

## A Year's End Exchange Between Friends

*Silvia is a former colleague from my solidarity days opposing U.S. intervention in Central America during the mid-80s. Raised in Cologne, and living in Berlin, Silvia was a Reconciliation fellow (Fellowship for Reconciliation), a German organization placing volunteers in countries with whom it was at war in WW II. We worked together at CASA of Boston, the largest local solidarity organization in the United States. Silvia lives and works as an RN, a union organizer, and as an activist in Berlin, Germany.*

What a great, newsy, Christmas email. I'm so glad you visited Ireland. You may know/recall, I went to school in Ireland when I was 15, County Galway, to which Sandell and I returned in 2019, to a very different Ireland. It had been very much a Third World nation at the time; did not even have its own currency, an economic colony of Britain's (resources exported; manufactured goods imported). And then the Irish Miracle and its per capita GDP is now greater than its former colonizer. Justice realized?

I was also particularly interested to read of the activities of resistance that you experienced this past year. Thank you so much! In this case, it will take the village of nations to address the many, many challenges ahead. I was heartened at the last major No Kings Day Demo - October 19 - that the youth were beginning to participate, rather than just the old foggies such as ourselves. Sandell and I were treated kindly, as Elders, a new experience for us both.

It has been an eventful year for us as well, as you might imagine, but also personally. As you may recall, we attended Martin Luther's church (🙏) in Spokane for many years but then became good Portland secularists upon arrival here in 2008. But Trump drove us back into the pews this past January. Augustana Lutheran, a sanctuary church—and not just in name but in action; they are party to a lawsuit against the federal government for violations of the principal of sanctuary which in natural law applies to both churches and hospitals. Our Spanish language pastor is under threat of deportation. He took sanctuary for 80 days at Augustana in 2015 when Obama tried to deport him. Trump is trying to finish the job. Tragically, his son—stressed out by the continuing threat of deportation—self-deported in 2016 and was dead within the week at the hands of Salvadoran gangs. We organized a fundraiser to secure Pastor Francisco's legal fees, and are training folks in the principles of non-violence. We've set up a secure alert system on Signal so that we might occupy the sanctuary of the church should that become necessary. And just this morning, our Lyft driver to the airport: A Turkish emigre, a Christian who fled political persecution under Erdogan. He has a green card but is very scared of being deported. I told him our church is a sanctuary church, wrote down my email address and the name of the church, Augustana Lutheran. He's quite scared and was very grateful.

BTW, I don't think the bastard is going to win; I think the sun has set on the apex of Donald Trump's power. The resistance - despite its highly visible capitulations (is it

bendings of the knee, or bending of the knees? 😊), has proved sufficiently strong - mostly street power, i.e., No Kings which were two of the three biggest mobilizations in U.S. history, the lower courts, and the sheer incompetence of the Trump Administration – and is writing its epitaph.

Elsewhere, I finally finished my memoir - self-published but available electronically (Amazon) and in paper; it can be ordered from any bookstore. You could even download it from my website, together with my stepmom Harriet's book, an extraordinary writer and the founder of Sinister Wisdom which was/is the leading intellectual journal of lesbian feminism in the United States and Canada. I would be honored if you were to give my memoir a read. I think, at this point, the only person from our movement days who has read it is Julie Meyer, with whom I do stay in touch and see on occasion.

We travel a great deal as well, but mostly to Chicago to see Jess and our simply delightful granddaughter, Ruby (2.5 yrs). We are headed there now, as a matter of fact. I watched the sun rise just moments ago as we flew past the Columbia River. Jess has made a decision to leave the CDC, where it is impossible to work under the current, very unserious, leadership of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.. She is joining the firm of my colleague, Keja Whiteman (Turtle Mtn. Chippewa), where she will be taking over operations of this emerging consulting firm that specializes in Indigenous health sovereignty. So I will have the extraordinary honor of spending a portion of my remaining professional time working directly together with my daughter in Indian Country. It feels distinctly like a blessing.

Meanwhile, Katie has returned to Portland, having first been —in a fitting example of Trumpian incompetence —fired and then restored to her position with the National Institutes of Health, where she worked on addiction in Indian Country. She brought with her her two children with whom we are very much in love, Ellie (nearly five), Pat (nearly 1.5) and her good natured husband, Mat. Katie has taken a job with the State of Oregon, utilizing her skills as a neuroscientist to distribute commercial marijuana tax revenue to address addiction here in Oregon, one of the states in the nation with the highest rates of Substance Use Disorder.

We have recently returned from roughly two months of travel. First to New Brunswick to visit my stepmother —one of just two of my four mothers who remain alive (which is another story altogether; both my bio-mom and my first stepmother passed in 2024)— and then to Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, which was simply spectacular: You will appreciate this—as Maine was 50 years ago. And then - with a trip to Chicago in between - a month in Uruguay and Argentina. It was epic. Montevideo is a lovely town; a little boring - in a pleasant way - and the people are lovely, some of the loveliest I've ever met. We are urbanophiles; we seek out and explore wonderful cities (the **2nd** reason why we must get to Berlin!) Buenos Aires is a terrific town. And while the food and wine were wonderful, and the avenues and buildings so gorgeously *fin de siècle*, I

was most struck by the trees, which line every street in nearly all of the inner city neighborhoods that we visited. They reach 25-35 meters, offering shade - and cooling on a warming planet - to the 10th floor! It's quite extraordinary. 20 meter jacarandas! Stunning. Our 9th floor apartment in Palermo had a shaded porch. They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; if so, Porteños planted theirs a good 50 years ago.

Sandell is doing well. She has taken to retirement (12/24) like a fish to water. She was quite sick in 2024 - a severe case of pancreatitis (6/24), from which her labs have only just returned to baseline. But she's doing wonderfully today and devotes herself to grandparenting, a role to which she is so well-suited.

I continue to work 15-20 hours per week, perhaps 40 weeks a year, and am likely to continue to do so for another 24 months. And I am writing, as I have suggested, but have several more things I'd like to put down on paper between now and then (🍌😄) as well, and have started in to several of those projects.

We are both grappling with the usual infirmities of age, primarily musculoskeletal. Sandell is due for her second knee replacement while my old back injury - spondylolisthesis - transmogrified via aging related arthritis which was accelerated by the original injury - into an anterolisthesis and retrolisthesis. Basically, everything from L2-S1 is FUBAR as they say in the Marines (Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition). I had a fusion at S1-L5 in January, 2023. It had largely healed - though additional recovery was on offer - and by November I summited the highest mountain in the Columbia Gorge (2,900 ft). It had been a brutal two years leading up to and recovering from this. And then I made the fateful decision to go to a chiropractor for discomfort in my thoracic spine, a condition I normally addressed in the swimming pool but which I was prevented from doing due to a sinus infection. I told the doc quite clearly- including with photos of my X-rays - not to touch my lower back. And so he did, violating the Hippocratic oath, expressed patient wishes, and a failed attempt to violate Newton's first law of motion (for every action, there will be an equal and opposite reaction). Because my back could not move at S1-L5, it moved above, at L3 and L4, narrowing the foraminal spaces between, and once again I find myself disabled, now with few options. I am in mostly good spirits as I continue to pursue many avenues —physiatry, physical therapy, pilates, injections—so that I might once again enjoy the pleasures of walking, beyond the mere puttering about that I am able to do currently (although I was up to about a 1.5 miles prior to our recent round of travel which set me back). I can swim and I can see the world on my bike and if I need to get a scooter to scoot about the great cities of the world, then that is what I intend to do. 😊 We did make it to Aconcagua, a mountain I'd once hoped to summit. It's magnificent. I think will send you under separate cover some photos to accompany this email.

An extraordinary thing happened to me this year. I was cycling home from our storage unit, riding on the sidewalk because Lombard is a four-lane death trap with a 45 mph speed limit and so, as you can imagine, everyone drives at 50-55. It's fairly busy but if

you're lucky, you can catch an opening to cross the street. It was a warm spring day, maybe 65-70, sunny. A Saturday as I recall because I told my pastor about it the next morning. There was a young man, no helmet, on a bicycle in the middle of the road, aimless, crossing lanes erratically. Cars slowed, swerved around him. Honking. He ignored them. I caught a break and was able to join him and escort him safely off the highway. He was distraught, suicidal. I told him that I was sorry. I told him that I loved him. And I asked him if he would do me a favor. He said yes. I said to him: just not today. What you do tomorrow is your own business, but would he please, please, for me, not today. And he agreed and I saw him safely off of Lombard and then biked home. I have never been so intimately/so directly involved in saving someone's life and it has given me a new perspective on what it must mean to be engaged directly, rather than indirectly as I have been, in the health professions. Thank you for the work that you do.

I suspect that kinda' catches you up. I do not know how many more times we will see each other, but it will be at least once and we very, very much look forward to that Silvia.

All the best,  
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No one is illegal on stolen lands.

On Dec 25, 2025, at 04:30, Silvia Habekost <[silvia.habekost@berlin.de](mailto:silvia.habekost@berlin.de)> wrote:

Dear Sandell, dear Steve,

how are you doing? Have a great Christmas day and greetings to everybody!! This year my letter is in this mail.. The calendar will get mailed this week. Your address hasn't changed - right?

Looking out the window I see blue sky and I know it's really cold – I went for a run before breakfast... I just reread my letter from last year. I think I travelled even more in 2025 than in 2024. But first things first: I get a pension now. Reducing my working hours to 50% in the last three months hasn't really felt different. Especially not this month because I worked full time – but our management rejected my request to work full time in December. But that's a whole other story which I'm not going to go into.. My January schedule looks great!! Four shifts in total!!! It's a 30% contract now...

Let's look at the whole year 2025: The calendar is ready to be mailed and I hope it will get to you soon!! This time it's even more important to let me know when you receive it!! There are mail restrictions now – but I'll try anyhow... The cover shows four different political topics – the war on Gaza – a poster seen in Brussels, strike conference in Berlin, the office of the tenants' union in Madrid and a quote by Goethe seen in Weimar. "Das Land, das die Fremden nicht beschützt, geht bald unter." *The country that doesn't protect foreigners, will soon be destroyed.* (My translation) I'm not going to go into politics. We have a new government, you have a new government. Wars are still going on. Hopeful I stay knowing that I have great friends and comrades!!

I still go hiking – not every month – but in January you see the Müggelsee. On the way to Switzerland my sister and I spent a few day in the Black Forest and then in we were in Maloja/Salecina again. This time we had to take a detour via Italy on the way back to Freiburg – because of too much snow. Staufen is the birthplace of Elke – a town close to Freiburg. I still go to Brussels four times a year and always stop in Cologne on the way or/and back. March 8<sup>th</sup> we had an even bigger International Women's Day demonstration with about 30.000 people there!! And I went to Celle for the 10k run again. The little statue called "Lastenbär" was put in front of the Zionskirche in my neighborhood during Covid. Unfortunately it had to be moved into storage – Berlin bureaucracy doesn't allow it to stay.. No major travels in April – just enjoying beautiful Berlin and Brandenburg.

The Strike Conference "Gegenmacht im Gegenwind" (*Counterpower in headwind.*) took place the first weekend of May – at the Technical University in Berlin. It was the biggest conference so far with more than 2000 participants. The photo you find in the calendar shows one of the most moving moments of the conference. Colleagues of the Charity Facility Management – an outsourced company of the Charité University hospital – are talking about their struggle for better pay. After 43 days of strike they succeeded to reach an agreement that will get them to 100% of the Charité collective agreement in 2030. A great success of ver.di in a company with a majority of migrant workers!!

Also in May Elke and I explored the cities of Erfurt, Jena, and Weimar. Erfurt is the headquarter of the Kinderkanal – a TV public channel for children – with very famous figures like the two you see in the photo (Käptn Blaubär and Hein Blöd). At the end of that week I went to Kassel for a meeting. In June you see a light installation to remember/celebrate the Wrapped Reichstag of Christo in 1995. The smurfs I found in an underpass in Brussels.

And now to June/July: Elke and I had decided to take a trip to Ireland in June/July. A tour organized by the leftist newspaper "Die Tageszeitung (taz)". The taz correspondent in Ireland organized the program. And on the way there we spent a few days in London (going there by train!!). London was really hot that's why we escaped to Whitstable in Kent for a day. Then we took the train to Holyhead in Wales and then went by ferry to Dublin. The tour started in Dublin and we went to beautiful and interesting places in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland including Belfast. My intention was to include a London/Ireland photo link – but that has to wait.. We learned a lot about the history and politics of Ireland.

In August we spent a summer week in Maloja – with a stopover in the Black Forest and Basel on the way there. Maloja is really beautiful in the summer as well – and we were very lucky with the weather!! And also in August I managed to visit the Heide (heather) near Celle. In September I went to a workshop about working conditions in the health sector organized by EPSU (European Public Service Union) in Copenhagen, Denmark. I added the weekend and spent it in Malmö/Sweden. Humlebaek is home of the beautiful Louisiana Art Museum close to Copenhagen.

In Oktober I went to Madrid on a trip organized by ver.di to explore the Madrid hospital movement. We met with unionists, different groups like a tenants' union and politicians from the leftist party Sumar. We also learned about the Spanish Civil War – which is basically forgotten in public memory in Spain. It was another great trip with a great group of people!!

In November I managed to visit Chemnitz for a day – cultural capitol of Europe 2025. And also in November I was invited to Zürich by the Public Service Union of Switzerland. I took the opportunity to spend a day with my friend near Freiburg and explored Zürich. I had been invited to speak about striking in hospitals and talked about the Berlin hospital movement. On the way back I took the train to Brussels for another meeting there and went to Bonn with my sister in Cologne. The last photos of the calendar were taken in December 2024. We went on a hike around Bensberg near Cologne.

And my plans for 2026? I'm going to Cologne on the 30<sup>th</sup> to spend New Years with Elke. In January we'll go to Switzerland again – this time with a few days in Bern after the snow time in Maloja and Sils. There aren't any other definite plans yet. I really want to visit the U.S. and Canada – maybe in July?! There are a lot of union conferences this year and I want to plan around those... As you can imagine I'm also a little hesitant. But I'll get in touch with you about all that ...

Greetings from Berlin!!

Love Silvia

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