

Interview

# PETER HATALA

## INTERVIEW WITH A SHEPHERD IN SLOVAKIA

Interview: Michaela Skuban, Daniel Mettler

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

Sometimes I have the impression that I was born a shepherd! (*laughs*) From the age of eight I started to herd sheep during my free time. I spent my holidays and weekends just with the sheep outside, alone in some abandoned pastures. Of course, I got some money for my work but, beside this, I was simply happy with this job. After I finished school aged 18, I fully dedicated my life to this work.

### *Could you describe your passion? What do you love most about your job?*

That is a difficult question, what do I love most? Actually, two things: I love the sheep for how they are and that I make a living from them. And I love the dogs as my companions and that they protect me and my animals. Let's make a long story short: I simply have a great passion for sheep and dogs.

### *Can you remember the most difficult moment during your shepherding life?*

Yes, as if it was yesterday. One night I was walking back from the pasture to the sheep-camp (*salaš* in Slovak) after dark. I had to pass a very dense forest and suddenly it was there: a bear, behind me. It was roaring at me and I could smell its body. Maybe it was afraid of me, I don't know, but it simply didn't stop roaring right in my ears. I started to run, but somehow slipped on the wet forest floor, fell and hit my mouth on my shepherd stick. I broke some teeth and started to bleed. It was painful and I felt helpless. Suddenly, I spotted two white creatures in the pitch darkness: my livestock guarding dogs (Slovak *Čuvač*). They chased away the bear and I managed to get away. Till today,

I am extremely thankful to these two dogs who possibly saved my life. So, I lost some teeth (*laughs*), but managed to run away otherwise unscathed.

### *Did you ever think about doing something else? If yes, why?*

No, I never thought about changing my profession. However, I remember some very painful moments when I realized how difficult and time-consuming my shepherd life is in reality. I get up at 3 o'clock or 3:30 in the morning and often return around 10 or 11 o'clock in the evening. When my first child was born, I only saw her sleeping, never active. One day, though, I returned a bit earlier from the pasture and went straight home to see my 6-month old daughter playing in the garden. When she spotted me for the first time, she was afraid of me and started to scream. Actually, she didn't know me at all; I was for her an unknown person, a strange man, frightening for her. In that moment, my heart was full of pain. Nowadays, I can sometimes return home a bit earlier. Now, we have a grandchild and I can enjoy this little baby even more than my own children. I am very thankful to my wife, who always supported me. She managed everything alone at home and never blamed me for that. I can say that I truly love her till today. And I am also thankful to my two daughters who help me a lot with the dogs.

### *Can you remember when you met a wolf for the first time?*

Oh, yes, you never forget such a meeting. It was in 1989 and I was with my sheep quite far away from the farm. At that time, wolves were very rare here in the

Low Tatra mountains due to hunting, but suddenly I spotted one 100 metres away. It was just observing me and followed me a bit when I tried to walk back, but always slightly hidden in the dense vegetation. I just had a small herding dog with me that I called Diabol (which means Fiend or Devil in Slovak), because he was so sharp with bears. However, Diabol stayed back; he had great respect for the wolf. The wolf did not attack, but from that moment it was clear that life would become more difficult.

***When did you start breeding livestock guarding dogs?***

During my childhood I trained and bred various dogs at the sheep camp. Sometimes I took them home, but my parents didn't like it. During my military service, I worked with German shepherd dogs and can now compare various breeds of dogs and their working abilities. When I returned to work, I continued to select puppies and trained them, but sometimes it happened that my boss stole my well-trained dogs. Since 1984 I've had my own herding and livestock guarding dogs and also breed them.

***Have you ever seen your dogs chase away wolves or bears?***

Yes, of course, I've seen both: how my dogs actively chased away attacking wolves and bears. Sometimes I also saw that very strong dogs just stood at the forest edge and barked without joining an active chase, which was enough, too. But you should never forget: attacks by wolves are more serious. I always say that



(Photos: Peter Hatala)

bears are wise, but wolves are professors (*laughs*). Thus, you really need very good, brave dogs against them. That's why I always have between two and seven dogs with me. The number of dogs depends on various factors including the place where I go with the sheep, the weather conditions, the situation with wolves, the numbers of tourists and the dogs themselves.

***Do you get some support for preventive measures, either from the State or some agricultural or sheep breeding organizations?***

This is easy to answer: almost nothing. Sometimes it even happens that people are annoyed with me because I have so many dogs. Nowadays, my boss contributes a bit towards dog pellets, but it is not a reliable cash flow.



***How serious is the influence of bears and wolves on sheep breeding in your region?***

Actually, bears and wolves are not directly responsible for many sheep farms closing. This is rather due to people. During recent years, there are more and more people in the forest, mainly for recreational purposes like mountain biking, hiking, mushrooming etc. Such people are not willing to take care about either sheep or dogs. They walk through my flock and start to beat the livestock guarding dogs if they bark at them. Mountain bikers and motorcyclists even kill your sheep if they get in their way. Arrogant people are much more destructive than predators. Since 2006, I have nearly no losses due to predators except one ewe and one lamb. On average, I herd around 300–400 sheep, exceptionally up to 600 sheep.

***How do you judge the future of shepherding in your region?***

Simply: bad. No one wants to do this job. It is difficult and responsible work and also very time-consuming. It is definitely not all about money: if you pay an unreliable and alcoholic person a sum of 200 or 300 euros more, what will change? Nothing. Before, such a person spent 600 euros in the pub, afterwards 800 euros. It is our society which is lazy and wants to make a lot of money in a short time without much effort. A shepherd's life is the complete opposite.

***How long do you plan to work as a shepherd?***

*(laughs)* Until I jump into the coffin ... Or maybe I would stop if something dramatic happened in my family. Or if I had a boss who was just making money from me. I don't want to contribute to the dirty lifestyle of corrupt people. Otherwise, I love my job with all my heart.

