

**Christoph T. M. Krause * England – My Dearest
Farewell Letters to an English Friend**

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This book is dedicated to Michael Tidbury

England My Dearest

25th March. The End of Yesterday.

Dear Michael,

As always, I am writing to you with plaintiveness.

The year 2020 changed everything, nothing will remain as it was.

What we thought were the most normal things in the world, going out, meeting friends, visiting family, going to the cinema, going for a meal, going on holiday, going on weekend trips etc., is no longer possible. It is also no longer possible to plan for the near future.

A year ago, one would not have thought it possible that such a science fiction scenario would ever become reality.

We knew these scenes from films, but even then, when watching these films, and when quietly thinking that this could one day become reality, no-one really believed it.

It was probably the same before the start of World War One; now we know how that might have felt.

Our forefathers, then “normal” people like us, probably could not imagine that there would be a

world war, that their young would go to war and kill each other. Who could have imagined that they would have to risk their young lives down in the trenches.

People could not imagine all that, and even years later, between 1933 and 1939, no-one in Germany and the world foresaw or imagined what was to come their way.

No-one had even the faintest idea, that their neighbours would be deported to Auschwitz from one day to the next. No-one was able to imagine, and it is the same today.

None of us thought it possible, that we would experience standing in front of empty shelves in the supermarket as a result of having previously been emptied by hoarders.

That is what it was like for weeks in March this year. For a long time, toilet paper was short or sold out completely; flour and canned food was also hardly available. These things cause panic, even when trying to remain rational, and it can easily cause us to follow suit when seeing long queues in front of supermarkets and following the introduction of mandatory mask-wearing.

Back then, we smiled at mask wearers when watching reports on Asia, where people were already running around in masks. For us, that was

an apocalyptic vision, now it is reality and we do not know, when it will end.

Immunisations have been announced, and by now, there are already several products available, but no-one knows, how and how long they will be effective, whether they are actually effective, and whether we will have to continue to protect ourselves somehow? Will we have to continue wearing masks, maybe forever? What about contact with our friends and family? What will become of us?

Essentially, the risk of a pandemic was always there, but no-one wanted to see or accept it.

29th March.

Dear Michael,

When riding the tram or train, I always have to hold onto something; I never did that with gloves. It is true that I started to disinfect my hands in the last few years, as I was worried and as I have to be careful due to various personal risk factors, but a “normal person” would have never done that, that would have been unimaginable!

Airborne infections, contaminated surfaces, for example due to norovirus or other germs causing diarrhoea at best, have been talked about for a long time as possibly causing more serious infections. And there were many other germs, which could have been a risk to us.

Now, some will say that a healthy immune system should be able to fight off such things. That is most certainly the case, but in the end, no-one was able to really estimate the risk, and now we can see that the risk is real and potentially deadly!

One of the biggest mistakes was made towards the beginning of the pandemic by officially claiming that young people would be more likely to fight off the Covid-19 virus, that they would often not become sick or not have any symptoms at all.

As it turned out, that was not correct. Of course, there were many people, who were able to deal with

an infection without problems, but there were also others, who became seriously ill or died despite being young.

As a result, many young persons fail to protect themselves, or do only very little, as they believe that they are not affected. It is understandable, that young people just want to carry on with their lives, but it will lead to some of them becoming very seriously ill, and the aftermath of this illness is often more serious than initially thought.

Essentially, I do not mind so much adhering to the stipulated safety measures. Professionally, we are mostly in the forest, but even there we encounter problems. There are people, who do not seem to care that there are fellow citizens, who may have to be more careful. For example, these ignoramuses will walk along a path in a group of three and not make way when approached by someone else. Often, we have to sidestep into the bushes, so as to let them pass.

Then there are the cyclists, who rush past us without keeping their distance, whilst spreading their aerosols. The same goes for runners, who are particularly inconsiderate, as they are very much spreading aerosols wherever they go.

Even in the forest, where one could think to be safe, there are potential dangers everywhere, meaning that the pathways are very busy, and one has to wear a mask to reduce the risk somewhat, as well

as to avoid the aerosols. That is not very nice, as one longs to breathe freely, especially in the forest,

When out shopping I am wearing a FFP3 mask, which I had even before the pandemic, and I wear a visor and gloves in addition. I feel somewhat safe with that, as it is not that easy to keep your distance in the supermarket, and even if it were possible, there are many other shoppers who just do not adhere to the rules.

Hence, the pandemic seems to be a reflection of what is happening in the world in general, with egotism, ruthlessness and know-it-all behaviour becoming ever more prevalent.

31st March.

Dear Michael,

We have always had fears and worries in this day and age. After all, the Third World War was not too distant, with conflicts all over the world and, for example, the Cold War. That is often forgotten or suppressed.

In reality, Germany was right in the thick of it (meaning between the East and West) and in case of a nuclear war, we would have been one of the first to be directly affected.

Today, we look around the world and realise that despite WWII and a holocaust in our own country, nothing has changed or improved. There are still wars, with impending world wars and mass destruction in some regions, even if on a smaller scale.

Hopefully, a sufficient majority might choose to end four years of Trump in November, and still, there continue to be wars and conflicts.

And last but not least, we are witness to one of the biggest refugee crises in the world. Millions of people are trying to flee their homes, be it people from Africa and Asia, and all are choosing routes via the seas to get to Europe or the USA, with according consequences for Europe's and America's politics.

Freedoms and liberties fought for over decades and centuries are being threatened, and one generally has the impression of there being a worldwide rollback.

Instead of the European Union coming closer together, the own national interests of some countries seem to be more important, one extreme case unfortunately being “your” Great Britain, which left the European Union, but without being willing to finalise a reasonable divorce settlement with the same. At this stage, no-one knows what will happen after the transition period.

4th April.

Dear Michael,

What is remarkable about all the things that are happening today is that you are probably experiencing them in the same or a similar way. Everything that we share today was essentially the same in the past, and yet, things were different. It sounds like a contradiction, but it is not.

Traditionally, Germany and England had always been like brothers and sisters before the lunatic wars of the 20th century.

Our royal families came from the same family, we were family, even if some parts of the same were very different and particular.

But is that not what also happens in normal life? Are we not all different within our normal families? Sometimes we behave like hostile neighbours, sometimes, during large gatherings, we act as a unified clan.

Dear Michael, look at our languages, they are very similar and still different, just like we are. One says that acoustically, English has a wave-like structure and German a sawing blade structure. What an accurate depiction!

The same goes for our mentalities, but this conclusion is only partially correct. As is often the

case, there are nuances and overlaps. And I think that in the end, that is a good thing.



10th May

Dear Michael,

In the 1970s, when I was 16 years old, I came to your country as part of a so-called “student exchange”. I realised immediately that England would become my second home, and yet, it was so damn different.

You had double decker buses with open entrance platforms. That just did not exist in my country, it was unthinkable! Open platforms!

And whilst the bus was moving, you were allowed to hop on and off! For me, that was the epitome of coolness. Never ever would such a thing have been allowed in my country. Too regimented, too uncool, too dangerous!

Another thing I noticed was that everything was a little more old-fashioned and run-down than I was used to from my home country.

Even though things were also old-fashioned back home, they were not run-down. Everything had been destroyed during the war and had to be rebuilt. Yes, many things had been built in an equally ugly, cheap and dreary way, but they were newer.

90% of my home town of Cologne, a Roman city with a history spanning over 2000 years, had been

destroyed! Thank “God” that our beloved Cologne Cathedral had survived, be it with quite some damage.

In London, and especially in the suburbs, everything seemed to be behind by about 50 years. The chimneys were spitting out coal smoke, the windows in what seemed like ancient houses were leaky and the curfew for pubs was 11pm.

I found it fascinating, as if the beautiful old times had been frozen in time, something we no longer had, as it had been destroyed by bombs, yet it was old-fashioned in a different way, but almost as Prussian.

Dear Michael, staying in England was so exciting, incredibly traditional and old school, but great.

I immediately had a sense of a home long lost, and a loving environment. Your people were different, British to be precise.

Everyone said sorry for everything. If I stepped on someone’s feet on Oxford Street, they would apologise to me.

That really did not exist in Germany. You would have been (or will be) given a mouthful, despite apologising; regardless. Germans are relentless in this regard. If you did something wrong, be it intentional or not, you would need to be put in your

place. That's the German or Prussian way. No mercy, that's how it has always been!

In the "Third Reich", something like this would have meant "death". You stepped on my foot, you are a godd... Jew, you should go to Auschwitz. No mercy!

No wonder that I immediately felt comfortable in your country. Only there did I realise that things can be and are different elsewhere. That gloom and grumpiness are not "God-given", but merely a German trait.

It is often the case that once abroad, you are able to appreciate the true nature of home, be it the good or the bad things.

Hence every trip into the world is also a trip towards cognisance of one's own nature, of what seems to be "God-given". A trip into one's self, so to say.

I was hosted by a simple working class family in Brighton. There was a "chimney" (open fireplace) in the living room. I can still hear the host mother shouting: "Don't set my chimney alight!". We were to be careful when raking the fire, so as to not set everything on fire.

Apart from that there was no heating in the entire (very small) house, just the fireplace, which was meant to keep everything warm. Hence everyone always came together in the living room, as all the other rooms remained cold. Cosy, but also eerie. I had never known anything like that. In the "upper

middle class” (a term my mother used) we did not have things like that.

In this small house in Brighton, there was also a boiler on the top floor, which was hidden in a closet. This ancient container was meant to supply hot water to the bathroom. It was heated with electricity, but unfortunately the fuse went all the time, as the heating process was too much for the ancient wiring in the house.

Everything was very primitive, but it did not matter. The family’s kindness was unique. And it was snug, something that the Germans always boast about. The only difference was that our German snugness had been reduced to a nice old cliché. In Post-War Germany, the concept of snugness was very different.

Human harshness existed not because of a disrespect for human dignity, but because of **self-contempt**. After all, the German people had been stigmatised to the point of snugness being impossible. An offender syndrome (of course rightly so up to a certain point).

These are memories of the past, when Jews were still neighbours and friends. Before they had poisoned our wells and charged exorbitant and excessive interest to the good German people. Before the Jewish world supremacy started to suffocate us. Yes, it was a terrible realisation, the Jews had been our downfall, and now we were the bad ones! Snugness? My arse!

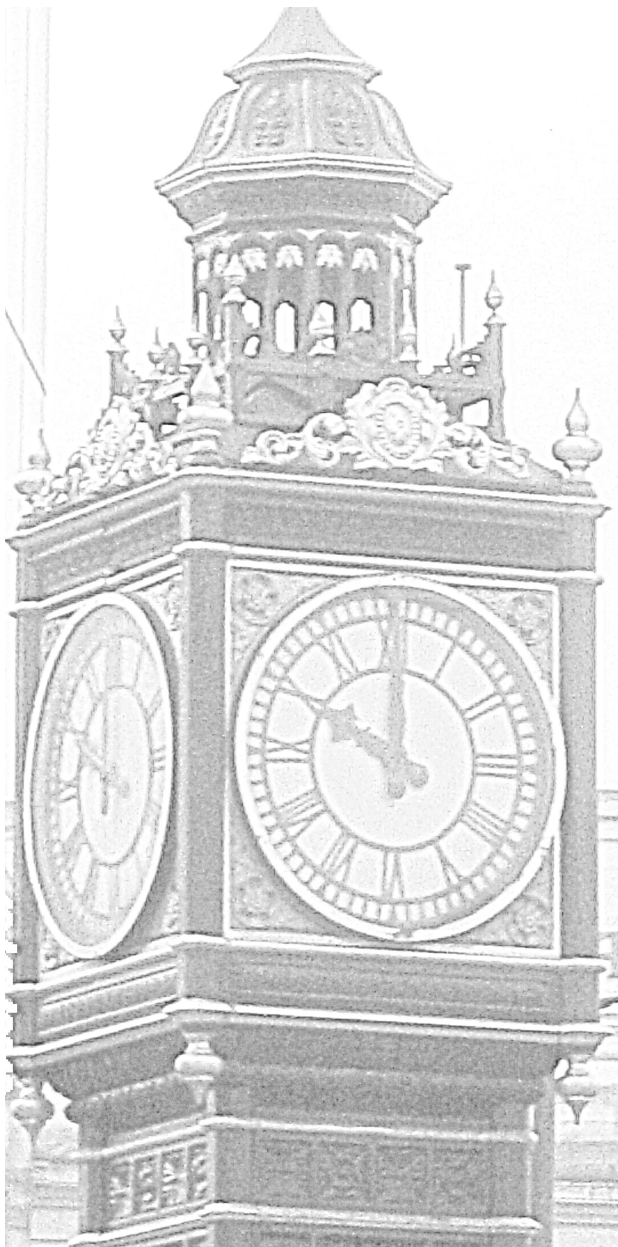
(Of course these words are meant sarcastically!!).

None of that existed where you were, dear Michael.

You were unsoiled **(these statements are also poignantly sarcastic).**

Your past was amazing. A vast empire had been conquered; you were the kings of the world. Great things had been achieved, but now it was different. Everything was over, the world empire had fallen apart, much was deteriorating and the glamour of the old times was a thing of the past, having turned into rusty old balustrades in Brighton and crumbling facades in Blackpool. "Rotten" was the word that your language so adequately provided, "rotten".

So we did have something in common in the end. Old, glamorous times, here and there, which were no more. "Rottenness" on both sides, but the guilt was assessed in a different way. On the one side, the holocaust, on the other colonialism. What does it matter?! The wheel had turned and new wheels were to appear.



14th June.

Dear Michael,

I am thinking back to an event in Sri Lanka, where I went on holiday for many years.

Until 1972, Sri Lanka had been a British Crown Colony and this beautiful country owed a lot to the British.

The entire infrastructure, the administrative system, schools, road networks, basically everything that a modern state should have, were essentially British.

And as the Ceylonese idolised European people for their wisdom and goodness, and as the locals traditionally tended to be more submissive than bolshie, this joint venture functioned very well indeed.

It was only later that many woke up and enforced their independence and autonomy. But that is another, much longer story, which is publicly available.

I am thinking about a specific experience, which shows how much the concept of colonialism was still rooted in the heads of many British people.

One day, three of us sat down for dinner at a table in a nice, cosy local restaurant somewhere near our hotel. At the table next to us, there were four

English people, bawling at the top of their voices at a table of four.

Suddenly, one of the Brits had the idea of taking a photograph of their table. Without asking, he took the fourth, empty chair from our table, pulled it back slightly, climbed onto it and took a photo of their table, whilst gesticulating wildly.

Before I could say anything, the manager of the restaurant approached our table and politely asked the Brit to cease behaving badly, as well as to climb off “our” chair and sit back down at his table.

Instead of responding politely, like British people usually do, he shouted at the restaurant manager and continued to take photos.

That is when I got involved and asked the Brit to follow the manager’s instructions immediately, which he then did whilst making some anti-German remarks.

I continued to experience such behaviour in a similar way, namely every time, British people were dealing with locals. They seemed to think that they were still rulers of the country and its people.

Now, these may be isolated cases, but they stir up prejudice. Of course there are also Germans (and many others), who also behave badly, probably more so now than at that time (1980’s and 1990’s).

But they leave an impression and we were shocked how widespread such unexpected behaviour still seemed to be.



3rd July.

Dear Michael,

Completely unexpectedly, and for the first and only time in our lives, we experienced discrimination for the sole reason of being German in 1990.

I grew up knowing that our country (in this case only the Federal Republic of Germany, aka West Germany) had a dark past, and that we should be happy that the world still tolerated us.

Being German was never unencumbered. There was no national pride (this only changed during the Football World Cup in 2006), national flags (especially our own) were frowned upon and the national anthem, which back then was still being played on TV at midnight to signal the end of transmission, was turned off immediately, as we did not want to hear it.

We perceived all of that as nationalism or even militarism. Despite the German flag initially originating from the first German revolution in 1848. The colours Black/Red/Gold were meant to signify the following: In the dark night, with blood flowing, into the golden freedom, which has nothing to do with militarism or Nazism! Of course we did not know this when we were young. In fact, we were not particularly knowledgeable or practical in this respect anyway.

Hence, we always expected to be discriminated against as Germans abroad. In my memory, however, this never happened.

Even in Israel I was treated with the greatest respect. I never spoke German there, always English. Often, however, the people replied in German, as they recognised us as such and wanted to pay their respect.

For us that was a noble experience. Being German and being acknowledged and even treated with respect? That was otherworldly and felt great!

In December 1990, shortly after the German reunification (which took place on 3rd October 1990), we visited Sri Lanka once again and were sitting by the hotel pool right by the Indian Ocean reading a book. We had been allocated our loungers at 8am by the pool attendant, even though this was not the stipulated practice. At this point, all other loungers were still free.

At around 10am, some Austrian and French people came over to us and claimed our loungers for themselves, even though all others were still available.

We replied that they could surely take the other loungers, as we were already lying on them. They did not agree, as they wanted to have our loungers specifically. They claimed that they always used

these loungers, and that things should remain that way.

The discussions did not go anywhere. The situation was extremely unpleasant and tricky, as the group was in the majority and the two of us in the minority. On top of that we did not speak French very well, and had to discuss with tooth and nail, as the French did not speak English, much less German.

Then the Austrians said something to us, which I had never before (and never again) heard: "You damn Germans just want to be the greatest again!"

I ended the discussion by approaching the director of the hotel, who then went to the group and told them that it was not common practice in their hotel to reserve loungers, but that every guest had the right to pick a lounge of their choice.

The group refused to go into it and continued to hurl abuse our way. This resulted in us leaving the hotel immediately, so as to avoid further conflict.

I think some people were very nervous in 1990, as they feared that Germany would become too mighty, something that we had ourselves feared for our country.

Luckily, such discrimination remained an isolated case, and we never experienced anything like this again.

17th August.

Dear Michael,

Is an international rollback actually happening?

Brexit seems to me to be a rollback to the good old glamorous times? “Britannia rules the waves?” Or is it rather a new beginning, a departure towards more independent times?

We on the other hand, as Germans, have experienced something similar in our history. In 1989 dark times had to be overcome. “*Deutschland einig Vaterland*” (Germany, united fatherland) they shouted in that historical year, our East German brothers and sisters. What? All of a sudden, we were brothers and sisters again?

For 40 years we had been sworn enemies, we, the ones from “over there”, the Westerners. Brothers and sisters?

The “Ossis” (Easterners) seemed more foreign to us than you Brits. People from a country of yesteryear, even though this country strived to be part of a new future.

Socialism and dictatorship of the workers and farmers. Another dictatorship in Germany, even if only in the small Eastern part, once again forced upon the people from above.

The “subtitle” of this pseudo-democracy (“German Democratic Republic”) was equally bizarre: “Dictatorship of the proletariat” or state of the workers and farmers.

What mockery. A dictatorship, which calls itself by the name and believes to be part of a new time!

“Common welfare and public ownership of means of production”, as it was stated. Abolishment of capitalism and its ugly face. Abolishment of suppression and inequality. It was reminiscent of the aims of the French revolution.

Only that no-one could see that this socialist happiness and freedom and equality were dictated by a few apparatchiks and not, as promised, by the people. The rest is history. We all have a lot of history to look back on.

Our own respective histories sometimes feel suffocating, Michael, but at the same time they allow us to see what should become different.



1st September.

Dear Michael,

“If at night, I of Germany think, no sleep for me, awake I blink”.¹ This sentence from Heinrich Heine could apply to many countries these days. But especially to the United Kingdom. Where is your journey taking you? Alone in an ocean of “world powers”?

You have left the “Rome” of our time (the EU is often compared to the Roman Empire, see the founding treaties, which are often referred to as the “Roman treaties”).

Everyone is thinking of what it actually is, namely suicide. There is nothing without “Rome”, “Rome” is the past and future all at once. We all go back to and come from “Rome”, “Rome” is our culture, our heritage, joint heritage. Whoever leaves “Rome”, leaves a known world and becomes a barbarian, an outcast.

Or is the truth the other way around? Are we blinded by Rome? Is the EU all that is decadent or is it you, the United Kingdom?

¹ “This is a poetic translation – deviations from the meaning of the original are present (extra words, extra or omitted information, substituted concepts)”. Internet quote of this hint and of the English lyrics version of Heinrich Heine’s poem. URL: <https://lyricstranslate.com/de/nachtgedanken-night-thoughts.html-0>. Status Dec 12th, 2020. English text was submitted by Robert Tucker, June, 26th, 2020. Tuckers latest edition from July, 03rd, 2020..

The future will tell, tomorrow's historians will know or will argue interpretive dominance. Some will say one thing, others something else, like always.

Dear Michael, I feel torn, "my" Great Britain, which I came to love as a 16-year-old, is jumping ship, doing its own thing.

Of course, the United Kingdom is generally still available, but it will be different. Will we need a visa? Do we need to use our passports? Who knows at this point towards the end of the year?



Above all, I loved London, the metropolis, ever-changing, big and impressive, but also, in some places, provincial and bourgeoisie.

I am thinking back to a visit shortly before Christmas in the year 2010, two years before the Olympic Games in 2012.

We visited the Christmas market by the Thames. It was wonderful and magical!

We felt like we were in Germany. There were many huts with German writing, there was Bratwurst and

mulled wine. We strongly felt somewhat at home here.

No matter where we are in Europe, we are home! Is that not a wonderful feeling?

There was a fairground at Hyde Park. It was like a fairground from my childhood, it could not have been more German. All of the huts and rides were marked in German. And it was not as commercial as most fairgrounds. It was unique and enchanting.

At home, it is always the other way around. All of the rides have English names, as it is modern and cool. It is an upside down world.

What is so nice about this experience is that everything seems to be entwined. Everyone is looking at what the other one is doing, what is beautiful, what is new, and then picks and chooses. And why not?

Our Europe is extremely diverse, and everyone is benefiting from it and sharing, and most importantly, we are able to do so.

Apart from during these times of Corona, travelling is no longer a problem. It is affordable, quick and if you are able to speak English fluently, even language is no longer a problem.

Hence, many people come into contact with other cultures and countries, closing the door firmly on the chance of there being another war.

Contact leads to peace, or at least to understanding and getting to know each other. If you do not know someone, you cannot understand them. Prejudices would become prevalent and peace would have little chance.

10th October.

Dear Michael,

I remember this wonderful film: "*Merry Christmas*"². It describes this magical, true story, where soldiers on the British and German front were facing and shooting at each other in the trenches during WWI.

On Christmas Eve, however, they put their guns down on both sides and join together for the festivities. There are Christmas songs being sung and Christmas trees being put up. On the next day, they return to the trenches and start shooting each other again. What craziness, and what a story!

Watching this film makes me cry, as the story is so symbolic. The fate of a continent summed up by a little story. Hatred and love sharing a moment.

Dear Michael, you see that our relationship is very much centred around emotions. Just as I have always hated that my country was divided for 40 years, your Brexit grieves me. It is the most anachronistic thing that I could imagine.

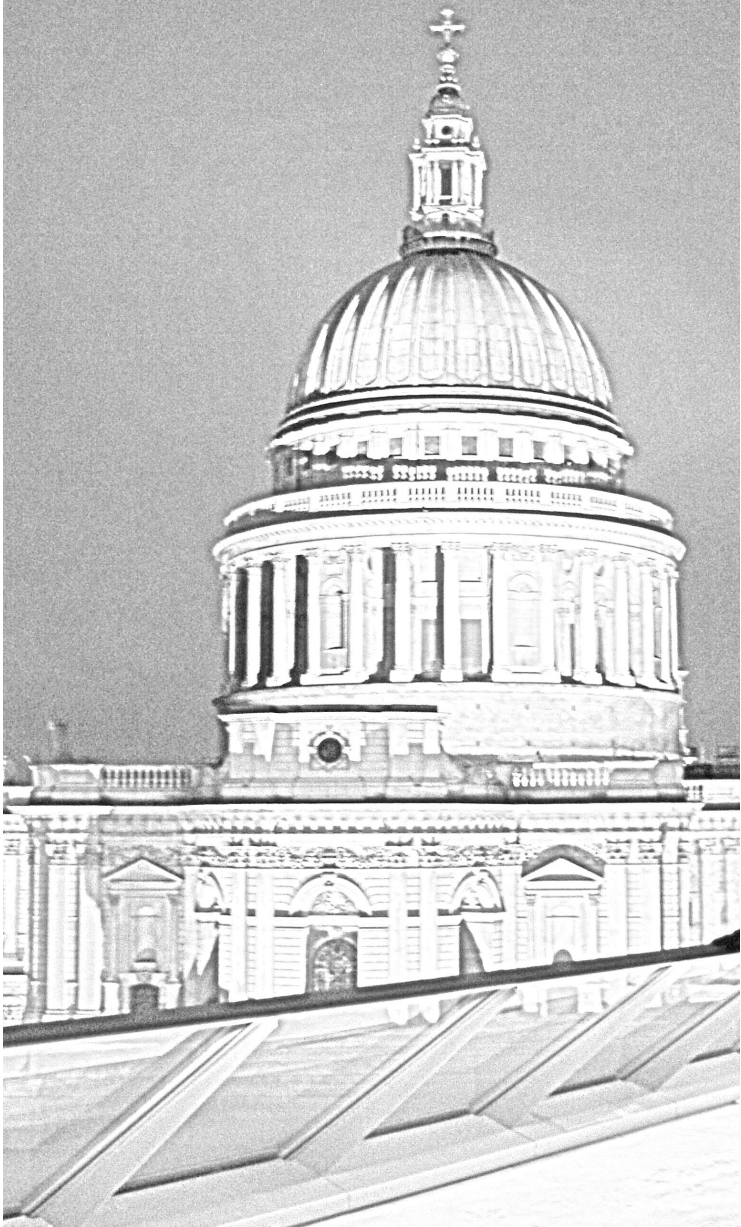
But who knows, what is to come. Will the EU survive? Will this "world empire" also fall and disappear?

² See: Citation of internet sources. URL: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merry_Christmas_\(Film\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merry_Christmas_(Film)). Status: 8th Dec 2020.

Since Donald Trump et al at the latest, we know that everything is possible. Nothing is unthinkable.

A year and one day ago, I may have thought that two World Wars were surely enough to assure us that something like that can never happen again, and we may have thought: 'No, that will never happen again!', but today I am not so sure. The opposite is true. I believe that everything is possible.

Corona has opened our eyes. After all, it is not science fiction, but reality, and there is more to come and not only good things.



27th November.

Dear Michael,

As I have told you already, we were in London in 2010.

As I had visited London quite a bit towards the end of the 1980's, I knew that it would be most convenient to book a nice hotel in the city, as you would not have to travel much on the bus and tube to get to the city. At our age, it is definitely important to be able to take a break at the hotel, for example at lunchtime, on exhausting city trips.

Therefore, I booked two single rooms right in the city online.

After a short flight, but still an exhausting journey, we were glad to arrive at the hotel.

The journey had been cumbersome, and travelling on public transport with luggage at this time of year, shortly before Christmas and a few months before the Olympic Games was in itself a challenge.

As said, we arrived at the hotel, which looked like a beautiful, small Victorian house. But the receptionist told us that we did not book two single rooms. I showed him my booking confirmation, where all the data was correct, and which confirmed my claim.

He then showed us his confirmation from the travel agency, according to which we had booked two single beds in a **room with eight beds (!!!)**.

I lost it. There appeared to have been a transfer error, and there we were with our luggage, not knowing where to go, as the hotelier had no single bedrooms available.

Luckily we had mobile phones back then, and I called the travel agency in Germany, who – thank God – were open at the time. They assured us, that they would call us back within the hour and that they would organise different accommodation for us.

They did call back and confirmed a new hotel address, and we were happy to at least be given new accommodation.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, our new domicile was way outside London and it took us one-and-a-half hours to get there. That was exactly what I had wanted to avoid, when I booked something in Central London.

In this suburb, we had to get off the tube and walk down a long road, which went up a substantial hill. As we did not know exactly, where the hotel was, we did not get on a bus, as we would not have known where to get off.

So we finally reached the “peak” of the hill, completely out of breath, and spotted an old,

beautiful and seemingly grand building in the distance, which had to be our hotel.

I said to my husband that they must have booked as a particularly elegant hotel as compensation!

As we approached the hotel, we were shocked to realise that it was not actually as beautiful and elegant as hoped.

It started with the fact that each door in the foyer had a barrier, over which one had to climb and lift the luggage. It was almost as if the hotel was waiting for a flood to hit, which had to be stopped, as the barriers were about 50cm high. I have never seen anything like this ever in a hotel before or since, and I still do not know what the actual purpose was.

The rooms were extremely dirty and the windows were single-glazed, i.e. old and leaky, so that the cold air (it was winter after all) of London's winter seeped into the rooms leading to all windows in the hotel constantly being misted over.

And it did not stop there. In the morning, we were asked to have breakfast on the top floor. There, we found a huge, unheated breakfast room, the windows of which were so untight that it was bitter cold.

There were several automatic toasting machines, which heated up slices of bread as if on a conveyor

belt. I had not seen such a machine before, but I found it quite practical.

To put on your toast, there was butter in small plastic wrappings and one type of jam, which was also offered in small plastic containers.

There was tea from large tea dispensers and everything was monitored and checked by around 10 members of staff, who were basically standing around doing nothing. It was entirely self-service. Even a canteen would have offered a cosier atmosphere.

Roughly in the middle of the room there was a TV, which had been screwed to the ceiling, and which blasted out music shows on a continuous basis. It was impossible to have a quiet conversation. All in all it was a room that you really wanted to run from.

The days spent in London were extremely exhausting, as we had to forego our naps completely, seeing that a one-and-a-half hour trip to the hotel and back into the city would have shortened our excursions significantly.

Hence we returned to our “hotel” each evening at 9pm, completely tired, and fell onto our triple-layered old mattresses like stones, which wobbled so much, that it felt like being on a sailing boat in the middle of a storm.

The only compensation for all of this is that I was able to claim back 25% of the costs of the trip from the travel agency, and they also compensated our additional expenses.

In any case, Michael, we will always remember this trip to London, as in the end, it had still been great.



5th December.

Dear Michael,

This month I will write to you more often, as your final departure (from the joint European Economic Area) causes me to do so. I am constantly thinking about it, and I am feeling very emotional about it all.

One important aspect of my youth was to listen to English music, namely pop music.

In the late 1960's and afterwards, good pop music in Germany was almost never available in German. The music for the youth had to be in English. It sounded cool and hip, as you would say today.

German music tended to be "Schlager" (which is a German type of popular music, not to be confused with English Pop music) or German folk music, and there was hardly anything in it that young people could get excited about.

Hence, I too was gripped by Beatlemania; my first (and the Beatles' last) album was "Let it be".

Basically, my age only allowed me to experience the dismal end of their career. I was only able to consciously get into the first years after their separation.

All of this brought English culture closer to me at an early stage in my life. Be it the myth of Carnaby Street or the Abbey Studios in London.

I admired all that was English, as it was the gateway to conscious music experiences at the time. In fact, it meant integration and identification at the same time.

There was an underlying early mixing of cultures, which started at this point. The young did not care where the music came from, as long as it was English, i.e. European.

From an early stage, the momentum of music focused on identification and crystallisation of a new, initially only European culture, which ended up unifying young people around the world.

When invited by the families of remote villages in the Sri Lankan jungle in the 1980's, you could hear Michael Jackson's songs being played in the courtyards of the huts, and kids breakdancing to it.

Everyone was familiar with now mainly American music, no, at that point it had already become world music.

Without much ado one immediately felt at home, it was a feeling of "everywhere". It was a time of coming closer together, of being uplifted and of mixing.

No-one, who likes the same music, would go to war against each other without hesitation. Having things in common creates peace, or at least a feeling of community.

There was no “America first” or “We want to do everything alone”. The slogan was “We want to connect with the world.” At least that is what the young people thought.



10th December.

Dear Michael,

The European Interrail concept created additional possibilities for those under 27 to travel through all of Europe by train, which I did several times.

Basically, I travelled through half of Europe. On my trips, I frequently met young people from all over the world, who joined me on some parts of my journey through Europe.

Without the English language, which everyone could speak at least a little bit, communication would have been difficult.

Hence, the language itself became a moment of integration for an entire generation. Another reason, why I loved it from the beginning.

Over the years, I came to realise that our two languages are very different on first glance, yet they do have so much in common.

Here is an example:

Let us take the German word for window: “Fenster”.

“Fenster“ originates from Latin, hence another example from the Roman Empire. After all, windows were a highly cultural matter for the Romans. Romans had permanent buildings, whilst many

Germanic people were still living in huts. Permanent buildings, especially when built in cold Germania, needed protection from the wind, cold and rain during the winter. Hence, the Romans invented enclosures for the openings using glass, i.e. “fenestra”.

As is well-known, Roman culture was not that successful in Britain, so that Roman terms and inventions or basic commodities were less prevalent.

In Britain (and also in their language) the simple openings in the huts remained “wind eyes”, i.e. “eyes” = openings, which faced outwards into the wind (windows) (whereas, Michael, you told me that the word “fenestra” can be found in the word “defenestrate”, which means to throw somebody out of a window).

This example alone shows how political and historic happenings influence language, and how they, in this case, led the Germanic (and later German) language in a different direction.

Sometimes, the meaning would change only slightly for particular words:

Example: The (hand) cart, an effective means of transport in the ancient world, remained a cart within the English language, but became a “car” for automobiles, which in German-speaking regions became “Auto” based on automobile.

“Automobile” is a combo of the ancient Greek word “Auto”, which means “self” and of the Latin word “mobilis”, which means “movable” and in part is simply Roman, meaning an “independently (auto) moving (mobil)” vehicle.

The basic word, i.e. “Karre” (cart) continues to exist in German, but it retains its original meaning: i.e. a cart. However, it can also refer to a car, but only when talking about a car, which is particularly old or cool.

These few examples serve to demonstrate the overall compositions affecting our two languages and also, of course, our two cultures:

We are from the same “stable”, and are very similar, but on a few occasions, we encounter changes, amendments and similarities on our joint, yet separate way, which makes us realise: We are one family, but have sometimes gone into different directions. We are one big family, living across the whole world.

15th December.

Dear Michael,

Another great example for this worldwide “dispersion” is the diaspora of the Jewish community, which, for millennia, has been scattered around the world and gained ground and integrated into many other cultures.

This strengthened a sense of belonging, but also differences, and therefore led to one large community, which sticks together internationally, but which is also aware of its differences, and which has learned to use these to their advantage.

The Holocaust, the external war of annihilation against the Jews (to my regret led by my own people), was the final push towards a strengthened awareness of intercommunity.

If we stopped for one moment to think that we Europeans are from the same “stable”, the newly resurgent nationalist rhetoric and arguments in Europe would be less virulent and could perhaps be avoided altogether.

Nevertheless, family arguments are not a bad thing per se. After all, democracy strives on debates, constructive arguments and compromise.

I believe that the interrelations in Europe, and particularly between Great Britain and Germany,

bring great advantages and disadvantages. But only, if we constantly remind ourselves of that interrelation we have, may we jointly profit from this fascinating situation.

We are diverse and individualistic, but also inclusive and one-sided, the secret lies in the balance, unison despite our differences.

You see, Michael, we are closer than we thought.



20th December.

Dear Michael,

In the course of Brexit, I have often watched debates in your House of Commons over the last few months. They were mainly in relation to Brexit.

Apart from the entertaining and witty traditions, which look quite strange and comedy-like to us “outsiders”, I realised how old and conscious of its tradition your parliamentary democracy is.

It feels like the clocks stopped centuries ago. It feels like actually being in Shakespearean times!

When, in contrast, watching the debates in our Bundestag (which is the German Parliament), one is immediately thrown into today’s events. Debates are led without pomp and circumstance, about matter-of-fact subjects (apart from a few examples, where things got quite heated of late), but all in all, there are no old traditions here.

Basically, when comparing the House of Commons and the Bundestag, the biggest difference between our systems becomes evident.

This is not meant to be an evaluation of any kind, I think it is great that we are different in that respect. If all parliaments were the same, we would no longer be able to draw comparison.

The other point is the type of constitution, i.e. a constitutional monarchy on the one side, and a parliamentary democracy on the other. How different our history is in that respect.

Our German Kaiser had to abdicate in 1919, and since then the concept of monarchy has seemed far away indeed.

The revolution in 1919, which led to the founding of the Weimar Republic, our first democracy, got rid of the old order in one go.

Of course, we had fascism and caused two world wars, in between so to say, but monarchy was truly over.

Hence our countries and their constitutions are entirely different, despite having retained their basic similarities.

Monarchy, feudalism and tradition exist, or did exist on both sides, but in a completely different way.

A British Empire with a United Kingdom as a basis and, until 1871, multiple states with kingdoms, principedoms and small states in Germany make for the difference par excellence.

The similarities of the “family” had been suppressed and lost beyond recognition. Hatred, vengeance and war took over.

Only the total collapse, the “zero hour” for everyone, managed to wipe the state clean.

A tiny seed of reconciliation grew out of these ruins, a new beginning, which developed into a strong friendship, probably not when looking at it superficially, and sometimes hidden away, a new relationship developed over centuries following an absolute, apocalyptic collapse.

With much plaintiveness I am thinking of a gesture made by the British royal family, who had made a contribution towards the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, namely the top crown finish on the roof.

With this, Great Britain confirmed that the United Kingdom regretted having destroyed this wonderful church in the attack of a thousand firebombs in 1944 and 1945, and therefore symbolically mourned the thousands that died as a result.

The question of primary guilt did not matter, and that for me was the actual act of reconciliation.

Just look at the video of the rebuilding of this wonderful church. The process was documented by means of time lapse and the attachment of the “British top” is the final element of the documentation. I am crying just thinking of it, as I find it so moving.

On the other hand, there are still reservations on both sides, and resentment continues to flare up between Germans and British people here and there.

Just think of football games, where emotions run high and sometimes burst out in nationalist outbreaks. But in the end, it is an old game, which no-one really takes that seriously.

When Angela Merkel is depicted with a Hitler moustache, it hurts me and it is not ok, as it is simply nonsense. But we know the game, it is how it is, old cliches and prejudices are dug out, and we know that it is not actually meant like that (or is it?).

Sometimes, I can actually understand it, but I am German after all and I feel the pain, but can handle it much better these days.

Most of all, I know that there are lovely people like you, Michael, who help me realise that there is another world, where we are friends and respect each other.

Especially as we used to be enemies, we are even better friends today. There really is no other way, Brexit or not.

25th December.

Dear Michael,

It's Christmas today. A time for reflection.

Once again, we have something in common, and still there is a difference.

For us, Christmas means handing out gifts on Christmas Eve, and we wait for Christ's Child in the evening. You, on the other hand, tend to celebrate Christmas on Christmas Day.

What we have in common is the Christmas tree, which, according to latest findings, appears to be a German invention.

No-one in the United Kingdom will want to acknowledge that, but that is how it is. Be happy that you have, for once, adopted something from us Germans! It is such a beautiful tradition.

We, on the other hand, are not familiar with the custom of hanging mistletoes above doorways at all.

Back in the days we also did not celebrate Halloween, or were completely unfamiliar with it, nor did we have a bearded red Santa Clause!

All these things came over from America and watered down our traditions. On the one hand, that

is completely inappropriate, but on the other hand it shows how everything continues to mix.

Despite the concept of “Black Friday” of course being mainly of an economic nature, leading to even more store transactions, we seem to have recently taken on this tradition from America.

We no longer call seasonal sales in winter or summer “Schlussverkauf” (which could be translated to ‘final sale’), but SALE.

I am still undecided as to whether I believe this to be a positive sign of coming together, or whether it is a vilification of our traditions and culture. As always, I feel fairly ambivalent about it all.

But is it not this ambivalence, which makes everything so fascinating and diverse? Does it not connect us, as we are familiar with everything and celebrate everything together?

What do you think?

I think that these ambivalences are an essential element of our joint history, as they build an interrelation, which accounts for and defines our coexistence.

Diversity instead of egalitarianism, ambivalence instead of separation and singularism, friendship instead of discrepancies. Common things, basically, with many nuances and diversifications.

Is it not extremely British and at the same time quintessentially German (or better: Prussian)?

31st December.

Dear Michael,

The year is coming to a close, and we still do not know what is coming our way.

Were you even aware of how different the Germans and British actually are?

Did you know that the Germans were really not a nation until Bismarck ended small-statism in Germany in 1871 by convincing the Bavarian King at the last minute to join the new union?

Truth is that we are a conglomerate of many different people. The Saxons and the Bavarians, the Rhinelanders and the people from Lower Saxony. Not to mention the Swabians.

Different tribes, different languages, different mentalities and histories. It's very different in your country. But you know that better than me.

That is definitely a big difference. It took a long time for a truly homogenic national conscience to develop in Germany.

In the end, that is what the Nazis used to their advantage, as the Germans had a certain longing, and even though that is not what they were and not what they really wanted to be.

If you do not have a true sense of national pride, but long for it nevertheless, you will follow those, who offer just the same in an exaggerated manner and who call on it.

Finally, there was a “strong man”, who wanted to unite everyone, and who wanted to bring together the great German people.

Well, he did bring the people together initially, but then turned them against the world and led them into the abyss. And he led another people, who were often part of the German people themselves, to their deaths.

Not only was it an abyss for the people, but also an abyss for the soul.

All of our souls were abused and killed. The soul of what is human.

All of us, who are humans, will never be able to get used to the idea that there were monsters like that, who did such things, be it Germans or others, that is not what matters in the end.

After all, we all had to stare into the abyss, which forced us to realise what human beings, i.e. all of us, are capable of.

And it never stops, but constantly reminds us that we have to fight it, with small, everyday actions, everywhere.

May our joint history, British and German, act as a reminder for what was and what is to come.

Our Chancellor once said “Wir schaffen das” (we can do it).

Let us take this message seriously today, ***my dear Michael***, as we approach the end of such a difficult year. We can do it!

