

Chapter 20. A tranquil little life: Les Aumettes, 1980-1991

At the end of 1985, Grothendieck wrote a letter to Florica Bucur describing his life. Let us quote it, as an example of the poetic style of many of his texts.

Quant à moi, je vis une petite vie tranquille à la campagne, très retirée, en cultivant un jardin et en compagnie d'un petit chat noir. Je vois très peu de monde, et me plais surtout dans la solitude, à vaquer à mes occupations.¹

Grothendieck moved from La Gardette to Les Aumettes in the second half of 1980, probably around October or November. He lived there in a secluded house at the edge of a small group of pine and cypress trees, surrounded by farmland. It lies in the midst of vineyards and fields, a few kilometers from Mormoiron, to the east of Carpentras. To the north rises the massive Mont Ventoux, with its gleaming white limestone peak, not exactly close up, but very present.



A sketch of Les Aumettes with the Mont Ventoux in the background

Nature lovers can find large numbers of orchids of various sorts in the neighborhood. The viticulturists in the area also plant oak trees, among whose roots thrive truffles that they seek out in the wintertime with their dogs. Grothendieck's house has been

¹ As for me, I live a tranquil little life in the country, very retired, and cultivate a garden in the company of a little black cat. I see very few people, and I especially enjoy busying myself with my activities in solitude.

altered and renovated since he lived there; he lived in more primitive conditions than the way it is now (in 2009). But one can still recognize the terraced gardens which he planted together with Y., cultivating lettuce, tomatoes, herbs and other vegetables.

Whether Grothendieck was sensitive to the poetry of this landscape is doubtful. In his letters and meditations there are few hints that his gaze ever roamed over the expanse of hilly countryside. Deline, who visited him here, was surprised that he never went walking about the area, although this is contradicted by Y. and by Grothendieck's German friends. Only once, on 8 January 1985, when he received the news of the death of Fujii Guruji, did he note in *Récoltes et Semailles*:

For the last week there has been a very unusual cold wave - temperatures of -15 and lower, and when the wind blows off the Mont Ventoux (the name says it all!²) it gets even colder. It seems that this cold wave is raging more or less everywhere in the world (according to someone who has listened to the news), and that in the Midi this has not happened since the famous winter and spring of 1956. During my childhood in Germany I experienced cold snaps like this, but then there was also snow, which protected the earth and added a note of softness to the air and objects. In this frigid cold with no snow, the surface of the earth is frozen like a block of ice. The garden was ruined within a few days - I don't know if anything that I sowed and planted will remain when the spring arrives.

Grothendieck also wrote about his life in Les Aumettes in letters to Félix Carrasquer and his wife from 1985 and 1986:

For my part I live a very retired life in a pretty little house, very secluded and rural, surrounded by hills planted with vineyards, at the foot of the Mont Ventoux - one of the most remarkable mountains in Europe. I am thoroughly pleased with my solitude (in spite of the danger of being accused of asocial behavior by Felix!), and rarely, very rarely, I receive friends who are passing through. I have a telephone but it is always unplugged so that I won't be disturbed, and I only use it if I have to take care of urgent matters. In a word: the life of an old eccentric. But an eccentric who is happy to live[...]

I have electricity, running water for the sink, a toilet and even a shower (which, however, I never use, but which the very rarely appearing friends know how to appreciate), and for two years now I have even had a little fridge (which is only used for the cat's milk). In regard to solitude, for me it is more than a choice, it is rather an absolute necessity, and is not imposed on me by some psychological state, rational or otherwise, in any way. I constantly have to ask for understanding from friends, colleagues and even family members, who would like to visit for a few hours or days, but for the last two years I have been in a phase of my life where I am simply not available for personal encounters. You would certainly call me pathological and asocial if I didn't assure you that I am in touch with many people by correspondence. And this contact has greatly expanded since sending out *Récoltes et Semailles* one year ago. Nevertheless, the most important events in my life are not the fruit of such encounters or correspondence, but the fruit of solitude.

The decisive factor in Grothendieck's move to Les Aumettes was doubtless his acquaintance with Y., whom we should perhaps now introduce.

Y. was born on December 31, 1930 in Nice; her father came from a Jewish family in Russia. One of her father's brothers was a painter, who emigrated to the United States,

² "Vent" means wind.

and at his death left Y. a house near New York and a large number of paintings. She sold most of these in a group for a trivial sum.

She grew up and went to school in Nice. Later she studied history and geography, first in Nice and then in Aix-en-Provence, and finally in Paris. At the age of nineteen or twenty she met her future husband, an African, probably from Côte d'Ivoire (or a neighboring country). She married him about one year later but never had any children.

Upon completing her studies Y. began an adventurous life in West Africa. For seven years she taught in a French school in Côte d'Ivoire, then for almost as long in Mali and finally for a shorter time in Chad. Every one of these stays ended because of a military putsch or political upheaval. In between, she also taught for short periods in French schools in the Paris suburbs, where the students were far less motivated than in Africa. She liked Mali, where she lived in the capital Bamako, the most. Altogether she worked in Africa for sixteen years.

Her husband accompanied her to Côte d'Ivoire, got into political difficulties, was indicted and spent some time in prison. At the request of her husband the couple were divorced in 1961. Around the beginning of her studies, Y. had gotten to know Wilson Tiberio, a painter from Brazil who also had African ancestors. She helped him to organize exhibits of his work. After her divorce, Tiberio became her partner (although this did not prevent him from always having a considerable number of other women around him). Tiberio was a confessed atheist, partook liberally of alcohol, did not shy away from conflicts and loved open and spontaneous speech. For these reasons, a lengthy stay in a Muslim country was out of the question; he only visited Y. in Mali (and in Chad?) for short periods. As an artist he had some financial success, but later became dependent on Y. While still living in Mali, Y. had bought (or inherited?) a crumbling house in Mazan, near Carpentras. Gradually it was restored, and starting in the eighties, Y. and Tiberio lived there together amicably throughout the period of Y.'s great love for Grothendieck.

Y. continued teaching for seventeen more years in France, and then retired. With advancing age Tiberio's health became very poor; finally he lost his sight and was confined to a wheelchair. Before the author ever met him, he had already become dependent on the care which Y. lavished on him selflessly. Soon after his death, a daughter who had barely troubled herself about him before appeared and carried off all his paintings.

Y. is an unusually warm and energetic person, and both helpful and practical (even if her house is a gigantic chaos and she is forever losing or misplacing things). She has a large circle of acquaintances all over the world, and innumerable guests; in her life she has traveled extensively. Apart from French and her mother tongue, Russian, she speaks various other European and African languages. One can only hope that she will write someday about her own adventurous life and her relationship with Grothendieck.

How did Y.'s relationship with Grothendieck come about? In the seventies Y. had a lover by the name of Giordano, an Italian, who earned his living as an itinerant worker and by writing poetry. (When the author enquired about Giordano's profession, Y., bewildered by such an incongruous question, responded: "He is a free man."³) At some point during his occasional work, Giordano had come to know both Grothendieck and his circle of acquaintances in Villecun, and Y. in Mazan. One day he told Y. about the "crazy man" in Villecun and how her whole life would certainly change if she were to meet him. In 1978, Giordano and Y. drove to Villecun, but did not find Grothendieck in his house, which was, as usual, unlocked. They remained there, sleeping on the rustic multiperson board bed that Grothendieck freely lent to guests (his "dojo"). The next morning Grothendieck, who had arrived home late in the night, prepared the breakfast table (contrary to his usual habit which was to sleep until midday at least) and declared to the astonished Y. that he loved three women, A, B, and herself. As Giordano had correctly predicted, this was the beginning of a passionate relationship, which at first involved many-hour long telephone calls, since they lived almost two hundred kilometers apart.

In 1980, Y. found a house for Grothendieck in Les Aumettes, where he lived for approximately ten years. She was Grothendieck's last great love, even if they always lived in separate houses. No one knows more about Grothendieck's personal life than she does.

As can be seen from his letters, Grothendieck led a much lonelier life in Les Aumettes than in Villecun. His gaze turned inward. After a few years, he stopped lecturing in Montpellier and seldom visited the city. Even when the secretary of the institute made a fair copy of *Récoltes et Semailles* there was hardly any personal contact; Grothendieck sent his manuscripts out by the post.

It seems that during the 80s, he only undertook two more lengthy trips: one to Hamburg-Blankenese in September 1982 on the occasion of the funeral of Dagmar Heydorn, who had died on September 8, and another three years later to the same place. He wrote briefly about the first trip to Uwe Heydorn, Jr. in the spring of 2005: "At the time I was sick and in a state of exhaustion, but out of love for Dagmar and Utta I pulled myself together for the trip to Blankenese."⁴ He wrote a short account of the second trip to his German friends in a letter dated September 19, 1985:

Recently I was in Blankenese for (near Hamburg) for ten days, in order to see an elderly woman (87 years old) one more time. In some ways a leave-taking of the people there, and of the places of my childhood (from age six to eleven). I also met a couple of former

³ Who among us can say that about themselves?!

⁴ He was referring to Dagmar Heydorn and her daughter in law Ursula (Utta) Heydorn, the mother of Uwe Heydorn, Jr.. From various scattered notes and letters it emerges that Grothendieck visited Hamburg (at least) in the following years: 1953, 1957, 1969, 1977, 1982, 1985, 2006.

schoolmates, very interesting. This is probably (I hope) my last trip, with the exception of the very last one to the cemetery (if cemeteries still exist, which I also hope).

The elderly woman was probably Gertrud Bendt (1898-1988), whom Grothendieck had known when he was living with the Heydorns. The classmates he visited were, Halvor Gutschow, Gerd Oldenburg, Helmut Weigt, and probably some others also. In order to meet Grothendieck, Gerd Oldenburg missed the funeral of a close relative. When he left, Grothendieck gave his pocket knife to Halvor Gutschow, who still has it today (2009). In the following period, some letters were exchanged between the former schoolmates, for instance with Elfriede Freundlich, who had survived the Nazi period in Hamburg despite being Jewish.

Grothendieck did not travel much even within France. In August 1983, he went on a hiking vacation in the Pyrenees with friends, and in May 1985 he visited Zoghman Mebkhout for a week in Paris, in order to work with him on some mathematical questions. On April 24, 1987, he returned to Paris to negotiate with the publishing house *Editions Kimé* about the publication of *Récoltes et Semailles*. On this occasion he met with a friend from his youth in Nancy, Paulo Ribenboim. However, he returned home on the same day.

As has already been said earlier, Grothendieck's main occupation in Villecun was the writing of his mathematical and philosophical meditations, of which more will be said in the next chapters. Apart from this, he also carried on an extensive correspondence, which increased enormously after he sent out *Récoltes et Semailles*, and even more so when he refused the Crafoord Prize (see Chapter 28). His lifestyle was of the simplest. He usually worked at night and slept for a large part of the day. It was often impossible to speak with him for days or weeks on end. His house, and especially the “dojo” was open to any visitors, but did not mean that they could speak with him, if he had just made a vow of silence. It happened that long-time acquaintances would come to visit, sometimes even from overseas, and he would not say a word to them.

On a few occasions, his German friends succeeded in persuading Y. and him to go hiking on the Mont Ventoux. But after one visit when French military fighter jets thundered over the mountain during their picnic on the peak he swore to never climb the mountain again.

Among his acquaintances there were some unlikely fellows - not pejoratively, but quite literally! We have already mentioned the “free man” Giordano, poet and itinerant worker. The farmer from whom Grothendieck received his milk had refused to do military service in France (which was illegal at that time) and as a “deserter” had absconded to Switzerland and Germany, but was now living with three cows in a tent or hut in the woods, and had published a book whose title was more or less *How to Make Cows Happy*. Finally, it is worth mentioning another friend, a farmer but also an adept of “orgasm therapy”, regularly convinced women whom he did not know at all, young, old and especially foreign visitors, to masturbate in front of a camera and

to send the liberated “orgiastic energy” to sick people as long-distance healing. He collected the photographs in an album, the contents of which, according to Grothendieck's friends, were not in the least bit pornographic.



Picnic on the Mont |Ventoux