

## **18-LOUDLER**

### **Cross border exchanges through the centuries**

On the Ösling and in its valleys of the Our and Ulf, borders were always barely perceptible. Hard borders, like language, were seldom the hindrance here that they were in other frontier regions. The Mosel-Frankish dialect made understanding with one's neighbours from Luxembourg easy. To this levelling effect were added the ongoing cross-frontier connections of family. Other local people have another explanation, geographical singularity. In high places, such as the Ösling, frontiers are not especially significant. Not only the wind whistles across the border. Two ancient trading routes also lead across the Ösling. Life in the Our valley always stood in relation to other regions and was usually in some sort of exchange with them. Today, frontier crossings with barriers and customs offices are part of the past, yet certain reasons for overstepping boundaries were always there and remain today, if only in a more modern form.

### **Trans-border commuters in the south of the neighbouring country**

In 2011, more than 3,300 Belgians commuted to work in Luxembourg. In the valley of the Our and Ulf, they call this "working in the little country", where they mainly earn their bread in the building, commercial and transport sectors. The numbers of Luxembourgers commuting to Belgium is about a third of the number in the other direction. If the commuter stream to Germany has diminished somewhat in recent years, the flow into Luxembourg has risen steadily. One reason is certainly the higher salaries. This fact has its roots in the very different economic structures of the two countries. Belgian-Luxembourg trans-frontier commuting can already look back on a hundred-year history. The increasing industrialisation at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew people from the Ösling into the south of Luxembourg. For the most part, these were poor agricultural labourers hoping for a better life as industrial workers. This rural exodus continued on into the 1980s. The Luxembourgers valued their neighbours for their work ethic. Often they would even be admired for their diligence in setting out so early from their homes in the north for a long commute, since Belgium, in the minds of Luxembourgers, is still foreign and thus distant. In 2007, 43% of people employed in Luxembourg were trans-frontier commuters. This high proportion is seen in the Duchy as a prerequisite for the future maintenance of their living standard. But there are also voices of dissent: those who see therein a danger for the Luxembourgish language and thus a weakening of national identity.

### **Off to Luxembourg to "fill her up"**

Signs indicating the "last filling station before the border" were once a commonplace in frontier regions everywhere in Europe. But in Belgian and German border zones, they are no longer a visible form of advertising. In Luxembourg, almost three-quarters of the pumps in the country can be found in close proximity to the frontier. These draw drivers like magnets, especially since the oil-crisis of the 1970s. The reason is a simple one: Luxembourg offers unrivalled fuel prices that are between 15 and 25% inferior to those of neighbouring countries, due to significantly lower VAT and mineral oil taxes in the Grand Duchy. Not only the populations of the neighbouring frontier regions are happy with this situation, Luxembourg's Finance Minister must be equally content to enjoy a tax bonanza every year of about 700 million Euros, thanks to the "fill her up" habits of petrol pump tourists from over the border. Those living along the roads leading to this petroleum paradise are probably somewhat less overjoyed, and the Grand Duchy's Minister for the Environment is also less than content. That's because petrol-pump tourism, and its attendant transit traffic, is responsible for 75% of Luxembourg's annual allocation of greenhouse gases under the Kyoto Protocol.

### **The last "Frites" before the border and, on return, after the border**

Non-Belgians, or those who are less familiar with the culture, might find a signboard bearing the words: "Last Frites before the border", as can be found in Oudler, somewhat strange. Over-familiarity with fast-food and greasy-fork restaurants has damned the humble chip, or "frite", by association. Yet, many frites restaurants here are proudly self-confident, because Belgium did not only give us the saxophone, it is also the "Kingdom of Frites". For years, they were only available with salt and

mustard. In the 1930s, the sauces arrived, also mayonnaise and tatar. And in the meantime, they have moved to better addresses. Not only to be found at the street corner when there's nothing in the fridge or for kids on their lunch-break, in the meantime they can even be found served with Champagne, as is the case at the "Cafe de Frites", on the road from Raeren to Aachen at the Köpchen border. There, you will find "chips with everything", from "Öcher Puttes" (Aachen potatoes) to Asian Saté skewers. Chip shops at the border are something close to a national visiting card for Belgium, as typical a feature of each frontier crossing as the state insignia. But this particularity is more targeted at the Kingdom's own citizens than its visitors; just in case they need one more fix before leaving the country. On the way home, they can once again indulge their national habit as they are sure to find a Pommes Frites stand close by or maybe even a "Cafe de Frites". The Belgians love their chips as they love all fine foods. Wolfram Siebek, one of Germany's best known chefs, insists that they are the most gourmet of all Europeans: "The Belgians are passionate eaters, they'd sooner go through life looking like hamsters than with an empty stomach. That was just how Peter Breughel painted them long ago, and they haven't changed a bit." But it still remains to be asked: just what constitutes the specificity of "Belgian Fries" and do they really come from Belgium?

### **From a potato shaped like a fish, to an element in the Belgian trinity**

If we credit French historians, the people of that great nation discovered "pommes frites" in the year of their Revolution, 1789, frying them under the bridges of the Seine. But eight years earlier, Josef Gérard, Secretary to Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, led her to believe that: "The inhabitants of Namur, Huy and Dinant fry fish from the river Maas in oil to enrich their diet. When the river is frozen over and angling is difficult, they will cut potatoes to the shape of fish and fry these instead." The particularity of a Belgian frite, as opposed to any other mere chip of fried potato, is that it has been fried twice; the first time in oil at 150°C to cook it through, and the second time in oil at 180°C until golden brown. Today the "frite" is an icon of Belgian cultural identity. According to the Belgian artists Marc Beauvent and Eric Lagrain, it is even a symbol of national unity, transcending the social and linguistic divisions that plague the kingdom. In 2005, they dedicated an exhibit at "wArte-Halle" to it and even wrote a manifesto, in which they rank the "Pommes Frites" as one of the Belgian Trinity of treasured delights alongside beer and chocolate (or waffles and chocolate if you're not a beer drinker).

### **Escaping Hitler across the "green border" into Belgium**

For many Jews, Belgium was the last hope during the years of the "Third Reich". More than half of Belgium's 56,000 Jews survived the Nazi regime. In contrast, for their fellows in Germany, the chances of surviving stood at 12%. This was possible in Belgium because the population were often prepared to help in imaginative ways with their flight or their concealment. Of course, there were also "escape facilitators" whose services could be had at a price. After 1942, more and more political refugees began to knock at the doors of farmhouses on the Ösling that were known to have hiding places or to help one cross into Luxembourg. Patriotic movements organised escape networks to Belgium, where the German military was less attentive. At the time of the occupation of Luxembourg by the German Wehrmacht in 1940, there were 3,700 Jews living in the Grand-Duchy. Three years later, there were only a few left, living in mixed marriages. Neighbourhood networks were part of the passive resistance in Belgium, alongside policemen ready to shut an eye and lone activists. Among those saved from deportation by these Belgian helpers was Paul Spiegel, former President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. "Who saves a single life, saves an entire people": so says the Talmud. Many Belgians made this their leitmotif during the years of occupation. The late German Journalist, Marion Schreiber, summarised their courageous service: "This people, who had learned to live for centuries under changing domination, perfecting the art of duck and cover, avoiding and adapting, cultivating a camouflage of obtuse disobedience to foreign authority ... in these inhuman times, they did not forget their humanity." She goes on to say that this willingness of Belgian citizens to help others has not been forgotten by those who were aided, even if their silent heroism is little known in neighbouring countries. Marion Schreiber believes she knows the reason for that: Belgians are the champions of modesty.

### **Shifting frontiers – from the lounge bar into the garden**

Frontiers are drawn as a consequence of political dealings at the international level, rarely do they take into account the day-to-day situations of those affected. Thus there are still borders today that run through the middle of houses and businesses. A certain pub on the Belgian-German border was once such a divided property. The two neighbouring states met right in the middle of the lounge bar. The owners were obliged to decide, after the First World War, to which nation they wished to belong, Belgium or Germany. They decided on Belgium. The reason was largely pragmatic: the distance to the nearest Vennbahn station was significantly shorter than the nearest connection to the rail network on Belgian soil. In the bar, certain bilateral state formalities had to be observed. The German half of the bar was permitted to serve spirits, but not the Belgian. Maintaining this rule was certainly possible, in terms of the division of space, but any enquiry would be met with a wink and a grin. Not surprisingly, the pub was popular among smugglers. But customs officers also figured among the regulars. Belgian officers often originated from the villages in the valley. Their German colleagues, however, had to change jobs more frequently to avoid accusations of fraternisation. In the course of the various frontier corrections made after the Second World War, the border was removed from the bar into the garden. Guests would jokingly query whether today's salad came from Belgium or Germany.