

Kathe Kollwitz
1867-1945

There is much in us of our childhoods—Fate is what happens to us.

And Destiny, that is what we make of it.

To begin about Kathe Kollwitz, a little about her childhood, the fate she was born in.

And after that the art—the destiny—she made of it.

Kathe's grandfather, Julius Rupp (1809-1874) had been, in succession, a teacher, university professor, clergymen, lay preacher, and political leader and legislator. He founded the Free Religious Congregation as distinct and opposed to the official Prussian Lutheran Church. He was known to the Free Religious Congregation as their Speaker, meaning spiritual leader. He never accepted for himself any spiritual authority beyond that of the other members of his congregation.

Kathe felt for her grandfather a shy respect and even veneration, but no personal warmth. To her he seemed to stand above everyday things.

Julius Rupp's gravestone says, "Man is not born here to be happy, but to do his duty."

Kathe's father, Thomas Schmidt (1825-1897), was born to a poor family and able to gain an education only through the generosity of a stranger. He studied law and could have become a successful and wealthy lawyer.

But even before he could begin to practice, he realized that this career was not for him. His religious views and socialist sympathies would not permit him, in good conscience, to serve as part of the legal machinery of the Kaiser's Prussia, a militaristic state. Instead, Thomas Schmidt learned the trade of mason first serving as an apprentice, then becoming a master builder.

When grandfather Rupp retired as spiritual leader of the Free Religious Congregation, Kathe's father gave up his building trade in order to replace him.

“Although I thought that Grandfather’s religious force did not live in me, a deep respect remained, a respect for his teachings, his personality and all that the Congregation stood for. I might say that in recent years I have felt both Grandfather and Father within my self, as my origins. Father was nearest to me because he had been my guide to socialism, socialism in the sense of the longed for brotherhood of man. But behind that concept stood Rupp, whose traffic was not with humanity, but with God.

“To this day I do not know whether the power which has inspired my works is something related to religion, or is perhaps religion itself. I am curious to see what you make of it. I know only that it is a power...

“I have never done any work cold... I have always worked with my blood, so to speak.”

Kathe's mother was a cultured woman, widely read in German and also in English. She was especially fond of Shakespeare, Shelley and Byron. Like her husband, she was talented in drawing.

Kathe remembered an incident about her mother...
“My mother gave birth with great difficulty to her last child. The baby was named Benjamin in accordance with my father's wish. This baby lived only for a year and then died, like the firstborn, of meningitis. I have a number of very vivid impressions of these events. It must of been shortly before the baby's death—we were sitting at table and mother was just ladling the soup—when the old nurse burst open the door and called loudly, "He's throwing up again, he's throwing up again." Mother stood rigid for a moment and then went on ladling. I felt very keenly her agitation and her determination not to cry before all of us, for I could sense distinctly how she was suffering.”

In those days some families would read aloud after dinner. My Father often read Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt*, describing workers in England in 1843...

“With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread--
Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt
And still with the voice of dolorous pitch
She sang the song of the shirt.
Work—work-work—
Till the brain begins to swim,
Work—work—work
Till eyes are heavy and dim!
Seam, and gusset, and band,
And band, and gusset, and seam,
Till over the buttons I fall asleep
And sew them on in a dream!”

A later verse reads...

“But why do I talk of death?
That Phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear his terrible shape,
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep,
O! God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!”

“From my childhood on my father had expressly wished me to be trained for a career as an artist, and he was sure that there would be no great obstacles to my becoming one. And so after I reached my 14th year he sent me to the best teachers. When in my 17th year I became engaged to Karl Kollwitz (who was then studying medicine), my father, who saw his plans for me in danger by the engagement, decided to send me away to Munich to study. My father no longer watched my work with the supreme confidence that I was making progress. He had expected a much faster completion of my studies, and then exhibitions and success. Moreover he was very skeptical about my intention to follow two careers, that of artist and of housewife.

“Shortly before our marriage in 1881, my father said to me, ‘You have made your choice now. You will scarcely be able to do both things. So be wholly white you have chosen to be.’ ”



Self Portrait, 1891-2

“In the spring of 1891 we moved in to a home in North Berlin where we were to live for 50 years. My husband devoted most of his time to his clinic and was soon burdened with a great deal of work. In 1892 I had my first child and in 1896 my second. The quiet hard-working life we led was unquestionably very good for my for the development. My husband did everything possible so that I would have time to work. “



Self Portrait, 1893 (?)

“A great event took place during this time: Hauptmann’s play, *The Weavers*. That performance was a milestone in my work. I set to work on a series to be called *The Weavers*. At the time I had so little technique that my first attempts were failures. With this reason the first three plates of the series were lithographed, and only the last three succeeded.”



The Weavers I, Poverty

“My work on the series was slow and painful but it gradually came, and I wanted to dedicate the series to my father. But meanwhile my father fell critically ill, and he did not live to see the success I had when this work was exhibited.”



The Weavers II, Death



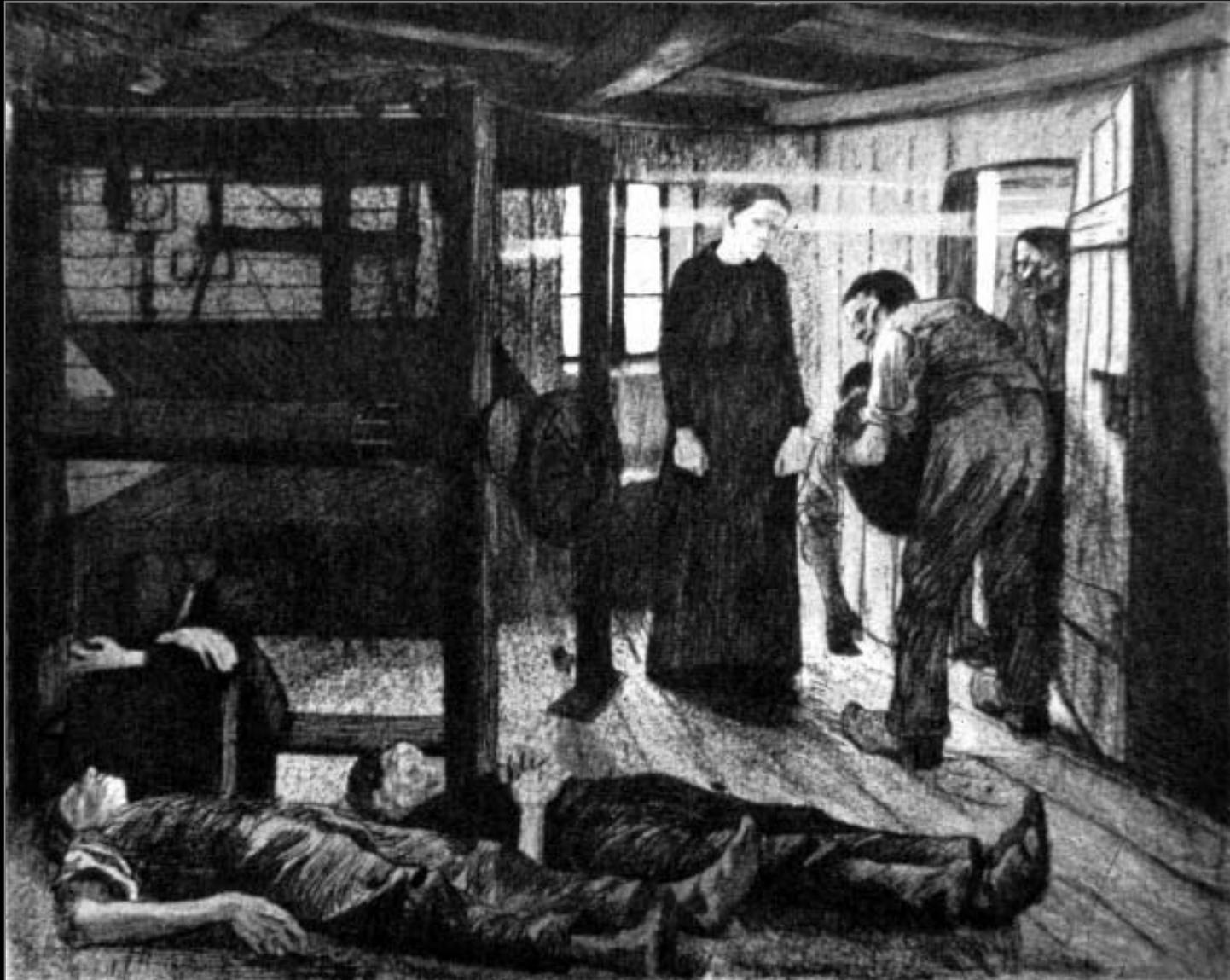
The Weavers III, Conspiracy



The Weavers IV, The March



The Weavers V, The Attack



The Weavers VI, The End

“It was arranged for *The Weavers* -to be exhibited in the major show. It was given the small gold medal. The Kaiser vetoed the recommendation. But from then on, I was counted among the foremost artists of the country. This triumph came to me as a surprise, but by then I was beyond the temptations of success.”



Self Portrait, 1904



“I continued to represent—to seek to get out of me—to search for the image of the woman revolutionary. Black Anna supplied me, at last, with the historical personage for this purpose. I used my own likeness for the preliminary drawings for Black Anna herself.”

In 1525, Black Anna and other peasants suffered the lot of downtrodden serfs. The landed aristocracy was depriving the peasants free use of meadows and woodland, thereby denying them a long established right. The serfs had no acreage of their own to till, no money to pay the excessive taxes levied by the nobility, and no civil rights to protect them from the wanton whims of the overlords who “owned” them. Spurred by the example of Luther, the peasants in Germany revolted against their lords and the repressive Roman Catholic Church, a large landowner.



Peasants' War I, The Plowers. 1906



Peasants' War II, Raped. 1907



Peasants' War III, Whetting the Scythe. 1905



Peasants' War IV, Seizing Arms. 1906



Peasants' War V, Outbreak. 1903



Peasants' War V, Outbreak. 1903

Chinese Communist Poster, ca 1930's



Peasants' War VI, After the Battle. 1907



Peasants' War VII, Prisoners. 1908

During the years of work on *The Peasants' War*, Kathe was hired as a free-lance artist for *Simplizicimus*, a satirical progressive publication with a large circulation throughout Germany. Beginning in 1909, the magazine published her drawings under the general title *Portraits of Misery*.

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Home Industry, 1909

“I should like to say something about my reputation for being a "Socialist" artist, which clung to me from then on. Unquestionably my work at this time, as a result of the attitudes of my father and brother and of the whole literature of the period, was in the direction of socialism. But my real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful. For me the broad freedom of movement and the gestures of the common people had beauty. Middle class people held no appeal for me at all. Bourgeois as a whole seemed to me pedantic...



Pub, 1908-9

“Much later on, I became acquainted with the difficulties and tragedies underlying proletarian life, when I met the women who came to my husband for help and so, incidentally, came to me, I was gripped by the full force of the proletarian state...



At the Doctor's, 1908-9

“Unsolved problems such as prostitution and unemployment angered and tormented me and contributed to my feeling that I must keep on with my studies of the lower classes. And portraying them again and again opened a safety valve for me; it made life bearable...



Suicide by Drowning, 1909

“...for the most part I ignore when people assert that my one subject is always the lot of the unfortunate. Sorrow isn't confined to social misery. All my work hides within it life itself, and it is with life that I contend through my work.”



Drunken Man, 1908-9



Christmas, 1909



Flophouse, 1909

“In addition to my work for Simplizissimus, I continued to make etchings. Generally, I did not have a model and used myself.

“When working on one of the etchings (not this one but similar theme), my youngest son, Peter, was seven.

“I was doing an etching of a mother with a dead child, and drew myself in the mirror while holding Peter in my arm. The pose was quite a strain, and I let out a groan. Then Peter said consolingly in his high little voice, ‘Don't worry, mother, it will be beautiful, too.’ ”



Death and Woman, 1910



Self Portrait, 1910

World War I came, and Peter was killed
within the first two months.

“I do not want to die ... and until I have faithfully made the most of my talent and cultivated the seeds that were placed in me until the last small twig has grown. This does not contradict the fact that I what would have died—smilingly—for Peter, and for haunts to come with the choice offered me. So how gladly, how gladly.

“Peter was the seed for the planting which should not have been ground. He was at the sowing. I am the bearer and cultivator of a grain of seed corn.

“... since I am to be the cultivator, I want to serve faithfully. Since recognizing that, I am almost serene and much firmer in spirit. It is not only that I am permitted to finish my work, I am obliged to finish it.

“This seems to me to be the meaning of all the gabble about culture. Culture arises only when the individual fulfills his cycle of obligations. If everyone recognizes and fulfills his cycle of obligations, genuineness emerges. The culture of the whole nation can in the final analysis be built upon nothing else but this.”

“Stagnation in my work.
When I feel so parched, I almost long for the sorrow again.
And then when it comes back I feel that stripping me
specifically of all the strength I need for work.

“Made a drawing: the mother letting her dead son slide into
her arms. I might make a hundred such drawings and yet I do
not get any closer to him I am seeking. As if I had to find him
in the work. And yet everything I can do is so childish and
inadequate. ... I have the feeling that I can no longer do it. I
am too shattered, weakened, drained by tears.

“For work, one must be hard and thrust outside oneself what
one has lived through. As soon as I begin to do that, I can kill
myself and the mother who will not give up her sorrow.
Sometimes it all becomes so terribly difficult.”



Self Portrait, 1919

“Count Keyserling opposes Expressionism and says that after the war the German people will need eccentric studio art less than ever before. What they need is realistic art. I quite agree—if by realistic art Keyserling means the same thing I do ...

“Art for the average spectator need not be shallow. Of course he has no objection to the trite—but it is also true that he would accept true Art if it were simple enough. I thoroughly agree that there must be understanding between the artist and the people. In the best ages of art that has always been the case.

“Genius can probably run on ahead and seek out new ways. But the good artists who follow after genius—and I count myself among the those—have to restore the lost connection once more. A pure studio art is unfruitful and frail, for anything that does not form living roots—why should it survive at all?”

“Now as for myself. The fact that I am getting too far away from the average Spectator is a danger to me. I am losing touch with him. I am groping in my art, and who knows, I may find what I seek. I confirmed to myself that I would be more scrupulous than ever in "Giving the honor to God, that is, in being wholly genuine and sincere"—not that I felt myself drifting away from sincerity. But in groping for the precious truth one falls easily into artistic over-subtleties and ingenuities—into preciosity. I suddenly see that very clearly, and I must watch out. Perhaps the work on the memorial for Peter will bring me back to simplicity.”

“I can no longer etch; I'm through with that for good. And in lithography there are the inadequacies of the transfer paper, and lithographic stones cost a lot of money, and even on stones I don't manage to make it come out right. But why can't I do it anymore? The prerequisites for artistic works have been there—the strong feeling—these things come from the heart. And secondly the rest comes on the basis of my previous works—that is, upon a fairly good foundation of technique. And yet the result lacks real quality. What is the reason? But I make a fresh start with woodcuts? In woodcuts I would not want to go along with the present passion of spotty effect. Expression is all that I want. Will wood cutting do it?”

The series, WAR. 1922-23















Posters, 1923-24

“While I drew, and wept along with the terrified children I was drawing, I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of man, the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain high. This is my task, but it is not an easy one to fulfill. Work is supposed to relieve you. But is it any relief when in spite of my poster people in Vienna die of hunger every day? And when I know that? That I feel relieved when I made the poster on war and knew that the war would go on raging?”



The Survivors, 1923

Hunger



Hunger, 1923



Bread, 1924



No more War, 1924



Self Portrait, 1924



1925



1929



Self Portrait, 1933

Death, 1934-35

“The work I am doing does not satisfy me at all. ‘It’s all been done before.’ When I worked it out for the first time it may have been no better, but it was more necessary for me. That is after all the crux of the matter. I thought that now that I am really old I might be able to handle this theme in a way to plumb the depths of ... but that is not the case ... At the very point when death becomes visible behind everything, it disrupts the imaginative process ...

“I start off indecisively, soon tire, need frequent pauses and must turn for counsel to my own works from the past.

“One can allow oneself emotional outpourings only after strenuous intellectual labors.”



Death I, Woman Giving Herself Up to Death



Death II, Death Holding a Girl in His Lap



Death III, Death Swoops Down on Children



Death IV, Death Seizes a Woman



Death V, Death on a Roadside



Death VI, Death Recognized as a Friend



Death VII, Death by Water



Death VIII, Death Calls



Self Portrait, 1934



Self Portrait, 1938



Seed for the Planting, 1942

“I have finished my lithograph ‘Seed for the planting must not be ground.’ This time the seeds for the planting—16 year-old boys—are all around the mother, looking out from under her coat and wanting to break loose. But the old mother who was holding them together says, no! You stay here! For the time being you may play rough-and-tumble with one another. But when you re grown-up you must get ready for life not for war again.”

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