

Chapter 21. Grothendieck's Family II

A biography of Grothendieck could not be considered complete without an account of his wife and children. While Chapter 12 was already devoted to this topic, it was extremely brief and there would be much more to say.

It seems as though Grothendieck's family never really played a decisive role in his life, particularly after his separation from his wife and children in 1970. In his writings he mentions them only marginally, and in letters to his German friends, which reflect his daily life to a much greater degree than the meditations, they appear only incidentally. Only once, in a letter to Ursula Heydorn from 1979, does he speak of them with any detail, clearly because he was asked.¹

Despite everything, Mireille (for the moment) remains the same. She doesn't need to work any more, because I send her enough money to live on - but her considerable energy is so dispersed in feeling sorry for herself and her fate that she is not able to realize her considerable talents - not even to mention a renewal. But that's the way it is, not only for her but for most people.

He went on to write more specifically and in more detail, first about his daughter Johanna and her family, describing her life with Ahmed, the father of her “charming” daughter Samara-Samba, and then about each of his sons in turn:

Alexander (who turned eighteen last July) is living with Ahmed's pretty sister Narimane [?name unreadable]. At the beginning of December they want to spend six months working in a ski hotel; up until now they have been keeping afloat with the cherry and grape harvests. For a little while they tried to earn something with handicrafts, they were making cloth wallets. [...]

Matthieu, who is now fourteen and a half, hasn't been going to school for over a year - he's been learning all sorts of useful things round about with all sorts of acquaintances, and he isn't dependent on Mireille anymore. He's worked at the grape harvest for the second time now.

It's been a long time now that Serge, too, has evolved into a "marginal"²- he is a follower of the guru Maharadji, and the main content of his life is to speak about the master wherever he can and to attend his events in every possible country.

I haven't had any news about my son Hans [John Grothendieck] who is now six years old, or his mother Justine, for a long time. I visited them over two years ago in America. It is probably too early to see if he has inherited my notoriously asocial character, rather than finding his place as a civilized factory or office worker (useful to both himself and

¹ Ursula ("Utta") Heydorn was the wife of Uwe Heydorn, the second son of Wilhelm and Dagmar Heydorn. Grothendieck always felt especially close to her. After the death of his foster parents she was his main contact within the Heydorn family. - Unfortunately the first page of this letter has been lost and thus it has been impossible to establish the exact date.

² The word “marginal” is practically impossible to translate into English; the words “dropout” or “hippie” have somewhat different and stronger connotations. “Marginal” refers to a person who has chosen to live “on the margins of society”, most particularly in terms of their professional ambitions.

society). If that should be the case for him too, at least no one will be able to ascribe it to my pernicious psychological influence!³

My relationship with my children is relatively warm, probably in part because I don't make a show of being a broken-hearted father when they live their own lives and make their own mistakes instead of faithfully following in the path of my (no less erring) footsteps.

From that time forwards, the lives of Grothendieck's children developed exactly as they appear in this letter. None of the four children who live in France ever integrated mainstream society in what concerns education, profession, family and social circles. They are all “breakaways”.

As we related in Chapter 11, Jean-Claude Durand organized Mireille's move from Paris to a rented apartment in Lodève. Johanna recalls that this happened in 1978. A few years later, Mireille found and moved into an abandoned *SNCF*⁴ station in Aspiran, about thirty kilometres to the south, which, in Grothendieck's own words, she arranged very attractively (letter to Florica Bucur). In June 1986 her daughter brought her to Villes-sur-Auzon, a town neighboring the village of Mormoiron where Grothendieck lived. Johanna had found a duplex there; she lived in one half with her partner and the two children they now had, while her mother occupied the other half. Six years later, when Johanna moved on to Gigondas, her mother remained in Villes-sur-Auzon, but in another (very simple) apartment, where she remained until her death. The author was able to visit her there in 2006. After a long illness during which she was surrounded by her three children, Mireille Dufour died on December 30, 2008. In her obituary one may read:

*Ses enfants, petits-enfants, proches, vous invitent à lui rendre hommage par votre recueillement, votre attention silencieuse, votre pensée aimante et bienveillante. Que la paix règne, en elle, en nous tous, vivants ou morts, intimement reliés au-delà de toute apparence. Amitiés.*⁵

³ The author has not been able to discover anything about this trip which took place in 1977. It was Grothendieck's last trip to North America. In a footnote to the meditation *La Clef des Songes* he writes: “I went there five years after my last professional trip as a mathematician. I made the trip in order to see my last son, Jean (who was four years old) and his mother in New Jersey. The trip was not a success: it was the last time that I saw them...” (Grothendieck had the habit of calling his son John, Jean or Hans depending on which language he was writing in.)

⁴ Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français [French National Railway Company], i.e. Mireille moved into an abandoned train station.

⁵ Her children, grand-children, friends, invite you to pay homage with your contemplation, your silent attention, your loving and benevolent thoughts. Let peace reign, in her, in all of us, living or dead, intimately connected beyond all appearance.
In friendship



Mireille Dufour, 2006

Grothendieck's eldest son Serge had a daughter, Ella, born in August 1974, who died of meningitis shortly after her ninth birthday, while Grothendieck was in the process of writing the mathematical meditation *Pursuing Stacks*. On August 22, 1983 he included a short note on the death of Ella in the text:

Since last Monday, namely for about a week, I have been mainly occupied by a rather dense sequence of encounters and events, the center of which has been the unexpected news of my granddaughter Ella's death at the age of nine, from a so-called health accident. I resumed some mathematical pondering last night.

A few days and some pages later, there is another mention of the death of his granddaughter. It is difficult to interpret what he wrote, but in any case it does not give an impression of deep sorrow, nor of empathy with his son. Serge Grothendieck told the author that Ella's death was the cause of a deep rift with his father which has lasted until today (2010).

It seems that there was always some contact between Grothendieck and Aline Driquet's other children, Serge's half-siblings. In Grothendieck's photo album there are many pictures of the sister, Suzanne, and the brother, Jean-Pierre, during holiday activities or vacations spent together. The eldest brother, Michel, born in 1935, attempted to visit Grothendieck in 2008, but met however with no success.

By the time Johanna was about fourteen and quit school, her parents had separated definitively. We have already mentioned that she spent a short time first in the commune of Chatênay-Malabry and then in Olmet. Afterwards, she lived for a time in her father's house in Villecun. The author does not know if she also stayed with her mother in Lodève.

Later, Johanna lived with an African by the name of Ahmed, the father of her two oldest children, and subsequently with a Moroccan called Mohamed, with whom she had three children that are still living with her now (2010). For many years she had a pottery workshop.

At one point in *Pursuing Stacks*, Grothendieck breaks off his mathematical meditation to describe the birth of Johanna's second child in detail.

These were again rich in manifold events - the most auspicious one surely being my daughter's giving birth, three days ago, to a little boy. The birth took place at ten in the evening, in the house of a common friend, in a nearby village where my daughter had been awaiting the event in quietness. It came while everybody in the house was in bed, the nearly five year old girl sleeping next to her mother as she gave birth. The girl awoke just after the boy had come out, and then ran to tell Y. (the hostess) that she had got a little brother. When I arrived half an hour later, the little girl was radiant with joy and wonder [...]

This text must be the only mathematical work in the world in which the birth of a child is described. Why did Grothendieck write about this in a mathematical text? Does he think he needs to remind the reader that mathematics is something different from real life?

When one learns more about the fate of the family and in particular that of the newly born child, however, it is impossible to read these poetical and moving lines without a certain bitterness.

Alexandre Grothendieck (Jr.) trained as an electrician after finishing school, but apparently only worked as such occasionally. As depicted in Grothendieck's letter to Utta Heydorn, he probably kept himself above water with temporary jobs for many years. Today (2006) he is primarily a musician; he sings with *La bande à Koustik*, a provincial band which provides music for weddings and other such events, and earns his living by making kalimbas, African instruments whose sound box is made from a hollowed out gourd with metal tongues. He sells these at markets, and on the stand next to the instruments lies a small leaflet with his name on it. Sometimes he is asked if he knows the world-famous mathematician Alexandre Grothendieck, and he replies laconically: "Yes, I know him."

Matthieu Grothendieck was just six years old at the time of “the great turning point” in his father's life. Since his mother lived in Lodève from 1973 onwards, he continued to see his father occasionally after the separation. As one can see from Grothendieck's letter quoted above, he too did not complete his school education, but chose the life of a breakaway. His siblings say that he is particularly adept with his hands, and indeed, he made original and very beautiful pottery. He is now a composer of electronic music.

Grothendieck view of his children and his relationship with them is far from clear, having gone through many changes. In a letter to his German friends dated December 30, 1980, he wrote about the year that was drawing to a close:

[...] - and yet I am not dissatisfied with the past two months. Some things have quietly matured, in particular between my children and me. Thus, for example, Matthieu on the one hand, and Alexander and Nari on the other, came to visit me here in November; in both cases it was the first time that they came to see me on their own initiative. I have just come back from a ten day round trip, where one after the other I visited Matthieu, Johanna, Alexander and Nari - Johanna, Alexander, Samara-Samba and I spent Christmas together, all four of us in Johanna and Ahmed's lair in Toulouse. Looking back it seems to me that the (relative) detachment of the children from their parents, Mireille and me, and the mutual rediscovery and the bond between each one individually and myself is the most important thing that happened in my life during this eventful past year.

Although this does not sound like a dysfunctional relationship, it does feel somewhat “theoretical” and not very spontaneous.

These contacts diminished over time to next to nothing, however. In the middle of 1986, Grothendieck wrote to Carrasquer (and others) that for the last one, two or even three years had corresponded only occasionally with Serge's mother, and had had practically no contact at all with Mireille or with his children.



Mireille Dufour, G., E., Matthieu and Alexandre Jr. Grothendieck Jr. in 2006