

Chapter 12. Grothendieck's Family I

In this biographical account, we have until now almost completely left out any mention of the lives of Grothendieck's wife and children. Although discretion is appropriate, this essential part of his life must be taken into account. Let us now catch up on the most important elements, giving more detail in a later chapter.

Grothendieck's wife, **Mireille Dufour**, was a few years older than he was, and originally came from Normandy. She had received secretarial training, and worked occasionally as an accountant. Lorenz G. said of her that she was a “person without a home”, not anchored in the bourgeois world; Ebba P. experienced her as a strong and determined woman. As early as the fifties she must have spent time in Spain; she spoke Spanish very well, and apparently had contacts with Spanish anarchist networks. Presumably at some time around 1956, she met her future husband and his mother Hanka in these circles. In Volume I of this biography (*Anarchy*), an account is given of how Alexander was obliged to promise his mother on her deathbed to break off his relationship with Aline Driquet and marry Mireille. The marriage cannot have been a really happy one – at least not in the conventional sense. Grothendieck had sexual relations with other women, including domestic employees, and he brought his lovers to the family apartment and occasionally let them live there. Things went so far that in one case Mireille made a “pact” with one of these women in order to fend off the advances of a third one.

After Grothendieck's “turning point”, his relationship with Mireille became not only tense, but hostile, at least on his side. At first he refused to pay any alimony, and took to addressing his ex-wife with the formal “vous”. Around 1972 Mireille could not bear living in the house in Massy anymore, and instead found herself an apartment in the dreary apartment blocks of the Paris suburbs. She was forced to start working again, and for twelve hours a day her two sons (then around eleven and seven years old) were left to their own devices. The relationship improved only after Grothendieck's meeting with the Japanese monks in the middle of the seventies. A casual remark in a letter by Grothendieck indicates that the divorce did not officially take place until 1981.

In spite of everything, Mireille never completely broke off from her former husband. In 1978, some time after his move to Villecun, she also moved to the region, the main reason being that their two sons should be near their father. The same thing happened when Grothendieck later moved to Mormoiron.

In *Anarchy*, it is also recounted that **Serge Grothendieck** was the son of Grothendieck and Aline (Marcelle) Driquet, a woman much older than him, with whom he had a passing affair. The issue of custody led to severe disputes between the parents, which in 1962 escalated to legal proceedings. Serge grew

up with his mother, spending the first thirteen years of his life in Nancy. In the spring of 1967, his mother moved with him to Nice. Serge attended high school, but did not take the baccalaureate exams. Later he went to the art academy in Paris for two years, but again without graduating. He says that all in all he spent most of his time in Nice. He kept his head above water with temporary jobs, and eventually gained expertise in the art of woodworking.

Around 1970, he began to come increasingly under the influence of his father; as already stated, he joined the group *Survivre* and helped his father in a few campaigns as a supporter. During this period he, too, became a breakaway. According to his own words his life, measured against the usual criteria, is “the grandiose career of a total loser”.

Serge never lived for long periods in the commune of Olmet or in Villecun, but he belonged to the circle of the members of these communes. He came to know the P.s and other commune members there, particularly Jean-Claude Durand, and he also met the Buddhist monks there. He became a fervent disciple of the guru Maharaj (Prem Rawat); in a letter dating from Christmas 1979, his father even goes so far as to call him a “Guru-Maharaj-freak”.

Johanna Grothendieck was born on 16 February 1959 in Boston, but spent only seventeen days of her life in the United States. Her mother returned to France after having been in the USA for about half a year. Johanna's parents were not yet married at that time, a fact that was quite a headache for the conservative community of Harvard. (How should one introduce Mireille Dufour to a colleague?) Johanna spent the last two years of primary school at a private school - her father had probably already grown skeptical of all public institutions.

In 1969, Johanna was sent to spend a year in Hamburg - not with the Heydorn family as one might suppose, but with the family of Hans Vollmer and his wife, who lived in the same street. However, she did visit the Heydorns almost every week. Her parents had brought her to Hamburg, and on this occasion they themselves also naturally visited with the Heydorn family. Johanna remembers “Aunt Dagmar” very fondly and affectionately.

According to her own recollections, by the age of thirteen she felt school to be “a prison”. She failed her first entrance exam for sixth grade (because of mathematics, of all things), but succeeded on the second try, and spent a further two and a half years in school, leaving definitively in the middle of the year at the age of fourteen. Her father wrote letters to the school administration in order to be allowed to remove her from school. He claimed to be teaching her himself, but in fact he never did so, not even one lesson. In fact he was of the opinion that school was superfluous, perhaps even harmful, and that everyone must find his or her own way.

Left to her own devices, Johanna found her own way, with the corresponding experiences. Sometimes she lived with her mother, sometimes

with her father in the commune, and sometimes alone there. Around that time, at the age of fourteen, she fell in love with a boy with whom she stayed together for about four years. Later her situation became more stable, as will be described in a later chapter.

The sons **Alexandre** (born on 18 July 1961) and **Matthieu** (born on 23 April 1965) lived with their mother after the separation, and became self-sufficient very early. Alexandre attended school until the age of seventeen, Matthieu only until fourteen, and neither of them graduated. Alexandre learned the profession of electrician, but only worked sporadically, and later turned to making and selling kalimbas.

As this chapter deals with Grothendieck's family, it is appropriate to also mention Grothendieck's half-sister Maida, who was discussed in detail in *Anarchy*. As far as the author knows, after leaving for the U.S., Maida returned to Europe only once, in the fall of 1978. Grothendieck first received a visit from Maida's daughter Diana (then eighteen years old) and then from Maida herself. He wrote about this meeting in a letter to Dagmar Heydorn dated November 27, 1978:

I was very pleased to have news of you again, on the occasion of Maida's visit to you. Yes, Maida roared through Europe like a rushing wind - so strongly, she says, is she drawn back into the so-called bosom of her family. But she so wanted, just one last time before the end of the world, to salute the older (and probably crumbling) branches of her existence, as a farewell, so to speak. The reunion with her was amicable - almost a rediscovery. That probably comes with the well-known serenity of age - I am now already half a century old and feel correspondingly wise. Even a woman hardly tempts me out of the chimney corner - that's how wise I am now, just imagine, Dagmar!

At the beginning of September Diana was at my place for a couple of days too, Maida's second daughter. She is a very alert young person, and loves Maida with all her heart. She understands quite a bit, and her love for her mother is quite poignant.

One might not even quote these rather banal lines if Diana's memory of the visit¹ were not been completely different:

Concerning my visit to Shurik in 1978, this was very pleasant for me, but for Maida it ended in disaster. I spent a crazy time in Villecun. He was very nice to me. Naturally he was condescending, but at eighteen years old I was too sure of myself to feel that. I met some of his friends. I would have thought of these as lovely memories, but after speaking with Y. in 2007 I realized how ignorant and immature I was. [...]

Once Shurik longed for Maida so much that he sent her money for a visit. At first she hesitated, also because it was his money, but then she gave in. The first two days were fine, but then he left Maida alone in his house, not with permission, but with the explicit request to read his letters. When he later came back he had a meltdown. He threw her out of the house,

¹ Email to the author

suitcase and all. He accused her of invading his private sphere, etc. From that moment on I can't remember a single sane moment. We still exchanged a couple of letters later on, but they got worse and worse. I didn't keep all of his letters because they were so horrible and contrary to the facts. Also Mairi received a few letters which she immediately threw away. I remember one that she didn't even open. She threw it straight into the garbage.

The rest of this letter will be quoted in Volume 4 of this biography. This visit and these letters marked the end of Grothendieck's relationship with his sister and her daughter.