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Objektyp: **Group**

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

Band (Jahr): **78 (2012)**

Heft [1]

PDF erstellt am: **08.08.2024**

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Happy (damp) New Year! I've been counting the blessings of a rainy holiday season - of course with due sympathy for the people who've had holidays and, worse still, houses and farms ruined. There was

- driving north for family Christmas in the Bay of Plenty through country-side so green it was almost luminous.
- the discovery of elder trees still flowering, thanks to the cooler damp air just where Waiouru becomes the Desert Road. The scent of the resulting elderflower wine is filling the garage as it bubbles its fragrance out of the barrel's air-lock.
- and - the reward of dipping into that reservoir of "rainy day jobs". We all have those, don't we?

In our "rainy day" pile was generations of videotapes Mani had recorded on holidays past, waiting to be reviewed, sorted, and the "good bits" edited onto DVD. There's probably a "rainy year's" worth of work there - but - 1991 seemed like a good year to start on. How could 1991 be so long ago? ... ah but there is Felix, nephew to Mani, proudly patting his wife Barbara's "baby bump". We met the tall 20-year-old result again last year.

Also on that tape was a sequence of brother-in-law Bruno in his smithy, and that was awe-inspiring to re-visit. The forge is under their house - as so many family-based enterprises traditionally were. The noise and vibration of the heavy hammers, the heat of the furnace, and the smell of hot iron were a constant domestic presence, as it always must have been before the industrial revolution segregated production into factories.

Bruno's specialty was smithing the "dongers" for great church bells - the tongues that give voice to the bells. They have to be beaten out of a single piece of steel, as a weld would never last the decades. (Bonus for pun-lovers, some patterns of bell-peals are also called "decades".)

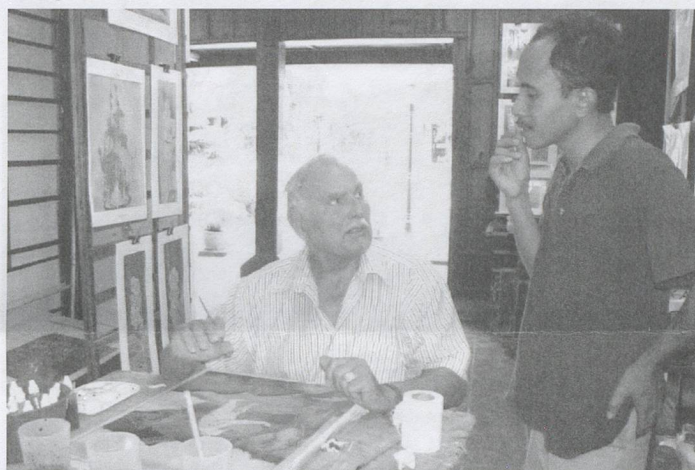
Back in the nineties, when Bruno was in his sixties, he was one of the few craft-smiths left in Europe doing this work. He kept it up till only a few years ago, despite the creek by the house flooding through the smithy and filling it a metre-deep with shingle. He dug it out, and kept on smithing. But now, in 2012, who is doing that work, in that way?

On a slightly larger scale, it seems to me the Swiss tradition of having small specialist factories in small towns is so sensible: sure - there's some transport involved of input materials, and final product, but the work is where the people live, and there's that much older sense of connection between living and working. It's just a consolidation of the old home-workshops, not a total relocation. Of course, as in NZ, there's that risk to smaller communities when "their" factory shifts or closes .. but just think what you can do with the hours you gain when you're not commuting!

At this end of the world, our domestic produc-

tion lines are going well. Last year's grapes are ready to become grappa (unless we find a barrel to make cognac); Mani has salamis air-drying ready for smoking - the beef he did as soon as we got back from Malaysia is already eating wonderfully; the DVDs of the photos from Malaysia are made and posted to our hosts, and next on the agenda is batik-making!

These days we're reluctant to buy souvenirs (um... well... there was that bronze chess set I lugged from Santorini, but ...well... that was different) so instead we did a day-long workshop to learn to paint batik on silk in a town right up by the Thai/Malaysia border. Mani's first piece was a splendidly upright Appenzeller bear. I think our tutor had never seen anything like it! Now we need to practise while the techniques are fresh in our minds and fingers.



Mani with his bear and our Batik tutor

The time since we got home has disappeared in a blur of catching up with friends, making music for Christmas (Swiss choir, Village Choir, and for the new year, a Village Ukulele orchestra!), getting *Feierabend* road-worthy again for a February house-bus holiday, and of course all the normal "re-entry" things. How I treasure my checklists!

The other lovely thing about being back is seeing that all 'our' wild fauna is flourishing.

Mother Duck brings her two surviving ducklings up to forage under the kitchen window. She is fierce in her protection of those two, chasing off the pukeko and the black-backed gulls (him, her and their teenager) who think our kitchen window is *their* territory. The California quail scurry past with their chicks - the cock in the vanguard, with two hens on flank and rear-guard, and the young freezing into invisibility in the shadows of a bush when the hawk flies over.

The flora also thrived under a neighbour's watchful eye, so we have come back to a great crop of strawberries, blueberries, and the passionfruit vine heavy with fruit.

The ordinariness of it all is wonderful.