

Ewald Frie: A Farm and Eleven Children

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Proud peasant farming with livestock markets, self-sufficiency and hard backbreaking work disappeared at a rapid pace and yet very quietly in the course of the sixties. Ewald Frie uses the example of his family to tell of the great caesura. With just a few strokes, using meaningful scenes and examples, he shows how his parents' world came to an end, how his siblings followed other lifestyles, and how general social change gripped the country.

Breeding bulls for the monthly auction, cows and pigs on the pasture, horses in front of the plow, a garden for stockpiling - the farm profitably managed by parents, children and helpers. The rural life of the fifties seems closer to the Middle Ages than to our time. But then everything changes: once prosperous and respected farmers are suddenly considered poor and backward despite all the modernization, their children smell of stables and are ashamed in school. The Catholic Church shows ways out of the peasant world with new youth work. The welfare state helps with education and the transfer of farms. Already in the 1970s, the world in the countryside was completely different. People look back in amazement, so quiet was the change: "My God, I still experienced that, it seems like something from another century." Ewald Frie asked his ten siblings, born between 1944 and 1969, how they experienced this time. His brilliantly written book brings the great upheaval to life with unerring laconism.

- Nominated for the German Nonfiction Prize 2023
- A family experiences the disappearance of farm life in the 1950s and 1960s
- Convincingly weaves together the family's own experiences with contemporary historical contexts
- Densely and hauntingly written, convincing and touching
- For readers of Christiane Hoffmann's bestseller "Everything we don't remember".

Ewald Frie was born in Münsterland in 1962, the ninth of eleven children in a Catholic farming family. He is Professor of Modern History at the University of Tübingen and a full member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences.

Sample translation

1 - Family, farm and village

Eleven brothers and sisters

Twice my parents commissioned a photographer to put their family in the picture. In 1947, they present their two eldest children in dark ceremonial clothing. The young family does not look happy, but rather dutiful and a bit strained. Only little Kaspar stands out with his curious, expectant look. But perhaps his eyesight is poor; he will have to wear glasses for the rest of his life.

In 1960, an extended family presents itself: Hermann, the future heir to the farm, born in 1944, looks almost grown up thirteen years after his first family picture. Kaspar (born in 1946) is also already wearing a tie, but has a different role. He spent the second half of the 1950s at a Catholic boarding school, learning Latin and Greek, and only came home on vacation. Wilhelm (born 1948), wearing a jacket and shorts, is twelve years old and at the end of his childhood. He seems almost darkly determined. Mechthild (born 1950) has found her place quite in the middle of the picture. She knows about her special tasks as the eldest daughter. These four will tell later about the years of my father, which were their childhood years. In 1960, however, they were no longer alone. Katharina (born 1954) proudly looks forward to her enrollment in school. Gregor (born 1956) and Paul (born 1958) in toddler plush pants take their cue from their mother. These three in particular will tell of my mother's years in the middle of the book that shaped their childhood. There is no third professional family portrait.

The last time a photographer came to the house was in 1968, when my parents celebrated their silver wedding anniversary. He photographed the party, and also me, all alone. I had missed the photo session and afterwards cried so long and unrestrainedly until the photographer appeared again and took a picture of me in front of our farm. Unfortunately, it has not been preserved. When my little sister Martina was born a year later, photography had just become part of our everyday life. Most of the pictures were in color, the world became colorful. But not everyone had mastered the technique yet. On the third family picture, which shows for the first and last time our parents and eleven children, all the people in the left half of the picture are crowded in front of the main entrance to our farm. Kaspar and Gregor have only barely and partially into the picture. Instead, the right side shows bushes. This could not be changed.

Photography was analog and cost money. Therefore there was only one attempt. When the picture came later from the photo store, it was too late for a repetition.

The back row of the photo shows men's heads. Wilhelm again on the far right, but this time adult and confident. Next to him the heir to the farm Hermann, father and one face of Kaspar. In the center three women hold the picture and the family together. Mother presents the main attraction of the day. Catherine is closest to them, she becomes Martina's godmother that day. Mechthild holds in her arms Matthias, the second youngest (born in 1966), whose godmother she had become three years earlier. In front are the younger, but already independent siblings. Gregor is not only the same age as Wilhelm in the last picture, but has also adopted his defiant attitude and somewhat indecisive choice of clothes. Paul seems to want to push his little sister Anna (born 1961) aside, but she remains in the foreground with me (born 1962). The two of us, as well as the two youngest, did not consciously experience the years of my father.

The years of my mother and the move out are the topics to which we will speak later. Am I overinterpreting the picture when I detect a mixture of joy and relief in the faces of the women in particular? Among the big brothers and sisters there had been uneasiness and also concern because of my mother's ever new pregnancies. Was that responsible? In keeping with the times? But now Martina was here. The fact that all of the surviving children were born and grew up healthy was something that Mother repeatedly described in conversations as great good fortune.

When Martina was baptized and the photo was taken, we were not a family according to official statistics. According to their criteria we were never a family with eleven children, because the statistics only count local children of a parent couple. But never have all eleven children lived at the same lived in one place at the same time. Kaspar and Wilhelm shared a student apartment in Münster. But at least we spent Christmas Eve together from 1969 to 1971 around the hearth and in the best room of our farm. Three times eleven children and their parents were united in song and prayer. Then Hermann and Mechthild married. They now celebrated for themselves. The other children would do the same after their marriage. Gradually the number of children on Christmas Eve decreased again.

My mother saved the family with the calendar of saints. Since the liturgical reform in 1969, the Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the Holy Family on the first Sunday after Christmas. We were guided by it, despite our unequal number of children. On the feast of the Holy Family, all the children and their children came together at my parents' house. There was

cake, followed by a walk. Then the candles on the Christmas tree were lit and as many Christmas carols from the Catholic prayer book as possible were sung. Grandchildren recited poems and carols. Dinner was a community production of the guests, as was the cake in the afternoon. Afterwards, conversation and double-headed groups formed. At midnight the party broke up. Those who still lived at home now washed dishes for a while. There was no dishwasher. Sometime in the late afternoon, a photo of the Christmas community was usually taken, with more and more grandchildren on it. A picture of the siblings alone, as still 1969, came only after the death of my parents. Until then, we saw ourselves as an ever-growing extended family, not as a sibling group.

My parents had never met their siblings in comparable constellations. My father's parents and my mother's father had died early. The siblings visited each other. They made "visits" on the occasion of name days, which were more important than birthdays in the Catholic Münsterland. Since the car had replaced the horse in the 1950s, visits began with afternoon coffee. Cakes had been baked for days beforehand. The regiment in our kitchen was taken over by Aunt Irene from the village, assisted in the 1950s by one or two "supports," young women who lived with us and helped my mother in the household.