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The non-Swiss Perspective

“Shoes on, shoes off”

A story of what it can be for a New Zealander in a Swiss world.

I was 23 years old. It was the first time I had seen snow and I was excited. Coming from South Africa, I was used to shorts, t-shirt and bare feet. I found myself at the family home of my future mother-in-law in the middle of Swiss winter. About zero degrees out, 24 degrees (exactly) in.

Having arrived, I felt I would freshen up and change into something more comfortable. Shorts, T-Shirt and finally, after a long flight, bare feet. I can't tell you how good it felt to be free of long trousers and socks after a full 16 hours of travel through the world's airports.

I emerged from the studio apartment and wondered if my feet would stick to the external metal staircase. I even took a test step just to make sure. I remember feeling the icy chill in the air and knowing that it would only be a few seconds until I was back inside and protected by the best climate control the world has to offer! No big deal. Or so I thought...

A quick hop down the metal stairs and skip over the ice in my bare feet. It wasn't too bad. I had strong feet in those days. Inside, brush the snow off my shoulders and arms and into the kitchen for a cuppa.

Next thing I know, my soon-to-be-mother-in-law is yelling at me and pointing at my feet! I had no idea what she was saying (no Swiss German at that time) except that I knew it must be bad. Straight away I knew I was in trouble. First impression – not good.

Apparently, it is NEVER appropriate to walk around (even for a distance of no more than 5 meters) in shorts, t-shirt and bare feet in rural Berner Oberland. Especially in winter!

I was promptly dispatched back outside, across the ice, up the metal stair case and to my room to change into winter clothes. I was instructed to wear socks and shoes.

At this point I would like to note that the shoes were on my feet for a period of no more than 30 seconds as I had to remove them on re-entry to the main house. It felt like some kind of bizarre Karate Kid film... “Shoes on, Shoes off...”

So, after I had dressed up again and returned to the kitchen, everything was fine and life continued as normal, albeit a bit stuffy in my long trousers, socks and jumper.

Two years later, in summer, we were visiting again and this time took the local bus service into the mountains. The bus driver announced in Swiss German as I boarded the bus, “Look everyone, it's that man who was walking around in Winter without shoes on.”

- Aaah how nice to be back and remembered in the mountains.

By David Latham



Chuderwaelsch (Swiss Dialect)

1. **aatööplä** – unnötig betasten – to finger
2. **ääli mache** - eine zarte Geste of die Wange machen - to stroke another's cheek tenderly
3. **ambrii und ambrüüf** – nach unten und nach oben – down and up
4. **äs biräbiräbitzeli** – ein klein wenig – a little bit
5. **alläwiil** – dauernd – continuously
6. **Ankämödeli** – Butter – butter
7. **Aaleggi** – Kleidung – clothing
8. **allpott** – immer wieder – again and again
9. **aamächälig** – angenehm, sympatisch – tasteful
10. **abgschnittä** – sehr ähnlich – very similar
11. **abschtottärä** – abzahlen – to pay off (with difficulty)