

In the Fatherland of Forestry: Time Travels through the German Wild

By Chris Bolgiano, Mildly Amusing Nature Writer

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“Don’t worry about the land mines,” said Holger Galonska, district forester for the former East German state of Mecklenburg. “They’ve all rusted away by now.”

He turned the Trabant from the old border road along the Elbe River into an open field that once was a death zone. My German was good enough to understand him, which did not reassure me.



It was 1991, and guard towers still strutted along the Elbe, their windows staring vacantly at the deep blue skies that frame my memories of Mecklenburg. Less than two years earlier, the Berlin Wall between East and West Germany — part of the undying legacy of World War II — had been torn down by singing crowds on both sides. This is the peaceful revolution that Germans call “die Wende,” the

turning point. The Iron Curtain was shredded for scrap as the parliamentary democracy and market economy of West Germany rushed in to reverse the socialist government and central economy of East Germany. The ensuing clash of cultures and bureaucracies rendered Holger's world as shaky as what remained of the Berlin Wall.



It was during this time that I dropped in on him, as a German-born American nature writer out to reclaim some part of her German heritage that didn't involve Nazis. This proved difficult, despite the fact that the art and science of forestry began evolving a millennium before Hitler and his fat and jolly Forest Master Hermann Göring. As early as the 600s A.D., the Germanic barbarians that defeated the Roman Empire were enacting forest protections. The term "forester" was first used by Charlemagne in an ordinance in 813. Early on, all forests except those owned by royalty — a fatal flaw — were declared a commons, open to free public use. Were they communists even then? Could it be genetic?

Over time this system broke down, perhaps predictably as petty kings and then even pettier monks took over much of the landscape. Large areas of the continent were deforested for farming, fuel, and timber as the population of Europe doubled, then doubled again. Even forest litter, the soil-in-the-making living compost of leaves, plants, woody stems, wildlife scats and tons of microbes that recycles the forest, was raked out to fertilize agricultural fields. The Black Death plague of 1350 slowed things down a bit, reducing population by up to half in some areas, but only for a couple of centuries. By the 1600s, religious wars and collateral nastiness were beginning to devastate the forests that had grown back.

The professional principles that became the forestry profession started to crystallize in the 1700s, after German landscapes were reduced to mere heathlands. Peasants froze to death in their huts for lack of firewood and even aristocrats put on more furs in drafty castles.

Forestry was the modern world's first step toward what has fashionably become known in the 21st century as "sustainability." My earliest lesson in the concept came in 1991, when Holger explained his management approach of "Nachhaltigkeit," which literally means holding something back for the future to grow on. A bumper sticker over some of the rust spots on his Trabi, as the Trabant car was called, proclaimed the value of "Artenvielfalt," species diversity, the idea we now call biodiversity.

I learned these fundamentals by tramping through the woods that socialism left behind in the fatherland of forestry. Then, nearly a quarter of a century later, I returned to



More than 1,000 people were killed trying to cross the border. This monument in a tiny village commemorates the "Border Victims of the Elbe, 1961–1989."

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Mecklenburg, this time with my husband Ralph, to see how Holger and his forests have fared since die Wende.

Wunderland

There was record flooding along the Elbe River in 2013. Train schedules were as distressed as the mien of the travel agent trying to get us across it. Ralph and I practiced our German by stuttering out local headlines as we waited in train stations. “Thousands Evacuated as Elbe Bursts Dam,” and “Letting Us Drown: Flood Rushes North, Leaving Angry Residents Behind” were typical.

Yet when we finally arrived in Wittenberge, where Holger picked us up, I found the landscape on its surface much as I remembered it, though with noticeably more abandoned buildings than in the west. Mecklenburg (the state is known as Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) is a gently undulating glacial moraine of alternating crop fields, pastures, and forests. Due to its scouring by glaciers, it has some 600 lakes. Due to its generations of foresters, it has lush green woods full of wildlife, including the biggest, most ferocious mosquitoes in Germany and possibly all of Europe. This speaks to the integrity of a food web that still supports 70,000 Eurasian cranes as well as major populations of white storks, white-tailed eagles, ospreys, otters, beavers, and many other smaller creatures.

Tiny, picturesque villages still had cobblestone streets that shake the teeth out of your head as you bicycle across them. Wetlands still increased toward the north, as you approach the tideless shores of the Baltic Sea. There, as always, bathers discretely change clothes on the beach — or bathe without them — without anyone thinking they are perverts.

During the transition decade of the 1990s, the new regime acknowledged the unique natural character that had been preserved in Mecklenburg by establishing three United Nations Biosphere Reserves, three national parks, and seven nature parks. Other places that had been protected under socialism continue, so far, to be shielded from capitalistic commercialism.

Foremost among such special places is the grove of Ivanacker Eichen, the famous thousand-year-old oaks near the village of Ivanack. The oaks sprouted under feudalism and grew through various monarchies, many less glamorous heraldries, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. They have survived innumerable wars and revolutions, including the Industrial, manifested in chain saws. Clearly, Germans venerate their forests under all forms of government.



Holger stands beside a tree he had a chain saw artist carve with many of the animals that live in his woods. It stands as a welcome to his village of Gadow.



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where wild poppies
form inland seas
of red. ✨

Ivanacker Eichen: Thousand Year Old Oaks near the village of Ivanack.

And they like to walk and bicycle through those forests, perhaps stopping to pick berries or mushrooms along the way. This is legal in Germany, even in privately owned forests, which actually comprise less than half of all forested lands. Town and state governments own slightly more than half of all forests in a reassertion of the ancient model of the commons. This was true even in the former West Germany before die Wende. The entire reunited country is covered with paths. In Mecklenburg, fifteen hundred miles of mostly paved bicycling and walking trails include the former border road along the dike of the Elbe River.

Ralph and I spent a perfectly sunny day biking along the Elbe, which was almost too broad to see across and dotted with the canopies of underwater tree islands. The water lapped a meter below us. Through the kindness of several German strangers we avoided being fined 1,000 Euros for blithely ignoring the posted warnings to stay away from the river. A token guard tower remains, and at least one memorial to those who dared to try crossing over.



A Fachwerk barn in a Mecklenburg village.



The author's husband along the dike of the Elbe River as it floods a local road in June of 2013.

Other paths wend through the countryside around the many lakes, through rustling woodlands and past green hayfields where wild poppies form inland seas of red. Trails pass through tidy, aged brick villages with flowering window boxes, good restaurants, and attractive beer gardens. Many houses and barns have solar panels. Thousands of wind turbines graze the air above cattle in pastures. Mecklenberg is an outdoor vacation paradise, complete with German energy efficiency. Plus medieval castles and contemporary aristocracy, like the Countess Wilamowitz von Moellendorff.

The Countess

There were no aristocrats in the socialist state, Holger told me on my first visit. And he corrected me, as did many other East Germans I interviewed back then, when I referred to their country as a communist state. “No,” said Holger, “we were socialist. The government drew lines on the map and gave every citizen a few hectares (one hectare = 2.4 acres). They bundled the pieces together into cooperatives to manage the farms and the forests.”

Immediately after die Wende, the western government established the Treuhand agency to privatize land, businesses, and other assets that had been owned by the state in the name of the East German people. Lines drawn on a map could then be legalized into deeds, creating many private parcels that would prove very difficult to manage as a whole. Former residents who could document property ownership as of 1945 had an opportunity to get it back.

This opened the door to those former aristocrats that managed to salvage family heirlooms as they fled westward in front of the Soviet Army through the chaos of World War II. When I met the Countess Wilamowitz this past summer, her small but beautifully appointed new house was filled with centuries-old documentation, including framed etchings of the castle I recognized as the one near Holger’s house.

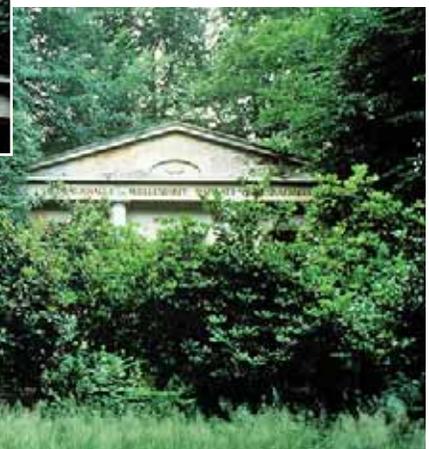
In 1991, the castle was empty, its future as uncertain as Holger’s. Back then, he met me at the Wittenberge train station, a tall, blond, Nordically handsome guy



The castle near Holger’s house is now a children’s summer camp.



Castle Gadow in 1991, with a sculpture from DDR times in front. At one time, the castle served as a vacation hotel and restaurant.



The Moellendorff Masoleum in 1991. It is now being restored.

of 32 in green lederhosen with antler-button suspenders, knee-high green wool socks, and a green shirt. He wore these not to show off the traditional German forester's field dress, but because he wore them every day on the job. He threw my luggage into the back seat of the Trabi, the inefficient car inefficiently produced in East Germany, dubbed by Time Magazine in 2007 as one of the worst 50 cars ever made. It gasped and rasped like a person with pneumonia.

"It's the quietest car ever," Holger said, "because you can clamp your knees over your ears." During DDR times (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), Holger said, a friend was told he would get his Trabi on a Friday in April ten years in the future. "Oh no!" the friend groaned. "That's just when the plumber is supposed to come!"

At the time of die Wende, Holger managed 8,000 hectares (19,000 acres) of state-owned hardwood and conifer forests surrounding his home village of Gadow, northwest of Berlin. His father, who had fled to Mecklenburg from Poland during the war, had been district forester before him. Holger was married to dark-haired Dietlind, who was rinsing strawberries she had just picked from their large garden as I arrived. They were raising two children in the same house that Holger and his twin brother Uwe had grown up in, a huge, rambling, brick and timber-framed maze in the style known as Fachwerk. This is the oldest architectural style in central Europe, first built in the 11th century.

This house was built roughly 150 years ago by an ancestor of the Countess' husband to house his forester and family. On the first night I stayed with them, bumping their uncomplaining son out of his room upstairs, I walked out to the stair landing in slightly less than a bathrobe before I realized that another family occupied the rest of the upper floor.



Uwe (L) and Holger, 2013.



Holger's house.



Holger in the woods with his loggers and their Trabant, 1991.



One of the network of forest roads in Mecklenburg.



When Holger got the job, his parents retired to a large brick house nearby that once housed the count's zookeeper.

Holger's twin Uwe was also a district forester for the socialist state. The twins graduated from the well-known forestry school in Tharandt, the oldest in Germany, founded in 1811. Uwe, too, lived in a centuries-old forester's house built by the duke of Mecklenburg in the much larger, fancier town of Ludwigslust, an hour and a half drive away.

Perhaps — no, certainly — because the duke outranked the count, Uwe's house was larger and rambled even further afield than Holger's. As with Holger's house, half of Uwe's had been turned into a second apartment during the socialist years to help house the many refugees from the war. During my first visit, the other half was inhabited by a querulous old man. As if to mimic the border only a few miles away, there was a fence down the middle of the back yard to divide the two households.

"He's always complaining to the police about my parties," Uwe said, "but I know all the police and many of the Russian soldiers, too. They don't pay any attention to him." Nearly 400,000 Soviet troops were still in the former DDR then, scheduled to leave by 1994. "That is the only poaching problem we have," Uwe said. "Russian soldiers don't get enough to eat." Both Uwe and Holger spoke passable Russian.

Each twin desperately hoped to keep his job and his house under the coming regime change. Most of all, they feared being banished from the fragrant pine and old oak forests, full of wild swine and three species of ungulates, in which they had grown up hunting and learning to be foresters. But die Wende was full of reformatory turmoil. No one knew what was happening. No one knew how to compose a resume, a practical problem then coming to the fore.



Entrance to Uwe's house, "Forester's House, Castle Park, Anno 1790."



Uwe Galonska and the fence separating the yard into two sections, 1991.

What they did know was how to have fun. Uwe was deep into a bottle of Bristol Crème with a table full of friends when Holger brought me to the charming town of Ludwigslust during my first visit. It was a hot summer Friday night, and they were sitting outside in a green and flowery garden at a pleasant remove from the corral of wild swine. It was still light at 10 p.m. because we were so far north. The castle park spread out from Uwe's front door in a sward of meadow lined with deep, leafy forests. I had a laptop with me, and everyone wanted to see it, so I fired it up. That was long before wireless, but word processing was enough to awe them, they were so digitally innocent.

☞ The castle park spread out from Uwe's front door in a sward of meadow grass lined with deep, leafy forests. ☞

By this time we were all very jolly. I laughed and joked using the formal "Sie" instead of the familiar "Du." Even though I was older and therefore had the prerogative to initiate familiarity, I had just met them, literally dropping in as a house guest without even knowing their names, and vice versa. "Sie" would undoubtedly have been the correct form in West Germany. I had been in groups there where conversational "Sies" and "Dus" flew around like little Grammar Nazi drones. But in East Germany everyone was Du, old and young, male and female, farmer and forester.

"It was part of the equality aspect of the government," Holger said later. "Everyone was supposed to be on equal terms in the DDR." Linguistically, this was a great relief, and made my life as a resurrected German speaker much easier.

Who would have believed that this informality would endure die Wende and even influence the Wessies, as East Germans called the Westerners streaming across the border to take advantage of new business opportunities? And yet, traveling from west to east across the country this past summer, it seemed to me that Du was used far more often than I remembered. Or maybe it's just that I'm old enough now myself to call everyone Du with impunity — except, I hasten to add, the Countess.



The author with Dietlind

At 81, after more than half a century as a refugee and a plebeian, the Countess Wilamowitz remained every inch an aristocrat. Tall and commanding, with a gracious and regal manner, she invited us into her comfortable home. Portraits of her husband's ancestors lined the walls. "My husband owned Gadow," she stated in perfect English. They had lived in New York after the war. After her husband died, she worked for years as the events organizer on a cruise ship.

She served us beer and wine at the patio dining table overlooking the 3,000 hectares (7,200 acres) of fields and forests that she, her son, and her sister-in-law had re-purchased since die Wende. Holger continued to manage those forests, but in an entirely different capacity.



Hunting trophies in just one room of Holger's house.

He had been offered his former job of district forester under the new government, but he would have had to move away, because his private purchase of 250 hectares of forest soon after die Wende disqualified him from working in the same district, due to conflict of interest. No one wanted to move away. So Holger leapt into the strange new world of entrepreneurship. He became his own boss as a private forestry consultant.

No longer was he managing forests in the best interests of the state, which, theoretically at least, had meant the community, the people, the nation. “Some of the party bosses liked to come here to hunt,” Holger said, “which helped protect the forests. Also there are many people here who worked to preserve the landscape. There were some battles we lost, but some we won, trying to keep the forests from being overcut or developed.”

In the DDR, Holger had six foresters, two office workers and twenty-four woods workers under him. “Some of the woods workers made more money than I did,” he said, “even though I was the manager and had all the headaches.”

Now he managed many of the same forests as before die Wende, but for the benefit of a few individuals, including himself. He subcontracted the woods work to local cutters. In the intervening years since my first visit, he and Dietlind, who took a course to learn bookkeeping, had bought their house — the entire house — and modernized it, including computers with wireless Internet access. They also bought a 180 year old house a mile away, built by the local count for the crews of hunting servants needed seasonally. It was a two-story-plus brick mansion (attics? attached barns? hallways? storage cellars?) folded around a small open courtyard with a well head and grass gone reassuringly rangy. This was where we stayed. Through the kitchen window we watched a great tit raising chicks in a nest on the old hand pump.

The castle was now a children’s summer camp, although Dietlind said a Neo-Nazi group tried to buy it for a headquarters. Trabis have become hobby cars and a repository for bittersweet DDR nostalgia. This time, Holger drove a late model if battered Subaru through the woods with a switch to turn his constantly ringing cell phone onto speaker. Dietlind drove a nicer Subaru. Their daughter was working on her Ph.D. and their son was working in the woods for his father to save money for a trip around the world. Under the former DDR, they were allowed to travel only eastward. “We loved Poland,” Dietlind said. “The people are incredibly hospitable and the landscape is so beautiful.”

Even on our visit to the Countess, Holger wore the scuffed, black leather pants that had succeeded the traditional lederhosen. “He sleeps in them,” Dietlind said, though I think she was joking. Rain began to fall and although the fog rising over the fields and woods was magical to watch, we left the patio for the living room. Flowers from the colorful gardens around the house lit every

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— Holger Galonska



A painting of BärWinkel, originally built to house the hunting servants of the local Count. Ralph and I stayed in a large apartment on one side.



Holger Galonska feeding Grunzi in 1991.

corner. We nibbled politely on a pate the Countess had made with wild swine fat from the animals Holger occasionally brought her. He had, in fact, just given her a Reh or roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) shot that morning in her crop field by one of his woods workers.

Hunting the deer and swine that eat too many crops is traditionally one of the local forester's jobs. But hunting is more than a duty. Forestry and hunting are twins in German tradition. Hunting enclosures stand on wooden legs like miniature watchtowers on the edges of fields everywhere. Racks and tusks hang in every room and I was always tripping over swine-skin rugs in everybody's houses.

When he shoots an animal, Holger places a sprig of oak, spruce or alder in its mouth, an ancient gesture of both apology and jubilee. "After the hunt," Holger said, "then we party."

The wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) holds particular power. "It is the noblest creature," Holger said. Honestly, I couldn't see it in Grunzi, the pet piglet Holger had on my first visit. Grunzi wallowed in his favorite mud hole beside a pond, then thrust his long and very dirty snout all over my legs, ran around and jumped up on me like a frisky puppy. Only with hooves. When a mother sow is shot or run over on the road, the local forester often raises the piglets.

The Countess and her forester talked hunting. "Those antlers are nothing today," she said, nodding toward the mounted head of a red deer, or European elk (*Cervus elaphus*), whose rack I found nothing short of impressive. According to the plaque, he was shot in 1913, exactly a century ago. "They are much bigger now," the Countess said, and Holger agreed. The fields are better fertilized and the woods are better managed than a century ago, they said.

Statistics bear them out. Although no one compiled national data a century ago because they were too busy preparing for World War I, a recent inventory found that forests cover nearly one third of Germany, and are generally in good condition with a high degree of biodiversity. The annual increment of tree growth exceeds the amount cut, thereby fulfilling the most fundamental rule of forestry, called sustained yield: do not cut wood faster than trees can grow. The problem with sustainability is sustaining it.



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One of the many hunting stands in the woods.

The Trees

Across the narrow one lane road from our house, the woods looked lush and wild. Unfamiliar bird songs rang out in the mornings and evenings. We glimpsed a young fox several times while walking and bicycling around the neighborhood. There was a small, hidden pond nearby. Did I mention very large and excessively ferocious mosquitoes?

The weather was unusually hot, but we couldn't open any windows because there weren't any screens on these elegant old casements. Holger assured us that Mecklenburg mosquitoes carried no diseases, but that didn't much relieve their irritating whine. Fortunately, our suite of rooms was so spacious and airy it stayed cool and comfortable even closed up. The house was named on local maps as BärWinkel (Bear Corner), although it likely hadn't seen a bear in well over a century, and it wasn't exactly on a corner. It was on one of those tiny roads that network through the forests. A big, beautiful old barn stood nearby. We rode bikes for the mile over to and back from Holger's.

BärWinkel had at least four apartments that Holger and Dietlind had modernized and furnished. Ours was stocked with food, beer, wine, and chocolates. Talk about hospitality!

Turning history on its head, Holger had purchased this house to rent to affluent Germans, Danes and others that came to Mecklenburg to hunt wild swine and deer under his guidance. This was now a large part of his income, although he was constantly busy with forest work. As he had done in 1991, but this time with Ralph along, Holger took us on tours of his woods.

Driving through the Mecklenburg countryside in mid-June means traveling the lovely Allees, the two lane avenues lined with large trees, of which surprisingly few carry scars from German drivers. Many trees are the North American native Acacia, Robinia pseudoacacia, commonly known as black locust, although not in the locust family. They were covered with magnificent white panicles of blooms. We saw them growing wild along train tracks, too, blooming in a blur.



Holger with a Douglas Fir.



Harvesting pines. Holger talks with the wood cutter.

The acacia were only one of many signs of globalized forestry. Douglas fir seeds were brought from the Pacific Northwest in 1865 by a count experimenting with timber trees. “These are now the biggest Douglasien in Germany,” Holger said, proudly. Ralph, who regularly hugs trees with a diameter tape at home, could not wrap his arms around them. The firs were rivaled only by occasional oaks and beeches.

“The environmentalists criticize me for keeping the Douglas firs, because they’re not native,” Holger said, shrugging. “But they grow the best here.” In one of many examples of adaptive marketing, he pruned the fir trunks to make clear lumber while selling the branches for Christmas wreaths.

Holger knew the tiniest of back roads and everyone we happened to meet anywhere.

We stopped in some of those blocks of regimented pines that you think of when you think of German forestry. A large harvester machine pulled the pines, snipped the limbs and roots and stacked everything in piles. But such intensely harvested stands are only part of the landscape. There are also blocks of oak forests with canopies and shrubby understories beneath which grow ferns and flowers. They looked familiar somehow, like the tangled and natural Appalachian woods of home.

That’s because they are familiar: our North American wild cherry tree, *Prunus serotina*, is the dominant understory shrub throughout Mecklenburg forests and the most invasive non-native plant, according to Holger. In 1991, he worried about tree damage from air pollution; the DDR burned highly toxic brown coal and “Waldsterben” (tree death) was a big issue. Now, with Germany leading the world in the shift to renewable energies, he worried about invasive plants, pests and diseases that are reducing the native biodiversity and may accelerate as the climate warms.

Wild cherries do not make much of a tree here, unlike at home where they grow stout and the wood is highly valued. Holger harvests them in places where he is timbering other trees and sells the small wood for biofuel. Little to nothing is wasted during a timber harvest. “But where soils are poorest,” Holger said looking around at a beach-sandy stand of scraggly pines, “I leave branches behind to help nurture the soil.”

In the many hardwood stands that looked convincingly wild, Holger practiced “Naturnahe” forestry — near to nature, by mimicking its processes. He selected individual trees for specific reasons, and left trees with natural holes for wildlife. Oaks were often grown in nurseries and planted in mixed stands with beech, which provide the two most important food crops for wildlife. The oaks (mostly *Quercus robur*) also seem familiar, being closely related to the dominant white oaks of home.

It’s not uncommon to find a huge old oak here and there throughout Mecklenburg’s forests, but the largest and oldest grove is the thousand-year-old Ivanacker Eichen.



Ralph Bolgiano measures a Douglas fir.

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On my first visit, my tour guide was Christine Neise, their forester. “We date them from rings in the branches that have fallen over the years,” Christine explained, “and they are mentioned in various parchments.” She was Dietlind’s younger sister, thus Holger’s sister-in-law.

In her early thirties, Christine had high cheekbones like a model and short hair tousled like a tomboy, with matching youthful energy. She had recently become district forester after her father’s 40 year tenure here. “You can’t see anything of what you’ve done as a forester unless you spend years at a place,” she said. “I’m just now starting to harvest a few of the trees my father planted in his earliest years.”

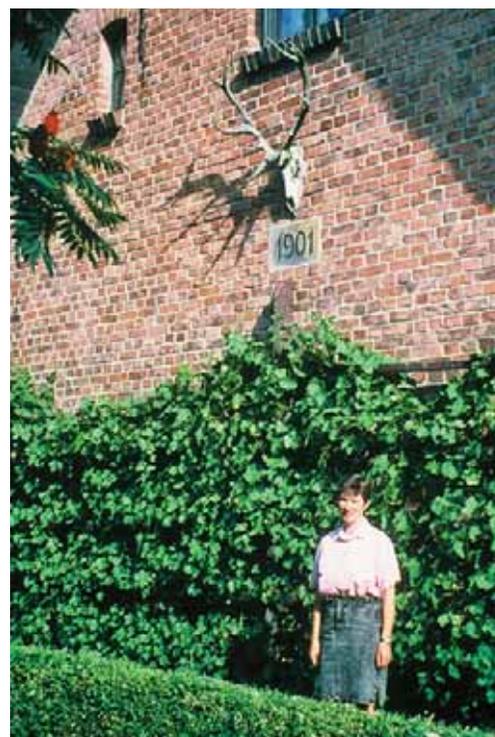
I had met her father the day before, when her parents invited me to dinner: wild swine and potato dumplings, absolutely delicious with green beans from the garden. Herr Neise told me that when the government began a big drainage project in the 1960s, he saw large old oaks and groves of trees being cut down. He went out early one morning and put “Protected” signs on all such remaining trees in his district, without approval. “The government didn’t acknowledge our preservation efforts, but they didn’t try to stop us,” he said.

With so much invested in the landscape, Christine, like the twins, hoped to keep her job through die Wende. She had even ended a love affair with another forester, Dietlind told me later, because neither of them could bear to leave the landscapes of home.

The Ivanack oaks were well-known in East Germany. On my first visit, the oldest oak in the grove of about half a dozen trees had already been fenced off from direct contact, to protect it from soil-trampling feet of visitors. But younger oaks were approachable, and I asked Christine if I could touch one. She smiled indulgently and nodded. I reached out to the rough bark and felt the centuries flow through my fingertips. Then I realized it was a line of ants crossing my hand.

German foresters like ants, specifically the couple of species that climb up into trees and eat the insects that are eating leaves. Formidable predators, ants are a natural pesticide. Some of the men working for Holger had explained to me how they transferred queens with a long board to start new mounds where pest control is needed.

When I came again 23 years later, I could not touch any of the oldest trees because they were all corralled and busloads of tourists arrived daily. Nor was Christine there to laugh and joke and drive me up to the Baltic for a vacation, as she had before. She was a devoted forester but an inexperienced hunter. Only a year after I met her, as she was climbing the steps to a hunting stand to shoot crop-eating wild swine, the rifle she was carrying somehow discharged and killed her. Her father found her. On this return trip, we put flowers on her grave in the village cemetery at Gemmelin, where she and Dietlind grew up.



Christine Neise at Jasmund National Park, 1991, and at her forester’s house, built 1901.



Dietlind tends the Neise family grave, where Christine is buried.

Clearly, the Ivanacker Oaks are not wild. Neither is the nearby herd of fallow deer (*Dama dama*), with a few wild sheep known as mouflon (*Ovis aries*) thrown in, that chewed their cud then and now in the castle park at Ivanack. Europe has been settled by humans for so long that the very concept of “wilderness” is defined against civilization. Some German parks incorporate living villages, the very opposite of our American ideal of wilderness as untrammelled by human feet, much less cars.

White storks have learned how to bridge the divide between civilization and wilderness. Thirty or more pairs nest on roofs in the small town of Rühstädt every year, in the nearby state of Brandenburg. This is the largest stork population in Germany. They eat insects, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals — in short, anything they can catch or find — in the surrounding fields and wetlands. On the roofs, they are protected from ground predators, while the villages they grace with their awkward magnificence and hundred-pound nests of twigs benefit from ecotourism. There is even a 450 kilometer, multi-state scenic byway called the German Stork Route, developed by a partnership of conservation and tourism agencies. Dozens of picturesque villages along the Elbe and the northern European coast supplement their agricultural economies with strangers who wander the streets staring up at storks like country rubes gaping at skyscrapers.

Plaques on neighborhood fences record the annual number of storks and the date of arrival from and departure to their wintering grounds in Africa. A museum offered a live web cam in the nest on the roof, with its five chicks, and exhibits on the ever more perilous stork migrations. I did not see kitschy baby-carrying stork lawn ornaments in the gift shop, but I might have missed them.

Shortly after we left, a female stork began attacking car windows and glass doors. A biologist speculated she was attacking a threatening reflection to protect her chicks in a nearby nest. Damages mounted into thousands of Euros. Some villagers hung blankets across doors and windows to avoid confrontations. But most villagers, reported the local newspaper *Nord Kurier*, were “waiting patiently until migration season rolls around and the troublesome family head south.”

Humans and storks have struck an admirable balance. Yet the wild survives in Germany. Christine knew it when she took me to the forested edge of a small lake. There was no obvious evidence of civilization. Trees stirred in the wind. Swallows swooped across the water’s surface. Geese paddled by unaware of us, bickering quietly among themselves. “This is what I love,” she whispered over the gentle lapping of water. “The wild.”

Nearly a quarter century after her death, Holger, too, whispered as he bushwhacked through a forest to where he knew a white-tailed eagle was nesting. He knew he could trust us with the location.



Stork nest in Rühstädt.

🦶 Plaques on neighborhood fences record the annual number of storks and the date of arrival from and departure to their wintering grounds in Africa. 🦶



Stork feeding young in a village along the Elbe.

Widely considered the most environmentally advanced nation in the world, Germany is even “rewilding.” Returning nature to its own devices is considered subversive in an America still too young and brash to admit that mistakes were made. “Renaturierung Polder Grosse Rosin,” explained a sign in the Big Rosin polders (low fields encompassed by dikes) of northern Mecklenburg. We were there for a weekend with Dietlind’s brother, Rudiger, and his wife Astrid. Both of them were foresters. I was beginning to see a pattern here.

The sign explained how breaching the polder dikes and allowing natural wetlands to grow back would eventually reduce the ground subsidence and inevitable flooding. Nearly two thousand acres went underwater and earlier connections with outside streams flowed once again. The theory is that respecting the natural flow dynamics will pay off over time with less damage to human life and structures. This takes a long view.

But it was Rudiger’s shady forest walk for children that demonstrated the major priority of today’s German foresters: children. They fear their screen-stuck young will develop Nature Deficit Disorder and lose the traditional German connection with forests. A forester for the state, Rudiger had helped develop a trail for children in the castle park near the town of Dargun. The Cistercian abbey there was established almost exactly a thousand years ago. The lake the monks built — apparently 600 wasn’t enough — looked as wild as any I’ve seen.

Rudiger put us through our paces. Every station along the trail taught something about nature in a manner both intellectually enchanting and physically exhausting. We walked to an excellent waterside restaurant, where a nice young waiter told me, “Your German is so good I thought you were Dutch!” Then we walked home to the strawberry and rhubarb cakes that Astrid had baked us from her garden. Ralph entertained us on guitar until midnight, after which we tumbled into bed. The other two couples stayed up until three a.m., swapping stories and sipping Schnapps. I was beginning to see a pattern here, too. These people know how to party.



Foresters Rudiger and Astrid Neise with the Frischling (piglet) that is the mascot for the Children’s Forest Learning Path.



Rudiger Neise demonstrates one of the stations along the Children’s Forest Learning Path.



Newly rewilded wetlands in Mecklenburg.

The Friends

When Holger later drove us to Ludwigslust to visit Uwe, the scene was almost exactly as I saw it in 1991: friends sitting around a table in the garden drinking, eating and laughing. This time there was no fence dividing the yard, and the pen of wild swine was even more pleasantly further away from the house. An elegant patio with a sheltered dining table sat at the edge of a tiny pond where frogs sang. Deer (Reh) might be seen anytime in the meadow beyond. Like Holger and Dietlind, Uwe and Birgit had bought and modernized their forester's house. They painted the latticework entrance, and its plaque stating "1790," with particular pride.

Uwe got the job of a district forester for Mecklenburg. "Most of us have done well since die Wende," he said. The several friends and neighbors around the table nodded in agreement. "Some have suffered," he continued, "especially older people who lost jobs and had to move away. But the government support systems are generally strong for disadvantaged people."

So far, government support for forests remains strong as well. The municipal forests so common throughout Germany traditionally supplied firewood and timber for governmental offices, and such non-timber forest products as mushrooms, berries, wildlife habitat, and trails for everyone. They also protected community watersheds.

But in the 21st century global economy, the price of timber has gone down as labor costs, especially in public forests, went up. Public forests are losing money. Economists question how long the public will be willing to cover these losses. Currently, conservation and mushroom-picking are not self-funding. Economy and ecology are the twin faces of sustainability.

As Holger drove home from Uwe's late in the evening, I closed my eyes and for some reason recalled photos I had seen of earth from satellites. These photos don't show scars on our lovely blue planet from capitalism or socialism or communism. What shows up from way out in space are the gouges of industrialization: the concentration of labor and equipment to use resources on a massive scale to produce consumer goods, especially armaments. Every government seems to want this.

"Scheiße!" Holger's exclamation and the instantaneous flash of light that caused it woke me from my reverie. He had triggered a "Blitz," a police camera set along an Allee to record the license plate and face of speedsters. It seemed unfair, to have a spy camera on this lonely stretch of road. "A new one," Holger said. "There's never been one here before." He could lose his license for a month. From his discussion with Dietlind, I gathered that this might not be the first such incident.

With his typical good nature, he shrugged it off after a few minutes with a story about how he and Uwe had dressed exactly alike for a court hearing years ago and so confused a judge that he wasn't sure which of them deserved the ticket, and dropped the case.



Uwe in the woods, 1991.

🌀 The municipal forests so common throughout Germany traditionally supplied firewood and timber for governmental offices, and such non-timber forest products as mushrooms, berries, wildlife habitat, and trails for everyone. 🌀



Holger and friends practice the traditional hunting horn.

On our last afternoon, Holger and Dietlind took us to a practice session of their horn club. I first heard Holger's hunting horn in the early morning of my first day there 1991, when he woke me playing outside my window. Back then, he took me to a practice session of the group of young people he was teaching. This time we went to a friend's cabin in the woods. We greeted eight or ten adults — maybe some of them were the kids back then — in the polite German way as each one came up to shake hands and say their names. They had been playing together as a regular group for the past eight years. Their instrument was a small, pretty horn, easy to handle and carry around.

There are old tunes for every function of the hunt and for every species of animal. The notes were melodic in the open air, drifting into the surrounding forest. The group sometimes played at festivals and schools. Some of the husbands who didn't play sat on the porch, drinking beer and laughing quietly.

After half an hour the horn blowers took a break, and — as seems to happen in every society — the men gathered in one group and the women in another. I sat around a picnic table with Dietlind and four of her best friends and several bottles of wine. I wanted to ask them, as I had asked everyone I met in 1991, how they found life since die Wende. Back in 1991, almost everyone made the same simple motion in answer: crooked arms thrusting out right and left in the classic "elbowing through the crowd" gesture.

But most of the women now around the table chatting and laughing were forty- and fifty-somethings. I wondered how much they would remember of the old DDR,



yet I could not pass up the opportunity. At a lull in the lively conversation, I explained how I had first come in 1991 and asked, “Are you satisfied with the changes in life since die Wende?”

Dead silence fell. I feared that I had stumbled on a taboo subject, like Hitler and the war used to be, or that I had garbled my German in some rude way. But they were simply considering the question. Slowly, they all began to nod their heads, yes, things were better now. “You can travel now,” one said, “though we didn’t really miss it earlier because we didn’t know what was in the west.”

“And it’s good not to have to be so careful about what we say,” another added.

“The DDR did a lot to help women and children,” a third woman said. “And men too. Everyone had a job and a home. Everyone could go to a doctor. We didn’t have many material things, but we all helped each other.” She smiled at the others around the table. “We still do.” They all smiled back. “There are advantages and disadvantages to both systems,” she concluded. “The best would be a blend.” Everyone agreed.

Before Holger took us to the train station the next day, he called us over to the old barn beside BärWinkel. It was a sturdy structure with heavy wooden boards, at least a century old. When he unlocked it and I stepped in, I saw that it had neither stalls nor hay cribs. Holger had recently made a single, open party room out of it, decorated with posters and photos of his son’s recent 30th birthday bash. “Next time you come,” Holger said, “we’ll have a party here.”

On the way to the station, Holger talked about an upcoming meeting with one of his clients, the count. “He wants \$100,000 Euros a year from his forests,” Holger said. He shook his head. “I want to make a good job, I want to make good forests,” he said. The forester’s dilemma, I realized, is always the same.



Birgit Galonska at her outdoor dinner table.

“I want to make a good job, I want to make good forests,” Holger said. The forester’s dilemma, I realized, is always the same. ✨



BIO: Chris Bolgiano is Professor Emeritus at James Madison University, an Independent Scholar, and an environmental writer who believes that humor is nature’s preferred survival technique. She uses solar power to write from her Virginia mountainside forest, which is under a conservation easement. She has authored or edited six books; her two Appalachian Forest books each won literary prizes. Her articles on nature and travel have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *American Forests*, *Sierra*, *Wilderness*, *Audubon*, and many other publications. On the left, she sits on a chain saw sculpture at the entrance to Holger’s house in 2013; right, riding a bike in Ludwigslust in 1991.

