Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand

Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand

Band: 76 (2010)

Heft: [4]

Rubrik: Carolyn Lane

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CAROLYN LANE

I think every conversation since we arrived in Switzerland has started with the weather - so that's the way this bulletin has to start too! We had wonderful weather-luck when we arrived – three days of warm sun and *föhn.* After snow at the airport in Seoul, we thought we'd fulfilled our promise to bring the sun with us. Then winter took another bite. We've even had snow at Altenrhein, though it didn't settle. Now it's cold – then warm – then cold again.

Snow above Hundertwasser's Markthalle in Altenrhein

In the euphoria of the warm days, I've sown seeds and planted flowers and strawberries. The cress and radishes are up, and we've been bringing the strawberries under shelter when the weather looks too fierce. Whether this early gardening is too optimistic time will tell – but I'm taking hope from the trees and wild-flowers: once they start bursting into bud and flower, nothing seems to stop them!

First out was the forsythia – brilliant bushes of bright gold, not just in the gardens but alongside the motorways as well. Front lawns are studded with cream and mauve primulas and daisies, and the daffodils have appeared since we arrived. The *bärlauch* has pushed through, and we've gathered several bags of it in the forest over the alten Rhein. Mani has processed it like French spinach (fine-cut, spiced and garlic'd, and mixed with cream) and we've frozen that for later eating. One of the little miracles is the way that the tender new shoots of the *bärlauch* can pierce straight through dried leaves on the forest floor. I've picked them with a leaf still impaled on the *bärlauch.* Such a metaphor for the power of the new! I couldn't resist picking a few other things at the same time - little white wood anemones and pale primroses (*Schlüsselblüemli)* are now in a vase on the table.

The changes in the weather have brought changes in the neighbourhood too - in the first week we were the only inhabitants here, then Roman and Margaret took up residence, and Easter brought holidaying families. So, community life is re-establishing itself. Jass is being played, the countryside re-visited, wine drunk, stories told... and *Osterkuchen* eaten. But no hot cross buns – it was a surprise to realise those must be an English Easter tradition.

A radio news item said Swiss eat 12 kilograms of chocolate per person – and most of that must be over Easter, judging by the shop-counters. Chocolate eggs, chocolate rabbits, marzipan ... I've never seen so much (and mainly resisted temptation!) The pre-christian easter symbols make so much more sense when it really is spring, and fertility and regeneration is bursting out all over. The retailers really burst out too - spring-themed tableware and house decorations are everywhere. Rebelliously, I've been still using the left-over autumn-themed paper serviettes... but the pretty spring things are calling out.

Brother Hans' friend Inge (what DO you call someone who's too old to be a girl-friend, and is not strictly an in-law?) is a fine artist, and to go with their Easter/welcome basket of wine, chocolate and coloured eggs, she painted a pair of eggs with Mani's and my portraits. They're a treasure – but how long can you keep hard-boiled eggs? I guess we'll see!

Spring from Hirschberg

All this extra-early experience of a Swiss spring has been because we're heading to Spain; now we're watching the weather-forecast there with hope and fervent belief that it must be consistently warmer. The car is looking forward to it - we unwrapped it from its winter covers, attached the battery leads, and it started first time. Well, if it could survive the wild roads of Albania and Macedonia last summer, it will find a leisurely drive through France and Spain a breeze! Or so we tell it.