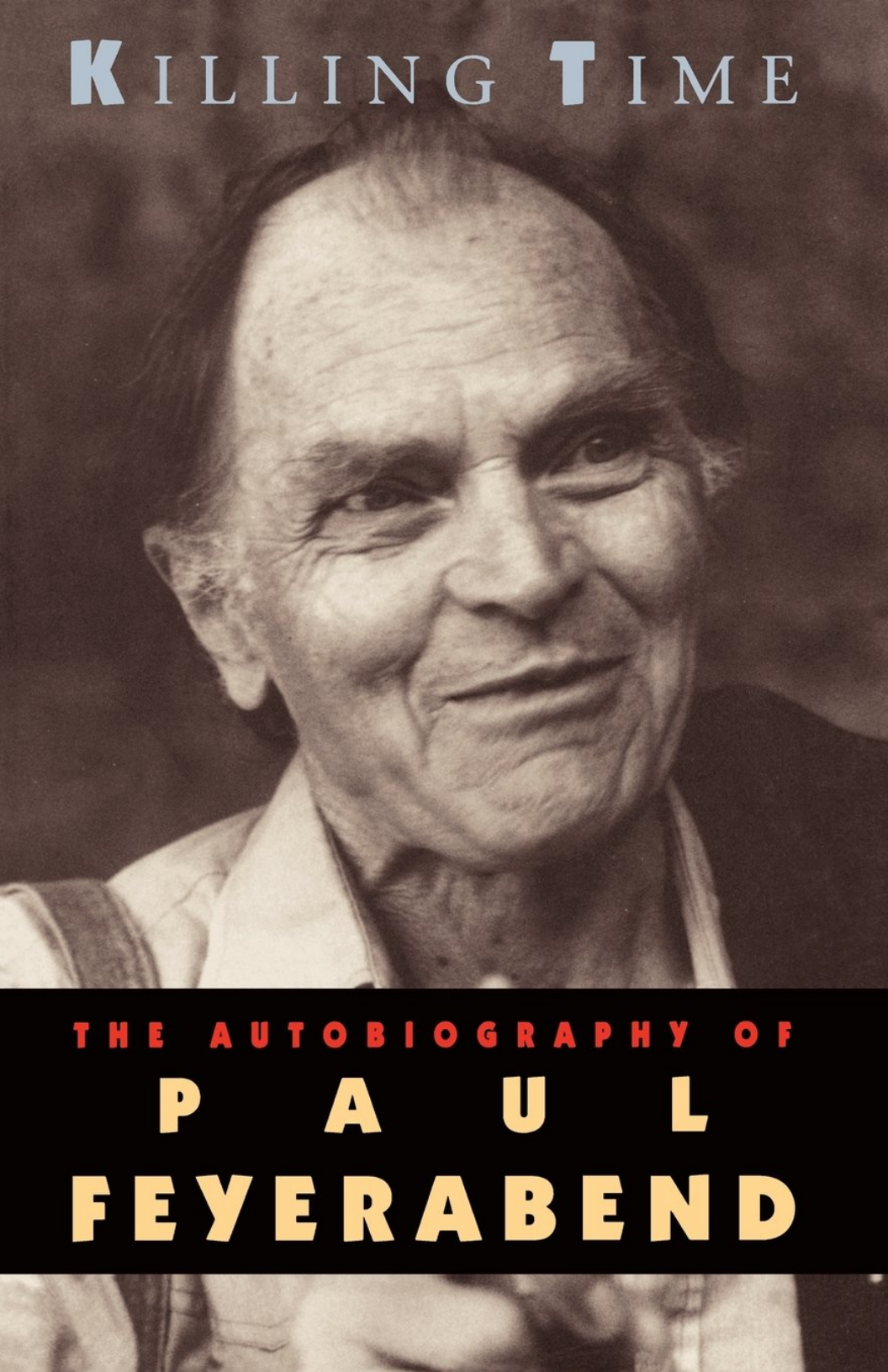


KILLING TIME



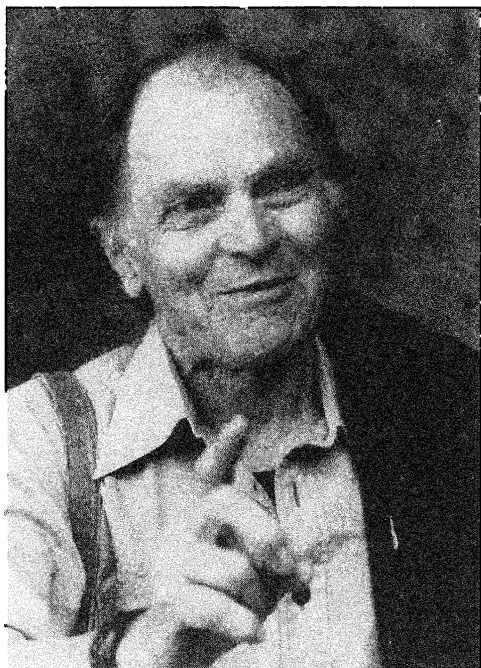
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

P A U L

FEYERABEND

KILLING TIME

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF



PAUL

SERAFINO AMATO

KILLING TIME

F E Y E R A B E N D

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To Bublein

*Einstweilen bis den Bau der Welt
Philosophie zusammenhält,
erhält sie das Getriebe
Durch Hunger und durch Liebe*

J. F. C. VON SCHILLER, *Die Taten der Philosophen*, 1795;
from 1803 better known as *Die Weltweisen*

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1 Family

A few years ago I became interested in my ancestors and the early years of my life. The immediate reason was the fiftieth anniversary of Austria's 1938 unification with Germany. I watched the events from Switzerland, where I happened to be teaching at the time. Austrians had welcomed Hitler with tremendous enthusiasm. Now I heard stern condemnations and resounding humanitarian appeals. Not all of them were dishonest; still, they seemed to be rather futile. I ascribed this to their generality, and I thought that a personal report might be a better way of looking at history. I also was rather curious. After four decades of lecturing at Anglo-American universities I had almost forgotten my years in the Third Reich, first as a student, then as a soldier in France, Yugoslavia, Russia, Poland. Even my parents had become strangers. Who were those people who had brought me up, taught me a language, made me the nervous optimist I still am, and occasionally invade my dreams? And how did it happen that I ended up as an intellectual of sorts, a professor even, with a smooth salary, a crooked reputation, and a wonderful wife?

It is not easy to answer those questions. I never wrote a diary; I do not keep letters, not even from Nobel Prize winners; and I threw away a family album to make room for what I then thought were more important books. The only papers that survived, more by accident than by design, are the birth, marriage, and death certificates of my parents, grandparents, and some great-grandparents.

My father assembled them in 1939, when Austrian civil servants had to prove their Aryan ancestry. Starting from documents already in our possession, he wrote to church registries, used their answers for further inquiries, and worked his way back until the information dried up. I also have the official records of my father's military career, my school reports, administrative details of my service in the German army (*Soldbuch*), and a notebook containing lectures I gave in 1944. Clearing out my office and my wardrobe before my departure for Italy in 1989, I found additional material. There were letters, pocket calendars, bills, telephone numbers, pictures, and documents I had completely forgotten about.

Using this material I can report that my maternal grandfather married a woman twenty years younger than he; that my mother's birth was legitimized twenty-two years after she was born; that my paternal grandfather was the illegitimate son of Helena Feierabend, occupation "houseguest" (*Gästin*); that he replaced the *i* in Feierabend (*Feierabend* is a common word in German, meaning knocking-off time) by the more exotic *y*; and that he married Maria, née Bizjak or Pezjak, a Slovenian national from Bohinjska Bela. I met Maria when I was about seven years old. She sat in the corner of a large room, dressed in the black clothes of a peasant woman. Though already slightly senile she was an imposing presence. Speaking German with a heavy accent she told me the story of her two marriages. "I married a railwayman," she said; "he died; but I *at once*"—and here she raised her voice—"married another railwayman." Then she started all over again. She also told me how she improved her vision by washing her eyes with soapy water. "It hurts—but it makes you see better." This was the only occasion when I saw her. It was long ago and I was a confused little boy; yet I often think of her with sadness and a sense of loss.

My father had two brothers and two sisters. Uncle Kaspar was a bald-headed gentleman with a daring mustache and missing an

index finger. He had strong views on almost anything. "Discipline is good for the soul," he said, and hit me. At sixty-five he married a twenty-year-old girl; they divorced when he was sixty-six. Aunt Julie was a dour spinster with a grating voice. She tried to get married but gave it up when one of the prospective husbands departed with her savings. She kept house for us during the war, after my mother had died. When she left, silver spoons, vases, money, sugar, butter, and flour (rare during the war) left with her.

Aunt Agnes was the wife of a station master in Carynthia. We visited them when I was five or six years old. I remember the colorful farm machinery that was being unloaded, the fast train that went by in the afternoon, the restaurant, and the chicken coop behind the station. I spent my days climbing around in the hills above the rails, and I still bear the scars I got from falling down a ravine. Occasionally I went into the chicken coop, closed the gate, and addressed the inmates—excellent preparation for my later profession. One morning Aunt Agnes decided to have chicken for dinner. She locked the kitchen door to keep me away; I grew anxious, smashed the windowpane, and found her with a dead chicken and a lot of blood on her hands. I liberated the remaining birds, fled to the hills, and watched as Aunt Agnes tried to reassemble her flock. In the evenings we all went to the local inn. Papa put me on a table, and I sang the songs my mother had taught me. I got applause, papa got a beer—all on the house.

Papa had participated in the First World War, in Istria, as an officer in the merchant marine. He was discharged because of cholera, which was widespread toward the end of the war. One picture of the family album showed a train with the windows open and occupied by the naked hind-ends of the soldiers; this was the only way to survive a transport. The army documents before me say that papa was proficient in German and Slovenian—yet the only Slovenian word he ever used was *krafl*, "mess." After the war he studied for the lower civil service and moved to the Big

City—Vienna. Mama brought me to his office when I was about nine years old; there he sat, answering questions, certifying copies, signing rental agreements. Not a very important position. But to me he seemed to have enormous power. He loved adventure in his youth; he became rather quiet later on.

After my mother's death, my father ran the household while I was studying at the university. He courted a variety of ladies, some of them married. He visited them at home, or took them out to educational events—lectures, demonstrations, films. Eventually he placed an advertisement: "Civil servant, retired but well preserved, intellectual interests, looking for sensitive mature woman—marriage not excluded." He got eighty replies. I ordered them according to age, income, and style and sent him on his way, twice or three times a week. He returned well fed, inebriated from the rich wines the ladies had saved through the war, and bored to tears. He ended up with a kind but quarrelsome woman and moved to her residence in Bad Ischl. He had a stroke that caused a speech defect and a duodenal ulcer combined with a ruptured peritoneum, which killed him.

We were friends, sort of, but not very close; I was much too self-centered and much too involved in my own affairs. I had already moved to California when I heard of his final illness; I did not return and I did not attend his funeral. Years later, papa appeared in my dreams. I saw him in the distance, wanted to reach him, could not move, and woke up feeling sad and distracted. "Talk to him," said Martina, my beautiful German friend. He came again, standing in a corner, his back toward me. "Papa," I said, "you are a good person; I am grateful for all your care, your patience, your love, the extra efforts you made, and I'm sorry I was such a selfish bastard; I love you." And while I spoke I felt that I indeed loved him and had always loved him. Papa neither moved nor spoke; but he seemed to listen and to accept what I had said. He left and stayed away for a long time.

My mother's family came from Stockerau in southern Austria. There were two sisters, two brothers, and a half brother. Aunt Julie once stayed with us for a few days. I resented her arrival and said so; I was heartbroken when she left. Aunt Pepi was quite beautiful; she drank, became an alcoholic, and committed suicide. Her daughter, my cousin Josephine, found her and came to us. She must have been twelve years old at the time. I can still see the small figure standing in the doorway, asking for help. Mama went and took me along. I remember the neighbors whispering in the corridor, the smell of gas, the motionless shape in the bedroom, and Cousin Josephine saying goodbye from a window when we returned home. I was not upset; I was not puzzled either. I took it for granted that the world was a strange place filled with impenetrable events. I recently returned to the scene, and it seemed as if time had stood still—the same surroundings, the same window, the same impressions, but all the main actors gone. Aunt Pepi often visited us. She also wrote letters, some of them abusive. "She is drunk," mama said. "Does that mean that her writing moves up and down and isn't straight?" I asked. "Yes," mama replied. My memory of things past consists entirely of isolated vignettes such as this one.

Aunt Pepi was married to Konrad Hampapa, a railwayman and a heavy drinker himself. They had two children—Konrad junior, who was retarded, and Josephine. The family visited us on Sundays, and Junior played the accordion. He was an excellent musician and could improvise on any melody he heard. When his father remarried, he tried to make love to his stepmother, Maria. This, he thought, was the normal function of a mother, for Aunt Pepi, apparently, had made love to him. Maria was a kind but determined woman. She stopped her husband's drinking; but she failed with Konrad junior. He left home, roamed the streets, hid in garbage containers (which at the time were large enough to hold ten people), played his instrument, and raped the women who

came to listen. He died in an insane asylum at the age of thirty-six—at least this is what I heard later, after my return from London. For me (at age ten), Cousin Konrad was just another relative with a great gift for music. I noticed that he was a little peculiar—but so were many people. My attitude changed when the peculiarity received a name, “retardation,” and when casual and unintended hints informed me of its social implications. Fear and revulsion were the result.

Uncle Rudolf was married to a huge Czech woman who loved to gossip about deflowered maidens, aborted children, cuckolded husbands, thieving relatives. She had a sinister face and a sizable mustache, and switched to Czech when the stories got too juicy. One day she forgot. She told my parents how one of our acquaintances had seduced another and how the lady, who seems to have been a virgin, lost “buckets of blood.” Buckets of blood! It took a long time for my views of lovemaking to become a little less dramatic. Uncle Rudolf occasionally appeared with a woman closer to his size and complained about the hardships of being married to Aunt Christina. Aunt Christina in turn accused him of trying to poison her. They separated, reunited, separated again; finally Aunt Christina died. Uncle Rudolf, tiny, weak, mousy Uncle Rudolf, lived to be ninety-four.

Uncle Julius was tall and handsome, always ready to play tricks on people. There were vague rumors that he had taken money from a bank, had fled, and had joined the foreign legion. He settled down in Meknes, Morocco, married a Spanish woman, Carmen, and sent us postcards showing him with Carmen, minarets in the background. “Uncle Julius *is* somebody” (“er hat es zu etwas gebracht”) was our comment. Uncle Karl, one of my godfathers, was a more shadowy figure. I never met him. He emigrated to the United States, acquired a farm in Iowa, and every year, at my mother’s birthday, sent us one dollar. With that mama

bought ham, wine, and sweets, and we stuffed ourselves for an entire week.

I also had two cousins, one genuine, the other less so. Cousin Fritz earned his money as a street singer. That was not unusual. In the late twenties the streets and backyards of Vienna looked like amusement parks with organ grinders, animal acts, magicians, dancers, singers—entire bands. They took up their position in the late morning and started tuning their instruments or preparing their equipment. The audience, mostly housewives, made their requests, and the performance began. Salespeople advertised their products with a speech or a song, some outside the house, some on the stairways. Gypsy women sold patchouli wrapped in colored tissue paper. They had a special song, which I still remember. There were accidents; a fire eater burned himself and had to be carried away. Every block had its own beggar who came once a week to collect his dues. “Our” beggar came on Saturdays. When he was through, he went to the butcher downstairs and bought a piece of ham bigger than any one of us could afford.

Cousin Fritz played the guitar and sang, accompanied by a vivacious redhead. I fell in love with her. Inspired by what I had heard about true love, I took an extra pair of shoes (“he packed his bundle,” the stories said) and ran away from home. No doubt, I thought, she would be waiting somewhere around the corner, would open her arms and exclaim, “I have been waiting for you all my life.” That was another element of the stories I took as my guide. Alas, it did not turn out that way. I got lost (I was five) and was picked up by the police and handed over to my parents. After that, Cousin Fritz and his companion were no longer welcome.

Cousin Emma was a smallish woman, elegant in a cheap way, with a loud voice and many songs in her repertoire. She married a meatpacker, Bautzi Bartunek, a kind but inarticulate gentleman.

On her visits she first sang, even yodeled, then cried a little, then talked about the counts, barons, generals who had laid her. Almost always she concluded by saying, with a gesture toward Bautzi—"and I ended up with this." Bautzi remained quiet, but sometimes he was ready to explode. "One day he will kill her," said papa. It does not seem to have happened. They lived in a tiny dark apartment close to the slaughterhouse; two unhappy people, tied to each other by accidents and disappointed hopes.

When my parents met, mama worked as a seamstress. They married before the First World War, survived the war and the post-war inflation, waited fifteen years until there was enough money for a child—and then produced me. Mama was forty years old when I was born. She had a warm alto voice, and she sang or hummed folk songs every hour, every day. She fell silent when we moved to a "better" neighborhood. Once she told me how, while working as a salesgirl, she had drawn a picture, and a customer, "a dashing gentleman," had complimented her on her talent. That was long ago, the story implied, and now the talent was wasted and life was just routine.

She tried to commit suicide twice. On the first occasion my father and I were out for a walk. It was evening; the gaslights were being turned on, but one of the pilots failed and the flame emitted a mournful sound. I got frightened and urged papa to run home. Mama was in a corner, unconscious, amid a cloud of gas. She succeeded thirteen years later. Often she would run toward the window in a mad rage; I had to use all my strength to prevent her from jumping. Many years after her death, when preparing the furniture for sale, I found her handwriting on the backside of the large bedroom mirror and the wardrobes. "God help me," it said, "I cannot go on."

Meeting my mother in a dream is never a simple matter. She may be kind, she may smile, but I have to be careful, I have to

watch every word and every gesture for madness, and hints of sexuality are never far away. More than once I dreamed that I married an older woman, a very old woman, in fact, and asked myself how I could get out of the disaster. Still, I made love to her, without much pleasure, even with revulsion—it was my mother in one of her many disguises. On other occasions I felt that I was not alone, that I could pick up the telephone and call her. I tried talking to mama as I had talked to papa; I did not succeed—until recently, in Switzerland. I dreamed I was sitting at a bar with Grazia, who is now my wife; it was dark and I felt uncomfortable. There was something sinister about Grazia—as if she were about to change. I became afraid and woke up. “That was mama doing her tricks again,” I said to myself. Trying to go back to sleep, I mumbled, “Why don’t you speak to me?” She appeared while I was still awake. It was mother all right—but with all her humanity gone. A scream of rage and despair had torn her face and corroded her features. Visually, the image was quite weak, barely noticeable, about five inches in diameter; but the impact was terrifying. The image lingered at the foot of my bed for about a minute and then disappeared.

A few months later, on Monday, September 11, 1989, to be exact, I discovered mama’s suicide note. I was in my office at school talking to Denise Russell, a friend from Australia. I was going through my filing cabinets. I had not looked at them for at least fifteen years—but I wanted to clear them out before leaving for Italy. I opened the top drawer. There were some offprints, old tax forms, and about ten pocket calendars. One of these contained some photographs and the note. I could hardly believe my eyes. I didn’t know that such a note existed—and then I remembered, yes, I had seen it long ago but had forgotten about it. I explained its content to Denise, went to my seminar, two hours, hurried home, and took a close look. The note is addressed to my father.

There is no anger, no madness; only love and a desire for peace. Holding the letter in my hand, I for the first time felt close to that strange, distant, and unhappy human being that had been my mother.

2 Growing Up

The first apartment I remember had three rooms: a kitchen, a bed-sitting-room, and a study. The kitchen and the bed-sitting-room are fairly clear in my mind; the study is a mystery. I went in occasionally, but I never really saw it. Here my father received visitors and kept his belongings. Below was a carpenter's workshop, above a seamstress. I often got scared when I heard the sound of her sewing machine. Even today an unknown noise disturbs me until I know exactly how it is produced.

We lived in the Wolfganggasse, a quiet street lined with oak trees. Downstairs were a butcher and a grocery; the drugstore was at the corner opposite. The whole block rejoiced when the owner's son, a fat, serious boy, finished high school; he now belonged to a higher plane, different from the rest of us. After the drugstore came the police station. Mama and I went there once when papa did not show up for dinner. Papa was all right; he had been out with his colleagues.

Farther down was an avenue with streetcars, traffic, and larger stores. That was the end of the world as far as I was concerned.

Years later, in the 1960s, when I was already teaching in California, I started dreaming about the apartment; it was eerily empty, and an important part of my life seemed to have been lost there forever. To resolve the puzzle I visited the place around 1965. I took a tram to the Gürtel, walked across Haydn Park, where I had played as a child, passed the corner with the movie theater—now