

## READING

## Even If All Others Do—I Do Not!

Only a few parents dared to challenge the education their children received. Among them was Johannes Fest. Near the end of 1936, he called his sons Joachim and Wolfgang into his study. Joachim, who was ten years old at the time, later recalled:

He wanted to talk to us about a subject, he began, that had been giving him a headache for some months now. He had been prompted by one or two differences of opinion with our mother, who was terribly worried and hardly able to sleep anymore. . . . He knew what his responsibilities were. But he also had principles, which he wasn't going to let anyone call into question. Least of all the "band of criminals" in power.

He repeated the words "band of criminals," and if we had been a little older we would no doubt have noticed how torn he was. He had discussed what he was about to say with my mother and they had with some effort reached an agreement. From now on there would be a double evening meal: an early one for the three younger children and another one as soon as the little ones were in bed. We belonged to the later sitting. The reason for this division was very simple; he had to have a place in the world where he could talk openly and get his disgust off his chest. Otherwise life would be worth nothing. At least not for him. With the little ones he would have to keep himself in check, as he had done for two years now whenever entering a shop, in front of the lowliest counter clerk, and—by force of law—every time he picked up his children from school. He was incapable of doing that, he said, and concluded with the words, more or less, "A state that turns everything into a lie shall not cross our threshold as well. I shall not submit to the reigning mendacity [lies], at least within the family circle." That, of course, sounded a little grand, he said. As it was, he only wanted to keep the enforced hypocrisy at bay.

He took a deep breath, as if he had got rid of a burden, and walked back and forth between the window and the smoking table a few times. In doing this, he began again, he was turning us into adults, so to speak. With that came a duty to be extremely cautious. Tight lips were the symbol of this state: "Always remember that!" Nothing political that we discussed was for others to hear. Anyone with whom we exchanged a few words could be a Nazi, a traitor, or simply thoughtless. In a dictatorship, distrust was not only a commandment, it was a virtue.

And it was just as important, he continued, never to suffer from the isolation which inevitably accompanied opposition to the opinion on the street. He would give us a Latin maxim for that, which we should never forget; it would be best to write it down, then brand it in our memory and throw away the note. . . . He put a piece of paper in front of each of us and dictated: *Etiam si omnes—ego non!* [Even if all others do—I do not!] “It’s from the Gospel According to St. Matthew,” he explained, “the scene on the Mount of Olives.” He laughed when he saw what was on my piece of paper. If I remember rightly, I had written something like *Essi omniss, ergo no*. My father stroked my head and said, consolingly, “Don’t worry! There’s time enough for you to learn it!” My brother, who was already at Gymnasium [secondary school], had written the sentence correctly.

That, more or less, was how the hour in the study passed. . . . After we returned to our room, Wolfgang repeated, with all the superiority of an older brother, that we were adults now. He hoped I knew what that meant. I nodded solemnly, although I didn’t have a clue. Then he added that all of us together now formed a group of conspirators. He proudly pushed against my chest: “Us against the world!” I nodded once again without having the faintest idea what it meant to be against the world. I simply felt myself to be favored in some indefinable way by my father, with whom in the recent past I had increasingly got into arguments because of some piece of cheek or other. The way he sometimes acknowledged me from then on with a passing nod, I also interpreted as approval. That evening after the parental “Good night,” my mother came into our room once more, sat down for a few minutes on Wolfgang’s bed, and later on mine. “I only say cheerful things—or prefer to say nothing,” she had once declared. . . . She stuck to that now. But she looked depressed.

It was an adventure, as I often, in the weeks that followed, happily persuaded myself before falling asleep. Who had opportunity of entering upon such an enterprise with his father? I was determined not to disappoint him. . . .

Only when I was older did I understand the horror of the situation, in which constant watchfulness was required as a kind of law for parents as for children, mistrust was a rule of survival and isolation a necessity—where the mere clumsiness of a child could lead literally to death and ruin. Fifteen years later, when I asked my father about the dark side of his afternoon talk, his expression again immediately revealed just how worried he had been then. He recovered himself and replied that at the time he had been very conscious of the risk to which he exposed himself and his family. Perhaps he had gone too far. But he had hoped to God it would turn out well. And, indeed, the gamble had paid off. At any rate, neither we nor Winfried [a younger brother], who had been allowed to join the second sitting of the evening meal later on, had ever caused him any embarrassment.

And, just as he had wished, none of us had ever forgotten the maxim which, he remembered, he had bequeathed us. Indeed, the fine Latin maxim “Even if all others do—I do not!” belonged to every truly free life.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Fest, *Not I: Memoirs of a German Childhood*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Other Press, 2012), 71–75. Reprinted by permission from Other Press, LLC and Atlantic Books, UK.

## Connection Questions

1. What was Johannes Fest's dilemma? Why did he insist on having a "double evening meal"?
2. Why did the talk with his father have such an impact on Joachim? How did he understand it at the time it happened, and what did he come to see many years later? What did Johannes Fest teach his sons?
3. Were Johannes' Fest's choices courageous? Could they be seen as resistance? Why or why not?
4. What does the line "Even if all others do—I do not!" mean to you? When might that quote help to explain a decision you've made in your own life?