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English sample translation by Ruth Martin



Winner of the German Book Prize 2023!

The jury's reasoning: "With subtle irony, Schachinger reflects the political and social conditions of the present. (...) In a narratively outstanding and contemporary way, the text negotiates the question of the social place of literature."

The German Book Prize is one of the most important awards in the German-language literary sector (endowed with 25,000 euros).

CHAPTER 1

When you see this place for the first time – the grand mansion house with its Schönbrunn-yellow façade and the crumbling yellowy-grey rear, the grounds with their lawns and playing fields, their wooded hills and grottoes – then the wall surrounding it, which varies in height between two and four metres depending on the gradient of Argentinierstraße and Favoritenstraße, is probably the last thing you notice. And why would you think about the wall on an open day? The children see so many other things, the tennis and beach-volleyball courts, the indoor pool, the wooden-floored gymnasium, the multi-purpose hall, the sala terrena and, when they look down at their own feet, the stone floor whose great flags have been worn smooth over the centuries by thousands of house shoes.

The children are also shown around the football pitches, the two multi-sport courts, the hard court, the Firsty Field, and most importantly the Large Field, which is in all the photos and, together with the running track that encircles it, gives the grounds an official air, a high-school air, even if these children will never play there again after the open day, because the Large Field is the subject of a long-running legal battle to which the notice: *Field closed, enter at your own risk!* bears witness.

As yet, the future Marianists know nothing of all this. They are told about the foreign languages offered, about school trips, exchange programmes, the “extra-curricular activities”, under which banner students can pursue every conceivable passion from chess to skiing or fishkeeping – but they aren’t shown the spot by the conference room where, despite an extra coat of paint, the name of the former director of learning still shows through, along with the words: *kiddy fiddler!*

They are shown the Firsty Field, though without being told what that is – a Firsty – and what it will soon mean for each of them to be treated as a Firsty by the older children, for a whole year, and that despite their best intentions they will fit themselves into this age-based food chain and just one year later will be treating the new Firsties in exactly the same way, not wanting to spare others what they themselves were not spared.

The woodland pitch isn't even part of the tour, this remotest and worst of all football pitches, with no side fences and no goal nets, and a solitary tree in the middle of it, though at the same time it is also the best pitch, because nowhere else on the school grounds can you get further away from everyone and because right behind it – opposite Theater Akzent and in sight of the Nuntiatur, the papal embassy – is the best place for climbing over the wall.

When the children get home and discuss their impressions of the place with their parents, comparing the Marianum with other schools, making lists of pros and cons in order to reach a well-considered decision, not a single one of them mentions the wall. Including Till, a small red-haired boy, who has very much noticed it, looked at it, taken it in, unlike many other children for whom it was nothing more than an old-fashioned theatre backdrop, a transition leading to the horizon in muted shades of grey.

CHAPTER 2

But it would be wrong to say that Till's impression was different because he was especially perceptive or observant, or that he was clear-sighted enough to recognise even now something that would only really become apparent to others at the age of 14 or 15, namely that they, unlike other young people at other schools, are locked up in here and that the wall plays a very pragmatic role in this. Nor is it that Till is bored even while the football pitches are being listed, let alone while visiting them, and doesn't want to try a penalty shot, even less so when they urge him, Go on, give it a go! You can do it! just as everyone is always urged into football, as if there was nothing else in the world, until he finally complies because the people waiting behind him are creating a pressure that is familiar to him from diving boards and water slides at the swimming pool, where eventually, turning round and climbing back down in humiliation becomes just as impossible as jumping.

As he takes his run-up, his legs grow so long that he gets vertigo, while the goal keeps shrinking and the goalkeeper's arms keep getting wider, and he finally trips over his own feet without touching the ball.

Till gets up and doesn't think for a second about whether that was embarrassing. It's Saturday, and when his mother fetched him out of his room with a "Right then, we really need to go now!" and walked him the few hundred metres to the school, he had already played three hours of Assassin's Creed, and is therefore still in that state of pleasant detachment from the real world, created by immersion in other worlds. When you are capable of doing something in a computer game, be it smashing down walls and building stairs into the sky with the resulting wood, or overcoming every imaginable obstacle with your parkours

skills, you can sometimes see the same very concrete possibilities in the real world as in the computer game.

How comparatively boring it is, then, to think about whether you really want to learn Latin, French and Russian, whether you want to go to this “semi-boarding school” and only get home at 17:30 every day; whether you feel comfortable amid all the footballers and volleyballers, among children who at ten years old are already dressing the way they will do for the rest of their lives: in green polo shirts and brown deck shoes, pink polo shirts and white jeans. How boring everything seems in comparison to the works of art that hundreds of people have spent years working on so that we will find them as entertaining as possible. Maybe it’s normal for a child whose idea of boarding school comes from the Harry Potter films and the Harry Potter computer games, to see a place where they don’t belong and imagine they could become the right person for it. Or maybe Till simply doesn’t think about it, because during the open day he is imagining himself leaping from the ground to the roof gutter and from there to the upstairs windowsill, climbing up the tall building next door, running across the roofs to the Karlskirche, and then diving off, arms streamlined at his sides. In any case, he feels good that evening when he and his mother put together a list of objectives and work out that the Marianum is the best option for him. And his mother is happy to know that he’ll be taken care of while she’s working full-time.

Notable alumni reveal nothing about the institution that produced them, and in a small city like Vienna they come about naturally over the course of time. Of the academically selective schools, the Wasagasse Gynnasium has Friedrich Torberg, Erich Fried and Stefan Zweig, while the Akademische Gymnasium has Arthur Schnitzler, Lise Meitner and Erwin Schrödinger, and the Schottengymnasium has Johann Nestroy, Johann Strauss and Ernst Jandl. And the Marianum, too, has certain people it can point to, depending on which way the

social wind happens to be blowing. Karl Lueger, for instance, is someone they used to be far prouder of than they are now, and the names Hermann von Trenkwald and Fritz Hamburger aren't mentioned at all, or vanish behind the names of those who had to emigrate because of people like them.

It is unfortunately less easy to gloss over other currently inopportune alumni, because when they include the SA Obersturmführer grandfather, whose performance at the 1936 Olympics did more to disprove than prove the superiority of his race (to general disappointment), and then the father, who was found guilty of Holocaust denial by a criminal court, and finally the son, whose arrogance will inadvertently do a great service to Austrian democracy, there isn't much you can do to distance the school from it.

But German nationalists and the far-right are no more strongly represented at the Marianum than in the rest of Austria, where they make up around 25% of the population, right across the class spectrum – and if you wanted to identify the prevailing mindset here, it would be more one of opportunism. A typical alumnus of this institution is someone who enlarges their family's existing fortune, who becomes a doctor, lawyer or businessman and takes over his father's practice, chambers or company, who finds enough rebellion for a whole lifetime at 17 by tying the jumper draped over his shirt jauntily over one shoulder, rather than symmetrically over both.

Till will never be one of these people.

And it wouldn't be such a terrible thing if Till was out of place here; the school is large enough to let someone slip through, to give them space – more out of neglect than tolerance – and at least leave them in peace, if not actively support them.

Which is to say: it wouldn't be a terrible thing if Till was in 1A or 1C, in 3B or 5D, in any class other than this year's 1B. Because while the school has been working for years to give

its elitism the most human face it can, there is one person whose attitude to all demands of the modern world, all student-centred approaches, is that of an unyielding Gaullish village. And because this person is 1B's form teacher, German and French teacher, tutor and on three afternoons out of five their afternoon supervisor, Till and his classmates have to be Gauls: inhabitants of an exclave of reality.

CHAPTER 3

Vienna draws in oddballs. There are canonised oddballs like Helmut Seethaler, who for decades has been taking legal action against the city's public transport company, to be allowed to Sellotape his poems to the walls of bus shelters; and the beer squire, who is driven by some compulsion to ask women on the metro whether they'd like to go for a beer with him, but responds to the rare Yes by turning away at once and moving on to the next woman. There is the King of Sudan, an older man in a black suit, red tie and red beret who you will find by the Schottentor; he has two doctorates from the University of Alexandria and a megaphone. There is the old lady in the 6th district who is waging a hopeless battle against graffiti, and paints over each new tag with a pot of brown paint, no matter what colour the building is. She is regularly taken to court by building owners to whom the brown rectangles seem uglier than the daubings they cover up and, at least in the eyes of the state, she is a vandal to the same degree as the vandals she is combatting.

But the special thing about Vienna is not its original outsiders, not the Little Lark of the Ottakring, the tiny man in the shepherd's-check jacket who seems to always have been old, and who used to imitate birdsong in his falsetto voice on Kärntner Straße; or Waluliso, who has now even had a bridge named after him in the nudist area of the New Danube; or the

homeless people or the drug addicts, the junkies who sell poems in the 7th district, written and copied out in childish handwriting, some of the them beautiful and sad, others sad and awful. The special thing about Vienna is the mad people with the middle-class façade, who are more or less functional but could never move away from here, because their anti-social behaviour would never have so few consequences in any other city. People who don't live outside society, but go about their jobs in protected areas with limited responsibility: in municipal authorities, private schools or the police force, even if their lives are psychologically precarious. They could lose control on any given day, because they are used to existing in a small habitat where they can write the rules to suit themselves, and others have to follow them, and it's only when they cause a scene outside their usual environment – when, for example, they start hitting an American student during a Bergman film at the film museum because, in their opinion, she was making too much noise; when they stab someone in the leg with their umbrella on the tram; systematically send lewd poems to young female writers through the post; when they start shouting because someone is drinking from a plastic bottle indoors – it is only then that what those who are at such people's mercy already knew only too well becomes obvious to everyone: namely that this is a mad person, someone who should never be in charge of anyone else.

CHAPTER 4

Dolinar, Till's form tutor, whose appearance his students would liken to Lord Voldemort's although, with his sparse strawberry-blond hair and bulbous nose, he looks more like the octopus who is continually infuriated by Spongebob – Dolinar, who always wears black with a loose loden coat in winter that makes him look like a bat, is one of these mad people.

For the past thirty years, his classes have had a special reputation. From the headteacher's point of view they are valued for their above-average grades, the lowest drop-out rate, his students' impeccable behaviour, their inconspicuousness, their reticence. Understandable, then, that the headteacher – who alongside her work as school leader and chair of the Döbling conservative women's group also teaches history and as such has only one class in the lower school – chooses a Dolinar class whenever possible. Nowhere else can she be so sure of tame students. When she enters the room, all the Dolinar children are already in their seats; they stand up within half a second, keep quiet, and only sit back down when they are told to – and the fact that they do this not primarily out of respect for her, but out of fear of their form tutor, is not something that the head, or any other teachers, care about.

Dolinar's colleagues give little thought to precisely what sanctions he imposes for bad behaviour to make his students so much more compliant. For one thing, most of them have no sympathy for children who know by the age of eleven that they will inherit more than their teachers could ever earn, and who show it, too, when they get the chance, who can be unbelievably condescending and cruel – and for another, no one except Dolinar's students knows what really happens in his classes.

What the headteacher might at least know is that in the course of their school career 1B, like all the other Dolinar classes before them, will get extremely poor results in one single area,

namely all the optional subjects and extra-curricular activities, and this is no coincidence.

Dolinar forbids his students from attending optional subjects and extra-curricular activities.

He forbids them from having contact with other classes, forbids their parents from interfering in his method, forbids low grades, in German or French or any other subject, and any kind of indiscipline. Anyone who fails to greet a teacher in the corridor, who stands up too slowly or leaves too quickly, is punished.

Offences are penalised with essays. 300 words on *Playing Football in Enclosed Spaces*, 250 words on *How to Greet People Politely*, 450 words *On the Opening and Closing of Doors*. As the years pass, the wordcount increases, and you will have to stay behind in the classroom writing on at least one or two days, and in extreme cases up to two weeks, while the others are out in the grounds or in one of the recreation rooms. Afterwards, Dolinar marks the essay, returns it, and you spend another day writing three sentences for every serious error, which must then also be marked.

There are days when there is no let up for ten hours straight. First come lessons, then a quick lunch, then the essay, followed by a *study period*, meaning homework and revision, during which Dolinar continues to keep an eye on you. At four o'clock you are allowed down to the buttery for fifteen minutes to get a roll and a chocolate or vanilla milk, and then there is another study period in complete silence until at five thirty, or more often than not quarter to six, and sometimes even six o'clock, Dolinar lets you pack up and go home. Then you are free until eight o'clock the next morning.

But in truth you're not free even then, because if you're out somewhere in Vienna, there is always the possibility of bumping into Dolinar. You might be coming out of the Apollo Cinema at half past nine, and suddenly he'll be there in front of you, and it's just like being at

school, the power imbalance remains, and you can work out what will happen the next day in your German or French lesson, because Dolinar's system of education is based on the motto that you can't dance at two weddings with one backside, and being out in the evening counts as one wedding, as a distraction from school, as a sign that you believe you've learned enough already, as a transgression that cannot be tolerated.

Dolinar needs your full attention, and therefore, he believes, he must restrict his students' lives. That attention is not only required for grammar and orthography, which fall within his subject area, or for all the other topics he teaches because they interest him personally although they're outside the remit of a German and French teacher – Belcanto operas, for instance, European ruling dynasties and the Catholic Church, ballet and architectural history – but above all for an area that is very much part of his subject, but which he interprets quite differently from what the curriculum envisages: literature.