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“Better than trying to learn English by reading European Commission documents” was one comment on our last year’s letter. Thank you, Günther: the praise is appreciated. Looking forward to hearing your comments on this year’s effort.

In this issue you will learn why hippos don’t make friends, how to take a selfie, how to eat soup without using a spoon, why the horses in Austria are happy but the bees in Müllenberg, the gazelles in Kenya and the camels in Rajasthan are all miserable, and how to dispose of used diapers. Plus a rant or two about the current rash of nationalism that is afflicting the world. Skip to the end if you want to avoid all this and just need your season’s greetings.

### January

BECHEN, GERMANY – Talking of bureaucratic jargon: I walked into the attic flat to find Evelyn trying to get a couple of Eritrean refugees to read a document they had received from German officialdom. She forced them to get their tongues around such polysyllabic gems as *Bedarfsgemeinschaftsnummer* and *Zugewinnungsgemeinschaftsmitglied*: words that have to be hyphenated across at least three lines in a standard newspaper column and that defeat even the doughty resources of Google Translate. Evelyn later gave me a tongue-lashing (*Zungenpeitschen*) for demotivating her by laughing at her efforts to edify the Eritreans.

The German language consists of a hotchpotch of mutually unintelligible dialects: Swabian, Bavarian, *Schwiizerdütsch* (Swiss German), *Kölsch* (from Cologne), Saxon, and even *Bergisches Platt*, the local dialect in Kürten. None is more bewildering than *Beamtendeutsch*, or German Officialese. Replete with paragraph-long sentences and sentence-long words, and peppered with abbreviations and “§” signs, this dialect delights civil servants and drives normal mortals to inflict grievous bodily harm on the innocent sheets of paper that bear it. Refugees struggling to learn German give up after the first three words of a letter in *Beamtendeutsch*; they usually add such documents to an unsorted pile at the back of their underwear drawer. The pluckier ones find a German to translate it into normal prose. Which may be the only way they find out that they will be deported if they don’t turn up to an interview on Tuesday.

Clever people, the authors of such impenetrable fog. They can claim that they have fulfilled the letter of the law, yet have managed to communicate nothing to their victims except confusion and despair. *Weiter so!* (Keep it up!).

READING, UK – No, I don’t understand why our daughter-in-law Julia would want to give up a job in Frascati, a glorious mediaeval hill-town above Rome, for one in Reading, a gritty exurb of London. Now Oliver has moved to Reading too, giving up a job in Rome for unemployment in the overpriced, traffic-clogged, architecturally challenged southeast of England. Now we have no more excuses to pay family visits to Latium and Tuscany, and I have no reason (other than it is a lot of fun) to continue my weekly Italian classes at the adult education centre in Bergisch Gladbach.

ROME, ITALY – The perils of technology. I decided to try out the feature on my new smart watch that navigates you from A to B. Designed for sporty types who do not want to stare at a map on



*Via Appia Antica, Rome*

their mobile phone while jogging, the watch displays a map and photos showing you which way to go. It may be useful in overcast Germany, but in sunny Rome it’s useless: the screen is invisible in the glare. We walked past our destination twice before we resorted to the good old-fashioned paper map.

### February

NAIVASHA, KENYA – Zebras are thought to recognize each other by their stripes – each one has a unique pattern. But how about hippos? They all look pretty similar to me. And to each other too: apparently they tell each other apart by smell. And the males spray each other with dung to establish hierarchies. No wonder they do not seem to form lasting friendships.



*Close, but not friends*

### March

COLOGNE, GERMANY – “Wear blue” said the instructions for the demonstrators. Blue? It’s the main colour on the European Union flag, and Evelyn decided to go to a weekly demo organized by Pulse of Europe in favour of the EU. With nationalism and xenophobia on the rise throughout the world, it is time to show support for openness, mutual understanding and collaboration, she said.

But what to wear? It’s not that she is short of blue garments: in her wardrobe it is hard to find anything that does not reflect light in the 450–495 nanometre band. Except for blue coats. She rummaged in the attic and returned triumphantly with an ultra-warm royal blue ski jacket that I call “Mr Blob” after a non-existent Mr Men character. (If this means nothing to you, google Mr Men.)

Around 1,000 people turned up for the demo, very few of them wearing blue. Evelyn got used to shouting snappy slogans like

“Vielfalt, Freiheit, Europa” (diversity, freedom, Europe) as they marched from the main station to the old city. She plans to attend future demos too, but hopes that the weather stays cool enough for her to continue wearing Mr Blob.

## April

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – Germans cannot understand how Brits can survive without an identity card. But about the only time I have felt a need for one over the last 20 years in Germany is when picking up registered mail from the post office – I have had to take my passport with me as proof of identity. Now I have acquired German citizenship as an insurance policy against Brexit, I have my very own German ID card that proves that I’m me to anyone who wants to know who I really am but doesn’t believe me when I say that I’m me. If you see what I mean.

## May

COLOGNE, GERMANY – For our Indonesian friends, the purpose of a trip to Germany appears to be to take as many selfies as possible. It does not appear to matter very much whether the tourist attraction being visited at the time appears in the frame: what is important is a row of smiling faces, ideally with hands raised to the camera in peace signs.

No matter: our friends taught me how to take selfies. Point the mobile phone in the right direction and tap the screen, and you get a beautiful picture of yourself staring resolutely away from the picturesque view behind you. All I need for a perfect shot is to look slightly less worried while I’m taking the shot.



*I wish to apologise for the lack of a picturesque view behind me*

STANSTED AIRPORT, UK – I thought I’d try out my new German passport on the automatic passport gates. Place the passport open at the right page on the scanner, and the barrier should open automatically. Except it didn’t. “Please try one of the passport desks instead”, said the supervisor after my third attempt. “No problem,” I said, “I have another passport.” Sometimes a British passport is useful after all.

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – I proudly showed my mother my brand new but sadly non-functional German passport. She was horrified. “You’re English!” My sister Annabelle, who lives in Melbourne, pulled out her Australian passport. “That’s different – Australia is part of the Commonwealth,” said my mother. Now all I have to do is to persuade Angela Merkel to get Germany to join the Commonwealth. Presumably it would qualify, given Germany’s long association with the British Crown: the British Royal Family was the House of Hanover or the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha from 1714 to 1917 and changed its name to Windsor only because of anti-German sentiment during the First World War. How about it, Angela?

## June

WEIER, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – If you want to sell bees, prepare new a colony by taking a honeycomb with bees and young larvae and putting it into a new hive. The bees will feed some of the larvae with royal jelly to turn them into queens. The first queen to emerge will hunt down all the other would-be queens and kill them: a hive can have only one queen. It’s a bit like the House of Tudor, or modern North Korea. Mark the queen on the back with a marker pen so you can spot her easily.



*Butterfly house in Mainau: blue is the colour of Europe*

Got all that? The evening before the annual bee exchange, plug the entrance to the hives of the baby colonies you want to sell. Take the hives full of bees to the beekeepers’ clubhouse. Buyers turn up with empty hive boxes, and the combs full of bees (point out the marked queens to their new owners) are transferred one by one into the new boxes. Money changes hands in the opposite direction.

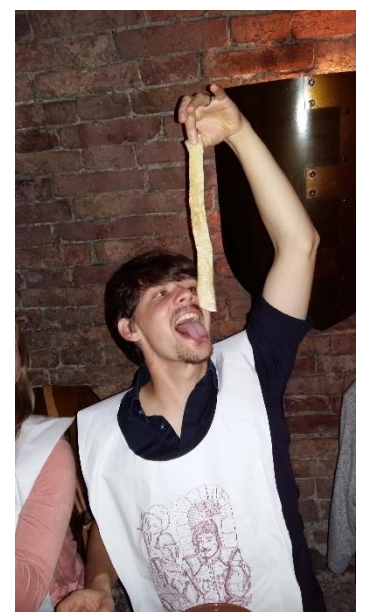
The bees have been pent up in the hives all day, so quite a few of them take the opportunity to get out for a breather. That’s not a good idea: their queen and sisters disappear down the road in the new owners’ car, leaving hundreds of strays behind. The air is full of bees. They have to hope that one of the remaining hives will accept them into their own colonies.

## July

EBSDORFERGUND-BELTERSCHAUSEN, GERMANY – A couple of years ago, Evelyn and I visited Shetland to do some research for a book about the local sheep. Last year we went there again to check on a few details. We had about a week’s work left to finish the book off, so we came here to Evelyn’s sister’s house to hide from other work and finish the manuscript off. After a week’s concentrated work, we only had two more weeks’ work left to do on it. I wonder whether we will ever get it finished?

AULENDORF, BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG, GERMANY – Here’s how to eat

*Bandnudelsuppe* (soup with broad, flat noodles) if you don’t have a spoon at hand. Grasp one end of a noodle in the bowl between the thumb and forefinger of your right hand (Oliver is using the wrong hand in the photograph). Lift it up and tilt your head back, allowing the noodle to dangle above your open mouth. Lower your hand, allowing the noodle to settle in your mouth. Repeat as often as required until the bowl is empty of noodles. Then lift the bowl and pour the liquid contents into your mouth. Before undertaking this procedure, it’s a good idea to don one of the paper bibs provided by the “mediaeval restaurant” you are visiting. Protects your clothes from stray drops of soup and poorly aimed or overhastily lowered noodles.



## August

TSCHAGGUNS, AUSTRIA – If you see a group of horses halfway up a mountain, it's quite likely that they are doing the same thing as you: they are on holiday. Their owners send them to a high altitude for a few weeks during summer to raise the haemoglobin content of their blood. On their return home to sea level, they can run farther and faster than they could before.



Such high-altitude training may work for racehorses and athletes, but alas, it did not work for us. There was a pile of work waiting for us when we got home, and it took us at least a week before we could claim our performance was back to par. We definitely ought to have stayed longer to benefit from the haemoglobin boost.

MÜLLENBERG – Regular readers will recall that our bees do not like lawnmowers. When I mow around the hives at the bottom of the garden, they pile out in an angry mob, like a crowd of Trump supporters setting on an innocent journalist. So I always dress for the occasion: I put on an extra pair of overalls, jacket, wellingtons, thick rubber gloves, beekeeper's veil – the works. But this time they found their way inside the veil anyway: dozens of them, all merrily stinging away. Normally, moving away to a safe distance in a calm, measured fashion is the best thing to do. Not this time: I ran. Back to the house, down the driveway, up the road. The neighbour working in her garden was startled to see a veiled figure run past shouting at her to stay away. "I thought an epidemic had broken out in Müllenberg," she said after I had batted away the last bee. Apart from the 14 stings on my face, there must have been a hundred stings embedded in my jacket and trousers.

Evelyn says it's my fault: I make the bees nervous. She has promised to mow around the hives from now on. She's welcome. Most frustratingly, the bees haven't attacked her yet.

## September

SADRI, RAJASTHAN, INDIA – The sad clusters of abandoned cattle that block traffic on India's roads have now been joined by a new species. Concerned about the decline in the number of camels in Rajasthan, the state government has declared the camel as the official state animal. It has prohibited the slaughter or export of the animals from the state. But they forgot to ask the camel herders for their opinion. This well-meaning law has backfired. Unable to sell camels, and shorn of their source of income, ever more herders are disposing of their animals. Stray, neglected, hungry camels are now commonplace along Rajasthan's roadsides. The powerful vegetarian and animal-protection lobby now threatens to add a ban on the slaughter of goats to the mix. That will do nothing for animal welfare, and deprive even more livestock keepers of their livelihood.

MÜLLENBERG – General election in Germany. Now I have a vote, I'm considering selling it. Every candidate and party I have voted for in the state and federal elections so far has lost. I reckon that I'm the Angel of Death for political parties. So if I sell my vote to a party I don't like, it will lose. Any offers?

MÜLLENBERG – A radio interview with one of the refugees we have been helping here in Kürten. "What differences have you noticed between Syria and Germany?" asked the interviewer. The absence of artillery bombardments? Sauerkraut and sausages? The enormous slices of cake that Germans treat

themselves to in the afternoons? The miserable weather? No: "Everything here in Germany is bunctual," came the reply (Arabic has no letter "p", so the Arabs replace it with a "b".) "The Germans are always bunctual. The buses are bunctual. In Syria, the buses are not bunctual."

## October

ATHI RIVER, KENYA – The developers have moved into this area, fencing off neat squares of savanna to build conference centres (like the one I'm staying at), villas and universities, inadvertently trapping small groups of gazelles inside. The gazelles keep the grass short, entertain the visitors and don't have to worry about lions or hyenas. But this used to be an important wildlife corridor for herds of zebra, gazelles and wildebeest to follow on their annual migration. Rising human populations and the growth of nearby Nairobi are disrupting these patterns. Throughout Kenya, wildlife are losing out to the inexorable push of "development". From the look on the gazelle's faces, I think they preferred the old ways.

AMPLEFORTH, YORKSHIRE, UK – My mother's sister, Yvonne, has been diagnosed with motor neurone disease: an incurable ailment that is depriving her of the use of her limbs. It's the same disease as the astrophysicist Stephen Hawking has: a cruel fate for someone who loved traipsing across the North York Moors with her dog. We took my mother from Herefordshire to see her. Yvonne is amazing: she is planning to go up in a glider early next year to raise money for a charity supporting research on a therapy. Let me know if you'd like to sponsor her flight.

ROBIN HOOD'S BAY, YORKSHIRE – Mundy family folklore has it that our forebears were wreckers on the coast here: they would light fake lighthouses on the cliffs and lure ships into the rocks below, where they would overwhelm the crew and pillage the wreck.

I asked in the local museum. "No wreckers here", said the man at the desk, "just law-abiding seafarers." And only one Mundy commemorated in the local church – his name carved on a bench, probably about a century ago. Maybe we come from honest stock after all.

MÜLLENBERG – If you are caught by a speed camera in Germany, the police send you a letter along with a photo of you behind the wheel as proof of your guilt. For my birthday Evelyn presented me with a homemade birthday card containing all the photos I had been sent over the years. "You can slow down now you're 60", she said.

Pah! Imagine being married to someone who goes to the trouble of collecting evidence of your transgressions, archiving them over decades, then presenting them to you on what should be a highlight of your year. She does not seem to understand that just nine speeding tickets over 30 years of marriage is a fairly modest tally.

## November

MÜLLENBERG – "Here's another letter for you from the police," Evelyn smirked. But this time the photo was of her behind the wheel. I have never been so pleased to get a speeding ticket: now I can start working on her next birthday card.

ESSEN, GERMANY – Over the last couple of years, a group of us have been trying to help refugees in Kürten find jobs. Nearly 70 of the 230-or-so eligible refugees are now in work, earning money rather than relying on the German taxpayer for their welfare. We interview each individual, put together a curriculum vitae, register them with the local employment agency, get them into German classes, put them in touch with prospective employers, and help them handle the paperwork.

I was invited to Essen to present our approach to a conference of volunteers. It quickly became clear why we in Kürten have been successful: we work closely with both the district council and the employment agency. We have gained the trust of the refugees, and have good relations with local employers. In other towns and cities, none of those things works: volunteers like us aren't allowed in the refugee accommodation; officialdom does not collaborate with the volunteers, and lots of refugees remain isolated, stuck in a monolingual bubble from which it is extraordinarily difficult for them to escape.

MÜLLENBERG – No annual letter for 2017 would be complete without a rant about the current political situation. Nationalism is rearing its ugly head everywhere you look: Brexit is just one example. And the currently crop of leaders is particularly awful: Assad, Duterte, Erdogan, Kaczyński, Kim Yong Un, Maduro, Orban, Putin, and Trump, to name just a few. A rare ray of light was the ouster of “Uncle Bob” Mugabe, the seemingly immortal president of Zimbabwe. But even there, he has been replaced by one of his henchmen rather than someone committed to democracy. The people of Zimbabwe deserve better. As do the people of Syria, the Philippines, Turkey, Poland, North Korea, Venezuela, Hungary and Russia. I'm not sure about the people of the United States: I fear that quite a lot of them actually do deserve the clown they have put in the White House. The rest of the world definitely does not.

## December

MÜLLENBERG – Scream from Evelyn: a mouse had jumped out of her boot as she tried to put it on. She thought I was responsible for smuggling it into her footwear. I only wish I had been.

The mouse (the same one?) was lying dead in the porch the following morning. Moral: don't move in where someone may put their foot down.

BECHEN, KÜRTEEN – This is the last time I will ever try to set up a kitchen. We were helping a young single mother from Iraq move into new accommodation. Her 8-year-old twins were continually underfoot, a couple of other refugees helped with rather more zeal than skill, and a string of people offered advice rather than help. The cabinet I constructed fell apart as we tried to move it, and then it turned out to be half a centimetre too long. The oven was set too high and was in the wrong place, with a hot plate directly in front of a power socket. Next time, I'll leave it to the professionals.

KÜRTEEN – Fame at last! Kürten, the unassuming rural district where we live, has made it onto national TV. People in the neighbouring district, Wipperfürth, are complaining that Kürteners are sneaking over the border and filling up their rubbish bins with used diapers. Waste bins overflowing with plastic bags stuffed with baby poo fill the nation's television screens.

Why? Because we Kürteners have to pay per kilogram of rubbish in our bins. Each bin is weighed automatically as it is heaved onto the lorry. At the end of the year, each household gets a bill for the amount of stuff it has thrown away. Wipperfürth households pay a set charge, regardless of how much they chuck.

It all adds up, especially if you have small poo factory crawling around your living room. Six full diapers weigh nearly 2 kilograms, and at 50 cents per kilo, that can amount to over €300 a year in garbage fees. Solution: slip over the border and dump the day's takings in a Wipperfürth bin.

This is a problem Evelyn and I do not have. Or rather, do not have yet. When Krümelchen (see below) comes to visit, we may



*My selfies look better with Evelyn and mountains in the background*

well consider taking the odd trip to scenic Wipperfürth to engage in some diaper tourism.

MÜLLENBERG – When it leaves the European Union, Britain will revert to a navy-blue passport, instead of the evil, conformist EU maroon one. I'm delighted. It's worth all the hassle of renegotiating laws and trade deals, the loss of goodwill and European solidarity, the risks of a hard border in Ireland, the economic damage, and the future isolation of the UK from all its closest neighbours, friends and biggest trading partners. Yes, a blue passport makes Brexit worth it after all!<sup>1</sup>

ROME, ITALY – Oliver and Julia's flat features a windowless hallway replete with more corners than it deserves, doors mysteriously offset from one another, and well-concealed, non-functional light switches. In need of a pee early on Christmas morning, I groped around in the dark for several minutes before I managed to locate a door handle – which turned out to be not that of the bathroom but of our own bedroom.

Oliver and Julia are aware of the problem. They walk around at night wearing LED head torches.

Yes, both Oliver and Julia are now in Rome. Oliver moved here in September to start a job with the International Fund for Agricultural Development, part of the United Nations. Julia followed in December after completing her contract with the snappily named European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts in Reading. She could have continued with ECMWF, but a brief career interruption is on its way in the form of “Krümelchen”, or “Little Crumb”. Due on 5 January 2018: we will return home on New Year's Day so the new parents can get to know the baby by themselves, without its grandparents offering well-meaning advice. Boy or girl? Julia and Oliver say they know, but they're not letting on. We have our suspicions, but we're not letting on either.

Good thing I didn't give up Italian lessons earlier this year, though: when Krümelchen arrives, I'll be able to talk Italian to him (or is it a her?).

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Tét and Norooz.

Paul and Evelyn

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<sup>1</sup> In case you don't get it, I'm being sarcastic.