

Chapter 30. A Short Letter for a Long Farewell

Unexpectedly and with no warning, Grothendieck left Les Aumettes, probably on July 24, 1991. Upon returning from a trip, his partner Y. discovered a letter, which announced his departure and contained directions of a practical nature concerning the rented house, the garden, necessary reparations and installations, and his “bequest”. Indeed, it seems that he had been preparing this departure for some time already. A few months earlier he had left his scientific “bequest” to Jean Malgoire. With hindsight one might speculate on whether the burning of numerous personal documents and the documents and letters of his parents in June 1990 was also part of the preparation for his departure. Presumably he had asked some of his acquaintances to discreetly help him look for new lodgings. This was in fact the case for Max P. (see Chapter 11.4)

In his farewell letter, Grothendieck wrote that he had decided to leave Les Aumettes and never to return to this region again, furthermore that he had informed only the landlady, that he had paid for rent, electricity, water and telephone for some time in advance. He then gave some instructions about the furniture, books, and other objects left behind, in most cases simply authorizing Y. to do as she thought best. The portrait in oils of his father, which was painted in the internment camp of Le Vernet, was to go to his son Alexandre¹ “in case he still wants it”. He excused himself for not taking leave in person, thanked Y. for all the goodness “you have heaped upon me”, regretted that he would not meet his German friends anymore, and left Malgoire’s address “just in case” he might be interested in the mathematical preprints and books.

It is hard to believe that this letter “of a very practical nature”, in which even the smallest details have been thought out, was written by a man who believed for many years already that he was receiving messages from good and evil angels, who felt called upon by God to announce the Last Judgement, who had almost killed himself with excessive fasting, and who identified with a nun who bore the stigmata. Clearly, Grothendieck was thoroughly able to deal with his “daily life”.

It seems that Grothendieck took with him only what was absolutely necessary, and not more than he could fit into his car. Manuscripts, notes, photographs, letters and even his typewriter, on which he had written so many thousands of pages, were left behind.

What might he have been thinking, as he drove for the last time through the vineyards, and down the country lane from his house to the byroad which leads a short way south? It was high summer, the grass and weeds along edge of the road

¹ Alexandre never received the portrait. Max. P. affirms that Grothendieck personally gave him the painting. Following Grothendieck’s wish, it was returned to him in 2010.

were withering in the heat, the grape harvest had just begun. A few kilometers further on, he reached the village of Mormoiron, and turned westwards. In the next town, Mazan, a little village like hundreds of others in the south of France, he made a small detour in order to toss his farewell letter in Y.'s mailbox; he knew that she was away on a trip. In Carpentras he reached the main road which led further west.

Here his tracks are lost. Alexander Grothendieck disappeared for many years.