Viktor's letters to Martha

1/33

Excerpts from a long letter, apparently shortly after Hitler's seizure of power.

The letter deals largely with a planned trip of Martha's to U.S. in summer of 1933 which did materialize.

Martha complains that I am mostly in the company of students.

Naturally it has been a great disappointment not to have established social relations with the older married colleagues; but this is not my fault, just as it was not the fault of Parmenters or Mr. Hall (American visitors to Spemann's lab, in Freiburg) that we invited them only once to our home! Perhaps that may change when you come here. Perhaps you will succeed better in getting a foothold somewhere. Women sometimes find that easier. But you know yourself how difficult it is to establish new friendships in a mature age (!!). The situation with Willier is different. (He was the embryologist and my closest colleague in Chicago. I worked in his lab. and lived at that time in his house, until Martha came in June or July.) She is very provincial, without wider interest. He is a very fine, intelligent and matter-of-fact man, but somehow also narrow and above all inhibited, always behind a wall, without a friendly-advancing warmth. I simply do not warm up and I feel very uncomfortable, also inhibited. Spemann (who was in U.S. and came home enthusiastic) cannot judge at all. 1) He has lived in a more or less heightened illusion, just as my father who reacted sometimes to new impressions, 2) He traveled around briefly, was celebrated everywhere, everybody gave his best in 1 or 2 conversations. He has not lived here and has not got to know the people really. Besides, he is such a fascinating personality in intercourses that to a larger extent he puts his stamp on the relations, right from the beginning, (whereas I have a wait-and-see attitude and I am reserved) (No longer! Thank goodness!) I have started all this again, so that you don't bring with you great illusion in this respect.

I hope very much for Woods Hole (where we would spend the summer) where the families are torn away from their daily routine, get bored sometimes without radio and shows and therefore are more ready for socializing.
Now quickly a few words from here. The most important achievement is that I have succeeded in transplanting limb buds in the chick embryos. The other day there was a real little sensation in the lab when I displayed the first little fellow which had on one side between leg and wing a very beautifully normal 5th limb, exactly halfway between the normal limbs, and surprisingly well healed in and well developed. It went well right away, with some tricks, and I am now in a heated campaign of experimentation. I am particularly interested in finding out whether the limbs are normally innervated: and if so, whether the corresponding motor centers which are "overloaded" react with enlargement=hyperplasia. Altogether the reciprocal to the extirpation, except that the positive finding, i.e. hyperplasia would be more convincing (for peripheral influence ). Apart from the fact that the *** of ***, opens up quite generally new possibilities. Lillie was also very much interested and pleased (erfrent)... I am now encouraged to transplant the embryonic part that is suspected to be the organizer. If one can succeed in proving that Hensen's node is an organizer, then we are a step further (I have never done this. I think Waddington proved it much later.) You see, I have become a chick-development embryologist ganz und gar, mit Haut und Haar (literally, with skin and hair). I hope that if all goes well to finish in February with the limb transplantations and to try the organizer experiment in March. Above all it is very important to me to see to it that my credit in this country rises as high as possible. Because since the overthrow (Unsturz) in Germany, my thoughts are very strongly preoccupied with the possibility of emigration. For that reason it is so important that you live for a while here in Chicago and get to know the circumstances at the University and the city. I must say, I know exactly that emigration would be bitterly hard for both of us. But if there is no possibility in Germany to advance altogether, then, as far as I can see, the U.S. is the only possibility. From here, the political situation looks very bleak, reactionary and anti-semetic and no prospect of change in the next 10 years, and these are just the years of our productivity (arbeit). Of course, sometimes I think one should stay and try to stand one's ground and help to fight for a free Germany.