

Translated excerpt

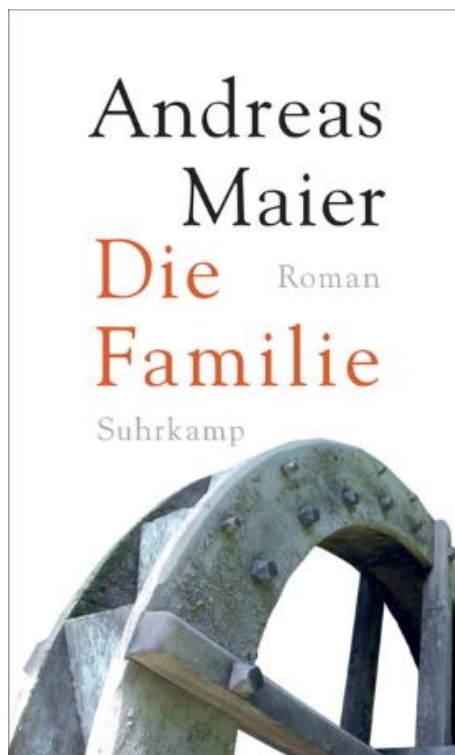
Andreas Maier
Die Familie

Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2019
ISBN 978-3-518-42862-7

pp. 8-26

Andreas Maier
The Family

Translated by Ross Benjamin



Prologue in the Old Swimming Hall

In my childhood, the old Jugendstil swimming hall on Haagstrasse was still open. It was used by schools for physical education.

In eighth grade my brother, like a few others in his class, still couldn't swim. That year the class, girls and boys, often marched from the school, the Augustinerschule, to Bismarckstrasse, past Adenauerplatz, and then into the changing rooms of the old swimming hall. There, clothing was shed, bathing attire slipped on. Then the whole troop assembled in the hall, which was sparingly adorned with Jugendstil accessories, where they first had to fall into formation to be inspected for completeness. The teacher shouted: Authorized strength? The group called back in unison how many members the class numbered. The teacher cried: Effective strength? The group shouted how many were actually present that day.

That year the class had a new physical education teacher. At the beginning of the school year, the first time they lined up on the poolside in the old swimming hall, my brother and his classmates who couldn't swim duly declared themselves non-swimmers.

The teacher directed the handful of pupils unable to swim to the non-swimmers' area and ordered them to stay there.

In an ironic mood, my brother and his peers sat down in the water and splashed around a little, though not little kids anymore (some of those who had had to repeat a year were already going to the Schillerlinde tavern during break periods and drinking hard cider). Sooner or later

they would be summoned, and then the arduous process of learning to swim would begin, exercises, instructions, perhaps arm floats, swim rings...

The teacher had a cohort in the swimmers' area do sprint drills, trained them in the correct breaststroke technique, and gave special attention to those who could swim the crawl or even butterfly (mostly boys). They were allowed to compete against each other.

My brother, thirteen at the time, and his peers sat in their bathing suits in the non-swimmers' area and splashed each other with unconcealed delight. They made mocking comments about the high-performance training being undertaken in the swimmers' area and the exertions of the athletes. After an hour they were still sitting there, finding it all very funny—especially the lack of interest shown in them by the teacher, who wanted above all to determine who the strong swimmers were. At the end of the double period came the order to march off: the non-swimmers left their splash area, shed their bathing gear, took showers, put on their clothes, and strode together with the others past Adenauerplatz, along Bismarckstrasse, and back to the Augustinerschule.

The following week the non-swimmers' club talked about nothing but the strange splash session they'd had.

A week later there was the same procession to the swimming hall, and the group to which my brother belonged again sat down in the children's area. There they sat, talking, lying on their backs on the tiles, letting the water wash around them, making little waves, and having another fully relaxed two hours. It didn't bother anyone that—as yet—there was once again not the slightest question of receiving swimming lessons from the teacher.

This odd swim class was a topic of conversation when my brother came home from school and informed the family about it. In those days he was always relating funny anecdotes. The teacher came across as a grotesque figure, the group of students splashing around in a quasi-

infantile way as involuntary participants in an absurd situation, which in my brother's telling was representative of all school experiences.

But then, he reported, after a few weeks, the non-swimmer group took the initiative and made their way from the splash area to the teacher to ask him what exactly the point of this class was actually supposed to be for them anyway.

This didn't interest the teacher.

And so the rest of the semester passed in the same way. Up front the champions did their sprints or practiced medley swimming, while in the rear area the splashing continued, and it was repeatedly brought to the teacher's attention that what was happening here wasn't getting some of the pupils anywhere. This did not detract from the splash group's ironic view of their own situation. It was indeed an exercise in nonsense, but at the same time very relaxed: little, chlorinated waves you made yourself constantly murmuring around you, and all this in a moribund, by then quite dilapidated Jugendstil atmosphere (three years later the swimming hall was closed forever).

Then came report cards. The non-swimmers hadn't participated in sprint, long-distance, or medley swimming. They had not performed. All of them received a failing grade.

My father, a lawyer and at that time a Christian Democratic Union mayoral candidate, was the parent representative; his deputy, a local Social Democratic Party politician, was from Florstadt. Both the son of the Social Democrat and the son of the Christian Democrat had sat in the splash area and both had been sent into school break with a failing grade in physical education.

What followed was a war by all legal means. On one side the Christian Democratic-Social Democratic grand coalition, or Friedberg-Florstadt alliance, on the other side the administration of the Augustinerschule, between the fronts the physical education teacher and the total "authorized strength" of the class.

My father and his deputy won the war. The physical education grades were expunged from all the students' report cards. For those who had been awarded a top grade, all the sprints, all the long-distance workouts and all the medley training had been for nothing, because now instead of the top grade there was only a dash in the report card, along with a note that the students' performance this semester was ungraded on pedagogical grounds.

The family owned by far the largest plot of land on the bank of the Usa River. It was so huge that on the opposite side of the street, named Mühlweg, there was room for at least ten houses. Measuring over two hundred meters in length, the grounds took up almost the whole stretch from the Twenty-Four Halls, our railroad viaduct, to Barbarastrasse. In my childhood, all that separated us from the viaduct was a small tannery standing between us and the railroad line. Everything else belonged to us.

The family legend went like this: In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Bolls had come from the Vogelsberg or the Rhön Mountains to the Wetterau and had founded here a stonemasonry business; the founder's name was Melchior Boll. The company was located on the bank of the Usa, where I later grew up. My great-grandfather Karl had a large orchard on the grounds, kept chickens and goats there, had numerous apple trees and a huge barrel from which he served the neighbors cider. They brought their glasses with them, and then they sat on benches in the shed next to the barrel, eating walnuts and drinking sweet cider and in the New Year the finished hard cider.

In 1970 my parents moved to the property. Previously we had lived in my grandparents' house in Bad Nauheim, though I have no memory of it. My conscious life starts with the early days on the property in Friedberg.

I have only fragmentary memories of the beginning. The stonework company owned by my grandfather (Wilhelm), great-grandfather (Karl), and great-great-grandfather (Melchior) was still operating; nothing marked off our part of the land with the new residential house from the company grounds: there was no fence, no wall, not even a visual boundary; one could simply stroll

across the field over to the company, without having to set foot on the sidewalk. Most of the time I saw my mother walking over in her light-colored between-seasons coat; at the time she was manager of the company. The office was housed in the old Falk Mill, a half-timbered building that had been there from time immemorial; it too stood on the property, and was missing its mill wheel. Also missing was the river, for its course had been diverted around the turn of the century. Now the wheelless mill simply stood on the side of the street, five meters from it. It was the oldest building in the quarter.

Surrounding our new house was open terrain, at first unplanted, except for a few remaining apple trees. Evidently, the fruits and vegetables that, according to family legend, great-grandfather Karl was said to have grown there must have all disappeared in the course of the house's construction. Now there was nothing but new tracts of green grass everywhere.

All that I experienced on this land had mythical qualities for me and seemed to me enlarged many times over. For example, one day my father and a few people dug a pit, perhaps two or three meters long, more than one meter wide, and one meter deep. What purpose this pit served I don't remember, but for us children it was for days a primitive dwelling: we roofed it over, put blankets in it, fantasized adventures...As others climb up to their tree houses, we clambered down into that pit. Making my way down into this pit was particularly adventurous, because for me it was immensely deep. Nor was it easy to get out; I always had to climb onto something, and usually someone pulled me up. It must have been the earliest days on Mühlweg, before I was overcome with the great fear that later kept me largely aloof from my surroundings (and such pit adventures) throughout my childhood.

Perhaps in those days I was still open to impressions, and the time spent in the pit meant my first impression of "being underground." I certainly had no association with "grave," but I had

never before spent time between “walls” consisting exclusively of earth, and I had never before experienced life below the grass cover.

Another situation, also very early on: a tent in the garden, without a purpose, pitched only for us children, presumably most of all for my sister, since the tent (a sort of party tent for children) was frequented mainly by my sister and her friends. It was up for a few days. Recalling that time today, I can’t help thinking of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. It was a ritual of being outdoors. Of course, I have no memory of whatever happened there. In my mind’s eye I see the tent alone. As the pit was the first in my life, so too was the tent the first.

Then: Fire. Burning torches driven into the ground. Night, stars, presumably a garden party thrown by my parents on plastic chairs with pretzel sticks, Gervais dip, and beer, but for me it was solely these odorous, puffing torches, wafting up like ghosts and flickering around. Perhaps my first open fire ever, for in my grandmother’s house there was no fireplace, and I’d never seen garden torches before. And so I gathered primal images on this piece of land: earth, pit, fire, but also: stars, moon, night.

From the beginning there were some people who “helped out” in the garden. Judging by a very dim memory, one of them might have been my uncle Heinz. At that time, when we moved to the property, our relationship with him was not yet strained. So it seemed to me at least; I sensed no discord or strain of any sort. Of course, the world and my family’s relationships with each other were always presented to me, the small child, as ideal.

My uncle J., disabled from birth, barred for life from an ideal world by a pair of forceps applied to his head, even if he might have felt as if half of his being were in such a world, helped out in the garden (if at all) only under compulsion. In the end I can see only one scene involving him in my mind’s eye: him going on a mole hunt with a spade. At times we had countless molehills

in the garden, and on occasion my father told us somewhat wearily about how enthusiastically J. rained blows on the moles, killing them and afterward throwing them into the Usa. Otherwise he never killed or was even inclined to torture animals. In this case, however, it was a matter of the hunt, success and recognition. In those days, I myself always saw only the hills, never a mole itself. I saw my first mole only decades later, in the Palatinate, while jogging. (No sooner had it noticed me than it disappeared under the grass cover into the earth, just as we had back then in our temporary garden pit.)

But even if I recall only this solitary image, I am nonetheless firmly convinced that Uncle J. helped in the garden in the beginning. Whether at the time they already called the land a garden, open as it was to the whole surrounding world, I can't say.

The terrace behind the house looked strange, a platform made of washed concrete; without any frame, it just extended into the vast meadow like a dock into the open sea.

Then came the fence facing the street, the first rose beds were planted, rhododendrons around the terrace, every Saturday the smell of mowed grass and at 5:15 p.m. my father invariably asking how Eintracht Frankfurt had played. For him the property was at once an idyll and a job.

Later a system of plastic pipes was laid in the garden, so that you had sprinkler water at your disposal everywhere and didn't have to drag fifty-meter-long hoses behind you. The installation was planned with military precision; hundreds of meters of trenches all around the house were dug up and filled in again. An arbor was added, and in summer all sorts of sprinkler devices now sprayed the garden, their mechanical ticking and tocking competing with the chinking of the blackbirds at dusk.

This, then, was where my family now lived. It had been their goal.

Even as a child I could recite by heart the legal circumstances surrounding the property, for they caused conflict and were the predominant topic at home. My great-grandfather's property, from the actual company premises through the part where we now lived to the end of the orchard, had after my grandfather's death been subdivided into four parcels. One parcel belonged to my mother: On it stood our house, and it also included the apple orchard. One parcel belonged to my uncle Heinz: It was located between our house and the former company grounds, where in those days the halls and cranes still stood. One parcel belonged to my uncle J.: a birch grove beyond the halls stretching to the Usa. The final parcel, the actual company property, was "held in common" by my mother, Uncle J., and Uncle Heinz.

In the first years after the house was built, my father would often drive to talks with my uncle Heinz and his Danish wife Dörte, who was considered an element of uncertainty. The matter under discussion was the fourth parcel "held in common." My father would climb tensely into his company Mercedes, my mother standing worriedly in the driveway, watching him drive away, then she would go back into the house and for the next few hours would herself be so nervous that she'd spend the whole time in the basement ironing or pressing to distract herself. When my father would finally drive back up the driveway, my mother would have to help him out of the car. Afterward my father would sit in the kitchen or in the living room, holding his head, unable to speak for a long time, completely distraught, and muttering to himself that my uncle Heinz was crazy. He would then have to be led to his bedroom, where he would try to bring his migraine under control. Before Heinz, my parents said at the time, would be willing to discuss anything concerning the jointly owned fourth parcel, he wanted—for completely incomprehensible reasons; he was, after all, crazy—one hundred thousand marks. In this way, for a long period of my life, my uncle Heinz was someone (supported or seduced by Aunt Dörte) who, just because and for no

reason, wanted one hundred thousand marks, a sum that seemed to me as a child huge enough to last a lifetime.