

Borders and bubbly: every day life in Entre-deux-Eaux, January 2020

A bleak scene of double high barbed wire fences. The police vans, armed patrols and dogs have disappeared. The young black men with shopping bags no longer come and go between the supermarket and the migrant camp, and they no longer watchfully line the dual carriageway. The encampment has shifted along the coast. But the road sign remains, warning of possible blockages or barricades on the approach road to the port of Calais. And small boats imperil immigrant lives on the Channel. The barbed wire still looms, a grim reminder of previous wars, shifting borders and racial purity ideologies.

This was our last trip to the UK before Brexit. During the course of 2020 the ease with which we have lived in Entre-deux-Eaux for eighteen years whilst maintaining our close links with the UK will be renegotiated. There have been some moving speeches of regret and singing in the European Parliament, and our French friends and acquaintances are solicitous as well as curious. But Boris has done it. For the moment it has been far less painful for us than for European-born friends long married to Brits and resident in Britain. But the quest for re-documentation lies ahead for us too.

2020 began as we spent New Year's Eve with friends in London with whom we have often seen in the New Year. It felt special as they are on roller-coaster of hospital appointments, grim cancer diagnosis, hope of a miracle operation and then shattered hopes. But we celebrated happy memories of earlier years, of shared travels, explorations, leisurely meals and hospitality and their constant encouragement of Toby and Leila.

Back here, the mayor and council invited all villagers to the usual New Year champagne, nibbles and speeches (no doubt bearing in mind the local elections in March). This year there was a huddle of men in dark suits ("they look like funeral directors" murmured John) who turned out to be local mayors from our recent amalgamation or agglomeration of communes. A few people seem to be realising that it's possibly not the best idea to exchange kisses with everyone in the room at a time when gastro infections and flu are a problem. We survived the germs of those who stick firmly to traditions. Generous prizes were awarded to two of the families who had put paltry Christmas decorations in their gardens, one of which we'd driven dismissively past along our road. (We need Alistair to come and demonstrate the garden illumination art!)

A couple of days later the mayor and council invited all the over 65s to lunch down in the village hall, - yes, the meal that lasts all afternoon, with dancing between the courses. We took our neighbour, Mme Laine, and were pleased that she stayed till the end - though she sent a message up the table as soon as she had put down her teaspoon after finishing dessert to see if I was ready to go home. So we left before the champagne, more dancing and coffee. But she did much better than John who found the music volume far too painful to endure added to his tinnitus, and had to leave after amuse-bouches, which

was a shame. Various people had tried to get the volume turned down, but it didn't subside by much. At least he missed "castanet man" joining in loudly as usual.

It is also the time of year when societies and organisations hold their AGM. The Oldies in Entre-deux-Eaux have the usual inducement of free lunch to follow the payment of subscriptions and re-election of the committee. But the Philomatique (local history) Society of the Vosges offers a loftier inducement of a slide or film show at the end of their AGM. And it was back to borders and the bitterness caused by their enforcement.

This year's offering was a film about the boundary stones which delineated the new border between France and Germany after the ceding of Alsace and parts of Lorraine to Germany at the end of the France-Prussian War. It endured till the end of the First World War and was reimposed by Germany during the Second World War.

But this was not a dry historical documentary as it involved some very personal imagery. What did the academic historians in the audience make of it? The film-maker, Gilles Weinzaepflen, who is also a poet and musician, interspersed sequences of his walking the length of that former border from Switzerland to Luxembourg, through winter snow and through summer brambles, searching for each of the numbered boundary stones, black and white images of the ceiling of a hospital corridor hurtling past as a man tagged for an operation was transported to the operating theatre, and old photographs of his great grandfather's restaurant in Mulhouse in Alsace. At the end of the showing he talked passionately about finding your identity after colonialism, war and forced separation of peoples and of healing and reconciliation. One of the black and white images had shown a kidney being stitched back together after an operation to remove a cancerous growth, and presumably his long walk was undertaken as part of his healing and search for meaning. The film also told of his great-grandfather's long absence from his family and restaurant and bar in Mulhouse. He had rejoiced prematurely when French soldiers took back Mulhouse from the Germans in 1914 and had put up a sign on the door saying that Germans were not wanted inside. But the triumph was brief, Mulhouse was soon re-taken by the Germans and great-grandfather had to go into hiding.

The Philo AGM and film was held on the same afternoon as the pensioners of Ste Marguerite offered more champagne, galette des rois and dancing, but it was worth missing that for the lyrical film. Despite the misery and separation caused by the border, Weinzaepflen was still passionate that the old boundary stones should not be moved from their positions by gardeners, road building schemes or souvenir hunters but classified and preserved in place as *Monuments Historiques*.

Our most recent crossing of that old frontier between Lorraine and Alsace was to return to the Auberge Frankenbourg for lunch one Saturday. We crossed the old frontier at the bitterly fought over Col de Ste Marie, from which footpaths

now lead past German concrete bunkers from the First World War and a small cemetery. Despite the fact that we haven't been to the Frankenburg for two and a half years, the staff had done their homework and their welcome was personal with enquiries after the family and our crossing the hills.

On Saturday, with half-term approaching, we hope to pass the barbed wire and cross the Channel with equal ease.