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The Children are gone

Letters of a father

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Cover design: Erik Kinting

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg
Printed in Germany

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliogra-
fische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

My dear children,

The letters compiled in this book tell the true story of our relationship; of a father who has been fighting to have contact with his children against the determined will of their mother. Not a usual or average mother but one who is very intelligent and resourceful, using all possible means to achieve her goals. I have no doubt that she loves you as much as I do, but her ruthlessness has put her own desire for revenge above all. I would not even exclude the possibility that she believes she acted for the good of you.

If I had read such a story a few years ago, I would have had difficulties believing it. My trust in our society, its legal system and authorities were then still unshattered and I would have thought it impossible that such things can happen in reality, yet the events described in the letters did really happen.

All the letters were written on the dates indicated. For the purpose of the book, I have worked a bit on sentence structures and formulations but I have not altered any essential content of the letters. Evidently, I needed to change the names of third persons.

Indirectly, the letters also tell the story of how society copes with the situation you and I have experienced, in particular the legal system but also the authorities for the protection of children. Perhaps it is better to say how helpless our society, fixed in its beliefs, rules and institutions, is in view of such a situation.

The events described in the letters happened in Luxembourg, not in a remote backwards society but a modern open minded one with a normally well-functioning justice system, in short, one equipped with all the attributes a modern society can claim for itself. Yet society lets such things as described in the letters happen. It puts its beliefs and prejudices in practice above the protection of children. In such a society the mother is always right; the father is by nature suspected

of bad intentions and potential mistreatment of children. These preconceived ideas even prevent the responsible institutions in making any efforts to look closer.

Writing a book is, today, the last resort to depict the larger picture, the complex situation in its full dimension. However, all these letters were also written for myself in order to mentally maintain the link to you and also to digest what has happened.

I am fully aware that such a book is evidently coloured by perception. The same facts may be presented in different ways. Nevertheless, it is the true story.

Your Father

To Anna Maria, Stephanos, Alexandros

17 April 2009

My dear children,
You are gone now!

It is about 2 weeks ago that I got the letter from the lawyer of your mother indicating your departure from Luxembourg and your permanent move to Greece.

You may not be able to imagine what shock that created in me. We were expecting the son of Kathi as a visitor for the weekend and I could not do anything else than to just run away. Just being friendly and social would have been too much for me. I drove without a real target. The next 2 days I stayed in a village at the Mosel in a small hotel and I spent the days just walking about without noticing much of my environment.

Even after I came back I could not think about much else than you. After I did not hear anything more and the prospects of having any possibility of contact with you in the near future were very small I decided to write to you.

I write to you in English because it may be easier for all of us. We always communicated in French but I think that now away from Luxembourg your lessons in school will concentrate on English rather than other languages. Also for me, English is easier than French. I use French a lot in my work but rarely for personal matters and I am not so well practiced in writing it.

I also call you with the international versions of your names as I always called you, thus Stephan instead of Stephanos and Alexander instead of Alexandros. You were objecting this lately but I think it is the freedom of a father to use this small modification of your name. It is a harmless one.

I very much hope that this letter and my future letters will reach you. I currently do not have an address for you in Greece, therefore, I

write to your old address in Luxembourg. Normally, the letters should be redirected to Greece as the post office should have your current address.

Please excuse me when I use a kind of language and expressions that may not be easy for you to understand at your tender age of twelve. I have never exchanged letters with children and I am not sure how to express myself, but I know that you are clever and if you do not understand my letters in full now, you may do when you re-read them in the future.

Probably, you cannot imagine how sad I am, not only about you leaving Luxembourg so quickly but without even any possibility of saying goodbye. I am also very sad about what happened during the last year, not only during your visits to my place, but also in the Treffpunkt in Luxembourg when I had one of the rare possibilities of seeing you. Even these short and mostly not so pleasant moments I miss dearly. You must believe me that it was very painful to see you trying to avoid any contact with me.

It was already a shock for me when in February I got the letter from the Treffpunkt that they were unable to organise any further meetings between us. Imagine the Treffpunkt in Luxembourg is a place for really disastrous relationships between parents and children, often with criminal and violent context and under the supervision of a police officer. The manager of the Treffpunkt declared to be unable to cope with our specific situation.

You may ask yourself why I write to you as you have so clearly said that you dislike me and that you do not want to have contact with me. I write to you for two reasons.

Firstly, everybody has the right to know his father. Therefore, I will say in letters what I could not say to you face to face because lately our conversations were so full of negative emotions and hardly any

time was given to us to communicate our deeper thoughts and feelings. Therefore I will try to do this from my part in letters.

Secondly, I know that one day you will look at things in a different way than you do today. Please do not think that I mean that you cannot understand a lot today but you will certainly understand better after some time when you are older and you will also see things differently. Life is like this. I hope that you will give me the chance of thinking again about us and our relationship in the future.

I have therefore decided to talk to you in the form of letters. It will be finally up to you what you make of them. I only want to confirm what I have often said to you and I will do it now again. I never lied to you and I never will. Lying is never a solution. It is for people who cannot reach what they want with the truth. Believe me, what you cannot get by telling the truth is not worth getting or you do not deserve to get it. Lying is for weak and bad people and not strong and good ones.

As it is my first letter, I will try to speak a bit about the recent past. It is very painful for me and I strongly believe that it was difficult for you as well.

All I ever wanted was a good relationship with you, simply to see you, to do things together and to be to you what every father wants to be towards his children, just to be there, to talk to you, to make an excursion on the bike with you, to play with you, to teach you things you need to learn, to be a good example to you and to help you when you need help. These are simple things. I never asked for more.

Children have a mother and a father and I myself was also closer to my mother than to my father but looking back, now that he is gone, I often realise how much I miss him, how much I owe to him, how much I have inherited from him and also how similar I am to him, not only in the way I look but also in the way I am and how I see the

world. I will tell you more about him in another letter. He was very old when you were born but I know that if you would have had the chance of meeting him you would have liked him, if you would have had the permission and if you would have been open for it.

I still do not understand why having just simply a good contact with you was so impossible and so unacceptable. I was fighting during your entire life simply to have contact with you and once I needed to address to the legal system and the judge in Luxembourg decided that there must be contact, our relationship has turned so badly.

Unfortunately, we could never talk to each other calmly in order to exchange our thoughts. That may have helped. Please believe me, I have tried but I did not really reach you. You had entirely closed up towards me. You saw me as an enemy that I certainly never was and never will be. Please remember this forever.

I was talking to the people in your school to see what happened to you and what date you really left Luxembourg. I could hardly believe what I heard. I was told by a teacher and a parent of a classmate of yours that you left on 11 March without saying anything to anybody. You just disappeared.

I also heard that your classmates, friends and teachers are very shocked about this. Do they mean so little to you that you do not make even the smallest effort to say goodbye to them or is there more behind it? I was also told that somebody tried to phone you and was told that you were at home feeling ill. I did not find out whether it was one of you or another person who said this. Evidently, this was not true.

If you really had a choice, would you do such a thing and do you really believe that this was good? You may have your reasons to behave like this. I myself do not understand it at all. Perhaps one day you may be able to explain it to me.

Perhaps, it was not you who took this decision to just disappear without a word.

I hope that you are well and I think about you a lot. Kathi tells me to say to you that she misses you as well.

Your loving father

12 June 2009

My dear children,

I hope you got my letter dated 17 April. I had sent it to your old address in Luxembourg and I had written my address on the back of it and as letters that cannot be properly forwarded are usually sent back, I am therefore confident that the letter was forwarded.

This time, I send the letter to the address of your grandparents in Athens because I still have not received an address for you in Athens, only the address of your grandparents was given to my lawyer. I know it cannot be the correct one and you do not live in the apartment of your grandparents. It is simply too small. Nevertheless, I hope that the letter will reach you.

It is now three months since you left Luxembourg and I miss you very much and so does Kathi. I also heard from Georges recently, the father of a classmate of yours, that your classmates miss you as well and that many of them are very sad that you left them without a word of goodbye.

I needed some time to digest the idea that you are really gone. I hardly saw you over the last year but this was different, perhaps not in reality but mentally. I had not resigned to the idea of organising my weekends entirely without you. Since my last letter I have realised that I will need to accept this change as a fact and to plan weekends and holidays differently.

Kathy and I now spend a lot of time travelling and doing sports. We spent 10 days at Lake Garda in Italy with a larger group of old friends. I had told you that I play golf. Now I do it more intensively than I have done since you were born.

I would have really preferred very much to pass some weekends and also the holidays with you. I cannot defend myself against the

flow of memories in moments that I am not fully occupied or something reminds me of you. Recently, I often think about the holidays we had in the Centerparc of De Vossemeeren. I am convinced that most of the time you liked it as well. There were so many very nice incidents and experiences I would not like to miss from my life.

I will certainly never forget the time you first rode your bicycles in the Centerparc. At first with stabilisers but after a very short time you mastered it very well. Do you remember the names we gave to each other during these days? You called me Monsieur 'Oublie Oublie' because I often forgot something in the house that we needed to go swimming, such as a bath gown or money to enter the pool building. Alexander, you were called Monsieur 'Tombe Tombe' because even after a short time riding the bike, you started to make daring experiments with it and you often fell. Stephan you were called Monsieur 'Trouve Trouve' because you could find the way better than anybody else and Anna Maria you were called Madame 'Je veux, Je veux' because you always had wishes for things to buy or you wanted special things to be arranged for you. I also like to remember the swimming pool and in particular the wild water channel we called 'l'eau sauvage' which you liked so much. Didn't we have a lot of fun playing in it?

I took many photos during those holidays and a few films, and I look at them from time to time.

Unfortunately, the last visit to De Vossemeeren was less pleasant. Perhaps Anna Maria you remember that as well? You and the boys had started to behave in quite a nasty way towards everybody around me, including people I had nothing to do with. There was, for example, the man with children your age with whom you started to quarrel. I did not see it but other people who watched it told me that you had insulted him. We left the swimming pool in a hurry. This

was not necessary and very deplorable but I try to remember the good things. I hope you do the same.

When I play Golf, I often think about you, particularly when I see the many kids your age or even younger who already play golf pretty well. They are so proud of their achievements and have a lot of fun and like to compete with others. There is also regular training by the golf teacher for the children. I have always wished to have learned a sport, such as golf or tennis, as a young child. Only then can one become really good at it. I would have been so proud to see you three trying golf. I know you would have liked it if you would have given it a chance. I often think about that even simple things, such as doing some sport together, was so absolutely impossible for us.

Really mastering a sport with excellence is something to be proud of for your whole life. Unfortunately as a child, I did not do it perhaps due to the lack of opportunity. There was really only the possibility to play football in the village in which I grew up. However, if I would have tried more, there would have certainly been a possibility, at least for tennis.

With golf I only started at the age of 38. This was much too late to become really good at it. Therefore I am only a reasonable player. Nevertheless, it is fun as well. Kathy and I always have competitions. She is a very good tennis player and has a better feeling for the ball than me but I am physically stronger which plays a role as well.

I also started jogging again. My health problems are now under control. The doctor tells me that that I am well again. I am even almost back to my old form and last week I was able to run 10 km in less than 52 Minutes. This is worse compared to some years ago but not too bad for somebody of my age. I turned 56 last month.

I will also have a new assignment in my job from 1 July onwards. I will be in charge of a different unit in the European Commission. It

will be smaller than the current one but I believe it will be an excellent team.

You certainly also have a lot of new things to experience; new school, new classmates and hopefully new friends. I think a lot about how you are doing and how you are coping. The school curriculum will certainly be very different from that of the Euroschool in Luxembourg and so will be the climate and habits in your new school. It may be hard at first but please be open-minded, in particular towards new classmates, and it will be fine. You are intelligent and you can help each other.

Last Friday we had another hearing related to my visiting rights with you in the Luxembourg court. I believe the Luxembourg court is no longer responsible for us, as you have left Luxembourg and I am living in Germany. Therefore the Greek, and possibly the German, legal system may be responsible in the future. However, I will see what the Luxembourg court will say. I am not too hopeful about this as the Luxembourg authorities and courts have shown rather incapable of coping with the situation. I am certainly not wrong in my assumption that despite all these legal battles about you since you were born; no one from the Luxembourg authorities for the protection of children was ready to look deeper into the subject.

The judge announced that his decision would be published in a few days. Your mother, who was there as well, is still very much determined to prevent me from seeing you. I am already looking for a Greek lawyer and I will not give up trying to see you. I never will.

Your loving father

7 July 2009

My dear children,

I hope you got my letter dated 12 June 2009. I still have not got a valid address for you in Athens and therefore I am sending this letter again to your grandparents' address.

I must say that I am not very hopeful that the letter will reach you. I think your mother will intercept it and tell you that I do not care for you as proven by the absence of an effort of mine to contact you.

Nevertheless I write to you. One day you will be able to read the letter. I have a particular reason to write to you this time. It is about a dream.

I miss you very much and I often dream about you; I must say too often for my own good.

There are so many memories of you so fresh in my mind. There are photos of you all over the house, your rooms are now empty, and for me, they are strangely deserted. Your toys are still lying around. Not only do I dream of you at night, I often have daydreams about you. There are so many moments when my mind is not occupied intensively, for example when I am driving and I think of the times when I picked you up or when we went to the Centerparc in Belgium. Driving is a particularly receptive activity for day dreaming. The mind is occupied only in part and there is a lot of free capacity for other thoughts. The fact that I live in Trier and work in Luxembourg means I have a lot of time for such daydreams. Fortunately, the majority of drives I do are with colleagues and we have ample opportunity to discuss issues of the job or other subjects. Too much daydreaming is certainly not so good.

In general, I catch myself thinking about you several times a day. Our recent past was not too pleasant but in these day dreams I tend to

remember the positive moments; often small things, such as smiles or when you were proud of an achievement, such as with Stephan in a play, Anna Maria with drawing and Alexander with his computer games.

In these moments I miss you more than other times.

Now, about my dream last night; it was really strange.

As is natural, such dreams from deep sleep are generally forgotten within seconds after waking up. However, last night I had a very intensive dream which I remembered well even after waking up. When you think about a dream after you wake up you do not forget it again so easily. It is then in the normal memory and not in the 'dream memory'. I think this is the reason why we can then remember them later on but I am of course not really sure about this theory.

Well, in my dream we were all figures of your Playmobile toys you have left with me. I was a knight and together with the two boys, who were also knights, we tried to attack a castle in which Anna Maria was kept a prisoner. I remember vividly the horses and the battle armour we were wearing.

Unfortunately, it did not go so well. We stormed the castle again and again but with little success. We were always pushed back and we circled around the castle trying to find a weak spot. The castle was just like the one you have as toy. However, in my dream it was huge with very high walls. The castle was defended by pirates. I must say, I personally never liked the pirates that much, even as a child; I much preferred the medieval knights. Perhaps that's why they appeared to me to be the enemy.

Of course I very much liked the fact that we, the boys, were fighting side by side.

Anna Maria appeared only once in the dream. She was dressed in Barbie clothes and had the funny blond hair usual for a Barbie. When

she appeared she told us that she lived in the castle and that we should go away because we would disturb her. Then she left the wall and we remained confused. Was she forced to say that or did she mean it?

In any case we stopped attacking the castle and went away to discuss what to do. I was in favour of the theory that she was forced to tell us that we should go away but you boys told me that you knew your sister better and that she wanted to be left in peace. We spent a lot of time discussing this and when we wanted to go back to see what happened, we found the castle empty. Anna Maria was gone and so were the pirates. Far away we saw the red pirate ship disappear on the horizon. We were left quite puzzled.

This must have been the moment I woke up.

It was a very strange dream, wasn't it? As you can imagine I was not able to sleep for a couple of hours.

There are people who believe in dreams. I am not one of them. In general, I have not been able to make sense of the dreams I have had in my life. Perhaps this one was a bit more meaningful than most dreams I have had.

Anna Maria was, at least for me, always more closed, almost putting a wall around her to defend herself against me or perhaps to prevent her getting closer to me. There were lots of moments when this mental wall was torn down but Anna Maria always tried to keep it up. I always attributed this to her taking the extremely strong position alongside her mother and this position did not allow her to be closer to me. The only time her defensive wall came down was during plays when she acted as a child and she could not resist enjoying moments with her father.

I would really like to discuss with you one day, Anna Maria, in a conversation without prejudices, how you really felt.

I really miss you a lot, every day, and I love you very much.

26 July 2009

My dear children,

I now have the judgment of the court in Luxembourg and I must say that I am very disappointed by its outcome although I am hardly surprised by it after I learned about what you had told the psychologist of the Centre Hospitalier who had been asked by the judge to investigate. The court order restricts my visiting rights to three times per year under similar conditions as in the Treffpunkt in Luxembourg. As you well know, our meetings there were not so successful and for me they were really hard. Maybe you have been told that the Treffpunkt stopped the meetings but you were certainly not told that it was due to a lack of cooperation from the part of your mother. This was explicitly stated in the letter of the manager of the Treffpunkt to the judge. She told me that in almost 20 years that this institution has existed they have never had a case as severe and crazy as ours.

I am still very much hurt by your attitude towards me in those meetings in the Treffpunkt. To see you looking down, hiding your faces, avoiding even to look into my eyes or to say anything was very hard for me. Nevertheless, meeting you there meant a lot for me, even though you may not believe it at this moment. There will come a time when you will.

Meeting you in Athens will need to be arranged, even if it will be just a few times. I now have a Greek lawyer, a woman called Eleni Koukoulas. She seems to be a nice person. She was born in Germany as her parents moved here to work but she studied and lived in both countries and now specialises in Greek-German legal cases. She will need to arrange the meeting with you later this year, if this is possible. I am sceptical. She will also have to take care of the legal

procedure in the Greek courts in Athens if the meeting will not happen. I assume that your mother will find a reason to prevent it at the last minute.

I wish you could speak to Ms Koukoulas. She tells me how much she benefited from growing up and living fully in two cultures. She told me that Greek and German characteristics would complement each other. It is not only the language but other things, like the way the world and events are seen and experiences are lived. I understand this positive opinion myself very well because I would have liked so much in my youth to see more of the world than I really did. I will tell you more about it in a future letter. I had a long conversation with Ms Koukoulas on that subject. She said repeatedly that you could be so privileged to be in this situation of having two cultures as well if you only would want it. I fully agree with her as I always envied people who had this chance and I would have liked so much that you could have benefited from it.

I have currently a lot of work to do as I have started the new job I told you about. There is a lot to read and learn as many of the subjects are quite new to me but it seems very interesting. However, my first tasks are mainly administrative; besides caring for budget and similar tasks, I urgently need to fill four open posts. Last Friday I recruited a quite young woman from Latvia as secretary.

This event made me think that the world is changing quite rapidly now. She has a full university education with both a bachelor degree and a masters but looks for a job as secretary. A few years ago when your mother and I we were in a similar position after university we looked for more demanding work and had no problems getting it. The conditions really are more difficult and the salaries are much lower for people entering the European Institutions or any other organisation now than they were when we started to work almost 30