

Interview with Lean Jabali, a shepherdess in Switzerland

# THE SHEPHERD'S CHALLENGE: LEARNING BY BEING

Interview: Daniel Mettler

Photographs: Lean Jabali



Lean was born 1980 in Jordan to a Bedouin father and a Swedish mother. When she was nine years old, the family moved to Sweden where she finished school and studied art, philosophy and cultural studies. After working with autistic children, she looked for a new challenge and moved to the Austrian Alps to snowboard in winter and herd cattle in summer. Her next move was to Switzerland to pursue her dream of making cheese.

## ***How and why did you become a shepherd?***

During my work milking cows and goats in the Swiss Alps I discovered a new world of landscape and animals. The milking process was interesting and challenging, but I was looking for even closer contact with the flock. With my wish to work only with animals I discovered sheep and shepherding. I have been working as a shepherdess for nine years now on various Swiss alpine farms, mainly in the canton of Graubünden, and I feel in love with this fascinating profession.

## ***Can you describe your fascination of working with sheep?***

The most fascinating thing about sheep is that you become small when you work with a big flock. You have to stay flexible because of the movements and the dynamic of the flock. It changes every moment and you have to stay constantly in contact with the flock. With cattle, I had more individual contact with the animals. With sheep, the flock as a whole is much more important, even if you keep an eye on some individual animals that have a special character or are sick. The relationship with the flock plays the key role in my fascination. And, of course, my devoted colleagues, the sheep dogs, without whom I wouldn't be a herder.

## ***What was the biggest challenge when you started this work?***

The first season I worked alone with 800 sheep, mostly the White Alpine breed. I had a very hard summer, but I had to learn fast. This pressure was the best apprenticeship for me. But after the first summer I wanted to give up. I don't know why, but next year I went up again. I wasn't looking for help, I wanted to learn myself, and I realised that I have to trust the sheep more, not to follow my head, but to follow the spirit of the sheep and the whole flock. And it started to change. I discovered the crucial role of "learning by being and observing".

## ***Did you transfer this experience to your way of life?***

No, I didn't think about this. I'm not a philosopher, thinking with concepts. But I realised that with an-



imals I can gain freedom with routine, responsibility and trust. With my full awareness I can forget myself and be completely in the present. Somehow, it is an exercise of self-control which leads to a confidence in what you are doing. This confidence and the attachment to the animals gives me a feeling of satisfaction.

***What do you think about exchanging knowledge and experience?***

Exchange is a good thing, and a lot of people need it to achieve confidence in their work. I did a shepherding course in Switzerland, organised by AGRIDEA (*Editor's note: see Box 1*), but theory and practice are two worlds apart. Technical skills and knowledge are important but herding and interaction with sheep and dogs are only improved by experience. I would definitely recommend doing an apprenticeship with an experienced herder the first summer as the education demands.

***What are the most important skills for a shepherd?***

First of all, you should be interested in animals and you should have a good capacity to observe them and infer from their behaviour. You should know how to read the weather, the vegetation and especially all the

interactions between these factors. Additionally, you should be able to handle loneliness and physical fitness is also very important. I think with all these aspects you also need a lot of patience.

***Do you remember any moments of fear?***

Yes, especially in the first year, when I started working with sheep: fear of losing animals, fear of constant movement of the flock, fear of being responsible for accidents or sick animals. During the second year I lost this fear thanks to better self-control and more experience. The responsibility and the stress can be huge when nobody is around to share your problems. You need self-control to manage fear and loneliness and you learn to accept that you cannot control everything.

***As a seasonal shepherd you don't own sheep. How is the contact with the owners of the sheep where you work?***

I was lucky because the owners trusted me and they let me do it my way, which I really appreciated. As a woman, I was always respected and people were mostly very helpful and supportive. I never felt discriminated or treated without respect. Through my work and my motivation I was respected and with more experience and self-confidence it's easier to be part of the "sheep world".

***What is the impact of wolves on your work?***

It's a threat to the flock like storms, falling rocks or diseases. I don't separate it from other threats that we have to handle and to live with it. It's a danger that you have to take into account during your work. As a shepherd, my job is to protect the flock from any possible dangers and I do what I can with my herding knowledge and my dogs.





***Have you had any wolf attacks in recent years?***

Yes, I have. I had two summers with quite heavy wolf presence. A few years ago I lost ten sheep, the next summer 11. If the wolf specialises on livestock and kills too many sheep, I would like to shoot it. Swiss wolf management is actually going in this direction with a system of damage thresholds. So, if all my efforts and my dogs aren't effective, I would shoot the wolves to avoid more damage. If the wolf eats the whole animal, I have a certain respect for the behaviour of the wolf. But it's very difficult to accept that it kills more animals than it can eat.

***How do you protect your flock?***

Since I've been working with sheep, I always have five to eight livestock guarding dogs in the flock. After the attacks, I have been putting the whole flock in a pen every night. Since doing that I haven't had any more attacks. The most important thing is to control the flock during night and day in the difficult topography of alpine pastures. For seasonal summer grazing most big flocks are a mix of different breeds from more than ten owners. From the moment you start in the first paddock in spring you have to keep the sheep together, to achieve a compact flock and to create a guided unit with this mixture of sheep. This is a very tricky and typical point for the herding management in the Alps.

***What impact do the dogs have?***

The livestock guarding dogs are a part of the flock and they have negative and positive impacts. Younger dogs (less than two years old) can be a problem if they disturb the flock or harass the lambs. Say you have two dogs that constantly fight with each other, they bring stress to the flock and to the other dogs. But



they can also help with herding. For example, to cross a river where the sheep are afraid, the dogs go ahead and then the sheep follow. They can play a role by pulling instead of pushing like herding dogs do. They show me when a sheep is sick or, for example, if there is a dead animal around. An important thing is that the dog team gels and works well together. I wouldn't go on a sheep alp without them!

***In your seasonal job you have to handle sheep and dogs that you don't know. How do you manage this?***

I learnt a lot from observing the animals and their behaviour. There are big differences between sheep breeds. Some have a stronger herd instinct, some much less. With the dogs it is the same. You have to learn to understand them. I see this more like a positive thing, it's challenging to accept the differences between sheep breeds, between individual guarding dogs and also herding dogs. It is like an apprenticeship to accept the diversity of individuals and situations. There's no recipe or quick fix, that's why you have to find your own way.

***What is the biggest challenge to protect your flock?***

With the fact that you have different types of sheep breeds from several owners it's difficult to build a homogenous group that stays together. The Suffolk has a completely different behaviour compared to the White Alpine. To protect the flock you have to keep them together, that's the only way the livestock guarding dog can protect the flock in difficult topography.

***What do you think about the future of shepherding in Switzerland?***

I can see two trends. On the one hand, there's a tendency that the hard work of shepherding is done

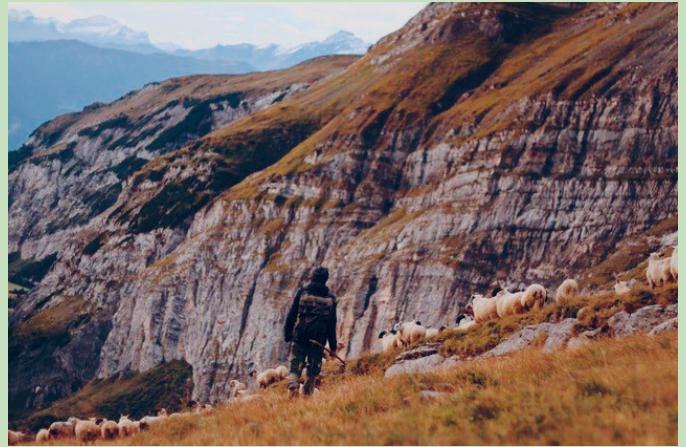


more and more by foreign people and, on the other hand, there's a need to go back to nature, to look for alternatives to urban daily life. But it will be more and more difficult to find herders with a lot of experience. Our seasonal job is not easy to combine with another job during the rest of the year. I hope that the profession will be more respected in the future, with higher wages. Maybe such a change could motivate young people to join the passion of herding.

**Can you imagine working as a shepherd for the rest of your life?**

Yes, when I discovered sheep, the job of shepherding opened my eyes to a new world. I cannot imagine doing any other job, actually. Shepherding has

become my life. With the animals I am at home and I feel I'm doing something meaningful, I can forget myself and be in the moment.



**Box 1 Training shepherds in Europe**

Shepherding is closely intertwined with protection of livestock. Along with night pens, fences and guarding dogs, permanent human presence is recognised as a key method of deterring predators. In many contexts, shepherds are a prerequisite for the implementation of the other measures. Moreover, the skill and experience of the shepherd in guiding the flock is often critical to ensuring safe grazing, especially in mountainous terrain (see Mettler et al.'s article on *Good practice for night pens on alpine summer pastures* in this issue).

This age-old tradition has declined markedly in recent decades, particularly in more economically developed countries such as those of central and western Europe. As large carnivores return, however, there is renewed demand for effective damage prevention measures, including shepherds. This calls for greater efforts to motivate, train and support the next generations of profession-

al shepherds, providing them with the necessary knowledge and other resources.

To meet the current need for more shepherds in Europe, there are a growing number of training courses and schools. AGRIDEA collaborates with the Visp and Landquart agricultural schools to run training courses for shepherds in Switzerland<sup>1</sup>. Artzain Eskola<sup>2</sup> was created in 1997 to revitalise and maintain grazing in the Basque Country (Spain) by increasing the professional level of shepherds. More recently shepherd schools<sup>3</sup>, Escola de Pastores<sup>4</sup>, have been set up in Portugal. Pastoral organisations, networks and research groups in Italy have launched a national pastoral school<sup>5</sup>. Other examples of training and apprenticeship programmes in France, Germany and the Netherlands were featured in a special issue of *CDPnews* focused on shepherds<sup>6</sup>.

The Editors

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.protectiondestroupeaux.ch/en/hirten/ausbildung/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gomiztegi.eus/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://queijoscentrodeportugal.pt/2021/05/06/2a-edicao-da-escola-de-pastores/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://escoladepastores.pt/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scuolanazionalepastorizia.it/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.protectiondestroupeaux.ch/fileadmin/doc/International/CDP\\_and\\_General\\_Infos/CDPNews14-Shepherd\\_Issue\\_2017.pdf](http://www.protectiondestroupeaux.ch/fileadmin/doc/International/CDP_and_General_Infos/CDPNews14-Shepherd_Issue_2017.pdf)