

Sheep Herders Anonymous

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In June of 2011, a few months after my arrival in Austria, I had been living on a farm close to a city called Melk (famous for a big golden monastery and not much else), helping the family who lived there with the farm activities in exchange for food and a place to stay. Other than a 10-day trip to Italy, I had spent the majority of my time on and around the farm and I was starting to get itchy feet.

There was another family on the property, which was renting a space to live out near the field. It was standard collection of a husband, wife, and two young boys. The thing that hit me as interesting was what this family lived in something resembling the two nicest “trailers” I had ever seen. It took me awhile before I got to know them (they were quite busy, especially as the wife Karin was going to school to become a midwife), but when I finally did, I learned that these were, indeed, not normal trailers. They were shepherd wagons!

Günter, the father, was a son of one of the few (if only) remaining full-blown shepherds in Austria. My curiosity was officially peaked.

As I got to know the family better (mostly from the 4-year old son Gabriel wanting to attack and wrestle with me on sight), they would mention bits and pieces of their previous lives as shepherds. Günter grew up as one and Karin worked with him at the beginning of their marriage. It wasn't until after having two boys that they decided they needed a less intensive life. What exactly was intensive, you ask? Keep reading.

One thousand sheep. I was told that Hans, Günter's father, was regularly herding *one thousand fucking sheep*. I began to fantasize about leading sheep that extended as far as the eye could see, and when I discovered that Hans spent two months every year up in the Alps with his sheep, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to go.

“Günter,” I said one day while in the berry field, “I want to herd sheep.”

“Okay,” came the reply forthwith, “I'll call my father.”

Thus was my fate set in sheep.

I planned the journey for about a month later. I'm pretty horrible when it comes to packing, especially when I'm going to be up in the mountains without access to anything in case I forget it, but luckily I had Karin and Leila (the wife and mother of the family I was staying with) to make sure I didn't set out with nothing. Karin and Günter lent me a heavy-duty sailor's jacket, a warm hood, and a pair of gloves once they saw the ones I planned on traveling with. Leila made sure I had an LED headlamp (which would save my ass later) and enough food to make my 8 hour journey. Right before I left, Karin sat me down in the shepherd wagon to give me directions. At the time I spoke hardly any German and was still nervous about using public transportation (I had this constant fear of taking the wrong train and not being able to explain my situation to the train conductor who wouldn't speak English), so I took detailed notes.

“The trains will only take you as far as a city called Murau,” she started, “from there you are going to have to take a bus to Krakaudorf. Or Krakauhintermühlen... or was it Krakauschatten? Krakautal? Hm...” she rattled off a few more *Krakau's* before saying, “Normally we drive there, so we aren't very familiar with the public transportation.” Great. So now I knew I had to go to *Krakau-something*. Karin went on.

“On the main road is a Gasthaus called Schallerwirt. It is near the road that leads up the shepherds. The owner there is named Sepp and he knows Hans very well. Sometimes he drives a bus up the mountain and if you make it in time, you might be able to ride with him. Just ask for Hans. He is so well known in the area that everyone will know who you are talking about.” She went into a few

more details about how walk up the mountain road in case I was not able to catch a ride, mentioning a small village near the end of the mountain road called Rantendorf. If I found it I would know I was going in the right direction.

She also warned me of the recent shepherd situation. There were four main shepherds: Hans, his pregnant girlfriend Mingo, a guy out of Germany named Jost, and his girlfriend Bauxi. Jost had recently slipped on a rock and broken his nose and was in a hospital in the nearby city Tamsweg. Mingo was gone for a few days on some personal business, and as if to jump at the opportunity at the lack of security personnel, the sheep had escaped a few days prior. The sheep are fenced in every night and the shepherds went up the mountain the next day, they found about 70 sheep still in the fence. This began an undermanned mad scramble to get them back together again, of which I might find myself in the middle when I showed up. I was also warned of long hours, grueling work, and being completely soaked for hours.

I was not concerned though; all of it sounded great to me. I was dripping with pent-up energy from not having done Aikido in a year and ready to get into the action.

DAY 1 – Ich suche Hans

My train journey was pretty uneventful and my fears of getting lost or having to interact with angry train conductors yelling at me in German didn't come to pass. To keep the story of the train ride simple, I made a map:



Legend:

- Green Dots* = Cities where I had to transfer trains.
- Blue Lines* = Path traveled by train.
- Blue/Magenta Line* = Path traveled by rickety old thing resembling a train.
- Magenta Lines* = Path traveled by things other than train.

Here's a smaller one for scrutinization purposes:



To answer the obvious question: The Alps run west to east through Austria, so I couldn't just travel straight south.

If you follow along the line on the map, the “real trains” ended at the second-to-last green dot and I had to use the local public transportation. I had never seen anything like this before. Because it was on rails, I guess technically it would have to be a train, but it felt more like a bus; I have never seen a train that needed you to press a button to tell the driver you want to stop at the next station. This apparently was important because there were usually more cows at the stops than people. There were not that many people riding and I noticed some signs reading:

“Schwarzfahren shadet den Nerven.” and “Schwarzfahren erhöht den Blutdrucken.”

After flipping through my pocket dictionary I figured out that this translated to “Black-riding* damages the nerves” and “Blackriding raises the blood pressure”. I realized that this was a technique used by the municipality, as it must have been cheaper to guilt people into buying tickets than to actually pay someone to enforce it.

*Riding without a ticket.

After passing many cows, Catholic shrines, and dudes wearing funny Austrian hats, I arrived at Murau, my last taste of a city before heading up into the mountains. Murau was set well into the side of the mountains with all the cool Austrian architecture blending well with the green trees popping up out of the hills. What I immediately noticed was the non-zero amount of attractive girls walking around. In Melk I think I had seen not a single local girl even worth looking at, so even if I had just seen one or two in Murau, it still felt like tons.

However, I didn't have a lot of energy to spend on chasing women because I ran back into my old arch nemesis: public transportation. My problem was compounded this time because I didn't think asking which bus to take to Krakau-*something* was going to get me very far. The bus station had over ten bus terminals. I spent some time walking around and reading the bus schedules at some of the terminals to see if I would be able to glean enough information to make a useful decision, but all I could do was pick out about one German word in fifty. Eventually I sucked it up and asked an official-looking portly character which bus was going to Krakaudorf (I picked that one because it was the easiest for me to remember). I must have garbled up the German; he looked irritated and waved me toward the only bus sitting in the bus station and walked off before I could thank him. I went over to the bus and asked the bus driver the same thing and he confirmed more politely. A cute girl was sitting in the back of the bus, therefore I sat myself up front next to the driver begrudgingly. Not getting lost in the middle of the Alps was taking priority over flirting.

The bus headed out of the station and I sat there with my German dictionary trying to figure out just what question I should I ask the driver and how the hell I was going to ask it in German. While I was doing this, we drove up over a hill and down switchbacks on the other side, and I was able to see a wide swath of the Austrian Alps. It was gorgeous. After spending some time gazing at the scenery I remembered Schallerwirt, the guesthouse-hotel-thing where I was supposed to ask for a ride. I managed to ask the driver if he was going there and I was able to pick out of the response that his last stop was five kilometers away from it. Normally this would not be a problem for me, but I was getting into my eighth or ninth hour of travel and carrying with me a large and rather full gym bag and a guitar. There was also the chance I was going to have to walk up the mountain. I made some disgruntled noises and went back to figuring out how to ask if there was another bus, when the driver asked me:

“Do you speak English?”

As normal as this situation sounds, I was ecstatic. This was the first time an Austrian didn't immediately assume I was a native English speaker. I told him my situation and he said there was indeed another bus going to Schallerwirt, but I was going to have to wait an hour for it to pick me up. Oh well. The day was nice and it probably would have taken me more than an hour to walk there.

An hour later the bus picked me up and dropped me off in front of Schallerwirt. I was making progress. I remembered back to Karin's instructions: Hans was so well known in the area that people would immediately know what I was talking about when I asked for him. Thus when I walked into the front door of Schallerwirt, finding two locals and an employee (which was clear from her clothes) sitting near the entrance smoking and drinking, I simply said:

“*Ich suche Hans.*” [“I'm looking for Hans.”]

I received three blank stares in response. Before I had time to wonder just what was so weird about what I said, the girl working there said something to me in German. She switched to English, probably after seeing my eyes go wide. This was still near the start of my time in Europe before I understood how much of the population spoke English. The situation was quickly cleared up when I explained I was looking for sheep. However, when I asked about Sepp driving up the mountain, I was told that he would not be able to that night. There were many guests and he would have to work in the kitchen.

“But,” she said and gestured to the two other guys sitting at the table, “I’m sure these gentlemen will give you a ride to the bottom of the road.” I said that would be great and she rattled something off to them in German. They looked agreeable.

“Yep. They’ll be able to do that after they’ve finished their drinks. Would you like something to drink? I invite you to a beer.” I had been in Austria long enough to know that “inviting” someone to a beer in German means that they are offering to pay for it. I couldn’t really say no to that and I got to sit drinking some local dark beer with my two new buddies. It was a bit awkward—not only did they not speak English, their dialect was so thick that I would not have been able to understand their German even if they used the small amount of words I knew.

We finished our beers and I got offered some extra schnapps that was on the table. Throat tingling, I followed the two to their car. We piled in and during the ride I attempted to break the silence by asking their names. The driver was Leohard the other guy was... Hans.

Thaaaaaat explained the weird looks.

Before long I was dropped off at *Krakautal*, one of the Krakau-somethings which was located at the bottom of the mountain road. The guys pointed me up the road then drove off. Karin had said something about a 2-3 kilometer walk, so I organized myself and went off up the road.

I didn’t make it more than a hundred yards before a guy in a safety-green vest tending his cows waved at me and said something in German. I didn’t know what else to say, and I figured that being a little closer to my destination would increase my odds, so I tried the same tactic:

“*Ich suche Hans.*” I said.

I was greeted once again by a blank stare. Was that such a weird fucking question? This time there was no English to save me, so when he continued to stare, I said:

“*Ich suche die Schafer.*”

The blank stare continued. In German the word for sheep is *Schaf*, the plural for sheep is *Schafe*, and shepherd is *Schäfer* (pronounced “*shaff*”, “*shaff-ey*”, and “*shay-fer*”. And yes those two dots make a difference. More on that in a minute). I was, however, constantly mixing these three up and I managed to do it in a way to make something that was not actually a word. I thought quick and then remembered the little village on the top of the mountain:

“*Ich suche Rantendorf.*” I said.

“Ahhhhh! *Rantendorf!*” His reply was like an explosion. He walked over to a nearby car and waved me toward it. I realized he wanted to give me a ride. Great! I threw my stuff into the trunk and jumped into the passenger’s seat. I instinctively reached for my seatbelt before I took a look at the dirt road we were going to be driving on and thought better of it. The guy noticed and said something like, “*Ahh geh. Mia san in Österreich!*” (“Nahhh. We’re in Austria!”) Apparently seat belts were for other countries.

We started up the road and the guy managed to simplify his German down to a level where we could have a basic conversation. He asked me why I was going up to Rantendorf. I went through some of the previously mentioned pronunciations for sheep and shepherd hoping I would hit one that made sense. I found a winner and he cried out:

“Ahhh! *Die Schäfer!*”

As a native speaker of English with our incredibly illogical methods of spelling, and American English specifically at that, vowels have a transient quality to me. Neither A, E, I, O, or U have a definite sound and each one often encroaches on the others’ territory. Comparing the words *route* and *root* should give one an ample idea of what I am talking about here. In German, when you write a letter or a group of letters, there is about a 98% chance that it is going to follow a specific list of spelling rules, and each vowel and diphthong is pronounced a specific way. Because of this they have a few extra vowels, namely Ä, Ö, and Ü. At this point in my German-speaking career, I didn’t really understand this specificity of vowels and I’d be damned if was going to believe that putting some fuckin’ dots over an A turned it into a different letter. Thus the initial miscommunication: I had said

“shaff-er” when the word was “shay-fer”.

With my destination established, I decided to do the normal conversational thing and I asked him what his name was.

Yea... it was Hans.

Karin forget to tell me half the guys on the damned mountain were named Hans. At least that explained the blank stares.

We continued the drive up the mountain and we reached a locked gate. Hans-2 had the key and opened it up so we could keep driving. I was impressed how high up in the middle of nowhere I was going, topped off with a locals-only warding device. It was not long before we made it to Rantendorf, which consisted of a restaurant (which must have mainly serviced hikers, because I don't know who the hell else would be eating up there) and a few huts which looked like they had an equal chance of someone living in them as not. Hans-2 pulled up to the restaurant and asked the guy inside where the shepherds were (not that I could understand the German, I just heard the word *Schäfer*). The guy pointed across the road and I soon found myself standing in front of a hodgepodge of trailers in a high valley between two mountains in the Alps.



I'm not quite sure what I expected, but this wasn't really it.

Before approaching the shepherd's wagon I took some time to take in my surroundings. I was disappointed that I couldn't see any sheep in the immediate vicinity, then surprised when I couldn't see any sheep after straining my eyes looking up and down the mountain sides. There were a few other houses sprinkled around the valley, mostly with solar panels, outhouses, and smoke coming out of the chimneys. There was a small creek running next to the shepherd conglomeration and cows (fit with cowbells!!) everywhere walking around and munching on grass as they damn well pleased. There was an electric fence around the wagons, presumably to keep them out. They looked like some of the happiest and healthiest cows I had ever seen, and though I don't know what they were kept for, I can imagine whatever beef or dairy products produced from them were delicious.

I walked up to the main shepherd wagon (or what I assumed it to be from the way it looked) and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I had been in Austria long enough to know that out in the

country side it is common and accepted just to walk into people's houses and yell for them, but I still felt a bit sheepish (har har har!!) about it, so I took the time to inspect the immediate surroundings and eat the remaining food I had packed with me. I found two chickens poking and clucking around, what sounded like dogs inside one of the trailers, a solar panel behind the shepherd's wagon, some food, wet and dry firewood, and a small stool with a big hole in the middle of it in the nearby woods. Apparently even outhouses were too technologically advanced for shepherds.

I sat on the wooden bridge over the creek while I finished my food and eventually it got cold enough that I decided to go into the shepherd's wagon despite my apprehension. I walked in to find a huge elevated bed in the back, a short table covered with dirty dishes that look like they were left in a hurry, short benches on both sides of the table, a stove near the door, and a heap of jackets, hats, rain gear, boots, shoes, and every other imaginable article over clothing. They were hung haphazardly from hooks on the wall to my right, from the lines of string criss-crossing the ceiling, and heaped unceremoniously on the floor. Before I had left Melk, Leila had mentioned something to me about the sheep being so important to the shepherds that everything else went to the wayside. I was getting a feel for what she meant. I tried the light switch near the door and nothing happened. Apparently the solar panel wasn't working, either.

I decided to do what I do best: make a fire. I had that wagon toasty within half an hour and was suitably bored within a full one. I didn't have a cell phone (there was not any reception even if I did), I didn't bring my computer, and I was convinced my German was bad enough that I should not go around starting conversations with the locals. I wondered where the hell the shepherds were, and as I didn't even know what direction or how high up they were, I couldn't even go look for them. I spent some time playing my guitar, gathering wild thyme I noticed when poking around outside, talking to cows, and writing in my notebook. Eventually it got dark and I stretched myself out in the corner of the wagon and fell asleep under the bed.

Around midnight I heard a car pull up and I saw lights through the window. I put my shoes on and went outside to find two young boys jumping out of a big white van and a girl in the driver's seat. She saw me and cried out in jubilation through the open window:

“Yaaaa! The sheep are all back together again!”

“Woohoo!” I jubilated back and went over to give her a high-five. This was Bauxi. Short, cute, wearing a funny hat, and speaking enough English to communicate with me. I turned my attention to the other two guys and found out they were helpers. Abraham was roughly my age and out of California (“Duuuuude. What's up?”). Theo was 16 and out of northern Germany. They were both soaking wet and looked like they were about to fall asleep standing up. It suddenly hit me that these guys had been up on a mountain until midnight rounding a bunch of sheep up into a fence. Tough work!

I told them I had a fire going in the shepherd's wagon and they all said they needed to change their clothes in the trailer (or the “caravan”, as they termed it) into something dry before coming over. I went back into the wagon to wait and after a few minutes Bauxi showed up wearing a light (and dry) dress. We lit some candles and started chatting. After awhile I realized that the other two boys were not going to be showing up. Not even a warm fire was enticing enough to prevent them from passing out.

Bauxi questioned me a bit about myself and I asked her specifics about being a shepherd and what helpers were expected to do. After trading answers she requested I play Pink Floyd on the guitar (I had *Wish You Were Here* ready and waiting) and afterwards I switched to my quirky celtic stuff. When the musical interlude was over, I asked her about what was going to happen the next day. I was told that she planned on visiting Jost in the hospital in the morning and going shopping for food. Then we she got back we would go up the mountain to see the sheep and help Hans and Paulina (a helper from Poland). Everything sounded good to me and we went to sleep not long after. She went out to the caravan and I stayed in the same corner I had passed out in before.

DAY 2 – Beat them, not nice

The next morning Bauxi came into the wagon and woke me up. She asked me if she could borrow some money for diesel.

“Sure, no problem,” I said sitting up, “How much do you need?”

“Maybe... 60 euros?” (Roughly 80 dollars.)

“60 euros! Holy shit! How big is the gas tank in that thing? Do you really need... oh wait. We're in Europe. Right.” It is about 7-8 dollars a gallon here. I would go into a long tirade about the cost of government and the potential of damage to economies from taxation, but instead I will just point out that oil is a world market, and a barrel of crude costs the same in the US, Europe, or anywhere else.

“Yea, it's horrible isn't it?” I dug the money out of my wallet, handed it to her, and promptly fell back asleep.

When I woke up again I found Theo outside and no Abraham. Theo told me that the day before was Abraham's last day and he had gone to town with Bauxi to go where ever his next destination was. Bauxi had asked us to clean up and make some food while she was gone. I'm not the most creative cook in the world, especially in a kitchen I'm not used to with food I don't know I have, but Theo was a 16 year-old male. This meant my cooking ability dwarfed his. For the dishes, I was a little confused how to go about them without sinks, running water, and as I was soon to find out, soap. Theo corrected me on the running water by pointing to the stream.

“We wash them there.” He said.

“Get the fuck out of here. You guys use cold water and no soap?”

“Yea, we just use the sand in the river.”

Well I'll be damned. Fuck soap! We clean our dishes with sand, motherfucker!

We got down to business of getting a fire going, chopping up vegetables, and cleaning dishes. The “fridge” consisted of a blue plastic barrel in the creek under the bridge. The bottom was filled with rocks to keep it anchored and it was full of cheeses, milk, cream, butter, and whatever else needed to be kept cool. I was surprised when I found how effective the sand method was for cleaning dishes, however my lack of familiarity with the organization of the place left the whole ordeal rather disheveled. Apparently our work was under par, because when Bauxi rolled back in just before 5pm, later than she intended to be, she was a bit upset.

“Theo!” she yelled, “I said we need to clean the dishes!” I realized I was getting yelled at, too, or else the conversation would have been in German. “And this isn't enough food for five people! Hans and Paulina have had no food since yesterday!” As much as I felt bad for not doing a decent job, I felt her prior instructions were not exactly adequate, especially for a foreign helper who just showed up. I blew it off as her being upset because she was so late. She ended her tirade with an exasperated noise and began putting the soup we had made into jars. I took this as a cue to get ready and I donned what I thought was proper shepherd-wear (I figured it would be something near hiking-wear). Luckily the day was short and nice enough that I didn't have to learn the hard way how wrong I was.

Not knowing what was going on, I tried to help get everything needed in the van as quickly as possible. Eventually Bauxi acknowledged that we were ready and we went off down the road, passing several cows along the way. We drove at least another kilometer and when we stopped we couldn't see any houses anymore. She pulled up alongside of the road and we all got out. She handed me a long straight stick with an steel tip fixed on the end of it, telling me that I would need it for climbing the mountain. I felt I had enough hiking experience to handle a trail up a mountain without a stick, but I took it anyway. A shepherd is supposed to have a stick, right?

I squinted up the side of the mountain looking for the sheep, but I still couldn't see any. How far up was I going to have to go before I would find these things? We started our way up and Bauxi pointed out to me a plant called *Eisenhut* (“Ironhat”) and warned me to stay away from it, as it was poisonous enough to kill. The walk quickly turned into a tight and steep hike. We went through forests

of short trees, over creeks, climbed on rocks, and eventually made it over the tree line. At one point I looked down and noticed that there were wild huckleberries (the blue ones) growing everywhere! I gobbled down any and all I could find and expressed my surprise to Theo and Bauxi. The only other place I had seen these berries was up in the mountains on the Mountain Loop Highway in Washington—crazy that they were on similar elevations at such huge distances apart.

During the hike I had been using my stick to help me across tricky places to step, poking it into the ground on the declining side of the mountain as a third leg. Bauxi told me that I should use the stick on the inclining side of the mountain, and explained that my method was dangerous because I couldn't always be sure that I would stick into something solid. I felt that I had enough balance and hiking experience (and incredible luck with falling) that I would be able to handle myself with my method, plus I didn't really see the usefulness of hers. Thus I ignored her and continued doing what I was doing before.

Up and up and up. We hiked at least forty minutes when I heard the first, “Baaaahh!” I froze and looked up. There was a sheep standing on a rock looking over at us! I finally found the sheep! It took another ten or fifteen minutes of climbing before we got over the crest of the upper valley and I found myself facing The Herd. 1,000 sheep on the top of a mountain in the Alps!



Nice view, huh? Know where I can find some sheep?

As we slowly got a more complete view of the sheep, I kept hearing a patient and musical voice calling out what sounded like commands. We crested over the edge to get a full view of the upper valley, and I finally found the Hans I was looking for. He was wearing a yellow hat that was so big it was border-lining a sombrero, and calling commands out to three dogs who were barking and dashing around the sheep, molding the flock around the valley. I spotted a girl who I assumed to be Paulina.

When we got to Hans it was clear he didn't have time to talk. He told Bauxi with a few quick words that we should go behind the herd to make sure that the last stragglers made it into the fence. I was pumped with energy, ready to do some herding, and followed Bauxi eagerly to the back of the flock, running and jumping between rocks whenever I had the chance. She began calling out something to the sheep to get them to move on, so I started doing the same:



Here's a close-up.

“Hopp! Hopp! Hopp begehts!” Or something like that.

The three of us got behind the sheep and fanned out in order to prevent escapees. The sheep were nervous at our presence (which gives an idea to the etymology of the word *sheepish*) and it was not hard to get them to move. I had no idea what I was doing and I kept waiting for Bauxi to tell me something. She more or less ignored me and because I was piss-full of energy, I kept doing what we were doing before: yelling “Hopp! Hopp! Hopp begehts!” and waving my stick around. I did this for a minute or so before I heard a shout over the wind.

“Beat them! Not nice!”

...what? I couldn't have heard that right. I looked over to Hans, who had shouted the command, to give him a quizzical look, but he had already occupied himself with his task at hand. I assumed I was hearing his words wrong, as we were quite a ways away from him at this point and

he had to shout over the wind and the incessant bleating of the sheep. I also hadn't had a chance to hear out his accent or even how well he spoke English. I gave my quizzical look to Bauxi, expecting her to clear things up for me. However she said nothing, not even looking over at me. Well, whatever the case, I was not about to start wailing on this guy's sheep. I decided to ignore him and hope that I could do the right thing by accident. I didn't notice that Bauxi was no longer shouting at the sheep. Another minute of this went by before the wind delivered me another shout.

“Beat them! Not nice!”

No way. There was *no way* Hans wanted me to actually start *beating* his sheep. I exchanged my quizzical look for a pleading one and gave it to Bauxi, but she still ignored me. I scrambled through my mind for what other words could easily confused with “beat them” and “not nice”, but I came up with nothing. Clearly I was not accidentally doing the right thing, so I decided to tap the sheep with my stick and continue to call out. I cringed in anticipation and it was not long before I was rewarded with next wind-delivered angry message.

“Beat them! NOT NICE!”

Well, sir, if you say so. Three times in a row (I thought) I had heard the same clear message. I attempted once more to extract anything remotely useful out of Bauxi, but to no avail. Thus I started... beating the sheep. I didn't hit them hard enough to injure them, but it was definitely harder than I would have liked to be hit. I was still calling out “Hopp! Hopp! Hopp begehts!”. The wind delivered the next message up first-class.

“DO YOU LISTEN?!”

I sure as hell was trying to! I couldn't understand how Bauxi was able to ignore me and Hans (or even why Hans didn't yell at Bauxi to give me more clear orders), especially because she was between the two of us. Hans must have figured that he was not going to be able to get any message across to me, because he gestured angrily and turned back to what he was doing up front. At least I was making a good first impression.

Bauxi, Theo, and I were successfully able to get the last of the sheep into the fence, minus two stragglers: an ewe and her lamb. Hans told me and Bauxi to go bring her back, and we spent the next twenty or thirty minutes doing just that. The ewe was even more nervous than the others I had

interacted with so far and we had to make a large circle around her to stop her from running up into the mountain. We eventually got the ewe moving in the direction toward the fence and got them both inside.

The fence was closed up and I finally had a chance to talk to Hans. I felt like an idiot and didn't think now was the best time to start coming up with excuses for why I was whacking the hell out of his sheep. I decided to just do a standard greeting and thankfully he was friendly and did the same back to me. I greeted Paulina as well, a 26 year old Polish girl currently living and going to school in Denmark.

The last part of the job was to make sure the bottoms of the fences were secured to the ground with either rocks or sticks, in order that the younger lambs would not be able to escape under it. After this was finished, Bauxi hooked up what looked like a car battery to the fence and the work for the day was concluded.

When the three of us had left the wagons earlier in the day, Bauxi had told us to prepare to stay the night in the tepee (you can see it in the previous picture). However, Hans decided it was better that we all went down for the night. While everyone was preparing for the downward climb, I had time to check out the surroundings. As can be seen from the picture, the place was gorgeous. The valley was surrounded on three sides by slopes, with the fourth side looking off over the rest of the Alps. There were two crystal clear (and very cold) lakes that begged jumping into (or having misogi done in them), provided one had a fire going to which he could immediately run. The ground was covered with large rocks (which I was jumping to and from), green grass, and interspersed with sheep shit. Screw state parks. This is where I would want to spend my summer.

With everything packed, we made our way back down to the lower valley. As this was still early in my stay, I was still jumping to and fro all the way down. I would know better by the end of the next day. It was getting dark as we reached the van. We drove back to the wagons, got changed, and prepared for dinner. After everyone had relaxed, I felt it was time to explain to Hans why I did what I did earlier.

"Ahhhh," he said, "I said: Beat them. *No noise*. The command you were calling out only works if you are calling to many sheep. If you are really close to only one or two sheep, this will just scare them and they will run away from you." Well that explained everything. Here I thought it was a matter of how I should be hitting the sheep, and all Hans wanted me to do was shut the fuck up and nudge them with my stick. I apologized and he waved it off, "It is not your fault. Bauxi should have explained to you what to do. I am a little bit angry and surprised that she didn't." Whew. At least my name was cleared for the time being.

Hans then told me about how living situation worked. He told me that I was free to enter the shepherd wagon any time I wanted, and was very clear that all meals were to be eaten together in the wagon, especially breakfast. That was the time when they discussed what to do for the day. I was also sternly informed that if I saw something I wanted to eat, I was to eat it. Again, I would know why the next day.

Dinner came and went and was able to get to know everyone. Hans and I were the last survivors to stay awake. He was really happy that I brought my guitar and we took turns exchanging songs, me on the guitar and him singing. He had an excellent voice, as I suppose any shepherd must. When you are at with your sheep 8 hours on up per day, singing is your best option for entertainment.

Eventually I had to ask him the question I am sure he gets from every helper that comes by: just why and how the hell did you decide to become a shepherd? The answer was more intense than I expected.

Hans' mother had him rather late in her life (somewhere in her 40's) and had the unfortunate luck of being a communist Jewish journalist in Vienna right before WWII. Yea, I cringed when I heard that, too. It didn't take long before she was captured by Nazis, and instead of being sent immediately to death camps she was tortured in an attempt to discover the identities of her friends and "collaborators". As she was being led to her next torture session, she felt that she would not be able to hold her tongue

and decided to kill herself by jumping out the 4th floor of the building she was in (extra note: the 4th floor in German is the 5th floor in English—ouch). By some insane twist of fate she survived.

Hans was not very clear about what happened between this and the end of the war (I was listening too attentively to interrupt), but when the war was over, he explained that one day when she was walking around through Vienna, something incredibly peculiar happened: she walked right by one of the men who had been torturing her during the war. She followed him until he arrived at his house, which was a huge mansion inside of Vienna. Her torturer was living in a huge house with a nice job when most of the rest of the people in the country were having a hard time finding something to eat (reminded me of Project Paperclip). These Nazis were supposed to have been executed and jailed for their war crimes, but she could see clearly that was not the case. She got a taste of the reality of politics and I think serves as a reminder for anyone who happens to read this: the good guys in history generally don't win, and nothing about our modern situation has changed this.

Hans was a bit vague on the rest of the story, only mentioning something about his mother protesting the guy in front of his house. He explained that because he grew up with this mother and the stories she told him, in his twenties he decided that he didn't want any part of this shit-system anymore. He had met a shepherd around this time and decided that was what he wanted to do. Fast forward thirty years to him having a conversation with me.

Around 1 in the morning we were noticeably failing and the candle light was starting to get hard on my eyes. I wished him good night and headed off to the caravan, where I fell asleep in one of the three beds there.

DAY 3 – Kudel-Mudel Mess

I woke up in the bottom bunk of the caravan sometime around 9 o'clock. The bunked beds were on one side of the caravan. I had slept on the bottom bunk and Theo on top. Bauxi slept in the bed across from us (where I presumed Jost slept as well when not nursing a broken nose in the hospital). The floor in between was filthy—a no-shoes rule didn't apply simply because people didn't have the time or patience to be bothered with something so insignificant. As I was making myself busy changing and putting on clothes, emptying my bladder, and giving my face a brisk morning rinse in the stream, Bauxi got up as well. She wore nothing but a pair of underwear, and looked like she couldn't care less that her breasts were bare as she moved around in the morning. I was still relatively new to Austria and not used to people walking around naked, especially young attractive women. I made an attempt not to stare at her blatantly, but she seemed oblivious that someone else would actually care. Whatever. It was definitely something I didn't put on the “negative culture shock experience” list.

Bauxi began to get suited up for the day and told me to relax when I asked if I should do the same. She was planning on going up to the sheep by herself this morning to get them started before the rest of us went up. She asked me if I knew how to drive a clutch so I could drop her off at the bottom of the path. I gave her an affirmative answer and soon we went into the van to leave. While I did know how to drive a clutch, I had never driven a diesel with a clutch and there is always a learning curve when dealing with a new clutch. I also had not driven a car in four months. I ended up killing it while trying to get a feel for where the clutch plate bit the flywheel, and Bauxi said, “I thought you said you knew how to drive this!” I waved her off and started it up again. Having now gotten a feel for the clutch, I didn't have much of a problem getting across the bridge and around the corner.

She was really quiet as we went up the road and I tried to make some conversation, but after a few attempts she asked if I could just be quiet as she was trying to concentrate on what she was going to be doing that day. While I understood the sentiment, I felt she could have communicated it to me a little more diplomatically. I was glad to drop her off and return to the shepherd wagon.

After I returned everyone else started to wake up and the people assembled themselves in the shepherd's wagon for breakfast. This in and of itself was an experience. Being nothing more than a

glorified trailer, space was very limited inside the wagon. It was imperative that when someone needed something that they couldn't reach, that they asked for the person nearby to hand it to them instead of getting it themselves. There also was not enough room for a lot of dishes—on the table or anywhere else. And because cleaning the dishes was a total hassle, when someone needed to use a dish, cup, or silverware, “recently used” didn't fall under the category of “dirty”. Any spoon, fork, knife, cup, glass, dish, or bowl could be used in any food item and put in any mouth, then immediately be used for something else. If someone were to use a spoon for honey then clean it simply by licking it off, someone else could immediately pick it up and use it for eating his oatmeal. This wasn't any problem for me, but I could imagine someone finicky over this sort of thing having an absolute fit.

Hans spent this time to go over the plans for the day. He had checked the weather forecast and discovered it was going to snow on the upper valley, and that we should bring the sheep down below the snow level today. I gave an internal groan. Memories of six months of brutal snow in Vermont were still fresh in my mind—temperatures going down to -20 °F (-30 °C) with a half-broken thermostat at home. That of course had been the winter following the winter as my time as *uchi deshi* working at the shrine in Washington, where I spent my days in a frozen shrine with nearly no heat, jumping in the river on the weekends, watching the sun rays never get lower than the treetops, and having my days filled with activities like swinging a pickax at ice which had pooled up in the driveway. I was seriously sick of cold and now I had managed to find snow at the end of June. Good fucking job me.

Whatever the case, I was in for the long haul and I hardened my resolve with a grunt (or something closer to a *kiai*), readying myself for the work ahead. Hans continued to explain that the fences which contained the sheep had to be moved every day, so that the sheep would have a fresh place to graze every night. The plan was that we would carry six fences down from the upper valley to a designated place on the side of the mountain to where the sheep would be led. Sounded simple to me. Boy was I in for a surprise.

We finally finished up with breakfast and did some dish cleaning in the stream. We didn't actually get up and going until almost noon, as everyone spent a lot of time dawdling—even Hans. As we were getting dressed for the hike, I was informed that I was going to need to be waterproofed. It could, and usually would, rain at any given moment, and there was no way to see how the weather was going to change because you couldn't see over the mountain peaks. I had the sailor's jacket that Karin had lent me, but I didn't have anything to cover my legs. Hans fished out some old water-proof pants which were a bit ripped up. When I gave him a questioning look over this, he told me to use duct tape to seal them. I was starting to understand how things were done around here.

Hans also told me that I was going to need a hat. At the time I was not much of a hat person and I tried to tell him I didn't need one. Thankfully for me he insisted and he let me use his old hat. It was gray and also a borderline sombrero. He was very clear that it was an important and expensive hat, showing me how to take it on and off (holding the top instead of bending the brim) and how to treat it.

The dawdling came to a close and we piled into the van. The hike up took some 45 minutes or so and I was sweating hard by the time we hit the top. When we reached the sheep Hans gave off a happy sound.

“Aha! She did it! Bauxi was able to do it!” He said. Apparently Bauxi had successfully maneuvered the sheep with the help of the dogs. Great. If Hans was happy about it than I was, too.

Theo, Paulina, and I started getting the fences down and rolled up as it started to become wet. The heavens were dropping rain, snow, and sleet on us in rotation. Despite my duct-taped rain pants, multi-colored sailor's jacket, sombrero-style shepherd's hat, hiking boots, and gloves specifically supplied by Günter, I was soaked before half the day was over. The low grass and mountain bushes were situated just right to get water all over my water-proof pants and have it drain down into my boots. I felt like I was walking through a muddy pond the whole day. Any part of me that was remotely protected by the rain was soon soaked in sweat, as hiking up and down a mountain carrying fences generates a significant amount of heat. I believe “soggy son-of-a-bitch” is an accurate description of

what was going on here.

Each person was able to carry two rolled-up fences, secured by bungee cords to what looked like they used to be backpacks. Bauxi led us down the side of the mountain and over to the new designated fence area so we could get started putting the fences up and went back to Hans, who was slowly approaching with the flock. This is when I realized our grave error: there was a science to moving these fences and I had no idea what it was, and apparently Theo didn't, either. The fences were made up of thin plastic posts with two-pronged metal spikes, connected by a light orange plastic thread material with some metal threaded into it so the fences could be turned electric with the application of a battery. Bauxi had told me that the most important part of setting up the fences was keeping the metal spikes to the air, as to not get them tangled with the rest of the fence. However, this advice could only help so much if the fence had already been tangled while it was rolled up. The fence I had rolled up fit this description and I had one hell of a time trying to get the thing unrolled and sticking into the ground. This turned into an absolute nightmare when the posts I had previously stuck in the ground would come back up because I was fighting with the tangled mess still in my hands. If more than two posts would come back out and fall in opposite directions, this would re-tangle the part of the fence I had so laboriously just untangled. All this was done on a rather steep part of the mountain, covered in rocks and bushes where I often couldn't walk, let alone walk while carrying a tangled mess of a fence.



Theo and Paulina with the sheep.

Add in the rain/snow/sleet and you have a wonderful combination for a work day.

We had carried six fences down from the upper valley and Hans showed up with the sheep way before we had them set up. At some point I realized I was incredibly thirsty and had to backtrack over the mountain to find a stream that didn't taste like sheep shit, and on the way I met Hans who was quite

jolly until I told him about the fence situation.

“What?!” he yelled at me, “How do you not have the fences up, yet? There are three of you working on it! I would have had them all up by myself by now!” Yea, you have also been doing this for 30 years. He went on to tell me that we now had a problem because we were going to have to close the fence faster than the sheep were going into it. Great, just what I needed, more stress to make me go faster and fuck up. I finally disengaged from him and found some water that didn't taste like sheep shit, then squished my way back to the fence-area to see if we could outrace the sheep.

After successfully fighting with the fences which I had rolled up, I moved on to a fence which Theo had rolled up—it was even more of a clusterfuck than mine had been. By this time I had been soaked for several hours, hadn't had anything to eat since we left, and was starting to run out of energy, so it hadn't taken much more to make me lose my temper. After I wasted precious energy getting angry at Theo, Bauxi did the same when she finally came back over and found me struggling with it. This was turning into just a wonderful day.

It was getting dark and the rain-snow-sleet roulette wheel was not letting up at all. At one point I was standing several feet up the slope from Theo, attempting to communicate with him to reorganize ourselves. There were several low bushes between us (I think they were junipers), and during the talk I lost my footing and fell tumbling down face-first and over them. My Aikido roll-reflex kicked in and I suddenly found myself with my feet on the ground, leaning back into the bushes and grinning next to Theo. The hat Hans had lent me was caught by the neck-strap and hanging behind my back like I had nonchalantly taken it off and set it there. As usual with near-maiming and near-death experiences, this allowed me to tap into the energy reserves deep inside and gave me a second wind.

It was close in the end, but we won the fence race with the sheep and all were inside. As much as I wanted to jump around for joy, there was still a lot of work to do. The bottoms of the fences still had to be secured. On the upper valley where it was relatively flat, this was quick work. On the side of the mountain, simply finding a proper rock or a stick was a pain in the ass. In addition the fences were often going over and around bushes, rocks, and small trees on a steep slope, making this task a royal mess and it was not long before we were all stumbling around in the dark with our headlamps.

We were thoroughly irritated and exhausted when the fence was finally deemed secured and the battery was hooked up. We could finally go back to the shepherd's wagon. This of course involved the standard hike back down the mountain (which was shorter this time because we were already part of the way down) and drive back to the wagons. Coming home may have been the most agonizing part of the day: we walked back into a damp and cold shepherd wagon dripping wet with no prepared food. All available hands had gone up to the mountain that day, meaning we came back to the living quarters exactly as we had left them.

Confusion was added to the disappointment: there was not enough room in the wagon for everyone to undress at once. Only one person could fit inside near the door, where he strip off his clothes and hang them up on the various hooks and clothing lines to dry. To make matters worse, the stove was also near the doorway, meaning that whoever was starting and tending to the fire had to be in the way of everyone else trying to get their wet clothes off. This disheveled attempt at an assembly line resembled a 3 Stooges skit as one by one everyone stripped down to their underwear and found a place to sit out of the way of everyone else, waiting for the fire to get going. I now understood the lack of attention and effort given to things like nudity and clean dishes: everyone was simply too tired to give a shit.

After the chaos was subdued and the wagon began to warm up we could finally worry about dinner. I was so hungry I was ready to start eating the walls. When the food was finally prepared and served I felt I had invoked the Abominable Stomach—something I had only ever experienced from doing Aikido. I ate and ate and ate and ate. The original hunger pains were quenched, but no matter how much I ate I still felt there was plenty of room for more.



Dead tired and ready to eat a whole sheep.

Three or four times after I thought I was finished eating I would reach back to refill my plate or pick miscellaneous food items off the table. I wondered how in the hell my stomach was fitting it all. After dinner (or in between me not eating things long enough to carry out a conversation), Hans gave me a better explanation on what I did wrong with the fences and how I could do it better. He emphasized over and over to keep the spikes of the fence posts toward the sky in order to prevent the fence from becoming “koodle-moodle”. He also took the time to compliment himself on the great decision on moving the sheep down the mountain out of the snow—something with which I could agree completely. The only thing I could think of that would have made the day more grueling was a good layer of snow over everything.

One by one every dropped off and eventually I did the same, still feeling like I could eat a little more. I slept like a rock could never know.

DAY 4 – Kudel-Mudel Mess, Take 2

I woke up some time around 10 o'clock with every muscle and bone in my body complaining bitterly. I had a brief attack of panic when I realized I was going to have to do the same thing again today. I beat this back down with the resolve that I was going to do better with the fences today and got around to getting my ass up. Bauxi was in her bed writing in her journal, her breasts carelessly exposed. I did my best to carefully monitor this out of the corner of my eye.

After emptying my bladder and splashing some water on my face from the stream, the

Abominable Stomach auto-invoked. I began going through the fruit and various other foods which could be immediately eaten in bins outside the shepherd wagon before going inside. Hans was still sliding out of bed (completely naked and oblivious to it) and greeted me before suggesting I start getting things organized for breakfast. I couldn't have been more happy to do so. I got together some food from the bins outside the wagon and some things from the “fridge” in the creek. I was already digging in as everyone else assembled themselves. I developed a rhythm where I would get a loaf of bread, a stick of butter, and a block of cheese near me and proceed to devour all three one slice at a time. In between slices I would mix it up with fruits, peanut butter, leftovers from the night before, something resembling oatmeal that Austrians call musli, and anything else that looked remotely edible and was not nailed down.

Hans' breakfast consisted of extra strong instant coffee and sliced up tomatoes and avocados, over which he would squeeze a lemon. Avocados and raw tomatoes are both on my short list of absolutely despised foods (the third and last of which is bleu cheese, the most vile and horrible apparatus that man has ever conceived to put in his mouth) and when I informed him of this, Hans laughed and told me I was always welcome there.

The plan for the day was laid out: Hans had checked the weather and the snow was going to stay at least until the next day. This meant that the sheep were going to stay on the slope. The plan was to use the right side of the current fence as the left side of the new one: the two fence pieces that were on the far end would stay where they were and we would move the other four fences to the other side where we could deposit the sheep in an orderly fashion. It sounded simple enough to me and everyone began to prepare themselves for the day. The dishes were sent out to the creek and people began poking through the modern art piece which was everyone's clothes hanging from every hook, string, or basket in the wagon. I discovered that I had been careless the night before and had not put my boots in a



Hey man, you got a quarter?

proper place to dry—they were still soaked. Groaning at the thought of having to *start* the day squishing around in soggy footwear, I was belated when Hans said I could use Jost's boots, as he definitely would not be needing them during his stay in the hospital. They were more comfortable and water-resistant than my boots, so I couldn't complain about the turn of events.

My gloves were also wet, which meant I had to dig around in the Box'o'Gloves. This box was a cross between a lost and found container, an overstock warehouse, and an orphanage. Finding two gloves that fit was a challenge and two gloves that matched was out of the question. In the end I

equipped myself with one mitten and one glove. I also found a scarf kicking around and by the time I was dressed I must have looked like some crazy homeless guy: I was wearing a sombrero-style shepherd's hat, a scarf over my face, one mitten, one glove, a colorful yellow, blue, and red sailor's jacket, and a pair of rain pants held together by rings of duct tape. My appearance had been officially added to the list of things about which I no longer gave a shit.

I was still munching on whatever I could find when we got into the van. While we were hiking up the trail (it was already raining), I hit Hans with some more questions about shepherding. Specifically, I asked him about the three goats and the donkey I had seen in the flock. He told me that

the donkey was originally bought to help haul things, but turned out to be too young to do so and now just hung out with the rest of the sheep. The goats, however, served a more useful purpose. Sheep, as most of us know, are sheepish. They are frightened easily and they stay frightened. Hans explained that if a really loud noise were to go off next to some sheep, for example an exploding bike tire, the sheep would freeze in fear and stay frozen, possibly up to 20 minutes. Goats, on the other hand, will freeze, check around to see if everything is okay, and continue on after a few seconds. Thus the goats acted as role-models for the sheep to follow in the case they had some reason to be scared and not move.



Not completely soaked, but getting there.

“Plus,” Hans said, “we get milk from the goats. If a shepherd is stuck in the mountains with his flock with no food, at least he can drink the milk from the goat instead of starving to death.” I nodded in understanding, despite the funny image in my mind of a shepherd stuck on a mountain for days, lying on his side sucking at the udders of a goat.

We reached the obnoxiously bleating flock and Hans opened up the fence to let them out after untying the dogs. Every night the dogs were tied up to a tree to sleep up in the mountain with the flock, given a half of a dead lamb every day for food (there was always at least one dead lamb a day). I found this an unfortunate state of affairs for the dogs, especially considering the recent precipitation, but the dogs looked healthy as ever and I figured Hans knew more about it than I did. I was itching to start with the fences, but Hans told me to relax and wait until all the sheep were out of the fence.

“Eat the berries you find in the meantime,” he said, “They will give you energy.” I didn't need to be told twice.

Hans also noticed my method of using my stick, i.e. *not* the method that Bauxi had showed me on my first day on the mountain. He explained the concept to me again (put the stick into the ground toward the inclining side of the mountain, not the declining side) and demonstrated it for me. I don't know if Bauxi was just bad at explaining things or that I was now in a different mood to listen, but I suddenly saw the genius of the technique. With two hands on my stick, if I stuck it into the ground in front of me and up the incline, I could use it like a cross between a vaulting pole and a crutch. While this might not sound so amazing in writing, in person it was like getting my driver's license for the first time*: suddenly I could go anywhere. *Fast*. I was converted into a billy goat—I no longer needed pathways or flat surfaces and could walk over any bushes or slopes like I was taking a stroll through the park. All I needed was my shepherd's stick and two free hands with which to use it.

*Seriously. This is so fucking cool. I would say the whole trip to the shepherds would have been worth it if I just went there to learn that.

The last of the sheep made their way out of the fenced area and we got to work. Despite Hans' extra efforts to tell me “spikes to the air!”, I still made an absolute clusterfuck of the fences. The day ended up being more or less a repeat of the day before. Several hours of work were added because we had to fight to get the fences unrolled properly and then find rocks and sticks to secure them with. We worked well into the night, each person a white LED spot on the mountain coming from the lamps on

his or her forehead in the blackness of night. It rained the whole time and despite Jost's superior boots, I was sloshing in them well before half way through the day. Hans and Bauxi became angry again at the improper usage of the fences and I did as well, because I had really tried hard not to fuck up. In any case, we were finally successful at fencing the sheep in (or Hans deemed it successful, at least) and we made our way back down the mountain. This in and of itself is a rather interesting part of the day. Just to *get to the sheep*, you have to hike up a mountain for at least 30 minutes to an hour, and then *just to get back home*, you have to do the same hike back down. Putting these hikes on both sides of a 10-12 hour day which was spent hiking up and down slopes carrying heavy fences on your back in the rain gives a recipe for absolute exhaustion that I had never before experienced (as well as the proper impetus and organization for the invoking of the Abominable Stomach). Like the day before, we came back to a cold shepherd's wagon with no prepared food, where everyone had to wait while each person stripped down in the entry way one at a time, trying to make maneuver around the person kneeling in front of the stove making the fire.

I was more careful this time in making sure that my clothes and shoes were hung up in a fashion to ensure optimal drying. However, for the time being I was almost completely out of clothes. The only dry articles I had left were a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, which made any reason for going outside unpleasant, as it was still cold and raining. After warming up and getting something to eat (or rather, after eating the house down) we crashed off to bed. I was so tired I didn't even care about Bauxi being naked.

DAY 5 – Sheep Mother

I woke in a similar fashion as the day before: creaking like floor boards in an old house and wondering just how in the hell I was going to manage to do that shit again. Fortunately, the weather had taken a turn for the better and I could see sunshine halfway down the mountain peaks, making its way into the valley. I went through a haphazard morning routine, which was rather quick because I was still in a T-shirt and shorts. It was not long before the Abominable Stomach yawned itself awake and gripped my innards with an iron claw. I was organizing things for breakfast while everyone was still waking up, munching on whatever fruit, bread, cheese, or leftover I could find.

As everyone gathered for the morning meeting, Hans declared that the snow was going to melt and we could bring the sheep back to the upper valley. He also decided it was time I received a crash course in proper fence-rolling. My excitement to be able to do a proper job out-shined my irritation that I had not been shown on my first day.

As I was equipping my shepherd's gear before the fence-lesson, I was bemoaned to find that not only were Jost's boots still soaked, my boots were still wet from two days before. Before I could throw a fit, Hans calmed me down by showing me the shepherd's solution to such a mishap: putting plastic bags on your feet over your socks. My immediate reflex to reject this was shot down by my desire for dry feet. Great. Now I had plastic bags on my feet to add to my duct-taped pants and mismatching gloves. I was becoming more and more homeless by the minute. The days prior I had wondered when and where the shepherds did their laundry, and just how much an article of clothing had to be used before it was considered dirty. Now I understood that the *dirty* property was not even a concern; all you cared about was *dry*.

Bauxi took me outside to practice with the fences. I was a bit apprehensive at having to get the lesson from Bauxi (not because I was irritated with her, but her teaching and explanation track record with me so far was pretty dismal), but as we had no time constraints (i.e. no sheep to race) it was not so bad.

The trick when rolling up the fences was to first have them lain out flat on the ground with all the spikes facing the same direction, then pick up each fence post one at a time, making sure that the adjacent and connected fence material was in the same direction. Then the overlapping fence material

was folded into a triangle and rolled it up as tightly as possible, securing it with bungee cords. To put the fences back up, you made sure that the spikes were to the air (seriously. *Spikes to the air!!*) and had to lay the posts on the ground (not stick them in the ground) one at a time, with all the spikes facing the same direction. Having adequately laid the fence out in the right spot, *then* you went back and poked all the fence posts into the ground. The process was simple but not exactly intuitive.



Proper fence-rolling procedure. If you look closely, you can see the plastic bag under my pants on my right foot.

After the lesson was finished, we geared ourselves to head up the mountain. The plan was this: as we were moving the flock back to the upper valley, moving the fences was going to be a pain in the ass. As the strong young male in the group, naturally I was designated for this job. I was going to have to carry four of the six fences up (the other two would be retrieved at a later date) the upper valley. Hans was going to lead the flock, while Bauxi and Paulina would be at the back making sure there were no stragglers. This meant I would have to make two trips up and down the mountain, as I would only be able to carry two fences at a time. It also meant that the entire ordeal depended on me, because the day was not over until the fences were up. Theo was going to stay down in the valley.

I was pumped. The weather was finally better and I had an idea about what I was doing. The learning curve had been sharp, but I felt like I had finally graduated from Dumb Bitch to Novice Shepherd. The day ahead of me was about to prove my new merits.

Properly dressed and motivated, we drove up to the bottom of the trail a little bit after noon. Unfortunately, as the weather can change at any given moment because you can't see what the clouds

look like over the mountain peaks, you always have to dress for rain and cold. This meant I was almost soaked in sweat by the time we reached the sheep. I guess there was just no way of not getting wet in this job. I had my sailor's jacket tied around my waste with my gloves stuffed in my pockets and Hans' hat on my back with its strap around my neck, but I still felt like I was in a sauna.

We reached the sheep and commenced standard operating procedure. While we were waiting for the sheep to make their exodus, Bauxi gave me a recommendation on how I should proceed with the fences. On top of the fences themselves, I had to carry the battery as well as a dead lamb that had just been found (dog food, remember). She suggested that I carry two fences and the battery first, then two fences and the dead lamb second. This sounded logical to me, so when the sheep had finally exited and I was rolling up the first two fences, I was rather irritated when I couldn't locate the battery. With high grass, large rocks, and low bushes everywhere, it was very easy to lose something even if it was right next to you. I was worried that I eventually would not be able to find the battery, but I realized I was going to have to get my ass in gear. I didn't want everyone waiting around for fences on the upper valley because I was going in circles. Thus I rolled up the first two fences (quite nicely, I might add), attached them to my backpack along with the dead lamb, and began my ascent.

This first trip up was hard work, but nothing I couldn't handle. The snow was almost all melted and with my new shepherd stick technique I made quick work of it, despite the load on my back. I



Sheepapolis!

passed the flock on the way up and waved to everyone, and before I knew it I was on the upper valley unloading my backpack.

On the way back down I passed Bauxi and asked her about the battery, and she assured me that it was right next to one of the fences. I realized that this information was about as specific as I was going to get, so I settled for it and continued on to the fences. I got back and to my relief found the battery nestled amongst some grass and

junipers next to one of the fences as Bauxi had told me. I also found another dead lamb to add to my load, which even though it was not very heavy, I was not exactly thrilled about any extra weight.

I took my backpack off and got busy rolling up the next two fences when I heard a peculiar sound and froze.

“No fucking way.” I said to the tree next to me, the only nearby sentient willing to listen.

The peculiar sound I had heard was a “maaahh!” with a distinct Austrian sheep accent. This was not strange by itself, as I could still hear the manifold bleatings of the flock in the distance. No, the problem with this “maaahh!” was that it was really close, and more specifically, *young*.

I set my fence down and moved in the direction of the sound and, lo and behold, there was a little black lamb looking up at me pitifully. It had not moved with the flock one inch. I groaned as it “maaaaah!”ed again, slapping my forehead. My load had just turned into two fences, a heavy battery, a dead lamb, *and* a live one. On my second hike up the mountain! I couldn't just leave the poor schmuck there to die, so I picked him (or her, I had no idea which. I'm just going to use “him” from here on out) up and deposited him next to my backpack while I finished rolling the fences up. After I was done and had gotten everything in one place, I began to strap everything to my backpack. Two fences on the

bottom, then the battery, then the dead lamb. I briefly considered strapping the live one there as well, but I realized that two over-stretched bungee cords were not going to hold the squirmy guy in place for more than a minute.

As my job with the shepherd's had primarily been fence-carrying, I had not yet had a chance to do the following, but I knew it was the standard procedure: when a young lamb decides it is too exhausted and simply cannot continue, it is picked up and held around a person's neck, usually to the loud protests of its mother. Thus once I had everything adequately strapped and my backpack on, I picked him up to put him around my neck and continue my journey. I was immediately met by an algorithm of problems.

First was the hat which Hans had lent me. The very, very precious hat. I had already been scolded for incorrectly taking it on and off by holding the brim instead of the top, and it was explained to me that it was a very expensive hat that "could have ten more years life left in it, if it is treated well". When I went to put the lamb around my neck, I ran into the problem that the hat was already there. Now, I couldn't just leave the hat and pick it up later, because who knows what would have happened to it, and even if I would have been able to find it later. That meant the only other place to put it was on my head. I was not very happy about this because the day was still really hot. This was compounded when I actually put the lamb around my neck, as it pushed the back of my hat up, and therefore the front of it down. I was not able to see more than a yard or two in front of me, and no amount of lamb-hat rearranging made it any better. This would make my climb fairly dangerous, as being able to see where I was going was rather vital to not slipping and falling.

The second problem was realized when I reached for my stick. As the lamb was so squirmy, I had to hold two of its legs with one of my hands. That meant I lost the ability to use the special shepherd stick-technique. This was a huge blow to my speed and balance. Lastly, I was already fucking exhausted, and now I was carrying too much.

While I was considering what to do about the situation, I remembered the flock slowly making its way to the upper valley, where everyone else would be waiting for me to show up with these fences and the battery. I simply didn't have the time to dawdle and fuck around. I accepted my fate, summoned my resolve, and began to make my way back up the mountain.

It turned out to be the most grueling hiking experience of my life. I was in a position where I really didn't have the energy to do what I needed to do, but I had to do it anyway. This gave a new meaning to putting one foot in front of the other, because that was as far as I could think and literally as far as I could see. It took all my energy to concentrate on staying upright, balancing on one foot during the time I had to lift the other one in order to put it in front of myself. I used my shepherd's stick like a standard walking stick—a poor substitute for a third foot. I had to go over streams, the slippery rocks next to them, narrow and steep paths covered in sheep shit, and short dense bushes that I would not label structurally sound when I couldn't even keep my back straight.

I had to take more than a few breaks on the way. I would (attempt to) put the lamb down gently, throw off my backpack, remove Hans' hat, and collapse onto anything I could sit on. It was not long before I was giving the lamb pep-talks.

"Come on, Billy!" I would cry, "We're gonna make it! We're gonna make it back to the flock and we're gonna find your mom and everything's going to be okay! Everything's under control!" I don't think I even convinced Billy—the pep-talks were really for myself.

I have no idea how long it actually took me to get back to the upper valley. It must have been at least an hour when the flock finally came back into view, making its way up to the last part of the slope. My path was to continue on the side of the slope to where we would finally put the sheep into the fence, but I decided to take the straightest path to Hans in order to get Billy off of my neck. I noticed Bauxi on the other side of the gorge from where I was and she soon noticed me traveling in the "wrong" direction. She waved her hands and yelled at me, trying to tell me to go the way. I knew I wouldn't be able to communicate my situation with her at that distance, and I didn't have the energy to

make the effort, so I just waved her off and ignored her.

I made my way up the gorge at an agonizing rate. When I reached the top I found Hans and Bausi busy butchering a sheep. While I was happy that we would be eating top quality sheep that night, I felt like I deserved a round of applause for making it up the mountain, and everyone was too preoccupied to care. Hans just acknowledged me with a nod and went back to skinning the sheep carcass. I collapsed in a heap on a rock near Paulina, who was chilling out as she didn't have much to do at the moment. I asked her if she would take a picture of me with Billy around my neck and she started digging around in her bag for her camera. I had a creeping intuition that I should put Billy down and leave him alone as soon as possible, but I felt that I had earned a photograph, so I picked him back up and put him around my neck. Paulina was able to get off a quick photo before my suspicion was confirmed.

“What are you doing?!”

Hans shouted at me, apparently not so busy with butchering the sheep to not look up at me, “This lamb is only a day old! It has not been imprinted to its mother, yet, and has probably been imprinted to you! That means that there is a small chance that it will find its mother again, and it will probably die!” I groaned mentally at this information. That would have meant I carried the fucker all the way up the mountain for nothing. I was also irritated that Hans was yelling at me for this. While it was not a long jump of logic to figure that a lamb would imprint itself to its mother, and thus imprint itself to anyone else in the mother's absence, I found it rude for him to have expected me to know that. Especially as I had been carrying the little guy around my neck, talking to him, and petting him for the last two hours or so, I couldn't really see how an extra 15 seconds to take a picture would make a difference. He was still going.

“Now in order to save it we would have to keep it and bring it down with us! You would have to be the mother! Would you feed it with your breast?” While I felt this would have been an opportune and acceptable moment to shout back at him for being a dick. I chose a more diplomatic approach.

“So should I have just left him there, then?” I shouted back over the rocks. I don't know if he was worried about me chastising him in return or just realized that he was going overboard, but he quickly changed his tune, apologized, and told me I was a good helper. With the crisis averted and a



Me half-dead from exhaustion with a still-living Billy.

photo successfully taken, I busied myself with making the rest of the hike up to where I left the other two fences. Having dropped off Billy and the dead lamb, I was lighter, able to put the hat around my neck again and utilize the shepherd stick-technique. I made it back to my destination and let my backpack fall to the ground, with me doing so as well. I took the time to relax, waiting for the others to show up and new orders with them.

When the others arrived we set about putting the fences up. This was a piece of cake on the non-sloped upper valley, especially after knowing how to do it properly. The battery was hooked up to the fence and the bottom was secured with rocks in a short time. When Hans deemed us finished there were still several hours of daylight left. We took some time to chill out before going down the mountain, and I spent some time chatting with Bauxi about the wide swath of mountains we could see from our vantage point.



Bauxi and I discussing mountains.

It was decided to go back down the mountain and I was able to do so with the satisfaction of doing a good job. I was even able to do it without being rained on, although I was almost soaked from my own sweat.

We arrived back at the shepherd wagon and began preparing ourselves for dinner, and it was sometime around here that more people started showing up. I don't remember exactly who showed up when, but eventually there was an Austrian guy who was a friend of Paulina, a Czech girl, two twin girls from Scotland, and Mingo, Hans' five-month pregnant girlfriend.

Mingo is usually a full-time shepherdess but was gone the last few days visiting someone. This

had added to the lack-of-personnel problem and the escaped sheep problem (which then was sprinkled with snow). Having her back would be a huge help, even if she was just staying behind during the day and taking care of the wagons and cooking. The first thing that hit me about Mingo was she was *absolutely beautiful*. Like slowing-down-cars and snapping-necks beautiful. She could have been a super model. Second was her age. When I had time to ask her the next day, she told me she was 23. That was even a year younger than me. Hans was well into his 50's already with three sons, the youngest of which I think was 18. This is normally the kind of situation you hear about with rock stars and celebrities, rich old dudes, or royalty—something which makes up for the fact that the older partner is no longer in the attractive prime of his life. Clearly there was something very attractive in the life of a shepherd that Mingo saw and was pursuing it with enough dedication to have a child with the head shepherd. It made me want to give Hans a high-five.

When I had time to ask her about it the next day, Mingo told me that she had simply been a helper, like everyone else that comes and goes, who ended up staying (come to think of it, I remember getting a similar story from Bauxi). That meant that it was a regular practice that helpers stayed anywhere from a few days to forever, and that the occupation of “shepherd” was open to anyone with the determination and balls to come out here and stay. It is weird the amount of opportunities to find in the world when you quit your job and just fly away.

Anyway, we spent the rest of the night chatting and munching (or devouring, in my case) on sheep. While Hans had been butchering it on the upper valley, he had asked me if I was interested in eating the liver. I said yes as a reflex before he mentioned that he really didn't like it, so now that it was cooked up I was obligated to eat it. It tasted good, as far as my squeamish American taste buds were concerned, but the meat itself was far more delicious. The Czech girl had arrived with a bottle of fruity schnapps (anything in Austria over 30% or so is considered “schnapps”) which was passed around frequently during dinner. I had been wondering where everyone was going to sleep; the Austrian guy had brought his own tent, but that still left an extra three people and the caravan was already full with me, Theo, and Bauxi. Before I was able to ask, Hans mentioned a shack he rented back down the road in Rantendorf, which was regularly used to house excess helpers. I was a little irritated at learning about this *now*, because I would have been more than happy to have my own fire and space to stretch out, and not having to squish around in the mud with less than adequate clothing every time I needed to go between the caravan and the shepherd's wagon. However, after thinking about it, being way back in the village by myself didn't sound like the most fun of options, so I put it on the “maybe next time” list.

The night drew on and everyone meandered off to their designated sleeping areas. Exhausted, I crashed in a heap in my bed and slept soundly until morning.

DAY 6 – The Call Back Home

I woke up the next morning with dread. I simply had no idea how in the fucking hell I was going to manage carrying fences up and down the mountain again (which also led me to wonder how Hans was managing to do it every single day). I needed a break, bad. Despite having slept solidly for nine hours, I had a headache from not getting enough rest and my muscles begged to do nothing. Thus I was elated when Hans, during breakfast, told me that I could take a break that day because there were so many extra helpers (I think I also had acquired some pity from the Billy experience and some respect from doing a good job from the day before). I could stay in the lower valley with Mingo and help take cook and take care of less demanding things. Around noon everyone was suited up and they drove off down the sheep-ward road.

Mingo had arrived the day before with a car, some standard small 4-door sedan, and had to take it down to town that morning. When she returned she reported to me that Leila back in Melk had left a message on her cell phone the day before which had sounded rather serious, asking that I call back as soon as possible. There was no signal up on the mountain, so Mingo had not received the message until

driving down to town. I asked her if I could use her phone to call Leila back, and she tossed me both the phone and the keys to the car, telling me how far down the road I had to go before I would get a signal.

I drove down to the described spot and called Leila back. She told me that she had been calling Hans' phone for the last three or four days trying to get a hold of me, and was finally told by Karin and Günter that Hans had lost his cell phone and called Mingo instead. I was not liking the way that this conversation was going, and my dread was soon rewarded. Tania, a helpx-er in a wheelchair from Luxembourg who had been staying at the farm in Melk for over a year, had been diagnosed with brain cancer, and my presence was specifically requested back at the farm in order to help out. My original plan had been to spend two weeks with the shepherds, but this was a hefty request that I was not able to just wave off. I told her that I didn't know the specifics of the needs and transportation with the shepherds, but I would get back to her as soon as possible.

After she thanked me and hung up, I drove back to the wagons and reported to Mingo the situation. She was concerned, but unfortunately it was too late in the day already to make it back to Melk and we would have to wait until Hans returned in order to have official information on the shepherding situation. Thus all I could do was organize things and cook as we had planned.

In between prying Mingo with borderline-too-personal questions, an old Austrian couple showed up at the wagons looking for Hans. They came with some pre-chopped firewood, some food, and a small bottle of home-distilled schnapps. I didn't understand a word of the exchange and Mingo told me after they left that they had previously exchanged something for a small lamb and that they would like to do it again for another one. I was annoyed briefly at the thought of Billy being already dead on the mountain when I could have brought him down here and given him to this old couple.

After they left Mingo and I began to focus on cooking, and she decided to make lamb wienerschnitzel, something which I jubilated over quietly to myself. We had to wait awhile before we could eat, however, because again it was not until after dark when everyone returned, all about to drop from exhaustion.

“Out of my way,” Hans ordered, when everyone was not moving fast enough, “I am exhausted and I need to sit.” Hating to have to watch everyone wait for the slow-ass wet-clothing-strip assembly line, I told everyone to throw their clothes in a pile on the floor and that I would hang them up after everyone was done. I was thanked for this and soon everyone was half-naked around the table barely able to sit up while I hung up all the wet clothes. Mingo began to set dinner out.

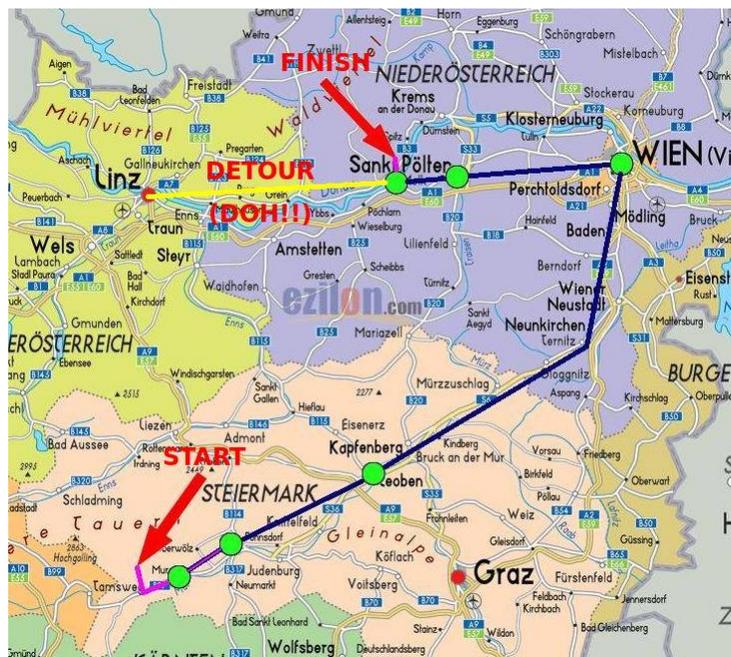
After we began eating and the homemade schnapps was passed around (it was warm, fuzzy, and burning in such a way that the store-bought fruity crap that the Czech girl had brought couldn't even dream of), I informed Hans of my recent turn of events. He said he was sad to hear that happen and sad to see me have to go, telling me that I was a really good helper (which probably meant that I was able to put up with their chastising after not being given clear directions on what to do), but agreed with that it was pretty hard to say “no, I can't help because I'm busy herding sheep” to someone with brain cancer. However, the shepherd operation wouldn't be disabled if I left, now that several new helpers had arrived. It was discussed further and decided that I would catch a ride with Paulina the next morning, who had to go down into Murau for something, and she would be able to drop me off at the train station. After dinner Mingo gave me her cell phone and the keys again so I could drive down and call Leila to tell her my plans for returning. By the time I walked out of the wagon Hans was already crashed in bed and he told me to leave the phone in the car and not to bother coming back in for the night.

I drove down to make the call to Leila and crashed into bed myself upon returning.

DAY 7 – The Ride Back to Melk

The next morning I got all my things together and prepared to leave with Paulina after breakfast (by getting my things together, I mean forgetting my belt, my fleece sweatshirt, and one of my T-shirts). I said goodbye to everyone, making sure that Theo had my email address so he could email me his pictures, and we left while everyone was getting ready to go up the mountain. I chatted with Paulina about life in Poland while we drove. We stopped at a grocery store so Paulina could buy food for everyone back on the mountain and I could buy something to eat for my seven and a half hour trip back to Melk. We went to the train station and asked for the next train heading out toward Vienna. The guy behind the counter asked me if I wanted to buy a ticket and I told him I didn't need one, because I had bought a ride-around-Austria-in-trains-as-much-as-you-want-the-whole-summer ticket back in May. He told me that ticket only applied to real trains, and that the rickety metro-bus thing that served more cows than people required its own ticket. I thought back to the signs I saw on the way to the shepherds about how “black-riding injures the nerves” and laughed before buying my ticket.

I exchanged email addresses with Paulina and hugged her goodbye before she drove off. I waited around twenty minutes before the train-bus-thing showed up and I was on my way. The ride back was exceptionally boring. Although I had a better idea of what trains to take (they were the same



I almost made a damn circle.

ones I had taken a week before, only backwards), I still had that nagging fear of getting on the wrong train. Near the end of the trip, my worries finally came to fruition. If we look at the map again, we see it is the same as before with just START and FINISH reversed. The second to last green dot on the return journey is the city of Sankt Pölten, a twenty minute train ride out from Melk. The direction to Melk, of course, is the direction to Linz, one of Austria's major cities. I don't remember my thinking processes at the time, but somehow I got on a train to Linz, thinking it would stop at Melk on the way. After about thirty minutes on the train I started getting the feeling that nothing looked familiar, and began perusing through a train schedule leaflet. I didn't need to be able to read German to figure out that the name “Melk” was not on timetable. I groaned in realization that not only had I taken the wrong train, I had taken the wrong train in the right direction. I had already gone past Melk on my way to Linz, which is a one hour train ride from Sankt Pölten. There was nothing I could do but wait.

The real frustration didn't set in until I got out at Linz and tried to make sense of the train schedules. To my dismay there was no train going from Linz to Melk, meaning that I was going to have to take a train back to Sankt Pölten, which meant I would ride past Melk *again*, so I could get on the train I originally meant to take. In total this added another two hours to my trip.

After being bored and staring out the window for another hour, waving at Melk as I passed by, I was deposited once again in Sankt Pölten and did a furious double-extra-check to make sure I would be taking the correct train, especially considering it was getting late and that soon the trains would stop running. Not trusting my train schedule-reading abilities, upon boarding the train I made a straight line to the closest person* on the train and asked, “Fährt dieser Zug nach Melk?” [“Is this train going to

Melk?"]

*By "closest person", naturally I mean the attractive young woman who was just as close to me as the older woman.

By the shocked reaction I received from the girl, clearly my accent and pronunciation were way off. She looked confused and asked me a question, and after a bit more confusion we switched to English and I repeated my initial inquiry. She confirmed that yes, indeed, the train was going to Melk, and I collapsed in relief into the seat across from her.

I must have looked interesting, as I had not really bathed in a week, I was wearing clothes that survived four days of sheep herding, and I clearly was not Austrian. She started poking me with questions about who I was and I did the same to her in return. I learned she was a 27 year old au pair out of Russia, currently living and studying in Austria. The conversation then turned to just who in the hell I was and what I was doing. It went something like this:

"So... what are you doing in Austria?" She asked, looking genuinely quizzical.

"Oh, you know. Herding sheep." I replied, holding back my smirk.

"You... what?" I took a minute to explain to her my last week and she went on, "But, that's not *all* you're doing in Austria, is it?"

"No," I said, "I've actually been spending most of my time working on a farm near Melk. This sheep thing was just some sort of uh... fling. An adventure."

"Do you work for money there or... what?"

"Nah, I just work for food and a place to stay. It's only about four hours a day and it's what I did to come to Europe."

"How long do you plan on doing this?"

"No idea."

"And when do you plan on going back to the United States?"

"No idea."

"Do you plan on going back to the United States?"

"No idea."

"And how did you find this farm? How did you pick Austria of all places?"

"To keep it simple, I basically threw a dart at a map of Europe, then bought a one-way plane ticket and showed up."

She stared at me for a second before continuing, "And... why don't you go to school?"

"Oh, I did that." I said.

Blink. Blink. "You finished? What did you study?"

"Chemistry." I said and received the same gawk I get from everyone I tell that to who has not studied a natural science.

"So what about getting a job?" she asked, "With chemistry surely you could find something good."

"Yea..." I said, waving my hand indifferently, "I had one of those. I quit."

"You quit? Where did you work?"

"At an oil refinery as a laboratory technician. The money was good, but I hated it. So I quit."

"Then you came to Europe?"

"Uh... no. There was another six months which I spent working for my martial arts instructor and then I moved to Vermont for a year." I explained to her what and where Vermont was. "I found two jobs there: teaching math and chemistry at a private high school for girls who play hockey and delivering pizzas." She just stared at me. "After the teaching job was over, which it was only five months out of the year, I had some money saved up and I decided to come to Europe."

I could see her still making an effort to try find a category to fit me into as the train began to

slow down. I had made it back to Melk. Looking back, it is clear to me now that meeting the Russian girl was the make-up for having the misfortune of taking the wrong train, which is why I'm sad that I totally blew the chance to get her contact information. As I was getting up to get off the train before it took off again towards Linz, I could see that she was waiting for me to ask her for her information or to give her my own, and all I did was give her an awkward good-bye. I stepped out of the train feeling like a total dweeb.

It was almost dark when I stepped off onto the train station and no one else was around. It was very reminiscent of my original arrival in Austria, except this time I didn't feel like a lost puppy. I called up the family with the nearby phone booth and was told Hartwig, Leila's husband, would be there to pick me up in about fifteen minutes. He did just that and I came back to the farm bouncing off the walls with the energy I had accumulated from the mountain.

In the next few days when I had time to tell Karin and Günter about my experience, we discussed the possibility of the acquisition of a shepherd's hat. Karin told me (and showed me the catalog) of a company based in Germany that makes clothing and gear for shepherds, primarily from the wool that the shepherds supply themselves. It was where Hans' crew bought all their gear and where Bauxi and Karin had purchased the same hat in which I was interested. Having survived my week of shepherding, I decided I needed a shepherd's hat and asked Karin to order one for me. It arrived in the mail a week or two later, and I have worn it with a smirking pride ever since, knowing I earned the damn thing.

Dylan Lawrence Moore
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Vienna