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As I write, winter has arrived here in all its splendour. We had the first snow four weeks ago which, although wet when it fell, remained as icy heaps along the streets. After that we had a number of heavy showers and then last weekend, with the temperature at -5°C , it snowed seriously. Today the sun is breaking through and creating a heavenly landscape, the trees loaded with soft glittering snow. So it is time to begin to prepare for Christmas and use the opportunity to send greetings to all our friends. We do hope that you and your family are well, have had a peaceful year and are looking forward to a pleasant holiday.

Our year has been mixed with some sad news and much to be joyful about and thankful for. Pat's mother died in April at the age of 89. It was not unexpected but even at our age there is a real sense of isolation when the parents have gone. The funeral provided an opportunity for a quiet family get-together; Pat's mother was always so proud of her grandsons and their burgeoning families.

Fiona and Felicity, Paul and Rosalind's daughters, are thriving at school. Their passion is riding now and their enthusiasm is evidenced by the frequency which one of them falls off. Rosalind is fully occupied with the children and many voluntary activities while Paul's responsibility seems to grow within his firm.

Sarah, Stephen and Conny's daughter, now talks furiously, mainly in German but a bit in English, and is always keen to speak on the telephone. The family has a modern house which is becoming more and more comfortable as they develop it. Conny is occupied at home and Stephen still travels frequently to the Far East, Japan and Australia where his business in anodised aluminium appears to be thriving.

Charles, Michael and Nichola's youngest, is a keen talker too when he can get a word in, since his brothers, William and James, are enthusiastic raconteurs in both French and English. Nicola has her hands full with three vigorous boys and Michael seems to be continuing to progress in his oil company.

We were so happy last year to have two of the families here for Christmas. We managed to fit everyone into our flat and had a wonderful holiday together. After nearly a week of parents, children, games, skiing, sledging, skating and sleigh rides, we had just one regret: that we all live far apart so that visits are infrequent and get-togethers far too rare.

We were also happy to see a number of friends this year too. Gurnos and Pat Jones visited us on their way to Italy, and Tomi and Dunya Cvitaš came twice on a mixture of business and pleasure. We were able to visit friends in Keele, Devon, Belfast, London and Stockholm. We had a lovely skiing holiday with Gwenda and Christopher Hordern in Cervinia; a time filled with chat and discussion. However Pat brought the holiday to a dramatic end with a fall on her head on the last run of the last day. She seemed alright when picked up but we then discovered that her memory of the event, the day and even the week had been erased, and that there was a repeat erase about every quarter of hour. In some alarm we got her to the hospital, some 40 km away. After about six hours her normal memory came back again and then, very cheerfully and with much discussion over what had happened (Pat needed some convincing), we made our way back to our hotel at one in the morning. Gwenda deserved a medal: she was not only a comfort to both us throughout the time but then had only four hours sleep before having to depart on a bus to the airport. As for Pat, there have been no after effects at all, which is truly wonderful.

In September we travelled again to Northern Ireland and, together with my sister and her husband, chartered a splendid motor cruiser on Upper Loch Erne for eleven days. We explored this wonderfully remote area, passed through the newly reconstructed Shannon-Erne Waterway and spent some time on the rivers and lakes of the upper Shannon, before returning. These were heavenly, mostly lazy, days spent in cruising, talking and playing bridge. The great advantage of a boating holiday is that there is no doubt about what to do, and what there is to do is mostly relaxing! Add to this that during the time we had mainly sunshine with just one shower, while most of central and southern Europe was enduring heavy rain, and you can guess we came back keen to recommend Northern Ireland as a holiday destination.

Life here is much as usual, skiing in the winter and walks on fine summer weekends, one of which was a breathtaking ascent of the Riffelspitz with Stephen, when he and his family visited us. We go regularly to the opera in Munich with an American group. These are pleasant bus trips not unlike the regular Shakespeare trips to Stratford we used to enjoy so much at Keele. We also managed to get to the opera in Berlin and London as well when we found ourselves there at the right time. We seem to have been into biographies this year (Cook, Fred Hoyle, Churchill (2), Shackleton, the Brontës, Marie Curie and Russell). The most impressive however was a gift I received at the Symposium in recognition of my work for the project. It is a two-volume diary of a Jewish professor from Dresden, who lived and survived there throughout the Nazi period. The gradual but inexorable degradation in living as he lost his job and house, the increasing restrictions and the constant threat, put into perspective the everyday problems that we worry so much about.

The working year started frantically but has quietened down to just busy. We had our fourth Symposium, which this time attracted more than 550 participants and some 300 posters. We have a straightforward system now, but it still seems pretty demanding. It seemed to go well. The first eight-year project finished at the end of last year, but its success prompted the participating countries to form a second phase that began in the middle of the year. It was encouraging for me to be asked by the German Government to co-ordinate the new project, and to receive a small promotion into the bargain. The second half of the year has been spent in putting a new structure together and starting to set up the groups of scientists who will actually do the real work of the project. For those with web access, <http://www.eurotrac.fhg.de> is our home page.

Pat has been extremely busy, editing and preparing books for publication. The legacy from the first project is the "final report", a ten-volume set of books being published by Springer, the first of which has just appeared. In addition there is the two-volume symposium proceedings that we expect to be out by the time you read this. Pat did most of the proceedings and two volumes of the final report so far, as well as assisting with several others. Two former colleagues of ours, Tomi Cvitaš in Croatia and Kerry Kelly in the USA, have been enlisted to help us too. You can imagine that the e-mail and fax machine are running red hot! The work is likely to continue for a further six months at least. Kerry, who miraculously appeared a year ago, had unexpectedly to return to the USA in the Spring so since then I have been alone in the secretariat. "Alone" of course means with Irmgard, my part-time secretary and right hand, and Pat who, although on a contract, works in the Institute most days. We hope to recruit someone new in the New Year, provided our overall contract is renewed.

On the broader front, the concerns seem to be political, with the Government economising all round and much opposition to any reductions in the generous social provisions enjoyed here. There is a feeling that too much is being attempted with the expected currency union, the move to Berlin, the continuing costs of reunification and increasing competition in the global context. However there appears to be no real shortage, either of political will or of money. It would surprise me if, after a bit of turbulence between now and the end of the century, everything did not come out well with a continuing prosperity within the European framework.

In reading this through I can see that life continues to treat us extraordinarily kindly. We do sincerely hope that you and your family have similar good fortune and most of all good health. We do wish you a most happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year.