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Greetings from Altenrhein - where we've returned with the swallows.

There's a phrase here which translates as "real April weather", by which they mean extremely variable. Well, it's May by the calendar, but April by the weather. Actually, it has worked well for us! A couple of glorious spring days to welcome us and reward us for the tedium of 48 hours in transit - then rain to encourage us to do the "inside" settling in. Then a couple of summer-hot days to reintroduce us to the deck-chairs, and now the cold snap which reinforces that one should never plant out the tomatoes too early. Of course, I did plant out the tomatoes, lulled by the warmth into thinking that the *Eisheiligen* (the Ice Saints) would not visit this year - and now we're covering them for fear of the bite in the night!

We asked our local "folks-knowledge" friend about the *Eisheiligen*, and he didn't know where the tradition came from. But Wikipedia does, and so now do I. Depending on what part of Europe you're in, there are between three and five saints whose feast-days fall between May 11<sup>th</sup> and May 14<sup>th</sup>. Those dates often coincided with a late spell of cold weather - hence the saints got their collective name - and farmers and gardeners take good note of their reputation.



Swan on the Alter Rhein, in spring finery

It had already been a hard winter, cold and long. Our garden bears witness. My pots of alpine strawberries - those small sweet ones - survived the previous winter and last year gave us fruit every day from spring to autumn. But this winter has killed them, along with the rosemary that had also survived several previous winters.

People here don't take the risk with precious cold tender plants: those get shifted into the basement to over-winter, or like our big diplodena, go off to the garden centre for a winter holiday. That's also getting a night-time blanket until the *Eisheiligen* pass by.

We'd been noticing that the locals have become accustomed to milder winters, and planted things like fig-trees - unimaginable in Mami's youth. Oh dear. There is a fig tree here which I "stole" fruit from last year. My excuse - we were still here late into October when the tree's owner had moved back

into her town apartment - so it was me or the starlings! That tree is *kaputt*. A restaurant in Staad developed a Mediterranean look and transplanted in a number of large olive trees, at around 800Fr each. Very good they looked for the last two years. Very dead they are now.

We're joking that just as the Swiss are getting stricter on migration, so the weather is reasserting that this is Switzerland, not more southern countries, and introduced trees had better not get too settled!

Over-wintering has been challenging for our gang too. Mami's older brother Hans has been poorly, friend Werner from the daily Yass table is minus a kidney, and friend Margrit was suddenly discovered to have a tumour pressing on her heart - fortunately benign - and sports a dramatic scar.

Convalescence and recovery is a big and serious business here: no leaping out of hospital and off home to get on with it! Margrit has had three weeks in a clinic with gymnasium, pool and a strict daily programme of monitoring, exercise and walks in the mountain air. The huge amounts people pay for health insurance fund a real rehabilitation industry, built of course on long traditions of towns and regions specialising in various "cures".

Mami and I look at each other and repeat our mantras about seizing every day - not putting off till tomorrow - doing it now!

Interestingly, just getting here this year seemed harder - and genuinely so, not just a factor of passing years. First, I decided to get legal. Till now, I've been operating on an "in and out of the country" sort of observance of a 90-day visa limit - but last year I got a couple of warnings that with stricter application of *Schengen* agreements I could cop a fine on final exit. So, once I got over my grumpiness (it's interesting, that sense of alienation - being made to feel an alien), I got on with the process. I think it might have been easier to get married! To get a short-term permit, I had to provide the same amount of information I would have for a five-year permit: 15 pages it came to.

But I was glad I'd done it when the counter-staff at Wellington scrutinised the precious document carefully, and then declared that it would be up to Thai Airways whether they'd "agree to uplift me" from Auckland. Love that piece of airways jargon - from now I'll always feel as if I'm being uplifted instead of just boringly taking off!

We flew Thai to Bangkok, and Swiss to Zurich, but we needed to get the second-leg boarding passes issued in Bangkok. Great new airport, helpfully signposted with the distances from here to there. To the Swiss counter was over one kilometre ... then 850 metres back to the gate. I do like to stretch my legs between flights ...but!

Anyway... here we are, and yes, it's all worth it, as we watch the evenings lengthen instead of shorten, and enjoy spring on behalf of all of you who are awaiting winter.