

### A Journey to Sonnberg \* Diary from the future

#### **Approximation.**

My journey to Sonnberg turned out to be extremely pleasant: by IC to the provincial capital, then by the express train, which runs at hourly intervals, to the district town, which lies in one of the alluvial valleys of the pre-alpine hilly landscape where the municipality of Sonnberg is located. Having arrived there, I chose, among two options, the slower one, as I had time and wanted to let the first impressions work their magic on me at my leisure: namely, one of the hill buses, which cruise each of the four cloverleaf-shaped circular routes with fixed stops in hourly intervals, but also allow branch-offs to stops in side paths, as long as the passengers on the bus select them in good time using a keypad near the driver's seat. Indeed, if I had been pressed for time, I could have called for an autonomous hill taxi (affectionately known as Hüxi) via the regional app. Each municipality has a small fleet of such Hüxis, ranging from two- to five- to eight-seaters; there is also a limited supply of small trucks for hire, but for that it is worth booking a few days in advance, as demand is high. The local hill buses are owned by the public transport companies with a minority shareholding by the municipalities. Particularly picturesque routes are popular with visitors to the region in hop-on-hop-off mode. However the hill taxis (Hüxis) are operated by inter-municipal consortia involving private and public operators. They are subject to a framework regulation that guarantees equal conditions for passengers across all regions throughout the country.

#### **Beauty emerges.**

The landscape around Sonnberg is beautiful, with its rolling hills and valleys, diversely structured into fields, meadows, pastures and forests, especially beautiful are the tree-lined fields, wild fruit hedges, dry stone walls, flower-strewn strips along the paths, which are used in part exclusively, in part in mixed form for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, but also provide farmers with access to their fields and forestry. Asphalt is used sparingly - only on completely or almost exclusively dedicated cycle paths.

Only after a few conversations with farmers who livened up the main square for the weekly market did I realise that the landscape did not present itself in such beauty at all times. The valley fields, drained and homogenized into large swaths of farmland, were worked by monstrous agricultural machines in day and night shifts. The grassland in the so-called unfavorable, because less fertile and



p.1





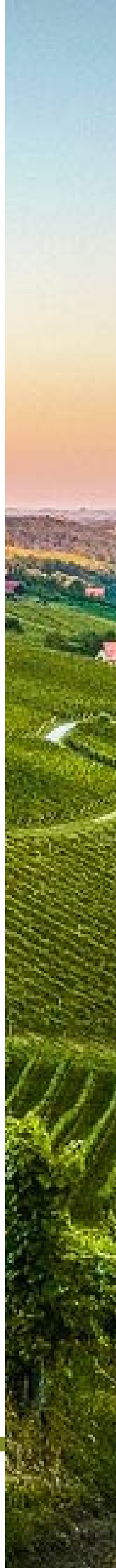
## Rural Europe in Action

and hummocky parts of the area, got abandoned and turned wild. Even where mowing took place, the grass cuttings were left lying around at best. The meadows became impoverished. Oh wait, this is not to demonize wilderness – at least 10% of the land has to be devoted to nature by law, and rightly so – but there is actually more biodiversity in structured landscapes, apart from their livability in aesthetic terms. Any blessing turns into a curse, if it grows out of proportion. The decisive turnaround only began when CAP payments were linked to labor and the reference to area was made strongly degressive. Significantly higher premiums were granted for the first 20 ha. Organic farming has been set the default mode of production and thereby as the basic condition for any subsidy or premium, but I will come back to that later. What I want to tell here is that the CAP reform led to a dynamisation of small and medium-sized farms that even die-hard optimists would not have thought possible: without land subsidies, one-sided mass production simply no longer paid off. Other, more natural, more diverse and more labor-intensive production options have become available since then, meeting the growing demand for high-quality products from agriculture, fish farming and extensive livestock farming. Landscapes don't lie: agricultural steppes have evolved into flowering gardens.

### ***The taste of beauty.***

Yes, and there I was! I got off the bus in the centre of town, having booked at the main inn near the church on the market square. The journey had whetted my appetite, so I sat down at the table straight away. The lunch menu was not long in coming. How good it smelled, what a delight! I quickly realised where the region's good reputation comes from. The kitchens of the inns and restaurants here, not just the one where I dwelled, use organic ingredients only, with declared exceptions: therefore they don't need to declare every single dish, because you already know from the plaque next to the entrance that only organic food finds its way into the kitchen whenever possible. The menu only indicates what does NOT come from controlled organic production!

During my entire stay in pretty Sonnberg, I did not experience any inn or restaurant that did not have the trinity of organic, regional and seasonal written on its banners, and did not have this certified via a regional brand. Believe me, you can READ that commitment in the features of the landscape.



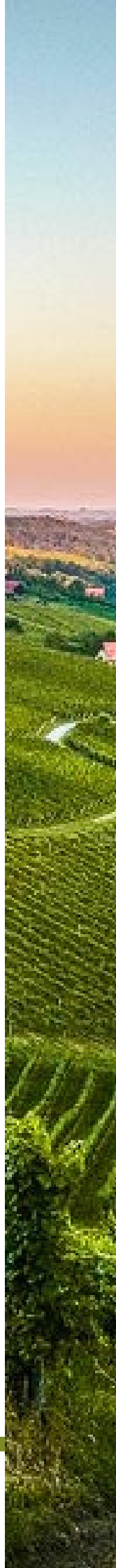


### ***Eco-friendly regulations.***

Most of the inn keepers have invested in recent years. The one where I stay is more reserved in this respect, trying to keep her indebtedness within limits. National construction regulations have been thoroughly revised some time ago. Certain building materials are banned, such as polystyrene insulation elements. The use of biological, renewable, climate-friendly building materials, energy and water saving devices and provisions to protect the employees' health - they are listed on a positive list - have become a basic requirement for subsidies. To complement the advice provided by the companies offering the services, there are advisory centres in every district which building applicants can consult for expert advice, be it on building plans and materials, on energy supply and building services or matters related to health and security.

### ***Rural renaissance.***

Similar principles apply to agriculture and forestry! After organic farming became a basic requirement for all kinds of public support, including decoupled payments, in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy 20 years ago (exceptions are possible if duly justified), unexpected cascading effects unfolded: some farmers gave up more quickly than expected, but were immediately taken over by the next generation or by new entrants who felt spurred on by the new framework conditions. The boom in new rural businesses that now set in surprised everyone involved. Only the partly excessive land prices and the financing of the start-ups threatened to act as a brake. However, this could be defused by the combined effect of generous start-up subsidies and the instrument of regional land banks. The regional land banks have emerged in a short period of time in most rural areas of the country. They are established by the municipalities in partnership with local banking institutions, individual companies and socio-economic interest groups, and offer financing models as well as professional advice in all municipal offices. Location and start-up counselling is by the way an integral part of a wider service offer to all newcomers and immigrants, be they people who want to stay in the countryside during their retirement, young families and company founders, job seekers from our country or abroad, or refugees seeking asylum in our country. Not every concern can be dealt with by the counselling centre in the municipality - but people seeking advice are reliably directed to where they can find competent support.





## Rural Europe in Action

Soon after the tide changed in the funding landscape, the share of organic farms had climbed above the two-thirds mark, and the share of organic food in consumption approached the 50% mark.

### *How it all plays together.*

Already during my first walk across the main square and the adjoining market alleys, I noticed that every shop was in use, there were no vacancies: the few shops that were apparently not in use because of an imminent change of ownership were available to traders or associations for pop-up uses. They could use them as communication space for little money. The local art and youth scene also made its mark there, sometimes charmingly provocative and always inspiring, because they could "play" the temporarily unused shops and displays for free.

In contrast, as the owner of the paper shop on the main square assured me, the suburban shopping centres had not grown in recent years, on the contrary. Building gaps in the settlement core were closed by gentle interventions and incentives from the municipal council. Properties on the outskirts were bought back from the regional land bank after the business out there closed down, and the landscape was renaturalised. In contrast to building permits for private residences, commercial facilities whose floor space exceeds that of a medium-sized local supermarket are approved at the sub-regional level. These permission processes are overseen by a tripartite advisory board made up of equal numbers of representatives from local authorities, social and environmental interest groups and of citizens chosen by lot. Although strict monitoring is supposed to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest, it is actually advantageous if different stakeholders sit on more than one of these advisory boards (which have been established not only for land but also for health and education issues), area-based development partnerships (such as CLLD) and professional associations (tourism, water management). Personal cross-representation allows for a high level of informal coordination, provided that the respective actors are willing to use his or her connections for the benefit of the region and not just for promoting their individual interests.

The central role in the coordination of planning levels and funding instruments is accomplished by the coordination office for sustainable development, circular economy and climate protection set up in each sub-region, which in our country are simply called "regional management"; in earlier years – when funding for territorial cohesion was still orchestrated at European level – they had primarily been





## Rural Europe in Action

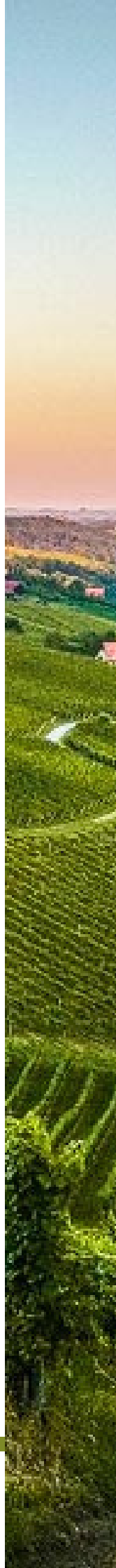
responsible for the use of EU funding (regional, social and rural funds). The coordination office acts on behalf of a regional development association in which the political forces of the region work together. Several interlocutors assured me that most of the issues concerning the sustainable development of the region are decided by consensus, as they are based on a mission statement that is revised every few years. Moreover, contentious issues are resolved through a sociocratic process moderated by independent consultants. The winning solution is the one with the lowest number of "resistance points".

### *Living democracy.*

Sociocratic methods are also used for citizen polling. The wording of questions is prepared by citizens' councils, whose members are drawn randomly from the list of inhabitants older than 16 years. The citizen's council also ensures that the poll is preceded by comprehensive and fair information campaigns and public discussions. Thus, there is rarely a simple yes/no vote, but rather a differentiated choice among not too many solution variants, whose "points of resistance" are sampled.

Many of my interlocutors referred to a particular vote that had taken place about 25 years ago: the question was whether some new road construction projects that had been planned for many years should be cancelled or drastically downsized so that the funds that would be freed up could be used to create cable broadband coverage in the entire settlement area at record speed, no matter how far from the local centres. The only exceptions were to be "digital detox" areas designated by the local communities, where no internet or mobile telephony was desired. The harsh choice between "road construction or broadband" was particularly sensitive politically because there was no solution that would not have disadvantaged some group, at least superficially, even though the climate balance of this strategic realignment would have been clearly in favor of digitalization. Moreover, the reduction of road construction projects was to be linked to corresponding measures for public transport. Broadband expansion should be supported in rural regions primarily by private-municipal partnerships in the form of bonds, which also proved to be a regional financial investment.

To take the heat out of the political discussion, the forms of discourse participation and sociocratic procedures had been developed throughout the country at that time, which now help us to complement representative democracy with direct and deliberative forms of





participation. Hate campaigns and fake news no longer find fertile grounds to thrive, just as fast food outlets (well, they still exist!) can no longer make big profits here. Their customer base is dwindling - in a very biological way.

### ***Local economy, closely networked.***

Inspired by many conversations with the mayor, councillors and experts - I just mention the utterly interesting visit to the recycling and waste material yard on the edge of the industrial estate of the local municipality - I came round to some of the local businesses, among them a colorful mix of food processors: an oil and grain mill, a chocolate factory, a spice manufacturer, a fruit distillery, a pasta factory, even a packaging company that exclusively uses biogenic and recyclable raw materials: they all have direct marketing shops, as farms use to have, where a wide range of local food and culinary specialties are available, not only those that are produced on site: The farms work together.

It may be that the producers initially oriented themselves to the highest quality standards of the industry by bringing their products to customers in the city regions further afield. All parties involved have mastered the claviature of online marketing. Gradually, local demand has followed suit and is also aligned with the standards set. With the rediscovered value of growing food in the garden and on the terrace, consumers themselves are becoming bartering partners in the neighborhood.

### ***People as researchers and practitioners.***

Not only products are traded at local markets and in the neighborhood, but also seeds and plantlets. Changes in seed management regulations facilitate the breeding and propagation of robust varieties of vegetables, herbs and fruits that were previously thought to have disappeared altogether. Private initiatives and institutional research and teaching institutions complement each other in this endeavor. Rural vocational schools, cooperative and regionally funded "fablabs", agricultural universities, farmers, processors and consumer initiatives team up to reconcile nature with human interference. So it is not surprising a group of students stays in my inn, conducting field research about new bread grain varieties. Building on the treasure of traditional seeds, a broad spectrum of new phenotypes is emerging. This happened some time ago in viticulture, which has been 100% organic in this area for a good ten years. This kind of research is driven by and with farmers and food processors: agricultural



respectively food research and practice are two sides of the same coin.

### ***A livable land.***

Further afield, there are a number of companies that produce cutting-edge technology (control systems, hardware and software components, precision equipment), operating on a global scale. They are not only important employers for highly qualified people from the region and all those who are attracted by the region's high quality of life and leisure. The aforementioned regional land bank, in association with municipal and cooperative housing and revitalization initiatives, ensures that housing remains affordable, with individual or community access to green space guaranteed for all. To encourage people to grow their own food in and around their private areas, the maintenance of all non-agricultural green spaces (private and public gardens, parks, avenues, cemeteries, railway lines, embankments and meadows left for general use) is mandatorily tied to organic criteria. Here, too, (temporary and well-founded) exceptions are permitted.

### ***Effects.***

From one of the regional print media lying around in my inn - they are mainly financed by local business advertisements - I learn that the region produces far more energy than its inhabitants and businesses consume. Local energy cooperatives (mainly photovoltaic users) have formed almost everywhere. Renewable energy production is also strictly linked to building permits. Depending on the type of building and its location, all possible precautions must be taken for energy-saving construction, solar power generation and thermal use of solar energy. Even asphalted road and parking areas must be used for photovoltaic purposes if possible.

In fact, the region is not only CO2 positive. Population is stable and their age distribution is well-balanced. For some time now, biodiversity indices and even the Farmland Bird Index have been on the rise! Recently, a few pairs of meadow nesting birds, which had not been seen for almost ten years and were thought to be lost, have reappeared.

### ***The end of my journey looms...***

Oh how time flies! A nice excursion to a nearby aquaculture, where a biotope is run with the residual heat from one of the thermal spas in the area, producing fish, shrimps, wasabi roots as well as ginger, turmeric and other delicacies, was the crowning glory of my stay in



p.1

## Rural Europe in Action

Sonnberg. Feed for the fish and shrimps is obtained from crops from the surrounding agriculture and by-products of the food industry. Now it's time for me to make my way to the next stop of the self-driving hill bus, because my train home will be leaving soon. But even if I miss the connection - so be it; I can wait for the next one, treating myself to another hour in the station café, sweeping the view over the landscape.

*Robert Lukesch, November 2021*

