opened the way for the three to indulge in their particular kinds of iconoclasm: Kafka’s self-destructive reluctance to adapt to bourgeois morals, Lukács’ even more radical leap into messianistic revolutionary action, and, finally, Weininger’s accomplishment of something many thousands of intellectuals were only talking or poeticizing about: breaking the vessel of life altogether, transmuting life’s imperfection into the perfection of total denial.

Far from being their sons’ fearful judges, the fathers merely stood by and looked on in horror or amazement. With them, the historic shrinking of the father-figure took on new dimensions. What took place in the three families discussed was, in sociological terms, an intergenerational leap from *Besitzbürgertum* to *Bildungsbürgertum*, in other words, a transformation of family property into intellectual assets. But on the other hand, probably more meaningfully, we may be witnessing here the final stage of the transformation of still powerful father-figures into ones (as Tibor Déry’s or Ferenc Karinthy’s reminiscences testify) without power, authority, or even the legitimation for any such things. It remains to be seen whether new generations of Weiningers, Kafkas or Lukácses *can* come about in a world without fathers.