

Preface

Why would I, a sixty-two-year-old American woman, fly to Germany and hike over two hundred miles?

Why did I endure physical pain, pushed my body to its performance limits, braved trails that almost paralyzed me with fear, and occasionally hiked under weather conditions that would have most women my age refuse to walk to the mailbox?

Naturally, there was the desire to become more fit and trim off a few pounds. This was, however, a minor consideration and could have been more easily accomplished close to my home.

I like to spend time in a quiet, calm environment. My husband, David, and I own and maintain a small alpaca farm in Burlington County, New Jersey. Our property offers the privacy and natural surroundings that I desire and enjoy. Nevertheless, its location, close to suburbs and major cities, does not offer the total solitude of a hike through woods and meadows—far removed from human dwellings. I looked forward to spending many hours walking on peaceful trails, with only the sounds of singing birds or rustling leaves breaking the silence.

The thought of a long hike—fifteen days if all went well—also awakened my sense of adventure. It would be a challenge, I told myself. Would I have the strength, endurance, and plain guts to rise to it?

I had never been afraid to take chances and explore new territory. In 1970, when I was twenty years old, I moved to the United States of America. My family, including my parents and three siblings, remained in Germany. There had been many visits back and forth over the years, but I rarely spent time alone with one of my three siblings. The opportunity to spend fifteen days virtually alone with my youngest sister, Karin, appealed to me.

Our destination? We planned to hike to Neumagen, a small village in the beautiful Mosel valley, and the place where we were born. Although I love my chosen country—the United States of America—very much, my memories of Neumagen and its people remain alive. I wanted to see my old home again.

In September, 2012, I boarded a plane in Philadelphia. It took me to Frankfurt, Germany, and there began a journey that surprised and sometimes shocked me in its intensity. The physical challenges were often greater than what I had expected. What I had not expected at all were my emotions—buried for decades—that rose to the surface as I walked the beautiful and often silent trails of my former homeland.

Writing this book was an afterthought. Once conceived, the plan to keep a diary during the hike added another dimension to my journey. My grandchildren belong to a large group of Americans with German ancestors. I hope this book will kindle more than just a spark of interest in the country of their forefathers.

Foreword

When Ingrid Wood asked me to review the manuscript and write a foreword for *Hiking With the Boss*, I was very reluctant to fulfill her request. I am not a hiker and did not feel qualified to comment on a book about hiking. Nevertheless, because I had read and enjoyed Ingrid's last book, *The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm*, I agreed to take on the task. I am glad that I did.

Hiking With the Boss is much more than a book about exercising in woods and fields. While taking the reader on a hike through the scenic German countryside, the author weaves fascinating facts about German history as well as cherished memories into the fabric of her journey.

Her quick wit, humor, and the lively descriptions of the people she met on the trail made me feel as though I was taking an active part in the hike. I smelled the fresh air, admired the bucolic sights of the Sauerland mountains and the Mosel valley, and held my breath in fear on the dangerous trails of the Elzbachtal and on the steep climb to the top of the Bummkopf. I tasted the delicious grapes in the Görden vineyards and walked on the ancient Roman road in Neumagen with Ingrid's aunt, Justine.

Some of the adventures of the hiking Görden sisters made me laugh out loud. Others made me wince and marvel about how much my friend was willing to endure to achieve her goal.

It is obvious throughout the book that the four Görden siblings feel a deep love for one another. While the boss is undeniably tough, she also showed her tender side during the hike. Many readers will want to reevaluate their relationships with their own family members.

Once I started reading *Hiking With the Boss*, I could not put the book down. I did not want the journey to end. The next time Ingrid and the boss go on a hike, I want to be included.

Nancy Aiello
Mount Laurel, New Jersey
2013

Chapter 7

September 14, 2012 Iserlohn (Letmathe–Oestrich) to Sürenhagen 8 Miles

When I get up, Karin has already left for work. The funeral home has a small staff, and my sister “wears many hats” throughout most days. Today, she must supervise a funeral. Because of the nature of the business she is in, schedules fluctuate.

“Do you think she’ll be home in time for us to leave at 13 o’clock?” I ask Peter, using the European way of telling time.

It’s a silly question. People don’t die to accommodate our hiking schedule.

“Don’t worry, nothing will keep your sister from starting the hike today,” Peter smiles reassuringly.

He heats up water to add to my coffee. The Germans whom I know all like their coffee very strong—much too bitter for my taste. I eat fruit and dark bread for breakfast. The passion Germans have for what they consider good bread is well-known wherever they travel or live in the world. After forty-two years of living in the USA—and I love my chosen country very much!—I still miss German *Brot* and *Brötchen*. On the trail, I would like to continue with my healthy eating habits but don’t know if that will always be possible. Best not to stress over the issue, I decide.

At 11 a.m., the UPS man delivers a large package. My new hiking shoes have arrived. I try on size 6.5 and immediately notice a difference in the comfort level compared to the smaller size. These shoes and the new inserts feel perfect.



Peter wraps the package with Ingrid’s hiking shoes.

Karin comes home a little later.

“Let me check how the shoes fit,” she demands. After the hiking shoes have passed inspection to her satisfaction, she tells me to apply the salve again.

“Top and bottom!” she emphasizes.

“O.K. boss,” I salute and follow directions. By now, I am too excited to eat lunch and turn down the nourishing bean soup offered as a last meal before we set out. The boss inspects my backpack one more time. She doesn’t find the hidden bandana that I added at the last minute. It can serve the purpose of a tourniquet, I thought when I squirreled it away inside one of the pairs of biking pants.

“Let’s buy some pepper spray,” I had begged a few months ago.

“Pah, we don’t need pepper spray,” the boss had dismissed my plan for self-defense. “The man who tries any funny stuff with us will be sorry.”

Four men watch us as we put on our backpacks and get ready to leave the house on *Wiesenstrasse 38* in Letmathe. None try any funny stuff. Peter takes a photo of us, and three young construction workers ask where we are headed. The boss tells them, and they gawk at us in silent disbelief.



Karin and Ingrid are ready to leave the house in Letmathe.

“Better you than me,” one finally comments. They all wish us a good and safe journey. I should entertain every doubt that I will be able to hike roughly 212 miles in fifteen days—at age 62!—but I don’t. Somehow, deep inside, I know that I will not fail.

My watch shows exactly 1:15 p.m. when we wave a final good-bye and turn around to begin the long walk to *Burgstrasse 5* in Neumagen. The air feels cool and fresh. I am grateful to have escaped the heat and humidity of a New Jersey summer.

We walk through downtown Letmathe and cross a bridge leading over the Lenne. Letmathe has many beautiful and charming sections. The industrial park we walk through now is not one of them.

I already feel hot in the borrowed Anorak and my alpaca hat and remove both. The soles of my feet hurt, and we've walked two miles at the most. The source of my pain is no mystery. Although I walk considerable distances on our farm each day, it's mostly on soft pastures. Over fifteen years, I've exclusively used organic fertilizer and composted alpaca manure to grow grasses and legumes for my animals. With spectacular results! The pastures on our farm are as soft as a plush carpet.

I should have trained by going on more shopping trips with Nancy, I decide. My friend, Nancy, shops just about each day of her life, walking on the hard concrete floors of New Jersey's malls and shopping centers.

We've left Letmathe and are now in Hohenlimburg, a once bustling but now sleepy, little town. With my feet burning like hell—over 210 more miles of this?—I climb the steep stone staircase that leads up to *Burg Hohenlimburg*. We do not enter the inner castle grounds to view the black hand; we've seen it plenty of times. The hand—severed from its body—was found on the castle's grounds many years ago. The story goes that a knight cut off his son's hand when the child struck its mother. The castle itself was built in the 13th century. Carbon dating proved that the hand belonged to an adult living during the 16th century. The hand—shriveled up and scorched looking—is displayed at the castle in a glass case.

When my siblings and I were little, local children were taken to view the gruesome sight as a warning. Never strike your mother, or your hand may very well be on display too!

My son, Ben, vividly remembers the black hand from his visits to Germany. As a teenager, he liked to tell his friends about it.

"When you were a child," he'd start, "your parents took you to Disney World." Pause. "I, on the other hand—" Pause. Then, sotto voce: "I was taken to Germany to see the black hand, no pun intended." Long pause to let this statement sink in.

His explanations after this dramatic build-up were always followed by the visitor throwing partly shy, partly horrified glances in my direction. In reality, Ben enjoyed his visits to the castle. And, no surprise there, he never raised his hand against me.

As we walk through the castle's gate, the boss promises me that the worst climb of the day is behind us. This, I find out shortly, is not true. Thankfully, after pounding pavement for several hours, my feet find relief on the soft soil of a *Feldweg*. Such trails can be found all over Germany. They intersect fields with crops or pastures and may be used by workers who drive agricultural or forest management vehicles. And, of course, by anybody on foot. Occasionally, *Feldwege* are paved. Most are left in their natural state but are maintained in some fashion.

As I walk on the grassy surface of the *Feldweg*, I joyfully increase my speed. My exuberance is short-lived. The boss, impatient with the slow pace of the hike, now takes off like a rocket.

I remember Margit's warning. "She'll run you right into the ground. Don't even try to keep up with her. It's not possible. You'll only make yourself sick."

I am sixty-two years old, not in top hiking condition, not used to climbing hills, not used to walking on pavement, and this is as fast as I can walk.

As if on cue, the boss turns around and calls, “Put the pedal to the metal! I told Silke we’d be there by 16:30 o’clock.”

Silke and Michael Dutschke are alpaca owners. Karin met them when she hiked this trail a few months ago with a family friend. Silke took my e-mail address and extended an invitation for a visit.

Shortly after 4 p.m., it starts to rain. My sister waits for me to catch up to her.

“We’re almost there. Hurry up and give me your backpack. That way you can run.”

Run? For how far? Obediently, I hand my backpack over to the boss. She carries it as easily as Claudia Schiffer carries a dainty clutch bag and gallops ahead. I try my best to keep up. At a run, we pass a field with cows and stop briefly next to a pasture with five alpacas grazing in it. They look at us curiously and, in typical alpaca fashion, advance slowly in tight formation to check us out. It rains harder now; we move on. I expect the house next to the alpaca pasture to belong to Silke and Michael, but we pass it and several others before the boss stops in front of a small *Fachwerkhaus*—what is called a half-timbered house in the English language.

“That’s it,” she says. “I remember it.”

We are fifteen minutes early. Since being punctual—read early—is a German character trait, Silke is neither surprised nor flustered to see us. She welcomes us into her immaculate and cozy home. A spinning wheel sits in the living room, obviously in use. I am also a handspinner, but not very skilled at this old craft. Michael enters with their two dogs and joins us for refreshments.

“Can you guess what kind of cake this is?” Silke asks.

I taste a piece and smile. “Zucchini cake.”

Silke’s eyes widen. “Nobody has ever guessed this right,” she marvels.

She doesn’t know that I live in the zucchini capital of the world. In South Jersey’s tropical summer climate, zucchini grow with amazing speed. By the end of the summer, home gardeners who grow zucchini practically threaten visitors with their lives if they refuse to take half a car trunk load of zucchini away with them.

Silke’s cake is a masterpiece—tasty and moist—with a rich chocolate icing. It’s so good, and I am so hungry, that I could easily eat the entire cake. Using all my willpower, I refuse a second piece and don’t take a morsel of the brownies she’s baked in the shape of two alpacas. Zucchini cake and brownies are not typical German baked goods. I am touched that Silke went through so much trouble to make American sweets for me.

We talk about alpacas and the products made from their beautiful fiber.

“Would you please show me some of your yarn and knitted clothing?” I ask.

Silke agrees, clears the table, and brings out rovings, yarn, and handmade items such as gloves, hats, and scarves. I sincerely admire her handiwork and buy a pair of fingerless gloves to take home with me. Silke asks me to sign the copy of *The Alpacas of Stormwind Farm* that I had given her as a gift.

Karin and I lace up our hiking shoes and shoulder our backpacks. Before we leave, though, Silke and Michael invite us to visit their alpacas up close.

“It must be difficult to have the pasture and barn so far away from the house,” I comment on the walk over there.

“Yes, that’s not so good,” Silke agrees. “We had a tentative agreement with a farmer to lease land right next to our property, but it didn’t work out. What is nice, though, is that all the neighbors look out for the alpacas and call us if they think there’s a problem.”



Karin and Silke Dutschke visit with Silke's alpacas.

The German alpacas view us—we are wearing our alpaca hats made in the USA—with suspicion, but finally their natural curiosity overcomes their fear. Karin and I stand motionless while the camelids cautiously touch us with their noses. All five males look well taken care of and healthy. Silke seems to be very knowledgeable about correct training and handling, and she's set up her pastures and shelter according to Marty McGee Bennett's *Camelidynamics* system.

After we leave the alpaca farm, we hike at a brisk pace and reach *Haus Becker* after only fifteen minutes. The small hotel is closed; the owners are on vacation. They had agreed to allow us to stay one night with the understanding that no dinner would be served. The temporary caretaker, a Dutch woman, brews hot tea for us. We sit with her and two of her friends in the hotel's old-fashioned, comfortable pub and talk about "God and the world." *Frau Wagner*—I estimate her age to be around seventy-five years—tells us that she likes to hike but rode her Mofa over today.

Our bedroom window allows views of a huge, beautiful pasture framed by a protective shelter belt of trees. I watch a herd of Holstein cows graze and feel happy.

"What's for dinner?" I inquire.

The boss holds out a bag of trail mix and a chunk of walnut bread. I eat both and wish I had more of Silke's zucchini cake. After a long, hot shower, I snuggle deeply underneath the warm down comforter and sigh contentedly.

"Do you know," I muse, already feeling drowsy, "that we did not meet even one other hiker all day? I thought Germany was the land of hikers."

"Maybe," the boss snorts, "but they are all running each other over on the *Jakobsweg*."

Before I can ask what the *Jakobsweg* is, the boss scolds, "Instead of worrying about other hikers, take the inserts out of your shoes so they can dry and put salve on your feet."

Although I sleep well that night, I dream that the shoes' inserts are the wrong size, forcing me to stop the hike and return home on the backseat of *Frau Wagner's* Mofa.