



Tending 400 weathers in a nature reserve in 1987

Back in the DDR

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

Last summer I took a trip with my family to Germany. To be precise, we visited my home state of Mecklenburg, which was formerly part of the GDR, German Democratic Republic, better known as East Germany. My home state is located north of Berlin and reaching up to the Baltic Sea. To the east is Poland, to the west is the city of Hamburg. (Hint: Now is a good time to get out the map or the globe that is catching dust somewhere in the closet.) The official German name for East Germany was Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR). Yet, it was neither German as the communist government tried to instill a new identity as East Germans to separate us from West Germans nor democratic since free elections were absent, nor a republic since separation of powers and the rule of law were absent. It was a communist dictatorship.

However, this article will not be about the many advantages and freedoms, oftentimes taken for granted and no longer recognized or appreciated by its citizens, of a free country like ours versus a communist dictatorship, here everything depends on what the ruling class decides. It will be primarily a tour through the history of sheep farming in East Germany in the mid to late 1980s as I experienced it as an eyewitness.

What exactly does communism, or its transitional phase called socialism, exactly mean? It means that all property

and means of production are publicly owned. In reality, communism and socialism are very much the same and for practical purposes they can be used interchangeably. The differences are rather academic.

After the Soviets liberated the eastern part of Germany from Hitler and the Nazis in 1945 (the western part of Germany was liberated by the U.S. and its allies), it also forced its communist system on it. So the people there were liberated from one horrible dictatorship only to be forced into another dictatorship, arguably a more benign one than the Nazi dictatorship. Everyone who owned a large property or factory lost everything they owned because the new government took it away. Small farms and small businesses were initially spared and stayed private, but in subsequent waves of expropriation most property, like small farms and factories, was taken away, at times at gunpoint when the owners refused to give it up. I personally knew of a farmer, where I spent some of my childhood time, who held on to his 50 acres of sandy soils for as long as he could until the police picked him up to sign the papers that he was surrendering his property.

The ruling communist party now owned and managed most of the agricultural land, although mismanaged is a better word. Absent of any incentive to work and produce, the system was unable to provide for its citizens. In the case of agriculture, large cooperatives were formed, mainly in the 1960s. They were called *Landwirtschaftliche*

Produktionsgenossenschaft (LPG), which translates into Agricultural Production Cooperative. These collectivized farms were modeled after the Soviet Kolkhoz. Those readers who know the history of East Germany will also know that the process was more complex, but I only wish to preface my article with this information rather than getting into all the details. Very small private businesses still existed but didn't exceed an acre or two and a few animals that were raised by private individuals.

I grew up knowing nothing else. My first summer jobs at a sheep farm near my home, my two-year apprenticeship after a tenth-grade school education, my first job at one sheep farm and then as a supervising shepherd at another upstart were at these collective farms. It covers the age of 14 years to almost 23. It spans from 1981, when I had my first summer job, to 1990 when the collective farm where I worked decided to dissolve the sheep farm after the wall had come down. I then moved to West Germany because I was going to lose my job. Less than a decade is no time at all when you are 50, but at that tender age of about 20 years and younger, every year means so much more since it is the time when you become a person, learn skills, and search for what you want in life.

East Germany's currency was, due to its weak economy, not accepted in global trade. Anything that the East German government wanted to purchase on the global market it had to purchase with accepted currency like the American dollar or the West German mark. However, it had very little of it. Because of this, it had a great desire to be as self-sufficient as possible. In political systems this is called autarky. If you heard a bit about North Korean propaganda, they talk a lot about it. Autarky or the desire for it can lead to very strange systems. Here I will circle back to sheep farming: Wool, a cheap commodity on the global market, was not affordable to the East German government. On one hand, it sought to replace it with synthetic, oil-derived fiber since cotton was no option either, while oil came relatively cheap from the Russians, who had an incentive to prop up their satellite governments in Eastern Europe. Aside from developing synthetic fibers, East Germany tried to establish many flocks of wool sheep and paid these cooperatives horrendously high prices for sheep wool. The basis for these wool sheep were Merinos. The breed originated in Spain and was so valuable at that time that a death penalty existed until the late 1700s when one exported sheep from Spain to another country.

The fine wool of Spanish Merinos was worth so much more than the coarse wool of most British sheep breeds. In the last centuries, it was Australia that became famous for raising millions and millions of Merino sheep. Why Australia? The extra fine wool rots on the sheep when the climate is humid. Countries with an arid climate are more suitable for raising them. This is why you find wool sheep of that kind in Australia. In the U.S., states like Arizona or New Mexico and the likes also raise wool sheep with fine wool. As an aside, very expensive suits are still made from this fine wool.

Despite a lack of an arid climate, East Germany tried to raise Merino sheep with wool as fine as possible. Russian sheep breeds with wool that was longer and not quite as fine were also introduced. My job as a shepherd in East Germany was at a sheep farm as part of the cooperative that raised about 300 ewes of a breed called Merinofleischschaf, which translates into Merino Meat Sheep or Merino Mutton Sheep. Aside from that, these cooperatives raised 400 or 500 wethers, castrated males, for the sole purpose of wool production. What was the wisdom behind it? When ewes lamb and raise these lambs, the growth and quality of the wool is being affected during the time of nursing. It is called "Hungerknick" in German. This uneven growth in the wool fiber affects the ability to spin it negatively. Wethers don't raise lambs and have more even wool growth.

The means of feeding these flocks of sheep was by tending them with herding dogs in open and unfenced pastures without any fences. Dogs like the Old German Herding Dogs were the dominant breed of herding dogs. German Shepherd Dogs were also used. In the spring and early summer, we tended the sheep on pastures that weren't suitable for any other sort of agriculture, like hills and what we call "Strassengraben." That is the part along roadsides in between road and fields with crops. It was often only a couple or a few yards wide. There is no good translation for the word Strassengraben. The literal translation is ditch along the road, even though it isn't always a ditch. The English call it the long acre. The dictionary defines it as the verge of the road. How did we do that? One dog was placed in between fields with crops and that verge and one on the other side, the roadside. These dogs would patrol their sides of the flock and keep the sheep from straying into the fields with crops and on the other side from venturing onto the road. The shepherd walked



*The same nature reserve 31 years later.
It no longer is being grazed.*



The strip of grass in between road and field with crops was grazed with flocks of sheep numbering 200 to 400, using herding dogs to keep the sheep from damaging crops.



Tree-lined roads and cobblestone roads are common where I come from. I used to walk down this road many times with 300 Merino sheep behind me and a herding dog on each side of the flock.

slowly in front. The sheep grazed while walking. There rarely was a standstill. Some of you might think how did this work, with all the traffic? Well, East Germany, just like other communist countries, was well behind the technological developments of the West. There were far fewer cars than in West Germany. Besides, most roads were in bad shape, covered with potholes. Many others had cobblestone or were unpaved. So, too much traffic was definitely not a problem. And if a car was driving too fast, you took the dog on the roadside away and let the sheep stray onto the road, which slowed the car down, and gave the hood of the car a good whack with your crook. That surely slowed the driver down the next time.

Tending sheep that way was hard. Whatever focus was required of a shepherd like me eased up the moment harvest started. A trademark of East Germany's agriculture was machinery in constant disrepair, working inefficiently, and parts being in short supply. This was because of the central command economy in all communist countries, where the government centrally planned where resources went. It was an extraordinarily inefficient way of running an economy, far inferior to our market economy, where supply and demand dictates where resources go and what products are produced. This inefficiency of mechanical harvesting meant this for me: The combines and machines

harvesting grains, potatoes, sugar beets, and any other crop were so inefficient that a lot of the harvest was lost in the field. Small grains seeped out of the combines, which at first gave the sheep grain to eat. Then, when rains made the small grains germinate, the regrowth was so plentiful that it often resembled a small grain field that was purposefully seeded, giving the sheep more to eat than they could. Potatoes were grown as well in my area. The sandy soils lend themselves to growing them. Again, the harvest was so inefficient that during potato harvest all classes of older kids had to regularly go after school to glean potatoes. After all of that was done, there was still lots to eat for the sheep, especially small potatoes. Sheep love potatoes.

In places of heavier soils, sugar beets were grown. Growing sugar beets was another one of the East German government's attempts to be self-sufficient. While cane sugar was and is rather cheap on the world market, the communist government had no suitable currency to buy it, so we grew heavily subsidized sugar beets. Perhaps that is a topic that some of you can relate to. States like Michigan still grow the heavily subsidized beet. Sugar beets keep well even if you have some frost. These fields yielded feed for the sheep for many months. In a mild winter you may still have them pick up pieces well into January or February. Of course, for all these crops—small grain, corn, potatoes, sugar beets—you always need to have some pasture to graze alongside, but that pasture could well be mediocre. It acts as a filler and to keep rumen activity intact. It is kind of like a pet horse that receives a lot of grain. It still needs some hay to not get sick or die, but that hay doesn't need to have much nutritional value.

Winter was often easy as well. Many agricultural companies grew small grains. Corn was rather the exception. These acres and acres of winter grains, be it cereal rye, wheat, or barley, were ideal pasture in the winter. The sheep walked over it, grazing it lightly. That helped the plants grow more tillers. We just had to avoid grazing it down and had to stay off when it was too wet. Then there were the many pastures for dairy cows that were housed in barns during the winter. The dairy industry in the part of East Germany where I lived deserves that I sidestep for a moment. I suspect that there are some dairy farmers who read this article. The dominant dairy breed was the Schwarzbuntes Milchrind, which translates into Black-pied dairy cows. These dairy cows are similar in appearance to Holsteins as far as coloring is concerned. However, they were smaller, produced less milk with higher butterfat, and needed less input as far as grain-feeding is concerned. Some Holstein influence as well as the use of Jersey cows took place in East Germany to improve the breed. In my home state you often had pastures away from the village which had a milk house somewhat centered in it. The crew to milk these cows went out in the morning around 3 AM and then again in the early afternoon. They herded the cows a short distance to

the milk house or parlor, often a small brick building, built solely for that purpose. The milk was then picked up by a tractor-drawn portable milk tank and then transported to the creamery, which often was local. A cooperative with several hundred cows or more often had several of these pastures with a milk parlor, often miles apart from each other. The herd was split into several smaller herds and distributed to these pastures during grazing season. Use of grain was often limited or absent during the grazing season. Was this method widespread in East Germany to manage dairy cows? I don't know. I only know it was in my home state.

These milk houses with adjacent pastures were not used in the winter. The cows were then more centrally housed in a larger barn, most often right outside the village. Since the winters where I come from are relatively mild, and killing frosts and deep snows are rare, we could graze the sheep on the residue in these acres and acres of pasture. In fact, I remember these pastures being as green around Christmas time as they had been all summer. As an aside, the dominant species of grass in these pastures was bluegrass. Bluegrass does well in areas with regular rains. Our temperatures were moderate at that time; heat waves and droughts—occurring now with great frequency—were rare just 30 and 40 years ago.

I mentioned that grain use in the dairy industry was not as widespread while the cows were grazing. Ironically, it was widespread in sheep farming, specifically when raising lambs. The ewes and wethers were tended on pasture, but starting at a few weeks of age the lambs were left in the barn during the day. After lambing season, during which the ewes stayed entirely in the barn, when the lambs were old enough to be left without the mothers for the day, the ewes were separated from their lambs in the morning to go out on pasture and were reunited in the evening to nurse them. At some farms, the ewes stayed in the barn with the lambs until weaning and then were grazed again. The lambs were fed stored feed, mostly hay, and quite a bit of grain. The same applied to the ewes as long as they nursed their lambs. Daily machine-harvesting green crops like grass legume mixes and then feeding them in the barn that day was common in the sheep as well as in the dairy industry. Sound cumbersome? Yes, it was. However, before you judge, think about how

widespread machine use is in the U.S. to harvest feedstuff and bring it to the housed animals or store it, while many of these animals would have no problem walking out onto the pasture and get the feedstuff themselves. It appears it is a worldwide phenomenon that farmers love to sit on a tractor or drive some piece of machinery.

My descriptions of how sheep and dairy cows were raised and fed are mostly based on my own experience and what I saw. I reckon that in some other areas in East Germany with a different topography and different soils, some practices may have been different. Yet, the general descriptions of large farms owned by the government holds true for all areas of East Germany. All that changed when in Eastern Europe one communist system after another collapsed, starting with Poland, where a popular movement called Solidarity brought the government down. Eventually, in November of 1989, the East German government was forced by its people to open the wall, the most-known symbol of the iron curtain. These systems had failed to offer its citizens personal freedoms and failed to provide economic stability and success. With the collapse of communism these large agricultural cooperatives ceased to exist. Many heavily subsidized industries collapsed entirely. Many sheep farms were among them. So was the one where I worked. The collapse of the system led to much upheaval, which usually only happens after wars. Due to widespread job loss, many people left their home in search of work in other parts of Germany, mainly West Germany. That is what I did. In the spring of 1990, I left my home state. I left for West Germany and five years later to the U.S.

Now I had returned to places I hadn't seen in decades, in some cases for more than 30 years. I realized that I am a very different person now than I was back then. I stood in places where I thought, "You tended sheep here some 30 years ago and now you stand here with your Polish wife and American kids." It seemed surreal. My thoughts about what once was, and seeing these places that didn't look at all the same, triggered emotions that gave me the idea for this article. Writing it all down and sharing it is my way of processing it. 🐑

This group of sheep is grazing in a hayfield of a neighboring farmer with high alfalfa content during this year's breeding season. Alfalfa is highly nutritious and especially high in energy. That leads to more ovulated eggs and in turn to more lambs. It's called flushing effect. However, legumes like alfalfa and white and red clover can cause bloat, which can kill sheep in no time. How do I prevent this from happening? I brought them here full and now I don't ever let them get really hungry. I graze nothing short or clean and rotate to the next grazing cell while the sheep are still full. Full sheep can't bloat. Only hungry and empty sheep can.

