

Andreas Maier, *The Room*  
Sample translation by Bradley Schmidt  
Page 7 - 20

## I

My uncle J.'s room is on the left side of the second floor overlooking Uhlandstrasse, directly across from the bathroom that my uncle probably wasn't even allowed to use. When I visited my grandmother as a child he was sleeping most of the time, the whole house stank then. If he was away, which meant hauling packages in Frankfurt, the odor still remained. Essentially, the house reeked of J.'s silage odor for years. It started when I was eight or nine years old. Before that he had still washed himself with relative regularity. To this day, my nose remembers J. each time I enter the basement on Uhlandstrasse, his territory. Down there, a bathroom with a shower cell and toilette had been installed just for him. It was there that he led a subterranean existence as an imaginary craftsman. J. had grown up in a family of stone masons, surrounded by craftsmen. The company had about thirty employees and was located three kilometers away in Friedberg. Uncle J. was there frequently as a young man; there was hammering and sawing and cutting and polishing, huge cranes were scattered across the entire yard and there were technicians who maintained the machines, workers who welded and torched, a blacksmith who made tools, made things flush; that fascinated my uncle and thereafter he thought of himself as a craftsman and began to set up a shop for himself in the basement on Uhlandstrasse, which was clearly nothing more than a fantasy work shop, a shop of appearances. Even today, there are boxes for screws mounted on the walls, various tools strewn around, even if most everything was cleaned up twenty years ago, after he moved out (J. was forced to leave the house following the death of his mother, my grandmother, with whom he had lived during her entire life until he was more than sixty years old). A vise is still there, and I remember how he once used this vise when he was still alive and still living on Uhlandstrasse and his mother was still there and all was well with the world, more or less, and not completely damaged or destroyed yet ... how he clamped screws there with the greatest care, chose one file from the many iron files, repeatedly checked and corrected the position of the screw in the vise according to a certain idea or a certain technical system, which he had thought up, and began to file, and as a child I could never refrain from asking what he was doing, that is, why he was filing on the screw, for example. With a certain kind of desperate anger J. then explained all of the instruments that he was using ("the vise is there to clamp a screw, you see, here is where you open it, and this is how you close it"), but he never answered my question, for him it seemed nonexistent. But he did notice that something was wrong,

and that made him furious. Over time, he understood that I didn't buy his filing on the screw. My uncle J. stood there, at the time slightly over forty years old, with me as a child in the basement, his territory, in the workshop where he was permitted to be what he never was and had never been allowed to become, and the child asked again and uncle J. just filed with growing anger until he lapsed into curses and then silence.

I know that I was always frightened when I entered the basement because I knew it was, at least in part, my uncle's realm. Down there was also the laundry room, there was a room for drying the laundry, the wine cellar; J.'s workshop was right next to the drying room and you had to go through the shop (a space of six or seven square meters, to be precise), to reach the cool room with the wine. This made the shop a room with open access, in contrast with J.'s room on the second floor. I usually saw J. in the shop. At the time he rarely spent time in the living room, at least not when someone was in my grandmother's house. The workshop was his pastime, perhaps even his life's meaning, aside from the women, about whom I have mere suspicions, just suspicions and a few clear clues. I must admit I initially thought J. was actually some sort of craftsman, an iron specialist. Maybe at first I even thought that he was working in the basement on something that was connected to the masonry company. Later, once I understood that J.'s work down there was purely and exclusively "independent," I still assumed that he was actually doing something and creating or at least repairing something. There were also small generators and motors and switches lying around, and just because they were lying around I thought that J. was familiar with all of these things and understood them. In fact, he only took these parts along when they were thrown away at the company, tore them apart at home, stared into them and didn't understand a thing because he was mostly an idiot, even if it wasn't immediately apparent. He didn't even act like certain fantastical artists who, using various materials, parts, and left-over objects designed for completely different purposes, construct collages or strange, functionless gadgets or mobiles, which – at least through their size or the number of the components they consist of, or through their fantastic form – represent something artistic for their inventor. No, I soon believed then and am still firmly convinced that J. was occupied with one thing in his shop: belonging to the world up above, and in particular the world of the masonry company three kilometers away. According to my mother, my uncle J. was never accepted by his father, my grandfather, whatever that might mean in regards to my uncle. At the time, I myself had not only never accepted uncle J.; even more, by the way he looked and acted, for me he was the prototype of horror during my childhood, and even if I have in the meantime grasped that my uncle was a person who always kept one foot in paradise, it still isn't easy to imagine how I could spend a whole half-hour with him in the basement. I probably had to go down to him in the basement when my grandmother went shopping at Schade & Füllgrabe or met a friend. I can remember my uneasiness down there. Even though each time I fervently hoped that I

could leave the basement soon, I always watched J.'s filing and drilling and sanding, was confused and in the end asked questions again (it never occurred to me to stop asking those questions). Then J. got more and more furious inside – all the while making strange hissing sounds and shaking a screwdriver or monkey wrench as if he wanted to smash something, maybe even me – and then eventually grandmother came and rescued me.

At the time I didn't understand how unusual it was that an entire bathroom was installed just for my uncle. The place, Umlandstrasse, had no history for me but seemed to me as child to have been there forever (I also thought of myself as having been there forever). And because everything had always been there, everything needed an explanation just as little as the sun or gravity needs one. There were also too few changes in the first few years of my life that I would have arrived at the idea that the world, in particular with regard to people, is constantly changing. I had no idea how it changed from generation to generation. At the time, my existence was eternal and every day was eternal because everything was set in place. A question like, "why is there an entire bathroom with shower, bathtub and toilette in the basement?" couldn't even arise. This bathroom actually only puzzled me when I entered the basement on Umlandstrasse for the first time after more than twenty years. What a bathroom! Relatively light and completely covered with tiles, the room in the basement had a drain in the middle, a small window at head level, no decorations anywhere; I immediately had to think of Gestapo cellars or at least Aki Kaurismäki movies. As a child, at the age of three or four, neither Gestapo cellars nor Kaurismäki movies existed, just a complete, unchangeable and irrevocable world in which everything was static and settled except for me, who could move through this entire world as I wished (or was supposed to), and although this world only consisted of two houses, my parents' house and the house on Umlandstrasse, where I would move much later, in 1999, after everyone was already dead, it was the most universal world imaginable. By the way, I have barely expanded this universe over the course of my life, later merely expanding it to the Wetterau region and it has stayed that way, from my uncle's room, the basement and everything else including Wetterau, where I'm from. Even Rome and other cities where I have lived are elements of the world that is Wetterau.

In my opinion, my uncle wasn't interested in little boys; otherwise he would have done something to me down in the basement. Maybe he was, like a child, just too consumed by awe for his mother, who up until old age cared for or rather tolerated him as a matter of course. Perhaps it was due to this awe that he refrained from everything. At some point he must have understood that it was more normal to sow wild oats with women than in other ways (i. e. socially acceptable and not so heavily tied to shame and punishment). Maybe this is how women became so central, even though it is still a mystery how exactly this would have worked for him. Is that why his room was always locked? I mean "locked" in a metaphoric sense; maybe he never even locked it and could count on it

that at least no one like me would enter his sinful shelter hellish abode, even if the door wasn't even locked. Apparently he had an unspoken agreement with grandmother, his mother, that she wouldn't snoop around there so she wouldn't find something that she didn't want to find and didn't want to know in the first place. I only know the cleaning ladies had their difficulties (another one of those words: difficulties) with him. He always snuck up, it is said, from behind when they were bending over; and aunt Lenchen had these sorts of encounters with him, even though she was ten years older than him and in the end, over seventy. In fact, he still stood behind her at an old age and, following his inner being and created by God for it, grabbed her bosom, which fit into neither his nor aunt Lenchen's life because it should have taken place in the wild. As a result, there was the usual commotion when J. once again followed the call of nature and grabbed aunt Lenchen's breasts from behind as if they belonged to him and was entitled.

I never entered J.'s room. Aunt Lenchen probably never entered this room either. I even suspect that even J.'s mother only entered this room extremely infrequently and only in real emergencies because maybe even she wasn't really protected by the reverence that J. demonstrated to her. He wouldn't let anything happen to his mother, but maybe her breasts; that was conceivable. So there you had a man at home who was something of a billy goat, your own son, who still lives with you and is already an old man but still prowls around and mounts people, however infrequently. His room was a kind of earliest darkroom I was consciousness of. Although I was at my grandmother's house frequently as a child, especially after the death of my great-grandmother Else, who had cared for me most of my earliest years, I have no mental image of J.'s room. I don't know where the bed stood, even though there must have been one, and I also don't know what else was in the room. I simply can't picture the room. It would have been hellish to enter it during the years of stench. I would have died of disgust. I wasn't even afraid of it: because entering the room was completely unimaginable, the existence of the room was beneath the threshold of my perception. It simultaneously was and was not there. Because J. slept most of the time, it must have been almost constantly dark in the room. Now it is my office. I have always written my novels in this room but I've never come across the idea to write about my uncle J., disabled from birth. About him and his room. About the house and the street. And about my family. And our grave stones. And Wetterau, which is the entire world. Wetterau, which for most people is named after an Autobahn rest stop, the A5 rest stop Wetterau, and is now being transformed into a bypass road. Wetterau is actually a bypass road with an rest stop attached. When I say that people laugh. And yet it once was my home. My home, a street. And now I'm writing a bypass while they flatten my homeland into the past, and I start with my uncle in his room. This is the beginning, out of which everything will flow. The room, the house, the place, the street, the cities, my life, the family, Wetterau and everything else. My uncle, the only innocent person I ever met. A figure at the brink of leaving paradise, but with one leg still in.

You couldn't immediately recognize my uncle's handicap (he was a forceps baby). He could speak, he just spoke in simple sentences but so did everyone else from the Wetterau region. He really started talking when it came to certain topics. J. always talked about the forest, the forester's lodge Winterstein, the hunters. He could recount all of the stag antlers that hung on the walls of the hunting lodge in Ossenheim. He knew all about the racks with the numbers of points. In addition, J. always wore a parka in hunters' green. He also spoke enthusiastically about the radio. When something from a large city in Europe was broadcast on the radio he stood in front of the old radio (brand: *Telefunken*), turned the receiver dial and pretended to be a technical pioneer, because of course my uncle remained a child his entire life and felt great enthusiasm for everything technical in nature, which I only felt at the very beginning of my life and never to that extent. At Christmas he searched for *Deutschlandfunk* where you could hear the bells of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and my uncle stood in front of the radio and the bells of St. Stephen's Cathedral like others had stood in front of the television and the lunar landing more than ten years before. Then he called out, almost reverently, as if we should all pay attention: the bells of St. Stephen's Cathedral! In fact, everyone did him the favor and listened, but of course just for a few seconds. My uncle liked to stand in front of construction sites and watch the machines and workers. He never started a conversation with the workers even though he would have liked to talk shop and chatted with them, as if he also knew the ropes. He had often observed this at the company: two or three workers standing together and swapping information with vocabulary which all had something to do with work or with the machines or some sort of technical process. Being a part of things in this way was his life's longing. It's said he was allowed to carry out small tasks at the company as a teenager. I picture some filing or running errands. I was told that my grandfather even had him transport wage packets. Still, it's said that he beat him with a leather strap, although I don't know when. My grandfather Wilhelm, the artistic man with the leather strap. The first thing said about my grandfather Wilhelm is always: such an artistic man! He was the last artistic person in my family (played piano, studied architecture), then I came and am also considered artistic. They picture artistic people like me or my grandfather (whom I didn't know). Maybe the leather strap is even essential for them, for artistic people. My uncle was not an artistic person although he loved folk music shows, and above all Heino, very much. Heino was a person that made my uncle happy, almost like the good Lord makes others happy. J.'s eyes started to light up and his face relaxed when he heard Heino. Most of the time my uncle wore an expression of resentment, he was usually in a bad mood or this close to a choleric outburst, which we loved to provoke as children, to our own misfortune, but when he stood in front of a construction site or was watching Heino in a folk music show, which were not yet so common, then he was mesmerized and attentive, as if in another world, and that's also how he walked through the forest with his hunting jacket. He was mesmerized and walked attentively through the forest, as I later did.

Uncle J. is the only one in the family who could recognize birds; we have that in common. Maybe he even wished to belong here: not to the forest animals, but to those who hunted them and knew their way around and where allowed to shoot, as opposed to my uncle who was never allowed to shoot. Perhaps J. even went into the forest to find peace there, with himself and with the thing in his pants, which were apparently always unwashed because in later years; as I mentioned, he never took showers and afflicted everything with his odor within a very short time. However, if I remember correctly, then what is always told can't even be true. J. must have washed himself, now and again, even in his later years, but not when he came back from his job at Frankfurt Central Station and not after he had slept in after his night shifts and came into the kitchen or the living room or even drove grandma to us in Friedberg with his VW painted a Nazi shade of brown and stank up our whole house, not then. But afterwards he must have washed himself, that is, before he went into the forest and subsequently to the bar (or even just to the bar).