

About a Young Man and His First Herding Dog

—Ulf Kintzel

In the same spirit of reflecting on changes to our farm and my life, I will attempt to tell an old story. One that turned thirty years old this spring. I am not a storyteller. So I was told. Well, I will try. It's a story about a young shepherd and his likewise young dog. A story from behind the iron curtain when there was still Communism in East Germany. I was born there and lived there until the wall came down in 1989. I had started my first job as a shepherd at a sheep farm after I had finished my two-year apprenticeship. The year was 1987. The sheep farm was part of an Agricultural Production Cooperative (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft* – LPG), which means it was officially cooperatively-owned, but effectively it was government-owned. I had my first dog too. He was an Old German Herding Dog, black in color. His name was Lukas. How did I come up with the name? I don't recall. I probably just liked it and found it to be a unique name.

At a neighboring cooperative farm was a start-up sheep farm with 300 merino wethers (castrated males) for the purpose of wool production. Fine wool was valuable to the East German government. The sheep weren't dog broke or used to being herded. They were wild. The guy in charge of them, 33 years old at that time, had no experience with sheep. His name was Hartmut. He had been milking cows up to then. He asked my supervisor to dog-break the flock for him and he would work for him at his job for the time being. This supervisor was known, even famous. He was Rudolf "Rudi" Hirsch, several times East German champion at the East German herding competitions with his German Shepherd dogs. (I later purchased my first two German Shepherd puppies from him. They tended sheep in East Germany, then West Germany, and in their later years in the U.S., where they are buried. But I digress). This was no job for Rudi. He declined but said, "He can do it," pointing casually at me. I was a nobody. Hartmut asked how old I was and how old my dog was. When he heard I was 19 and my dog was less than two years old, he was skeptical, very skeptical. He agreed anyway. He had no other options.

I packed a suitcase with essentials and drove with my little moped the 20 miles or so to that farm. I was living alone at that time, had nothing that tied me down, and had no personal responsibilities. I smelled adventure. I stayed with his family while doing the job of tending and dog-breaking this flock of 300 wethers. I had no idea of the scope of this challenging task. I was like most 19-year-old young men at that age: no self-doubt and no foresight. The first day on the job, I took the wethers out of the barn and tended them in a nearby meadow. My thoughts soon wandered, after all it was bird migration,



The black dog in the picture is my Lukas. The young man is me. I have been told I had more hair and weighed less back then. I am unsure if this is true.

and I paid little attention to the sheep and more attention to finding Northern Lapwing nests on the ground. Then I heard a sound, the kind of sound something big makes when it moves by you fast. *Whoosh*. It was the flock taking off. All at once and fast. They came from behind, ran under me, threw me (literally!) up in the air, and I landed on my back while they ran to the barn. Up to here I hadn't understood what Hartmut meant by "the flock isn't conditioned to being tended by dogs and likes to run away." Now I knew. All right, I gave it another try. I pushed the sheep back out of the barn and this time I closed the doors behind them. Back in the same meadow I now paid attention. My Lukas patrolled the border between the meadow and the field with crops, but he was as clueless as I was. He had never experienced sheep that just take off either. So the flock tried again and I failed to hold them. But now Lukas got the idea and learned how to read the telltale signs. I don't recall how many tries it took, but eventually both the dog and I knew when the sheep wanted to escape. We kept them in the meadow. They tried in vain.

I started to think further. I wondered if I were to take them out of their usual environment, would they still try to escape? There was another meadow a couple miles down the road, which I was supposed to graze eventually. The next day, using Lukas, I walked the sheep down the road to that meadow. It worked. Well, it did that day. Hartmut, who returned home every evening, asked every day what progress I had made. He was still skeptical. A few days after my job had started, we passed the meadow by car after work, where I had taken the flock that day. He said if I can get them there one day, that would be a sign that I was succeeding. Coolly I told him I had been there that day. His mouth stayed open in disbelief.

Pride comes before the fall. A few days later, while I was

taking the sheep from the barn, where they spent the night, to the same meadow, the flock took off. The sheep ran a mile down the road before they ran straight into a red clover field where the road curved left. Out of breath, I came behind them. Yep, pride comes before the fall. A few tractors passed. I just pretended that I was in the right place until these cooperative farm workers had passed. I had chutzpah too. The sheep were grazing. How would those guys know where I was supposed to be grazing them? After the tractors were out of sight, Lukas and I whipped the flock out of the clover field, back onto the road, and finished my walk to the meadow. My dog now knew that he had to be further up front when the sheep started passing me and he became more effective in holding them. The sheep no longer escaped. Well, they tried, but they no longer succeeded. Finally they gave it up.

At the end of my stay of about two weeks the flock was dog-broke and well conditioned to be tended. This gave me a big confidence boost. It wasn't exactly that I had needed a



The smaller dog in front is my Lukas in 1986 as a pup. Here I am exciting the night pen with a flock of a few hundred Merino wethers.

boost. Again, I was 19 and self-doubt was not part of my vocabulary. I wonder how unbearable I must have appeared in the eyes of some of my peers. However, Lukas had proven himself to be a reliable and capable herding dog. He had gotten slightly injured toward the end of this endeavor and I had to use a different trained dog in addition, which the cooperative had purchased. Still, the hard parts had been done with and by my Lukas.

Hartmut and his family and I became friends. A year or so later, I got a job at this farm when 200 Merino ewes were added to the flock of wethers. I tended the ewes and Hartmut tended the wethers. We remained friends after I moved on in

life until he passed away at an age way too young. His family and I are still in contact. It was my first experience where I had to prove myself as a shepherd and dog trainer. But most of all, it was an experience of a lifetime that I will always remember fondly. What an adventure it was! 🐾

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.

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