

Cabbages and cardboard, anarchists and kings; everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux year 4 weeks 32 - 43

The wine route on the other side the mountains in Alsace is always picturesque. Even in last week's cold dampness, the rows of black stumps criss-crossing the slopes formed stark but attractive patterns broken by drifts of pale smoke from bonfires of pruned twigs. The February austerity held the promise of summer's pale grape globes and autumn's golden leaves. And not a tourist in sight!

We were making our way to a restaurant in the mediaeval walled village of Riquewihr. One of the many prosperous wine producing villages. We walked down its cobbled main street, looking for the evocatively named street of the seigneurial stables and the *Grappe d'Or*. Many restaurants are closed in February; this one was re-opening that lunch-time. We felt as if we'd intruded on a family setting. The chef's baby was temporarily propped up on the bar; kitchen-hands were getting changed in the toilets; and the waitress had no record of our booking. However, there were plenty of tables free, and we were soon celebrating Roger's birthday with *Cremant d'Alsace* (the Alsace sparkling wine) and perusing the menu.

The traditional Alsace food is hearty, doubtless to nourish the gnarled vineyard labourers. Platters heaped with cabbage and sausage, mounds of potatoes and salted pork. It's curious that there are also many Michelin-starred restaurants in Alsace serving dainty portions of tastefully arranged food. However the *Grappe d'Or* was definitely a traditional restaurant (décor old beams, red tablecloths and vinicultural implements) and John chose *choucroute* for his main course (he said he always to have it once a year).

Cabbages seem such a prosaic crop compared to grapes. But the plains of Alsace, between the vineyards and the Rhine, produce mainly sweetcorn (though only wire store cages of dried cobs for the animals remain in February), and stumpy cabbages. And the tourist board has even capitalised on the passion of the inhabitants for *choucroute*, to create a *choucroute* route to rival the world-famous wine route. Personally I can't see the tourists lingering, discussing the relative merits of the 2003 versus 2004 cabbage harvest, studiously tasting dishes of varyingly fermented cabbage and pork products, then filling their car boots with jars of their favourite vintage *choucroute* / sauerkraut.

Sad to say your discerning diner, John, pronounced his mound of *choucroute* bland and lacking spice. However those of us who'd chosen equally hearty alternatives like black pudding and apple in crispy filo with celeriac purée, or (don't flinch) succulent *biche* (doe) casserole were well satisfied.

By the time we reached the coffee stage, the kitchen staff were leaving, the chef was again playing with the baby, and the waitress had cleared everything apart from us (it was three hours since we'd arrived). So no lingering for the afternoon by the warm fire. The wind was chill outside. Not the day for a stroll

round the village. But on the way home we did a small detour, following signs to an abbey.

Kaysersburg is the last of the vineyard villages before the land changes to grazing mountain pastures and then road begins to wind back over the forested summits of the Vosges. It has timbered houses, fortified bridges, picturesque castle ruins (recently restored), a popular Christmas market, a good bakery, glass blowers, wine merchants, a pottery and a constant flow of tourists. It is also the birthplace of Albert Schweitzer. On its outskirts is a large cardboard box factory with faded gabled and shingled administration buildings and hideous factory buildings belching white steam. The ground all around is piled high with bales of old paper for recycling. Usually we drive past this eyesore. But the abbey signs led us behind the factory, past boarded up old workers' houses and came to an end at the cardboard box factory car park. No sign of an historic abbey.

Eventually, as John was photographing the abandoned houses and a rusting gateway, I spotted a hint of Romanesque zig-zags behind the bundles of paper. Despite large notices on the main gates about private property and keeping out, we walked down through the car park and read a much smaller notice from the mayor saying that provided one used the pedestrian gates and stuck to the pedestrian routes between the mounds of paper and avoided all lorries, one could enter to view the abbey. Picture the scene as we walked forward, flanked by giant square parcels of soggy white, scarlet, blue and brown newspaper and cardboard towards walls of corrugated iron, cement and breeze blacks, beneath a grey cold sky pierced by funnels of white steam.

Suddenly the west end of the nave rose before us. The rounded arches of its doorway had dog-toothing and comic animal faces. There was a weathered human figure on the door columns near the ground. The plain south wall could be viewed from a narrow passageway between the church and a huge hanger. The north wall had glass windows to the ground, which suggested a recent renovation. The east end was engulfed by more hideous factory. Peering inside, we could see a few more fragments of carving, and the edge of an information panel indicating that it had been a Benedictine foundation dating from around 1100, which had been turned, after the French Revolution, into a paper factory. Somehow the mounds of paper and the steam and rust made it more of a desolate ex-abbey than others we'd seen which had been turned into prosperous textile factories or even used as barns. But beware, despite not featuring in any guide books, it's now on our visitor itinerary!

That's probably our biggest expedition since New Year. This winter has seen snow on the mountains from the end of November right up to now. Apparently the saying is, « *Quand une femme enfile sa robe blanche à la Sainte-Catherine, il faut attendre la Saint-Joseph pour qu'elle l'enlève* ». St Catherine's day was on 25th November, which is when we woke to snow. And with St Joseph's day being on 19th March, we seem to have a few more weeks of snow ahead of us! Although in the valleys we haven't had continuous or deep snow, we have had plenty of days of white landscapes and we seem to have spent much of

January and February indoors enjoying the white views from the warmth. But on sunny days the walks through the snowy fields and forests of Entre-deux-Eaux have been exhilarating.

However, one Saturday morning saw me getting my car (his name, "Snowy" seemed particularly appropriate that day) out of the garage and driving cautiously through snow and ground mist to St Die for the AGM of the walking group. "9.30's an odd time for an AGM," observed John. "Must end with a big lunch for the committee", I said jokingly.

For the past four summers of walks with the group, I'd sensed that there was an Inner Circle of Committee and Friends (an old-boy network) whose winter activities were shrouded in secrecy. The President would never answer our questions about membership, though kept promising (and failing) to send us information. It was almost as if he felt that as a foreigner you could hardly expect to be admitted to the "*club vosgien*"

But the old-boys were under threat. At the AGM, the President had been allocated a quarter of an hour for opening remarks. There was a huge communal sigh of relief when he sat down after pontificating for an hour and a quarter. He was particularly irate about quad bikes using footpaths and about an instruction from on high that local clubs should function more like businesses. Concise reports were then given on footpath maintenance and sign-posting. Part way through the President stood up again and declared bitterly that he was going to retire because of all the personal criticism and was not going to be dissuaded. Significantly no one even tried to dissuade him (or thank him). He sat with his arms folded, looking detached from the meeting during the next 3 reports, which included the Treasurer revealing a deficit of 800 euros (perhaps the reason for the club being urged from above to become more business-like!). Then the President interrupted the insurance agent who was dealing with proposed changes to cover for walkers' injuries and leaders' liability. The President suggested he should be brief and not go into detail. The floor erupted with objections to his high-handedness, as insurance details were a matter of concern to walkers and leaders alike.

The problem was that mid-day, the sacred lunch-time, was fast approaching and most of the 150 members present had signed up for lunch at the centre. The waitresses were also laying out the free pre-lunch drinks. So the "elections" were rapidly held. As the angry President, the improvident Treasurer and two other long-serving members had retired and there were only 4 nominations, it was easy. Then all the invited guests speakers (like the Club Vosgien Regional President, the Mayor's Envoy, and a local Forestry Commissioner) had to shorten their official speeches. They kindly included thanks to the retiring president (since none of the local members seemed prepared to do so). And everyone rose rapidly for the lunch I'd joked about.

Anyway, I was glad that I'd managed to join the club at last and now have a list of activities for the whole year. Let's hope the new President will be a bit more forward-looking! And thank goodness it had never been such hard work to join

either the Ste Marguerite pensioners group or the organisation (UCCP) which arranges the Monday lectures in St Die!

After the UCCP pre-Christmas outing to the Epinal Archives and *Imagerie*, lectures resumed in January with a suitably serious topic - the moral philosophy of Kant. Later there was an interesting lecture on the short-lived Republican Calendar (whose failure might be of interest to all those who think that the change to kilometres will never succeed in the UK). The 10-day week just didn't appeal to people accustomed to doing the washing every Monday, getting married on a Tuesday, and recalling the good old days of resting and going to Church on a Sunday. However, the largest audience was for the lecture on Alexandre Jacob (part two). The continuing French fascination with their anarchists! We'd heard all about Jacob's subversive activities in part one last year. This year's sequel was about his journey to the penal colony. Shades of the discredited story of *Papillon*. As our anarchist wasn't dead by the end of the lecture, we may be treated to part three next winter.

The small Scrabble group had not convened between June and December, owing to illness. So I was a bit rusty when we resumed in January. Unsurprisingly, I hadn't come across clever words like *meiji* and *knouts* (which aren't French anyway, but are accepted by the Official French Scrabble Dictionary!). But it was galling to have my *quilt* disallowed, since the annual patchwork exhibition in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines frequently uses the word in its brochures. "No, it's spelt k.i.l.t" the group told me. But my stumbling explanation of the difference between a kilt and a quilt fell on deaf ears. Quilt simply wasn't in the Official Scrabble Dictionary whereas kilt was.

Soon after Scrabble and Gym resumed in January, the pensioners of Ste Marguerite, who are very sociable, celebrated the coming of the Three Kings. We were all invited to partake of *galette des rois* - a covered pastry tart with a ground almond filling (as tasty as Bakewell Tart, despite the lack of jam). The social centre is a bit drab, but everyone dresses up for the occasion. By the time John and I arrived, everyone was seated at tables for 8, with white clothes, serviettes and champagne glasses and the music was striking up for dancing! It was all very jolly. John found it a bit much, but managed to sit it out for nearly two hours, sustained by *galette*, champagne, black coffee and brioche. Interestingly he was the only man on the table who could open the champagne bottle - it was put down to his youth! We sidled out as the dancing was warming up and everyone was re-living their youth with some kind of early version line dancing which we'd last seen at the firemen's ball.

As I have been writing, the snow has been falling steadily. It's a good thing we have a good stock of books and broadband internet (for John's genealogical research, among other things) to keep us occupied until the snow miraculously ceases on St Joseph's Day. Dorinda and Roger were suggesting a trip this weekend to the hitherto untried *Blanche Neige* restaurant. But we've decided its name is probably nothing to do with Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (despite the quantity of garden ornaments on that theme). Given its situation on the ridge of the Vosges, up winding roads, its name may reflect

its tendency to disappear under snowdrifts in this weather. So John's planning an Entre-deux-Eaux dinner party for Saturday night instead. Good aromas are already coming from the kitchen, and this newsletter has returned full-circle to winter-warming food. *Bon appetit!*