

**House & Home****From grotty to glorious**Cheryl Markosky SEPTEMBER 4, 2010

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*Technology and telecoms consultant Stefan Zehle, who runs London-based Coleago Consulting, swapped safe, suburban Bavaria for edgy Notting Hill in the 1970s. Today, the ardent London-aficionado lives up the road in Holland Park with his Syrian wife Rania and stepdaughter Lea, who is studying French and business studies at the University of Edinburgh. Zehle's book, 'Guide to Business Planning', co-written with Graham Friend, is published by Bloomberg Press.*

“Grotty” is the word that springs to mind when Zehle recalls west London in 1978, the year he left Germany to study and work in the UK.

Born in Berlin in 1959 and brought up in Munich, Zehle first fell in love with England at the age of 13 when he took a language course and stayed with a local family in Wimborne, Dorset, for three weeks, and was determined to return. But when he arrived in Notting Hill he was shocked at the conditions he found.

“London was very different back then, very drab. But it was also hugely exciting for a 19-year-old who was used to neat lawns and hedges to discover great second-hand clothing shops and market stalls selling exotic items,” he says.

He enrolled in a part-time business studies evening course at the City of London Polytechnic while working at Barclays Bank during the day, and rented a little room at the unsavoury top end of Portobello Road.

“I loved the Notting Hill Carnival, Portobello Road market and meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures. It was very far removed from the homogeneous Bavarian world I came from, and I learnt to be very open to new things.”

Zehle went on to work at a Scandinavian bank in the City of London for three years and was awarded an MBA with distinction from the University of Westminster. He believes that being a German-speaking expat was a big advantage.

“I had a second language, obviously, and I had been taught to speak English competently while, generally, the English are famously bad at learning foreign languages.”

Zehle didn't know then that he would stay in London permanently and assumed he would one day return to the city of his birth, Berlin. “But I never did,” he says. “One thing leads to another, and where you work and make friends becomes the place where you build and live your life.”

Zehle insists he never encountered any anti-German prejudice in the capital and has always found Londoners extremely interested in his homeland and how Germans live. “The English are happy to talk about Germany in a *Fawlty Towers* ‘don’t-mention-the-war’ kind of way. I love English humour and sense of politeness and found discussions of this sort quite funny.”

He also suggests that the much-touted English sense of reserve is a myth. “The English are not at all aloof and I find them very engaging. Whenever I go into a pub, I always find terrifically interesting characters to talk to.”

Everything was not perfection in the rundown part of London in which Zehle chose to settle, however. Notting Hill had yet to become the pricey and chic hotspot it is today. The food was dreadful for a start. Zehle recalls being subjected to “plastic, white, sliced bread that was truly horrid. I would say that German bread is the best in the world, and I still miss it,” he says. “At least now I can get hold of good bread and cakes from local French patisseries.”

“Food always takes you back to your childhood”, suggests Zehle, who when arriving in Berlin always heads straight for a *Currywurst* stall that sells his favourite spiced sausage. “It’s a Berlin speciality, and I have to stand and eat it at the stall before proceeding on to my mother’s house. I can’t bring it back to London with me, and even if I could, it wouldn’t taste the same.”

He also misses German beer and cakes. “The cakes in Germany and Austria are the world’s best,” he says. “And the Christmas markets sell wonderful spiced cookies and decorations. If I lived in Germany, mind, I’d be grossly fat by now.”

A regular jogger, Zehle appreciates London’s green spaces. He can run through three parks – Holland Park, Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens – and a typical Saturday would involve going for a run, reading the Financial Times over croissants from Paul, and a visit to an arts fair or a stroll along the King’s Road, followed by a barbecue with friends.

It all sounds idyllic, but the city Zehle loves could improve further by loosening ties with former colonies and blending in more with Europe.

“I worked at the Electric Cinema in Portobello Road and found it odd that I was corrected when someone asked if a film was foreign. The film was American, so I said it was foreign, but what they were asking was whether it was English-speaking.”

In spite of these gripes, Zehle considers himself lucky to live in such a cosmopolitan city. New York is the only other place that comes close, he says, but is culturally more American while London is truly international. His London neighbours are a wonderful mixed bag. “On one side we have an Italian-German couple, and on the other, they are Saudi Arabian and English. Two doors down, there is an English-Czech guy married to a Canadian.

“London’s a very easy place to live and has to be the most convenient city in the world. It’s easy to drive around, you can find somewhere to park, and the mayor’s just introduced a new bike scheme.”

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