



A dream coming true: purchasing our own farm, raising White Dorper sheep.

Forty Years of Being a Shepherd *A Personal Journey*

—Ulf Kintzel

“Panta rhei” ~ Heraclitus

Today I would like to tell a personal story because on September 3rd of this year is my 40th anniversary of being a shepherd. Today I will not lecture you. I postpone it to the articles after this one. Today I intend to entertain you. So sit back comfortably and enjoy.

I grew up in East Germany, behind the Iron Curtain. It was customary in East Germany to attend 10 years of school and then, at the age of 16 or 17 years, to do a two-year apprenticeship. While a small percentage of students went to school 12 years to get a high school diploma and then went on to college, most students went down the road of doing an apprenticeship of some sort. I was no exception. I had no issues in school, being a good but unruly student. But I was itching to get out and opted against my high school diploma and college. I wanted to be outside and work and not stare into textbooks.

Until the age of 13, I was steadfast in wanting to become a forester. I never wavered. Then, one day, by chance I entered a sheep barn with Merino sheep at feeding time. I witnessed the woolly sheep feeding on grain, hay, and straw at old-fashioned wooden feeders. I was dazzled by the smell of the lanolin of wool, straw, hay—all mixing into the most sensible smell I could imagine. I still have the image in front of my inner eye.

That was the moment I wanted to become a shepherd. I again never wavered. It was at that collective sheep farm, just a few miles away from my childhood home, where I worked during the next three summers during school break, starting at age 14. It was taxing. I had arms comparable to strings when I started working, was physically weak, and the manual labor took its toll. Getting up at 5 in the morning, biking several miles to the farm to be there at 6 when the job started wasn't the easiest task at age 14 and 15, then 16. Still, I loved it. Oh, I earned money too. I also loved that part.

At the end of ninth grade, we had to apply to a business, in my case a farm, that was licensed to train and teach apprentices. I opted for a farm more than 60 miles away from home. In a place and at a time with limited mobility where few people had a car and most travel was done by train or bus, it was quite far away from home. I recall getting the acceptance letter. What a joy it was. I was going to become a shepherd! Just one more year of school!

September 3, 1984, was the first day of my apprenticeship. We were housed in a dormitory for apprentices. It housed dozens of apprentices, mostly working at the large dairy barns. I was the only shepherd apprentice. The rooms housed six people each. There was one table, six chairs, six locker-sized closets, and three bunk beds. There was one washing room with one shower for the boys and one for the girls. A kitchen was

Photos by Author

attached to the dormitory, which fed us three meals a day and also functioned as the kitchen to provide lunch for all people working at this large collective farm. Everything was very basic and spartan. We apprentices didn't care. We didn't know it any other way. The practical education took place at the sheep barn for me, which was part of this large collective farm. At age 17, 18, and 19 you don't really give the wisdom of collective farms much thought. Nor do you think much about the wisdom (or lack thereof!) of a communist government with its restrictions, its slogans, its inefficiencies. Most youths at that age think a lot about themselves. So did I.

Every few weeks all apprentices of a certain trait gathered at a centralized school for a few weeks to learn the theoretical parts of their respective traits. That was a little less fun since it meant studying. All the more fun it was to return to the farm.

After two years of my apprenticeship, I received my certification after some final exams and was now officially a shepherd. Likewise, many of the people I grew up with now received certificates as mechanics, bakers, butchers, engine drivers, farmers, or construction workers in their chosen fields of apprenticeships. I then applied for a job at a sheep farm where the supervisor was well-known in the region for being particularly good at training herding dogs and tending sheep. That was the skill I felt I was lacking because my supervisor during my apprenticeship wasn't good at it. I wanted to enhance that skill. I was accepted at that farm and received a room in an apartment. (Housing was allocated; you couldn't just rent an apartment.) It was a two-bedroom apartment, and it was meant for two people to live there. I was lucky that during my two-year employment I was living there almost the entire time by myself. That was almost unheard of in a communist society, which was notorious for lacking housing. Again, the living conditions were simple. The building was poorly insulated. I had to heat the apartment with lignite (brown) coal briquettes, using a masonry stove made from stove tiles (Kachelofen). It had indoor plumbing, which was not the norm at that time, but only cold water. To take a warm shower or bath I had to heat the water in a bath stove, also with coal.

I now drew a paycheck. While apprentices received a little money, I now had an income. That was a new (and a good) feeling. My supervisor Rudolf was indeed very good with dogs, and he was willing to share his knowledge with those who wanted to know. And I wanted to know. Oh, the extra hours we spent after work talking about herding dogs and how to train them. I am grateful he taught me so much. He was also a very difficult supervisor. He was an alcoholic, a wife beater,

a cheater, and he came into fights as well when he was drunk. It was my first life lesson in learning that there aren't just people who are only good and others who are only bad, but good and evil are often personified in one person. He also was the breeder of my very first two German Shepherd dogs from herding lines, Sina and Cora. He sold me these two as puppies and I trained them under his guidance. These two dogs became essential in my further development and influenced my career. It is fair to say that without them I would not have ended up in America. You will hear more about these two dogs later.

During my two-year employment I was once hired at a neighboring sheep farm to dog-break a flock of wethers (castrated male sheep), that were kept for the production of Merino wool. The person in care of that flock of 300 wethers was a former dairy farmer named Hartmut and had no experience in tending sheep. The flock would not respect a dog and would just escape and run down the road. I wrote an article about this experience for this very magazine and will not rehash every detail. But I will say this; I succeeded in dog-breaking this flock and immediately received a job offer from the heads of this collective farm. They wanted to establish a sheep farm with 200 Merino ewes for breeding purposes and also wanted to keep the wethers. I was supposed to become the supervisor, now working with this former dairy farmer Hartmut (who became a very good friend of mine). The collective farm built a brand-new barn (with asbestos roofing!) for the ewes, and I was hired to be the manager and supervisor and oversaw the purchase of the 200 Merino ewes. I was just 21 years old, and I certainly made my mistakes "supervising" a co-worker, who was 14 years older than me. There was friction at times! Learning to deal with people in an appropriate way is the hardest thing in life and in business. It is especially difficult when you are just 21 and think you have all the answers.

This new job at a sheep farm with me as the man in charge was my dream job. My story and thus my article probably would have come to an end right about here had it not been for big world events unfolding. The communist regimes started falling apart in the late 1980s and were toppled, starting in Poland under the leadership of union leader Lech Walesa (after whom our second son is named). On November 9, 1989, the wall came down. If you are old enough, you probably all remember where you were when the World Trade Center Towers were attacked on September 11 or where you were when J.F. Kennedy was assassinated. Well, I remember where I was when I heard that the Iron Curtain was lifted, when the

Berlin Wall fell. It was in my view the most influential event in my life. None of what unfolded afterwards for me would have happened that way without it.

However, the fall of the wall and the collapse of the East German government and the subsequent reunification of West and East Germany meant I was in for a bit of hardship. Many branches in the communist economy were unproductive and were kept afloat with subsidies. Those farms and factories now went bankrupt or were bought by western businesses or were restructured. For me it meant I would become unemployed because the flock of sheep was going to be sold off because the wool was now basically worth nothing. When I heard the rumors about it, I immediately started looking for a job in West Germany. There was a monthly publication in West Germany called “Schafzucht” (sheep breeding), which had job offers for shepherds listed in it. A neighboring shepherd and friend of mine had given me a few back issues. I called up two sheep farmers, trying to get an interview. Such calls were no small task in East Germany. Few people had a phone, the connections often failed, and all phones had rotary dials. That meant you started over several times, dialing the lengthy number, when the connection failed. I got two interviews. The first one was in the heavily populated industrial West; the job description

purchased Russian-built car. It was no small task to go back and forth with these notoriously unreliable cars. The landscape was breathtaking, and the villages were lovely, convincing me that was the place to go. The interview, conducted by the head of this sheep farming family, an old man well past his retirement age, went well. Why did it go so well? Because I understood next to nothing of what he said. The dialect in that area is so completely different from where I was from, and he did not speak high German, the kind of German in which Germans from different parts of Germany, with very different dialects and often resembling an almost foreign language, can communicate. Yet, I nodded in agreement most of the time, desperate to get this job. I did get it, but I had no idea what I had signed up for.

I went back home, dissolved my small household, and drove back in late April of 1990 with my two herding dogs, Sina and Cora, and a couple of suitcases. That was all that was left of my belongings. What I didn’t know at the time was that this job became the first true hardship in my life. The new boss was merciless. I worked from 7 in the morning to 10 or 11 at night. The room I had, just a little subdivision in a church, of all places, was very basic, to put it charitably. After penning up the sheep at night after tending them, I often had to help some at the restaurant they also ran, getting beer crates from the basement to still the thirst of the many French and American soldiers who came to the restaurant/bar. The pasture where I tended a flock of 1,200 Merino Landrace sheep was a training area for the U.S., Canadian, and French militaries. It was a restricted area, void of regular people. The only humans I saw were those firing grenades with their tanks and artillery on training days and my boss and his family at breakfast and dinner. And they were almost hostile in their interactions with me. I was never more miserable and lonely in my life—before and after this stint.

In early June, coincidentally on my 23rd birthday, my employer asked me if I had the courage to participate in a local herding competition one week later. They were looking for competitors and were falling short. I had already participated in such herding competitions in East Germany, and a lack of confidence in my abilities, real or perceived, was not one of my shortcomings. I said yes, mostly in the hopes that I would finally get out for a day and meet people. Who knows what was to come.

At that herding competition, I met a fellow shepherd who told me about a job he had as a hired farmhand for



My very first German Shepherd dogs, Sina and Cora. I am wearing traditional shepherds’ clothing at a herding competition.

was tending sheep on the dikes along the river Rhine, living mostly in a tiny camper. It was an odd place, and I hoped the second place would be nicer. The next interview took place in the southwest in Germany, right on top the Swabian Jura. I drove there with my recently

a company run by the Catholic church. They rented out qualified farmhands as part of the farmer's insurance. The government-mandated health insurance entitled a farmer, who was sick or needed surgery or had died, to hire such farmhands and the insurance paid for it for a limited time, working Monday through Friday. Weekends were off, but since animals need to be fed on Saturday and Sunday too, farmers would often be willing to hire you for extra pay. They also housed you and fed you.

This all sounded too good to be true, and my fellow shepherd was known to look too deeply into beer bottles now and then and tell tall tales. Nevertheless, I got an interview at the firm and was hired. Everything I was told was true. My pay was twice as high, my accommodations were now far nicer, and the food was far better. I was appreciated by whomever I worked for because I came at a time of hardship when they badly needed help. How hard of a hardship was it for the farmers? In one case the farmer had died, and the family needed help.

All these contracts were time-limited, depending on the cause, such as surgery or illness. Over the duration of my employment I saw many different farms. I milked cows, plowed fields, transported grain, and also tended many flocks of sheep once the word got out that my company, the Katholisches Landvolk, had hired a shepherd with trained dogs. My home base was a rented room in the Black Forest at an elevation of 3,300 feet above sea level. I enjoyed incredible views. Where I spent the few days I was off work. My apologies to my wife and kids when they read this, but I had the time of my life. At the same time, I realized that this job was not sustainable, and at some point when I wanted to settle down, get married, and raise a family, this job was not what I wanted. So what did I want? I didn't know. I decided to get my high school diploma and then went to college, getting a degree in agriculture. It was a way for me to figure out what I wanted in life.

While in school and then in college, I continued to work on weekends and during recess at various sheep farms. After all, I needed money to live. College was not what I had envisioned. Turns out, I was not made for being indoors and studying. An office job after college was out of the question. So what would my future hold?

I continued participating at herding competitions where I met some Americans, who told me there was a

herding club in the Northeast in the U.S. that did herding as a hobby with a few dozen sheep, trying to model their training according to German sheep-tending practices. They were looking for someone to come with his dogs and teach them, all expenses paid. "Yeah, right, crazy Americans," I thought but then the herding club sent an official invitation the following winter. I accepted, thinking of the great adventure lying ahead of me at someone else's expense.

I spent the month of August in 1993 in northeastern Pennsylvania. I was fascinated by the lifestyle in the U.S. It wasn't difficult to win me over, though. I had always looked favorably at America even before that. This trip went so well that I was invited to come back in the summer of 1994. This time, nearing the end of my time in college, I looked beyond the adventure and started looking at it as a business opportunity. My new-found friend Beth, a realtor, helped me to navigate the extraordinary bureaucracy that was called Immigration and Naturalization Services. After I finished college, I moved to the U.S. in the fall of 1995, settling first in northern New Jersey on a small farm, owned by my friend Beth, taking care of her sheep in exchange for room and board, starting my dog training business for herding dogs.

The beginnings were hard, never having much money at first, but it slowly developed into a profitable business. Something was missing. I turned 30 a couple years later and decided it was time to get married. But where could I find a wife? Mutual friends told me about a Polish girl working for their relatives at a farm, doing farmwork and helping at their home. So she and I agreed on a blind date. When she arrived that day at the farm, I was not at all intrigued when she got out of the car. I later learned that her first impression was similar, thinking I looked too arrogant. So it was not exactly love at first sight, perhaps something that only exists in Hollywood movies anyway. Then we started talking and it got better. Did it work out? Twenty-six years and three kids later I would say "YES." Turns out, soulmates are not found, they develop over time.

Meanwhile, our time in New Jersey did not get better. My business became harder because of the influx of many people seeking affordable housing while working in New York City and surrounding areas. Real estate prices skyrocketed as the area became more congested and suburban, and the agricultural infrastructure diminished. My wife's commute to work, which was once an hour,

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became an hour and a half and often two hours. The situation was untenable. We started looking for farmland elsewhere. We traveled as far south as Virginia and West Virginia, as far west as Wisconsin, and as far north as Vermont and New Hampshire, looking for affordable land. It was pure coincidence that we discovered the Finger Lakes area in western New York when a stud dog I wanted to use for my German Shepherd dog happened to be in this area, residing with the brother of the Pennsylvania-based owner, who was on a business trip in Canada. We admired the area but dreaded the cold weather and the big snow. The resident brother of the dog's owner told us it really wasn't all that much colder in western New York compared to northern New Jersey. The realtor we consulted told us that heavy snowstorms don't hit where we were looking. The Buffalo and Syracuse areas were the areas receiving the kind of snow that made the news. I dismissed the former as wishful thinking and the latter as sales talk. Yet I did my research to find out myself. It was all true. In fact, the northern part of New Jersey, where we lived, has seen far more snow in the last 18 years from Nor'easter storms than the Finger Lakes has seen from lake effect snow where we now live.

In 2006, after many trips to western New York, looking at land and farms, we were ready to buy a farm. We were looking for bare land, not wanting the headache of never-ending repairs of a century-old house and barn. On Memorial Day weekend we visited several places for sale. The last on the list was a 100-acre plot, which would indeed become our new home. After purchasing the land that weekend, we initiated to have a modular ranch house and a pole barn built. We moved all our belongings and the sheep in October of the same year to our new home, leaving New Jersey after 11 years of living there. Two years later, an adjacent 25-acre parcel became available, and we didn't hesitate to purchase it.

We had taken a high risk when we left New Jersey, my wife leaving a well-paid job and I leaving a thriving business. However, this move to western New York

rewarded us in many ways. Let's start with my wife: Her job is much nicer with a much better work environment. She also has more professional and fairer supervisors.

For our three children, this was also a blessing. While our oldest child, our daughter, has some memories of New Jersey, they all three view this farm as the place of their childhood. What better way is there than growing up on a sheep farm in the Finger Lakes area?

I reaped even more rewards: the land was now mine, no private moody landlord and no unreliable state landlord decided about my fate any longer. I no longer

had to drive miles to my pasture—I just walk out the basement door and I am at work. All pasture is adjacent and on one side of the road. The area lacks weather extremes: no record low temperatures in the winter, no record highs in the summer, no huge rain events or stifling winter storms. Also no tornadoes, no mud slides, no earthquakes, no

wildfires. The item I had not given much consideration and had greatly underestimated was the quality of the soil types. In comparison to the pastures I rented in New Jersey, this new farm had much better and deeper soils with far more fertility and water-holding capacity than I anticipated. Anyone who is familiar with Lansing and Honeoye silt loam, which are the majority of my soils, will know what I am talking about.

I completed my transition from Texel to White Dorper sheep. Between selling hair sheep that needed no shearing and sheep that are grass-fed and need no grain to fatten, my market for breeding stock skyrocketed. I won't go much into these details since my last article outlined that transition to White Dorper sheep, published in the last issue of *Farming Magazine*. I say this: it has been a great time to be in the sheep business.

Our time in western New York, now counting 18



At the tender age of 19: leaving the night pen with a flock of several hundred Merino sheep.

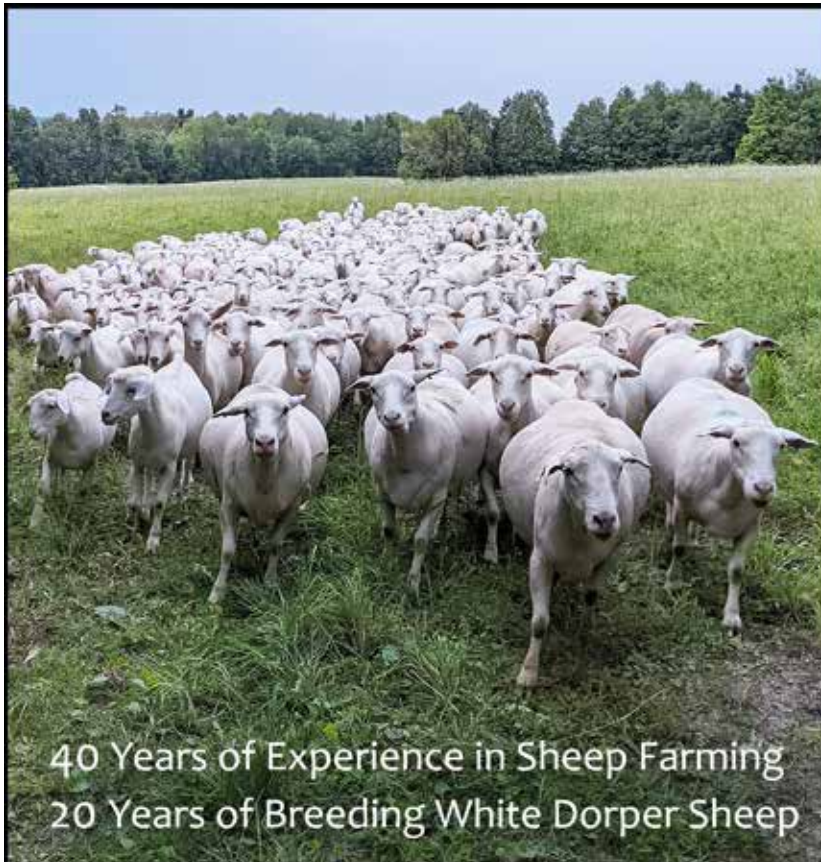
years, has only upsides and no downsides. Everything in our lives had improved compared to our time in New Jersey. It was well worth it to have made this move. Our quality of life is lovely here in the Finger Lakes area.

Now I am approaching the “last chapter” in my business life. The kids have left and live their own lives. Everything has been paid off, and the need for making money, once tremendously important when paying down two mortgages, investing in the farm with expensive items like fencing and tiling, has come down to a trickle. I am approaching 60 in big steps, and I am contemplating downsizing to be able to travel some more with my wife. Soon we will sell some of our farmland. A sense of safety and the desire for an easier life has replaced ambition. None of our children will farm, and thus the farm has become our retirement plan. I will continue raising White Dorper breeding stock, but I will no longer do so on the same large scale with all the farmland plus rented parcels in the neighborhood. At its peak, I had over 700 sheep in my flock, and nowadays I often wonder, “How did you do all this by yourself without any permanent fencing and rented pastures of odd shapes all over the neighborhood?!” Fact is, I’m no longer as productive as I once was, and the days take their toll followed by slower recovery. So if you are in your 20s and 30s and 40s—enjoy it and work as much as you can.

It won’t last. You’ll see.

Panta rhei. Alles fließt. Everything flows. I have accepted that change is inevitable because I have found joy in every chapter of my life. The whole book has not been written yet; I am still looking forward to becoming a grandfather one day. I am not one of those who bemoans that the times that once were are gone or have changed. I can see the beauty in every chapter that unfolds. I am grateful that I was able to live such a fulfilling life thus far. Look at it this way: had someone back then when I was living under communist rule behind the Iron Curtain told me that one day I will marry a Polish woman whom I will meet on a blind date, have three beautiful children, live on a farm in the Finger Lakes region in the great United States of America of all places, and raise sheep of a breed that didn’t even exist in Germany yet, I would have said t they are crazy. Such a story would seem to be just too far-fetched. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the U.S. 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 during “calling hour” indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.



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