



Josef Probst whistles and the sheep fall in line and follow. Still whistling, Josef rewards a sheep for coming when called.

American Hosts Reciprocate By Visiting German Sheep Farm

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BEDFORD (Bedford Co.)—Twenty-four years ago our family hosted a young, married, German couple through the American Host Program.

It was the time of the "ugly American" in Europe and the object was to erase that image. Rural Americans were asked via newspaper articles to take European, English-speaking teachers, into their homes for a one-to two-week time period.

Response was overwhelming! There were more hosts than guests.

Having been one of those to answer the call, we developed a life long friendship with Dieter and Gerlinde Blahak from rural Bavaria.

Cards, letters, and packages sailed back and forth across the ocean. Each year came an invitation to return to visit. Each year we said, "Maybe next year."

In 1995, having joined the ranks of the senior citizen set, we decided that time was "now."

We found ourselves in the heart of German farm country in the Bavarian forest. Small farms surrounded the ivy covered home of the Blahaks.

As I looked out my bathroom window the first morning in Germany, I saw a Bavarian lady, dressed in skirt, headscarf, and boots, loading hay onto the front of a small hayloader.

"Most of the men work for BMW or other industry," Gerlinde explained. "The wife and children do most of the farm work."

Potatoes were an abundant crop and we saw a lot of mechanical potato pickers at work in the fields. Cabbages, kale, and broccoli were also plentiful.

I was extremely pleased to have the opportunity of interviewing a sheep farmer, Josef Probst. Like many sheep farmers in America, he raises sheep as an avocation.

He is the president of the Sheep Farmer's Association of the Bavarian Forest.

There are approximately 550 sheep farmers in the Bavarian Forest and about 4,500 in all of Bavaria.

"We have only eight sheep farmers who make their living with sheep," Josef said.

As he talked, a smiling German baby crawled about a spotlessly clean, white marble, floor in the

duplex farm house where the Probst family lives.

Josef speaks in German which is translated to me in English by my friend, Gerlinde.

Eight different breeds are raised including Merino, Black Headed Meat Sheep, Welch Sheep, and the German Milk Sheep. The rest are crosses of these individual breeds.

A few of the Bavarian farmers milk sheep and make their own cheese, which is sold at the many outdoor markets around the numerous towns and cities of Germany.

"You can get a good price for sheep milk or cheese," Josef says. "About six marks per liter for the milk and about 20 marks for a kilo of cheese." One mark is equal to about \$1.30.

Josef raises some of the German Milk Sheep and while he does not milk them, he says they produce very healthy lambs.

Just as in America, the low price of wool is often discouraging. They get some of their best prices from those buying it for insulation.

German homes, all built according to government standards, do not have insulation. Instead, the walls are extremely thick. However wool insulation is sometimes used in the attic. "It is," Probst says, "something that is approved by the environmentalists."

Wool is bought once a year by a salesman who deals through the Sheep Farmer's Association of the Bavarian Forest.

Wool that is used for insulation is sold separately. For every two kilos of wool, the Bavarian farmers get back one mat. A mat can be sold for about 32.5 marks.

"Insulation with wool is more expensive," admits Josef. "But it is also very safe."

All meat must be government inspected in order to be sold and the slaughtering must be observed by a veterinarian or government inspector.

Best prices for meat are gotten at outdoor markets. Other marketing avenues are ads in the newspaper. People buy it for their freezers or sell directly to the butcher shops.

Most farmers receive ten to 12 marks per kilo for butchered sheep or five marks per kilo for live sheep.

Once a year, the-Turkish population of Germany has a huge celebration with lamb as the main dish. "This is a good time of year for the sheep farmers," Josef says smiling.

Like America, the German's main competition with both wool and meat comes from Australia and New Zealand where sheep are raised in much larger numbers.

Josef does feel they get a lot of help by being organized. The Association of the Bavarian Forest has only been in existence for 25 years and was founded by Franz Hirtreiter. He saw a dwindling of the sheep population and was concerned because there are so few cows that the sheep are needed for grazing.

Josef's own flock of 40 crossbred sheep are fed a diet of primarily grass which is supplemented with hay, beans, wheat, oats, and barley.

Sheep graze as long as weather permits but the harsh winters in Bavaria call for the sheep to be housed in the barn at least three months of the year.

There are not 4-H clubs or other organizations to attract young people to sheep farming. "Therefore," Josef says, "the number of sheep farmers is dwindling. Many of them are already in their 50s or 60s."

"However," he adds, "the younger farmers we do have are raising larger amounts of sheep so the population is remaining about the same."

While there are no competitions regarding breed standards, there are shearing competitions and Josef is proud that one of the Bavarian Forest members won the champion title in Munich this summer.

German shepherds are the most popular herding dog however, few are used. Most sheep farmers simply train their sheep to answer to a whistle. Such is the case with Josef. As he whistles, the sheep form a line and march forward.

Natural predators are not a problem in Bavaria. However, in northern Germany, the lynx gets its share of the sheep population.

Josef feels that spinning and weaving are dying arts in Germany, but is proud to say that his mother does some spinning and sells the wool to local knitters and crafts people.

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