

Gerry's Diary 36: A trip to the beach, Wimbledon and stories from the sea (July 3, 2009)

Hi, this is Gerry and this is my Diary for Friday, July 3rd, 2009. How time flies! That can be my saying of the day. Sometimes the days and the weeks go past so quickly. It's already July. The longest day has been and gone. In Welsh the month of July is called Gorffennaf, which I think means the end of summer. "Gorffen" means end or finish and "haf" is summer. But for us, I think July and August are the real summer months, so we mustn't be depressed. In fact we've had some beautiful hot weather and I have a story about a trip to the beach last week. Then I want to tell you about Wimbledon - it's such an important event in Britain. Finally, as I promised you last time, some stories from my grandfather and his days on the sea. That sounds like a good summer cocktail of topics. I hope you'll enjoy it.

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And before I start, thank you for your comments on the website. It was good to hear your opinions about how fast I should speak and so on. I loved Sofie's answer about the people of Berne. She said that the only reason why the Bernese speak slowly is to help the other Swiss understand. That's a good answer to an unkind joke about the Bernese, but the reason why I speak slowly or why I repeat things is because I know that understanding people in another language isn't easy.

We had a visitor from Switzerland last week. She had a good mixture of weather. At the weekend it was grey and a bit wet, but then it got hot and sunny and we decided to go to the beach for a picnic. It was a typical sunny day here. The sun was very strong but there was a little breeze [1] coming from the sea, so we didn't notice how strong the sun was and we came home rather sunburnt. Because it was still June and the children are still at school, there were no older children on the beach but there were a lot of little children, children who were too young to go to school. Near us there was an English mum and dad with their little boy who was called Max. Now, Max was maybe three years old. There was just him and his parents who were there, of course, to do what he wanted. And Max wanted to build a sandcastle. So he said to his parents: "I want to build a sandcastle, and you, Mummy, can help me." "OK," said Mummy. Max had a bucket and a spade [2] like every child needs on the beach. So Mummy got the spade and she started to make a flat platform to build the castle. She took the spade and started to pat [3] the sand down, to hit it with the spade to make it flat and smooth. When Max saw that, he didn't like it. "What are you doing?" he shouted, "I want to build a castle." "Well, I'm just patting the sand down, so we can make a nice castle," said Mummy. "No," screamed Max. This was clearly not in his plan and he was terribly confused. He didn't know what to do, and so he started crying and shouting at his mother. So then Daddy came over. It was clear that Mummy's plan was not working, so Daddy said: "Look, why don't we go down the beach to the wet sand. Look, down there", he said, pointing, "The wet sand is very good for building sandcastles." Well, it took a bit of time, but in the end Max agreed to go with his father. "OK, but you can help me, Daddy," he said. "not Mummy." "That's OK, I'll help you." said Daddy. And off they went, hand in hand, talking away man to man about their project. And the last words we heard from Max were "And I don't want any more of that patting down", "No, of course not," said Dad.

Do you remember my neighbour who went on the cruise? Well, why do you think that I won't see her for the next two weeks? Why are her curtains [4] closed in her living room every afternoon while the sun shines outside? And why does my wife keep on coming into the house from the garden to check the computer? And what's on the front page of the newspapers every day? It's no longer the political scandals; there may be stories about Michael Jackson, but the big story is Wimbledon. It's difficult to explain how popular Wimbledon is in Britain. Football is popular but Wimbledon for two weeks is the big, big story. One reason why it's different from most other sports events is that it's so popular with women. If you look at the people who go to Wimbledon, it's at least 50% women. If you want a ticket for Wimbledon, by the way, you have to send in your name and they sell the tickets by lottery [5]. Every day the place is completely full for the big games. It's a very British event. There's usually some typically mixed British weather. But this year, we have the new roof on Centre Court and everybody wants it to rain. Of course it didn't rain, and the first time the roof was closed was last Monday - and that was because the match between Murray and the "other" Swiss star, Wawrinka was late. And what a match that was! Wimbledon's the only tennis championship with a dress code [6]: the players have to wear white. That's the tradition. Most people say that this is the best tennis championship in the world. The British certainly think so. The French have a different opinion, perhaps. But if this is so important in Britain, why are the British tennis players so bad? Every year, there's usually one British player with a chance. It was always Tim Henman, and now it's Andy Murray. And he is, of course the world number 3. But he's the only British player in the top 100. Switzerland has two men in the top 20, and it recently had two women players in the top twenty as well. The French, the Spanish, the Germans, they all seem to produce great players every year. But Britain's tennis never gets better.

But we don't mind, because we also love Roger Federer. And every year he has a new Wimbledon outfit [7], and that's good for a few front-page stories in the newspapers. This year, he's wearing white and gold - a little vulgar perhaps. But if somebody gave you a million pounds to wear a gold suit, what would you do? I was a little confused by the logo on his jacket. I saw something that looked like what you see on French money: RF - République Française. It looked very similar to me, but I guess the good people of Nike in America don't see much French money. I have to record this before we know all the results of the second week, but so far both Roger and Andy Murray look good. It could be a great final, like last year.

My grandfather was a sea captain early in the twentieth century. It just shows you how old I am! My great-grandfather was a sea captain, too. And my grandfather went to sea for the first time, with his father, when he was just 10 years old. Can you imagine that? They sailed from the little port of Caernarfon and they were then away at sea for two and a half years. When the boy came back he was 12 years old, and he then had to go back to school again. But somehow he learnt enough to do his exams and to become a master mariner [8], somebody who could be captain of a ship. Today we think that children who are 16 years old are sometimes very young to start work. The world was very different then. My wife's father was also a seaman. He ran away from home when he was 14 and joined the navy [9]. My wife's step-father was 12 when he joined the army. There was a special army school that he went to when he was twelve, and he learnt to look after horses and to work with them.

When I was a little boy I used to hear the stories from my grandfather about life on the ships when he was young. On one ship there was a monkey [10] and it was a very naughty monkey. It liked to take the sailors' pipes [11]. In those days, all the sailors smoked pipes. Some pipes were made of wood and others were made of clay. The monkey took the pipes and went up the mast of the ship where the sailors couldn't catch him. Then he dropped the clay pipes on the deck [12] of the ship, where they broke, but he knew the wooden pipes wouldn't break, so he threw them in the water. When my grandfather started a new trip on the ship my grandmother would give him some special food to take with him. One thing was his favourite dessert. It's called bread-and-butter pudding. It's made with eggs, milk and sugar, so you have a sort of custard [13], and then there are slices of bread and butter in the custard and a lot of raisins (dried grapes). My grandfather put the dessert in his cabin and he was looking forward to eating it. But the monkey found it first. The monkey turned it upside down [14] on his bed and then ate all the raisins. He left the rest on the bed.

The problem was that an animal on a ship is very special. It brings good luck, and sailors knew that if they killed the monkey or treated it badly the ship would have very bad luck afterwards. So the monkey was safe.

I already told you my saying of the day: time flies. And sometimes the show flies as well. My time is up, as we say. It's the end of another podcast. I hope you're enjoying some good summer weather and, if you're a tennis fan, enjoy the Wimbledon finals, and till the next time, this is Gerry saying, take care!

[1] breeze: light wind

[2] bucket and spade: something to carry water or sand in and something to dig the sand (cut into the sand and lift it)

[3] pat: here: to hit or knock gently

[4] curtains: pieces of cloth to cover the window (US English = drapes)

[5] sell tickets by lottery: they pick names by chance and sell the tickets to those people

[6] dress code: rules about what clothes you have to wear

[7] outfit: a set of clothes (here: his shirt and shorts but also a jacket, long trousers, etc.)

[8] master mariner: a qualification to be the captain of a ship

[9] navy: either the merchant navy (commercial ships) or the Royal Navy (war ships)

[10] monkey: an animal with a long tail that can use its hands like a person and can climb trees

[11] pipe: something to hold tobacco to smoke

[12] deck: the flat floor of a ship where you can walk

[13] custard: here: a mixture of milk, eggs and sugar that you bake in the oven until it is solid

[14] upside down: with the top down and the bottom up