

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 73 (2007)
Heft: [8]

Rubrik: Stories from our correspondents : Bodensee Bulletin

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Bodensee Bulletin

Carolyn Lane

Continuing an “occasional journal” in instalments from Switzerland - and this time with thoughts from further abroad. Over the last few weeks we’ve been at Neusiedler See on the Austro-Hungarian border to see Nabucco in the old Roman Stone Quarry at St Margrethen and Wiener Blut on the See-Bühne at Mörbisch; in Hungary to have our teeth done at Győr and ‘take the waters’ at Heviz; and soaking up some sea-water on the Croatian Coast.

With all this, and the news that Swiss police and border control are now sharing the border work and changing their focus from the physical border to “inland”, I find myself fascinated by the idea of borders, and what they mean.

In NZ, we are in NZ – or we are across the natural barrier of the seas. There is no question about where we are. In Europe a slight walk in this direction or that may have you somewhere else entirely. The accident of the border which may have moved and changed hands many times over the centuries means little, until in crisis it means everything.

Because Hungary not yet “EU-proper”, and is seen as a through-way for undesirables from further a-field, the borders are strictly controlled until 2008. At Mörbisch we were staying at a pension which had border guards billeted in the next building, so we had an armed guard on sentry duty outside our gateway, and a constant procession of Austrian soldiers in and out. A kilometre or so around the lake, the road ended at a border post, and continued on the other side. No through traffic except on foot or bicycle. There, I had my NZ passport examined more thoroughly than at any big crossing, and – yes! – got stamps in my passport. I miss those. Remember when you could recall your travels by looking at the stamps? The string trio concert we ‘lucked upon’ inside the stone quarry at Fertorakos will

always come back when I see those stamps.

Added twist – the production of Wiener Blut was directed by Maximilian Schell, the movie director. He played up the political context of the Vienna Congress, and there were some stunningly bleak moments among the glitter as defeated armies trailed across the stage. One piquant scene had Metternich as Puppet Master, raised high above a map of Europe, pulling the strings of the Kings dancing below, and directing the redrawing of boundaries and placement of flags. In places the Austro-Hungarian Empire almost feels still intact ... and then there are the tight borders.

Close to home the contradictions continue: Altenrhein is on the Swiss side of the old Rhein, where it goes into the top of Bodensee. A stone’s-throw over the water is Austria. Mani’s memories of the border in the war years point up the contrast with the way it is today. His family brought hay across the border in carts, which were run through with spikes by guards to ensure they weren’t concealing escapees.

Now, the same road-bridge zoll at Gaissau is only sometimes manned (I use the gender-specific term correctly!). The bike-bridge we often use, 50 metres down the river, is never – well hardly ever – manned. Our gang was out biking the other day. We stopped for a coffee on the Austrian side. Hallo hallo – the customs/police were checking passports on *our bike-bridge*. One of our party was not carrying his Swiss pass, and had to take the slightly longer way home across the unsupervised road bridge. To what purpose, we wondered? Then Mani remembered an old joke. This bloke biked across the border at least once a day, with large carrier boxes on his bike. The customs officers were sure he was smuggling, but despite daily searches could find nothing. One day, he told them he was retiring, so farewell. Then tell us, they

asked – what *were* you smuggling? Bikes, he replied.

So, what else? The weather of course! Downpours have continued, flooding parts again. Here on Bodensee we’ve escaped the worst, though a couple of neighbours are drying out carpets. And now it seems winter may be early: we were snowed on at the entrance to the Arlberg tunnel on 5 Sept, which seemed a little soon!

Related to the wet - the mosquitos! During the early summer there were none. Ticino had a plague so bad they resorted to aerial spraying, but it had been so dry around Bodensee in April the little beasts had not got started. Then the rains came back – and now the evening wine-conversations are punctuated by slaps and sprays.

And of course - 1 August. We were in Croatia on the day, so missed our holiday camp celebrations which are always a community knees-up in a big marquee by the swimming bath, lots of dancing and throwing people in the water, live music with a couple of indefatigable accordion-players, and then as the dark comes, the children’s parade around our Hüsli, and fireworks. Did I mention eating and drinking? – but that goes without saying. The celebrations at Rütli were routine, after all the fuss!

1 August seems to mark the start of the formal festival season. We have our own annual ceremonies too. For us it starts with the holdermus ritual. The gathering and the plucking of the berries, Mani’s cooking (much-adapted from his mother’s recipe), and then a long lunch: we packed 14 onto our small patio.

There are more ‘fests’ to report too – but they will have to wait. “German for Beginners” still demands my attention. At least I am comforted in my struggles by thinking about the issues friends report of *texting* in Swiss-German. Just imagine the cross-dialect communication!