

Der Atem

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This is the third installment of the author's autobiography. He is now eighteen and has quit the Gymnasium and worked, much to his own satisfaction, as an apprentice in a store. But now it happens. The author's beloved grandfather is taken sick and becomes hospitalized, and he moves temporarily into his room, only to be taken sick himself, following his grandfather to the hospital. He is really sick, a serious condition of an infection, referred to as *Rippenfeldentzündung* [Pleurisy] which necessitates repeated punctures of his chest in order to remove great quantities of yellow grayish liquid (a so called thoracentesis). Ostensibly the sickness has developed from an untreated case of pneumonia, the young author so bent upon his work as a shop assistant, that he was unwilling to acknowledge that something was wrong with him. The doctors do not give him much of a chance and put him into the 'Sterbezimmer' a room packed with beds for the terminally ill, only expected to have a few more days to live. This is a room filled with old men in their eighties coming to the last of their tether. The hospital priest makes regular visits to deliver the last rites, meaning a quick and mechanical anointment with oil. Often it is done after the patient is already dead. When it is just a question of hours they are brought into a bathroom, where they will be put into a zinc container when done for. Many of the patients do not go that far, but die already in the room. A bed vacated because of a death is seldom empty for more than a few hours. There is a steady stream of dying patients. The author himself is once taken to the bathroom which also serves as a washing room, and is almost suffocated by wash that falls down on him, just missing his face. Soon afterwards he is taken back to the Sterbezimmer. It is a depressing place, of which the author has a very limited view, as he is more or less immobile, hardly able even to move his head. It is a quiet place, most patients make little noise, lying around like dead already. Some, however, are more talkative. One guy lying motionless for days, saying nothing, making no sound, suddenly starts to scream, climbs out of his bed, makes for the door, where he collapses and dies. Another patient, seemingly in good shape, goes to a wash basin, while carrying on a conversation, then suddenly falls down, hits his head in a funny position on the basin, and then slides down to the floor. This is the first time the author experiences such a sudden death, such a abrupt contrast between life and death, when it normally is a prolonged sliding into decay and extinction. *Ein Tod ohne Sterben*. Death without dying. What could be more enviable? How many would not envy his fate, to be spared that painful descent without any hope. The patients of the Sterbezimmer seldom receive visitors. It is painful for people to enter and visit their dying relatives when those are beyond any contact or hope. Normally there is at most one such visit, but the author's grandfather comes every day. When he had learned about the hospitalization of his grandson he had at first despaired finding it a catastrophe beyond comprehension, but decided more or less immediately that his grandson would rally and survive. He himself was in for a diagnosis of his condition, which seemed to be taking time. On his visits to his

grandson he tried to impart encouragement and optimism. Staying at the Sterbezimmer was an experience for him, from something he learned a great deal, besides the ugliness and degradation of death. He learned its inevitability, that death was the bill we are forced to pay at the very end. Life is not given us for free as a gift, it is something we have on loan, and which we have to return along with the paying of the rent.

Eventually the author seems to rally. There is no longer any more liquid to be drained, but his extended stay in bed had taken its toll. He had lost a lot of weight and been reduced to just skin and bones, and his employer on a one visit dismisses him as a hopeless case frightened by the sight. His muscles have atrophied and he no longer is able to walk. His grandfather tells him that he should start walking on his birthday, this being a momentous time to start such a project of recovery, and he promises to come and visit him on that day. The day comes, his mother, his step-father and other relatives come for a visit, but not his grandfather. They make excuses but seem uncomfortable with the subject. Days come and go, and still no grandfather. His relatives seem more and more uncomfortable. One day he borrows a newspaper and finds a picture of his grandfather in it, along with an extended obituary covering a page.

The death of his grandfather is felt as a big relief. He had been no closer to anyone than to his grandfather, his grandfather was the one person in the world he really loved. In fact his grandfather has owned him, taking him away from his mother and his other relatives, and kept him for himself. He had been given an education by his grandfather, the best possible education, and with the death of his grandfather his education had come to an end, and he was all alone in the world. He was all alone and hence on his own. He would overcome his disease and life would start all over again, but now he would be ready for it, his education being concluded.

With the death of his grandfather he had rediscovered his mother. His mother had been given back to him. She now came regularly to visit him, as his grandfather had done. At times she read to him, books from the library of his grandfather, books he had cherished, such as the German translation of Sterne's 'A Sentimental Journey'; at other times none of them said a word, only reading their own books. This was almost nicest. His mother had loved her father, his grandfather, but he had not reciprocated. He had not been a good father to his family, he had not been interested, he had been submerged in his own work, and then he had taken over her eldest son, removed him from the family and appropriated him. It would take some time before he became informed of how his grandfather had died, it was not because of the operation he had been scheduled to take, an operation which anyway would have been too late, it should have been performed a year or so earlier, now it was too late, his entire body was poisoned. He died rather suddenly in front of his wife, who had been summoned to him. His last word spoken was 'Heraus' when catching sight of the hospital priest about to perform his act. The priest had immediately retired, and the grandfather had given up his breath. His death was untimely, he was only sixty seven. The author was to inherit some of his clothes, some knick-knacks, but most importantly his typewriter, a sturdy one of American make, as he himself had been a writer of some renown, still working on his big book at his death.

The author is making steady and maybe surprising progress on his road to recovery. A doctor offers him a place in what he refers to as a friendlier room. The author turns it

down, he has after all become used to his surroundings, and besides he finds the way the doctor phrases it 'friendlier room' offensive. His relatives dread his homecoming, because it means that he becomes their charge, their responsibility, now when his grandfather is dead. What would he do? His career as a singer is of course out of the question now with his lung condition, better that he passes his matriculation as a shop assistant, but before that he will not be in a position to continue his work in the shop and will become an encumbrance on them. They need not to worry, he is transferred to a nearby sanatorium up in the mountains, some ten miles away from the city of Salzburg. It is a sanatorium for lung patients. The very name *Lungenkrank* sends terror into the author, he suffers from no disease of the lungs. *Lungenkrank* means to have tuberculosis and thus to be marked for an early death. Yet of course most of the patients are affected by TBC, the old ones are sent there as there is no hope for them, the few young ones, may rally a bit. He now has a room he only has to share with one more patient, a young man studying architecture. He is admonished by the nurse never to have any contact with the local population, of not going outdoors, seeking out restaurants, but how he could do that? He has only recently relearned how to take a few painful steps. Only later does he realize that she had assumed that he was a TBC patient, liable to infect others. He had no TBC, neither did he have any immunity against the disease in the weakened condition he arrived. Why had the doctors sent him to this place? Was it out of stupidity, or malice? Or had they just been cynical, not caring one way or the other? Of this he would not care initially, he was too sick, but as he grew healthier and stronger, and was able to take a longer view.

His mother comes regularly. She brings books. He discovers the pleasure of reading. Not the pleasure as much as the passion. Books open up a new world for him. He reads the classics, he reads philosophy. As he puts it

Diese Entdeckung, daß die Literatur die mathematische Lösung des Lebens und in jedem Augenblick auch der eigenen Existenz bewirken kann, wenn sie als Mathematik in Gang gesetzt und betrieben wird, also mit der Zeit als eine höhere, schließlich die höchste mathematische Kunst, die wir erst dann, wenn wir sie ganz beherrschen, als Lesen bezeichnen können, hatte ich erst nach dem Tod des Großvaters machen können, diesen Gedanken und diese Erkenntnis verdankte ich seinem Tod.

In other words the true nature of reading is disclosed to him only after the death of his grandfather, and that he owes this insight to the death of the latter. Besides reading he also starts to take walks, longer and longer walks, finding a way of sneaking outside without being discovered by the staff. The sanatorium is close to the German border, Bavaria is on the other side. He learns to pass over into the latter avoiding the border controls, and his excursions become more and more ambitious and extended.

When he is released and returns home he learns that his mother has been stricken with cancer, that she may have survived the operation but will not long survive the disease. He too, has a dark secret to divulge eventually, at the end of his stay a dark spot has been discovered on his X-ray of his lungs. He has, what he feared would happen, been infected by TBC during his stay.

And what will he do when he is back. His relatives take for granted that he will matriculate and become a shop assistant, but he has no interest in that, he never had, it

was just a job, a way of marking time, earning money, while preparing for his real mission in life.

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