Dear Paul, September 13th, 1916

The summer humidity is drifting away here in Quedlinburg. Soon the air will be filled with autumn’s chill and the leaves will turn to crunchy golden foil. I wish you could be here to see it, Paul. But I know that the accomplishments you are gaining at war are far more pristine. We are all so proud of you here. Your willingness to do this for Germany is such a remarkable act of honor and courage. I can only imagine how terrible the conditions are for you. Regardless, you know that what you are doing is worth it. You are the most powerful and determined man I know…a true war man. You have always had such a strong soul, Paul. I know that the war could never break that within you.

I snatched a few stamps from Mr. Heinrich’s office so that I could write you. I don’t think he will ever know. The man has so many. Things are tough. Mother’s cancer only seems to be getting worse. And the bills just keep coming. Poor Father is helpless. He can’t pay for all the doctors. But what are supposed to do? I don’t mean to worry you, Paul. I just wish there was something I could do. Yesterday I spent my last mark on a loaf of bread and a quilt for mother. Her treatments are making her cold. When I grab her hand to help her out of bed, her skin is like ice. I’ve never seen her look this weak. The flesh on her face is truly white. It hangs off her rigid bones. The doctors say to keep her well fed, but soon we will not be able to afford the loafs. The food shortage is also increasing. I fear the day when I go to the bakery and see that there is no more bread to bring home to mother. She says she thinks of you everyday and wishes she could write to you herself, but her hands are too weak. She always tells the doctors when she meets them, “My sweet Paul! He’s on the front! He’s out there defending our country.” And with a great big smile too.

Paul! I’ve though about it, and I want to join you in the forces. Father says it is the most honorable thing a man can do, and I couldn’t agree with him more. Competition is key. We need to wipe out those disgusting Brits. They deserve nothing but death. Here, I feel worthless. Just sitting here, watching mother’s health crumble. I need to do something. To help our country! I want to experience the glory of war, the way you do. I have already spoken to Kantorek, and I am enlisting this afternoon. They have arranged for my deployment, which will take place next week.

Please write back soon so that we know you are well and safe.

Love,

Kurt

Dear Kurt, October 1st, 1916

I just received your letter. I am afraid that it is too late for what I am about to say. Who knows if you will even receive this letter. But I have to tell you that war is not what you think it is. You cannot enlist under this mind-set and make the same mistake I did- yes enlisting was a mistake. Father doesn’t know. Kantorek doesn’t know. And you don’t know. There is no glory in war.

Everyday the generals are commanding us to fight and fight harder. Be stronger, more vicious, better Germans. I ask myself, how is this at all characteristic of a German? And a good one nonetheless? It appalls me inside. A English man is no different than a German. He too has a family at a home…a sick mother who needs more money. He too likes to drink cognac and smoke cigars with his friends. Yesterday I was hiding in a British trench, when a British soldier jumped in. I had to stab him, so that he would not stab me. Until this moment, I had never killed a man with my bare hands- such an intimate interaction. It felt like murder. I looked inside his pocket and saw a photo of his little girl. War, Kurt, is not what you think it is. On the front, we don’t have enemies. They are our opponents. We have been placed here. The German and British governments are our true enemies. They have told us whom to hate. It is our duty to obey our leaders, but that does not mean we truly obey them in our hearts- only in our actions. I came to war for the wrong reasons. I thought it would be a brave act. I felt like it was my duty to help our country. But now that I am here, I realize that I am not helping our country and I am not being brave. I am a coward who does what the generals say even when it is against my beliefs. I don’t know who I was before I enlisted. That man is a stranger to me now. The war has crushed me and it will crush you too if you enlist with these intentions. We are not war men. We are not iron youth.

I hope that it is not too late and you still have time to rethink your decision. Believe me, Kurt, you are not a war man- and you should not want to be.

Love,

Paul