



**FACULTY
OF ARTS**
Masaryk University

Ludwig Wittgenstein: Life and Work

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Family background

- Born on 26 April 1889 in Vienna.
- His family was of mixed Jewish, Protestant and Catholic origin.
- His father Karl Wittgenstein was one of the richest businessmen in Austria. An owner of an iron and steel industry complex (Poldi Kladno).
- Their family house hosted the most distinguished artists of the time: Johannes Brahms, Franz Grillparzer, Felix Mendelssohn, Gustav Mahler, Gustav Klimt.
- LW has four brothers and three sisters. Two brothers committed suicide.

School years

- LW visited the second-rate *Realschule* in Linz. Adolf Hitler was one of his schoolmates.
- His earliest influences are
 - Karl Kraus, his satirical journal *Die Fackel* (“The Torch”)
 - Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*
 - Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, his conception of genius, the duty to think clearly as a duty to oneself)
 - Heinrich Hertz, *Principles of Mechanics*, his method of dissolving conceptual problems
 - Ludwig Boltzmann

Univerasity years, Berlin, Manchester

- LW studied mechanical engineering in Berlin and aeronautics in Manchester.
 - He conducted his own research leading a patent of a jet rotor (for a helicopter).
- At that time, he read
 - Bertrand Russell's *The Principles of Mathematics*
 - Gottlob Frege's *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*
- He suggested a solution of Russell's paradox.

Cambridge

- On 18 October 1911, he appeared in Russell's office. This date marks the begin of their fruitful collaboration.
- In 1913 he dictated his earliest text that survived: the *Notes on Logic*.
 - Logic is the basis of philosophy.
 - Distrust of grammar: surface grammar can lead us astray
- In 1914 he dictated notes to G.E. Moore which weren't accepted as a BA thesis.
 - the distinction between what can be *said* and what has to be *shown*.

The great war

- In 1914 LW got rid of his inheritance in favor of Austrian artists without means. Rainer Maria Rilke and Georg Trakl were among them.
- He was enlisted as a volunteer into Austrian army and sent to the Eastern front.
- Reading Leo Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief*.
- Often thinking of suicide and the meaning of life ("The meaning of life ... we can call God")
- Awarded for bravery and valor.
- Finally, in 1918, he was transferred to the Italian front and ended up in a prisoners of war camp.

The *Tractatus*

- During the war years, Wittgenstein wrote his first main work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.
 - The manuscript was rejected by two publishers.
 - Eventually published with a help of Bertrand Russell and with his introduction (which according to Wittgenstein misinterprets the main idea of the book).

Out of academia, teacher, gardener, architect

- In 1920 Wittgenstein began his unsuccessful career as primary schoolteacher in rural Austria.
- From 1926 to 1928 he worked as an architect designing a modernist house for his sister.
- In 1929 he returned to Cambridge and obtained his PhD for the *Tractatus*.
- Since the end of the 1920s, he was regularly meeting with the members of the Vienna Circle, esp. with Moritz Schlick and Friedrich Waismann.

Later years

- Wittgenstein spent his academic career as a lecturer and later as a professor in Cambridge.
- Often visiting his family in Vienna and his hut in Norway.
- In 1935 he investigated a possibility of moving to the Soviet Union.
- During the Second World War, he worked as a porter in a hospital and a technician for a medical research.
- He didn't manage to publish anything (save one paper) during his Cambridge years. He avoided academic journals and conferences.
- In 1947 he resigned his professorship.
- He died in 1951, writing his remarks to his last days.

Further reading

- Monk, R. (1990). *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. Jonathan Cape.
- McGuinness, B. (1988). *Wittgenstein. A Life (Vol. 1): Young Ludwig 1988–1921*. Duckworth.