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A Socialist Writes to His Conservative Father

Johann and Joseph Most in 1870

Tom Goyens

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Coming out to a parent today usually refers to a person's difficult decision to reveal something about their sexual identity. The fear of reprobation or rejection may also be present when a young person discloses political or philosophical beliefs so contrary to the parents' worldview that a lasting rift may result. Things get even tenser when a parent has also engaged politically in the opposite direction, and any reconciliation seems unattainable, perhaps even unwanted.

What does such a fracture look like in 1870, when socialism and religious conservatism gained traction among the working and middle classes of a rapidly industrializing world? First, some background.

Before he became an anarchist in the 1880s, the Bavarian bookbinder Johann Most had been a well-known socialist orator and editor, first in Austria and then in Germany. He had already discarded religious faith as a teenager. His conversion to socialism happened in 1867 when he was twenty-one; by all accounts a life-changing event. He felt "human for the first

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time” and “inspired by a certain urge to fulfill a higher mission.”¹ He moved to Vienna, where he joined the budding socialist movement amid a fight for civil liberties. The spirit of solidarity and acceptance among fellow activists in this new crusade and the daring speechmaking all filled him with righteousness and courage.

The road to getting there had not been easy as he struggled to find footing and cope with the effects of childhood traumas. At age nine, his freethinking mother succumbed to typhus, and a year later, a new stepmother hampered a fellowship with his father, Joseph. Four years later, a life-saving operation on his jaw left his face disfigured for life and subsequently crushed his dream of becoming a stage actor, which had also been a dream of his father. Most’s discovery of the socialist movement at age twenty-one thus ended a period of aimless searching and self-loathing.

In January 1870, Johann Most was summoned by the police to verify his employment status.² He needed official documents from Augsburg, his place of birth, to remain employed in Vienna. He could have his father send the documents if it wasn’t for the fact that the old man had strongly condemned his son’s political activities. No replies came. Both knew very well that they had grown apart ideologically.³ Joseph had joined the Bavarian Patriotic Party, a conservative Catholic group with ultramontanist (or papist) leanings. His son’s atheism was undoubtedly a great insult to a man known in town as the devout caretaker of a Catholic cemetery.

¹ John Most, *Memoiren: Erlebtes, Erforschtes und Erdachtes von John Most* (New York: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1903), Vol. 2, 57.

² *Die Presse* (Brünn), January 8, 1870; “Keine Arbeiter Demonstration,” *Hans-Jörgel* (Gumpoldskirchen), January 8, 1870; *Morgen-Post* (Vienna), January 10, 1870.

³ *Augsburger Postzeitung*, July 16, 1870, p. 5; Most, *Memoiren*, Vol. 2, 63. Most claims that his unlicensed employment situation aggravated his conviction and sentencing during the treason trial.

I deny that it ever occurred to me to achieve anything through violence or even to participate in such acts, and I am not aware that a violent act was ever planned in any form. I should also hope, Councilors, that your judgment will be based on the law and not on party, and that you won't let the government influence you.⁵

Joseph Most followed the trial in the Bavarian newspapers, and for reasons that would remain unknown, he decided to use whatever political connections he had to free his son. Making the charge of treason disappear was not possible, but perhaps he could obtain a pardon if his son saw his error and requested mercy. Joseph allegedly gained access to the Duke Maximilian Joseph of Bavaria, the father of Empress Elizabeth ("Sisi") of Austria. Johann Most was indignant when he learned of his father's plans, and the two men clashed again. The son flatly refused to prostrate. "I have to beg for mercy when I suffered injustice? Never!"⁶ This pardon story appears in Most's memoirs and cannot be corroborated by other sources.

Most did not have to serve three years. After four and a half months, a new Austrian government issued a general amnesty. He was even allowed to remain in the country but would eventually be expelled only to spread the socialist gospel among German workers. By the time his father died in 1882, Most had abandoned Social Democracy and was on his way to embracing anarchism.

⁵ Scheu, ed. *Der Hochverratsprozeß*, 424-425.

⁶ Most, *Memoiren*, vol. 2, 57.

On January 13, Most wrote again to his father, but the following letter was never sent because it was confiscated and entered into evidence during a trial several months later:

My Dear Father!

As I am still waiting for an answer to my last letter and You have not yet followed up on my request to send my papers, I am very concerned and feel compelled to write a second letter to You.

I don't know, are You unwell or did You find my last letter unworthy of an answer??

If the former were the case, which I hope not, I urge You once again to write to me so that I no longer have to dwell in uncertainty, since this tiresome and anxious situation has become almost unbearable to me.

If the latter is the case, well then I cannot help but express my deepest regrets.—I explained to You thoroughly in my last letter that it was certainly never my intention to insult You, but that You have completely misunderstood me.—It, therefore, surprises me all the more that, despite my last written explanation for my words, it seems that You don't have a father's ear. But is it perhaps your ultramontane sentiments, bolstered by recent apparent victories, that drown out Your paternal feelings to such an extent that your heart is closed to your son forever? Well then, this is the best proof for me that priests are really capable of accomplishing a great deal. I don't need to know what kind of mind You used to have; when I was home about two years ago, You said yourself: 'Man must be an actor.' For my part, I made no secret of my feelings at the time, and

You weren't particularly able to object to it at the time. So I don't see why I should play the prodigal son because, for your sake, I didn't exchange my republican sentiments for ultramontane ones. –You probably thought it might be my luck; but I tell You that for me there is no more terrible hell than the one in which a man must act while his innermost being resists, even if well paid. – Consider the matter with calm reflection, and You will surely conclude that it is better and nobler for a man to show his sentiments in all his actions than to play a different color every moment. –I could've played the moral coward and hypocrite to You, sending You sweet lies, while I let the pure, unadulterated truth flow from my pen in coarse words. How else could I act? If, as tribune of the people, I hurl the naked truth unvarnished and bluntly in the faces of the people, of the whole world, I shouldn't shy away from maintaining my strength of character towards my own father and tell him the truth as I find it. I assure you and swear to you that if you offer me a job with a monthly salary of 1,000 florins and I must serve a party hostile to me, and if, on the other hand, my party comrades only offered me dry bread, I would reach for the dry bread without thinking twice. So I kindly ask You again to write to me as soon as possible and not to forget to send all my papers immediately, especially my declaration of being of age, because I have a tremendous amount of work, but I am tied down because I am not actually allowed to work for commercial purposes without tax papers and I, therefore, risk the seizure of my tools by a magistrate. So I think I can assume with confidence that You will comply

with my request as soon as possible and I also hope to receive good news. With warm greetings

Your sincere Son

Johann Most, Bookbinder,

9th District, Wiesengasse 28, first floor, Nr. 13.⁴

This is the only known correspondence between them. This letter survives because it was included in the transcripts of a sensational trial in Vienna six months after the letter was written. Fourteen socialists, including Most, were charged with treason for belonging to a “subversive” political party and because they had dared to tout its tenets in public. Two weeks later, four men, including a twenty-four-year-old Most, were found guilty and sentenced to prison, a verdict that shocked even the well-to-do. Most faced five years, later reduced to three.

Newspaper readers in Austria and Germany enjoyed full coverage, and Most made an impression when he took the stand in his defense:

I confess that I am a Social Democrat, I confess that I will remain one as long as I live, that I will pay homage to it in the highest degree, and that I will hold up its banner no matter what the verdict may be. I deny, however, that I ever did something unlawful while in Austria. I have always operated on legal grounds; I spoke only at authorized public meetings and in the presence of official commissars. You may not attribute more to me. That was all that lay within my weak powers, and that I did.

⁴ For the entire letter, see Heinrich Scheu, ed. *Der Hochverratsprozeß gegen Oberwinder, Scheu, Most...Nach stenographischen Berichten bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Heinrich Scheu* (1870), 241. Interestingly, Most addressed his father with the formal German “Sie” (You).