

15 Dec 93

Dear friends,

Was it in last year's Christmas letter that we said we decided to settle down and stay put for a while? Well, things didn't work out quite that way. In fact, just after last Christmas, we started talking about moving to Europe, and by the end of July, we had packed up half our belongings and moved to Brussels.

The occasion was Jim's work — he took a fulltime job with Philips as Design Manager for the European multimedia publishing group based in London. Jim's office is in Hasselt, a small Flemish town an hour away, but we decided to live here in Brussels in order to practice our French and be near the international school.

The International School of Brussels, or ISB, is where Colin (11), Sanford (10), and Emily (7) attend 5th, 4th, and 1st grade, respectively. Classes are in English, and the curriculum largely follows the U.S., but only 40% of the students are American. The kids all have good teachers, and they've all made some friends.

We're living in a townhouse of about 1910, with lovely 14-foot ceilings, in an area of Bruxelles known as Ixelles, near a couple of duck ponds. With our expectation to be here for only 2 years, we thought we'd try city life for a change. It's nice to be able to walk to the open-air market, the bus, the tram, the post office, the corner store, and about 5 patisseries. (This is not a good place for

loosing weight.) The kids walk to the end of the street every morning with bread crusts to feed the ducks while waiting for the school bus. Every morning, they look for their favorite ducks: Greedy and Honker especially, but also Purty, Clickie, Whitebill and Bumphead!

In June, just before we left, Wendy earned her Master's degree in museum education from George Washington University — a major milestone! Coming to Europe also meant that Wendy had to turn down an attractive job offer from the National Gallery of Art — not an easy thing to pass up! Here in Belgium, she is not permitted to work or even volunteer in museums, but through the school, she recently took two classes of 5th grade "ESL" students and their teachers on a guided tour of the big exhibition of Maya art. Afterwards, the teachers all said it was "best museum tour I've been on in 14 years" and the like.

Wendy has also organized several one-day trips with friends to nearby (and not-so-nearby) cultural attractions like the diamond markets of Antwerp, the Christmas fairs of Cologne, and the porcelain factories at Limoges and Gien south of Paris! At home, she is sewing some curtains that would be worthy of the Dukes of Burgundy who used to call these parts their own in the 15th century!

The best part of all this, of course, is the opportunity we've had to travel to interesting places. We all went down to Paris only a couple weeks after we arrived — Wendy required the kids to spend a morning in the Louvre as the price

for an afternoon in the waterpark next to our hotel. We visited Jim's sister Dot & Roger & family in Cheshire; we hadn't realized the ferry we booked was a hovercraft, and that was exciting! (We also stopped in Stoke-on-Trent for some dishes from the Portmerion factory outlet.) Our trip to Amsterdam was very enjoyable, even if it was extended an extra day when Jim discovered, as Wendy and the kids were lugging all our bags down to the hotel lobby, that he had parked the car in a garage that stays locked all Sunday! One weekend we went to Vianden (Luxembourg), where the kids got the shivers from our first sight of castle looming above us as a huge silhouette in the light of a full moon! Finally, a trip down the Rhine led us past a few castles and on to some beautiful walled medieval cities, including Dinkelsbuhl, the site of Sanford's class play last year.

Of course, life here is not just wine and roses — which is too bad, since those are about the only things here (along with chocolates) that are less expensive than in the U.S. Brussels is horribly expensive, and this is not good for two people who don't like to think about money. Also, nobody does bureaucracy like the Belgians. (You're supposed to register with the local government when you arrive. We've been there four times. Each time they demand more documents and translations — the last time they wanted a certification that Wendy had a clean criminal record (they had already done Jim), and French translations of the kids' birth certificates (just in case we might try to slip in creature from outer space, no doubt). We

promise never to complain about paperwork in the U.S. ever again. And, it must be said, the Belgians must be the worst drivers in the world.

As long as we're complaining now, another disappointment is that friends have come and stayed in our guest apartment only once! We don't offer room service or guided tours, but where else can you can a free bedroom, sitting room with kitchen, and private bath in Europe for a week or two. Let's hear from you!

When asked what they liked and disliked about being here, the kids answered as follows. Colin didn't like having to adjust to so many changes (school, home, friends, etc.), but he likes going on trips to other countries so nearby. Emily misses her friends back home (in fact, even we miss Emily's friends back home), and for Sanford, the worst aspect of living in Europe is A.J. Harris. All of them agree, however, that the best aspect is having a toy store just around the corner.

Despite the occasional difficulties, we are convinced that this European jaunt will be a great experience for all of us. We are learning to appreciate a lot about other cultures and other histories, but we are also gaining a new and vigorous appreciation for American culture as well!

With best wishes for the holidays,

The Hoekemas