

Marriage as Partnership—Magdalena and Balthasar Paumgartner of Nuremberg (Correspondence, 1582, 1591, and 1592)

Abstract

Wealthy Germans often commissioned diptych portraits to memorialize their marriages. The partnership of husband and wife stood at the core of the 16th-century household, which, in turn, formed the fundamental social unit of the era. The household was the primary civilizing milieu, the place where children learned both obedience and table manners. Domestic life is by nature poorly documented, but sometimes the records offer an all-too-rare picture of what it meant for a married couple to organize, administer, and provide for a household. The correspondence between Magdalena and Balthasar Paumgartner, a well-to-do Nuremberg couple, provides just such a glimpse into family life. The spouses shared the rule of their household, the rearing of their children, and the management of their mercantile ventures. Their letters begin soon after their engagement and continue through the death of their young son. They record joys and sorrow, intimate affection and hard calculation, faith in God, and worldly wisdom.

Source

1. Balthasar to Magdalena

December 15, 1582, in Lucca

My honest, good, true, friendly, dearest, closest bride:

I have at 12:00 this night received with great longing your letter of November 11. As I had carefully considered and calculated the mail delivery with which your reply to my letter must come, I waited with longing for a letter last Sunday; anticipating it, I did not leave the house the entire day. But how just it would have been to me, had you not written as soon as you did!

The news that all are well is received most happily. I and all my associates here are also, praise God, still well. May it be God's will to keep us in his grace and help us soon to come happily together again in our little garden of joy.

I am truly happy to hear that you have already visited my old Aunt Scheurl several times and that she was so friendly to you, which I never doubted she would be. Please continue to visit her when there is opportunity, and cultivate her counsel in various matters. I know she enjoys such attention and that she is especially well pleased when someone places their trust in her and takes her advice. She also wants us to think well of her and, when possible, to turn to her as to a friend. Although she is of little benefit to us, she is also the kind of person who will never do us any harm. But you already know well how to stroke the tail of the fox, of that I have no doubt.

Dearest one, with this letter you will have discovered the reason, and therein also my excuse, for being so slow and rather irregular in my writing. As far as I can tell from your present letter, you have not yet received such clarification from me. Matters were such that had I managed now and then to write to you while I was on the road, I would have brought you little joy and much worry. For as long as I am traveling and wagering on good fortune and not yet home, I have no assurance whatsoever that the strong

prohibitions against travelers issued because of plague will allow me to enter the towns through which I must pass and make my way back to you. I do not want to add to your worries with news of such difficulties.

But if you have often asked why and have been surprised that you have received no letter from me, the same has certainly also been true for me here. Every Sunday, when the mail usually arrives, there has been no end to the question in my mind why you have not written to me, and I have also pondered why you will not write to me until you have first received a letter from me. So let this anger between us end!

Most dearest love, I will await your answer to this letter here. Thereafter, you need not write to me again in Lucca, for around the end of January I will have to travel on business to other places and towns en route to Modena and Reggio, and for this reason your letters may no longer find me here. Too much is presently unsettled in our business to know for sure if I will depart so soon. I desire to go, but all too often and far too long I am prevented by many things beyond my control. If I could now complete one most important matter in which our firm has not a little invested, how quickly I would turn the other matters over to my brother and the staff here and be on my way! I am trusting and hoping in Almighty God that next January nothing will prevent my planned departure.

Meanwhile there is plenty for me to do here. Over the holiday I am going to Florence, which is forty miles away, but I will be returning here in three or four days. Meanwhile, trust that on my return from Florence my health may, praise God, be good and that I will have recovered from my wearisome journey, for I will return here beaten and exhausted. Take care not to let yourself be tormented by many vain worries over things which in the end you can do nothing about. You may be sure that as soon as my affairs here are settled, I will not tarry here one hour, but (God willing) may hope to be with you there even sooner than you and I now think. May dear God grant that hope soon and happily!

I am certainly distressed to hear about the long, grievous pestilence you are having. Others there have written to me that it has abated somewhat and that cold weather is on the doorstep. I hope to almighty God that it has not posed any further danger. Here we have had almost beautiful bright weather for five weeks. Many others would not say so, as at this time of the year it customarily mostly rains (presently the rain is steady) and many are surprised by the beautiful weather.

I had learned already before your letter from cousin Andreas Imhoff in Venice of the blessed departure from life of the good and pious Sebastian Imhoff in Lyon. Wilhelm Kress, who was with him in Lyon, suffered not a little with him. May the Almighty be to him as to all of us gracious and merciful and grant him after this life eternal life! Amen.

I had also learned before your letter that old Matthew Fetzer is a bridegroom. However, his bride, and the Rosina whom Dr. Wolff is marrying, are unknown to me.

Wilhelm Kress, whom I have put up here in good quarters, and brother Jörg both again send their sincere greetings and thank you kindly for thinking of them.

When you see Frau Lochner, indicate to her that I will do my best to get the crimson satin lining and the bicolored double taffeta. I had already ordered the lining before I got your letter.

Otherwise, apart from my work, I lead a truly boring life without any diversions whatsoever, save for a two-week visit here of players who performed every evening for four hours after sunset into the night. Among them was a woman who could (as one is accustomed to say) "speak and ride." I wish to God you could have seen her, for you would certainly have marveled. I passed some time watching the plays, but such things come to an end. After the Christmas holidays other players will come, but they are no match for the plays you have in St. Martha's and the Dominican cloister there. But I cannot sufficiently describe how eloquent and skillful the women in such plays here are, especially the one who was just here. If you

have not seen it for yourself, you cannot believe it. Without doubt, they have studied many storybooks and must be well taught.

Among other things in your letter, you announce that I should not again wait so long to write to you: “who knows [you say] whether I shall find you alive because of the bad air there.” By saying such a thing you have disturbed me not a little and raised all kinds of strange thoughts in my mind. If dear God cannot immediately reconcile us, I still trust he will spare us this time and help guide us joyfully back together again in our little chamber or flower garden. We are all in his hands, and if I do not place my entire hope in him, I must constantly worry that misfortune will befall me. I am hoping for the best from him and you should, too, in the end letting him rule.

Dearest and closest, I don’t know what more to write you at this time. Only that I thank you most sincerely for the little flower you have sent me from our garden. I am carefully preserving it for your sake. May I kindly ask you to give my sincere greetings and best wishes to your brother Paul, your sister, and to Katherina Imhoff and Magdalena Held. And for you, dearest Magdale, many hundred thousand friendly and sincere greetings! I commend you in trust to the grace of the loving God.

Your true, loving bridegroom,

Balthasar Baumgartner the Younger

2. Magdalena to Balthasar

December 9, 1591, in Nuremberg

Honest, friendly, dear Paumgartner:

I cannot stop writing to you every week, even though you give me no reason to do so. It is now three weeks since I last heard from you and there may be no letter again this Saturday, which will leave me quite dejected. I cannot help thinking of the old proverb: “Out of sight, out of mind.” Your brother tells me that you are preoccupied with a great many business letters, for which I think I am being made to suffer. Your not writing has made me wonder whether you are well, but Jörg gives me to understand that you are doing a great deal of writing. I pointedly reminded him that in the end I have simply to believe that there is no other reason for your not writing to me than that you have so much to do. He says that he understands from your letter [to him] that you will be departing Lucca before the fair. Confirmation of this I eagerly await with all my heart in your letter on Saturday; such news from you also makes me happy. We are, praise and thank God, still as we were, in good health; may God continue to keep us both so. Amen.

Dear Paumgartner, I am writing this letter because of the boy, who constantly admonishes me when I write to ask you to bring him a suit of clothes. So I am sending along with this letter a measure of the length and width of the jacket, also the length of the sleeves and the pants, all of which I have taken liberally from his old velvet suit, which still fits him properly, and I have also measured him. Choose only something black, for he already has two colored suits. Of course, in this matter it is yours to do as you please.

Old Bair is the same as a week ago; one still believes he cannot last more than three or four days. Every day some rotted flesh is cut away from his wound. However, he feels no pain and he no longer asks for anyone. He speaks only when he is thirsty or wants something to eat. He has lost interest in everything. May the Lord God end it soon for him.

Frau Tobias Kastner sends warm greetings to you. She is now living here with her mother on the third floor in Frau Lienhart’s manor house. She had traveled around for three days with her mother before

arriving. Blood has begun to flow from her mouth, and she is so weak that I do not know if she will last long. I visit her often, for she was earlier going to put up with us. She has now been sick here for three weeks. I worry that she will not last long when she goes back home [to Engelthal]. May God help us all!

Dear treasure, I ask you not to forget about my Italian coat, one like the one Wilhelm Imhoff brought his wife from Venice, which is worn as a fur. Do not think ill of me because I always try to wheedle something out of you in every letter. I especially ask that you bring some red and saffron-colored satin, if you can find an inexpensive measure or two. Brother-in-law Jörg says a package is coming to me in a trunk; I hope the material for the vest is what is on the way; I very much need it.

Later today I must be a dinner guest of old Frau Kleewein, who is entertaining the girl, her new daughter-in-law, who is going to stay with her for a while. In a week, God willing, we will celebrate brother Paul's betrothal. Would to God that you could also be here.

May Almighty God bring us together again in joy after this tedious separation that we all want to forget with his help!

Kind, dear treasure, I have nothing more to write at this time, only to send many friendly and warm greetings to your loyal heart. May the Lord God keep you in his grace. Many, many others, all of whom I cannot list, send greetings to you—Frau Gröser, Frau Scheurl, Herr [Hieronymus] Paumgartner—yesterday I gave him a note at an engagement party, he has been to see us and greets you—Frau Lochner, Frau Roemer, Wilhelm Imhoff, Plauen, [both] he and she—the list is just too long. So many danced with me this week at the Pfinzings' wedding [December 6]. They wished you the best and asked me when I last had a letter from you. I dissembled and said, "Last week," when it has already been three weeks! This for now!

Magdalena Balthasar Baumgartner,

your loving housewife

3. Magdalena to Balthasar

September 13, 1592, in Nuremberg

Honest, kind, dearest Paumgartner:

Your letter reached me last Saturday, and I was joyed to learn of your safe arrival [in Frankfurt] and that there is now much work for you there. May God grant that all goes well and that your work may be promptly finished, so that we may come together again in joy—although God has now made a painful tear through our joy. In the past we have always been able to reunite with greater happiness than will unfortunately happen now. Nevertheless, our strong hope in God can again make us joyful. Amen.

Dear Paumgartner, I have read with pleasure all the news in your letter, [and I have] also [learned] that the quinces are not a success. Nevertheless, would you try to get at least 300 for us, if you cannot get more? If you have also inquired about golden pears for yourself, you have done well. When you depart, buy some knives for the servants and simple folk. And do not forget sugar.

I have today written to old Frau Köppel in Schlackenwalde to remind her not to forget about the flax; I sent along a dozen honeycakes to make it easier for her to remember.

Herr [Hieronymus] Kress has today gained another son. They now have five sons. They could well give one to us, if it were permitted. Finold lifted him from the baptismal waters. His name is Joachim Friedrich. I have just been to the baptism.

Early tomorrow I am going with Christoph to run bird traps.

I must share with you some real news about weather here. For the last three days, praise God, have had good weather; since your departure weather had been constantly rainy. Had the rain lasted any longer, it would soon have incited something. For whenever it has rained around here, the rains have been torrential.

I also heard today that people are beginning to die there [in Italy, from plague]. Therefore, I ask you dearest treasure, to take care of yourself and not travel without first having eaten something.

During the past week, I have also worried about your father, who has not been well. But, praise God, have today received word that he is again a little better. I regret that you are not here and that we cannot go and be with him, because the end is now surely approaching.

At this very moment, when I want only to write to you, a barrel of wine has arrived. And, as it is being put away, a letter from you has also just come, making me very happy. You will surely also by now have received my last letter. The barrel of wine that has just arrived contains almost 4 kegs [360 liters].

Since your departure, I have heard nothing from Adam Stutzer [about the horses], and he has not been at home. Perhaps the order [for the horses] has not yet come from Salzburg; therefore, I cannot well advise you to buy the horses [you desire in Frankfurt]. Should you bring the four horses [the two older browns and two new grays] together, a buyer may want to pay you that much less for the two browns. But it is your decision to make, and what pleases you also pleases me.

Dear Paumgartner, I also asked you in my first letter to get me 2 or 3 measures of linen—[at least] I believe I remembered to do so. You can get it for around 10 or 12 pazen a measure; I need it for a jerkin.

Dear love, I have at this time nothing more to write, except to report that our largest catch of birds on Sunday was 15. Today at 6:00 it began again to rain. May God give us good weather again soon!

Warm and sincere greetings, dearest Paumgartner; may the Lord God keep you in his grace.

Magdalena Balthasar Baumgartner

Source of original German letters: *Briefwechsel Balthasar Paumgartners, des Jüngere mit seiner Gattin Magdalena, geb. Behaim. (1582–1598)*, edited by Dr. Georg Steinhausen. Published for the Literary Association in Stuttgart. Tübingen, 1895, pp. 6–10, 141–43, 174–75. Available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015018633506&view=1up&seq=5&skin=2021>.

Source of English translation: Steven Ozment, *Magdalena and Balthasar: An Intimate Portrait of Life in 16th-Century Europe Revealed in the Letters of a Nuremberg Husband and Wife*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 28–32, 78–80, 151–53.

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