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Hello again! This time I'm double-checking that the email has not only gone, but been received, and Trudi isn't needing to get out her bottom drawer of fall-back articles. I always staunchly say when people ask how we cope without having on-line facilities in Altenrhein that it's good for me to restrict myself to the occasional visit to an internet café ... and then I have a failure like last month's, and wonder....

So where were we...?

Altenrhein in Spring! As the Ogden Nash poem goes (partly translated from the New York Bronx dialect ...)

*The spring is sprung, the grass is riz,
I wonder where the birdies is?
The little birds is on the wing
No, that's absurd - the wings is on the bird.*

Well, Spring had definitely sprung when we arrived. The trees were fully green, with only a few late apples holding blossom. The grass is riz... Some farmers are on their second cut of hay, and Roman says that before he cut our lawn for our arrival, we could have taken a crop off that too.

And the little birds? They're in full flight, and full song. We live on the edge of the Altenrhein *Naturschutz*, so the birdlife is plentiful, and the dawn chorus harmonises with the cowbells from the orchard paddock next door for the most wonderful waking music. The *meisli* only took a day to realise that we were back and filling the nut bowl for them. They're now introducing their young to the nut bowl, and teaching them how to manage the nuts. Those of you who know the *meisli* will know what clever eaters they are; they fly onto a branch with the nut in their beak, then hold the nut steady between their feet while they peck away at it. The young take a while to learn, and are still begging loudly to be fed.

Also true to spring is the weather. The temperature springs up and down! We arrived in Zurich to 2 degrees and low clouds, and rushed to put the electric blanket on the bed. Then within days it was 22 degrees and glorious, and we'd had our first thunderstorm of the season. May turns out to have been the hottest for over 100 years - we had many 30-plus days, though the start of June has been cooler again.

Then there are the spring hunting and gathering rituals. We've plucked hawthorn flowers and tips of fresh shoots to make tea, and picked *bärlauch*. And already we're into early summer rituals. With a rainstorm threatening, Mani's brother Hans called for help with his cherries. The gang turned out with alacrity and quickly picked one of the old trees, on the well-established principle of "one for the mouth, one for the bucket." A second tree is due next week, and I can't wait!

Hans' garden is just starting to recover. It had a nasty shock - as did we. Hans was away on holiday, and Mani and I were in charge of watering his prized tomatoes. We arrived one morning to find the entire house-grounds deep in sheep-dung, and the garden stripped! The sheep had gone, but the evidence was overwhelming. A good hosing and scrubbing of the concrete shifted the fertilizer to the lawn, but the tomatoes were beyond help, and the roses pruned from bottom-up... Turns out the chap who carts his sheep around for grazing hadn't checked the gate between Hans' bottom paddock and the garden... and oh dear. The way it works here is that people with paddocks but no stock, pay to have the sheep brought in to keep the grass down, rather than the sheep-owner paying for grazing. I think Hans might not pay for that visit!

Switzerland is weathering the economic crisis much better than most of Europe, but there definitely is some budget-watching going on, with discretionary and tourist spending down, and exports hit. Some unfortunate chaps who in September launched a large luxury ferry for the tourist and "corporate outing" market on Bodensee are taking it out of the water - no custom. There are other signs of the times:

- The Bundesrat is looking at a clause in their bilateral agreements with the EU to reduce the cross-border flow of workers - not that unemployment is high, it's still only 3.5% - but the normal reduction with the start of the building season has not happened.
- Migros has negotiated a lower price with the dairy farmers and brought the cost of milk in its supermarkets down. These are the same dairy farmers who were prepared to strike last year for a price increase!
- The fruit and vege prices are also low for this time of year - we got tomatoes for CHFr1.99 the other day. Producers in the wider Europe must be having to take price-hits as well.
- In Canton Jura, they're introducing shorter working hours in the watch industry which has been hit by the export down-turn. Should we worry about watches made with shorter hours?!

In keeping with such times, I have had to give up "hope"! You might have read in an earlier *Helvetia* of my delight in finding the word "HOPE" on the bottom of shampoo bottles. Alas, our sharper-eyed Editor (for it is an Editor's job to have sharp eyes) tells me it really reads HDPE, so it will be about the plastic. Since I have always been dismissive of people who cling to beliefs in the face of contradicting evidence, I'll have to let that one go - and simply hold to my natural optimism, which is always refreshed by spring!

May your optimism hold through winter - whatever the shampoo bottle says!