

Becoming a farmer – 1981

Matthias Langensiepen, Bonn – June 2021

Having just turned 18 years I sat for the first time in an airplane from Bonn to Tel-Aviv. I had accompanied famous German actors as a stage musician in a theatre during the previous months, worked in a steel factory which manufactured working platforms for coal mines, and was otherwise interested in electronics. I had talent to become a flutist, but my teacher warned me that being a musician is not all about having fun. His advice was very precious. I maintained my joy for music by deciding against becoming a professional musician.

Next day after I had landed in Tel-Aviv, I went to the city center being afraid to talk to anyone because my English was extremely bad and I didn't know Hebrew. It was the first time I saw palms against a crystal blue sky. People from all kinds of origins were buzzing relaxed on the streets. Sun reflection from the white city buildings was intense, the air hot and steamy. Car drivers were impatiently honking in the streets on all kinds of occasions. Shop designs reminded me of the 60s. Falafel with hummus and pita tasted very well and got me addicted until today. I walked through the Bauhaus quarter to the beach where the sun glittered on the Mediterranean and people enjoyed the refreshing sea. Later I slowly strolled back to the center looking amazed at the variety of interesting faces of passing pedestrians. An older woman at Dizengoff Square asked me in German "From which town are you in Germany?" I was very surprised that somebody approached me in my mother-tongue. "How did you find out that I am a German?", I asked back. "Well, the way you walk..." the women retorted, smiled, invited me to sit next to her and continued "Tell me from where you are and how life is there today". A hugely interesting conversation followed, the first of countless of this sort I later had. A number was tattooed on her arm. She was a survivor of a German concentration camp. We didn't speak about it.

Many young people from around the globe worked in Kibbutzim at this time, dwelling in modest accommodations sort-of hippie style. We could do whatever we liked as long as we did our work and respected the rules. We had partner families, were included in all cultural activities and taken on occasional leisure trips through the country with an old school bus equipped with good food, kitchen tools and camping gear. I never forget that someone from the Kibbutz drove to the North to harvest a Christmas tree and the Kibbutz prepared a decent dinner for us at Christmas. We were truly made feel at home. Only now, four decades later, I am realizing how precious this experience was to have lived a social utopia in reality. It doesn't exist anymore.

Having a fine sense for music I first worked in the recorder factory of the Kibbutz and went through initial steps of becoming a tuner. It was interesting to experience the manufacturing steps of different recorder types. The working atmosphere was very pleasant and informal. Eating breaks were taken in the nearby dining hall where the community met for collective meals. Kibbutzniks working in the fields and orchards from daybreak till sunset were highly esteemed for the tough work they were doing. Sometimes we had to help them during peak

work like cotton harvesting or citrus picking. My interest in farming rose considerably while working with them and I asked to be transferred from the recorder factory to farm-work on the weekly work-roster. Irrigation was my new assignment. I worked many months in a decent team operating irrigation equipment in all kinds of field crops. It was huge fun and fulfilling, particularly as a tractor driver. I learned how to adjust to the rhythms of the days and seasons affecting crop choices, irrigation scheduling and application of cultivation methods. It was the first time in my young life that I felt truly satisfied with what I was doing. Only later did I learn that the dignifying working culture of the Kibbutz decisively contributed to this satisfaction. What a contrast to today's neo-liberal working culture!

One early morning, I towed a carrot harvester to a distant field. A lorry driver from Gaza was already waiting for driving in parallel and loading the harvested carrots. However, there was no jeep coming for bringing the harvest operator which had to ensure that the machine-belts picking the carrots were always in place. After conversing a while with the lorry driver I contacted the Kibbutz with a walkie-talkie asking what has happened to the harvest operator. "Didn't you notice? We are in war! All reserve soldiers were drafted to the army last night." I apologized to the lorry driver. We said goodbye and drove back to where we were coming from. It was the outbreak of the first Lebanon war on June 6, 1982.

Agricultural operations had to be maintained in the absence of drafted soldiers from the Kibbutz. Sprinkler irrigation was replaced by water-saving drip-irrigation. Cows had to be milked and fields cultivated. Suddenly, we few volunteers became responsible for running farm operations of an entire Kibbutz. What a task for an 18 year old boy! It felt good. We received a crash-course in dimensioning dripper lines with hydraulic calculations, started installing the freshly delivered drip equipment and improved our skills through hands-on experience. The war was short. Soldiers of the Kibbutz were slowly returning from Lebanon, some of them heavily traumatized, not speaking to anybody, working like robots, not coming to the dining-room, hiding in their rooms, unable to socialize. I wasn't interested in Israel-Arab conflicts till then, but this was real. We worked together in the fields under entirely new circumstances. A volunteer recommended a book to me in this time: E. F. Schumacher (1973) *Small is beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered.* The Kibbutz threw a party to celebrate that we helped saving its harvests. Something drew me to the Lebanon border near Rosh HaNikra where I stayed for two weeks. Security was safe. There was no tourism, just army on land, in the air and the sea. I looked into faces of soldiers who came back from Lebanon. I never forget them. War serves only one purpose, mutual butchering. I decided to become a conscientious objector.

I returned to Germany about a year after I had left, still unsure what I wanted to do in the future. I had to prepare myself for an examination whether I was serious as a conscientious objector or just pretending which I passed. Next, I had to apply for community service, which every conscientious objector was required to do instead of army service. I initially helped people living on the street and applied for a volunteer position at Action Reconciliation and Peace Service in Berlin which I eventually got. I also occasionally worked on two farms to get

an impression about German farming. Bridging time until my service I also started reading books, which I hadn't seriously done before. I remembered Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* a Kibbutz volunteer recommended to me and ordered a German copy. I read it from cover to cover, took notes, unaware that I was holding one of the most influential books of the last century in my hands. To be honest, I understood very little at that age. However, I found one argument very convincing, that work becomes fulfilling when a human finds a good balance between physical and mental work. I realized that this balance can be ideally attained in farming. I decided to become a farmer and never regretted this choice.