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Neighbourhood Street Party - the Swiss way

When we saw the flyer "Neighbourhood Street Party" in our mailbox, we were surprised. We'd been living in our apartment for over four years and only knew the other two couples in the house. There was a nodding acquaintance with the family next door and sometimes a tentative "Grüezi" to anyone wandering along our street – and that was it. For all we knew the remaining people in our area could be aliens preparing to take over the world.

Swiss German neighbourhoods are a chilly affair. It is not the custom in this country to welcome newcomers by coming round and knocking on the door with a "Hi, we're Thomas and Sabina. We brought you a hot fondue to welcome you to your home." The Swiss generally keep to themselves and observe you from a distance. It might be different in a village but not in the city. So we were glad to see that someone in our neighbourhood was making an attempt to break the ice.

In the flyer, the two organising families said that the party would take place in the small park opposite us, that we should bring something to grill and, if possible, contribute to the salad and dessert buffet, otherwise the drinks, cheese and bread would be provided. Now that sounded good. In case of bad weather, the party would be cancelled.

We awaited that Friday evening in August not without some trepidation. What was there to talk about with complete strangers? I'm shy around people I don't know, so I found myself half hoping for rain. The weather, of course, turned out to be splendid. In the afternoon I had observed how some men were setting up large picnic tables at the far end of the park. When the clock struck 7 p.m., the time given for the start of the party, a small crowd appeared from out of nowhere and gathered around the smouldering grill. We packed our salad and dessert into a bag, swal-

lowed a couple of times, and headed for the park.

"Hi, I'm Thomas and this is my wife, Regina, and that's our son, Andreas."

"Uhh, I'm Roger and this is... Janet."

"Great to meet you! Where do you live?"

"Right there, in the corner house."

"Oh, that's you. Well, we're in the third house down the street, the place with the giant pink geraniums."

It went on like that for the next hour or so, exclusively in the familiar "du" form! We felt like movie stars visiting a local fan club.

"Oh, you're the one who always wears the strange bike helmet," a middle-aged woman said to me as she pressed my hand. "I thought you were bald."

I had no idea who she was.

"Have another drink, Roger," an exceedingly friendly man with two kids...quick...what was his name again...poured more wine into my glass.

When it comes to names, the Swiss have the memory of an insurance salesman. Once they meet you they never forget. Even the information operator remembers you.

"Gute Tag, Herr Bonner. You called on 5 June 2006. Did you ever find that long-lost cousin of yours, Fridolin Gautschi?"

I put my sausages on the grill and circulated some more. The tables were laden with delicious food: exotic salads, moussaka, home-made cakes and pies, and, believe it or not, brownies!

"Roger, your Bratwürstli are done," a short stocky man called....Freddy...no Oski...no...no...

"Thanks a lot, uhhh..."

"Ruedi...remember, I live down the street from you."

"Oh yes, of course...Ruedi," I said as he dropped the sausages on my plate. He was the one with the model trains in his attic, complete

with six tunnels, five stations, three bridges and two lakes.

"Roger, you have to come and see my trains."

"Yes, yes, of course, Beat...I mean Ruedi."

Children were running around the park laughing and squealing as more people turned up with the same exuberance. It seemed the fastest way of breaking the ice that evening was by putting it on the grill.

We stayed long past midnight, talking, laughing, drinking, stuffing brownies in our mouths. When we were glutted and sated, we reluctantly said good-bye to our new-found friends by dutifully shaking each of their hands.

"Bye Thomas, Regina, Andreas, Sylvia, Peter, Ruedi, Moussaka..."

"Ciao...Tschüssli...Uff Wiiderluege zäme..." voices rang behind us.

We walked back to our apartment feeling content and oh so lucky to live on this wonderful street. The next day though we rudely awoke to an eerie silence in the neighbourhood. All the friendly Swiss elves and fairies had disappeared. But we know that they're out there hiding behind their curtains and that we'll see them next year when that bewitching neighbourhood street party takes place again... if it doesn't rain.

Roger Bonner BN

Helmet? It depends...

The helmet has become popular, especially with sport cyclists. According to the bfu (Beratungsstelle für Unfallverhütung) a correctly fitted helmet reduces the probability of head injuries around 70 per cent. When cross country and mountain biking, 88% of Swiss German cyclists wear a helmet, whereas only 51% of French and 41% of Italian speaking Swiss think a helmet is necessary. In the cities and on the way to school and work only 38% wear a helmet.

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