

The Scapegoat

BRUNO BETTELHEIM

(1903—1990)

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My Dear Son and Daughters,

I begin what may be a very long letter on a sheet of letterhead stationery presented to me during my latest series of lectures at Stanford. Today I contacted the Hemlock Society, which gives a simple recipe for ending one's life: drugs, whiskey, and a plastic bag. I do not intend to use these measures now. I only want to be prepared to end my diminishing life when it becomes unbearable. Control over my own death is my right as a rational man, regardless of whether or not irrational fools recognize that right. Obviously, when death becomes the logical choice, I may not have the energy to write the long statement I must make to you. (Indeed, even now, I can no longer write for hours, after a full day's work, as I used to do.) Accordingly, I write this letter in short installments as time allows, between my professional writing, my speaking engagements, and my attentions to your mother.

She was grateful to have all three of you with us during this bleak holiday season—Ruth from Pasadena, Naomi from Washington D. C., and Eric, all the way from England—to help us absorb the news that the cancer has returned to attack her bones.

Now we two are alone again. I try to face the fact that I will almost surely outlive your mother, in spite of being seven years older, and myself suffering from a long list of medical mishaps all too common at the age of seventy-eight: my heart, the stroke last year, the fall that leaves me still limping on a cane, and, of course, the old diabetes, circulatory, and digestive problems. As always, I find comfort in work. My collaboration on the children-and-reading book progresses, in spite of interference by my editor, who avidly cuts and softens my words as he would never have dared to do twenty years ago.

Here, I will soften nothing. These final thoughts are intended only for you three to read and then destroy, as I am sure you will be eager to do. I write solely for your benefit, to prepare you for attacks on me that will grow more vehement and more personal when I am safely dead. Trust no one to defend me, not even those who, like my

publishers and disciples, have profited most from my work. I would not be surprised if they led the attack! I can only prepare you for the onslaught by arming you with the facts, in their proper context: beginning with the events of my life before you were born, events which shaped the forces arrayed against me, intended to destroy me. I was determined to struggle, to survive and to succeed. As you know, I did succeed, beyond all expectations.

This letter will also give you stories about my early life, stories which, being so absorbed in my work, I never had time tell you when you were children. I do not apologize for my absence during your early years. If I had the past thirty-five years to live over again, I could do nothing different, such was my joy in my crowded schedule of intense counseling, writing, speaking, and such was my certainty that you and your mother would be proud of my accomplishments. Perhaps it is as well that your mother should die before I do, before my attackers manage to tear down everything I have built and which she so faithfully protected.

I am tired, and another nurse is arriving to be interviewed. Why is it so hard to find and keep a sympathetic, white nurse in America? This one says she speaks German. Probably she is the granddaughter of a Nazi who will resent caring for a grumpy old Jew.

Portola Valley, Ca

27 January 1982

Home again after short lecture tour explaining (and defending!) my latest book, this one on teaching reading. I am accused of “putting the alphabet on Freud’s couch,” of citing and condemning obsolete primers no longer used. Those teachers attacked me as they never would have dared twenty years ago. But I was still able to dismiss their neurotic attempts to defend their own inadequacies.

Your mother was happy to welcome me home, and managed to leave her bed with the aid of her walker so that we could sit and sip tea. I entertained her with stories of my jousting with “reading specialists.”

I came home to receive the sad news—sadder than I would expect to feel—that my Cousin Edith has died. How many childhood days I spent at her home in Vienna, escaping the gloom of my own. And when I arrived in America—she was already here to help me to recover from the terror we had escaped and to adjust to the changes in my life. You probably do not remember Cousin Edith. We lost contact some years ago. I was busy and successful, and she did not like my success. Many survivors of the old days in Vienna did not like my success—envy is always a component of neuroticism.

I mourn Edith as I would mourn my childhood, though, unlike yours, it was far from happy. Of course, your mother has told you the bare facts of our early years in Europe, but you cannot fully understand the world in which she and I and Cousin Edith were born. That world has vanished forever.

To recreate it, start with a pre-1918 atlas. You will see the Austro-Hungarian Empire spreading across Europe, encompassing Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, part of Poland, part of Italy. And at the center of this empire—Vienna, the apex of high culture and, recently, birthplace of Freud’s new science, psychoanalysis. When I was born, every enlightened person, especially we Jews, held one faith: progress. The time of churches and wars was finished. Steam locomotives carried people and ideas at unprecedented speed to all parts of Europe. The poor and criminal by the tens of

thousands, by the millions, were going to America, ridding us of the drain on our resources by inferior classes. Industry flourished. A new era of peace had begun.

I was eleven years old when this illusion collapsed in the Great War, killing a generation of men, destroying my father's lumber business, and dismembering the Austrian Empire. By 1918, Vienna, was left within a poor remnant of a nation with sparse, unproductive land and few industries left intact. The great city of my birth sat like an old woman in faded finery in a cramped, dingy room

Our family was able to salvage just enough money to live decently, to feed ourselves and the servants, to keep me and my sister in school, and barely enough for my father, already in poor health, to start another wholesale lumber business.

But youth cannot repress its zest for life. It was an exciting time to enter high school during a time of a more salutary breakdown—that of the dreary old drills of rigid, regimented classrooms. I had finally been fitted with thick, ugly glasses that enabled me to read for hours without getting headaches, and to see some distance, though not well enough to dependably catch a ball. (Fortunately, I no more desired to be admired for athletic prowess, than I desired to be a violin virtuoso.) My ugliness only spurred me on in my studies, in my determination to distinguish myself as a great philosopher of aesthetics and—my ultimate secret ambition—to become a great novelist and playwright. (Then, as later, I overflowed with ideas and energy, with little patience for the tedium of re-writing. In later years, I always hired someone to do that polishing up, like hiring a cleaning lady.) First I had to assure my getting enough money to lead the life of an artist until I won recognition and was rewarded by society.

Half the doctors and lawyers in Vienna were Jews. I could always fall back on one of these professions to supplement my income as a writer. I might even make a career in the fascinating new science of psychoanalysis. Nearly all authorities on Freud's daring principles and dramatic cures were indeed Viennese Jews. In my boyish daydreams, I lived a brilliant life as Freud's close disciple, his scientific heir, my practice in psychoanalysis feeding and deepening my novels and plays (in which my sister Margarethe, who had begun acting in little theaters, would play leading roles).

Despised as a Jew by gentiles, despised as the son of a businessman by intellectual Jews, despised by the prettiest girls because of my ugliness, I was determined to rise above all snubs. I studied Freud's insights into the irrational unconscious of all human beings, even the respectable high and mighty. Thus, I would rise above them all.

18 July 1982

Half a year lost! Detached retina! Wrong anesthetic! Blockage of the prostate! Seven hours of surgery! If the debilities of old age do not kill me, the doctors will—unless, of course, I ask them to, in which case they will refuse me a merciful death. More than once, I nearly cut short this letter with a brief farewell, and took the pills. But the time has not yet come for the Hemlock Solution, not as long as your mother is still alive, not as long as there are constant demands on me as an authority in my field. (I have accepted an invitation to speak at a conference in Venice early next year)

It was good of you all to spend a few days here, until I was more or less on my feet again. As you saw, your mother becomes ever more frail, but, as always, goes on without complaint.

I left off this letter after mentioning the general cataclysms of war and social upheaval that shook my adolescence years. They were nothing to the personal catastrophe of my childhood that doomed all my energetic plans.

When I was only four years old, my father had fallen ill. He recovered from the first attack, only to slide into a permanent state of precarious and debilitated health, while my mother settled into a permanent state of silent grief tinged with cold resentment. A chill settled over our home, which I escaped as often as possible by going to Cousin Edith's house.

I was near sixteen when the Great War ended. Theaters were opening again, and my sister Margarethe was finding roles in small productions. One night she took me to see a production of Ibsen's "Ghosts," which, nearly 40 years after Ibsen wrote it, was still controversial and rarely staged. This was Margarethe's way of naming for me the unmentionable illness that had ruined my father's health and our home life.

In the play, the young man's health had been destroyed by the "sins of the father"—the syphilis brought home from illicit sex, then transmitted through the mother to her son when he was still in the womb. Ibsen's play was mistaken in its scientific and historical bases, of course. Medically, the young man's congenital illness would have been evident much earlier. And historically, the implication that the sexual freedom of his French friends was accompanied by immunity from disease was preposterous—syphilis had been the scourge of Europe for centuries.

But Ibsen's message was deeper than these objective realities. The father had been driven to "sin" by the coldness of the mother.

As Freud always said, the great artists had anticipated his theories. Ibsen and Freud held the deeper truth—the fault of the mother.

From that night onward, I knew the cause of the steady decline of my father's health. I knew that, no matter what efforts my father was making to restore the lumber business, his illness would destroy my hopes for a life of philosophic, psychological, and artistic studies.

In all my writing or speaking, even in casual conversation with friends, I have never been able to bring myself to mention the true cause of my father's illness, of my mother's gloom, of her distance from my father, of their separate bedrooms. Instead, I wrote of her rejection of me, citing her refusal to breast-feed me. Actually, it was customary for women of our class to employ wet-nurses at that time. Indeed, it would have been seen as a sign of failing family fortunes, a source of humiliation, had my mother herself breast fed her children. I also accused her of rejecting me because of my homely looks and my near-sighted eyes. In truth, I have no memory of my mother ever expressing anything but pride in my achievements.

I don't know how well you remember your grandmother, who died when you were children, too early for her to enjoy the fame I achieved, but not too early to know I had often written and spoken of her supposed rejection of me—to illustrate points of a lecture or an article. She never contradicted me, never mentioned my fictional portrait of her, just as we never mentioned the true nature of my father's illness.

By the time I started university in 1921, my father could barely drag himself to the lumberyard every few days. I took up my burden. I carried the equivalent of two courses of study at two different institutions—aesthetics at the university and business at

the vocational college—and I worked every day in the lumber business, as my father failed rapidly.

I was nineteen when he became totally bedridden. I left the university to run the lumberyard. He lingered nearly four more years, until 1926, while I supported him and my mother and my sister, even expanding the business. I was already a good psychologist, instinctively, which made me a good salesman, analyzing and defining the needs of customers better than they could, always smiling and bowing to Herr Arrogant and Herr Superior. You three know nothing of that Viennese straitjacket of status and class and title. I truly believe that the poor and uneducated were luckier than an intelligent, educated young man like me; the lower classes would not have been exposed to the full humiliation I knew, clinging to the edges of the higher, educated professional classes, while despised, even by Jews, as a mere “trader in lumber.”

At least some of my friends were not snobs. They did not drop me as they continued at university or began their professional careers. I was determined to keep up with them, even outshine them in their own fields, by independent study and reading. And I was determined to marry and provide handsomely for the most beautiful and admired woman of our circle, whom I loved passionately. Since it was clear she could never love an ugly lumber trader, I bought her, so to speak, with my abject devotion and also with money that subsidized her progressive nursery school. I insisted on paying many of her other expenses too, stepping forward at the slightest hint that money was needed. My determination wore down her indifference, and four years after my father’s death, she married me—out of gratitude and friendship, not love.

As you know, I am not speaking of your mother, my dear Trude, whose steadfast love was a great solace to me when my first marriage began to unravel, as it soon did. I remember how shocked you were when your mother and I decided you were old enough to be told that your lively “Aunty” Gina had once been married to your father. Perhaps you will never quite understand how we, members of the same small tribe of survivors, fellow Viennese Jews in a strange land, shared a painful bond that rose above all personal grievances. In fact, we all owe our lives to Gina, who had taken one of her mentally disturbed students into our home in Vienna. Little Patsy was the daughter of a wealthy American woman. When the Nazis rose, it was Patsy’s mother who got Gina out of Europe. It was Gina who, in turn, helped me and my sister Margarethe, and your grandmother to escape to America—and finally, your mother, by way of Australia. So, you see, were it not for “Aunty” Gina, you three would not exist.

But before our terrified escape there were some years of gathering darkness. During those years, my hopes of artistic achievement were sinking, and Gina was drawing away from me. She and Patsy left for America. I had only the solace of the devotion offered by your mother. More than a decade had passed since I left the university. Trude insisted, she begged, she pleaded that I somehow secure a degree, any degree. It didn’t matter that a position in teaching was now closed to me as Jew. She insisted that I was brilliant, a professor in all but title, but that my brilliance would count as nothing without some papers, any papers, to validate it, should present conditions change. The “papers” she nagged at me to acquire turned out to be of no practical use, but her faith in me kept me going through those terrible years, and the questionable degree I earned gave me some assurance when I later made claims backed by no “papers” at all.

In short, I evaluated the few credits I had accumulated, researched related fields, and found my shortcut. I worked night and day, preparing a thesis, taking oral exams, while keeping the business going as well. In two sleepless years of midnight writing—fourteen years after I had left the university—I acquired a degree in Art History.

As to why the Nazis put me into a camp for ten months before the war, I always told reporters or audiences that I had worked in the underground. This will be the first of my claims to be challenged as soon as I am dead. So I admit the truth to you, I did nothing in the resistance. I avoided politics entirely, hoping, as so many did, to avoid trouble. Nevertheless, I was arrested early, before the war, simply because I was a Jew with money and property. I could have gone with Gina. Instead, I was swept up, like so many others, because I refused to face reality, leave my money, my business, and go to America like one of those filthy peasants who'd been filling the boats for decades.

I survived my ten months in Buchenwald and Dachau because my mother sent money every week. The money bought me extra food, and—as Federn or some other fellow inmate will no doubt divulge after I am dead—an inside job, a shelter from the hauling and digging in the snow that killed the weaker inmates during the first weeks of that terrible winter of 1938. The Nazis took everything—our money, our home, and my business. In those early days before the war began, their motive was simple greed, and when they had taken everything, they were glad to be rid of any of us who had some place to go, out of the country.

So I had only a brief taste of their sadistic evil in the camps, so clever in the smallest aspects that one must almost admire their methods. The SS guards, our social and educational inferiors, appointed low, violent criminals as our capos. They abolished all titles among inmates and forced us to use the informal “du” on the few occasions we were allowed to speak to each other. You have studied languages. You know something about the subtleties of polite and familiar address—to express affection, status, respect, disdain—in ways that the simple, democratic English “you” would never convey. Yet, growing up in America, you can have no idea of what it means to hear and speak from birth a language that etches into your speech, into your very soul, the rigid lines of class and status that governed life in Vienna. The purpose of the SS men was to degrade all the Herr Doctors, and Herr Professors—to non-entities, low convicts digging privies and hauling rocks, and addressing only the guards and capos, the thugs with power of life and death over us, with respectful titles.

The effect on me was strangely mixed. I hated bowing to the thug capo and addressing him as “Herr.” Yet I was suddenly the equal of all other prisoners, all the respected professionals brought down to the level of the lumber merchant.

And so, I promoted myself to intellectual leadership by devising a research project for my fellow prisoners. During our few hours in the barracks at night before we fell into hungry, nightmarish sleep, we would interview each other, collecting observations and analyses of events in the camp that day. I prescribed the follow-up work: during our work hours we must all silently recite these memorized observations, which, of course, we were not able to write down. Busy work? Trivial? My children, there are men still living who credit my project with distracting them from total despair.

As you know, once safely in America, my rewards were more tangible. My career in this country began with the first writing I published—using these observations.

I admit—before the vultures gather to denigrate the article that launched my career—I admit that I inflated the numbers of inmates involved in my observations, and that, in my writings, I quite changed the significance of the enforced “du.” Once I saw the possibility of establishing myself as a child psychologist in America, it was more useful to put aside the “status” connotation (which Americans might have trouble understanding as a serious insult) and interpret the prescribed use of “du” as infantilizing. (From there I moved easily to equating harmful mothers with concentration camp guards. A considerable leap? Yes, but I had only to drop the names of Dachau and Buchenwald to create the invincible credibility of the survivor of Hell. Illogical but effective.)

On 11 May 1939 I took my first steps onto American soil, your grandmother and your aunt Margarethe already en route to join me. My cousin Edith was here to welcome me. She assured me that American gentiles respected smart Jews, recruiting them into the intellectual and scientific professions, to enrich the thin intellectual air of America. In other words, the old European-type “patron,” a necessity anywhere in the world, might actually be easier for a Jew to find here.

My hopes rose. I would not be despised like one of the millions of peasants we’d emptied out of Europe. Gina and I would reconcile. I would first build a teaching career, then climb higher. I even toyed with the idea of entering politics.

One by one, these bubbles burst. Gina, too, was building a new life in America—with Peter, who was already arranging his divorce so that they could marry as soon as Gina was rid of me. Furthermore, there were many Jewish refugees with degrees from great European universities and long experience in a profession—medicine and law as well as teaching.

I will spare you details of the positions I applied for at rural colleges in the middle of nowhere, of my going from one conference to another, of trying to make the most tenuous of contacts, of my efforts to improve my English, both writing and speaking. But not my accent! I quickly learned the power of a Viennese accent, a sound of authority which overwhelmed most Americans. (Poor Margarethe’s indelible accent, on the other hand, proved fatal to her hopes of continuing her acting career.)

Finally, at a tiresome conference in Chicago, I made contact with a Freudian from Russia, who gave me a task on a study he was doing for the University of Chicago. My only pay would be my name appearing along with others on the report. It proved enough to attract the attention of Ralph Tyler, Chairman of the Education Department! He offered to help me get a teaching job—somewhere.

I had found my patron.

I wrote to your mother, who had safely reached Australia. My dear Trude dropped everything—her work, the man she had promised to marry—and came to America, prepared to marry me as soon as my divorce from Gina was final, in 1941.

In that same year came the revelation that there was no better place for me than America. How did this revelation come? Where? In a place I would never have gone by my own choice. I let your Aunt Margarethe drag your mother and me to a Broadway musical. It was ridiculous, this “Lady in the Dark,” —a story of a woman’s psychoanalysis, complete with surreal dream sequences performed by dancers, uncovering her denial of her womanhood rooted in rejection of her by her mother. A flimsy mish-mash of stage psychology expressed in banal music.

The program informed us that this piece of trash was “soon to be made into a major motion picture.” The subject was considered suitable even for a mass movie audience! In other words, these cut-rate, third-rate, watered-down assumptions about analysis already lay nearly as deeply imbedded in the culture as the vulgarized Biblical myths of movie spectacles. You would have thought that everyone in America had undergone analysis or knew someone who had. Yes, in America, I suddenly realized, one breathed the faith of which I was already a self-ordained priest.

Yet another event of that year was the publication of a badly-written book of attacks on all things American. “Generation of Vipers” was given to me by another refugee from Vienna during one of his parties near the University of Chicago campus. As he held it up to me, he said, “The one redeeming quality of these ignorant Americans is their appetite for Jeremiads attacking themselves!” After the usual amount of time had been devoted to trading stories of complacent stupidities or well-intentioned American gaucheries in the intellectual wasteland between Manhattan and the Chicago campus, he read from the heart of this book, an impassioned, semi-literate attack on American mothers, coining the term “momism” as the pernicious infection responsible for most ills of American society. Mainly on the strength of that section, said my host—as he read aloud a reference to Freud—it had become not only a best seller, but was read and quoted on college campuses. That its vicious tone was so popular, he said, showed a general reaction against what Europeans had condemned for years, “the dominance of the American female.”

Thirdly, during that same eventful year, the new term “autism” was invented and applied to a vaguely-defined mental disorder appearing in infancy. Some American psychologists—not me! I did not invent causation—attributed autism to a failure of connection between mother and infant. Nor did I invent the handy term “refrigerator mother.” That came from a psychiatrist named Kanner, who later repudiated this accusation of maternal coldness. But the term had taken on a life of its own—it had become the popular, preferred answer to questions of childhood psychosis.

Only a fool would fail to see how the pieces of the puzzle came together into a usable theory.

I began referring to Patsy as an autistic child who had lived with me and my wife in Vienna while being studied and treated by me, after rejection by her American mother, who had given birth to her after a one-night stand. Yes, what a mouthful, what an enormity of invention! What a poor way to repay Patsy’s mother for helping us escape to America! How can I defend it? With the words of Picasso: an artist lies in order to tell the truth. The novelist I always wanted to be, and might have been in a different world, invented plausible stories to support theories I plucked from the zeitgeist. Many intellectuals do the same; I simply did it better

By the time you read this, you may already know about my grandest invention. Not a day has passed in forty years that I have not wondered—is this the day on which this invention will finally and fully be exposed? But that day has not yet come. Forty years.

Tyler offered to get me a teaching job at a nearby women’s college. “Send in your resumé, and I will speak to the college president.” By that time America was in the war and ordinary communication with Germany was cut off. Your mother was pregnant with Ruth. The job paid little, but it was a job. I had never mentioned my business, only

hinting vaguely at studies and teaching. So I obliterated Bettelheim the lumber merchant and invented Bettelheim, the scholar-professor-artist. I gave myself the education and the profession I should have had, would have had, if I had not been cheated of it.

To this day, my doctorate in “psychology” has not been questioned, nor has my claim to “14 years of research and teaching” at the University of Vienna, nor my “two books lost in the Nazi book burning,” nor my work with Schoenberg in the Vienna Music Society, nor my long invented list of creative projects in art, theater, and music—based on what I wanted to do and should have been allowed to do, in addition to practicing as a Freudian analyst. There were dozens of Viennese refugees in American who knew me as a lumber merchant and could have challenged my invention. I took that chance. Our mutual escape from Hitler’s ovens imposed a protective silence. Wasn’t America the place where immigrants re-invented themselves?

My vita was invented, but my hard work at Rockford College for Women was real. In my two years of teaching German Literature, art history, and psychology (plus volunteer discussion sessions, a foreign film series, free one-on-one therapy sessions) I became the most popular professor on the campus. These young women feared me and loved me; I drove them to tears, but they worshipped me.

The resident faculty at Rockford did not. At the end of two years, I was abruptly told not to return. There were vague whispers about the ethics of my one-to-one counseling sessions with my students. I believe the true reason was jealousy of my students’ regard for me. Or envy of my publications.

By that time, the article based on my “research” while a prisoner at Buchenwald and Dachau, had been reprinted widely, establishing my authority as a psychologist who overcame his own fear and hunger and avoided dehumanization by studying it in fellow inmates. Thus I gained the authority, not only of a sufferer, but of a profound thinker who could rise above evil forces to describe them in the process of destroying other minds. The analogy I drew of the child as prisoner, the rejecting mother as SS Guard, was embraced, swallowed whole. This theory rested solely, of course, on my authority as a survivor of the camps. On this authority I saw that I could build a reputation, a career, and a respected body of psychological writing.

Only yesterday the mail brought a notification that I am to be awarded the Goethe Medal next March in San Francisco. In other mail come a few hints that my eightieth birthday next year could be the occasion for the awarding of more honorary degrees from here and there.

But wouldn’t one such occasion be a perfect time for someone in the audience to stand up and shout that all these honorary degrees are my only degrees in psychology? I am indeed very tired, seeing threats within honors. Not while your mother is alive. That is all I hope for now.

*Mark Hopkins Hotel
San Francisco*

23 March 1982

Since your mother is still very weak, I let a former student fly me up to San Francisco and set me up at the Mark, where I am comfortable, but lonely. So I continue on sheets of hotel stationery to make my “confession” to you three. Confession is the wrong word. It implies shame and regret. I do not regret my rise to fame, not should you, having gained from it a comfortable, secure home and a good education!

I gave a good lecture on Freud at the ceremony, but it used up all my energy. Eating is an ordeal, and pleasant chatter with the sort of people who come to such ceremonies is beyond me.

Forty years ago, I was a different man. I could see and use possibilities in every offer that opened to me, even that most unpromising offer from the University of Chicago. The Orthogenic School was a run-down, confused mess when I took over. My career was born there, in the war years, the early forties, the years when you three were born.

I took the job on the condition that for at least 5 years, there would be no intrusion, no inspection, no reports to psycho-bureaucrats or university administration. To my surprise, the university agreed. America! I felt both admiration for an institution so open to new ideas, and contempt for its bowing to a nobody with a Viennese accent.

First of all, I got rid of half of the children, the obviously hopeless ones—such caretaking being no help to me in building my reputation for healing. I had them placed in other institutions. Henceforth, the Orthogenic School would accept only children between age 6 and 14, white, of average or better intelligence, with emotional disorders, but no physical abnormalities or chronic illnesses. They must be committed to the school for at least two years, with as little contact as possible with their parents, who were obviously the source of their problems, especially their mothers.

I fired everyone and hired a new staff—the less training and experience in caring for mentally ill children, the better. I looked for young women like the bright, highly privileged girls I had taught at Rockford—idealistic, pliable, energetic—girls at that wonderful age around 20, when they are dominated by two aims—to get free of their parents and to dedicate their lives to some great work. At that age, most young people—especially Americans—believe that, with some new, revolutionary approach, any problem can be solved.

Furthermore, while teaching young American women, I had learned that they were not at all like the image held by Europeans. In fact, they were rather insecure and shy compared to European women of their class and education—women like your mother and your Auntie Gina. Perhaps it was, again, a matter of class. Educated women of Europe had several generations of educated family behind them; these American girls, despite the money their families had acquired, were only a generation or two removed from the humble, black-shawled European peasants and servants their female antecedents had been. On top of that, this generation of them was cowed by so-called books like the “Vipers” thing, which was actually being required in some college classes.

Whenever possible I interviewed applicants in their own apartments or college dormitory rooms. I would explore the room while questioning them: “Why so many

science fiction books? Are you afraid of the real world? Why so many white blouses? Do you feel in need of some purification?" These girls were eager to prove they were not neurotic, or, at least, eager to be emotionally healed by my insights.

I required that those I hired live at the school, available to the children day and night, observing and recording what the children did and what they themselves did, and submitting everything for discussion at staff meetings, where we probed, not only the children's pathology, but their own. I presided over staff meetings, exposing the dark places in the mind of a counselor in more ways than had ever occurred to these young women, who were often in tears by the end. But, by the next day, they were more dedicated to me and to the work than ever.

These young women (and a few young men) had never hoped, never dreamed, that they could be part of a world-changing experiment overseen by a Viennese psychologist who had personally known Freud. (I saw no harm in adding the great man to my resume. I knew his writings better than many people who claimed to have actually met him.)

While my young staff worked with the children, writing accounts of their behavior, I concentrated on raising money. Speeches to parents and benefactors brought in funds to renovate the old building and make it into a colorful child-centered place, the ideal proving ground of total milieu therapy. I wrote articles with entertaining stories to illustrate psychological points. My weighted and formal English was smoothed out by my lucky discovery of just the right young woman. R. M. was and is a perfect editor, an expert in making my principles readable, clear, lively, even entertaining. (I use only her initials, since she no longer cares to be associated with my work.) I quoted accounts from the notebooks of my young staff, designated "participant-observers," who were thrilled to be acknowledged in a footnote. My articles, always heightening a fresh approach, a new insight, a promising hint of recovery, appealed to magazines with wide circulation, bringing in even more money, in grants and bequests.

As the war ended and the full horror of the Holocaust was revealed, my position as concentration camp survivor inspired awe and enhanced my authority on treatment of psychotic children. Whenever I spoke, I began with a sentence referring to both my camp experience and my work with children. Never mind the illogic of this pairing. I never failed to get complete attention and respect, disarming any potential doubter, by conflating the two, my suffering and my work melded into unassailable expertise.

No matter that the psychology department at the university and the psychiatric establishment elsewhere ignored me, or disparaged me in one or another academic journal nobody reads. I had already published more than thirty articles in literary-intellectual magazines, some reprinted in popular magazines (my first article on the camps had already been reprinted twenty times). With my invaluable editor R. M. cleaning up and organizing my thoughts and anecdotes, I had bypassed the "authorities" and had become the psychologist most in demand for well-paid lectures, clear (if heavily accented) and direct, full of stories which enhanced and dramatized the written records of my young counselors.

After five years, I permitted evaluation of the school by a pediatrician appointed by the university. It was a favorable evaluation, except for one or two annoying questions. Why were the children allowed time and materials for art, for drawing, and

none for music? The question hit a sore point. The drawings of children provided expressions of their problems, which I could analyze and interpret at staff meetings, as part of their cure—which I could write articles about. Music was useless to me. (That was not my answer. I said something about the “proven” danger of escape by disturbed children into meaningless sound. No one questioned this answer or asked for the proof.)

More problematic was the accusation that many mothers left in tears after a consultation with me. I never learned who had complained that I was unkind to the mothers of the children under my care. Surely none of my participant-observers—in my private counseling sessions with these girls, I had drawn out much worse things they subconsciously felt about their own mothers. I dismissed the complaints about weeping mothers by pointing out that these women were displaying precisely the behavior that had made their children so gravely ill.

I can sum up many years—the best years—in a few words.

In 1950, the first of my 9 books was published, and I was beginning to turn that dump, the Orthogenic School, into a model for the cure of intractable childhood psychosis like autism. No one questioned my diagnoses or my reports on my rate of cures. For the next 25 years, right up through my retirement and our move to California, my books remained best sellers, especially my 1975 book on fairy tales. (Despite the accusations of plagiarism by that envious reviewer who only wishes her children’s books sold as well!)

Exhausted! I’ll be grateful to get home to your mother.

28 March 1983

I have a yearning to celebrate my eightieth year in Europe. Yes, the lowly lumber merchant will return as the internationally known and honored authority on child development, consulted everywhere, from Stanford University to Israel. You know our plan. We fly to New York and take a stopover rest visiting Naomi. Then a leisurely ocean crossing—on the QE2—to London. After a visit with Eric, on to the conference in Venice (another lecture, another award), then on to see old friends in Basel. By air back to New York, rest again, then home.

Of course, the doctor advises against it, but your mother insists that she can manage it, and, frankly, I do not want to make the trip alone. This will surely be our last long trip together. During rest periods in hotel rooms while your mother sleeps, I will continue this letter, and will work on “Freud and Man’s Soul” to be printed in the *New Yorker*, and later as a little book. It will negate the recent feeble attacks on my work. It dismisses these critics as working with bad English translations of Freud! How easy it still is to demolish these virtually mono-lingual Americans.

Yet, writing is so tedious now. I have found devoted editors since R. M. deserted me, but somehow the feeling is not the same as it was in the old days.

2 August 1983, New York

We are resting after a fine visit with Naomi, and your mother says she feels better for the change in our routine. She goes to bed early. Naomi gave me some good, workmanlike writing paper. I told her I needed it to take notes for my next lecture, but I

really want to get through this—through with writing and thinking about those exhausting, productive years when I stood at the top, but could see disorder below, rising.

The 1960s were a terrible time. You young people found them intoxicating, but a drunkard enjoying himself at a raucous party does not care that he is tearing the house down. Picketing and shutting down the university with their thuggish behavior! Protesting the Vietnam War? Demanding that I take a stand? All right! I took a stand! I likened student protestors to Nazi Youth! A few years earlier, that would have shut them up. It no longer did. Worse, my colleagues actually took their part. I stood firm as the storm broke over me. The work I was doing was too important to be endangered by these self-indulgent hot-heads. They were spoiled children, not adult professionals responsible for keeping hundreds of thousands of dollars flowing in grants—dependent, in one way or another, on the good will of people highly placed with the U. S. government.

Looking back, I see in that filthy tide rising against me, not only the unruly students, but psychologists who wanted to usurp my place. 1960 was the year Bernard Rimland wrote his book positing an organic cause of autism—just what all those guilty parents of autistic children (and Rimland was one of them!) wanted to hear, an excuse to deny responsibility, to form organizations, to write articles, to hire speakers who challenged my authority. They were ignored at first, but during the past twenty-odd years, their numbers have increased. I have had to take firm steps to silence them. A mild hint to editors is usually sufficient; publications and institutions that profit by my popular articles and lectures know that if they give space to my enemies—even in letters to the editor—they will lose me as a contributor. So the opposition must await my death before hoping to see their attempts to destroy my work and my reputation in print!

The noisy sit-ins of the sixties and the upstart psychologists did not disturb me as much as a more quiet undercurrent did. I suppose you know the story they tell on me, the story that has become a favorite joke among my enemies. Humor is a weapon, as Bergson said. I used it freely and skillfully, victoriously—until the knitting incident, when someone dared to turn it on me, and—despite my status, not only as an authority, but as a Holocaust survivor—a lecture hall full of students and observers dared to laugh.

The woman habitually sat in the front row, knitting. You know how it annoys me to speak to people who do not keep their eyes on me, who do not show, by their expression, their appreciation of my little jokes, their shock at my extreme examples of abnormal behavior and its meaning, their puzzlement at a point that eludes them. This woman was a passive-aggressive pest. She sat twiddling those knitting needles, day after day, her eyes fixed on them, her expression never changing. One day, as I began to talk, I noticed her in her usual place, right in front of me, head bowed over her busy fingers. I decided it was time to put an end to this annoyance. I stopped speaking, gave her a cold smile, and said, “Miss (whoever she was), I presume you know that knitting is a well-known symbolic substitution for masturbation.” She did not blush, she did not burst into tears and run from the class (as any girl would have done a decade before), she did not even raise her head from her clicking needles. She only said, in a clear voice that filled the lecture hall, “Doctor Bettelheim, when I knit, I knit. When I masturbate, I masturbate.”

The class burst into laughter. Then they sat grinning at me—as if they suddenly found me just an ugly old Jew with a funny accent. I don't remember how I finished my lecture.

That very night, the recurring nightmare began. I stand before a huge audience, hundreds. The knitter sits smiling and knitting like Madame de Farge. Then someone rises from the audience—someone I knew in Vienna, someone who died in the camps—to denounce me as a fake.

So. My dream is not a subtle expression of my complex unconscious, requiring skilled interpretation. It is no more than an expression of my conscious fear. I find it frankly humiliating that my terrifying nightmare should be so banal.

Nevertheless, in that decade of political assassinations and campus riots and defiant questions, and the recurrent nightmare, I reached the apex of my career. 1967 saw the triumphant publication of my book on autism, *The Empty Fortress*. My book, especially the section on Joey the Mechanical Boy, won the admiration of people like the great poet, W. H. Auden, and of others who liberally quoted from it in the leading magazines.

Yet I did not dare to lower my guard. Your mother told me that in my lectures I seemed ever more abrupt and stern, that even innocuous questions triggered contemptuous answers from me. I am sorry to say I dismissed her abruptly too. I did not admit that the ghosts who haunted my nightmares were invisibly haunting my waking hours, my public appearances, where I feared—what? Another knitter to make a joke of me? a Holocaust survivor to rise and call me “lumber merchant?”

I will forget all of this when we reach Europe, our old friends, and my latest award in Venice.

Jolly Hotel
Basel, Switzerland

(ridiculous name for a chain of hotels—never before did it seem cruel as well)

25 October 1983

You three have already received telegrams about this mess. But I am the broken old man who must solve it!

Everything went wrong! From the moment we sailed from New York! The ocean was rough and stormy. London with Eric was only a brief respite before the Venice Conference—the same old tedious speeches and empty honors. Our reunion here with Emmie and Bertel was ruined when your mother collapsed. Congestive heart failure. The doctor says she may die. Now. Here. Why didn't she tell me how weak she felt? Why did she just push on? What am I supposed to do, think for both of us, for all of us? How on earth can we get home? No airline will let her on a plane with that oxygen tank! Why is everyone so stupid? I am old and sick too! But does anyone think of me? If she dies now what will happen to me? Of course, she takes the easy way out, abandons me. The only solution is for me to take my Hemlock Society potion as I sit by her deathbed. But I didn't bring it on this trip! This trip was to be pure pleasure, and she has ruined it all.

10 November 1983, Portola Valley

We are at home one week now, and Trude is resting fairly well.

In the end, I did find a solution. I remembered Sandy, who had often thanked me for his years at the Orthogenic School—tangibly thanked me, contributing to the school, to my pension fund—since he became such a great success on Wall Street. I telephoned Sandy, who arranged everything, bought space on a Swissair jet, to fly us home.

Sandy is my answer to those envious upstarts who say that my claims of diagnoses, cures at the School are exaggerated, figures falsified! My answer to those ingrates who insist that a few, very few, of the children at the Orthogenic School recovered, regardless of anything I did—or even, damn them all, in spite of what I did.

Your mother improves daily. She talks about a trip to New York in the spring. In the mail were several invitations to accept honorary degrees at eastern universities. Trude suggests we plan our trip around those invitations. I think she is feeling guilty for causing so much trouble.

29 December 1983

Your mother was pleased to have you all here again for another Christmas. How she loves being a grandmother. Now all is quiet, and she rests, still determined on New York in the Spring. I have no doubt we will have more years together.

I tire even more quickly now, and I must complete this letter, must tell you what I want you to know, what you will need to know.

I want you to remember that regardless of rebellions of the 1960s, I remained the authority on how to become a better parent. Millions of women read my monthly column in the *Ladies Home Journal*, flooding the magazine with letters beseeching my help. I softened my reproof of these earnest mothers, who at least acknowledged their culpability, the harm they had done to their children, the harm they were likely to continue to do.

I was less gentle in the many reviews and reactions still solicited from me, regarding all sorts of books or events or articles. As the sixties melted into the seventies, I faced strident challenges to Freud from feminists. (It was as if those pliant girls at the Rockford College for Women had given birth to monster women!) Still, I could hardly keep up with the invitations to write and to speak. I did speak, but with even more impatience at stupid questions! Or was it fear of exposure that made me strike out at them before they could strike out at me? Every hand raised in the audience could be a challenge to be met with force. It seldom was—and then only a weak, tentative challenge.

Nevertheless, I went on the offensive, striking first, and harder than any challenger. Many Jewish intellectuals wrote that the play based on Anne Frank's diary was mere sentimentality, so I went further and attacked the Frank family and other Jews who did not get out in time, refusing to leave their money, their property, their businesses. (Be ready; the first attack on me after I die may be to point out that I also waited too long, for the same reasons.) I attacked writers on the Holocaust for the simple use of a word like "martyr," as if it were a tawdry crime to bestow an unearned halo on a simple "victim." I ridiculed feminists for rejecting Freud's "penis envy" while they simultaneously fretted over their relations with men. When any of them defended such

attitudes as involving no contradiction, I called them closeted Lesbians—and those who acknowledged openly that they were Lesbians, I called cowardly, unnatural neurotics.

I reviewed whatever was sent me, everything from *Portnoy's Complaint* to Lifton's book on Hiroshima, and I always managed to write something that would shock, would focus attention on me at the expense of the author. Isn't that what all critics do? I only did it better. No one questioned my authority (the magazines knew better than to print protesting letters if they wanted another article from me.)

I attacked anyone who questioned Israeli policies after the six-day war. After my visit to Israel I proclaimed it the living proof of my theories: kibbutz child care had virtually abolished the family, producing the first generation of healthy adults free of the complexes and psychoses I had worked to cure

I went even further, attacking the Head Start Program. Take them out of the defeatist environment of poor homes, I said, set them up in well-run group homes.

That was going a bit far. I did not really believe it would be possible to have thousands of perfect "orthogenic" boarding schools for all these poor black children. I was a bit annoyed, tired of heading off challenges about there being no black children and no black staff at the Orthogenic School—except for kitchen staff.

One of you told your mother I always attacked anything that hadn't been my idea first—oh, yes, I saw the letter, though Trude tried to hide it from me. I also overheard one of you saying that I would never admit I was wrong about anything.

No matter. I forgive you.

29 January 1984

Your mother insists that we will take our trip to New York as soon as the weather changes. She studies the *New Yorker* listing of upcoming exhibits and is already planning our museum outings.

I look at my last entry and realize I left out one reason for my feeling that I must attack in order to head off attacks on me, looming like shadows in a bad crime movie. The truth is that I do have such unexpected enemies, betrayers. You want proof? You shall have it. I have never even told your mother why my first editor R. M. left me.

At first, R. M. made flimsy or evasive excuses, insisting that I would have no trouble finding an editor eager to take her place. I knew that, but I wanted her. Had I not paid her enough? I would pay more. Had I not taken most of her suggestions gratefully? Had I been in any way rude? Did I take advantage of her?

Finally she admitted she was deserting me because of her neighbor, a mother of a very disturbed child. The neighbor read *The Empty Fortress* and then had come to R. M. weeping in despair, repeating over and over, "I didn't mean to hurt him, I didn't know I was so twisted. Dr. Bettelheim says that for me even to make such excuses is just another expression of hidden rejection, of my secret wish that my son should cease to exist. But I never knew that I—" and on and on like that, the way they all do.

R. M. told me she had known this woman for years, had known this deeply troubled, volatile child almost from birth, had known how this family tried, suffered, how they had turned in every direction for help. She told her neighbor that she should not take my book too literally. But the woman opened the book and read aloud the very principles and accusations that R. M. had helped me to write in clear English.

Then R. M. finally admitted to me that she must leave me because her conscience bothered her! She believed she had helped me to write books that have done such harm. But I will not be crushed, not even when those I trusted turn on me.

I think I must travel alone to Tulane, to Bard College, and the others—let you mother save her energy for our two weeks in New York.

Amusing offer. I have been approached by Woody Allen, who asks me to make a cameo appearance as a psychiatrist in his next movie, “Zelig.” Your mother laughs and insists that I will enjoy being a movie star for three minutes. For me, Allen’s offer proves that my reputation is still secure. Unless it could be a twisted example of his humor, intentionally presenting a famous therapist and hinting fraudulence? No, I shall not entertain paranoid thoughts. Even if Allen did have ulterior motives, no movie audiences would understand his joke. I will simply be on guard, and insist on approval of my lines.

*Chelsea Gardens Hotel
New York, New York*

20 April 1984

Your mother maps out a full schedule every day, but cannot walk far, cannot stand in the galleries and museums, nor even sit through a complete concert or play. Nevertheless, she insists that she is having a wonderful time, and I must admit that my appetite for most plays and concerts is satisfied well before the intermission. We come back to the hotel, your mother takes another dose of pain medication and dozes off for an hour or two before waking and needing another pill. I am content to sit beside her quietly and try to finish this one-sided conversation with you three.

The trouble is that sitting here I tend to brood over some of the more open insults I have been subjected to lately

This Terrence Des Pres, with his book *The Survivor*, has attacked me directly, starting with my first article forty-odd years ago, the very foundation of my career. He dismisses the psychoanalytic approach as inapplicable to the extremes of camp life. Worse, he says my tone implies, not scientific detachment, but a need to assert my superiority over other inmates—in my ability to transcend the horrors of camp life by analyzing their deterioration. Then he accuses me of misreading or distorting accounts of men who survived years in death camps, as opposed to my few months of detention before the war. This juvenile academic, not even born yet when I was in Buchenwald! I would have ignored him, as I ignored Rimland and Park and all the others, but his book was reviewed widely, sold widely, even excerpted in Harper’s! A few years ago, such attention would have been impossible. None of these publications would have risked losing me as a contributor by accepting such an article. I had no choice but to fight back, to demolish him.

I wrote a review that took apart his prose word by word, squeezing out all meaning, turning every adjective and most nouns into husks of boring, confusing rhetoric, like a joker creating amusing anagrams. Anyone who read my review, without knowing the book yet, would conclude that he was a fool. Furthermore, I wrote it as a

joint review—fusing it to that disgusting, arty movie on the death camps by Lina Wertmuller. My authority over that upstart professor became complete as I smeared his book with the obscenity of that movie. The *New Yorker*, as always, was delighted to get 20,000 words from me. It came out just as I learned that my book on fairy tales would receive the National Book Award: it was like smashing a fly.

Some flies are harder to smash. The world seems to be full of old death camp survivors who have by now all written their own books, and who—as if fulfilling the prophecies of my nightmares—have begun to show up at my lectures to argue with me. I still shout them down easily, but it may be only a matter of time before one of them who knew me or old friends from Vienna, will call me “Bettelheim, the lumber merchant.”

18 July 1984

Home for a month. Idle. Have written nothing.

My editor says I should move with the times, write a more “parent-friendly” book. I lack the energy. I told him to paste together some things from my *Ladies Home Journal* columns. He agreed, “if you write an introduction saying that perhaps parents, while not perfect, might avoid being destructive—might be—just good enough.” He should stop expecting me to write something to ease his guilt about his poor parenting.

How can I get another book together when your mother will not help herself to get better. She refuses to pull herself together enough to at least keep the cleaning woman functioning, to find me a new secretary to replace the idiot who threw away my new editor’s rewrites and corrections, and to—I can hardly bear to look at your mother since she has started dramatizing her health problems. She used to at least make an effort. Now she only swallows pills, chokes on them, and groans. I have to be grateful when she just keeps quiet instead of indulging in those dramatically stifled moans. Like a bad Bette Davis movie!

10 November 1984

What will I do? How can I manage?

I thought when Eric came, she would perk up as usual. I made no demands on her. We stopped going out, except to places where I could push her around in a wheelchair. She seemed to be tolerating the radiation treatments. She should have outlasted the cancer another year, at least. Heart failure? How could that be? Only 73. I am 81. How am I expected to go on without her? After nearly half a century together? No one understands me as she did. No one understands at all.

Time for the Hemlock solution.

Albion Hotel
New York, New York

4 January 1985

I am forced to come here to make arrangements for your Aunt Margarethe. Sleeping pills. Botched suicide. She will die. But it will take a day or two, the doctor says. We have not been close. Back in Vienna I admired her and believed she would become a great actress, but in America, as I rose, she fell. She became to me a reminder of our miserable childhood, our father's disintegration. We went our separate ways.

If I did not have several meetings, lectures, symposiums to keep me busy, I would go mad or collapse. How I miss your mother.

More stupidities during a talk I gave yesterday. Now it is the homosexuals rising up to do their mincing little harangue at my position—no, no, homosexuals cannot rear children to psychological health. Period. How can anything so against nature be called a family?

If that were not enough, an Israeli in the audience pronounced that everyone in Israel hated my book on the kibbutzim, and how did one month in Israel qualify me to say anything at all, and, even in only a one-month visit, how could I have failed to notice that parents have been steadily withdrawing their children from child care and going back to traditional family groups? Took no more questions.

Large party planned for me when I pass through Chicago on my way home. NOT an official university event. Am I being honored or insulted?

I should have brought my Hemlock kit along.

5 May 1985

What is worse, going from one stupid crowd to another, or coming home to this empty house? I looked again at retirement homes. Never!

20 June 1985

Trouble eating. Something about my esophagus. Will I be able to swallow the Hemlock pills? Even crushed into powder?

3 December 1985

My publisher took *The Good Enough Parent* out of my hands. Another writer will revise, will "make nice" to mothers. Fine. I should have a ghost writer, since I am almost a ghost.

Last night the dream was horrible. I was speaking—strongly, eloquently—to a huge audience. Suddenly a young European woman dressed in pre-war fashion stood up. It was my mother. "You blame me for our unhappy home. Me! Not your father, who sacrificed our marriage, our livelihood, your future. I loved him, I was not cold toward him, yet he insisted on the traditional male privilege, casual adultery, sexual variety,

regardless of danger. He knew the terrible risk he was taking. Yet you blame me. He threw away our lives, yet you blame me.” On and on, over and over, “you blame me.” I woke up sweating and crying—like a baby?—no, like a senile old man.

4 December

This was to be the end of my long letter to you. I was ready to follow my Hemlock Society plan.

Then I looked out the window to see in the driveway a Christmas present from Sandy, a brand new Mercedes Benz. Everyone wants to console me in my grief, to give me moments of relief and pleasure.

BBC requests interview. Agreed, but they must come here. After I get back from the conference in Vienna. Then it will be time for the Hemlock solution.

*Hotel Bismarck
Vienna, Austria*

7 May 1986

Everything went dark, but I stayed on my feet. They helped me off the stage. Possibly a small stroke, says the doctor. All limbs working, all brain cells, speech is fine. As soon as I am better, I fly to Chicago—another conference in my honor. More stupid talking. Then I will put an end to this farce called life. This is not living.

9 Nov 1986

The *Good Enough Parent* has come out. Not bad? Too soft? No. If I were starting my career again, I might be softer, do more for mothers, help them more, since, after all, motherhood cannot really be abolished, can it? But fifty years ago would such a mild, wishy-washy books have sold in America? No! I would have been ignored. I succeeded, I became famous, and now, now! they say I hate mothers! That I hate women! I? Did I write *Generation of Vipers*, or *The Shrike*, or *Craig's Wife*, or *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, or Trilling's story about Ibsen's *Ghosts*?

No! It was all here when I came to this country, where the very air breathed fear and hatred of women. The worst anyone could say of me is that I sniffed that air and gave America what it wanted. I became famous and admired. Admired like the scapegoat that is decorated with garlands and fattened up and petted and bowed down to by worshippers who put their sin upon him, THEIR sin. And then destroy their sin by destroying him.

The only person who cared for me is gone. My own children could not care less for me.

Naomi and Eric, you say Ruth and I could never get along together and that I would hate Los Angeles—but then you both suggest a retirement home! Not a whisper, not a hint of offering me a place in your own home.

Now is the time. Why can I not take the pills now, now, now? Losing the will to live, have I lost the will to die? What is this stupidity? Die, you fool!

Los Angeles
15 May 1987

How could I have let Ruth talk me into this? How can I work in this stupid house she bought for us—with my money! My savings! my borrowings! Huge and pretentious and uncomfortable, a set for a Hollywood movie, not a cozy home like your mother used to make for me. And her children! Why can't she keep them quiet when I am working. I tell you, Ruth, I tell all three of you, this cannot go on. I am a sick old man. I did not come here to fight with my daughter. She is not my daughter. I see the lawyer tomorrow. I will change my will. I must leave this place.

Go on, Naomi, Eric, say "we told you so!" You two only want to put me in some warehouse for the old, and Ruth only wanted my money for her vulgar house.

7 July 1987

A bad fall. No broken bones, but constant pain. Then the flu. I would have had the courage or the despair to finally end it—but then came the invitation. One last speaking tour. London, Vienna, Paris, San Francisco.

*Mark Hopkins Hotel
San Francisco*

25 March 1988

Nearly a thousand people at my lecture in San Francisco! My voice held up. Held up for the TV interview, the BBC, the French film maker.

No nightmares. But no sleep. Terrible headache.

Los Angeles
8 November 1988

I waited too long. Stroke. Eight months helpless.

Arm still weak— can write slowly—surgery—esophagus. Food again stays down.

Stupid mansion is sold. Where Ruth lives, I don't know. Never want to see her again. Mercedes sold. Can't drive. Stuck in stupid apartment. Series of stupid nurses. My will is paralyzed. What crude, animal urge to live takes over? When? How? Worth a book—if I had energy to write. Enough in these scraps of stationery from all over to make a book. A book that must never be published. I need help to die.

30 November

Fischer recommends psychoanalysis! Analysis can't solve my problems. Only death can. But no one will help. Not the doctors. Not my own flesh and blood.

Eric, some day you will be old and sick, and you will ask a friend to take you to a country where euthanasia is permitted. I hope that friend refuses you, as you refused me.

7 January 1989

Knopf pestering me for the introduction to that collection of old essays. Takes all day to write a few sentences. Let them do it. I put words together, they don't make sense.

20 September 1989

Phone calls every day. "How are you feeling?" or worse, "Cheer up!" My question to anyone who calls—will you help me find a way out of this life?

24 December 1989

So, Naomi. I surrender. Arrange the move to the rest home near you. No, I don't care to see them, to choose. You decide. They are all alike. I will become one of those hopeless shells sitting in a wheel chair, gazing on nothing. You will pick me up once a week and prop me up at your dinner table. And wait for me to die, refusing the only thing I want—help to die quicker.

One suitcase. Underwear. Pajamas. One decent suit. Hemlock Kit. Large envelope full of these scraps of paper—this letter you must read at my death, before the attacks begin. If you throw it away, you will be unprepared. You will deserve the shocks that come.

Charter House
Silver Spring, Maryland

24 February 1990

Terrible food. No one to talk to. No one listens. No one even knows WHO I AM. Nurses hate me.

My only comfort is my secret. Hemlock Kit, closet shelf: whiskey, sleeping pills, plastic bag.

12 March 1990

A rare, good day. More energy. My last good day? Last chance to act? Yes. Now. I use my final burst of energy to warn you.

As soon as I am dead, the jackals will gather to call me a fraud—credentials, theories, practice, teaching. (What holds them back? Sympathy for a sick old man? No. they want to prolong the time they can profit from my books, They must go on promoting the man they soon will denounce as a fraud!)

Magazines that printed my every word as scripture will begin the attacks on me.

Old friends will confirm the worst.

Death camp survivors will curse me as a know-nothing who cheapened their suffering and dying.

All this and more will complete the ritual killing of the scapegoat on whom the people of this country lavished their worship, their gold, their sins, in the long ceremony before the sacrifice. The idol smashers are setting up new gods, new idols: salvation in a bottle of pills or brain surgery or gene replacement.

I leave you only one comfort: the shame will be intense but brief, very brief. I know this country. I know these people. They will forget me and all I stood for. Quickly. Instantly. Especially the therapists, counselors, teachers who used to quote me. They will say they never believed me, never read my books, never blamed a mother for her child's autism, or schizophrenia, or colic, or eczema, or homosexuality, or anorexia, or

Trust me. By the time the savaging biographies are written, no publisher will be interested. Bruno Who? They will forget me. And you can too.

It is time for me, for a few moments, to be the decisive man I once was. A bit of whiskey to calm the stomach. Crush the pills well lest some stick in the throat. Then more whiskey. The plastic bag to speed the effect.

My final word to you is a joke on them all. Today happens to be the date Hitler invaded Austria. Obituaries will mark that date, and in their one and only note of sympathy for me, will count me among victims of Nazism who suffered suicidal trauma on especially infamous dates, throughout their lives.

The truth is the reverse. Hitler destroyed a life I hated and thrust me into a new life I never could have had in Austria: half a century of work, respect, fame, and honors.

I leave that irony for the vultures to pick over.

Destroy this letter.

Forgive me.

Your Father

In the words of Nina Sutton, an English/French journalist, at Bettelheim's death in 1990, "In the space of six months, not a single stone of the Bettelheim monument had been left standing." Articles exposing Bettelheim were printed in the very journals (New Yorker, New York Review of Books, Ladies Home Journal etc.) that had helped to make and maintain Bettelheim's reputation.

Sutton had been near completion of a laudatory biography of Bettelheim when the revelations came, one upon the other, including plagiarism, falsification of his education and experience, fabrication of results of his treatments, even physical abuse of students in his Orthogenic School—revelations of facts that Sutton had apparently never suspected, let alone uncovered, while researching Bettelheim's life and career (although critics of his work abounded). Sutton, nevertheless, completed the biography, adding an introduction acknowledging his exposure. In 1996 she published a 600 page book that awkwardly tried to salvage some evidence of positive influences by Bettelheim, contradicted in every chapter by facts she attempted to rationalize.

A well-documented and less ambivalent biography by American Richard Pollak, whose brother had been a patient at the Orthogenic School, was published in 1997, but by that time Bettelheim was out of the conversation about autism. The 20th century was over, blaming Mom was out, and scientists pursuing organic/environmental causation of mental illness were in.

References

- Bruno Bettelheim 16 books, only one of which, the highly “derivative” (if not plagiarized from Heuscher, Fromm and others) *The Uses of Enchantment* is still read by some people who like heavily Freudian interpretations of fairy tales.
- Clara Park *The Siege* (1967). A first-hand account by a mother of an autistic daughter, published the same year as *The Empty Fortress*. Bettelheim, a reliable source told me, threatened to cancel his commitment to speak on a panel unless the invitation to Park was withdrawn. It was.
- Richard Pollack *The Creation of Dr. B* (1997)
- Nina Sutton *Bettelheim: a Life and a Legacy* (1996)
- David Simpson,
J.J. Hanley
Gordon Quinn *Refrigerator Mothers*
(2002, documentary film, Kartemquin Films, featuring interviews with mothers who struggled to raise autistic children during the reign of Bettelhem’s theories)