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“Nobody wants to read about grumpy old people ranting about the British government”, said Oliver. Though from the feedback I get, it seems that the avid readers of this annual letter are more interested in politics than family mishaps. Let me disappoint everyone: this edition contains both. Read on to learn how to avoid vacuum cleaning, how to use search-and-rescue services, why you should learn Malayalam but not Ukrainian or German, where to place your beach towel in Italy without having to shell out €40, how the Welsh government makes your life more comfortable, and the subject of our granddaughter’s PhD.

January

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – How stupid can you get? My New Year’s resolution was to vacuum the house every week. Evelyn threatened dire consequences if I broke this rash promise, so I am stuck with it. I’ve learned where the vacuum cleaner lives, how it works, and even how to empty it.

I’ve also learned that Evelyn has a sophisticated results-oriented system to monitor and evaluate task performance. She keeps close tabs on timing and quality and is interested only in outputs, not in inputs, activities or time investments.

But I’m learning to game the system. I now know which corners she inspects for fluffballs, and where the most visible cobwebs accumulate. I wait till she’s out of the house before pulling out the vacuum. This has several advantages: I don’t disturb her while I am doing the vacuuming, and she cannot provide instructions or offer helpful advice. I leave the vacuum in a strategic location so she knows I have fulfilled my weekly duty. But she doesn’t know the details: have I really thoroughly cleaned the whole house, or merely done a quick, cosmetic pass through those bits where I know she’ll look?

February



Harvester at work across the fence



First stage in making firewood



We saved Heidelberg from certain disaster (see April)

MÜLLENBERG – They’ve cleared all the spruce trees from the land across the fence, and have loaded the logs into containers to ship them off to China. It has sometimes been difficult to get out of our driveway because of all the lorries clogging the road. No spruce means we now have a view of the lake next door. But there’s nothing to protect the remaining beech and cherry trees from the wind. Storm Zeynep downed two trees across our driveway, and five more on the other side of the fence. This is a mixed blessing. We are happy the big cherry tree did not demolish our garage, and we are grateful for all the firewood, given the energy price rises towards the end of 2022. They say that heating with wood warms you twice: when you cut it, and when you burn it. They forgot the intermediate steps: you also have to haul the logs, pile them up, cut them into 25 cm lengths, split them, and then carry them up a ladder to stack them. I make that seven warming events in all.

March

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND – My mother has had a stairlift installed. Emily (4) had never seen such a contraption before, so was impressed as Sheila rode sedately down the stairs to greet us. To our disappointment, Emily didn’t want to have a go herself – which meant that we could not either.

My mother’s birthday party attracted Mundys from Germany, France, Italy and Australia, as well as the UK. What does one give to a 92-year-old who has everything and really does not want anything new? Answer: German sausages. And a honey spoon. Last year’s honey harvest was meagre, so instead of honey we gave a spoon to each family. This has a kink in the handle so you can hook it over the edge of the jar, allowing the honey to run back into the jar instead of dripping onto your tablecloth.

April

HEIDELBERG, GERMANY – We had only two hours to save Heidelberg from an evil professor determined to poison the city’s water supply! To do this, we had to solve a series of riddles: find the correct solution, and the secret instructions revealed the location of the next puzzle. This outdoor escape-room game takes you on a tour of the bits of the city you might not otherwise see. Alas, we were so busy concentrating on the riddles that we neglected to admire the townscape.



More Mundys than one could ever wish for

You might think that the more people who try to solve a riddle, the faster it goes. Not so. Things sped up considerably when Julia's parents and Evelyn retired to a café. They accelerated further when Julia took charge and relegated me to porter duties. The good news: we managed to prevent the prof from poisoning the River Neckar. But we didn't finish all the tasks within the allotted time, so he is still on the loose. If you live near Heidelberg, stock up on bottled water.

KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – “Our city has a nuclear power station. If it exploded, the explosion would be 15 times bigger than Chernobyl.” The robotic voice from Google Translate sounds marginally depressed, whatever the subject. But especially so if it is talking about potential nuclear catastrophes.

The first Ukrainian refugees to arrive in Kürten were in fact Bangladeshis who had been in Ukraine for years, and who had friends here who put them up for a few weeks before they found a place of their own. They were swiftly followed by several hundred more refugees fleeing Putin's invasion. Most are young Ukrainian women with small children, though there are several third-country students who were studying in Ukrainian universities when the bombs started to fall. A very different demographic from the single young men from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea who arrived here from 2015 on.

Something like 300 people from Ukraine have now found a new, temporary home in Kürten (population: 20,000), doubling the number of refugees here. Most of the locals have welcomed the newcomers: many found spare rooms or holiday flats that they could open up for the refugees.

Some things are easier now: the Ukrainians are generally better educated than the previous group of refugees; instant translation services remove the need for interpreters or to learn Ukrainian (or German); and the infrastructure of government institutions, social workers, language schools and volunteer groups doesn't have to be created from scratch.

The German government has also been more generous to Ukrainians than to the Middle Easterners and Africans who preceded them (and who continue to arrive). Our volunteer group runs a weekly café where people can meet and get help. I run a news service in German via Whatsapp, with the most important items translated into Ukrainian, Arabic (and occasionally English, French, Farsi and Tigrigna too), and I write CVs for people and help them find jobs or apprenticeships. Other volunteers have started a second-hand clothes store selling cheap clothing, and our furniture store gives away donated tables, chairs and cupboards. The food bank provides free food packages, but has had to limit the number of people served because the local supermarkets have been cutting back on donations.

Amid the challenges, the successes are heartening. Most of the refugees in Kürten live in private accommodation (though too many are stuck in overcrowded and unhygienic refugee shelters). Most of those who arrived in 2015 have found jobs, their children are in school, and many have started apprenticeships or university study: the first step on the ladder to getting a decent job. The newest arrivals are learning German – not the easiest of languages – and several of them have already found work. That is good for them, and it is good for Germany too, which faces a shortage of both skilled and unskilled labour. The biggest problem is finding affordable accommodation: the low-cost rental market is swept bare by the surge in demand, and the government has for many years neglected to build enough social housing.

May

HERRENBERG, GERMANY – After two years of covid-induced staring at people's faces on computer screens, it was nice to go to a real-life event. Especially one to celebrate Evelyn's cousin Elke's 80th birthday. Elke was a pioneer of women's rights in local government: she helped found a women's movement in Herrenberg and in 1994 was one of its first representatives on the town council. Shows how recent progress has been in fair representation, even in liberal Germany.



Our friend Rolf taught Evelyn and Emily how to make puppets

MÜLLENBERG – You would have thought that laptop designers would have discovered by now that the best place for the camera is at the top of the screen. A secret the makers of Evelyn's new laptop have not yet discovered: its camera is at the bottom. On a videoconference, the other participants have a livestream of her chin. We have bought an external camera to give a view of her face from a more flattering angle.

The more sensible participants in videoconferences turn their cameras and microphones off. The ones who forget to do so appear in little tiles on screen, where everyone else can view them yawning or picking their nose. This is frequently more interesting than what is actually being presented.

BONN, GERMANY – What used to be called a “conference” is now an “in-person conference” to distinguish it from the online variety. Julia was attending the European Space Agency's “Living Planet” environmental symposium in the former German parliament complex in Bonn. Oliver gave me his spare identity tag, and I sneaked in through the side entrance, tucking my tag under my jacket to conceal the fact that there now appeared to be two Oliver Mundys on the premises.

The crowds filtered through hallfuls of posters devoted to the cryosphere, geomagnetism and ecological dynamics. Faced with titles like *Type-discriminated aerosol concentration profile retrieval from the AOS spaceborne LIDAR multispectral measurements and their synergy with polarimeter*, Evelyn and I quickly realized we were way out of our depth. Fearful of being mistaken for senior specialists in Landsat imagery by twentysomethings eager to tell us about their latest work on Arctic sea-ice thickness, we retreated to the main hall to admire



Left to right: Oliver, Emily, Julia, Evelyn and Oliver (again)

the satellites dangling from the ceiling. Satellites are surprisingly small, or maybe they were scale models? Lucky we did not spend more time mingling with the cryospheric throng. A 2022 synonym for “in-person conference” is “superspreader event”. We avoided covid, but Julia picked it up and had to spend several days in isolation until Oliver and Emily caught it too and they were able to quarantine together. Proof that concern for the planet is bad for your health.

June

ISMAILIA, EGYPT – First time I’ve been back to Egypt since 1983. An eight-lane motorway in each direction now links the concrete sprawl that is Cairo to Ismailia, on the Suez Canal. The widest motorway in Germany, the home of the *Autobahn*, has only half that many lanes.

The *Zahabia* is a pleasure boat that features super-loud disco music, flashing lights, two parrots and Winnie the Pooh dangling from the top deck, and superb onboard communications with the local search-and-rescue service. During its final figure of 8 around a branch of Lake Timsah, the engine failed. While we contemplated the parallels with the small boats trying to cross the Channel or the Strait of Sicily, the crew called for assistance. It took several minutes of drifting across the lake while the captain and the rescue boat haggled over the price, then the rescuers towed us back to land. Frontex and HM Coastguard, please note.

July

SPERLONGA, ITALY – Italy’s long coastline has many fine beaches, all covered with an almost continuous canopy of beach umbrellas. These belong to *stabilimenti*, or beach clubs, which lease a stretch of beach from the government, set up umbrellas and loungers, and charge people access. There are no tides in the Mediterranean, so this furniture can stay put all year round. A mystery how a small child can possibly find its way back to its family through the maze of identical umbrellas.

You are free to walk along the shoreline in front of the umbrellas, but do not lay out your towel in the *stabilimento*’s fief unless you want to pay the hefty entrance fee. Our friends Anne and Reinhard showed us the workaround. The strip of beach, several metres wide, between neighbouring *stabilimenti* is a public area. Spread out your towel there, and you can sunbathe for free. You can even put up your own umbrella to make it easy for your small child to find your pitch. Plus, you get to listen to music blaring from the loudspeakers of the *stabilimenti* on both sides. Caution: if you set up camp in the



Pitch your towel in the right place to avoid getting run over



16 hours on the train from Bergisch Gladbach to Rome – and in the *Area silenzio*, too.

wrong place, you risk being run over by a cart laden with inflatable beach toys.

MÜLLENBERG – Unlike in 2022, Woglinde, Grimigerde and co. have been busy this year. The spring was warm and the blossom period frost-free, so our bees were able to collect gallons of nectar and turn it into record amounts of honey. We harvested 90 kg in June and another 40 kg in July. But we have reached the end of female Wagner opera characters to name hives after. So our new hives are named after Verdi heroines. Aida honey, anyone?

MÜLLENBERG – Saying goodbye is never easy, but sometimes the process of separation can be long and drawn out. After six happy years, Evelyn has given up her part-time job with the German shepherds’ association. The new board could not get its act together, and the work was more stress than fun. She no longer does the administration work, and has passed on responsibility for the association’s monthly newsletter. But she has still not been able to divest herself of all her responsibilities. A glitch in the registration procedures means the new board cannot access the association’s bank accounts, so she still has to manage them.

Her resignation also means we have had to slaughter our sheep. Every month I would draw some cartoons for the newsletter, These featured “Henrietta” and “Mathilda”, two ewes who commented on events in the world of shepherding. See the end of this letter for one of them. No more newsletter, RIP Henrietta and Mathilda.

August

ISLE OF WIGHT, ENGLAND – Our friend Alan is learning Malayalam, a language from Kerala in southern India, the home of the nurses who come to care for him each day. Alan is bound to a wheelchair by multiple sclerosis, so has to be winched in and out of bed using a hoist. It helps to be able to say *nirttuka* (stop), *pāākū* (go) and *nandi* (thank you).

LANDOVERY, WALES – Among the great unsung achievements of the Welsh government is the National Toilet Map. This is an interactive online map of every public convenience in Wales (though “other toilets may be available”). Click on a loo, and it tells you the opening times, entrance fee and facilities (disabled access, baby changing...).

It turns out that most of Wales’s toilets are concentrated in the south and north – hardly surprising, as that is where most people live. The Great Green Desert of mid-Wales, which is largely uninhabited moorland, is also a Toilet Desert. It’s 30.4 leg-crossing kilometres from Llanspyddid to the next loo in Llandovery, and if that one is out of order, another 29.9 kilometres to Lampeter. I advise you to plan your trip ahead.

CARDIGAN, WALES – It’s hard to find handicap-accessible accommodation on the Welsh coast at short notice, but the choice between the only two available – a B&B in Cardigan and an anonymous hotel in Swansea – was easy. We took my mother to old holiday haunts, including Little Haven, where I made the mistake of pushing her wheelchair onto the beach. Just time to take a photo and get her back to the concrete slipway before it sank permanently into the sand.

ST DAVID’S, WALES – A shepherd’s wagon is not handicap-accessible, but it didn’t have to be: we took Sheila home to before returning here for a few days of walking along the coast path. The wagon was our bedroom, while the kitchen and bathroom were in a shed nearby. Glamping at its best.

You used to see just two colours on British beaches: blue and red. Those brave enough to venture into the water were blue from cold, as were those huddled behind windbreaks and shivering in the rain. Those lucky enough to head for the beach on one of the rare days of sunshine would quickly turn red from sunburn.

Now you see only one colour: black. Not a bikini or budgie-smuggler in sight: everyone seems to be clad in full-length black nylon jumpsuits. Surely there has to be a market for more colourful beach attire that still protects you from the perils of both the cold and sunburn?



Sinking into the sand



Not handicap-accessible

WHITEHALL, LONDON – The Foreign Office is both overly ornate and spartanly functional. Our nephew Alex took us on a tour. The Durbar Court is a symphony of statuary, columns, marble and polished granite; the staircases are lined with oil paintings of nineteenth-century worthies. The offices, on the other hand, are faceless rooms filled with computers, devoid of any decoration other than security notices. “No, you may not take a photo of those”, said Alex. The staff hot-desk. No books, no reference materials, no coffee mugs, no family photos. I decided I prefer the familiarity and disorder of working at home.

Alex did show us where they used to keep the helicopters, though: they would wheel them out of the basement and into the courtyard, from where they would bear their ministerial guests up into the yonder. He also showed us the window from which staff could peer out at the doorway of Number 10 on the other side of Downing Street. The famous front door was open when we peeked out, but was quickly closed by an invisible hand: perhaps someone had spotted us taking photos?

September

NEBMERSIEL, GERMANY – When she was a small child, Evelyn’s parents took her on holiday to the North Sea coast, where she had refused to go on what passes as a “beach” in these parts because of the mud squelching between her toes. Her despairing parents swapped her for her more amenable cousin who did not mind being sucked into the ooze.

She has wanted to return ever since. So as a birthday surprise I treated her to a trip to the same area. No shepherd’s wagons available, so I settled on a holiday flat instead. The rain was horizontal, but at least the windfarms were twirling: the night horizon is filled with blinking red lights to warn off aircraft and migrating birds.



Johnson out, Truss in, Truss out, Sunak in. May as well keep it open all the time.



Even less wheelchair-accessible than Little Haven

THE UK (AS SEEN FROM MÜLLENBERG) – For over 70 years, Queen Elizabeth rarely put a foot wrong. She had always been there, and we thought that somehow she always would be. Now she is not. Goodbye to a remarkable woman.

Contrast Her Maj with the British government, which rarely puts a foot right. It was somehow fitting that Boris Johnson was brought down not by his disastrous policy decisions (Brexit, covid...) but by a string of ethics scandals.

Could anyone make a worse prime minister? Yes. Liz Truss was still in charge of the Foreign Office when we visited in August; by the end of September she had moved twice: once across the road and through that famous front door – and out again, in the shortest reign ever for a Prime Minister. Thereby opening the door of No. 10 for yet another replacement. One of the main contestants in the contest for top job: Boris Johnson. If he was not fit to lead the country in July – in the eyes of his own party – why should he suddenly be fit to do so in October – in the eyes of that same party? Fortunately someone seems to have told him as much, and the Brits now have Rishi Sunak in charge of a slightly less catastrophe-prone administration. The next election is scheduled for January 2025. Let's see if he lasts that long.

October

WIPPERFÜRTH, GERMANY – Evelyn was so enthused by her birthday treat that she decided to respond in kind. She proposed a romantic weekend bike trip to Wipperfürth, around 20 km away. Much appreciated, as she isn't really into cycling.

Alas, the day before, I was riding back from my Italian class Leverkusen when my chain broke. Lacking the tools to repair it, I pushed the bike until I found a mobile phone signal, then called Evelyn to ask her to pick me up in the car. While I was waiting, an elderly couple parked their car where I was waiting, and I borrowed some pliers from them and repaired the chain. I met Evelyn in the car halfway down the road, coming in the other direction.

Next day, after thoroughly checking the bikes and packing every tool I could think of, we loaded up our overnight bags and set off. We hadn't gone more than 5 km when my chain broke again: this time irreparably. Evelyn cycled back home to fetch the car. We loaded my bike in the back and headed for Wipperfürth, where a bike shop repaired the chain overnight.

I rode back home after the weekend, so the bike was OK, right? Wrong. Climbing a hill on the way to Leverkusen, the chain jammed and the back wheel came off. I called Evelyn's search-and-rescue service again... but no reply, so I tried in vain to repair the bike. Twenty minutes later she arrived: on her bike; she had decided to use it to go shopping. She cycled home to fetch the car.

Another 20 minutes passed, but still no Evelyn. I managed to fix the bike once again, and rode home, to find her and our neighbour Ulli in the garage, trying to start the car. Dead battery. Someone (modesty prevents me from revealing his identity) had left the car lights on overnight.



Spoiled for choice

November

MARBURG, GERMANY –

Double graduation: Congratulations to our daughter-in-law Julia for defending her PhD dissertation on “Cloud-based services for Big Earth data” (ask Julia), and to our granddaughter Emily on her PhD on “Paw Patrol” (don't ask). We are proud of you both!

Since you asked: Paw Patrol is a kiddie cartoon series featuring puppies that rescue adults in trouble. I must ask Emily sometime how juvenile dogs can drive lorries, fly planes and operate complex equipment, and how their 8-year-old human coordinator can afford all this costly gear.

MÜLLENBERG – *Atomic habits* is the title of a self-improvement book that Oliver has taken to heart. If you want to form a beneficial habit, it says, don't set yourself unrealistic goals, but start small. Don't aim to run a marathon: just get used to putting your running shoes on. Oliver is using this technique to go running. Every day. “Don't break the chain!” he says. Which I find ironic given my cycling woes (see October).

I can testify that this approach works even less than overambitious New Year's resolutions (see January). I have tried getting the vacuum cleaner out, but have failed to convert that into any cobweb-significant action. I've tried putting the vacuum in an inconvenient place, like next to the bed. Nothing doing: I will happily climb over it to get into bed.

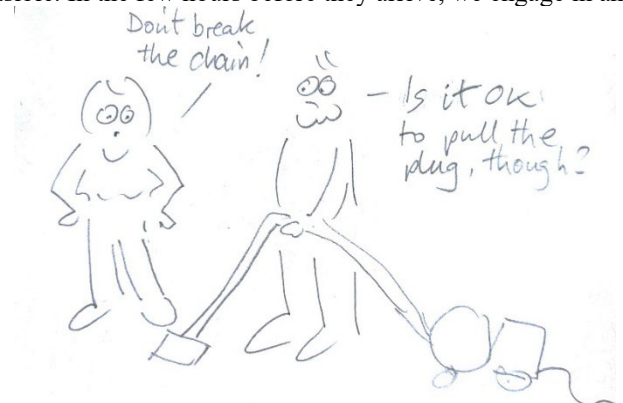
The one thing that does work is the impending arrival of visitors – something that the end of the covid pandemic has made feasible. In the few hours before they arrive, we engage in an



Double graduation



Guess what my mother got for Christmas this year



intensive flurry of housecleaning. Is that why Evelyn has taken to inviting people round more frequently?

MÜLLENBERG – Do an internet search for “pastoral”, and you will be deluged with hits for either spiritual support or Beethoven’s 6th symphony. Neither is the topic I am currently interested in. To get to what I want, you have to add a more specific search term, such as “grazing” or “sheep”.

This is for a worldwide map of pastoralists (= herders, not priests) I’ve been working on (check it out at pastoralpeoples.org/pastoralist-map). Click on one of the 700+ entries, and it tells you the opening times, baby-changing facilities... er, sorry, wrong map. It’s got everything you can herd, from alpacas to yaks, and including cattle, ducks and reindeer as well. Find out about the Maasai of Kenya, the Barolong of Botswana, and the commoners of the Longmynd. Know of a group that is missing? Let me know.

December

MÜLLENBERG – After all the political antics in Britain, it was time for some in Germany. A group of nutters called *Reichsbürger* (citizens of the Reich) decided they wanted to kidnap the minister of health, overthrow the government, and name a tweedy and confused aristocrat, Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß, as regent. The police arrested this bunch before they could storm the parliament building.

All very silly. Except that they had links to the far-right AfD party, which won 10.3% of votes in the last general election and nearly a quarter of all votes in some east German states. Do not underestimate the power of right-wing extremism.

Fun facts: All male members of the Reuß family are called Heinrich (hence the numbers). The highest-numbered Heinrich was LXXV (that’s 75, for those not used to Roman numerals). Anni-Frid Lyngstad of ABBA fame was married to a distant but saner cousin, an unnumbered Heinrich.

MÜLLENBERG – I’ve discontinued my Twitter account because of Elon Musk’s new policies to permit hate speech and disinformation. And his disregard for workers’ rights. And his catastrophic approach to corporate governance. I don’t think Mr Musk will notice I’m no longer tweeting, or my disinclination to purchase a Tesla. But I feel just a little bit better for it.

MCDONALD’S, HIRSCHBERG, GERMANY – Yes, McDonald’s. The first one I’ve been to in something like 30 years. One has to boycott something in life, and for me it’s McDonald’s and fizzy drinks (and Twitter – see above). So why the change of heart? Our nephew Sven was taking us down south, and had to recharge his car. McDo has fast-charging stations, but you still need to kill 15 minutes while your car fills up with juice. Add on hunger, the need to visit the loo and the lack of other hostleries in the vicinity, and you have the breaking of a boycott. I promise to do better in 2023.

REICHENBACH, BAVARIA, GERMANY – “Let’s have a family Whatsapp group,” suggested Julia’s sister Linda. The “Reichenbach Family” group was created in a trice, while Julia and her cousin (who is studying political science and is active in student politics) explained feminism to the assembled throng. The group was secretly renamed “Reichenbacher Men’s World”, which was immediately corrected to “Reichenbacher Matriarchy”, and all the male members were deprived of their administrator privileges. I secretly borrowed Evelyn’s phone, restored our admin status and renamed the group “Reichenbacher MatriarChat”, but these improvements were swiftly reversed. At least the men of the family now know their rightful place.

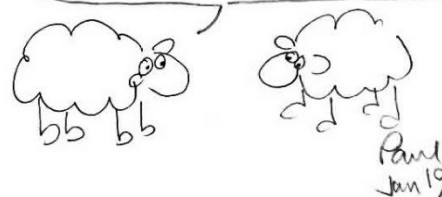


Boxing Day in Zischendorf: intense competition for bandwidth

THE WORLD (AS SEEN FROM MÜLLENBERG) – Despite the end (we hope) of covid, 2022 was not a good year. Putin tried to annex Ukraine, and was surprised when the Ukrainians didn’t like it. Thousands have been killed and millions have fled. Food and energy prices have surged. Around the world, millions go hungry because of one man’s delusions. Putin is now dragging things out until Trump gets back in power and agrees to all his demands. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.

As we make our way into 2023, let us express admiration for the people of Ukraine, who are fighting for their freedom. And for the women of Iran and Afghanistan, who are fighting for their basic rights. Seeing such courage in face of adversity makes us feel small.

Die Politik ist verrückt...
Der Wolf ist um die Ecke...
Der Bock, der mir ewige
Treu geschworen hatte, ist weg...
Und ich bin schon wieder Schwanger.
Und du sagst mir "Frohes Neues Jahr?"



“Politics are crazy, the wolf is round the corner, the ram who swore me everlasting love has vanished, and I’m pregnant again. And you say ‘Happy New Year?’”

We wish you a very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Tét and Norooz.

Paul and Evelyn