

MY FARMER

by Heidrun West

Everybody should have a farmer. I have one, and how I'd hate to lose him. Particularly now that we have become friends. The parking area in front of our garage is one of the few points where tractors can stop and allow cars to pass. It was during one of these enforced stops that the farmer and I got to talking - or nattering, as my husband calls this intellectual activity. I still remember being pleasantly surprised by the farmer's friendly directness. It was such a balm on my newcomer's wounds.

With not enough land close to his farm, he rents bits and pieces all over the nearby hills. Mountain farming is labour intensive at the best of times. But this ferrying of grass and hay from the fields to the barn, and carrying manure back to the fields makes this farming family's day even longer. Sometimes I hear them drive down the hill before the bells 'ring the day in' at 5 am. In summer their tractor tuckers home as I fall into bed at 11 pm. One endless marathon.

I soon learned to recognize the sound of their tractor, and even if I hadn't, their laughter and singing - or the occasional exuberant yodel - would draw me to the edge of the road. We got into the habit of exchanging a cheery wave and a shouted hello. And no matter how frosty and hard the ground, whenever they pass by, a soft warm wind blows through my garden.

This family is in the unusual situation of owning farm land that has not been in the same family for generations. They were moved here from the Waegital, a beautiful mountain valley, not more than ten miles away. Its location and topography made it the perfect site for a dam. In 1923 the valley was flooded - and with it the church and the cemetery, the school, the farmhouses and pastures. Where cows once grazed peacefully, trout and perch feed, cruising past roof tops and chimneys and the church spire. The farmers were compensated for the loss of their ancestral lands with farms elsewhere, and so this family came to live here.

Their new land, however, did not come with membership in the *Genossame* - an association of farmers that I believe is peculiar to Switzerland. Hundreds of years ago, when farmers first settled here, they decided that the rivers, the woods and pastures would need to be common property as these valuable resources could only be successfully worked with the help of all. Co-ownership was limited to the founding families of the *Genossame*. With farms being passed from father to sons, and all sons becoming members of the *Genossame* at birth, it is almost a natural law that a farmer is by definition also a *Genosse*. Over the years, however, some of the pastures have been turned into pricey building land which is made available at very low cost to the male members of the *Genossame* or sold at current market prices to outsiders. The *Genossame* may even build houses and apartments which they then sell or rent at a profit. No longer are all of the *Genossen* farmers, yet the rights and prestige continue to be passed on to sons and their sons. This sense of continuity and pride in possession makes the *Genossen* the aristocrats of the village. A farmer who is not a member of this decision-making and profit-sharing forum is, therefore, at a marked disadvantage. No matter how many of my farmer's future generations live here, they will never 'belong' - no more than those of us who came here from another country. I often wonder whether our sharing this fringe status is what made 'my farmer' accept us so readily, without the usual cautionary period.

But let me introduce 'my farmer' to you. Even though this term represents a whole family, when we speak of 'the farmer' we really mean the Grandfather as the head of the clan. He must be around 70, a thinnish man of medium height, a little stooped perhaps, but still with dark and curly hair, a tiny golden cow in his left earlobe. In the early years it was Grandfather driving the tractor with Grandmother standing behind him and their daughter, Ottilia, sitting on the flat-bed truck.

Sometimes, when he was alone, he would stop for a rest and treat me to a bit of his life. "I'm happy at home," he told me, breaking into a contented smile. "I don't go anywhere, not even to the Beiz. Once a year I go to the farmer's market in Uznach, about 15 kilometres away, and that's enough." But once, he wanted me to know, he had even been to Zurich, not to discover city life, mind you, but to change trains on his way to the Aargau area where he was serving his military duty. And yet he does enjoy my birthday cards with pictures of the New York skyline or the harbour in Shanghai. "As long as I don't have to go there," he keeps saying, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Gradually Grandfather's place on the tractor has been taken over by Otilia or one of his grandsons. But since his accident in June, he has hardly been able to leave the farm at all. I visited him in hospital and brought him his favourite *Stumpfen*, a Swiss cigar. He sat on the edge of the bed, looking smaller and thinner. While we were talking, he kept looking out the window to the hill where the others were working harder than ever to make up for his share of the workload. "We were lucky," he said, cradling his left arm in a heavy bandage from fingertips to elbow. His eldest grandson had been driving the tractor as they were picking up freshly cut grass on a very steep slope. He had been walking alongside and pushing the tractor with his right arm. "All of a sudden there was a *Chlöpf*, a terrific noise, the tractor overturned, pinning my left arm underneath it. It caught the dog too. Poor little Senn bit me in my right hand in his final pain."

Fortunately, some other farmers had seen the tractor suddenly disappear from sight and came to investigate. His grandson had hit his head badly on the cabin frame, "blood was running all over him" and he had also injured his knee. "He needs treatment, too," Grandfather reported. "But he can't go to hospital now, not while I am here. That will have to wait until I can work again." Out of the window he looked, longingly, sadly. "We have learnt a lot, you know, we just went on to steeper and steeper ground, a little further each time. No telling what would have happened if the tractor had turned over once more. ' , He cried when I left, and I felt like crying, too. It was more than the crushed arm. It was his dignity that had been broken along with the bones - the dignity to do his share of the work.

Grandmother's hair is streaked with grey. Wearing a dark skirt, dark woollen stockings and high leather boots - irrespective of the weather - she looks more robust than Grandfather. But she, too, is rarely on the tractor these days. "My legs hurt too much to work in the fields," she says. Yet, almost seventy years old, she still does all the cooking, washing and mending for a household of seven without the help of an automatic washing machine, a dishwasher, an electric sewing machine. She hates to admit that it is almost too much for her now.

But Grandmother does enjoy talking, on the phone and otherwise. I can never call up to order eggs without being given the exact status of her health, plus an in-depth record of her neighbour's ailments. Then I am informed about farm life. At one time, it was the cows that were giving less and less milk and would have to be moved to another barn. A 'diviner' had discovered a deep water vein beneath their barn which had affected the cows' well-being. "Maybe if you moved your bed," Grandmother advised me, "your backache would go away too."

Another time it was the hens that were not laying and would have to be killed because someone had given them the evil look. "You won't understand this," she said, "you're not a Catholic, are you?" Not that I saw any correlation between poultry and religion, but I have learnt that it is no good interrupting her train of thought. "Anyway," she went on, "it's a punishment not going to Church regularly and having failed the Church in some other way. Even though," she indignantly pointed out, "my youngest grandson serves as altar boy. So these poor hens will have to leave this lovely earth; there is nothing else we can do with them."

Fortunately she knew just what to do about the evil eye. They would get new hens and as soon as

they were laying, she would send some eggs down to me. True to her word, some months later I found the usual bag at the front door, containing not only eggs but the healthy smell of twenty cows and their calves in a warm and humid barn. Each egg was painstakingly wrapped in newspaper carefully torn into squares. Egg boxes wouldn't help much, as those hens have never heard of uniform, standardized, neutralized production methods. The eggs not only vary in size, shape, texture and colour, but they also bear traces of earth and grass; occasionally a feather sticks to the shell. Lacking the efficiency of pre-programmed supermarket hens - who undoubtedly lay their eggs directly into boxes - these hens hide their eggs all over the farm and it is up to the youngest grandson to find them. Their taste? Incomparable.

I only hope the fox does not discover this generation of hens. Or else he will go the way his cousin went: shot down and roasted. "He didn't even taste so bad," Grandmother assured me.

Strange as some of her tales sound, there may be an underlying truth that escapes our scientific analysis. Dependent on the weather, on the quality of the soil, absorbed, by caring for their animals and their fields, these farmers have retained a link to nature we have lost. Maybe this link enables them to detect influences we cannot even imagine to exist. Producing food, after all, is a matter of survival to them. Many of us fool ourselves that it is the responsibility of the supermarket.

Unlike her mother, Otilia never talks for the sake of talking. But her words have punch. If I look sick, she will let me know it immediately. If something troubles her, she'll come right out with it, expecting me to do the same. When I came back after two years abroad, she welcomed me, "Hey, you really have turned grey! Did you have problems?" The warm concern in her question more than made up for my injured vanity. By nature jolly, she accepts the hardships of her life, and she certainly has her ample share of those, with a shrug and a laugh - like bad weather one cannot change.

Built like a rotund pillar of strength, she handles the tractor with the certainty of a sleepwalker. Otilia lives in trousers and never seems bothered by wet and cold weather, rarely wearing more than a dark sweater or a blue cotton jacket. Rain has to fall in sheets, the wind cut your skin with a knife of ice before she dons one of her three hats - the brown woollen one, the olive felt hat like the baddies wear in films, or the wide-brimmed black one. Otilia wears her hats on the back of her head, giving her an air of jauntiness, the me against-the-world look. And why not? A woman who does the work of at least one man, if not two, has the right to wear a man's hat any way she pleases. Right? Right.

Her sons take after her, big and husky, yet good-natured and soft-hearted like puppies. The oldest two, hardly twenty, drive and smoke as if they had been doing so all their lives - Sepp with pipe and a Jeep, Toni with a cigar and a tractor. They are strong. Once, I had already broken several tools trying to remove a bush - without even budging it. I called Sepp as he was driving past. Very coolly, the unlit pipe in mouth, he pulled, once, maybe twice, and out it was - roots and all. Not a word, no effort and no further tools were wasted- a shy smile betrayed the careful economy of action. The youngest, Heiri, still rides past us on his moped four times a day to and from school. Slimmer than his older brothers, with his grandfather's curly dark hair, his gold-rimmed glasses, he delivers the eggs with the courtesy of an English butler.

Our friendship has reaped many treats, though I never really know what I do to deserve such generosity. In June I found a crate of glossy black cherries at the front door which I know took hours to pick. Even if they had allowed me to pay for them, cherries of that perfection would still have been a rare gift. The cherries were followed by plums in September, apples in October.

But the real treat is not for me but for my garden. I believe that we should be as good to the earth as

it has been to us. So when autumn comes, I need to cover the ground with compost or manure. Compost I use as fast as I can produce, and manure is difficult to get - unless you are lucky to have a farmer as a real friend who is willing to risk his reputation. A farmer, you see, runs the risk of being considered a 'lazy farmer' if he gives some of his manure away. Not only does 'my farmer' share it with me, but what I get is true gold: well-rotted, beautifully crumbly stuff. If you appreciate its value, you must be asking "How come SHE is so lucky?" Well, Grandfather likes to see me gardening in my bikini; and when I recently asked Grandmother for my yearly supply, she told me not to worry, Grandfather had already given instructions to have the nice old stuff set aside for me. "With a *Poschtuerli*, a figure like that, she deserves it," he said. So if you see me swimming lap after lap or puffing my way through the fitness exercises at the local gym, do not accuse me of vanity. I am simply earning my manure.

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