

his adultery on having been “wickedly manipulated by treacherous friends and colleagues who victimized me with the aid of a female confederate,” a bungling non-confession that cost him his ministry. The following year, when pictures surfaced of minister Jimmy Swaggart checking into a motel with a prostitute, Swaggart, too, resorted to the public confessional, though, having learned from Bakker’s self-involved floundering, Swaggart took full responsibility and refused to shift the blame: “His brief sermon contained no less than nine clear statements of fault, and eight pleas for forgiveness,” according to Bauer’s tally. Although the confession was successful, his efforts to give up his habit weren’t: three years later he was caught with another lady of the night and his congregation disintegrated as a result.

If scandal is the most successful entertainment genre around, one reason is that scandal purports to be revealing the *truth* about something, exposing secrets illicitly concealed, things that are imperative for us to know. Truth is valuable, but it is also socially rationed—more than ever in times like ours, when surfaces reign supreme and “truthiness” (in one TV satirist’s coinage) is in the ascendancy. The irony is that the truths exposed by scandal are typically open secrets, information we already have: that married people sometimes consort with persons other than their spouses, that public moralists are private hypocrites, that the rich treat the rest of the world like a feudal estate.

In the scandal audience’s psyche, maybe we’re all Mary Jo Kopechne, about to be driven off a bridge and left to drown while the leaders party and ignore our cries for help. We’re looking for the life raft that would save us, the crucial missing piece of knowledge—something that would change the outcome. Clearly we’re looking in the wrong place: the truths we need are hidden in plain sight; the depredations of power are no secret. How much anger toward leaders and elites gets played out around their minor personal missteps, how much sense of social injury; yet how little of it is directed at the moral failures and inequities that actually matter. ■

# UNHAPPY TOGETHER

## The Wittgenstein family feud

By Evelyn Toynton

Discussed in this essay:

*The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War*, by Alexander Waugh. Doubleday. 366 pages. \$28.95.



They were raised in a vast marble palace in Vienna, with liveried servants, seven grand pianos, a Rodin sculpture, and frescoes depicting scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Their father, a self-made millionaire and one of the leading industrialists of the Habsburg Empire, was also a deeply cultured man, an art collector who provided the funding for the

Evelyn Toynton’s last review for Harper’s Magazine, “*The Other Side of Silence*,” appeared in the April 2008 issue.

Secession Building at which the “advanced” artists of the period—Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka—exhibited their work (Klimt referred to him as his “Minister of Fine Art”). But it was music that was Karl Wittgenstein’s great passion, and that of his wife: Brahms, Mahler, Schoenberg, and Richard Strauss all attended the musical evenings in the palace’s opulent *Musiksaal*, and the elder Wittgensteins spent many hours playing music with each other and their eight children.

The conductor Bruno Walter, another attendee at those private concerts, described the “all-pervading atmosphere of humanity and culture” that prevailed in the household.

Yet if the Wittgensteins were among the most cultivated and privileged of families, they were far from the most cheerful. Hermine, the oldest child, never married and became increasingly depressed and reclusive as she grew older; Gretl, the most intelligent, most adventurous daughter—immortalized in a painting by Klimt that now hangs in the Neue Pinakothek in Munich—entered into a disastrous marriage with an impoverished American who turned out to be a paranoid hysteric, is rumored to have consulted Freud about her frigidity, and spent most of her life searching restlessly for a cause or project to devote her energies to. Nor were the sons any happier.

Hans, the eldest boy—a prodigy in both music and mathematics, who translated the world into mathematical formulae from an early age and mastered the violin, piano, and organ to such a degree that Mahler’s teacher proclaimed him a genius—disappeared during a trip to America at the age of twenty-four, a presumed suicide, after a protracted struggle with his father: Karl had insisted, despite Hans’s obvious unsuitedness for such a career, that his firstborn son go into business rather than pursue his passion for music. Rudolf, the third son, entered a restaurant in Berlin, where he was studying chemistry (probably at his father’s insistence—his real interests were music and theater), asked the pianist to play a melancholy song that was fashionable at the time, ordered two glasses of milk, emptied the contents of a packet of cyanide into one of them, and drank it. Kurt, the second son, who had always seemed the most cheerful (and least gifted) of the brothers, shot himself in the final weeks of the First World War—perhaps because he feared a court-martial after disobeying an order to send his men into a battle that was already lost.

The Wittgensteins’ youngest son, too, contemplated suicide “continually,” as he told a friend when he was twenty-three; he was, he said, ashamed of lacking the courage to end his life. Instead, Ludwig Wittgenstein went

on to become one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, revolutionizing philosophy not once but twice: first, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—the only book he published in his lifetime—by applying rigorous logical techniques to the question of language’s relationship to reality and truth, while insisting on the limits of what descriptive language could express (a matter of ethics as much as logic, with, in the final section of the book, mystical overtones); then, in unpublished lectures circulated by his students in samizdat versions, by subverting all the received wisdom about language and thought through an anti-essentialist, anti-dogmatic view of how language functioned in “the stream of life.”

As a student at Cambridge in the period just before the First World War, he was hailed by Bertrand Russell as “perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense and dominating.” (John Maynard Keynes, who also met him at this time, referred to him as “God.”) In his later years, his own students at Cambridge aped his mannerisms and regarded it as a privilege to be subjected to his scathing critiques. Since his death in 1951, he has increasingly become a legendary figure even to many who have never read him, in large part because of his ferocious lifelong quest for moral purity.

He enlisted in the Austrian army during the First World War, though he was convinced that the Allies would win, and volunteered for the most dangerous postings; when captured by the Italians, he indignantly refused to let his family use their connections to have him released from the prisoner-of-war camp. On returning to civilian life, he gave up his entire share of the fortune his father had bequeathed to the surviving children and for the rest of his life owned virtually nothing. He spent six years teaching elementary school in poor villages in the mountains of Austria, worked as an assistant gardener in a monastery, and was only reluctantly persuaded to return to Cambridge to teach. During the Second World War, he quit his academic post and served as a porter in a London hospital,

where he fervently sought to preserve his anonymity.

His philosophical writings, the vast majority of which were published posthumously, have been the subject of countless books and articles; the interest in his personality is such that memoirs of him have appeared by everyone from his former students and the literary critic F. R. Leavis to the man who delivered peat to a cottage where he stayed toward the end of his life. There have also been two major biographies, most recently Ray Monk’s excellent *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. Painters and conceptual artists have used his ideas, or their idea of him, in their work; poets and fiction writers have taken him for their subject—Bruce Duffy’s novel *The World As I Found It* may be the best portrait of Ludwig yet written. Bits of the *Tractatus* have even been set to music.

**B**ut for once it is not Ludwig who is the focus of a book with the name Wittgenstein in the title. Instead, in *The House of Wittgenstein*, Alexander Waugh concentrates primarily on Paul, the second-youngest son—a man, he would have us believe, who was just as remarkable as his more famous brother.

Paul was twenty-six years old and had just begun a career as a concert pianist (Karl having died in January 1913, his sons were free to follow their own inclinations) when World War I broke out, and he was called up to rejoin the cavalry regiment in which he was a junior officer. Three days after arriving on the Eastern Front, he was shot in the right elbow while on a reconnaissance mission, and his arm was clumsily amputated in a field hospital. He was then shipped to a series of freezing, disease-ridden Russian prisoner-of-war camps, whose inhuman conditions Waugh vividly evokes:

[The commandant] had them [the Austrian officers] stripped and horsewhipped in front of him, constantly searched, forced to run the gauntlet of Cossack knouts for minor offences, and deprived of all manner of basic needs.... Even the tea was made from water that some insane Krepost commandant had insisted be dragged up by the prisoners in buckets from the exact spot in the river where all the town’s sewage was disgorged. For



lavatories the prisoners had to make do with holes in the ground. Amputees with one or no legs needed to be supported by their comrades to use them and when a delegation of prisoners came forward to ask permission to construct a lavatory seat from a wooden box their request was sadistically turned down.

Yet from the very beginning of his imprisonment, Paul was determined to play the piano again. Having drawn the image of a piano keyboard on an empty crate in a Russian prisoner-of-war hospital to which he was sent, "Day after day and for hour upon hour, he addressed himself to [his] arduous and improbable task, tapping his freezing fingers on the wooden box, listening intently to the imagined music sounding in his head and creating, in the corner of a crowded festering invalids' ward, a tragicomic spectacle that aroused the sympathy and curiosity of his fellow prisoners and all the hospital staff."

When he was finally released in November 1915, Paul returned to Vienna and closeted himself in his apartments in the Palais Wittgenstein, practicing the piano until he could perform with one hand pieces that other pianists required two to play. He also commissioned some of the finest composers of the period—Ravel, Prokofiev, Richard Strauss—to write piano concertos specifically for the left hand, for which they received generous payment, although they were often angered to discover that he'd changed their pieces to highlight his own playing at the expense of the orchestra. During the late 1920s and the 1930s, he had a successful, sometimes even a triumphant, performing career, not only in Vienna but throughout Europe. It is not always possible to tell, however, whether he was being praised as a pianist or a one-armed pianist. Certainly the members of his family, whose musical tastes were perhaps more exacting than those of the general public, never really joined in the acclaim. Hermine once wrote to Ludwig of Paul's piano-playing that it was "a torture for me and a lasting source of sorrow."

Like his father and brothers, Paul exhibited certain peculiarities of character of a slightly autistic kind (one wonders if there might have been a strain of Asperger's syndrome among

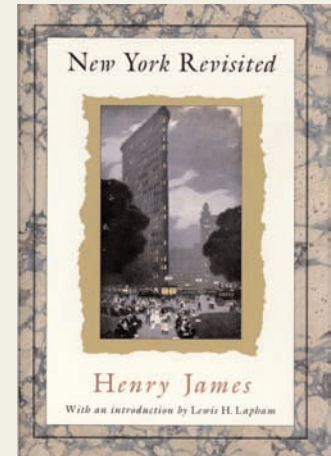
the males of the family). Unable to engage in ordinary social conversation or to deal with the simplest practical matter, he once wore a hat onto the street when it was still attached to its hatbox. When his hostess at a dinner party told him that a goulash had been cooked specially for him, he set the tureen in front of him and ate the entire contents while the other guests looked on in astonishment.

Nor could he ever contemplate living with anyone else, even when he married and had children. He did, however, get himself involved in some messy love affairs with much younger women of a less exalted social class than his own. The woman he eventually married—a nearly blind piano student from a lower-middle-class family—was eighteen to his forty-seven when she first came to him for lessons at the conservatory in Vienna where he taught; within a few months of becoming his pupil she was pregnant. He set her up in a house in another part of the city, where she bore him two daughters, and kept her a secret from his family. Only much later, when he had fled the Nazis and gone to New York, were they married in a hasty ceremony in Cuba, where he had installed her while he was waiting for American visas to come through for her and the children. Once in America, they had a son and lived out the rest of their lives there, he in an apartment in Manhattan, she in a house on Long Island that he visited on weekends. Although his playing deteriorated, he never gave up concertizing completely. He continued to take on piano pupils, always for free, and in 1958, three years before his death, published several volumes of piano music for the left hand.

In addition to writing the "autobiography" of his own famous family, Alexander Waugh has published several books on music, worked as a music critic, and composed the score for a musical comedy; he originally set out to write a biography of Paul, and his sympathy for him is evident throughout. Ludwig, however, Waugh can hardly speak of without sneering; everything about him, even his bravery during the war and his religious leanings, Waugh presents as either faintly ridiculous or somehow fraudulent (Ludwig's prec-

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cupation with Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* is derided as "an opportunity for conscious self-elevation and transfiguration from mere mortal to immortal Jesus-like, prophet-like, perfect human being"). He is also unimpressed by Ludwig's reputation for genius, preferring to regard him as a con artist who somehow bamboozled many of the major thinkers of his time: "Ramsey, like Russell, Moore, Engelmann and others, had fallen under the spell of Ludwig's striking looks, manner and extraordinarily persuasive personality. From these small beginnings was the great industry of Wittgenstein exegesis born. Thousands of books have since been written to explain the meaning of the *Tractatus*, each different from the last."

Such remarks are just plain silly—a little like saying, "Having dazzled those around him with his calculatedly charming air of vagueness and his lovable head of hair, Einstein managed to persuade the scientific community that his work on relativity was a major breakthrough in physics, even if nobody really understood what he was talking about." Waugh's animus toward Ludwig seems almost like protective jealousy on Paul's behalf, as though all the acclaim the philosopher has received was stolen from his musician brother, who was much better known in their lifetimes but is virtually forgotten now. Whereas Waugh is always urging Paul's heroism on us, and either excuses or glosses over his less likable qualities—his rudeness, his self-absorption, his seduction of vulnerable young women—practically every passage dealing with Ludwig is subtly or not so subtly denigrating. Sometimes Waugh achieves the tone of biting irony he is no doubt aiming for, but too often he sounds merely peevisish:

Ambitious, unstable and driven by a neurotic urge for self-improvement, Ludwig needed geniuses to worship as much as he desired to be regarded as one of them himself. . . . Having thrown himself at Bertrand Russell's feet, Ludwig soon discovered that, without having completed a single significant piece of written philosophical work and while still only in his mid-twenties, he was being hailed by many of the brightest minds of Cambridge University as a genius.

It is possible, of course, that Waugh's exasperation is that of a man who, con-

fronted with something he cannot understand, prefers to dismiss it as nonsense rather than attempt to figure it out. (He tries to argue that there are "many doubters" when it comes to Ludwig's genius, but since the only fellow skeptics he cites are certain unnamed Wittgenstein aunts and cousins, he doesn't make a very convincing case.) Philosophy would not appear to be Waugh's strong suit, nor is he much given to analysis and reflection in general. His pace never flags, which makes his account eminently readable throughout—a fact that may explain its generally rapturous reception in the British press, particularly in those periodicals to which Waugh himself contributes. But his book might have been better had he stopped occasionally to speculate or dig a little deeper. He is given to character descriptions such as "[Gretl's] problem was that she was an irritating person" and "[Hermine] suffered from low self-esteem." And sometimes his breeziness and lightness of touch, which might be virtues were he writing on another subject, strike a jarring note. It does not feel entirely appropriate to relate the suicide of Gretl's husband, for example, with flip sarcasm: "In any case he was woebegone, and on 15 June for some forgotten reason he lost his temper and shot himself in the head with a hunting rifle."

Instead of trying to capture something of the political and ethnic and sexual tensions seething under the whipped-cream-and-antimacassar surface of respectable Vienna, Waugh contents himself with writing, "The Viennese were regarded abroad as a good-natured, easy-going and highly cultured people." It would be hard to come up with a less revealing or blander characterization of a place that gave birth to Nazism on the one hand and Zionism on the other, that witnessed some of the largest Communist and Socialist demonstrations in the world, as well as the rise of right-wing nationalist parties fanatically committed to the emperor. As for the cultural life of the city: it seems very telling that the name Karl Kraus does not show up anywhere in Waugh's book. Kraus, a journalist and satirist who served as the scourge of Viennese society from the turn of the century well into the 1930s, made it his life's work

to strip away pretense in all its forms, the debasement of language by journalists being the target of his fiercest mockery. He was one of the most influential figures of his age, as well as one of the few writers Ludwig admired wholeheartedly. It would seem impossible to understand the milieu that Waugh is discussing without at least some consideration of his work. Yet Kraus does not even appear in Waugh's bibliography.

Waugh is clearly most comfortable when gliding along surfaces, a further case in point being his blithe treatment of the murky question of self-loathing among Vienna's assimilated Jews. Three of the Wittgenstein siblings' four grandparents were Jews who had converted to Catholicism; although the family subsequently became officially Catholic, they were aware of their Jewish ancestry. It therefore seems fairly obtuse on Waugh's part when, noting various disparaging remarks they made about Jews, he characterizes them as anti-Semites.

**B**ut if Waugh is not one for plumb-ing the depths, he does have a gift for lively narrative. The most gripping parts of his book are those in which he tells the stories of Karl's early adventures as a runaway in America, of Paul's experiences in the army and as a prisoner of war, and, above all, of the Wittgensteins' tortuous negotiations with the Nazis, about which Waugh has diligently unearthed a great deal of new information from primary sources.

Despite the repeated pleas of the other siblings, Hermine and her sister Helene (the only member of the family who seems to have had a reasonably normal married life) were determined to stay in Vienna even after the Anschluss with the German Reich—Hermine because she could not imagine living anywhere else, and Helene because her elderly Protestant husband was suffering from both cancer and dementia. In October 1938, when the Nazis had already forbidden the family to leave, Gretl persuaded the sisters to flee, but all she succeeded in doing was to get them (and herself) arrested for buying forged Yugoslav passports. (Helene and Hermine, unworldly to a

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fault, had actually believed that the documents were genuine.) Once the last escape route had closed down, their only hope lay in convincing the Nazis that they were not after all *Volljuden* (full Jews) but *Mischlinge* (persons of mixed race), a claim they had been trying to establish since the Nazis first marched into Vienna. Since three of their grandparents had been born as Jews—the definition of a *Volljude*—they resorted to the argument that their paternal grandfather was in fact the illegitimate son of an Aryan. Thus, to satisfy the demands of a loathsome regime, they were forced to the loathsome expedient of insisting that their great-grandmother had been an adulteress, and then trying to find evidence to back up that story.

At the same time that the petition for *Mischling* status was being reviewed in the highest quarters—Hitler himself had to sign off on it—the Nazis were trying desperately to get their hands on the part of the Wittgenstein fortune that was held in Switzerland. Since Paul had managed to escape to America by then, and since Gretl was an American citizen by virtue of her marriage, the Germans, who had already annexed much of the family's wealth in Austria, could not simply force them to hand over all their Swiss assets but had to enter into complex negotiations, involving trips back and forth to America by various legal eminences of the Reich. Having bullied her sisters into the disastrous passport scheme, Gretl, who could be almost as overbearing as their father, tried to bully Paul into acceding to all the Nazis' demands, while his American lawyer was battling to save as much of his fortune as possible. Waugh suggests several nefarious reasons for her behavior—her desire to protect her own Austrian properties, her wish to preserve Hermine's properties for eventual inheritance by Gretl's son—but it seems possible that concern for her sisters (who were also, not surprisingly, urging Paul to comply) and awareness of the likely effects the outcome would have on their bid for *Mischling* status may have been factors. And although Waugh tells the story wholly

from Paul's point of view, and regards him as entirely blameless in the feud that erupted among the siblings, it is not really clear that any of them behaved exactly nobly.

In the end, the Nazis got enough to satisfy their lust for foreign currency and gold; the sisters got their *Mischling* status; and Paul was left with a personal fortune of \$900,000 (the equivalent of \$10 million today), which proved sufficient to support him and his family for the rest of his life. But such was his wrath at what he saw as his siblings' browbeating and mistreatment of him that he severed relations with all of them—even Ludwig, who'd had no financial stake in the negotiations. Ludwig wrote to his brother several times, but his letters were never answered.

As much as the two world wars that changed their lives forever, it is surely this family feud—the last of many squabbles among the siblings—that Waugh is referring to in his ambiguous subtitle. The Wittgensteins were indeed a family at war: with their father, with one another, with themselves, but also, in Ludwig's case, with the whole milieu into which he had been born. Karl Kraus, whose “critique of language” in certain ways prefigured Ludwig's own, famously called Vienna, that seeming bastion of conservatism, imperialism, bonhomie, and bourgeois values, the “research laboratory for world destruction.” The very absence of a liberal, reforming tradition within the Habsburg Empire may account for the radical nature of the assault on its mores—mores in which elaborate hypocrisy, repression, and a floridly ornamental style in both speech and the arts were paramount. The assault was carried out by Freud, by the severely functionalist architect Adolf Loos, by Schoenberg, and not least by Ludwig, whose writings on language represent, among other things, a repudiation of the pretenses of philosophy itself. (It can be instructive to look at photographs of the opulent, sumptuously adorned rooms of the Wittgenstein Palace after reading the *Tractatus*.) And despite Waugh's valiant attempts to resuscitate Paul and restore him to a place in the pantheon, it is due to Ludwig that the family name will survive. ■