

WILHELM REICH

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*Passion of Youth*

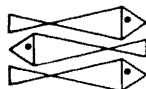
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 1897-1922

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EDITED BY MARY BOYD HIGGINS  
AND CHESTER M. RAPHAEL, M.D.

*With translations by Philip Schmitz  
and Jerri Tompkins*



FARRAR · STRAUS · GIROUX  
NEW YORK

Translation © 1988 by Mary Boyd Higgins,  
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Originally published in German under the title *Leidenschaft der Jugend*  
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the Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund  
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Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Jack Harrison  
*First edition, 1988*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Reich, Wilhelm, 1897—1957.

[*Leidenschaft der Jugend*. English]

Passion of youth : an autobiography, 1897—1922 / Wilhelm Reich :  
edited by Mary Boyd Higgins and Chester M. Raphael : with  
translations by Philip Schmitz and Jerri Tompkins. — 1st ed.  
p. cm.

Translation of: *Leidenschaft der Jugend*.

1. Reich, Wilhelm, 1897—1957—Childhood and youth.
2. Psychoanalysts—United States—Biography. 3. Sex (Psychology)
- I. Higgins, Mary (Mary Boyd) II. Raphael, Chester W. III. Title.

BF109.R38A3 1988

150. 19'5' 0924—dc 19

[B] 88—11286

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# *Preface*

We rarely catch a glimpse into the process by which great men develop, or experience intimately their passion, and their pain. Only the finished product—the mature person, the objective work—is presentable. Feelings of sexual need and desire, of love and hate, of longing, despair, frustration, and confusion lie buried in secrecy. Man's penchant for gossip and malicious intrusion may well express his need, however distorted, to break through this wall of secrecy and to learn the truth about his world and the great men and women whose lives “thrust it forward.”

Wilhelm Reich was well aware of the danger implicit in this truth “in a world that was not ready to listen.” But he was firmly convinced that it was essential to preserve it. In 1919, as a twenty-two-year-old medical student, Reich began to keep diaries and, during that same year, he wrote a recollection of his childhood and youth. Later, in 1937, he recalled his experiences in the Great War and his medical studies at the University of Vienna. These writings are now made available in order to dispel the myths given currency by the various biographies that have appeared since his death and to keep faith with the basic mandate of his will: “to safeguard the truth about my life and work.”

In publishing this material, I have not lost sight of the essential: what Reich did, what he discovered, the tool of scientific knowledge he has placed in our hands. But, as a Nobel laureate remarked recently, “Science is made by people.”

Mary Boyd Higgins, Trustee  
The Wilhelm Reich Infant Trust Fund  
*New York, 1988*

T H R E E

*Vienna*  
1918—1922

My medical studies at the University of Vienna lasted four years, instead of the usual six. Students who had fought in the war had the right to finish three semesters within two years, rather than spend a full year on each. This meant working harder, because the medical student who was a veteran had to be as much an expert in his field as the others. I graduated as a doctor of medicine in the summer of 1922. Those four years, crammed with experience, were to affect all the others to come. Unconsciously, they laid the foundation for my theory of sex-economy. I say unconsciously, because I was a completely innocent student, one of thousands, without any pretensions to a better life, satisfied with the hope of one day being able to practice a decent profession and make a decent living. I fought for material independence.

Breaking away from my family was concurrent with being able to support myself. Two of my father's brothers lived in Vienna. Though not rich they were materially so well off that my brother and I could easily have been taken care of financially. The remnants of our former property were unobtainable. After four years of war, nobody was able to bring any order into the legal confusion. Added to this, our native province had fallen to Rumania. A court case to salvage our farm property (the very existence of which was questionable) would have used up more money than it was worth. My renunciation was therefore without regret. My father's life insurance was completely devalued.

It is the great luck of life-insurance companies that they can legally pocket the premiums in good times, in order, equally legally, to avoid full payment of the insured sum in bad times. Here, a bad period—currency devaluation or something similar—comes to their aid at the right moment. Nobody reads the two hundred insurance regulations and clauses at the end of the contract. In this way, my brother and I were forced into beggary. An aunt who lived in America sent us a few dollars now and then. In addition, one of our two uncles, who liked us, would sometimes give us a hundred Austrian kronen, which had just been devalued.

At first, we occasionally ate with our relations. But family ties look different in practice: my uncles' wives gave their own children precedence. During the years of hunger, what we ate left less for them. It was embarrassing and embittering. One day an aunt served her children coffee; afterwards, she gave me a watered-down serving. I knew that she would never have given this to her own children. I left without a word, slammed the door behind me, and never saw those relations again. There was a student cafeteria which then was the only place I ate. But for two years we ate oatmeal with dried fruit day in and day out. On Sundays, we had two pieces of jam cake. Since the woman who served us liked me, I sometimes got a double helping. Bread and sugar were rationed, as were meat and other important foodstuffs. We received one-quarter, and later only one-eighth, of a loaf of bread per week. This I ate immediately, with yellow castor sugar sprinkled on it. We were starved and frozen. Poor people got no coal, so I studied in a small café, where an iron stove burned. I came to love that café. Early in the morning, at seven or half past, two hours before my first class, I studied, with great pleasure, physics, chemistry, and biology. I was to take the first half of the first oral examination for my medical degree by the end of December. I lived in an unheated furnished room with my brother and another student, who later became a psychoanalyst. I mention the fact that he sometimes received food from his mother

because in those days it played a big role in my struggle with homesickness. I don't know how we survived those first months.

We sold for almost nothing some valuable pieces of clothing and some small pieces of furniture which we had managed to save. The regimental command issued our severance pay, but there was a muddle, and the demobilization office in Vienna paid it a second time. I did not clear up the mistake. I had given the state much more: four young, hopeful years. When you are hungry, wrong becomes right, and right wrong. I had no scruples. I borrowed the necessary textbooks from colleagues. I do not recall how I scraped together the payment for the first year of study and the cram course.

After I took the oral examination in physics, chemistry, and biology, my situation became easier. I started giving cram courses to colleagues and soon had a lot of students. I learned even more by teaching; it obliged me to explain what I had learned mechanically for the examination. In this way, I supported myself as best I could for about three years. Later I taught anatomy. I had passed the first set of medical oral examinations with the top grade in every subject.

The students organized themselves to cope better with the great misery of those first postwar years. They accomplished a lot. There was a German, a Jewish, and a nonnational students' union, the Vienna Medical Association. I belonged to the last. The war veterans had a special position at the university. They were usually from two to four years older than the regular students. They were experienced, grownup men, from whom the younger student generation differed in every respect, particularly in their relations with the female students. Soon there were many liaisons. Studying together was difficult, but it was done with passion. Aside from studying and cultivating relations with friends of both sexes, we did nothing. Like the majority, I experienced the great political events of those years from a one-sided viewpoint which I have never found described in any political textbook. Our teacher of anatomy was Professor Tandler, a famous



anatomist and social hygienist. He was a strict but excellent teacher, and we learned anatomy with enthusiasm. We related to him as a teacher, but not as a socialist. We knew little of this movement, even though our lives, and the student organization, put us in the middle of the political ferment. Once, in the fall of 1918, Professor Tandler asked us to help with the demobilization of the homecoming soldiers. Not one of us suspected that here a piece of Social Democratic disarmament policy was being played out with regard to our own people.

Everybody was totally taken up with his own studies and with keeping alive as best he could. We studied from early morning till late at night, in order to master the mass of material. We ate quickly in the student cafeteria after standing in line for one or two hours with our notebooks held in front of our noses. Many kept up with their studies with great difficulty, and some not at all.

During the years leading up to my graduation, I experienced everything in confusion, without inner coherence: socialism, the Viennese intellectual bourgeoisie, psychoanalysis, and my unhealthy fixation on my early experiences.

I was regarded as a promising doctor, especially by my relatives. Prior to my breaking with them, they tried to "marry me to someone rich." In this way, I was to be relieved of my poverty, which was very great. It was not easy to say no. I lived over a year in abstinence, with occasional masturbation, and longed for a woman. But I wanted to be free and was afraid of tying myself down. I was engaged for a short time to a pretty girl, but she didn't want to sleep with me, and she could not talk sensibly either. I dropped her. After thinking it over, I turned down two or three offers to sell myself to a rich girl.

Female colleagues would take me to medical get-togethers and private gatherings. We were all very clever and well educated, and even indulged in a bit of spiritualism, "for fun." The girls liked me as a dancing partner because I danced well. They flirted a lot, and hid their sensuality behind clever talk or intellectual

dignity. They could get very excited while dancing, but no expression gave it away. They were all afraid of a serious relationship, just as they were of the open admission of what they unconsciously felt. I saw through their behavior and spoke with them about these things.

Most of these girls lived in warm, apparently well-adjusted families. This bothered me, for I was jealous; I was freezing and nobody took care of me. It annoyed me that they had to be home on the most beautiful Sundays at one or two in the afternoon, since their mothers would otherwise be "hurt." I was invited out often. The mothers were usually very fretful and neurotic, unhealthily attached to their children, devastated without them. Some of the girls were aware of this. Yet they were considerate. In so being, many of them wore themselves out and regretted it later, too late. The parents were friendly and kind-hearted, but they watched over their daughters' chastity, threatening to break down if their children were to misbehave while unmarried. The girls suffered from the necessary self-control, consciously or unconsciously, but they didn't want to "grieve" their parents. I could never understand how their daughters' fulfilled love could seriously harm the parents. The boyfriend of a female colleague was a medical student. They were often together and wanted to get married. Before it came to that, two years had passed. Until then, they had never embraced one another. I had absolutely no understanding of that kind of behavior, which at the time was highly regarded and praised. It seemed to me pathological. These girls sensed my attitude and it pleased them. But they never overstepped certain boundaries, even the twenty- and twenty-four-year-olds.

There were others who did exactly the opposite. They came from the same proper, upper-class homes, but they slept with everybody who chanced their way. I never had any serious friendship with these girls, or if I did, it was when they became healthier. In my diary I called the chaste ones, who were afraid of falling, "whores"; the others were unhappy creatures, whose

sickness I later, as a psychoanalyst, had many opportunities to study. Chastity was just as serious an illness, but I only understood its meaning much later.

The atmosphere in the girls' homes and their sexual restraint made me neurotic. When my mind was clear, I felt myself an "outsider." I longed for a home with parents and at the same time feared it. But I knew that I had to make myself free inwardly. Freeing myself from this longing for a home took some years. But it entailed no ideology which I wanted to impose on others; I was neither for nor against the family, sensed nothing of its function, and felt only the morbidity of my own longing for a home and the restriction imposed by it on my friends.

I read a great deal over and above my studies, and was often disturbed by manifestations of abstinence. I had no idea that the wild enthusiasms which overcame me at times, the overexcitement of my senses, and a certain restlessness, were the result of a lack of sexual gratification. In 1919 I came to know Weininger's *Sex and Character*. This book, written by an unfortunate but clever philosopher, was read by all intellectuals and raved over. I read Schopenhauer's *Aphorisms* and tried Kant. I lacked all prerequisites for the understanding of *A Critique of Pure Reason*. There were colleagues who spoke a lot about it, and I was embarrassed that I did not understand it. Later I knew that they did not understand it either and had only been letting off clever hot air. Being clever was a special sport of the bourgeois elite, especially of the Jewish youth. Cleverness for its own sake, to be able to talk wittily, to develop ideas, and to philosophize about the thoughts of others were some of the essential attributes of a person who thought something of himself. I admit that I could not keep up with this, although I was not stupid. Much was obscure to me, and some things even seemed wrong. They contradicted my sense of what the world was about. "The world as will and representation" was a wonderful idea, it impressed me very much, but, but . . . I knew nothing about it and even less what to do with it. Though inwardly I felt I was correct, I felt inferior. My life was constantly affected by this contradic-

tion. I stayed in the background at first and only came forward slowly. But when I had worked out a position, that position triumphed, I emphasize, without my having made a plan. For more than a decade, I defended views against which my inner feeling warned me, but to which I had no alternative to offer. In short, I have never in my life indulged in fantasies of being a genius or of becoming one.

During my student years I came up against the best minds of Vienna. And it always happened that I followed a way alien to me, until the admonitions of my inner resistance became too strong and I broke away. On the basis of such behavior, I was later accused of being unreliable. Only today do I know that, intuitively, I was on the right track. By getting to know everything exactly and at the same time remaining self-determined, I learned to exercise *productive* criticism.

Not that I wanted to become an “objectively correct critic.” On the contrary, I gave myself up to impressions quite uncritically. Nor was this done to make myself an especially good student. Each subject with which I became involved consumed me completely. This caused me a lot of suffering, but I would not want to have missed it. It was my greatest strength.

\* \* \*

*Feb. 25, 1919*

9 a.m. Convention of the organization of Jewish university graduates of Vienna. Were we going to have to listen to the same old platitudes? Perhaps from a different slant? But no, something new appeared on the horizon, something I had never noticed before in Jewish sentiments of any sort: not the all too familiar wailing, not the tirades against everything non-Jewish (which, because of my contrary convictions, have caused the dilemma in which I find myself today), but a new trend, born of strictly socialistic ideals—not the old “race against race” but a new, encouraging “people for people” attitude. Many speakers, lots of talk, not very meaningful, the usual on such occasions. But there was one among them, a Dr. Bergmann from Prague. What

a wealth of intellectual content he presented! He expressed my innermost feelings—I anticipated every word, could almost physically feel the thoughts surfacing from my own subconscious. Much that had been lying dormant within me was aroused, I saw clearly on so many issues—and hundreds of others must have seen clearly as well. There was no hatred for everything non-Jewish, but a meaningful receptiveness to others; no controversy over Jewish versus Hebrew, over blue-and-white versus red-and-green,\* but expansiveness in all directions, renewing itself in ever-widening circles. Down came the impenetrable barriers, and then—the word came to me—international cosmopolitanism in the broadest sense! I confess that, for the first time since hearing or experiencing similar speeches, something arose within me—an explanation! This was the reason why I hated—yes, hated—all those who endeavored to help the Jews attain happiness—not along with other human beings, but over their dead bodies; not with the consent of others, but against their will! Not “we are all together,” but just “we”! And finally I was listening to a man who is both a Jew and a human being simultaneously, not a chauvinist! We shall see what kind of fruit his efforts will bear.

A female colleague with whom I had dissected the upper portion of a cadaver was seated in front of me. Seems to have come for the sole purpose of showing off her blue silk outfit. She was ecstatic at the opening lines of some hackneyed speaker.

Was invited for tea at 5 p.m. at the apartment of a female fellow student named Neumann. The lady of the house was very charming, first impression excellent, then joined several of the other guests in Neumann’s room. Very pretty, good taste, more like a schoolgirl’s room than a university student’s. A trace of envy (I wish I did not have to put it into writing). The conversation had already turned to banalities. I remained silent, as usual, although I should have liked to speak up. Why? Grete†

\*Colors symbolic of various organizations. [Trans.]

†Grete Lehner and (on the following page) Eduard Bibring—medical students who were later married and became psychoanalysts. [Eds.]

arrived, smooth and sleek as ever. I greeted her and at the same moment I recalled her “*Guten Tag, Kollege!*” from the Saturday before last. Oh, these conventions which muzzle you at the very moment you have so much to say you could burst! Bibring and Singer arrived—Bibring in a frock coat which was too wide in the front. But I was glad he came anyway, I enjoy watching him so much! Then refreshments were served. There was an error in the seating plan and I found myself between Grete and Neumann’s brother. Just fine as far as I was concerned. I do not enjoy *entertaining* ladies. The conversation couldn’t seem to get off the ground. Toward the end, it was somewhat more lively. Groups formed—had a highly interesting discussion with Neumann’s younger brother (a law student) on the subject of Jews and the question of socialism. We are fairly well in agreement. Danced at first with Miss Neumann and then with Grete. Why do I enjoy dancing with her the most? Perhaps because she is all woman then and not . . . but what? I don’t really know. I prefer to view her as a woman rather than as a grave “academician.” She’s only charming when she’s being naïve. After indulging, unsuccessfully, in a little spiritualism, we all left. Felt quite satisfied. The milieu, the lady of the house, and the brother were extremely likable. While riding home, I thought with annoyance of the chemistry grind in the weeks ahead.

*Feb. 27*

Had a chance to talk with Grete alone and allude to several matters. I do care very much about my friendship with this intelligent girl, but before I proceed to deepen it, I must probe her apparently complicated emotional life—which may exist only to a very small degree or, what seems more likely to me, be largely obscured by a substantial intellect.

My brother arrived from Bukovina. What a magnificent fellow! I wish him better luck than he has had until now! I feasted my eyes on him—on his intelligent expression and the esprit of that eighteen-and-a-half-year-old.

Tomorrow morning at eleven o’clock I have been asked “to

call” at Krugerstrasse 17, District I.\* More humiliation. Oh, this dependency, having to “grovel,” and how the philanthropists seem to enjoy it!

### *March 1*

Today Fenichel† completed his lecture on “clitoral sexuality.” Like all pupils of Freud, he sees latent sexuality in everything and everywhere. Even if it does hold true in the majority of cases, I do not agree with him completely.‡ Perhaps morality speaks against it, but my own experiences, my observations of myself and others, have led me to the conviction that sexuality is the core around which all social life, as well as the inner spiritual life of the individual, revolves—whether the relationship to that core be direct or indirect. Now this appears to contradict what I just said. We are all aware, however, that something is active within us, be it morality or aesthetics, which holds us back from believing this. We tend to deceive ourselves by trying to appear better in our own eyes. If one remains generally aware, in larger and smaller social circles, at all levels, and even in the academic community, one can easily satisfy oneself as to the probability of this theory. I do not make such claims under the influence of Freud’s writings or today’s lecture—and as proof I offer the fact that I was already conscious of these things long before I began to study this science. For example, I recall that during my childhood, conscious sexuality was awakened within me at the age of four through contact with the maids, i.e., their caring for me when my mother had to be away for several months due to illness. *I imagined sexuality in every glance, gesture, and especially in everything that seemed at all suspicious to me.* I personally have a strong sexual and

\*Presumably, the address of Reich’s uncle. [Eds.]

†Otto Fenichel—a medical student who, in January 1919, had organized a students’ seminar in sexology at the university. He later became a psychoanalyst. [Eds.]

‡[Added in 1937] In these first lectures that I heard, the sexual had something bizarre and strange about it.

erotic disposition, although these elements have continually varied in their mode of expression from the first time I had sexual intercourse (at age twelve) to the present day. My sexuality was on the increase until I reached the age of twenty, when it attained its peak, while my eroticism (in the sense Weininger and Krafft-Ebing use that word) remained fairly latent until that time and only then began to grow. Nowadays, it frequently happens that *a woman excites me to the extreme in an erotic sense, without my entertaining thoughts of coitus*. In such cases, however, I do often catch myself undressing the woman with my eyes. Am I to attribute this to sexuality or eroticism?\*

### March 2

3 p.m. Sitting in my room wearing gloves and fur coat, studying chemistry—no, I am forcing formulas into my brain, which is resisting, refusing to assimilate them. The window is wide open, the sunshine outside is enticing, but I enjoy playing the role of a person with willpower. No street noise reaches my room overlooking the courtyard. All I hear is the ticking of my clock. I am tired, and as I lean against the window, I feel my chest expanding with a wish. I wish . . . yes, but what do I wish? On the floor below, someone was playing “Träumerei,” then came Schubert’s “Schlaf ruhig, sei ruhig, mein Kind”—songs which always fill me with nostalgia. I try to penetrate the wall around the courtyard with my eyes; how beautiful the view from here (the fifth floor) would be—directly out to the Kahlenberg and the Kobenzl. At the same time I associate this with my experiences last summer in Neuwaldegg when I did myself so much harm—without being able to help it! In my blind search for the happiness of having someone, just one person fully and completely, I made the mistake of grasping recklessly and was then forced, after only a few weeks, to break the self-imposed chains. She was pretty and good, but lacked idealism, viewed everything prosaically, constantly talking of being married, hav-

\*[Added in 1920] How naïve!



ing children, making soup, and the like. I couldn't keep up with it! I want to live, but in a different way than you demand of me! Life, life, I scream for it, crave it, don't want to vegetate, grovel, surrender my personal dignity for two hundred kronen, stand outside the door for hours on end for a hundred kronen, just because there is a dragon in the house who dared to insult my mother and to whom I gave a suitable reply!\* I don't want much! *But I don't want to go through school in order to prescribe ten aspirins a day, nor do I want to be compelled to go through school.* Don't rush me, don't rub my nose in your generosity every hour of every day, let me be a human being, don't suppress every emotion in me, every impulse which might make a better person of me. It is your fault that I shall never be capable of happiness, that I repress everything within me, that I am full of inner unrest and turmoil! How beautiful, how absolutely beautiful it could be! I look up at the sunny blue skies of spring-time and something within is set in motion, calls out for fulfillment, something which could develop and bear beautiful fruit! And yet there is this *murderous pressure*, it weighs upon me, oppresses everything which is not useful for mere survival. *And the fact that there is no end in sight, that I know I might still be myself at a time when everything else within me will have died—that is the bitterest insight of all!*

### March 3

Was enormously distracted today, couldn't keep my thoughts on my studies, or on any other subject. Was due to visit my uncle again at four o'clock, and my foreboding of what would take place at that time may well have been responsible for my condition. Naturally, once again I had no opportunity to speak to him. As Robert informs me (he is so much more practical than I and had already spoken with Uncle on the day he arrived), our uncle has agreed to lend "support," but only "*when he feels*

\*An apparent reference to the conflict between Reich and his uncle and aunt. [Eds.]

*like it.*” What prospects! I feel like a person who tried to sit between two chairs and landed on the floor. I want to visit Winia, to seek comfort and encouragement from a creature who is unhappy herself and deserves a better lot. At this very moment a name occurs to me: it is B. and I am ashamed of myself. And strangely, the first advice Winia gave me after I described my situation was to *get engaged, and to a wealthy girl!* (a woman’s logic, definitely). But to whom?—B. again, and I am ashamed a second time. Although I had grown quite close to the girl, such a thought never even entered my mind, and now, suddenly, the thought presented itself twice. I was interested in B., in that sixteen-year-old girl who had emerged from a small town steeped in all its drawbacks and then, over the course of two years, had developed so magnificently in an intellectual sense. The traits which must have attracted me were her naturalness and the unaffected way she reacted to everything and everyone. After she left Vienna and I went into the service, we carried on a lively correspondence. Her straightforward, unartificial way of exchanging thoughts revealed many an aspect of her personality and her emotional life which she might never have disclosed to me consciously. It was then that the thought first occurred to me—quietly, with due consideration, not impetuously as might have been more in keeping with my age. And just this quietness was the reason why I was unable to understand the nature of my interest in the girl. Was it merely a passing interest, or was it more, perhaps the beginning of a serious attraction, of what could definitely be called love, as had befallen me once before and come to such an inglorious end? Robert spent three days there, raves about B., and assures me that she made the liveliest of inquiries about me. *May nothing serious come of this!* It could mean great unhappiness for her, she deserves something better, an inwardly firmer person. Winia’s advice could easily be acted on, B.’s parents would have no objections either, but no, that would never do, *I would rob myself of my last bit of spine.* It would mean having my wife “keep” me (the very sound of it!). It could never form the basis for happiness as I picture it! The

question of how else I am going to work my way out of the situation this year (not to mention next year) remains unanswered. *I am simply not the practical person my brother is.* To my great disadvantage, I have been imbued with much more idealism than is practicable. I strive for clearer vision and suffer the bitterest disappointments because of this.

*March 8*

Today I succeeded for the first time in reaping the benefits of studying Freud's theories by interpreting two dreams (one of them my own), and believe I arrived at a fairly plausible result. I plan to put it all down in writing, to occupy myself more with the interpretation of dreams, and to approach the practice of psychoanalysis via this method.

Spoke with my colleague Grete. I had told her of my argument with Arthur Pines over the importance of sexuality in the emotional and social life of women; also informed her of the fact that I could not agree with Weininger completely because I had her in mind as a case in point. I then came upon something which strikes me as highly interesting: she immediately remarked that she had frequently been made an example in such cases and asked me to describe the situation in detail. Today I did so, and I encountered a self-confidence in this girl which I would ordinarily have considered extreme conceit or self-complacency, although it actually was only to a small degree unjustified. The significance of this self-confidence in her life, and the extent to which it helps or hinders her, will be the object of my further observation of her. Wanted to start right in and hear her comments on self-confidence, but regrettably, I was disturbed by another colleague who joined us.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, on the way to a party given by the Jewish physicians, we were talking about marriage when I broached the subject of self-confidence—that factor whose absence seems to play such a large role in my own emotional life. Naturally, she realized immediately that I wanted to hear her opinion on her own self-confidence and told me exactly what