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This year has seen five catastrophes, all moving at different speeds. Only one of them is coming to an end. The other four will continue to plague us into 2021 and beyond.

So it's hard to come up with an entertaining annual letter packed with side-splitting anecdotes and exotic colour. But I've done my best. Apologies (but not very sincere ones) to those readers who support Donald Trump or think that Brexit is a good idea. Feel free to skip the polemics if you so desire.

In this year's letter you will learn how to repair a toilet, what not to take to France, when to clean your house, where the world's elastic comes from, how to terraform the intertidal range, why shepherds in Germany are unhappy, and how to make pastry. Plus, there's a cool tip for your next Zoom conference.

January

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND – Readers of last year's letter will recall that I left you with a cliffhanger: in a cack-handed attempt to do minor repairs, I had dismantled my mother's toilet cistern and disabled her water supply. The solution involved a plumber with the right tools who knew what he was doing – plus me up in the loft with my arm plunged into a freezing-cold water tank, using a credit-card wallet to block the water flow to the pipes while said plumber replaced the master stopcock. I gave the wallet (minus contents) to the plumber after our triumphant success. Dammit, I should have patented the solution.



Who you gonna call?

BECHEN, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – We have launched a cooking group of refugee women. They meet every second Wednesday to cook, chat and share lunch. We needed to set some rules: how often to meet, who should cook, how to pay for ingredients.

“No men!” they said. Women from Africa and the Arab world welcome a chance to get away from their menfolk and their controlling ways.

I was regretting the loss of delicious lunches but relishing the prospect of free Wednesdays. “But German men *are* allowed!” they said. Maybe I should tell them that I'm British?



February

MÜLLENBERG, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Catastrophe no. 1: The slow-motion tsunami that is Covid-19 has reached Europe. Evelyn and I were both laid low with coughs and sneezing for much of February, so were self-isolating before we knew what self-isolating meant. We thought we might have had contracted Covid somehow, but no: Evelyn had a test that showed she was negative. Just the flu after all.

MÜLLENBERG – Visits by my uncle Phil and his wife Akane are always special. Three reasons: first, of course, they are delightful people who keep us entertained for hours. Second, Akane is an excellent cook – who cooks far too much Japanese food for us to eat in one sitting. The leftovers kept us deliciously fed for an entire week after they left.

Third (and this is less specific to Phil and Akane): the arrival of any visitors means we have to clean the house beforehand so they do not entangle themselves in cobwebs while they are staying. Emily (now 2) knows this already:

“Where are spiders, Emily?”

“Omi Paul!” (Evelyn is Omi (grandma); I'm just Paul).

The Covid-induced lack of visitors has meant that this year our house has been even dustier than usual. Phil and Akane: you are welcome back any time. Especially Akane.



Housecleaning equipment in Müllenberg. Note the wheelbarrow.

March

BECHEN – The room we use for the cooking group used to be a bakery, so we have named it the *Backstube* (baking room). An article on our initiative appeared in the local newspaper. The next day I got a phone call from the distraught landlord's

mother. “It wasn’t a bakery (*Bäckerei*)”, she insisted, it was a pastry shop (*Konditorei*).

I apologised (not profusely enough, said Evelyn), said that we weren’t aware of the history, and that we would inform the journalist who had failed to fact-check the story.

Konditoreistube doesn’t trip off the tongue easily – and might be tough for refugees learning German as their fourth language to remember. So *Backstube* it remains.

We use the room mainly to help refugees find a job. We do interviews, produce CVs, and help them decide on the type of work they’d like to do. Then we look for suitable jobs or apprenticeships, write application letters, and call potential employers. Over the last few years we have helped over 100 refugees in Kürten find employment.

It’s rewarding but can be frustrating: some will never learn enough German to get a job; some have psychological or physical handicaps; others lose their job because of some misunderstanding, often due to poor German skills. And a few employers are happy to exploit refugees by putting them on limited-term, low-paying contracts – or by not paying them at all.

Covid meant we had to suspend the cooking group, plus the computer course, the art group and all the other activities we had planned in the *Backstube*. We have loaned out the computers to refugee schoolchildren who have no other way of doing their remote lessons, and we have found printers for them so they can print out their exercises. Saves me from having to print and deliver reams of schoolwork to them.

~~STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, AND LOOE, CORNWALL, ENGLAND~~ – Yes, we planned to go to Stoke Prior for my mother’s 90th birthday, and then whisk her off to Cornwall for a few days of seaside fun. But Covid put paid to that. Family gatherings and international travel both out. We stayed put in Germany. My mother cancelled the knees-up at the village hall, and we have indefinitely postponed the trip to Cornwall. I doubt somehow whether we will ever get there.

My mother’s neighbours made up for it a little, though: they turned up in her driveway on 23 March, all safely socially distanced, to sing her happy birthday. It even made it onto the local BBC news:

[facebook.com/phillippa.willmot/posts/1643092275840198](https://www.facebook.com/phillippa.willmot/posts/1643092275840198)

BECHEN – An e-bike (actually a pedelec, as you still have to pedal to get anywhere) is a wonderful thing. The two hills between Müllenberg and the supermarket in Bechen fade to insignificance, and a trailer allows me to do the weekly shopping. I have scarcely used the car for shopping all year.

Wonderful – unless the power runs out at the bottom of one of those hills. I briefly considered leaving the trailer by the side of the road and walking home but decided that the two crates of beer on board might be too tempting for thirsty passers-by. Pushing a heavy e-bike plus laden trailer up a hill is hard work. Lesson of the day: recharge the battery every time before you get on the bike.

April

MÜLLENBERG – Imagine: you are in a new country when a pandemic strikes. The government suddenly introduces all kinds of restrictions: the schools and shops are closed, the buses stop running, and you will get a fine if you break the rules. But what are the rules? You don’t understand the language, and you are

not allowed to meet your friends who might be able to tell you what’s going on.

That was the predicament many refugees here found themselves in. So I’ve started a Corona news service for the refugees in Kürten. I distribute information in VERY SIMPLE German (and sometimes in English, French and Arabic too) via WhatsApp to my list of 254 refugees. Topics: health advice, government restrictions, places to get help, the situation with supermarkets, doctors, government services, and so on. The news also goes to the volunteers here and in Bergisch Gladbach (the nearby town).

KÜRTEEN – A group of German and refugee volunteers have started producing facemasks for residents of care homes, elderly people, customers of soup kitchens, and other people in need. Seventeen tailors from 8 countries have been making masks; we have found them sewing machines, thread, cloth and wire inserts to hold the masks firmly over the wearer’s nose (the best type inserts are the metal fasteners used for filing).

Finding elastic was a problem, though: the world’s elastic is made in China, and factories there had shut down due to Covid. Mask production slowed to a halt until someone discovered a substitute: strips cut from old T-shirts are elastic and soft behind the ears.

The group produced and delivered something like 2000 masks around Kürten and Bergisch Gladbach, as well as to a refugee camp in Greece, before commercial production of masks kicked it and they became commonplace. The group leader – an 80-year-old retired tailor – even got a visit from the mayor in appreciation of her efforts.

May

ZISCHENDORF, BAVARIA, GERMANY – Our daughter-in-law Julia was on a business trip in Germany when lockdown struck: no travel to Italy. Ingrid, her mother, was staying with Oliver in Rome to help look after Emily. Lockdowns and travel bans loomed with both Julia and Ingrid in the wrong countries. The solution: Ingrid, Oliver and Emily got the last flight out of Rome and spent the next several months in Bavaria.

Ideal for all involved. Ingrid and Günther have a big house; Emily could entertain her grandparents: she learned German and cooking from Ingrid, and Franconian and fishing from Günther. Meanwhile, Julia and Oliver could carry on working.





ZISCHENDORF – The mid-year drop in Covid cases meant that Evelyn and I could also visit Zischendorf for a socially distanced weekend. Emily hasn't quite got the hang of hide-and-seek yet: she carries on talking while she is hiding.

When Oliver was little, we lived in English-speaking countries, and he always spoke English to us. Evelyn gave up speaking German to him, so I tried to compensate by talking German. Big mistake: we taught him German English and English German.

Oliver and Julia are determined not to repeat our error. Oliver and I speak only English to Emily; Julia, Ingrid and Evelyn speak only German. Günther doesn't say much anyway. Emily has learnt that men speak English and women speak German.

June

MÜLLENBERG – **Backhanded compliment:** *Definition:* An insult disguised as a compliment. *Example:* Evelyn informed me that the frozen pizza I had just served for lunch was delicious – and a welcome change from my usual cooking. **Caution:** backhanded compliments may lead to ► REPUTATIONAL DAMAGE.

Reputational damage: *Definition:* Damage caused to the reputation of a person as a result of unforeseen events.

Example: I carefully arranged a row of books about beer (including *300 beers to try before you die*) behind Evelyn, in full view of the camera, shortly before she was to give a webinar presentation. Revenge can be sweet.

MÜLLENBERG – Many of the refugees in Kürten are working in low-paying jobs that have suddenly become *systemrelevant*: helpers in care homes, delivery drivers, bus drivers, shelf-stockers in supermarkets, dustmen, cleaners. Not that their status as essential workers will get them any more pay, of course.

We did interviews, collected photos, wrote stories and put together a publicity piece for the local paper. Many Germans think of refugees as a drain on the public purse. Reality is



Look, no trees



Puppets speak German too

different: five years after the big influx of refugees in 2015, they are making vital contributions to our society.

July

MÜLLENBERG – Catastrophe no. 2 – climate change – has given us the sound of the summer: the wail of chainsaws felling dead trees. Several years of drought have parched the forests of the Bergisches Land. The shallow-rooted spruce woodland next door has turned brown as it has succumbed to a combination of drought and attacks by bark beetle (which are in turn encouraged by drought). Foresters wonder what species to plant in their place. Will mixed beech woodland be hardy enough to cope with further climate change?

We now have a clear view of the Dhünntalsperre reservoir below us. That is – we would have a view of it if were full, but the drought has lowered the water level by dozens of metres, leaving a broad, muddy strip where grass is beginning to grow.

BECHEN, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – “Keine Rutsche?” (no slide?). Emily is critical when it comes to playgrounds. She has to make do with swings and a climbing frame at this one.

Playgrounds are a facility one doesn't take into consideration unless one is accompanying a small child. I discovered a website showing the location of all the playgrounds in Kürten. The next day I took her to a different location. “Keine Schaukel?” (no swing?) was the comment this time. A slightly older child came up and advised me not to let her play in the sand: “There might be broken glass.”

Emily is better than me at spotting playgrounds. “Trampoline!” “Yes, Emily, but that is in someone's garden...” “Spielplatz!” (playground). “No, the neighbour is building a carport...”

PLOUESCAT, BRITTANY, FRANCE – “What can we bring with us?” I asked my sister Liz, who lives in Brittany. No answer. Evelyn went off to the supermarket to buy things typically German: sausages, beer, and cheese.

Cheese? Does she not realize that there are 1,600 varieties of cheese in France? I can imagine that cheese was one of the reasons my sister moved there in the first place. Cheese sections in French supermarkets are extensive and richly stocked with aromatic varieties of which Germans can only dream.





Gardening tip: Harvest your courgettes before you go on holiday

We packed the beer and sausages (which as expected were greeted with delight in Plouescat), but left the cheese in the freezer in Müllenberg. We'll eat it when we get home.

PLOUESCAT – The biggest advantage of visiting the beach with a small child? You get to do the beach engineering you have always dreamed of. Take with you a small spade and small bucket for small child, and a large spade for you. Instruct child to make as many sand-pies as possible while you attend to the engineering aspects. Then dam any streams flowing across the beach, taking care to dig diversion channels to drain off excess water. Build moated fortifications to impede access by other beachgoers. If anyone asks you why you are ruining the beach (quite possible in France, where they do not seem to go in for such foreshore enhancement), point at small child in the distance and explain in your best French that you are keeping your grandchild amused.

August

KIENTZHEIM, ALSACE, FRANCE – Second trip France in a month. This one for work, though. Regine (Evelyn's sister) and her husband Erich, both erstwhile professors of Japanese studies, have retired to Alsace, bringing their collection of 100,000+ books on Japan with them. Could we come and help them set up a website for their library?

Yes, we could. Social distancing is anyway easy if all you are doing is staring at a computer screen. The library, housed in a picturesque but crumbling chateau that started life as a hunting lodge, then served as a monastery and school, has shelves upon shelves of books in Japanese – a language that neither Evelyn nor I can understand. We discussed the website structure and content; I took photos and drafted a site.



Someone tell Regine they're going to have to pack this lot up again

A month later, the provincial government decided to sell the chateau housing the library. Regine and Erich are going to have to move the books to a new location in Colmar. Lucky they had not finished unpacking after moving earlier this year from Germany. A professional library-removal service will take the books off the shelves and take care of the 800 boxes that are still full of books. Problem: the new home for the library will be available only in 2022. The new website is on hold until then.

September

BECHEN – The *Backstube* is back in business. We have permission from the local government to use it as long as we follow strict hygiene rules. There is now a plexiglass screen in the middle of the table, with a computer monitor on the other side so the person we are working with can see what is on our screen. Disinfectant and spare masks stand guard by the door, the windows gape open for ventilation, and we keep records of who meets whom when.

It beats WhatsApp messages and Zoom meetings. These work with people who speak German or English, who are reasonably computer literate, and if the internet connection does not stutter. But they are hard work for all if any one of these conditions does not apply.

German officialdom has closed down: no more appointments for things like residency permits, unemployment registration or dealing with debts. Communication is by mail or phone only, couched in legalese and peppered with abbreviations and § symbols. At the same time, the number of volunteers working with refugees has plummeted: most are retirees who are not necessarily Zoom-savvy and who naturally prioritize the health of themselves and their families.



That's a Backstube, not a Konditoreistube

MÜLLENBERG – The bees were lazy this year – another sign of climate change? After a promising spring, during which they worked overtime to collect nectar, came a hot, dry summer – always a stimulus to swarm. We did our best to stop them by taking combs out and creating new nucleus colonies, but swarm they still did.

This is bad news for two reasons: (a) You feel compelled to follow the swarm to where it has settled in a tree, brush the bees into a bucket and take them back to a new hive. Warning: you will probably get stung while doing this. (b) Neither the swarm nor the hive they have left will produce enough honey to harvest this year.

Result: we were able to harvest only 25 kg of honey this year. Apologies to our friends and customers for rationing them.



Beekeeping tip: Remove veil before taking refreshment



October

MÜLLENBERG – Congratulations to the World Food Programme on the Nobel Peace Prize. Commiserations to Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement, and to the WHO, which would also have been worthy winners.

I'm shocked, SHOCKED, that the Nobel Committee chose to overlook Donald Trump, despite his ceaseless efforts to promote peace and understanding around the world, especially in the USA. Also bitterly disappointed that Boris Johnson's tireless work to seek an agreement with the EU has gone unrecognized by the Committee. The Committee members are obviously in the pockets of the Chinese and European Commission. Scandalous.

MÜLLENBERG – The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 has allowed wolves to spread westwards from Poland (the East German government used to shoot them), and they have now arrived in western Germany, where they feast on wild boar, deer – and sheep.

As farming has become more intensive, pigs, chickens and most cattle have been moved indoors. Only a few livestock are still kept outside. Cattle and horses are not on the standard menu for wolves. Sheep, though, are just the right size from a wolf's point of view.

The shepherds are caught between the law (killing wolves is prohibited), animal protectionists (who love wolves as part of nature), the mounting costs of protecting their flocks, and the need to earn a living in an unprofitable industry. Herd-protection dogs live with the flock (white and shaggy, they even look like sheep), but they must be specially trained and are expensive to buy and feed. Electric fences must be at least 90 centimetres high, and even then an athletic wolf can jump over



Hairdressers closed: Evelyn insisted my hair was too long. I'm still hoping it will grow back.

them. They have to be checked and maintained: a fallen branch can short-circuit the whole fence. And repositioning hundreds of metres of fencing is impractical when you have to move your flock from one field or patch of heath to another.

A wolf attack can kill dozens of sheep: both directly and by panicking the rest of the flock. The government offers compensation, but first the shepherd must prove that a wolf, not a dog, was responsible. Cue DNA tests and veterinary reports.

While the wolves tear their sheep apart, the association of shepherds that Evelyn works for is tearing itself apart arguing about them. Some want to want to defy the law and shoot the wolves; others want to find ways to coexist; others bet on dogs and sneer at fences. Heated discussions on social media, provocative videos, rumours that turn out to be fake: it is like national politics in miniature.

November

MÜLLENBERG – Catastrophe no. 3 – Trump's misrule – is finally coming to an end. Thank goodness Biden won! But the election wasn't nearly as clear-cut as it should have been. Somehow, 70 million Americans still managed to vote for Trump, despite his comical mismanagement over the last 4 years. It will take at least as long for Biden to repair the damage the orange clown has wrought, both within the US and to the world as a whole. We hope (but are not confident) that his departure is permanent, and we wish him a long and unhappy retirement, with much of it spent in court and behind bars.

At least the dying days of the Trump regime have kept us entertained. Rudy Giuliani has outdone himself. He held one press conference in the car park of the Four Seasons Total Landscaping (presumably mistaken for the Four Seasons hotel by some hapless White House intern) – located in an industrial suburb of Philadelphia, down the road from the Fantasy Island porn shop and opposite the local crematorium. He held another



German supermarkets may have run out of rice, flour, pasta and toilet paper, but unlike those in France, they still had ginger.



Italy is warm enough for T-shirts in November

presser in which the story was not the “massive fraud” he claimed, but the hair colour running down his chin.

I wonder if the city fathers of Philadelphia might wish to show their patriotism by renaming the road between the landscaping firm and Fantasy Island after the 45th president? “Trump Circus”, maybe? The Four Seasons parking lot could then be something like “Giuliani Close” or “Rudy’s End”.

MÜLLENBERG – A long time since I made pastry, so I checked the recipe. “5T” of water for 2 pie crusts, it said. *Fünf Tassen* – five cups of water – sounded a little too much, so I tipped just two into the mixer for starters. The flour and butter mix quickly turned into sticky goo. The mixer ground to a halt.

I rechecked the recipe, and realized it was in English, not German: 5T meant 5 tablespoons, not 5 cups. Lesson of the day: stick to one language when performing critical tasks.

We still had enough flour and butter in stock – even though we hadn’t done any panic buying. I ended up with five piecrusts: three apple pies and two quiches – one of which Evelyn promptly gave to the neighbours.

Evelyn has vocabulary problems of her own: she insists on calling my apple pie a “quiche”, my quiche a “pie”, and a tart a “cake”. The neighbours still aren’t sure which one they got.

December

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Alas, not even Germany is idiot-free. The *Querdenker* (“out-of-the-box thinkers”) movement has been demonstrating against Covid restrictions and for conspiracy theories. Meanwhile, Germany, which has been so far spared the worst of the crisis, has been seeing rising infection rates and more people dying.

Fake news, “alternative facts”, conspiracy theories, science-denial, lies that go viral... Catastrophe no. 4 is the pandemic of misinformation. Fanned by social media, gullible activists, professional liars, self-centred politicians, web-bots and (doubtless) malevolent foreign governments, trust in democracy and the institutions that support it is under attack as never before.

A healthy dose of scepticism is, well, healthy: after all, you know that everything that comes out of Trump’s mouth is a lie, and you should never trust Boris Johnson. But by deliberately spreading falsehoods under a guise of free speech, the *Querdenker* and their ilk endanger both themselves and many others – and further erode the trust that our society is based on.

MÜLLENBERG – Which leads us to Brexit: Catastrophe no. 5: longer-lasting than Trump, but shorter-lived than climate change. We await a more sensible generation of British politicians to apply to rejoin the EU. “One of the easiest” trade



Instructions for making your own Christmas tree available on request

deals in history and the “oven-ready deal” was nothing of the sort. It is the only trade agreement in history to make trade harder, not easier.

This hard Brexit is the result of an unprecedented series of self-harming decisions by Johnson and his cronies. He chose to support Brexit in the 2016 referendum (bad idea). He then supported a hard Brexit (bad idea), then a no-deal Brexit (bad idea) – something that virtually no one voted for in the referendum. He proposed that Britain break international

law in the event of no deal (terrible idea), going back on a treaty he himself had agreed to just one year before. All through this, the Tory party have followed like sheep, or have even egged him on. Shame on you, Johnson. Shame on you, Tories, for supporting this charlatan. How dare you even think of Britain deliberately breaking international law? How can Britain expect that others abide by their international commitments if it threatens not to do so itself?

Respect, on the other hand, to Michel Barnier and the EU for standing firm in face of this nonsense. Now we will look forward to what Johnsonite Michael Gove calls a “special relationship” between the UK and the EU. I’m trying not to laugh.

LEOMINSTER, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – Some good news to end with: my mother has had her first Covid vaccination (though we weren’t there to witness it). She has been “shielding” (staying at home with very limited outside contact) for most of the last 9 months. Thanks to Ann, Phillippa, and her neighbours, for making life bearable for her. For her, as for many others, it’s been a long, long year. We have tried to keep her jolly with regular phone calls. She has learned to tell us to call later if we interrupt a Miss Marple programme or an episode of MasterChef on the TV.

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

May you and your family be safe from Covid, your bees industrious and sedentary, your fence high enough to deter wolves, and your home fully stocked with both toilet paper and ginger.

Let’s hope that 2021 will be a better year.

Paul and Evelyn