

# Zine **Verschenken**

#26 | september 2024 | weather



# Editorial

Welcome back readers,

As we welcome the beginning of a new season, we can't help but use this month's theme to discuss one of Berlin's favourite topics, weather.

The city and its dwellers seem to have a love/hate relationship with its extreme conditions and no-one is exempt from a telling a tale of a moment when Berlin's weather got the better of us.

Which I think is humbling really. A city of 4.something million people, we can all share in this connection of funny, unforgettable or just downright miserable stories that bind us together as Berliners.

So this month, why don't you find a moment to use weather as a conversation starter. Ask someone, a friend, loved one or even a stranger you would like to start up a conversation with about one of their Berlin weather memories, let's continue to build our connections to the city together.

## Endless Summer

A year ago, I saw a very interesting exhibition at Spore Initiative, in Berlin. It was about traditional agricultural practices in the milpas of Yucatán, a millennia old crop-growing system that used very intricate knowledge about the environment for accurate weather prediction. A complex matrix was gathering data about the movement of ants, the shape of certain bird's nests, date of their singing, the blossoming of certain flowers, correlated with other natural phenomena, to predict the optimal dates for seeding and harvesting. So many insects and birds were presented, whose carefully studied behaviors were giving clues about climate and weather, accurate for millenia, until recently, when global warming started to wreak havoc and bring extreme and unpredictable weather.

All this knowledge reminded me of similar calendars, though less complex, found in our Romanian village cottage, with marked dates of cows mating, birds returning, and flowers blossoming. I remembered some sayings of my grandmother and her fellow villagers, who would look at the colour of the clouds, the movement of the mist, the rainy days, the movements of certain creatures that predict a good harvest year or a good day for mating animals. I asked around in my family, and unfortunately all complained that most of the knowledge they have lost, that they regretfully didn't pay attention, but I still managed to gather some information. Here it goes.

When swallows, who usually have nests on houses, fly very close to the nest and remain there for a long amount of time, it will rain very soon. Similarly, when flocks of swallows or other high-flying birds, like crows, fly low, close to the ground or water, rain will come. You can also predict rain by looking at ants. Go to places with many ant hills. If lines of ants have formed, and most of them are going away from the ant hills, the weather will be good. But if the lines of ants are going towards the ant hills, then it will rain soon.

You can see how long the rainy weather will last by looking at the movements of the fog. If the fog settles low, on the valleys, then it will be rainy for quite some time. But if the fog has already risen upon the hills, the rain clouds will soon dissipate. Legend says that if it rains on the 8th of June, on the celebration of Saint Medardus, it will then rain every day for the next 40 days.

Also, the rains of May bring good harvest, especially corn, so they are welcomed and celebrated.

Besides the well known shapes of clouds that could predict rain, their colour is important, too: clouds that turn red at sunset predict strong winds.

The coming of the Spring, with enough sun to melt the snow, is predicted in February, when in the Carpatian mountains, bears are seen to have left their lairs after the long winter hibernation. If they do not return to the lairs after walking outside, then Spring is around the corner and it will not snow again, regardless of the weather on

that day. The frozen rivers are said to melt soon after foxes and wolves are seen crossing them.

In Spring, to avoid the risk of freezing, corn seeds are planted only after black-thorn bushes have already flowered. For the same reason, beans are planted (between the corn, together with squash) only after the 1st of May. The weather is warm enough for swimming and walking barefoot only in the months that do not have the letter "r" in their names: May, June, July, August. August is an exception, though, it becomes unsafe to swim after the deer are seen crossing the water. In Autumn, if lilac, cherry, sour cherry, apple, or acacia trees bloom again, then the Autumn will be a long and warm one.

## Bonfire Night

There was gunpowder in the broom cupboard under the stairs. A barrel of it. It was a dangerous secret, but not for long. We'd caught Papa red-handed, trying to hide fireworks behind the onions... For the whole of October, bangers and fizzers, dare-devils and demons, candles, whirligigs and whizzers were added to the stack of dynamite. There wasn't any point in putting it in the shed as the damp would get at it and the fuses wouldn't light. It was a funny feeling eating our breakfast in the kitchen knowing that, from one moment to the next, we could all go up in smoke.

The shiny, brightly-coloured stash grew slowly as fireworks didn't come cheap: a Golden Chrysanthemum could set you back two-and-six, and a Harlequin as much as half-a-crown. They could burn a hole in your pocket, Papa said, but he knew he'd top it all with a Shooting Star or a Silver Orion at the very last minute when they came up on special offer at the Rainbow Stores. Of course, there mightn't be any left, but that was the risk you'd have to take.

Meanwhile, the school playground became a minefield as fire-crackers screamed and whistled all around and Jumping Jacks were thrown onto the ground as if they were grenades. You could never be sure when and where they would pop, or if they had fizzled out completely.

"Don't touch them! You don't know if they're dead or alive!" said Mama.

To my ears, even the names sounded exotic. The first time I'd ever heard of Mount Vesuvius was when it was pulled out of a glittering selection box!

At home, Mama practised feverishly to produce the perfect toffee apple. It was a fine art and just as dangerous as storing explosives, what with all the spitting sugar and apples falling off their sticks and splashing into the boiling caramel. Soon, we children

set about making a scarecrow. Luckily we didn't need to beg for stuffing - there was plenty of straw to be found in the farmyards and barns around. Up in the village, there was a competition for the best 'Guy'. Older kids would wheel theirs around in prams and wheelbarrows, rattling tin cans as they shouted "Penny for the Guy!" (We weren't allowed to ask for money.)

At last the 5th of November came around, and so did all our school friends. One year the bonfire, piled high with bits of broken furniture, boxes and brushwood, was so big it nearly set the apple tree alight and had to be doused with buckets of rain-water from the garden butt. (Later, Papa admitted he may have overdone the paraffin.) Of course we stood far too near to the fire, our cheeks burning hot, our backs freezing cold. Howling gleefully, we watched as our scarecrow toppled into the roaring flames and was consumed under a candelabra of falling sparks.

Then the display began... A Silver Fountain played in the bird bath, Roman Candles glowed in the flower beds, Traffic Lights changed colour in the sand pit, and a giant Catherine Wheel whizzed around and around on the rose trellis... until it got stuck on its nail... That was when Papa risked his life by jamming a cardboard box over his head as he nudged it with a long stick, so we could watch it blaze a fiery trail in the smoky blue haze that hung in the autumn air.

The high point was when our one-and-only rocket was fired from a milk bottle. Papa ran out of the way as fast as he could once the touchpaper was lit; it was a matter of seconds before it exploded into life. If we were lucky, we would have lift off. If not, we had to swallow our disappointment and cheer ourselves up with a baked potato raked from the hot ashes of the fire. Surrounded by the rotten egg stink of sulphur, we toasted our marshmallows and held up our magic sparklers, drawing patterns in the night with the white hot tips as they fizzed brightly, trying not to put each other's eyes out! Such fun we had!



## Chestnutting

Come November, Papa would make regular inspections of the giant Sweet Chestnut down in the woods. He wanted to make sure he would be waiting with his bucket underneath the raggedy trees, ready to catch the husks the moment they fell. When they did, he'd roll them underfoot, splitting their spiky shells so he could gauge their plumpness and tear off their skin with his teeth. After a lot of chewing and spitting, they would be left to mature in their skins until the moment was ripe, before giving us, his little hunters and gatherers, the signal to stuff our pockets with treasure. Too late, and they'd have shrivelled or been swiped away by the squirrels; too early and they'd be soapy or bitter. The trick was, if they were light to leave them, if they were heavy, to pick them up.

My sister had a particularly good eye for the fallen chestnut, possibly sharpened by the promise that, if placed in the four corners of our bedroom, chestnuts would get rid of hibernating spiders. Mind you, they also attracted mice, but this would be the lesser of the two evils!

By the time we were seven or so, we could tell chestnuts apart. The sweet variety had toothy leaves, prickly burrs and flatter nuts. If the shells were just warty and you could pick them up without gloves on, they were horse chestnuts and not for eating. No, 'conkers' were poisonous and fighters-in-the-making. Looks could be deceptive. The small ones, scrawny and bullet-hard, could be right little buggers in the ring, although the king-sized ones, if correctly seasoned, did occasionally live up to their bluff and banter and become fearsome warriors. Anyway, Papa was a dab hand at the pickling of champion contenders, after years of refining the art as a lad in the Forest of Dean, way before conker fights were banned in the school playground. In those days, bruised knuckles, dead nails and, God-forbid, a black eye, were the trademarks of a killer instinct. But toughening up a conker was nothing short of a science.

After lining them up on the windowsill for selection, experiments would soon be underway. Soaking them in saltwater and then boiling the hell out of them in vinegar was one treatment. Drying them in the airing cupboard or baking them in the oven was another. The old-fashioned way was to simply store them in the dark for a year. It might take longer to harden them, Papa said, but then you could surprise everyone with a late-season 'unconquerable conker'!

We watched in hushed anticipation as he drilled a hole through his favourite one with a skewer, taking care not to pierce his hands as he impaled it. Next he threaded it onto a knotted shoelace, whirled it around his head like a cowboy and then whacked it smartly against his workbench to see if it would hold a blow.

You'd pin your hopes on it, your prize conker, which was part of all the build-up and the betting. How many battles would it sustain before it dangled limply on the edge

of its string? Would it be a one-er, a two-er, a ten-er or unbeatable? Would it be put into a matchbox and brought out to fight another season? - that was the question.

But really, it was the thrill of the discovery of a chestnut that stayed with us; the 'furry hedgehog' held in the palm of your hand, that never lost its appeal: The surprise of the glossy seed against the soft pillow that lined its prickly nest. The weight of them in our pockets as we kicked up the papery leaves under the trees on a blustery autumn day. They're empty shells smelling of apple core and wet leaves. Waiting for them to spit and sizzle on the shovel as it was held over the flames. The charred, salty taste of them as we nibbled them from blackened fingers, sitting around the bonfire.

## Currents

When I was 19, I went on a bike trip with my best friend J. We cycled all the way from Geneva to the Mediterranean Sea, using the same bikes we used to ride to school. We wore cycling gear such as padded pants and shirts made of fast-drying jersey; our calves were the color and shape of unbaked baguettes.

Although it wasn't the first time we traveled without our parents, it felt like we had never been more on our own: we had to move using our own muscles, cook our food on a camping stove, and set up the tent we slept in every night.

On that trip, I learned a lot. For example, I discovered there were other currents than the ones I used to know. Before, I had been only aware of the Bise and the Föhn, two winds that blow over Switzerland. The Bise is icy and cold and, when strong, feels like a slap in the face. My mom used to warn me about it, telling me to put on a scarf before leaving the house. "Es geit ä Bise," she would say, which can be translated to: "A Bise is going around", making the wind sound like a witch hiding behind street corners. The Föhn, on the contrary, is more like an old lady, moving slowly through the village, knocking on every door, exhaling hot air from exhaustion.

Behind the French Alps, there was a wind called the Mistral. At first, we couldn't feel it as we moved with it toward the sea. But on a campsite by the Rhône River, we met a Polish guy who was complaining about it. We were trying to push the tent nails into the earth with our bare hands when he approached us and suggested we use a stone. Then he asked where we came from and whether the roads toward the mountains were steep. We said that they were, but since we only cycled downhill, we couldn't tell him how hard it would be.

"Oh boy," he said, "I really should have started the other way around. And I

thought the fucking wind was already killing me.”

As we moved southwards, we could feel the wind getting stronger and stronger, as the Polish guy had predicted. And as we entered the flat landscape of the Camargue, the Mistral was undeniably present. It tossed our hair around and played with the flaps of our saddlebags, making communication impossible. This was a problem we had been struggling with for days; as we cycled, one behind the other, the wind swallowed most of the words we tried to exchange. J. said something that I couldn't understand, and when I asked her to repeat it, she yelled: “Are you deaf?!” In addition to the wind, we were constantly hungry, thirsty, or in need of a calm spot to poop or pee. This led to innumerable fights; I cannot remember what they were about. Sometimes we spent the evening in silence because we were so angry with each other.

During the hours on the road, we reflected in silence. One day, after eating our camping-stove pasta with cheese and mostly raw zucchini, J. raised her spoon like a conductor's baton and said that she understood Death in Venice now; before, she had seen the Scirocco as a motif, but now she truly believed that a wind could make someone go crazy. I nodded and said that I hadn't read the book, but that I could imagine it does. Then we packed up our things and peed behind a mound.

I remember the day we reached the coast: we were cycling through the salt fields, and although the wind kept getting stronger, pushing the pedals felt a lot easier. And then, after seeing salt piles and bushes for hours, we could see the cement pier of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. I remember thinking to myself: “This is something one can do; one can just take a bike and cycle all the way to the sea.” Our petty fights were forgotten. We hugged each other, taking pictures of ourselves and our bikes at the pier, with the big blue Mediterranean Sea behind us. We couldn't see Africa, but knowing that it was there, somewhere beyond the blue, felt impressive.

Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer was an ugly town. We spent the afternoon eating ice cream and walking around, and then we took a train to Montpellier, where we spent the emergency budget we fortunately hadn't used. On our way back to Switzerland, we were a little disappointed to see the land we had crossed within two weeks fly by in less than six hours. Our achievement had felt grand, our legs strong, but now I think we overestimated our strength. It was as if it was not only the Mistral that we felt on our backs, gently pushing us, as we moved further and further away from our homes into the open. Sometimes I miss that support, that strange current.

## Endless Summer

It wakes her in the early hours. The air turns from slightly bearable to a thickened, dense cloud. She rises before the sheets become a sticky mess and throws on the loosest items possible, wondering why it's so hard to find breathable fabrics in this city. Rows of polyester, rayon and nylon are easy to come by, but what ever happened to cotton, linen or silk? Not many natural things left these days anyway, she shugs to herself and begins to prepare for the day.

She grabs her meal supplement breakfast drink, she opens her sun shield and holds it over her head as she walks out the door. As she heads down the street, she sidesteps the group of 5 or 6, huddled together in the alley, providing them with the vital shade needed to survive the extreme conditions. They are sleeping peacefully almost as if they had known nothing about the state of the world. She knows better than to wake them and carries on.

Entering her office, and now safe from the extremities, she packs her shield into its designated case, sits down and grabs the remote to open the shutters the 15% allowed by the city regulations. Turning on her screen, she sees the morning emails lighting up. She glances through them until she spots something unusual. An email from the environmental commissioner. The subject reads, “Templehof-Schöneberg - zero protection zone”.

She opens the email and skims through it. “Today's test results have shown that the neighbourhood districts of Templehof-Schöneberg have been declared unsafe and can no longer be accessed without mandatory protection. We will issue a public announcement this morning at 9am and subsequent announcements every hour after that for the next 48 hours. After this timeframe, anyone seen in this area without appropriate protection shall be removed and fined accordingly”. She paused to think of the several unfortunates she had seen outside her door and wondered where they will go. Is there anywhere left that is safe for them?

Since the arrival of what the authorities called, the endless summer, the city had provided mobile UV shields and shutters for homes and offices as long as you could provide evidence that you belonged to the city. Meaning for residents that were documented and had their registration papers. Unfortunately, as many parts of Southern Europe had become inhabitable, the survivors had come in their thousands on foot. Travelling by night and sleeping by day in shaded cracks and slivers, the dispossessed were constantly moved on, either by unwelcoming locals or the worsening weather conditions from the thinning of the Earth's ozone.

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