





A scenic mountain landscape featuring a village with several houses and barns nestled in a valley. The foreground is dominated by lush green fields and a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the background, majestic mountains rise, some with patches of snow. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and idyllic.

CHAPTER


10





1. The outstanding beauty of the landscape: autumn in Lesachtal

# THE ART OF BEING DIFFERENT

 SIMONE MATOUCH

I first set foot in Lesachtal over 25 years ago. I was scared at that time, not yet used to travelling to unknown places with unknown people. I was also fearful of the stories which preceded my arrival, stories of the outstanding beauty and wilderness of the landscape, but also of the narrow-mindedness of its inhabitants, - *'typical stubborn mountain farmers'* - I was told. The Lesachtal is a high mountain

valley in the South-West of Austria. It sits between 600 and 1400m above sea level, a wild stretch of a canyon cut by the Gail river.

I was there as a biologist, still based at university, to carry out a project on biodiversity and cultural landscapes. The first meeting with the mayor was unfriendly and cold, not just because the place was sparsely heated. Nature conservation is a topic people get



*"We don't need any advice from outsiders."*

emotional about, particularly when confronted with scientists who want to measure, evaluate and quantify it. *"We know best about the land here." "we don't need any advice from outsiders," "you university types will not impose anything on us."*

## SCIENCE VS 'THE REAL WORLD'

Such were the deeply ingrained, firmly held opinions we were confronted with. This was intimidating but it points to the often complex relationships between scientific and experiential knowledge, and also academia's role in the rural world. Frequently non-scientific and non-academic ways of knowing about the environment have been excluded from serious study. These ways of knowing often require integration, feeling and prolonged immersion, an expertise garnered from real experience.

Still, I had to do my job. The weeks ahead were tough. I felt isolated and alone and decided to head back home earlier than planned. The bus home wound along seemingly endless curves laced by steep slopes. I remember clearly wishing this trip would finally end. Now, over a quarter of a century later, I have been living here for 15 years and these endless curving roads fill me with a feeling of coming home... What changed? It takes courage

and openness to confront the stereotypes and prejudices you hold; it requires a readiness to be wrong and reconfigure what you think you know. Reflecting, back home in the university, I felt attracted by the Lesachtal way of life, the landscape and the community spirit. After 5 months, I decided to try again. I came back on a new job. This time everything felt a little more familiar and I slowly began to understand the Lesachtal '*sense of place*,' a concept Camille introduced in chapter 3. After that project drew to a close, I decided to stay and to try out this way of life for myself.

## HARNESSING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Hans Windbichler, regional manager in the early 1990s, was trying to put in place the regional development plan. Hans had to take over the family farm from one day to the next after his father passed away suddenly. He was thus unable to do further education or training and had no professional experience in regional development. Crucially

though, he was a local, he understood agriculture and the people who lived and worked in it. These are things further education cannot so easily teach, as this is a different form of knowledge. He took a crash course in development basics and built a team with an external professional (who understood the legal and administrative framework in which the regional development plan had to operate). This combination was the key to success.

Eigeninitiative Lesachtal (EIGL) was the association running the regional development programme. In 1996, Forum Synergies invited EIGL to a rural workshop in Wulkow, East Germany. Hans liked the idea but as a dairy farmer had to milk his cows twice a day. He invited me to represent the region instead.

This was a big deal. A woman, with the urban, scientific and academic background was not the typical face of European rural life on the international stage. It was a chance for me to represent an area I had come to love quite dearly. Both Hans and I had confronted our stereotypes and off to Wulkow I went.





## WULKOW AND EAST GERMANY 1996

What Forum Synergies was trying to do in Wulkow, a local community initiative in the former German Democratic Republic, was something quite similar to what we tried in Lesachtal. It was the beginning of a series of travelling workshops, visiting remote rural places, where people tended to leave. Forum Synergies' workshops were about moving out of the ivory towers of universities

and institutions. We met in stables or farmers' shops instead of conference rooms. It was a discovery tour rather than one to teach people what to do. This goes to the heart of Forum Synergies' principles: we need to confront the unknown, to experience it, in order to change our mindsets. The Wulkow workshop was a discovery of rural East Germany after the Berlin Wall had come down

The Wulkow workshop fired me up, because I discovered so many similar challenges of small communities not

to close themselves in because so many things out there change. I was excited to share the experience back in Lesachtal. Words, written reports or even photos felt insufficient to explain what was so special about the Wulkow experience. It was definitely different from the classically sectoral - or stakeholder-driven, hierarchical, expert-oriented - approach. From the onset, it was about crossing boundaries, both physically and mentally, and facilitating a constructive dialogue.

*"We need to confront the unknown, to experience it, in order to change our mindsets."*

2a. 2b. Welcome to Wulkow





3a. 3b. Workshop Lesachtal 1996: in the middle of alpine rural reality  
4. Hans Windbichler (second from left) in 2019 as major of Lesachtal

## FROM ATTENDEES TO ACTORS

It was just logical to me to host a workshop in Lesachtal. Forum Synergies placed trust in me, giving me confidence that I had the skills and enthusiasm to take such challenge on. This trust was fundamental for me. It shifted my thinking. I had something to offer, not to ask for. We were more than just attendees at workshops, we were all actors in sustainable development, active participants and invited to really get stuck in. It was how I became a networking person.

This was significant for Lesachtal, as the place was expressing openness and hospitality to the world beyond the boundaries of our own little valley.

This was a chance to cultivate a more open mindset which welcomed the outsider. We wanted to share what had worked well for us from a rural development perspective but also what our unsolved problems were. Participants from other countries might offer valuable ideas or shared experience. And so Lesachtal became a place to visit during the Sustainable Mystery Tour.

## ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES AND NEW LOCAL ENERGY

Times change, politicians change, funding schemes change. For us in Lesachtal, a significant change in rural development energy came due to more or less coinciding

developments: the general trend of centralisation in all parts of the administration and the loss of independent regional management. In 1996 Lesachtal lost its independent regional management status and was pooled together with other regions, which had quite different character in terms of geology, farming, heritage and education, just as it happened in Beaufortain, as described by Philippe Barret in chapter 8. The positive development, however, was that Hans Windbichler decided to become an active local politician. Today, he is the mayor of the valley. He is excited and eager to bring new energy to rural development and his long experience in farming and working on regional development makes him just the candidate for the job.



## LESACHTALER BREAD AS INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

It takes courage to do things differently, to buck the trend – but much of why Lesachtal is known beyond its place is because of its resistance to global trends of industrialisation, agricultural modernisation and mass construction of tourist infrastructure.

The Lesachtaler bread is a good example of this. It is made using traditional agricultural techniques which use water mills, associations with the local linguistic heritage, and it has a real spiritual dimension

too – it is much more than just a foodstuff. The culture of making this bread was one of the first initiatives in Austria to be listed on the national UNESCO inventory of 'Intangible Heritage'. I was fascinated by this concept of intangible heritage, how could we go about measuring and valuing traditional knowledge? This includes oral traditions and cultural heritage but also social customs and rituals, traditional crafts and songs and knowledge of the natural world. These are intertwinings of ecological, social and cultural aspects and all are relevant for sustainable rural development.

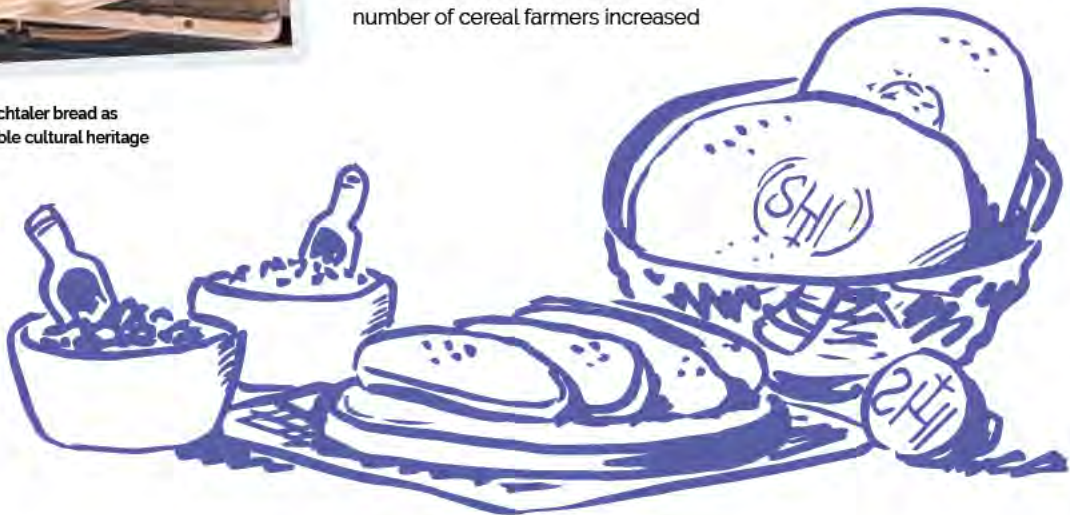
It is astonishing that the Lesachtaler bread has survived at all. It is the product of a few individuals who continued making what others had abandoned a long time ago: cultivating cereals in a high alpine valley, maintaining old water mills and producing their own wheat. A few individuals were inspired and began replanting their own grains, excited to take on the challenge of how to grow wheat at such altitudes. The number of cereal farmers increased

from just two to the ten we have today. We have new cooperatives for the harvesting, a new association for brand protection, the 'Lesachtaler Brot Verein', and several women active in baking and marketing their homemade bread. This is all thanks to those few individuals who held on to the traditional bread making practices. So today's Lesachtaler bread is a real meeting of innovation and tradition. It is part of the reason why our region became one of the first Slow Food Travel destinations, a scheme which tries to encourage tourists to be not just consumers but also to actively experience the production of local food.

Here we begin to see how tradition is about the future and not about the past, it is about looking after what we think is valuable for future generations, not about preserving the ashes but 'passing on the flame'. Some things we let go and move on and some things we decide need to be passed on to future generations.



5. Lesachtaler bread as intangible cultural heritage







6a. 6b. Hay making in alpine meadows : hard work deserves a special moment of recreation

7. Simone in her herb garden: passing on traditional knowledge of herbs has become one of her passions

## TRADITIONAL GATHERING OF HIGH MOUNTAIN HAY

The special quality of the high mountain hay is well known. It has always been an essential addition to fodder when cows were sick. It still is today but also the benefit for human health - mainly for the musculoskeletal system - is known and well used. In former times this way of making hay was one of the most demanding works to do - and mainly abandoned in the mid 1960s. When Manfred Guggenberger started to mow the Alpine meadows again most of the people shook their heads and told him to be 'am Holzweg' - a friendly expression that he is on the wrong path. It turned out that he is a pioneer instead, his project is successful despite people's negative prediction. When nowadays somebody tells him he's 'am Holzweg', he knows he's on the right route.

## HERBS, HEALTH AND HEILSAME LANDSCHAFT

Interested in pursuing traditional knowledge preservation further, I began my own herbal business, [NATURSCHATZ Kräutermanufaktur](#), twelve years ago. The region has a long heritage of female herbalists, but I was the first local of a new generation who began studying the use of herbs for health and nourishment. I guess I was a pioneer of sorts building on the work of the herbalists before me, those who have a deep, empirical knowledge of local herbs and their uses. Their way of knowing herbs is not about a quick diagnosis and easy solution to an ailment, based on cursory evidence. Instead, it is based on instinctive knowledge: often it can be difficult to explain the exact mechanisms by which a herbal remedy works, it's just that you know it is right. Legal requirements for fully quantifiable evidence really threaten this other form of knowledge.

Now though, I see many new herbalists in our region, women who have done training and education and

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who know which plants to use for what but who also know the complex legislation around herb production for sale. There really is a thriving scene so what began as a pioneering, daring move, has become quite the norm. This is an ordinary process and sometimes allows us to forget the important, path-making way of the pioneer.

What does the recent upsurge in herbalists tell us? I think partly there is a recognition that science cannot explain everything. Scientific knowledge is vital, and has brought the human race immeasurably forward, but it struggles with the intangible. This is where traditional knowledge comes in.

## LESACHTALER HEALING

A more holistic understanding of health and wellbeing is something the Lesachtal valley wants to pursue, both now and into the future.

'*Heilsame Landschaft Lesachtal*' is the name of a new LEADER project

just beginning in 2018. '*Heilsam*' is difficult to translate into English. It means some combination between healthy, beneficial and salutary. '*Healing*,' not just physically but also psychologically and emotionally, is a concept which comes closest. By bringing this concept together with landscape and agriculture, we want to acknowledge the many different aspects of good health.

For some time now, science has shown us that nature is beneficial not only for medicine and health insurance institutions. Spending time in Alpine regions generates positive effects on overall health.

At this time of exponential growth of non-communicable diseases (such as cancer, diabetes, but also burn-out), which may cause the financial collapse of public health care systems, there is growing interest in '*prevention*'. There seems to be a great potential for regions - especially Alpine regions - who are able to provide an authentic offer for tourists in general and people who care about



8. A new LEADER project called '*Heilsame Landschaft*'

their health. It can also be a form of sustainable tourism that does not require us to destroy our landscape with mass tourism projects. Since the project is embedded in the local community and the local landscapes, with local stakeholders offering up their businesses, we hope to prevent the kind of economic dependencies which often arise from the tourism industry. We want this to be a type of tourism which encourages social cohesion, values local tradition and encourages rootedness. This project only started a few months ago, we still have to see how it grows, but it is looking good.

## PEOPLE!



*"Having finished our studies we had to decide - leave or go. Looking for 'good jobs' or living our dream. We decided in favour of our dream to become reality: living a self-determined life full of creativity close to nature". Helene, who was born in Lesachtal, and her partner Pepi, coming from further afield, also wanted to act consciously against the brain drain of rural places - of well-educated people who leave. Their hepi Lodge now is full of energy, full of funky ideas combined with traditional elements - with regard to their house but also with regard to their lifestyle in general.*

*"We want this to be a type of tourism which encourages social cohesion, values local tradition and encourages rootedness."*



## THE LESACHTAL EXPERIENCE IN A NUTSHELL

**25** years after my first time in Lesachtal, I can see that the struggles facing the region are a little different in nature but have in common the ongoing trend toward centralisation, dependency on multi-national corporations and bodies and the loss of self-sufficiency. However, I see that the Lesachtal still has the capacity to resist trends which silently rob it of its authenticity. The art of being different seems to build upon a mixture of resistance and innovation, mutual assistance and private conflicts, of personal appreciation of our own roots.

The creativity which has helped Lesachtal deal with difficulties in the past is more necessary than ever. I write these lines with the sounds of military helicopters endlessly whirring above the valley. For the past week they have tried to restore electricity connection and clear roads after extreme storms. Heavy rainfall, mudslides and floods pummeled our valley, destroying vast chunks of forest as well as homes and vital infrastructure. It makes for a sorry, painful sight - 30 or 40 year-old pine trees snapped like toothpicks, a devastated landscape peppered with homes without roofs and whole slopes which have been washed away. We are fragile in the light of such disasters, and we can expect more of them as the climate changes.

*"Rural areas need to welcome newcomers, they can bring new ideas and innovative approaches."*

I also notice the smiling faces and companionship of my neighbours who have come together to clean up. The main help comes from the locals: skilled farmers or foresters do not need to wait for external professionals to begin the work. These *'stubborn and old-fashioned'* people - what a treasure their skills are! A friend of mine is stuck with a vast quantity of milk she cannot deliver because the roads are blocked. Quick-thinker, she instead made a large batch of butter and a kind of soft cheese, the *'Schottekigilan'*. A speedy and creative response to disaster!

Lesachtal has taught me many things. It has shown me the worth in confronting my prejudices and opening up. I hope I have taught Lesachtal the same. Rural areas need to welcome newcomers, they can bring new ideas and innovative approaches. This is needed to keep these places lively and connected to the wider world. Sometimes it is difficult to straddle the preservation and value of the local with the connection to the global but Lesachtal, with creativity and courage to resist the trends, has done just that.