

A WHOLE NEW APPROACH

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I GREW UP ON A SHEEP FARM IN OWAKA, SOUTH OTAGO. MY ONLY REAL AIM WAS TO BECOME A SHEEP SHEARER DESPITE SOME ENCOURAGEMENT IN OTHER DIRECTIONS FROM TEACHERS AND A MOTHER WHO THOUGHT WE HAD ENOUGH SHEARERS IN THE FAMILY.

By age 20 I was shearing full-time. In 1985 I traveled to Europe on holiday. I remember very vividly my first contact with a foreign language as I sat around the dinner table of a very friendly Danish family. Not being able to join in was a new and slightly frightening experience for me.

A week or two later I met up with a friend, Robin Munro, in Germany. Robin was an exception in the New Zealand sheep shearing world in that he was a master of four languages, German included. He tracked down a few shepherds in the Oldenburg region and I joined him for four days work for two different shepherds. We still work for both of those men 16 years later.

Anton, one of the shepherds, made a casual suggestion that changed, to a degree, the direction of my life. 'Come back next year and you could shear 10,000 sheep.' (10,000 sheep = good money). My brother-in-law and I returned the following year to test it out.

Then began the battle with German. Robin taught us the numbers and a few other key words and off we went. Our German was, at best, basic with extensive use of hands and feet and daily confusion. Helped by a German friend who became our manager, we built up over a few years a very good run of work each European spring in the north west of Germany.

At 24 I moved to Dunedin to study mathematics in order to become, with time, a maths teacher. Along with my maths I took Prelim. German at Otago University with a patient lecture Alyth Grant. I loved it. I was back shearing in Germany the next year and the difference was amazing. It was like the lights had been turned on. With the language the work changed from two months of long days, sore backs and bread at every turn to a really enjoyable time. I got to know the people and to understand a whole new approach to farming and life in general.

After a few years out of shearing to become a teacher I returned to Germany again. My starting point was a four week intensive course in Prien, compliments of the Goethe-Institut. With my German brushed up, I was back shearing and my own manager as well, which was a real thrill and made life on the road a lot easier.

The work there continues to go well and it has paid for a great deal of travel in Europe and beyond. My wife and I have just returned from six months away.

I am in no way a natural linguist and am not a fast learner, but I have lapped up the opportunity to learn German. I have found it a satisfying thing to learn. Any word or phrase added to the vocabulary is a step in the right direction.

People in Germany appreciated, on a business level, that we took the time to learn the language but, more importantly, it opened the way for some real friendships.

From a young man shearing in the Catlins I have, thanks to my German connection, been able to travel a great deal and have developed a real interest in the world beyond my own borders.

After going back last year my share of the work is being passed down to my nephew and he will have to begin his battle with German.

For additional testimonials to those printed in the text visit: <http://www.goethe.de/ins/au/lp/lhr/wer/en1181095.htm>