

Translated excerpt

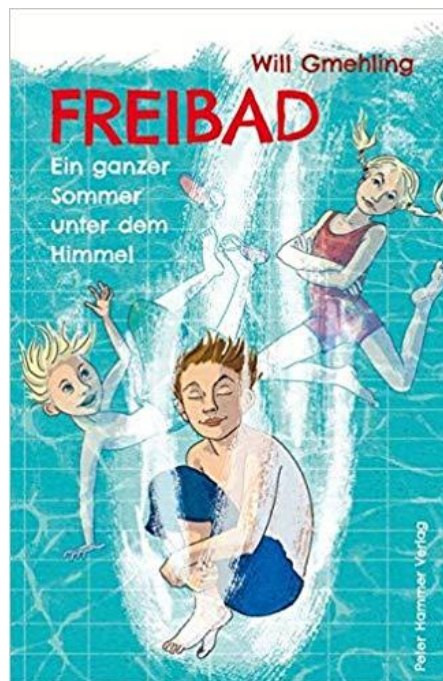
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Freibad. Ein ganzer Sommer unter dem Himmel

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Will Gmehling
The lido. A whole summer in the sunshine

Translated by John Reddick



We were at the indoor baths, Katinka, Robbie and me, in the learner pool, all three of us. Robbie wanted to learn proper swimming and we were showing him what to do. But he kept swallowing water and then coughing like crazy. Katinka whacked him on the back, which helped. Robbie wasn't going to give up. We told him how he ought to kick his legs, but he just thrashed around like a demented dog. Although he already had his beginner's swimming badge, he was often still scared of being in the water on his own.

Close by the pool there were loungers where people could relax. There was a woman on one of them with a little kid, she was thumbing through a magazine. The kid was wearing a nappy - nothing else. He was probably bored out of his mind - anyway, he started whining. But the woman just kept her head stuck in her magazine.

Suddenly her phone rang, and she answered it. She immediately started gabbling away, so loud that everyone could hear. She was laughing at first, but then she started getting worked up. Her kid clambered down from the lounge and tottered off in the direction of the water. The woman was having a real go at someone on her phone: 'You're having a thing with that stupid cow Mona, don't think I don't know!' She was in such a rage, she was deaf and blind to everything else - including the fact that her child was staggering towards the swimming pool. We thought - Well, she must know what she's doing, and turned back to concentrate on Robbie.

Then all of a sudden there was a loud SPLASH, and we felt spray hitting our backs. We turned round, and there was the kid floundering in the water, thrashing about with his arms and legs just like Robbie, swallowing loads of water and looking really peculiar. We looked at the woman on her lounge. She'd completely lost it - she was ranting away on her phone like mad and nothing else was getting through to her. The pool attendant was a dead loss: he was just sitting there in his glass box staring at a computer screen.

Katinka and me, we didn't faff around - we swam straight to the edge of the pool: the kid had already gone under, with nothing showing except his hair. I dived down, grabbed him by the arms, and yanked him up to the surface. It was dead easy. He was completely still at first once his head was out of the water, and we thought, Crikey - hope he's not dead. But then he started hollering and turned bright red.

Only now did the woman realise her child wasn't with her. We waved to her and pointed our fingers at him. The woman screamed. She dropped her phone, ran to the

pool, held her nose, and jumped in. She snatched the kid from my arms and started crying. Then she started bawling at us - that was so out of order.

The attendant finally came running over to us, and we told him what had happened. He called an ambulance, just in case the kid had swallowed too much water and could get brain damage. Turned out everything was ok, fortunately. The woman calmed down and wouldn't stop thanking us, and someone turned up from the paper and took photos of us and the kid in his nappy.

All of a sudden we were famous. Everyone at school kept staring at us: they were proud of us even though barely any of them liked us.

A few days later the swimming pool boss came to our house, shook everyone's hand, and showered us with praise. We thought, Come off it, we've had enough of this.

'And so as to give the three of you some extra fun,' declared the man, 'we'd like to give you this free pass.'

We didn't get it at first.

'You can go to the open-air pool whenever you like throughout the entire summer, completely for free!'

We had no objection to that, needless to say! It was already almost the end of April, and the pool would be opening on the fifteenth of May.

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Everybody said we were heroes. We weren't. We just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And I've only given you this rundown so you know how we came to be spending every day at the pool. Every single day. Right throughout the summer. From the fifteenth of May to the fifteenth of September. More than a hundred days. Even when it was raining.

After all, there wasn't anything else on offer; I mean, our parents couldn't... There just wasn't ever enough money for holidays and that stuff. And Robbie needed to get into the water.

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Robbie's name is really Robert. Mine's Alfred, but everyone calls me Alf. It used to get on my nerves, but not any more. I like it now.

Katinka's name is just plain Katinka.

We're the Bukovskis from the block of flats behind the railway line. I'm ten, Katinka's eight, and Robbie's seven. Mum works in the bakery at the station, and Dad's a taxi driver.

We live in Georg Elser Strasse. There are two bedrooms - one for Mum and Dad, one for us three - plus living room, kitchen and bathroom. No balcony.

But who needs a balcony anyway when you can spend the entire summer in a swimming pool, out in the open air all the time?

There's even a 10-metre diving board.

And next to the volleyball pitch there's a kiosk that has everything you could possibly need. If you have the money.

Our swimming pool.

Where you can just pop out and watch one of the top football teams in the country practising on their training ground right next to the pool.

And where you think, Wow! a summer like this is going to last for ever.

4

It was lovely and hot on the fifteenth of May. The minute school was over we collected Robbie from day-care. When we arrived he was skulking in the corner looking furious: someone had grabbed his favourite car off him - a boy a lot stronger than him. Katinka was going to get stuck into the boy right then and there, but I didn't think that was a good idea. We were dead set on the swimming pool, after all. So Katinka just shook her fist at him. He grinned. He'd already turned eight, so he wasn't scared of my sister.

We didn't have any money for the bus, so we walked the whole way. We'd have to get used to that, 'cos there wouldn't be any money the next day either, or the day after that.

We went across the river and entered the bit of town with all the pubs. People were sitting outside drinking all sorts of different stuff. As we walked past a café Robbie pointed at a man with a bottle of lemonade on the table in front of him and said, 'I want some too.'

'No way', I told him, 'too expensive.'

Mum had given us three euros, and that had to do for all of us.

Robbie pulled an angry face, and we continued on our way.

We walked past loads of people stuffing themselves with cakes and ice cream, and I decided not to take this route again. Not with so little money in our pockets. Not with Robbie holding my hand.

Then we crossed a wide street, and there it was, right in front of us: the stadium. And on the other side of it the open-air pool.

Robbie let go of my hand and broke into a run. Katinka chased after him. I laughed.

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At the entrance we showed our free pass. The woman at the till gave us a suspicious look and checked with a colleague, then they rang someone or other, probably the boss at the indoor baths.

They let us in once everything was sorted.

We'd already been here a few times with our Mum and Dad. Once you're in, the first thing you see is a great big grassy area. The pools are all on the other side of it. A paddling pool for the little kids, then the non-swimmers pool, complete with slides. Next to that, the diving pool. Beyond that, the 50-metre pool with swimming lanes.

The sun was shining, so I'd reckoned there'd be loads of people there. But there weren't - and I soon found out why.

We found a spot to spread out our towels and pulled our swimming things on. Then we dashed to the pool with the slides and jumped straight into the water. It was freezing cold.

The water's always nice and warm in the indoor baths, especially in the non-swimmers pool. Not here, though. Here, it was as if someone had tipped ice cubes into the water, ten tons of them at the very least. Katinka scrambled out again straightaway, and so did I. But Robbie stayed in the water - he was having a great time! We kept a careful eye on him. The cold didn't bother him at all, he just pranced around in the water, happy as a sandboy.

One of the attendants came over and stood there looming right over us. His belly was as fat as if he'd swallowed a gigantic beach ball. He also had a gigantic moustache and looked like a walrus. No tusks, though.

'The water's freezing cold', Katinka informed him. 'It's crazy.'

'Complain to the city council', he retorted. 'The water here isn't heated.'

'Why not?' she asked.

'Cost-cutting', he grunted. 'You're the kids with the free pass, aren't you? My mate at the indoor pool told me. So where are your parents then?'

'At work.'

'Keep a good eye on that little lad. You stick to the non-swimmers pool, got it? I'll be watching you.'

'Sure', I said. 'And anyway I've done my silver and my sister's done her bronze.'

This cut no ice with him. He put on a tough face and glared. In the end he just left us to our own devices and went off to drink coffee with the other attendants.

Robbie waved to us: he wanted us to join him in the water. He looked so happy in the huge pool, where there were almost no other swimmers - but he looked a bit lonely too. He slapped his hand on the water and shouted our names.

'Ok', said Katinka, 'Let's do it.'

6

Once you've been in cold water for a while you get used to it. Main thing is, you need to keep moving, then you don't even notice how cold it is. We played all sorts of games, like pretending to be sharks: we swam round and round Robbie, grabbed hold of him, and made as if to bite him. He loved it.

It's not true that he's disabled or backward. He's just different. When he paints, it looks as if a baby's done it, or an alien from outer space. It's just a multi-coloured

scrawl. And he doesn't speak much - he points at things instead. Mum and Dad took him to the doctor. Several times. But he said there's nothing wrong with him.

Robbie can get into a rage really quickly. Or he'll suddenly burst into tears, just because someone's trodden on an ant or spilt their cocoa. That's the way he is. That's Robbie Bukovski. We turned blue with cold after a while and had to get out of the pool and into the sun really quickly. Robbie didn't want to, so we simply yanked him straight out. He couldn't stop us because he isn't all that strong.

We dried ourselves off and stretched out on our towels. But no sooner had we lain down than we felt hungry. We didn't have any food though.

'Chips would be great right now', said Katinka.

'Yum!' said Robbie. 'Tasty chips!' There were chips at the kiosk. One euro fifty for a small portion. We ordered two.

'Go on, put lots on!' Katinka told the man who was serving. 'There are three of us. And we're so hungry we could eat a horse.'

The man smiled and asked what we wanted on the chips, ketchup or mayonnaise.

'Both', said Katinka. 'And shovel it on!' He put loads on both portions and put them on a small tray. There were masses of other yummy things there too - lemonade, fruit snakes, ice cream. Robbie pointed at them and rolled his eyes.

'Forget it', I said. 'We've no money left.'

We were about to leave the kiosk when, at that very moment, a girl came in. She had long brown hair. She was wearing a white T-shirt and white trousers. She came in, and she dazzled me just like the sun.

I dropped the tray, and the chips landed on the filthy soaking-wet floor.

'Oh no!' groused Katinka. 'You idiot!'

Robbie burst into tears and started eating the chips off the floor.

'Nah, don't do that!' called the man behind the counter. 'I'll give you some more.'

'Are you kidding?' asked Katinka. 'Will you really do that?'

'Yes, I will', he replied. 'Cos it's my birthday today!'

'Ooh! Did you get nice presents?'

'Nah', said the man.

'Why not?'

‘Because... Because I don’t have nobody who gives me presents...’

‘And how old are you?’

‘49.’

‘Wow! You’re even older than our Dad!’ Katinka exclaimed. ‘You’re dead ancient!’

‘Yeah, so I am’, said the man, and handed us our chips.

Two portions!

‘Thanks!’ me and Katinka said. Robbie just gave him a really sweet look.

We went back to our towels and ate the chips. When we’d finished them we sunbathed. Then we had another go at teaching Robbie to swim. But he just didn’t get it.

We went over to the small water-slide with him. He must have gone down it a good fifty times, but after that he was completely done in.

‘We’ll go on the big one tomorrow’, I said. Robbie laughed with delight.

‘Not you, though’, said Katinka. ‘You have to be eight to go on that one.’

Robbie looked as if he was going to start blubbing.

Then we did a bit more sunbathing.

At half past six we dressed and got ready to go, as we had to be home by seven.

There were daisies on the grassy area, loads of them - Robbie pointed at them.

‘Dead right’, said Katinka, and picked a small bunch of them. I reckoned she was going to give them to Mum, but she headed for the kiosk, with us trailing along behind.

She was already singing by the time we reached the kiosk: ‘Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you!’ Singing in a loud, ceremonious sort of voice, she handed the bunch of daisies to the chip man.

‘Have a lovely birthday’, she said. ‘And find yourself a wife. You’ll get presents then.’

‘I... I’ll do me best’, said the man, swallowing hard. ‘Thank you!’

We'd just reached the exit when the beautiful girl suddenly reappeared. She was standing by the till chatting to one of the pool attendants. She looked straight through us as we walked past her.

7

We walked along the riverbank and watched all the people playing football and having barbecues on the grass. There was the yummy smell of sizzling sausages, and it made us feel hungry. We still had a long way to go, first to the bridge, then on through the suburban streets beyond. We could have come on our bikes, of course, but it wasn't possible because of Robbie: he cycles like a drunken alley cat and veers all over the place. And he's forever stopping to have a little muse or to gaze at something. 'In city traffic it's just too dangerous', Dad had said. So we had to walk. From one delicious waft of barbecued meat to another.

We talked about everything under the sun. Katinka told us about a girl in her class called Klara. Her legs were different lengths, so she had a limp. She stammered as well, and her eyesight was bad. She had a couple of other things wrong with her too, but I can't remember what they were. Klara had a dog that brought her to school every morning. The dog was already ancient and could only shamble along really slowly, but he always brought Klara all the way to the school entrance. Then when school was over the dog was always there again, waiting to take Klara home.

I yacked about the boxing club that had opened a few weeks earlier just around the corner from our house. I'd walked straight in, sat on a bench, and watched. They probably thought I was the brother of one of the boxers. I was no sooner in there than I knew this was my sort of place. It was exactly the sort of thing I wanted to do. Box. And soon.

Robbie didn't say much, but he constantly pointed at things he'd noticed: stones by the roadside, a ship moored by the river bank - that sort of stuff.

We talked about our plans - for the summer, I mean. Katinka wanted to do crawl for a whole kilometre. I wanted to jump off the 10-metre diving board. The plan for Robbie was crystal clear: he had to learn proper swimming. His beginner's badge wasn't enough.

'We'll get you there, kiddo', Katinka told him. 'Show some steel - that's all you need to do.'

Robbie looked at her and smiled his special Robbie smile.

All of a sudden, just like that, Katinka jumped onto the bonnet of a car and up onto the roof. It was a black VW Golf.

She started dancing.

‘Get off there!’ I yelled. ‘There’ll be trouble!’

‘“Oh, oh, trouble, trouble, trouble”’, sang Katinka *[zitiert wohl Taylor Swifts ‘I knew you were trouble’; vgl. <https://classic-rocks.de/englisch-lernen-popmusik/taylor-swift-i-knew-you-were-trouble.html>]* as she carried on dancing.

With someone inside the car banging on the window and shaking their fist at us, she leapt from the roof and we sped away.

We reached home on our housing estate at exactly seven.

8

We ran up the stairs as we didn’t like using the lift - it smelt funny. And anyway, three floors were a piece of cake. For us, that is. For old Herr Mahlstedt in the flat opposite they were like the Himalayas, though. He had to stop after every few steps, puffing and panting like a steam train, before shuffling on again. Katinka was full of admiration for Herr Mahlstedt, because he never gave up. Steel, that’s what he had. And he was always friendly and full of laughter whenever he saw us, even though he was already more or less dead.

Mum was sitting in the kitchen cutting up onions. She had tears in her eyes as a result, but otherwise her face was all smiles.

‘So how was your first day?’ she immediately asked us.

We said our first day had been good. We told her about the freezing cold water and the chip man and Katinka singing ‘Happy birthday’. We didn’t mention Katinka’s little dance on the roof of the car, needless to say.

‘Any progress with the swimming?’ asked Mum.

Robbie shrugged his shoulders.

She didn’t ask whether we’d kept an eye on him. She knew she could rely on us. In things like that, anyway. ‘You’ll get there’, she said, tossing the onions into the frying pan. ‘Lay the table, will you. Dad’ll arrive any minute.’

And so he did. He always went straight into the bathroom to have a wash, then into the kitchen to give Mum a kiss. First her, then us.

‘Blimey, what a day!’ he grumbled. ‘There was this bloke, he didn’t want to pay. Said he had a better use for his money.’

‘So what did you do?’ I asked him.

‘Grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and gave him a good shaking. That did the trick.’

I looked at Dad. He was strong as a bear. And if you get a thorough shaking from a bear you’re in deep trouble.

‘So what delicacy’s on the menu today, then?’

‘Spaghetti with tomato sauce.’

‘Oh, great!’ we all chorused. Even though we had spaghetti and tomato sauce pretty often.

‘Made the sauce myself!’ added Mum.

‘Oh, great!’ we said again.

But first we had to eat salad. Lots of salad. It was good for us, Mum said.

Dad, too, wanted to hear all about the swimming. Then Mum told us about her colleague Maria, who suffered from a bad back but had to work all the same; about her boss, who never said ‘Thank you’; about a new cleaning fluid that smelt revolting.

After we’d eaten we all watched a film together. It was called *Miss Minoes [ja, tatsächlich!]*, about a woman who’d once been a cat. Mum had seen it when she was a little girl, and she still loved it. Then we went to bed. We were tired after such a long day. And there was school the next day.

Mum turned the light out.

I thought about the 10-metre diving board. And about the girl who’d dazzled me just like the sun.