

The smugglers, the geographers and St Nicholas: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 4, weeks 21 - 31

You're probably all too busy with Christmas preparations to want to wade through the latest (much delayed) ramblings from Entre-deux-Eaux, so just save it for the bleak, wet days of January or even February, and in the meantime accept our very best wishes for a very happy Christmas!

Here's just a flavour of December over here: the weekends are filled with Christmas Markets, and the best ones are over in Alsace. So last Saturday, getting into the Christmas spirit, we crossed the snow capped Vosges to Barr. Its lower streets were overflowing with the colourful weekly vegetable and fruit market. We walked uphill past small shops selling bread, jewellery, garden implements, wine, houses and clothes. Outside the Town Hall we paused at a little wooden cabin and sniffed. Mulled wine. Not your coarse red wine with assorted bits of fruit floating disconsolately, but light, white, honeyed wine with thick slices of oranges wedged into the bottom of the cup! Swigging appreciatively, we plunged into the colourful hall, with its silk printed scarves, wooden dolls, home made soap, carved animals, sumptuous felt hats (round which elegant bird-like women were swooping, posing and preening in front of glittering mirrors), white and gold candles, flower paintings and displays of breads of all shapes and sizes. Slightly tipsy we emerged into the cold air clutching a large carved wooden duck. We'd started our Christmas shopping!

Last time we wrote, the summer weekend flea-markets and the summer weekday walks were drawing to an end, the winter lectures were about to start, but a long gap loomed before communal weekend activities like Christmas Markets. The very last flea-market we headed for, Uffheim, was a distant one, not far from the German and Swiss borders. And unfortunately it turned out to have been mis-advertised, being an antiques market, so way out of our price range. However, there was a small sign pointing towards a nearby Maginot Line blockhouse. It was a tiny pre-war defensive fortification, lovingly restored in recent years. It was, like many sites, closed for winter, but from on top of it the Black Forest and its blue mountains seemed very close and we savoured our unexpected non-flea-market discovery.

A couple of Sundays before, while John was still recovering from a really nasty cold, I'd taken advantage of some superb sunshine to go on a guided walk I'd long wanted to do. It was the walk along the *sentier des passeurs*, the route used by the men who smuggled people from annexed Alsace across to occupied Lorraine in the last war. The people they risked their lives for were mainly young men who faced compulsory conscription into the German army (and who then joined the French army) and later people who faced deportation to camps. (The routes for escaping prisoners were organised differently). It was very interesting, and was led by descendants of the original *passeurs*. An old man in a car seemed to be following us up the track. Apparently he is of the generation of the original *passeurs*, and in honour of his brave contemporaries he accompanies every walk, and at the point where they would have crossed the border safely, he unloads glasses of schnapps to drink a toast in their honour.

At the end of our 14 km walk over the mountains, we had the obligatory French two-hour lunch break. This was in a small Lorraine village called Moussey, where the *passseurs* had handed over their charges to the Lorraine resistance. At 4.15 we ended up sitting in the pews of the church. As a lad of 13, the present sacristan (called René, of course!) had run messages for the resistance. In the church graveyard were headstones to the English SAS who'd been parachuted into the area, captured and killed. Recently one of the surviving English officers had been back and recognised René, and René (who sadly was a bit of a creep in old age) showed a photo of their reunion. By the time we'd caught a coach back to the forestry house, gone in convoy downhill, and I'd branched off and driven back to Lorraine and Entre-deux-Eaux, John was beginning to get a bit worried. I'd been gone over 12 hours! Perhaps we do need to acquire a French mobile for such occasions!

Of course, Autumn is the time for a bit of cultural enrichment. And the Mayor of St Dié-des-Vosges annually lays on the prestigious International Geography Festival (FIG), which attracts geographers from all over the world (but mainly France) to whose wisdom and lectures many of the humble populace (a.k.a. voters) can listen in awe. This year's theme was "Networks, visible and invisible". So one afternoon we dragged visiting friends off to one of the venues: the railway station. Paul is a transport enthusiast, not to mention being keen on maps. As we entered the main hall, we walked over a full 1:50000 map of France from Paris to the German border which spread across the floor. The contours had shading, which made you feel like a giant striding over the landscape below. And the star of the railway network, a brand new high-speed TGV train had been invited for the day. We dutifully did the quiz, calculating extra leg-room available from the sliding seats and noting numbers of power sockets per compartment. Alas none of us seems to have won the prize, a free trip when the new TGV Est service from Paris to Lorraine and Alsace, including St Dié, starts. And I even flattened myself against the carriage walls, prepared to bow humbly, as the mayor and his entourage swept rapidly through on a photo-opportunity. "Are you enjoying it? Have a good day" he commented, whizzing well out of earshot before one could respond. Other festival sessions included an American talking about international migration networks (one could have concluded from the lecture that people only ever migrate to America, that American lecturers can't identify the states of America on a map and that there are foreign restaurants in the lecturer's home town); an intense young Frenchman complaining that the English and Americans monopolise all the publishing networks, forcing everyone to publish in English, so that geography can never be genuinely international; and a charming lady talking about French genealogy sources.

The start of November 2004 had been enlivened in Entre-deux-Eaux by the bonfire and fireworks by the strange English people commemorating some Catholic dissident and also by the lively firemen's ball. This year, the firemen's ball fell on 5th November. This was also the ninth day of the nation-wide rioting and disorder in the deprived suburbs, and the day after Interior Minister Sarkhozy had inflamed discontent by calling the perpetrators *racailles* or scum. On 5th November, while the fire fighters were otherwise occupied, would have

been a good time for any local disaffected Muslim youths to have indulged in a bit of car burning. However, there is no north African community in Entre-deux-Eaux, only in St Dié. We had not so far heard that the youth of St Dié had responded. ("Well, even if they had," Beatrice and Jean-Robert wryly observed, "the Mayor of St Dié wouldn't let the papers report anything negative about St Dié, so we'd never know"). Our part-time English neighbours in the next village of Mandray have often spoken of their local character "Baron Klein." He has a huge collection of rusting old cars up the track to his house, which are quite an eyesore. It occurred to them that the two problems really needed to be introduced to each other. However the "scum" remained unaware of the opportunity; the English refrained from celebrating either Guy Fawkes or the firemen's ball; Entre-deux-Eaux remained calm on 5th November; and we finally heard St Dié's copycat incidents at the end of the national rioting totalled a lift, a car and a dustbin.

Later in November, one of our friends, Alistair, who has exchanged the life of a dynamic insurance agent for that of picaresque landscape gardener (and old ladies' "treasure"), kindly agreed to come out and labour with John for a week on our attic transformation project. Alistair was lulled on his arrival by breakfast at IKEA on the way back from the airport and then afternoon champagne and cake to celebrate Dorinda's birthday. But after that it was hard labour, lugging sheets of plasterboard single handedly from barn to attic, with lunch breaks for bread and gruel. A week later, with the wiring cables in place, all the large sheets of plasterboard attached firmly to the sloping ceilings, and much of the chipboard flooring in place, Alistair returned to his old ladies. Oh yes, we did also allow him out to a celebratory meal one night at one of the many local "auberge Lorraine". This one did us proud with such delicacies as snails with garlic and walnuts, and duck with extremely alcoholic cherries and a green mousse. It was quite an Anglo-American invasion of the almost deserted restaurant as our long table was shared with Roger, Dorinda, Nicola and Nicola's second experimental internet date, who happily was an interesting and talkative improvement on the first (who can only be described as a silent wimp with nerdish tendencies). I think John has been missing Alistair ever since he left, but thumping sounds continue overhead. Soon we may be choosing paint colours!

The snow fell on the mountains in mid-November. We had a spectacular sunset walk on one of the highest ridges of the Vosges (the Hohneck) with Alistair. The ski resorts are very happy, as the snow settled comfortably in the folds of the hills around Gerardmer, to depths of twenty to thirty centimetres. Round our farmhouse on the plain, the snow came later and only lingered for a few days. But the late afternoon sun obliged with spectacular lemon and apricot sunsets. But the snow was already turning to sleet by the time the good St Nicholas and the evil Père Fouettard paid their annual visit to Entre-deux-Eaux to check whether the children had been good all year. The children, their families and some of the nostalgic older people were all gathered in the village hall watching a one-man show drawing to its conclusion, when suddenly there was the sound of sleigh bells, and in came St Nicholas. Now a more efficient St Nicholas would have gone straight up to the front of the hall, praised the

performance, spoken to all the children and got them performing their songs and recitations before distributing sweets! Instead, he started at the back, where the children up at the front couldn't see him, and went round asking who'd been good. At the end of each interview, he gave that child some sweets from Père Fouettard's basket. The cheekier boys up at the front soon got bored and started creeping up to try to steal sweets, so Père Fouettard chased them, waving his token twigs wildly, and St Nicholas temporarily lost his sweet supply. The hall soon degenerated into chaos, as St Nicholas stood sadly at the front appealing forlornly for children to come and sing to him.

We were a bit puzzled as to why St Nicholas had come to our village a week earlier than usual. But at least his early visit had been well announced by a leaflet in every letterbox. The following weekend it became apparent that he had been displaced from his usual slot by a concert. A recently formed choir from St Dié was giving a performance as part of the country-wide Téléthon fund-raising (a Children-in-Need equivalent). Now, Entre-deux-Eaux is not noted for its concert-going audience. (The previous accordion "concert" had not gone down too well). And for this latest concert there had been no publicity in our letter box or poster on the shop door (the usual place for publicising local events). Fortunately Mme Laine (who knows everything) mentioned it. It was not hard to spot Danielle and Pierre Laine and Danielle's sister Giselle among the rows of empty chairs. Then the mayor arrived with his aunt. There may have been about 10 other elderly villagers. Certainly no families and children this week. And Pierre gave a good impression of someone forced to change into his best pullover and attend against his better judgement. At half-time he and the only other village male present persuaded the mayor to "find" a few bottles of beer from the bar. It was fortunate that this tiny audience was boosted by 10 further people from St Dié who were obviously friends and supporters of the choir and knew concert etiquette like when to clap and demand an encore. But the rest of the commune missed a ravishing programme, which included gospel, Canadian, French and Greek folksongs, all sung unaccompanied with lovely harmonies.

The Christmas Outing of the Monday lecture group has in previous years been an opera or theatre trip. But this year it was to the Departmental Archives. So you can imagine its appeal for your ex-librarian friend. The Archives are at Epinal, in a wonderful new building on a trading estate which also houses a DIY warehouse that John patronises. The tour was fascinating, concluding with a special exhibition on the great French education Minister, Jules Ferry, who was born in St Dié, and instituted compulsory primary secular education for all children. Questions at the end were curtailed, as no French Outing is complete without lunch. Once my table discovered I was English, conversation switched to the euro, Joan of Arc, Tony Blair and the rebate, Princess Di, the next British monarch and driving on the left. Two and a half hours later, our wine glasses having been exchanged and filled with each course, we set out for the famous Epinal "Imagerie". We had an interesting tour of the old printing presses and colouring methods and saw one of the wooden back packs from which the pedlars used to sell their images. Then we were shown round a special exhibition of paper theatres. This brought back happy memories of Pollocks

Toy Theatres! But I'd no idea how much social history an enthusiastic guide could find in paper theatres. It was a most unexpected Christmas outing!

And a few days later, Leila flew out for a week to see us and the Christmas Markets. So after picking her up at Basel, we wandered round the Christmas Market at Mulhouse. Yes, the mulled wine (red this time), the church with cribs and the roundabout with horses. And at one of today's markets they were even roasting boar as well as chestnuts. Whatever Christmas preparations you are in the midst of, we wish you a very happy Christmas!