

Host: Dupa Gard, RO

Trainee: Paul Hermann, DE

Duration: 17

17.5.2025-10.6.2025

Report by Paul Hermann



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My experience report of the rural experience hub kick-off (REHK) at Dupa Gard in Posaga de Jos Romania.

After two weeks of my traineeship at the permaculture project *Dupa Gard* in the small Romanian village of Posaga de Jos, I had the chance to take part in the **kick-off event for the Rural Experience Hub of *Forum Synergies***. The event was hosted by *Dupa Gard*, which is run by Ioana, who was born in the village, and Andreas, a German who moved here with her ten years ago. Together they have a daughter, Dhalia, and started the first campground in Posaga.

Today, their project has grown into a self-sufficient permaculture farm that hosts volunteers, offers workshops for locals, and sells its produce to local slow food restaurants. Furthermore, they are now part of the rural sustainable network of *Forum Synergies* and had the opportunity to host the **kick-off meeting of the Rural Experience Hub**.

This event brought together people from many different backgrounds – rural farmers, students, permaculturists, and European policymakers. For this unique weekend, we gathered to discuss the intergenerational challenges facing rural areas. Surrounded by one of Europe's largest primal forests, our group immersed itself in the peaceful, slow life of this place.

Along the small river flowing through the village, we saw aging farmers hand-tilling their small agricultural fields. Herds of goats and cattle grazed on the lush green hills above long-forgotten fruit orchards.

In the evening, at a traditional welcome dinner prepared by a young local woman who had returned from the city to reconnect with her roots, I got to know the other participants. They came from all over Europe – primarily from Eastern countries like Hungary, Armenia, and Slovakia, but also from Sweden, Italy, and Luxembourg.

Adam, the facilitator of the event, led us through a series of group exercises and discussions aimed at shaping the future of rural development. The main task of the

workshop was to envision a cooperation space — a "**HUB**" — for rural development which will be presented in October at the next European Rural Parliament in Scotland.



To create our vision of the HUB, we combined our individual experiences and knowledge of rural development to design both a physical and a conceptual space.

The overall goal of the HUB would be to secure clean water, clean air, healthy food, and healthy communities in rural areas.

The **digital component of the HUB** could serve as a welcoming platform for people interested in moving to rural areas, offering information about local opportunities, culture, and help with administrative processes. It could also serve as a knowledge base of established farming practices and a marketplace for regional products, helping to decentralize food production and distribution.

The **physical component of the HUB** would be built around a small, self-sufficient ecological farm. It would provide seedlings, seeds, and best-practice knowledge to support local agriculture and food security. Most importantly, it would serve as a social meeting space — a forum where traditional indigenous knowledge and modern techniques could enrich one another.

These HUBs could also offer space for art and cultural exchange and provide a stage for workshops and social events — bringing new life to underdeveloped rural areas. Community projects like this could be financially self-sufficient by being energetically independent, ecologically designed, and organised by local experts and volunteers.

Revenue and jobs could be generated by offering accommodation to tourists, selling locally prepared food and farm produce, and providing access to shared equipment, technology, and land design services.

Naturally, many more ideas were discussed during the workshop. For me, this visioning exercise gave a clear picture of what is truly needed in rural development today.

**After centuries of investing in infrastructure, it is now time to invest in socially and ecologically resilient communities** – building cooperation, shared values, and a culture that reconnects people with nature.

What struck me was that these much-needed spaces are not a distant dream. In my years as a permaculture scholar, I have met many small, private projects already providing most of these functions for their local communities. Seeing our group of experts agree that places like *Dupa Gard* and similar projects are at the frontier of rural development gave me hope that policymakers might help fund and support the creation of such HUBs across rural Europe.

The importance of these places became even clearer during our conversations with local residents. Over the weekend, we visited a local family – two brothers and their partners – who collaborate closely with *Dupa Gard*. They had invested all their savings earned while working abroad to buy the only farming machinery available in the village. They chose to live off grid, without electricity, on a farmstead in the forest, raising cattle and goats.

They told us about their struggles in connecting to the power grid, and the exploitation of local forests by corrupt politicians and companies. They had previously organised a local cultural festival, but now lack the support of young villagers, many of whom have moved away for work.

Later, our group was invited by Posaga's newly elected mayor. She had just taken over from a man with close ties to the forestry industry. We spoke with her about the possible closure of the local school, driven by declining birth rates and the challenges of providing spaces for social events – all clear signs of the need to attract and retain a younger population.

Overall, the workshop offered a valuable opportunity to gain insight into the rural situation in Romania and to meet people actively working on these issues. Witnessing everyone's passion and commitment to addressing the challenges of tomorrow was inspiring.

As we move into an era of fully mechanized factories and the loss of creative and office jobs to AI, we are witnessing a historic shift in the role of human labour. Cities originally grew to provide factory workers and to serve as hubs of cultural exchange. But in the not-so-distant future, rural life could become the new norm for people displaced by machines.

Modern technology and knowledge of biological polyculture can replace much of the hard labor traditionally required in rural life. We now have an opportunity to lay the foundations of a resilient, ecological, and human-friendly future in the face of a changing global climate.

We can start by creating spaces for connection between young and old, from near and far. Sharing a meal prepared and cooked together has shaped culture and tradition throughout human evolution. Now we must reclaim these values from the alienation of modern industrial life.

Monocultures, overconsumption, and the exploitation of nature have led us to the crises we face today. In my view, bringing people together to take responsible action on the land is the only effective path to a healthy Earth.

### ChatGpts opinion on the matter:

The key legal and interest-based obstacles are:

1. Rigid land use laws
  2. Fragmented and unclear property rights
  3. Economic power of industrial agriculture & forestry
  4. Local cultural and political resistance
  5. Complex legal setup and liability risks
  6. Lack of supportive rural policy and funding mechanisms
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How to overcome them?

- Work **closely with local communities** from the start to build trust.
- Use **cooperative or multi-stakeholder ownership models** to spread benefits.
- Partner with **progressive municipalities** or EU programs that support innovation.
- Build **alliances with existing rural networks** (e.g. Forum Synergies).
- Be legally smart: design the HUB so that each function (farm, events, education) complies with the relevant part of the law.

## Itinerary of my stay at Dupa Gard.

### **17.05.2025 - Arrival Day**

After a long train and bus ride from Germany, I was picked up by Andi and Ioana from the bus station in Turda.

### **18.05.2025 - First Day**

On my first day, I received a tour of the project. Andreas showed me his permaculture garden and food forest. I also met two volunteers who were staying at Dupa Gard. In the afternoon, they gave a flute and macramé workshop for some local people and children, which was very interesting.

### **19.05.2025 - The Barn**

Today, we planned what to do with the old barn on the property, which needs renovation. On the first floor, they plan to house goats. We cleaned the room and I built a new door for the goats' area using recycled wood.

### **20.05.2025 - Trip to Turda**

In the morning, we drove to the nearby town of Turda. We visited the old salt mine, which was very impressive. For lunch, we ate at a local Slow Food restaurant that uses only locally sourced and fairly produced ingredients. Afterwards, we visited the farmers' market and explored the old town of Turda. Back at Dupa Gard, I fixed the doors of the tiny houses, which didn't close properly.

### **21.05.2025 - The Fence**

To create a space for the goats near the barn, we built an electric fence. Andi and I selected the area and set it up. I then installed the solar-powered electric system and connected it to the fence. Later, I turned the grass cuttings on the campsite and mulched the aronia plants with cardboard.

### **22.05.2025 - The Barn's First Beam**

The plan for the barn is to create a second level for future volunteer accommodations. To preserve the traditional style, we used interlocking wood joints for the beams. I measured the barn and beams and created a construction plan. Fortunately, Andi had beams from a previous project with perfect dimensions, so I began chiseling the joints and installed the first beam.

### **23.05.2025 - Trip to Cluj-Napoca**

Over the weekend, Andi, Ioana, and Dhalia and I went to Cluj-Napoca, the largest city in Transylvania and Ioana's hometown. Ioana gave me a city tour and shared the local history. Unfortunately, it rained heavily, so we missed the old farmers' market, but we enjoyed a great dinner and some local wine.

### **24.05.2025 - Trip to Cluj-Napoca II**

After a good night's sleep in an Airbnb, we visited friends we met at a permaculture workshop in Sicily—Nadine and Bob, an elderly couple with a beautiful property on the outskirts of Cluj. Their house and garden are designed following permaculture principles. After a lovely couscous meal and engaging conversations, we said goodbye. On the way back, we picked up sweet potato seedlings that Andi had ordered.

### **25.05.2025 - Free Sunday**



**26.05.2025 - The Goat Barn**

In the morning, Andi and I planted the sweet potato seedlings. Afterwards, I continued working on the wooden barn structure and installed three more beams. In the evening, we visited Christina and her family, who own a herd of goats and offered to donate some to Dupa Gard. We transported the goats to their new home at the barn.

**27.05.2025 - Tomatoes**

Andi had prepared many tomato seedlings that needed planting. We prepared and mulched the beds and planted various tomato varieties. We also built a new tomato bed near the barn and planted seedlings there as well.

**28.05.2025 - The HUB**

In preparation for the Forum Synergies event, we visited the house where the kickoff meeting would take place. After preparing the venue, I met the owner and the event chef, Speranța, who also organizes movie nights and social events in the village.

**29.05.2025 - Preparations**

We cleaned the campsite and communal kitchen at Dupa Gard for the upcoming event. I picked up Dhalia from school while Andi and Ioana went to Cluj to pick up Adam from Forum Synergies at the airport.

**30.05.2025 - Arrival Day**

All members of the Rural Experience Hub kickoff meeting arrived in Poșaga, and we had dinner together.

**31.05.2025 - First Day of the REHK**

The day was filled with interesting talks and activities. We were introduced to the work of Forum Synergies and the Rural European Parliament. We discussed challenges and our experiences as rural youth. After a delicious lunch from Speranța, we toured the Dupa Gard permaculture project. In the afternoon, we began a workshop envisioning the future of rural life. After several inspiring group sessions, we created and presented our vision of a rural hub.

**01.06.2025 - Second Day of the REHK**

After breakfast, we finalized and presented our hub visions. This was followed by a deep group discussion. Later, we visited a local family who had returned to village life and were actively contributing to community development. That evening, we visited the newly elected mayor, who shared local challenges and her vision for the future. Before dinner, we held a closing session and feedback round. The evening campfire was a perfect end to the day.

**02.06.2025 - Saying Goodbye**

On Monday morning, we said goodbye to the last participants of this inspiring weekend. I helped clean the event space and spent the rest of the day exploring more of Poșaga.

**03.06.2025 - Back to Rural Life**

Andi and I prepared another vegetable field in the morning. After lunch, I continued working on the barn.

**04.06.2025 - Finishing the Barn**

I installed the last beam in the barn, so the flooring for the second level can now be added. I spent the rest of the day writing this report on the REHK.

**05.06.2025 - Willows and an Overview**

I offered to lead a natural building workshop to create a willow dome. In the morning, we collected unused basket willows from the riverbank. We then drove to Poșaga's summer mountain, where the village once moved seasonally with their herds. From there, we had a panoramic view of Poșaga and the surrounding villages. Along the way, we saw old straw-roof barns and even wild horses. In the afternoon, we built a new goat fence and added sun protection to the greenhouse.

**06.06.2025 - Preparations for the Workshop**

Two friends of Dupa Gard who had moved to the Romanian countryside came to visit. Together with Andreas, they planned a workshop on rural income opportunities.

**07.06.2025 - The Willow Dome**

I had the honour of leading a willow dome-building workshop at Dupa Gard. About 15 people of all ages joined. The dome, built at the campsite, will serve as a social space. Since it's a living structure, we dug deep holes for the willows to root. We then wove them together—an enjoyable activity for all. We ended the day around a campfire.

**08.06.2025 - Hike to Mount Șeșul**

Some participants invited me on a hike to the nearby national park of Șeșul-Craiului, the highest mountain in Transylvania. After a great day of hiking, we visited a local *Punct Gastronomic*.

**09.06.2025 - My Last Day**

Andi, Ioana, and I had a debrief and shared feedback about the past weeks. After a full weekend, I took some time to relax and finish this report. I said goodbye to everyone—and the goats—as I had to leave early Tuesday morning to catch my bus.

**10.06.2025 - Goodbye Romania!**

After three beautiful weeks in Romania, it was time to head home. The time flew by. I gained deep insight into Romanian rural life and traditions. Seeing what a meaningful place Ioana and Andreas have created truly inspired me. Despite living differently from most in the countryside, they are deeply integrated into the village. Hosting international guests for the REHK and co-creating workshops at Dupa Gard made this an unforgettable experience.

## About Me

My Name is Paul Herrmann, born in the million city Berlin in Germany. I was always fascinated by nature so I chose to study Biology in Berlin. During my studies, I was captivated by ecology, biotechnology and protein structures. While working in laboratories on water testing over biological plastic degradation to artificial photosynthesis. I realised that many fields in modern biology and biotechnology were merely aiming to cure the symptoms of a broken system.

During COVID my life changed completely when I learned about the systemic world view of Permaculture. I realised that my life was not made for writing publications but for understanding myself and my responsibility in an interconnected modern world. My mother and I chose to leave our never fulfilling life in the metropole behind. And we used our European freedom of movement to move to rural Sicily,

where we opened a permaculture hostel. Here I continue my research on polyculture and give workshops on sustainable living and Permaculture. We connected to the rural population and invest our energy in natural protection, beach clean ups and fighting the garbage problem of the island. Moving to the countryside helped me reconnect to nature and gave me new ways of having an impact on a better planet. This feeling of a possible change, I like to share with others.