

My Mother, Myself

A Comparison of Our Childhoods

By [Anne-Christine Hoff](#) (November 2023)



Children In The Park, Maurice Prendergast, 1907-10

The Alps vs. the South. Post World War II Europe vs. 1970s United States. My reference points are Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan; hers are Willy Brandt and the Nuremberg Trials. My movies are *Can't Stop the Music* and *The Sound of Music*. They didn't have a television. They listened to the radio.

Comparing my mother's childhood to mine is not easy. We both developed our love of reading in our early years. Both our fathers worked themselves to the bone, and yet the similarities seem to end there. The countries, families, and time periods we grew up in could not have been more different. Our sense of autonomy, our perceptions of the nature around us, and our economic environment growing up shaped us to view life sometimes in diametrically opposed ways.

My mother was born at her home in a small village in the Austrian Alps called Pians in the winter of 1942. Her father, a general practitioner, delivered her in my grandparents' bedroom while the three older children stayed with Opapa, my grandmother's father, in the living room. Winter months in the Alps were cold, typically somewhere between 20 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and having a newborn in the winter while living thirty minutes from the nearest hospital must have been a strain, even with a doctor in the house.

The challenges her father, whom I called "Opa," faced as the town doctor in the winter were considerable: house calls in the middle of the night, snowstorms, and icy roads. Some residences were only reachable by foot. By day, an electric furnace heated the living room and the doctor's office, but not the bathrooms. The three youngest girls took a bath together, followed by either her brother, her sister, or her mother or her father. No one wanted the third bath after the water had cooled off, the cast-off of the family's weekly grime and soap lingering like a bad dream.

I was born in Baltimore, Maryland in the winter of 1973. My only sister was two and a half years older than me, and within a few more years we would move to Atlanta, Georgia, a place that my mother considered backward, but that I adored. From the school to the weather to the neighbors, I loved everything about the south, especially its slower pace of life.

I also remember my father working inordinately hard. Unlike my

maternal grandfather, most of his travels were not by car or by foot but by plane. After he started his consulting business, his clients were mostly in the New Jersey or New York area. I remember the stale smell of sweat that would invade my senses when he took off his jacket before getting in the car, exhaustion seeping out of every pore of his body. Sometimes he would be too tired to speak. Other times he would make forced conversation first and then eventually lapse back into silence.

In elementary school, my world shifted between our home in north Atlanta, a three-bedroom condominium, in a larger complex of about twenty or so units, and a private Christian school called Trinity, which was about a mile down the road. My mom drove a sleek white Chevrolet Monza for the first year or so, and I can remember trying to squeeze other children in our carpool in the hatchback. By year's end, a four-door station wagon replaced the hatchback, and then by third grade, a two-toned blue Chevrolet Suburban succeeded the station wagon as our family went the way of many families in Atlanta, shuttling more and more, to the point where we sometimes felt as if we were living in our cars.

Where carpools were the thing in 1970s Atlanta, my mom and her sisters took the train from their home in Pians to the school in Landeck. Her daily commute involved rising at a quarter to six, boarding the train in Pians at quarter to seven, and then getting off two stops later in Landeck. Once her older sisters went away to boarding school, my mother would endure this round trip commute alone. The wait for the afternoon train was over an hour, but if she missed that train, there wouldn't be another until the following afternoon. Self-direction and reliability would be one of the byproducts of her daily ordeal.

For my mom growing up, nature was her playground. Many times she told me how she and her sisters would go down to a nearby creek, an offshoot of the Inn River, to play. My mother's Opa

would watch them while she and her sisters, Gabrielle and Maria, would make up games and play with their dolls. Their dolls had picnics together while Opapa read his book and made sure no one got into any trouble or fought about anything.

Once her older and younger sisters went to Innsbruck for boarding school, things changed. My mom was then the only child still in Pians, and this is when she developed into an avid reader, reading and re-reading the newspaper's fiction section. Rather than buying toilet paper, the family cut the newspaper into small square sheets. She would read the fiction section while in the bathroom, then eagerly seek out the square sheet with the ending on it and find that section already discarded. While still in middle school, she hatched a plan to have her friend Katya check out books for her from the nearest town with a library, Landeck, but unfortunately, Katya's mother put the kibosh on that idea after only one round. The girl's mother contended that she didn't want to rack up a bunch of overdue fines because of my mom, and that was the end of that.

Nature was never my playground. In fact, growing up in Atlanta, in the late seventies and eighties, I was mostly terrified of uninhabited areas of the city. Wild dogs would attack my father while he would go out for a weekend run. Mounds of red clay housed fire ants, digger bees, or any number of biting or stinging pests. Child murderer Wayne Williams prowled the streets undetected. The evening news might talk of the bodies of young black children turning up in rivers or, even more disarmingly, in an open area of south Atlanta.

Although I knew that I was white, and the victims weren't, I was still scared of Wayne Williams. My imagination ran rampant at night when I closed my eyes. Maybe his victims were not chosen at all. Maybe they were simply the ones he could access. A full tank of gas, and he would be on the north side of town, circling my area in search of another.

The Greater Atlanta area would balloon out to five times the size of the city when we moved there in 1978, but the population of Atlanta proper stayed relatively constant. Malls opened up all over the suburban Atlanta area, and Marta rail created connections between the airport and south Atlanta and the leafy suburbs of north Atlanta, connections about which many whites weren't happy.

I can remember hearing my friends' parents talking about Lennox Square Mall on Peachtree Road. Some parents refused to drop their children there, saying it was dangerous now that the Marta rail stopped right in front of the mall. Some would only drop their kids at Cumberland Mall in Cobb County because Cumberland was not accessible by rail.

I get the feeling that in the 1940s, in Austria, people had just gone through some pretty piss poor years. Two world wars, both of which they lost, the precipitous decline and fall of the Austro Hungarian empire, those last thirty years had been pretty brutal. They still had beautiful nature around them and their families. The mountains affected the way people saw the outside world. Rock climbing, skiing, and hiking kept one's body fit, but politics had just split the world open. Opapa was forcibly retired for the negative things he said about Hitler. Opa was also on a list for refusing to inform the authorities who were the mentally retarded members of the community. "Keep your head down and get on with it. Don't complain." This was the ethos of my mother's generation.

While I wouldn't say we were taught to complain, Madonna told us to "Express [yourself]. [You] got to be [you] baby." Michael Jackson cooed, "Mama say mama sa mama coo sa," which I am told roughly translates to "Dance." Over the years, my mother and I struggled to understand each other, and yet despite these opposing upbringings, there remains on my part a great deal of respect and even envy for my mother's discipline, her wide ranging knowledge on a vast array of disparate subjects, and her diplomatic way of getting along

with all kinds of people. It's as if after all these years we are forever and eternally bridging gaps in our understanding of each other, as if those early years, that Georgia red clay, that roaring, inhospitable Inn River, and those stark Alpine mountains solidified our worldviews and our understandings in a way that neither of us can fully control.

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