

Franz Hohler



At Home

a selection of stories

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Franz Hohler

Bergli
books

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Published with the support of Pro Helvetia, Swiss Arts Council Lotteriefonds Kanton Solothurn

Cover photograph © Christian Altorfer, Zurich, www.altocard.ch

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ISBN 978-3-905252-33-0 digital edition
ISBN 978-3-905252-18-7 print edition

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At Home

I'm at home when my hand reaches out at just the right height for the light switch.

I'm at home when my feet automatically know the exact number of steps on the stairs.

I'm at home when I get annoyed with the neighbour's dog who barks when I go out into my garden.

If the dog didn't bark, something would be missing.

If my feet didn't know the stairs, I'd fall.

If my hand wouldn't find the light switch, it would be dark.

My Mother's Father

His parents died when he was a child and he spent his youth as a poorly treated Verdingbub¹ as described in the stories by Jeremias Gotthelf. But he managed to complete his studies at a technical school and became a telephone technician. He married a woman who had also grown up as an orphan. They brought four children into the world, and as everything had turned out so well, my grandfather apparently remembered his secret creed. This creed that stayed with him through the hard times of his life must have been something like a belief in beauty, because at 41, my grandfather decided to learn to play the cello.

How did he do that? Did he borrow a cello? Did he go to a cello teacher? No, he went to a violin maker and ordered a cello from him. Only when he had the instrument — and it could not have been cheap since Mr. Meinel in Liestal was a well-known violin maker — did he look for a cello teacher who told him, however, after the second or third lesson, that there was no point in continuing since his fingers were too small for the fingering needed to play the cello.

At this point in the story my grandfather used to show me his left hand and stick out his little finger to prove it wasn't big enough to play the cello properly.

So he put the instrument aside and joined a mandolin club. It was surely more fun than cello lessons and the fingering was easier. For years he had to make payments for the cello. Only recently I found the bundle of receipts in a family drawer showing the monthly installments. He arranged for his daughters to have private violin and piano

lessons — my mother was a good violinist her whole life — but his son wasn't interested in the cello.

And then the next generation arrived.

My older brother also learned to play the violin and when my parents asked me when I was 10 years old which instrument I wanted to play — we had a piano and a cello at home — I said without hesitation: the cello. I started with a 3/4 instrument, but soon my hands and my little finger were big enough that I could play my grandfather's cello and this is the cello I still play today. And when I sing my chansons, I accompany myself on it.

Without my grandfather's persevering belief in beauty, his instrument would not have waited for me. And maybe it was only I, two generations later, who was able to fulfil his creed — also I am persevering enough to stick to *my* creed: What you feel is good for you, you simply have to do! °°°

The Tragic Centipede

The old centipede was sitting in front of his cave and finally wanted to count his feet. He had wanted to do that his whole life but there was always something preventing him from doing so. Now, at last, he had a little bit of time and started counting his feet.

But the life of a centipede is very hard. Just as he reached his 218th foot he had to jump into the cave to save himself from being eaten by a crested tit. That would not have been necessary because, as everybody knows, crested tits are vegetarians. So the old centipede grumpily had to start counting all over again. He got to his 432nd foot when his 810th started itching so badly that he scratched himself with the following dozen, and that got him so confused that he lost count and had to start all over again. This time he got to the 511th, when his wife showed up with the shoemaker's bill. Furiously he threw the paper on the floor, trampled it with his feet and sat down in front of his cave determined not to let himself be interrupted by anything else. He was only at his 203rd foot when the crested tit ate him (by mistake — that is the tragedy) and so he never learned just how many feet he really had.

Let us pray. °°°

Alternatours (a one-man act on stage)

Oh, I almost forgot to ask you something: Have you already filled out the questionnaire? The one included in the last monthly bulletin about 'Alternatours'? It's on the book table. You can still do it. Or haven't you heard about 'Alternatours'? They're from the charity travel office that arranges holidays that are well, let's say, different.

Well, it's like this. When we go someplace on vacation, then we always expect to see some natives for us to photograph. That already starts before we leave our own country. When we go to a mountain village in summer, somebody has to be out there working to bring in the hay, and we also want to see a few cows. And the guy tending the sheep might be an Albanian, but he has to be wearing a local cheese-maker's cap.

And when we go to a Portuguese fishing village, then we expect the fisherman to be working, and to return from the sea in the morning with a tough look on his face and a boat full of fish. Without that, you can forget having a party to show slides of your vacation. And we'd be really surprised if we went to Guatemala and all the natives with the colorful scarves were away on vacation, for example, in Switzerland.

When you go on vacation you need to have a certain amount of alienation. Genuine natives don't really need to go on vacation at all. Or how do you explain the fact that while you're strolling over the Lägern mountain you're unlikely to meet up with a group of Portuguese fishermen coming your way who are spending their hiking vacation in Switzerland?

Or has it ever happened to you that while you are having a barbecue in your garden, a few Senegalese shepherds take photographs of you over the garden fence so that they have something to show about Swiss traditions when they get home?

Or that when you're shopping at Oerlikon market, an Indian woman takes a picture of you because she wants to bring back to the Altiplano a picture of all the colours at our organic fruits and vegetable stand in front of the Hotel International?

You see, that's how Alternatours helps people from the Third World get an impression of the First World. They don't only make such a trip possible, but it's combined with a photography course. And for that they're looking for people here who'll let themselves be photographed doing everyday activities, and the questionnaire is so that you can give your agreement to being photographed.

Now, what do we have to fill out?

Under 'occupation', that's where you have to watch what you write. If you put 'farmer', it's possible that a dark-skinned tourist will drop by sometime and take a photo of you on your tractor or on your hay tedder or on the manure spreader, like we do when we take photos in Paraguay of the farmers on their ox-drawn carts. Or if you put that you are a 'central-heating technician', the tourist will show up at the construction site wanting to take a picture of a typical Swiss day just as you're down in a pithole sealing off a pipe.

Whether you live in the city or in the country is, of course, very important. You put that where it says 'place of residence' as that can possibly give quite different pictures.

Let's say you're in a town. Your guest can go with you to a tram stop and take a picture of you putting a coin in the

ticket dispenser, and of the look on your face when you realize that you've got ten centimes too little, and how you go to a kiosk to buy a BLICK newspaper just so you get a two-franc coin back as change to put in the ticket machine to be able to get to the train station. And he can take a photo of you trying to disentangle a luggage cart from a long row of them stuck together. He can get some terrific photos that way. Or maybe he can take a picture of you putting part of your rubbish in a public waste container so that you can save on the fee for garbage bags, or some other typical picture of life in a Swiss town.

You're asked to write down your kind of 'festivities planned'. You can put there that you'll soon go to a christening or a wedding. Or if there's going to be a funeral soon, that's always something really interesting. We always take pictures of that too when we go to a foreign country and there's a whole procession of mourners all on one truck riding together with the coffin. Those are very impressive photos. So our dark-skinned guest should also be able to join the funeral ceremonies and take pictures at the burial sites too. You have to take all those questions into consideration.

You're asked to answer questions about your family, about your pets and your preferences for music. You know how important music is in developing countries — just think of the rhythms of African drums or of the Balinese temple dances, or the flutes of the Andes. Would you let someone take a photo of you putting a Tina Turner CD in your CD disk player? Or of your son playing a little local music? And your guest could go along with him to the airraid shelter in your neighborhood and take a flash shot of him with his friends playing 'Enter Sandman' by the Metallica band?

And where the form asks you to mention your 'rituals', that's of course also interesting. There you can write in 'mowing the lawn', 'washing the car', 'playing cards on Saturdays', 'bowling' or 'Sunday mountain hiking'. (It's a good idea to write there 'Attention, red socks' so that your guest is sure on that day to take along a color film.)

Or there is also an interesting question: 'Do you frequently wait in lines?' That refers of course to the fact that in Third World countries there's a lot of waiting for certain things. Therefore our guest would surely be interested in finding out where the waiting lines are here. Can he wait in line with you at the end of the month and take a picture of you at the post office while you're paying your bills, or of you in front of an ATM cash dispenser on a Saturday?

The questionnaire asks a lot more questions, what kind of dances you do, sports, shopping habits, children, travels, employees, household help, etc., etc. — if you're interested, as I said, you can go get a questionnaire at the book table and take it with you so that you can think about whether you want to make yourself available as an ethno model. That'd be great. But you'd have to accept the fact that sooner or later at a slide show at adult evening classes in Cameroon, slides will be shown of you stuck in a traffic jam waiting to get through the Gotthard tunnel with a surfboard on your roof, and the lecture will be titled something like 'Switzerland, the Last Nomads of the Alps'. °°°

Conditions for Taking Nourishment

I know the case of a child who didn't want to eat anything anymore once it was one year old. When you wanted to give him his mashed-up baby food, he'd throw his hands in front of his face, shake his head and turn around so that it was impossible to get even one spoonful in his mouth. If you succeeded in finally putting a bite in his mouth, he'd spit it all out and start screaming. The only thing he'd allow in his mouth was a bit of water. But when you gave him some milk instead, he'd want nothing of it.

His parents were worried and could not understand what caused this sudden change. They first tried to convince the child to eat his baby food by pleading, then by threatening and even by smacking him. It was all useless. They put a banana in front of him, something he had always eaten before, but the child wouldn't take it. The solution to the problem was found by accident. The child's room was closed off by a gate mounted in the door frame so that the child could be left in the room with an open door and the parents could hear what was going on inside without the child being able to run out of the room.

On the third day of the child's refusal of any nourishment, the father wanted to hand in the baby food to the mother who was already in the room to put the child to bed. The child ran to the gate and looked up longingly at the plate. Right away, the father bent down over the gate and started to spoon in the baby food. And the child, who was gripping the bars of the gate with both hands and whose head came to just over the top of the gate, seemed to be very pleased and ate everything.

The next morning the father fed the child in the same way before he went to work and the child didn't show the slightest resistance. But when the mother wanted to feed the baby over the gate at lunch, he ran away and kept opening and closing the lid of his toy chest with loud bangs until the mother moved away from the gate. In the evening he accepted the food from the father over the gate without a fuss.

Now the child was eating again, but the fact that he only wanted his father to feed him created a problem for the parents. Besides the fact that the child now only got two meals a day, it was not easy for the father to be home on time every evening to feed his child since his job often required him to be out of town. Once he came a little late and heard the child already screaming. He quickly threw his coat over a chair, rushed to the child's room and fed him over the gate. Only afterwards did he realize that he had forgotten to take off his hat. When he went to feed the child the next morning, the child pointed incessantly at his father's head and refused to eat. Then the father remembered the previous evening, fetched his hat and put it on. Happily the child let himself be fed the baby food. From now on the father always had to have his hat on if he wanted the child to eat.

So far the mother had always been present when the child received his food. But once when she had not slept well, she stayed in bed longer since the father had offered to take care of the child alone. However, the child refused to eat the baby food without the mother being present. This left the father no choice. He had to fetch the mother who sat down in her nightgown on a child's chair.

That same evening the child resisted, screaming at the impertinence of having to eat the baby food even though

everything was in order. The father stood outside the gate with his hat on and the mother was also present. Admittedly she was wearing her normal clothes, and since the child kept pointing at her again and again, in the end she put on her nightgown and returned to the room. The child was, however, only satisfied when she sat on the little children's chair and watched the child eating.

From then on, the mother always had to put on her nightgown at mealtimes, otherwise there was no chance of the child eating his food.

Soon the child was no longer influenced by coincidental things happening that he wanted repeated, but he began to think up new requirements on his own. Once he pointed to the wardrobe in the room and looked at his mother. The mother went to the wardrobe and was going to open it but the child screamed and pointed to the top of the closet. The mother said no, she would not do that. The child lay down on the floor kicking about with his hands and feet and letting out the most disagreeable, ear-piercing screams. In spite of this, the parents decided they could not go along with this wish of the child, and so he had to go to bed without eating anything, just until the next morning when they hoped he would surely have forgotten the idea.

The next morning when the mother was sitting in her nightgown on the child's chair and the father stood in front of the gate with his hat on and they were set to feed the child, he again refused to eat and pointed to the top of the wardrobe closet. The parents did not give in to this wish, and the child ate nothing.

Two days later, as he was showing signs of weakness since he had not had anything but water, the parents gave in. In her nightgown the mother climbed to the top of the wardrobe and stretched out flat. Immediately the child