

One Swallow Made My Summer

When I smelled the air from the Baltic Sea even before we reached the old city of Wismar and passed its ancient harbor, I knew the old farmhouse in Lischow was near. After a few more miles in high speed on the Autobahn between wide and flat wheat fields the car finally turned onto a narrow dirt road, which lead us to the small group of farmhouses in the distance. When we came close I remembered the bizarre old trees where further beyond the plowland and towards the sea the paddocks were hiding. I looked eagerly for the horses and sheep on the meadows. Mom stopped the car at the yard in a cloud of dust.

Andrea and her husband Bernd must have been waiting for us all day. He has been a life-long friend of my Grandparents and Mom had been guest on this farm since she was born. There was a time when the government seized the arable land of most farmers in East Germany and many of the remote farms had been abandoned. During these years Bernd had bought the old farmhouse and some acres of infertile land very cheaply as a getaway from his business life in Berlin. He never considered being a real farmer but kept a large library in the house instead. Only after his second wife Andrea decided to live year round on the countryside and to breed sheep and horses on the rough grasslands and rocky woods near the beach the farm came to real life again. It was her who managed all the heavy work involved with the livestock.

I could see that my brothers felt a bit awkward when we greeted our friends. But within five minutes they disappeared in the barns and I heard them chasing the cats. The boys were not even afraid of the four big shepherd dogs. Last year they always had tried to avoid them.

The best in Lischow is the abundance of horses to ride on. I do horse riding in Los Angeles at a riding school, but this is different. To walk, trot, canter or gallop on my horse the different goings through the meadows and woods or along the beach of the Baltic Sea with my friend Andrea and one or two big dogs on my side is a horse rider's paradise. When we return to the old stables we unsaddle the horses, cool, brush, clean them, give water and hay or corn and then care for the saddles and clean the stables with a water hose. On most

farms there is a lot of smelly organic waste like dung, which attracts all sorts of insects. Horses sweat much and flies are always around. Swallows catch a lot of flying insects and because of this many of these birds nested on the farm. My brother Carl found a dead swallow and wanted to perform an autopsy to find out how it looks inside. Just before dinner he dug the dead bird out of his pockets and asked me for a pair of scissors. How disgusting was that.

The very next morning I found a young swallow fluttering helplessly on the ground of the stables. The beak was yellow and its feathers were brown-red, pink and grey-blue. The eyes were black and round, staring at me. I heard it chirping quietly and could feel its heart beating. It seemed almost mature and I couldn't find what was wrong with it.

Everybody on the farm said the sick bird would die very soon but I tried to save it anyway. First I looked for an empty nest for it in the stables. One was built there high under a wooden beam where the cats couldn't get. On top of a carefully plastered mass of dry mud there was an open cup lined with soft feathers and some horsehair.

But then I decided to use an old shoebox instead. I decorated it with drawings and cut holes in it and lined it with kitchen paper, which is easy to change daily, and placed it on a post high enough, but still reachable for me. With a pipette full of water I let the bird drink as much as it wanted. I knew that swallows eat insects, which they mostly catch in flight. But the next question was: How much flies a day does a swallow need to swallow? My mom looked it up and said it were about a staggering sixty per hour.

Nobody but a swallow can all day long catch a fly every given minute. But at least I tried to. I used a flyswatter and an old mosquito net and found the best places to get them were the inside of the stable windows. But it was hopeless. I got about forty until lunch, way to few for my bird to survive. When my mother suggested grasshoppers or beetles or any other insects could be included in the diet, my brothers came to help me. In the afternoon they crawled between the sheep over the wildflower meadows and hunted down all hopping or flying insects they could find.

My brother Carl with his interest in anatomy was also willing to cut them in pieces small enough to be fed to my swallow. In the morning of the second day my bird sat in its box, looked at me and spread its wings. It tried to flutter around and made it out of the box. With the swallow in my hand I went outside.

It had been raining earlier in the morning but now the weather was fine. Fluffy white little clouds silently passed by in the sky like a flock of sheep. The farmyard was washed clean by the rain and the air smelled fresh and salty. The little bird hesitated a while but then jumped and fluttered to the other side of the yard. I could hardly pick it up in the corner of the kitchen entrance.

All afternoon I went on to feed the swallow as much as I could and gave it water to drink. Then came the moment of truth. There was no way I could successfully keep on collecting its diet of insects at a sufficient pace. The bird would now have to master this challenge or it would perish.

From the dim lit stable I walked into the yard's bright evening sunshine carrying the old shoebox with my bird in it. I placed it on the wall of the fountain and opened the box. My mom watched from the kitchen window as I held the swallow on the palm of my hand. The bird sat tight. I raised my hand slowly. The bird looked at me and all over the farmyard. Nothing happened. My hopes seemed to be deceived. I lowered my hand to place the swallow into the box again but in a fraction of a second the bird was gone. It flew high up over the farmhouse and disappeared. I don't know if I ever saw it again, because I couldn't recognize it anymore; they are too many on the farm.

But that it flew away definitely made my summer. I know that in autumn my swallow needs to fly far away from the cold winter in northern Germany but hopefully it will return next year.

And so will I.