

Selected letters of Kurt Gödel to his mother (Marianne) and brother (Rudolf)

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Translated by Marilya Veteto Reese, edited by Stephen Budiansky*

Princeton, 31./III. 1940.

Dear Rudi!

Today we've been here 3 weeks and except for your airmail letter of 7./II. I have not had any news from you and Mama. . . . You did probably already hear from Mama that we already have a nice 2-room apartment with furniture rented separately. The address is 245 Nassau-Street, but you should keep writing to Fine Hall.

Of the journey the best part was San Francisco and the Hawai-Islands. I also sent you a card from there. San Francisco is absolutely the loveliest of all cities I have seen up to now. We would like to send packages from here with coffee etc., but it apparently all gets confiscated. Groceries here are unbelievably inexpensive, so that it really pays off to run one's own household (much more than in Vienna.) Also furnishing a household is surprisingly cheap. There are the so-called 10 cent-stores, where all household articles are almost given away. E.g., a nice glass sugar bowl costs 5 cents and a little framed picture (very charming) the same.* I pay 50\$ a month rent (and if I stay till the end of Sept. 40\$), the furniture costs 8\$ monthly. . . .

My invitation here was extended to June 1941. Tomorrow we are going to New York for 2 days, where I will go the German consulate. I hope you received the 300 RM that I sent from Berlin. Am very anxious to have word from you two again. This is my seventh letter to you two. Warm regards also from Adele

Your Kurt.

* How long the hunt will go on, remains to be seen!

Princeton, 6./X. 1940.

Dear Rudi!

Three days ago your letter of 15/IX. arrived and I was glad that some of the packages did arrive after all. I was very astonished that I was being inquired about by the Military Command. After all, I requested an extension of my leave of absence back at the end of April and they told me at the local consulate that it had been reported to the Vienna authorities and that the matter was completely in order. About my renewal "in absentia" I was just as surprised. Until May 1941 I will stay here at any rate, for I did accept this position and have drawn part of the salary.

By the way, it would interest me very much whether any salary (and in what amount) would be associated with my Vienna position? Could you not find that out? According to the new laws, all *Dozents* are to be paid.

If you speak to the people at the university can you tell them too that I submitted an application for extension of leave of absence to the Vienna Rectorship and the Ministry for Science, Education and Culture via the local consulate, primarily with the justification that I 1) have no money for the return trip and 2) have no money* to live on in Vienna. They apparently know nothing of this request in Vienna, otherwise they would not ask me to appear in the upcoming days. . . .

Your Kurt

* No dollars

Princeton, 16./III. 1941.

Dear Rudi!

. . . I now have quite a bit to do again since I am giving a lecture class and in addition am invited to give a talk; though in both cases the topic is my most recent work that I have not even put to paper for myself exactly. For next year (i.e., 1941/42) I am once again invited to the Institute for Advanced Study (with the same salary) but I am not exactly enthused about this year-to-year position, for in addition I am given to understand that the available funding is getting ever tighter (perhaps due to the war?) .

..

Here there are once again some social events and a dance evening once every 14 days where American folk dances are danced (similar to the quadrille). I of course do not go, but Adele is quite enthused. . . .

With warm regards
Your Kurt

P.S. Please send Adele's father (Joseph Porkert VII. Langeg. 67) 150.- RM.

Princeton, 21./IX. 1941.

Dear Rudi!

. . . My state of health that you ask about was in fact not particularly good last year. I lost quite a bit of weight (and still have not got my normal weight). In addition, my heart issues were at times worse than usual. That probably is in part due to the climate here. For here it is (often already in May and up through Sept) at times so oppressively muggy that even mere walking is strenuous even for a healthy person. . . .

In my opinion, a further reason was (even though the doctors wanted to take no notice of it) the furnace in our apartment. It was supposedly a warm water heater (with circulating water), but it very often smelled of smoke in the rooms. The skilled craftsmen that I had come made fun of me of course but one of them actually admitted that perhaps some kind of fumes could be coming from the cellar through chinks in the walls or through the windows.* . . .

Warm regards also from Adele

Your Kurt

* I also told the people at the Institute. I didn't have any headaches.

Princeton, 22./I. 1946.

Dear Mama and dear Rudi!

I am happy to hear again from you in more detail after such a long time and to know that you have managed to survive the past months. . . . I wrote to you for a year now (counting the answers to your letters) ca. every two months via the Red Cross and am surprised that you have not received anything. . . . Might it be possible as early as next summer for us to come visit in Vienna? Hopefully conditions will improve quickly and that we hear from you very soon. We send you a thousand *Bussis* and wish you both the best from the heart for your wellbeing.

ever Your Kurt

From Rudolf Gödel, 21 January 1946

Vienna, Kärtnerstr. 32

Dear Kurtl!

I add a few more lines to this letter on a very important matter. Since yesterday *Volksdeutsch* in Vienna are being taken from the Russian Zone to collection camps in Western Austria, indeed fairly suddenly and unexpectedly. Mama is for the time being also a *Volksdeutsch* as she has not yet received Austrian citizenship (no one has yet). The order was made by the Russian Military Authorities. We are in the American Zone but it is easily possible that a similar order for this zone could come soon.

Since the Austrian government in this case is apparently not relevant, but rather the military government, it would be very important if I could emphatically point to your position in Princeton to be able to keep Mama here. So if it is at all possible for you, send me as soon as possible a notarized copy of your then-invitation from the American Government in which it designated you as a VIP of the first rank, and before the German Government (1939) demanded your return. If it were possible for you to get from the authorities at Princeton University a letter in which the local military government is requested out of regard for your position to make an exception here for Frau M. Gödel, that naturally would be an even better possibility.

The expulsion from here has nothing to do with the [Nazi] Party, but rather affects all *Volksdeutschen* from the CSR [Czechoslovak Socialist Republic], thus even Mama who was not a Party member! I will here naturally also put all levers in motion to keep Mama here, especially with the point that she lived for many years at the time in Vienna, though for the American authorities the above mentioned documents would likely be more decisive. If you can get something from the Univ. do not send the original but a legal copy. It would be good if you sent the two in two separate letters as it is uncertain if all letters arrive. I hope that in this matter a humane resolution will be possible, as it is impossible to really imagine Mama in a camp. That I will put everything in motion to prevent that you can believe!

Rudi

Princeton, 28./IV. 1946

Dear Mamerl!

. . . I thank you both warmly too for the telegraphed birthday greetings that arrived yesterday; they made me enormously happy. So now I have happily turned

forty years old, thus older than Papa when the First World War broke out. It is scarcely imaginable and yet time passes ever quicker. . . .

Regarding my life here you have been updated in my earlier letters more or less. At any rate, I do feel very at home here in this country and envy Thirring his position not a bit, and would not go back to Vienna even in the event that I was offered something. Aside from all personal circumstances, I find the country and the people here ten times more appealing than at home. . . .

The fact that we had a dog for a year is something I think I have not written you about. It was a blond "Cocker-Spaniel" with long broad dangling ears and a fluffy coat, a particularly adorable animal. Adele bought him while very small and raised him with a bottle. Sadly he was run over by a car and was dead on the spot. . . .

Thousand *Bussis* ever Your Kurt

Princeton, 15./VIII. 1946.

Dear Mama!

Now I have not heard from you two for quite a while again. . . . The article about Schlick got here fine and interested me very much. The fact that I am not mentioned in it should not surprise you. I was not a particularly active member of the Schlick circle and in some regard even in direct opposition to the predominant views there. . . .

Princeton, 26./VIII. 1946.

Dear Mama!

. . . Dear Ma, do not be sad that I am not coming now; you act as if it were something irretrievable, whereas it is really only the case of a couple of months. For next Spring (the Institute closes already in the beginning of May) traveling in both directions will surely be substantially easier. . . .

The book "Goethe" by Chamberlain that you write about carries with it any number of youthful memories for me. I read it (oddly enough exactly 25 years ago) in Marienbad and see before me still today the strangely purple-colored flowers that everything was covered in. It is unbelievable how something like that leaves an impression on you. I believe I already had written in 1941 from Mountain Ash Inn, that I had found the very same flowers there and how strangely it moved me. This Goethe book was the beginning of my interest with Goethe's science of colors and his argument with Newton and thus indirectly led to my choice of profession. Thus curious threads spin themselves through life that one doesn't discover until one grows older. . . .

I send you thousand *Bussis* and an extra large one for the charming four leaf clover (where did you manage to get ahold of that?)

ever Your Kurt

Princeton, 11./XII. 1946.

Dear Mamene!

Most of all I wish you and Rudi a lovely Christmas and a happy New Year. Hopefully the entire world will be steer itself back into a normal path again; after all, the war has been over now almost two years. . . .

That the Austs. today often do not want to give their colleagues abroad what is due them is probably true, and in part is motivated by material reasons. For in fact, since the current Austrian government clearly views the Hitler regime as unlawful despotism, it ought to be obliged to rescind all firings from the universities. In most of the cases the victim would likely forego returning, but clearly the offer has not even been made them. . . .

Princeton, 7./XI. 1947.

Dearest Mama!

It is truly fathomless how long it has been since I have written to you. It has to do with the fact that in reading through my work, which I wrote to you about being finished with, I discovered that I was able to add a good deal, or say it better. The fact is that this time it is more a philosophical than a mathematical matter, namely the relationship of Kant to the Einsteinian theory of relativity, which is of course not all so clear and unequivocal as in pure mathematics. I chose this topic myself when I was asked to author a contribution to a collected volume about the philosophical significance of Einstein and this theory; I could not very well decline. I am also not at all sorry that I accepted and chose this particular topic, for this question had interested me all along and its thorough examination also led to pure mathematical results, which I want to publish afterward; or maybe beforehand, for it is dependent on the editor when the Einstein volume will appear . . .

Princeton, 17./XII. 1948.

Dearest Mama!

Above all we wish you two a very Merry Christmas and a happy New Year and thank you both heartily for the lamp, which (along with its shade) arrived undamaged. It is really beautiful and gives such a "serene" feeling that you can scarcely believe it comes from the age of electricity and the atom bomb. . . .

I have never heard of the diaries of Eva Braun. What is the main content and why does one suspect that it is a forgery? I am particularly interested in forgeries. . . .

Princeton, 1./XI. 1950.

Dearest Mama!

. . . Now, first to the picture with Einstein that I sent. My poor appearance must be an illusion because my weight has remained pretty constant for several years and shouldn't be much different from that in the previously-sent photos. Einstein looks like a good old grandpapa which there is no reason to object to, and as for the suspenders, it is merely a question of habit and fashion as to whether one finds them aesthetic. A 100 years ago one would have found an uncorseted woman unaesthetic.

The thing that Einstein warned against was attempting to attain peace by building up arms and by intimidating the "opponent." He said that this process would necessarily lead to war (and not to peace), and he was right. And it is known that the other process (a goal of agreement by amicable means) was not even attempted by America but rather rejected out of hand. Who started it is not the only question and usually is also difficult to ascertain. But at any rate it's clear that America is waging a war under the catch phrase of "democracy" for a completely unpopular regime and does things for the U.N. in the name of a "police action" with which the U.N. is not in agreement.

The current entry restrictions here have nothing to do with the immigration of criminals. Perhaps you have heard that they are turning to experts to advise the UN and that recently the participants of an international doctors' convention were taken into custody on an island near New York. I am surprised that you say I would change my views in Europe. I was just thinking that people are more sensible in Europe. . . .

I did not like the movie "Cinderella" nearly as much as Snow White. It looks more like a parody. Just one cat that is in it, is really sweet. It's true that I am now working on "cosmology."

With thousand *Bussis* and warm regards to Rudi

ever Your Kurt.

P.S. I sent the money punctually this time. I am glad your citizenship is taken care of.

Much love and warm regards from Adele

Princeton, 27./II. 1950.

Dearest Mama!

. . . What you write about Einstein's biography is correct, so far as I know, insofar as the sight of a compass as a child awakened in him his interest in physics and that through Religion class the foundation was laid for his seeking a unified theory for the entire world. That really must have been a very good and interesting Religion class. Because with the kind we had, that would certainly not have been possible.

. . . You are right about sadness: if there were a completely hopeless sadness, nothing about it would be lovely. But I believe this kind cannot reasonably exist. For we comprehend neither why this world exists nor why it is made the way it is, nor why we are in it, nor why we were born into these and no other external circumstances. So why should we imagine we know one particular thing definitively, namely that no other world exists and that we were never in another nor will be? . . .

Princeton, 8./I. 1951

Dearest Mama!

Most of all we thank you heartily for the lovely things you sent us for Christmas. We should really be ashamed that you two always go to such efforts in making a little package and I only send a prosaic check. . . .

The political situation has continued to develop wonderfully here over the holidays and one hears nothing but: defending the nation, conscription, tax increase, inflation etc. I believe myself that even in the blackest (or brownest) Hitler-Germany is wasn't that bad. The people that are talking so stupidly again there like in Hitler's time are probably in the minority and I hope the Germans will not be so stupid as to let themselves be used as cannon fodder against the Russians. I have the impression that America will soon stand isolated with its nonsense. . . .

Princeton, 20./IX. 1952.

Dearest Mama:

. . . I did not tell you that I took up a new sport during our vacation, a kind of bowling, but one does not knock down pins but rather manage to hit inside numbered rings. There are also prizes and I won a nice set of kitchen utensils for Adele made of stainless steel that costs at least \$6.-

Even more interesting is the fact that Adele has developed a marked talent for guessing numbers in games of chance; of course not always but more than randomness would dictate. I have determined this flawlessly with ca. 200 attempts. That belongs to the chapter on occult visitations which have been analyzed at a university here with the greatest of scientific rigor, with the result that each human possesses these capacities but in most only to a very minor degree. . . .

Princeton, 25./IV. 1955.

Dearest Mama!

. . . Einstein's death was of course a great shock to me, for I had not expected it at all. Einstein particularly in the last few weeks made a quite healthy impression. Whenever he walked with me the ½ hour to the Institute conversing all the while, there was never any indication of fatigue, as sometimes had been the case before. Of course I have lost much by his death, purely personally speaking, all the more since in particular lately he had become even nicer to me than he already was before, and I had the feeling that he wanted to come out of himself even more than before. He had been rather reserved regarding personal matters. Of course I have been doing worse again the last few weeks especially in regard to sleep and appetite. But a couple of times I took a strong sleeping pill and now am more or less up to snuff.

Isn't it strange that Einstein's death followed barely 14 days after the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Institute? . . .

Princeton, 8./V. 1958.

Dearest Mama!

. . . Adele and I were hugely happy about your visit and think it was a success in every regard. But afterward it is naturally somewhat depressing to be alone again. . . .

Recently I met a specialist on Austrian history on the New York train with whom I also spoke about the Crown Prince. He told me* that the papal nuncio maintained that it had not been a suicide but rather a murder. That was deduced by the fact that the pistol had not belonged to the Crown Prince and that the bullet transected the head

from left to right. But I have very little trust in the love of truth of papal nuncii. I will close for today and send you thousand *Bussis* and many warm regards to Rudi
ever Your Kurt

Thousand *Bussis* also from Adele. She says that your stay was far too short
* To be more exact, he gave me a treatise in which that was reported based on documents

Princeton, 25./VI. 1961.

Dearest Mama!

. . . Health-wise I continue doing thoroughly fine. I can eat whole grain bread and soup without it harming me and I could probably already start up again with coffee but tea with milk now tastes better to me. . . .

You are right in that it is difficult to find a connection to Shakespeare. One always forgets that he lived 1564–1616, so almost still in the Middle Ages. Back then the *Weltanschauung* and the problems that occupied humanity were quite different ones. Some things by Gogol are really quite horrific, but others only depict, in part caricatured, the societal circumstances in Russia and thus very interesting. . . .

I find the Eichmann trial (going by the little I have heard about it) not particularly of interest. He is surely right that previous good Nazis now occupy high positions in Germany. . . .

In response to your question about my wish list, if you could send me in the Fall the price catalogue (or at least brochures) from Mühlhauser or Niessner or their successors. It would interest me greatly to see what kind of progress the toy industry has made in the last 45 years. Are there not also already little atom bombs for children? .

..

Princeton, 23./VII. 1961.

Dearest Mama!

. . . You pose in your last letter the momentous question if I believe that we shall meet in the hereafter. About that I can only say the following: If the world is set up rationally and has a meaning, then that must be so. For what kind of a sense would there be in bringing forth a creature (man), who has such a broad field of possibilities of

his own development and of relationships, and then not allow him to achieve 1/1000 of it. That would be approximately as if someone with laid the foundation for a house with much effort and expenditure of money, then let everything go to ruin again.

Does one have a reason to assume that the world is set up rationally? I believe so. For it is certainly not chaotic and arbitrary, but rather, as science shows, the greatest regularity and order reign in everything. Order is but a form of rationality.

How is another life to be imagined? About that there is of course only conjecture. But it is interesting that it should be modern science that offers support for it. For it shows that this world of ours with all the stars and planets that are in it, had a beginning, and with all likelihood will also have an end. Why should there then be but only this one world? and since we found ourselves in this world one fine day without knowing why and from where, the same thing can repeat itself the same way in another one.

Science confirms at any rate the end of the world prophesied in the last book of the Bible and leaves room for that which will then follow: "And God created a new Heaven and a new Earth."

Princeton, 4./VII. 1962

Dearest Mama!

. . . There were all sorts of things going on here, which distracted me from my usual activities. In May we had houseguests for several days, relatives of Adele's who live in Canada. They are very nice people so that their presence was not disruptive for me at all. It was a young married couple with a child and the mother of the wife. But only the latter slept here, the others next door. We also showed them some of Princeton, of course.

Then a short while ago, a young married couple moved into our neighborhood, whose female half is from Graz. So, Adele naturally started keeping company and already threw two garden parties for them and other neighbors. Then finally there also was an Austrian-born mathematician in Princeton in June for another 2½ weeks with whom I had much to discuss. And to add to it all, I came across a philosophy book that particularly interested me. . . .

Recently I discovered a modern writer previously unknown to me, "Franz Kafka." He writes quite insanely, but has a strangely lifelike way of describing things, e.g., his description of a dream had the effect on me of having two lively dreams the next night that I could still remember exactly in the morning, which otherwise never happens with me. . . .

Radiogram

3. X. 63

dr Rudolf goedel 81 lerchenfelderstrasse Vienna

adele very hurt that no congratulations for silver wedding write soon without mentioning this telegram

regards kurt

Princeton, 21./IV. 1965.

Dearest Mama!

. . . You are right that fairytales are like oases among the other arts. For only they depict the world as it should be and as if it had meaning, whereas in tragedy the hero is killed off and in comedy the ludicrous (therefore also something bad) is emphasized. Of course, there are novels and novellas too, but in most of them the tragic or the ludicrous is in the foreground. . . .

Princeton, 21./X. 1965.

Dearest Mama!

. . . Otto would certainly have been much better than the Nazis. But in the case of a monarchy one never knows what will follow, after all. Franz Ferdinand was not much better than the Nazis, for the policies of him and his party ultimately led to a world war, too, as you know. Did you hear about the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam here? They are right! In order to end the war in Korea, we needed Eisenhower. But no sooner had he stepped down than the very same thing started up in Vietnam.

Did you hear that East Germany is gradually reverting to imperial-German patriotism, despite Communism? It is entirely possible that the next war will start from there. For West Germany is now quite peaceable and Prussia never belonged to it. . . .