

# A 30 Year Anniversary Review

## Munich International Women's Club

**A**ccording to Sue Pope, one of the founding members, the Munich International Women's Club exists because of True Love. Specifically, the true love that pulled Susan Hodgson out of her home in England in 1987 and into the small Bavarian village of Grafrath, just outside of Munich, where her new husband lived. True love is all well and good, but a year of life in a small town without the language can make a woman thirsty for friendships and human connections.

The second step in the path toward the beginning of the MIWC happened a year later when the now lonely bride met a New Zealand woman who knew about a coffee with other English-speaking women. By the time the coffee pot went dry, Sue Pope tells us, Susan Hodgson was convinced her life was saved.

While the informal coffee group assuaged her immediate isolation, Susan Hodgson was not content to leave other women, other newcomers, to struggle on their own as she had struggled.

Susan wanted to create a club that could be found easily and could grow as more English-speaking women arrived in Munich. Before long, Susan connected with Carol Schreiber (USA) and Joan Judt (UK) to organize and promote the first meeting of the International Ladies Club\* on October 10, 1990, in Eching am Ammersee. Seventeen women came.

This is how this club begins. The Munich International Women's Club was born out of a hunger for community and friendship. The kind of community that takes intention to build up. The kind of friendships that grow while reading books or going for hikes or simply meeting for lunch together. Women came to Munich from all over the world and found in the club a quick connection to their new home. The core patterns and traditions of the club we see today were laid down in these first years as the small club continued to meet in Grafrath. The thirst for community was so strong that many of the slowly increasing Munich members willingly took the hour-long ride on the SBahn and waited for a ride from the station each month, at least for the first four years.

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Two splits happened in the club in 1994. The first was a formal spin-off of the Ladies International Association, which is still in existence. The second was a division of meeting places with one located in Munich and one remaining centered in Grafrath. The women still paid one membership fee, but could attend meetings in either location as they chose. Within a year, the club reunited at St. Johannes, north of the Gasteig.

New members kept joining faster than old members departed, and the club soon moved into a larger space: the Parish Hall at St. Johann Baptist Church near Max Weber Platz. It may also be that the club might have been invited by St. Johannes to find new space due to an unfortunate encounter between a paper napkin, a tea light, and the floor rug at the 1997 Christmas lunch, as member Suzie Lentz remembers. Whatever the reason, the new location offered a larger meeting space and an actual

kitchen so that coffee and tea could be prepared for the meetings.

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“Monthly meetings were very well attended,” Roberta Zöllner recalls. Roberta joined the club in 2003. She quickly volunteered to serve as secretary for the club, a task she shared with Tricia Jendretzke. It quickly became apparent that Tricia

enjoyed writing, editing, and laying out the newsletter more than taking minutes. Roberta, who preferred taking minutes, then took the newsletter master to the printer and the resulting 60 printed copies to the monthly meeting. Members signed in on arrival, picked up a name tag and a newsletter, which contained the dates and locations for all club activities, moved into the main room where they crowded around sign-up sheets for the activities they wanted to attend. “The day walks were very popular. It had to be capped at 20 people and the wait list would often be another 20 people long,” Roberta said.

Even as the printed newsletter continued to be the primary communication piece, the club set up its first web page (run by “The Web Chicks”) in October of 2003. Before long, the newsletter was distributed in PDF form via email with copies being mailed to members without an email address. The website has gone through several significant redesigns and the newsletter has disappeared but the basic content of activities remains remarkably the same.

A casual reader could easily mix up an activities list and calendar from a June 2003 Newsletter with the calendar from June 2020. The Monthly meeting is on the 2nd Wednesday and begins at 10:00. Lunches, coffees, walks, language groups,

cinema, tennis, the Book Club, and tours populate the weeks of the month. Early August meetings were held as potlucks in the gardens of Grafrath members, and the Mother's Corner was active with playgroups, bike rides, and painting projects.

The club grew in the second decade of its existence and soon moved to another meeting space, also owned by the church but down the street a couple of blocks at Kirchenstrasse 6. By 2006 there were 150 members. Babies were also very much a part of the MIWC growth with 2 or 3 babies being born to members nearly every month between 2003 and 2005. The Mother's Corner was very active, generating six to nine events for families each month.

By 2009, it had become clear that the Munich International Club needed to move again. The relationship with the host location was unstable, and the club could not count on the room's availability on a month to month basis. Then newly-elected club chair Margaret Hilditch surveyed the city until they found Peace Church/Friedenskirche near Sendlinger

Tor. They found not only a larger room and a more workable kitchen but also a welcoming environment between the English-speaking congregation in Peace Church and the club. A tragic accident in the pastor's family pulled the club into the refugee support work of the congregation. In the months following, the club made up baby welcome packs of diapers and other newborn comforts for the new babies of the congregation as well as offering other acts and gifts of support.

At the same time, it was also becoming clear that the club needed to professionalize itself and incorporate under German law with a dedicated bank account and legal standing, first as an organization and then as a non-profit organization. The constitution was re-written, an Executive Board congruent with German law was established, and budgets were proposed and voted on from year to year. Meanwhile the club kept busy creating a community for both long-term members and newcomers with dinners, dances, art tours, more hikes, more books in the book club, a quilting group that grew to include all hand textiles and which is now re-inventing itself into all creative physical arts.

If moving the club and legalizing the standing of the club weren't enough in 2009, the club also started to network with other women's clubs around the world by affiliating with FAWCO and Open Door. Several members of the MIWC have served in significant leadership positions in FAWCO and The FAWCO Foundation. The club sends enthusiastic delegations to the regional and international meetings as well as

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supporting the Foundation's programs. Members of the club and their families have received educational awards and development grants for life changing projects in India and Tanzania nominated by our members.

MIWC has always been interested in making the world better. Early in the club history the club chose to support (with cash, donations of food and goods, and garden tending) Frauenhaus (Frauen Helfen Frauen e.V.), a transitional safe space for women and children escaping abusive marriages. Alex Koch introduced the club to NEED, a school development for educating girls in Burkina Faso in 2009, where we have sponsored a student every year since.

The club has also kept a long-standing commitment to fundraising. Events have ranged from White Elephant sales, quilt raffles, sponsored runs/walks/rides from Isar bridge to Isar bridge, roast pig feasts, musical concerts, sales of cookbooks, books, magazines and videos, as well as member craft fairs. The first "Grand Auction of Unusual and Eccentric Talents" burst into the club's life in February 2008, led first by Margaret Hilditch but soon captained by Hope Moore in the twelve years following.

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From its beginning, MIWC has always been a busy, generous, and welcoming group of women. The club extends a welcome to newcomers and celebrates the long-termers. The photos of hikes taken and visits to the Oktoberfest reveal a constantly changing mix of long and short term members, each with a big smile for the time they have together. Other photos show too many cocktail parties, dinner-dances, tours, shopping bus trips, gingerbread houses, Christmas lunches and dinners, picnics and tours to list here. This is a club that makes the time and the effort to get together no matter what life throws at the members.

A ten-week Corona Virus lockdown in early 2020, legislated by the German government, was no match for the Club's activity schedule. Within a week of Ministerpräsident Söder's stay-at-home edict, members got busy recreating activities and meet-ups on the internet conference site, Zoom. At the time of this writing (July 2020), it remains unclear exactly when or how we'll mix real time and virtual events in the coming months, but it is safe to predict that this club will still be doing something together for years yet to come because being together is what this club does.

The virus and how it changes social interaction is an odd and unexpected inflection for the club's 30th anniversary, but it underlines Susan Hodgson's original

vision. Women want community. We need friendship, and we need ways to make the world a better place. No matter if we are following love or work or even just out on a world-wide lark, the Munich International Women's Club has been and will continue to be a place for women to connect to each other and a meaningful life, not to mention the never ending game of Mahjong. This club may have begun with the "True Love" of the Princess Bride movie but quick grew into the even deeper and more dependable true love that we call *Camaraderie, Culture, & Charity*.

Anitra Kitts

September, 2020

Munich, Germany

*Based on interviews, previous histories, and newsletters and minutes of the club*

\*Susan Hodgson's chosen name for the early club was International Ladies Club. Sue Pope remembers Susan's reasons as "International, where there were no restrictions on what nationality you were (ie, no quotas) and Ladies, because we had come to this meeting and therefore were special people and therefore ladies!"

## MIWC Club Presidents/Chairs

Joan Judt United Kingdom 1990  
Jenny Lang Australia 1998  
Norma Crystal United Kingdom 1999  
Diane Wills United Kingdom 2000  
Ursula Euteneuer Schliwa Deutschland 2001  
& P. Stadler  
Cameron Wakefield United States America 2004  
Kate Stayt New Zealand 2004  
Anna Rogalska-Hedlund Sweden 2006  
Margaret Hilditch United Kingdom 2006  
Mary Lynne MacKay Canada 2009  
Hope Moore United States 2011  
Liz Jenson United States 2013  
Cecily Garver United States 2015  
Anitra Kitts United States 2017  
Annette Wendland Deutschland 2019

In the early years of the club, selecting leadership was very informal. The woman in the office simply recruited her replacement. After a few years, the selection was contested and an election held. Formally organizing as a non-profit standardized the process and the last decade has seen the formation of a nominating committee for the three constitutional offices.