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Ehrwalder Straße 9  
D-82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen  
Germany

tel: int-49-8821-73981

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Although as I start this letter there are still 42 shopping days left, it already feels like Christmas: the first serious snow fell a fortnight ago, it is foggy and frosty outside, warm and cosy inside, and in the kitchen Pat's Christmas puddings are bumping and boiling.

So a merry Christmas to you and a happy and prosperous New Year for you and all your family!

The highlight of our eventful year was the marriage of our second son, Stephen, to Constanze Bruckner in Düsseldorf in September. It had a quite unexpected side for we arrived for the customary Polterabend a week before to find Stephen in hospital! A couple of days earlier a heavy slab of double glazing had fallen on his leg and foot severing several tendons and he had been rushed to hospital for an emergency operation. In the end he was able to come out in time for the wedding at the Standesamt at 8 o'clock on a Friday morning and the Church wedding on the Saturday. With his new suit, foot plaster and crutches he provided a handsome compliment to Conny who was truly lovely in her very pale pink wedding dress. Despite the obvious problem, Conny and Stephen provided three days of more or less continuous hospitality for their families and friends, who seem to have travelled from all over to be there. It was altogether a splendid time.

Another nice event was my brother's Golden Wedding in October in Taunton. It was arranged as a total surprise for Doreen, my sister-in-law, who had no idea that there was to be a large party or that so many people were coming from so far. For us it was a rare occasion to be together with my two older brothers and my sister again, probably the second time in forty years. It was nice to gossip and a surprise find how much we had in common.

A less happy event was Pat's father's illness. He was taken to hospital at the end of November last year and there were several anxious months with a number of rushed visits to Peterborough for Pat as his condition fluctuated. Happily he is reasonably recovered now and has moved with Pat's mother to a new nursing home in Wisbech where they seem comfortably settled. It's rather like a five star hotel with nursing care!

We had a nice Christmas with Paul, Rosalind and the two grand-daughters, although it was somewhat overshadowed by Pat's anxiety about her father. Paul's family seems to be ascending in every way as the girls shoot up in size and he seems to rise in his job. Unfortunately we have not managed to see much of them this year.

Stephen and Conny not only got married but also bought a brand new house in Düsseldorf on which they have spent much time, effort and money. We are especially pleased with their location; they are a handy distance from the coast and so we have been able to stay several times on the way back from England and see much more of them than we could have expected. Stephen was overseas a lot early in the year but his travelling was rather curtailed by his accident. However he will be on his travels again to the far East and Japan before this letter reaches you. Conny found an interesting job as a production assistant for music with West-deutsche Rundfunk (the main radio station in that part of Germany) and was very busy in Cologne. Unfortunately it was only temporary and she is vigorously seeking another position at the moment in her previous area of export-import business.

Michael, Nicola and the two grandsons have also moved. Total Oil wanted Michael at the head office in Paris and provided the family with a nice house in Chatou into which they moved at the start of the year. So we find ourselves provided with a stop on the way to England as well! Thanks to their willingness to accommodate us at all sorts of odd times, we again have seen a lot more (never enough) of the family who are growing at a great pace. Michael's work in the management team is absorbing but keeps him occupied for too much of the time. Nicola seems to have adjusted well to life in France and she and the children are busily learning to cope in French.

You will already appreciate that it has hardly been a calm year and our own trips have taken us as far afield as Porvoo (Finland), Lisbon (twice), as well as the more usual destinations. We had to cancel our skiing holiday at literally the last moment before departure to dash off to England but, thanks to plentiful snow in this area, we managed a lot of skiing at the weekends. The high point was a number of descents of the Kandahar, the world cup run here in GAP. I should in honesty add that it takes us a lot longer to get down than the two minutes which the racers require!

The weather during the summer was very mixed but we managed several substantial walks in June and July. Our holiday this year was two weeks in Staffordshire, cleaning and sorting out our house which we had not really been in for five years. It has been well looked after but the small jobs which one does automatically oneself tend to get left. It was lovely to enjoy the hospitality of our old friends and we did manage to return it a bit by providing wine and cheese for about thirty people on one evening.

We also managed a week's boating before the wedding, this time in Holland, sailing gently through the myriad lakes, canals and rivers in Friesland. Despite a lot of boats at times, it is a lovely lonely area with enormous skies; ideal for relaxation. No long distance cycling this year although we did manage a couple of weekend rides.

The nearly continuous travel rather curtails our social life here but we still manage to see some friends and Pat was very pleased to win a prize in the open competition at the German/American friendship shooting festival; as she pointed out to the commandant, while neither German nor American, her son, an American citizen, had just married a lovely German girl so perhaps she had some grounds for participation. We have managed a few concerts, several in the glorious Rococco surroundings of the churches in this area, and we also heard the Merry Wives of Windsor sung in Finnish!

My year in the Institute started well with the offer of a new contract to take me to retirement. EUROTRAC is moving into its final two years and we seem to be ever busier, trying to see what is happening in the project, beginning to prepare for winding up and also attempting to formulate a new programme which, if the Governments want it, will determine the future of tropospheric research in Europe for the next few years. What will actually happen is a source of constant speculation as is what we ourselves will do after the project is finished. Pat is still involved part-time with a lot to do in preparing for another Symposium next April.

Despite the general happiness and good luck which we and our family enjoy, there is a nearly daily reminder of the world outside when the military aircraft pass overhead to drop supplies in Bosnia. The constant news of violence there, in Northern Ireland and in so many other places is a depressing illustration of the fragile nature of our society, of the thin line between civilisation and chaos, and of the fact that there are determined people about who are not committed to peace in any form.

After I began the first draft, the fog cleared, the mountains appeared and we broke off to trudge up the hill behind the house to enjoy walking through the snow and seeing the glorious views of the surrounding hills. This does raise one's optimism and so, on this cheerful note, may we once again wish you all the very best for the New Year and a very happy Christmas.