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# THE BIG PONDER

## Hunting

By Ada von der Decken and Moritz Gerlach

[MUSIC]

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] I think typically if you hunt in the States, you have that mentality of – when I get out and I see something, I have to take a shot at it – which is in a way ... I try to break it sometimes ... and say, just think before you shoot, don't make a bad shot, because there's no rush. It's ... you have all the time in the world to hunt here.

**Ada von der Decken:** This is Fred Lane talking. We are sitting on a high stand overseeing a wide field in the Ansbach area in Middle Franconia, Bavaria. And – in Fred's words – we have all the time in the world. We'll hear more about Fred in a little.

[MUSIC]

**Ada von der Decken:** Thinking back, hunting has always been near and dear to me. As a child in rural North Germany, even before I started school, my father would take me and my sister to shoot a fallow deer. It really wasn't a big thing for us. We had deer in an enclosure on the family farm. Seeing the herd everyday behind my mother's kitchen garden, collecting antler shovels in spring, and spotting newborn calf in June. These are clear childhood memories. For some of my earliest birthdays, instead of sack race we would count the herd. Usually, there were around 30 fallow deer. We could never agree on a precise number, as the herd was shy and in constant move. Watching my father take a deer down with a clear shot to the neck was as much part of this annual cycle as it was to see my mother mastering the hard work of cutting venison meat in the cellar or preparing a roast. We had it on a regular basis as well as on festive occasions like Christmas.

My grandfather was a hunter. My father, my brother, my cousin – all are hunters. You might think it's a man's sport. And yes – at least in our family, it is. My mother blew the hunting horn. Later she got her hunting license, too. Although she never shot an animal, she really is proud of passing the so-called 'Grüne Abitur,' a sort of SAT for the great outdoors. Everyone who has gone through the 160 hours of hunting instructions and passed the difficult theoretical and practical exams has my respect.

When I think back, killing an animal was just one small component of hunting – it was never the center of my attention. I saw it as a necessity to keep the nature in balance. Preventing one population of getting too big and pushing back others.

The last time I was on a hunt was about 25 years ago. My father took me on a drive hunt on my godmother's farm just after New Year's Eve.

[HUNTING HORN]

**Ada von der Decken:** I must have been about eleven years old. It was that kind of traditional hunt where relatives and friends would come together. A day like this kicks off with the hunting horn and wishing one another ‘Waidmannsheil’ – the German term for ‘happy hunting.’

[RATTLING NOISE]

**Ada von der Decken:** As kids, we would form a chain and go through the fields to flush hare, which then the hunters would shoot.

[HUNTING HORNS PLAY]

**Ada von der Decken:** There were dozens of dead hares lying on the lawn afterwards. We would all come together, hunters as well as drivers, listening to the horns. It was a way of paying respect to the dead animals.

My last name “von der Decken” was once a title of nobility. For centuries, hunting in Germany was a privilege of the aristocracy. In 1918, the nobility was finally abolished in Germany. Today, hunting is open to everyone. I think for many who have a “von” in their name, it is a way to keep the noble tradition going. The drive hunt back then on my godmother’s family farm fell into this category.

[MUSIC]

**Ada von der Decken:** Although hunting was always close to me, I myself never considered it something I was a part of. This journey into hunting culture is an opportunity to widen this idea of hunting I have that was shaped by my childhood. Georgia Pellegrini is the go-to person if you want to broaden your perspective on hunting. Among many things, first and foremost, she is a chef. But hasn’t always been.

**Georgia Pellegrini:** I was from New York. I had worked on Wall Street. I changed my career and was really viewing everything through the lens of food and our role in the cycle of life. And I was a woman and it just didn’t really look like I was ready to throw on the camo and run out into the woods.

**Ada von der Decken:** But she did. For her book *Girl Hunter* Georgia Pellegrini stepped out of her high heels, threw on the camo, and stepped into the world of hunting. Georgia hunted in many different states in the U.S. She went hunting in the Mississippi Delta, in West Texas, in Montana, Wyoming, and elsewhere. She shot turkey, doves, pheasant, and javelina.

**Georgia Pellegrini:** We viewed it as this sort of barbaric act. When the reality is, that it’s really that we’re allowing proxy executioners to do our work for us. In the sense of, you know, we go to the grocery store, we go to the aisle, and we buy a boneless, skinless chicken breast that’s wrapped in styrofoam and plastic, and there’s no sign that it was ever a living thing. And so, we don’t have to deal with death and all of that.

**Ada von der Decken:** Since publishing her book a few years back, this approach of “going back to the roots” has become her topic. She calls it ...

**Georgia Pellegrini:** ‘Manual literacy,’ the idea of learning to use your hands and create things and make things and be self-sufficient with them – that in general has become a lost art in the U.S.

**Ada von der Decken:** Georgia hosts a TV show called *Modern Pioneering*. In between all this busyness and productivity, there is this one aspect of hunting, which has nothing to do with filling your freezer. And that struck me. It is this very moment when you wait for the animals to show up.

**Georgia Pellegrini:** Hunting is an example of allowing all of your senses to become heightened in a moment. You hear differently. You see differently. You smell differently. Your cells tingle in a way that they don’t when you’re walking down a city street. There’s that stillness, there’s that presence that you experience when you’re hunting – this sort of level of presence and focus and just aliveness.

**Ada von der Decken:** A stillness, a time of utter silence, when the world seems to be on mute, she describes it. This part of hunting is the one I never experienced before. Hunting may be different from state to state, from country to country. But this intense waiting for something to happen, this period of not doing anything but having sharpened all your senses and being ready to react immediately is key to hunting, whatever place you go to in the world.

[HIGH STAND – SILENCE]

**Fred Lane:** A ‘Haas’ just ran out. I told you that’d be the first thing you saw.

[MUSIC]

**Ada von der Decken:** In the meantime, my colleague Moritz Gerlach turned his attention to another aspect of hunting.

[MUSIC]

**Moritz Gerlach:** When I talked to Fabian Grimm, I could pretty much relate to the path he follows and his ideas behind hunting. Fabian was living a life as a vegetarian in Berlin and studied communications design. After helping out some friends on a farm in Scotland taking care of the animals, something changed. It was not his need to have meat in his life. The way the animals were treated impressed him. After that, he felt unhappy that he in his life just made decisions about what not to eat and that he was not part of a responsible process.

**Fabian Grimm:** I became a vegetarian because I disagreed with how meat is produced. I don’t want to be the one controlling that. And always thinking about it. So, I guess there are some ways of farming that are okay for the animals. But if I buy meat in the store, I have no idea about that, and I don’t want to be the one who tries to always trace back where does it come from, who did it, who slaughtered it, who butchered it. Where did it grow up? Was it born on that farm? Was it born on another farm? I’m not an investigator.

**Moritz Gerlach:** Fabian's girlfriend studied forestry at that time. It is not mandatory for a forester to become a hunter – but it is quite common. She was a vegetarian at that time, too. She brought books about hunting to their apartment.

**Fabian Grimm:** So, she had all those books about hunting. And about hunting, why you need to hunt. And how you could hunt. And animals. And she brought them to our flat in Berlin ... those two things just met at the right point in time. So, it was my need to change something and to produce food and her hunting. And there was one image in one of those books that impressed me. It was a table. Somebody had killed and butchered a wild boar, and there was a table and it was full of meat. Like always similar shapes from the right side of the body. And from the left side. And he did that by himself and I thought: That's just what I want. He killed this one wild boar and he will eat for half a year or something.

I knew a lot of people who were into gardening – very small-scale gardening on their balcony. And they were super happy when they produced three tomatoes or a bucket full of potatoes, but that was not what I wanted to go after. I wanted to really produce quantities and substance, to bring something onto my table. And if I produce five zucchinis and three tomatoes in a year, that's not ... that's interesting and it's fun, and I like to do that myself sometimes. But it's not ... there was not a point, and I thought that guy – with a huge table full of meat – he was going where I wanted to go.

**Moritz Gerlach:** I am not a vegetarian and I never was, but I think about the food choices we make from time to time. I have friends who can only eat meat if it does not look like an animal anymore. Burgers, chicken nuggets, and stuff like that. This shouldn't come as a surprise, but if you want to eat meat, you have to take the lives of sentient living things. There is no way without doing that. And I think it's wrong to ignore the fact or keep that part out of your life.

When I had to write about this topic for a magazine, I decided to go deeper into this. And because I'm a bit of a coward, I did not visit a slaughterhouse where most of the meat I eat comes from. I asked my cousin if I could join him on a hunt. We were lucky, he shot a roe deer for me.

[HIGHWAY]

**Moritz Gerlach:** When I drove home, I saw livestock pigs on the autobahn, putting their noses through the bars of the trailer. When I was a kid, I thought that they might enjoy that. I had to think about the fact that those trips on the highway are the only two times pigs here see sunlight. The first time is after they get separated from their mothers and go to another location for fattening, and the second time is time on the way to the slaughterhouse. The deer in my trunk had lived for years in the wild with no limits on its movement. It could decide where it wanted to go and what it wanted to eat. With that knowledge, the meat tasted better to me.

[MUSIC]

**Fred Lane:** There's been times where, you know, I've shot 300 meters on a roe deer, and there's been times, one's come out 50, 60 meters from me, and I just didn't take the shot 'cause it didn't feel right. It's just, you know, it's all part of it. You have to trust your gut when you do this.

**Moritz Gerlach:** To get a better understanding of how hunting is seen from a U.S. perspective we travelled to Ansbach, Bavaria. 76 years ago, the first U.S. troops arrived here. The army is still here. Even though their number has been reduced over the years, their presence is visible. Local shops accept U.S. currency, and some service personnel decide to stay here, even after their deployment ended. We met Fred Lane and Hubert Bodächtel who have known each other for years. Hubert is a local. He is named after Sankt Hubert, the patron saint of the hunters. This idea came from Hubert's grandfather, a hunter himself. It is said that Hubert's grandfather was the first German who invited American soldiers to join him on a hunt. Since then, it has become a crucial part of the local German-American friendship in the region.

**Hubert Bodächtel:** My grandfather used to work also for the Americans as a carpenter. And with his work he got in contact with, of course, American hunters. And he invited the first American hunters to hunt here at his place, at our place here. And I was about seven, eight years old when I had the first contact to American hunters. So, it was good to hear the stories from their side, and this was my first contact to the American hunters.

**Moritz Gerlach:** Fred already had hunting experience before he came here as a soldier.

**Fred Lane:** I'm part Native American as well. So, the way I grew up is you respect nature, and you respect animals, period. Matter of fact, my first two years of hunting in the States with my family – the first year I always, I had to carry the gun. And, of course, it was the heaviest gun we owned. It was an old 32 Remington Special. So, it's got two barrels. The thing's like a cannon for a young boy, it's heavy. So the first year, I had to carry that gun and if I made no mistakes – which I didn't – and if I did flag somebody – that's when you point your muzzle at somebody – I was severely scolded. We won't get into that. So, that was the first year. The second year, I was allowed to carry the gun, and it was loaded. And then not until that third year – my third first year of hunting, we'll call it – is when I was able to take a shot at an animal. So I mean, tradition and respect in my family was big. But I don't know of a lot of any cultural things. I mean – any time in, I ever shot an animal you walk up to it, you place your hand on it, you know. You thank it. And I know there's a lot of people that do that.

**Moritz Gerlach:** When Fred left the army, he took the chance to stay in Germany and became a hunting and fishing instructor for the local garrison. He teaches and prepares U.S. citizens for the German hunting license exam. These courses take four months of intense training. In contrast to the U.S. where being a hunter is a thing just for the hunting season, German hunters are involved in their business for the whole year.

**Fred Lane:** You know, German hunting is being part of something, something a lot bigger than us or even our group.

**Moritz Gerlach:** German hunters perform certain rituals on the dead animal. These are part of the unwritten laws in German hunting. Quite common is to offer the dead animal a twig of a tree as a "last

bite” and put it in its mouth. It moved me when I saw it for the first time. I asked Fred about this part of German hunting tradition.

**Fred Lane:** In Germany, we just take it to a different level. You know, we give the animal its last bite. You respect the animal. You never straddle an animal unless you’re breaking it open. And when it’s laying, you never step over an animal, which are the biggest respect things I think there is. You asked if we do it, you know, when we’re alone – absolutely. I know I do, and I teach my students to. The way Germans hunt – the culture and their traditions – is probably the biggest thing I teach in the course. I mean, most of my folks know how to shoot, most of them are smart enough to memorize what I’m teaching them. But what they really have to know, and they have to understand, is why we do things.

**Moritz Gerlach:** The ideal of wildlife conservation is the key to understand German hunting politics. You feed the game in the winter, look together for fawns before grass or crops are cut, and go after poachers. You have to keep the nature balanced and make sure that humans and wildlife live in peace together. For Fred, less competition between hunters is a consequence of this common goal.

**Fred Lane:** And the difference here, in Germany – it’s a family. So once you start hunting here and you find your group or your group of people, you really become a family. So, you hunt together. You look for lost animals together. You come together on the social hunts. We do what’s called a ‘Sommeransitz,’ which we do here even every year. Where hunters you wouldn’t see maybe about once a year, but every year they’d show up for their hunt. And it’s a real sense of community. In the States, it’s the opposite of that. I mean you have drunken deer camps and stuff like that, but typically it’s a secret. It’s very secretive, you know. I have this place where, you know, I know this animal’s walking around, and I’m gonna try to get it, but then it’s mine, you know, because hunting in the States is so much more open. I mean, you have to do a hunter safety course and things like that, but even back years and years ago in the States you didn’t have to do anything, you could basically just go buy a hunting license whether you had experience to do it or not. You know, it’s that ethical – that family side of hunting over here is what’s pretty amazing. There’s no pressure here. I mean, we hunt year around. We talked about this being the time where we really don’t hunt, but we still hunt. We hunt for boar and stuff like that. You can hunt here year round. It’s not three weeks where you have to run in the woods and try to harvest a whitetail. Or you know, try to do it with a bow. Or now, I have to wait a week, you know. And then, I get two more weeks. And I can try to do it with black powder and then rifle and then so forth. It’s stressful hunting in the States.

**Moritz Gerlach:** One of the big differences in Germany is that almost all hunting ground is also used for agriculture. Even the forests. If a hunter wants to hunt in a certain area, it is also his duty to keep the game from damaging crops and woods. Otherwise, he can be held accountable. Depending on the situation, the state, farmers, and landowners can demand that hunters shoot more or fewer animals.

**Hubert Bodächtel:** There is also a big difference between hunting in the States and in Germany. Here in Germany, we hunt on a managed forest or in a managed forest. In the United States, you mostly hunt in the real nature, so this is a big difference. We are here in Germany, we have a lot of pressure. We are under control. We have our numbers, what we should shoot and so on. And

they check about the growing of the trees – ‘Vegetationsgutachten’ – is a German word for that and hunting in North America is hunting in the wild nature.

**Ada von der Decken:** It’s about time. We are getting ready for the hunt. Hubert takes us to his hunting ground.

[GETTING OUT OF THE CAR]

**Ada von der Decken:** First stop is the highest point of his ‘Revier.’ The sun is hanging low, casting our silhouettes as long shadows on the ground. On the fields, the young plants show their fresh leaves after weeks of strong winter. Anytime Hubert goes on a hunt, he stops here for a moment.

[GATHERING FOR AN OVERVIEW]

**Hubert Bodächtel:** In Germany, according to the law, the hunting right is connected to the ground. So, I can only lease the hunting right from the farmers. And right now, one of them is coming. So ...

[TRACTOR APPROACHING]

**Hubert Bodächtel:** [TO THE FARMER, IN GERMAN] Kommst du rum? Alles klar.

[TRACTOR DISAPPEARING]

**Hubert Bodächtel:** I run here around since I shit in my pants so to say. I learned all the hunting from my grandfather. And I can say I know really every tree around here. So, I was born and raised here. And that’s where we spend the next hours.

**Ada von der Decken:** Hubert grew up hunting. Hubert even works in the hunting industry, spends his free time hunting. He is a member of the Bavarian Hunting Association. Who could be a better guide?

**Hubert Bodächtel:** The wind is perfect for both sides. It’s coming from the treeside and going in our face, which is good. So, the animals won’t smell us tonight. And there are good chances for a fox, very good chances for foxes. The wild boars, they can be there anytime ... You have to expect them anytime, anyplace. The deer season is closed, so we can only watch the deers today. But, for us – we are not going out to shoot something. We are going out most of the time to explore and check around.

**Fred Lane:** When life gets too hectic, the best place to go is a high stand.

[UNINTELLIGIBLE INSTRUCTIONS]

**Ada von der Decken:** Hubert leads us to one of the many wooden high stands along the fine line dividing field and forest.

[UNINTELLIGIBLE INSTRUCTIONS]

**Ada von der Decken:** Being a trained carpenter, he has set up a wooden high stand every other hundred meters.

**Hubert Bodächtel:** [IN GERMAN] Waidmannsheil, viel Spaß.

**Ada von der Decken:** For Fred and me, he chooses a spot next to a small pond. He will take Moritz to another place close by.

[GETTING INTO THE HIGH STAND]

[BACKGROUND CHATTER]

**Ada von der Decken:** You have to show me how we're gonna sit here ...

**Fred Lane:** So, you come over here on the left side ...

**Ada von der Decken:** We find our places on a bench. The view over the field is beautiful. Its shape is defined by the neighboring forest. Acorns, conifers – it's a typical 'Mischwald' – mixed forest. Home to small game like roe deer, wild boar. Our eyes are wandering along this fine wood line – contrast of dark and light, low and high, trees and open field. The sun behind us covers everything in a pink and warm light.

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] When you just sit here and look out, you start to learn what everything looks like. So even if you look out, and something's not moving – but something looks different – 90 percent, it's usually a deer or a fox or a boar or something like that. So, I helped your eyes, you know, pick up the discrepancy.

**Ada von der Decken:** The full moon is going up, hanging low like a big lantern. As it gets darker, the outline becomes blurred. We take a handheld thermal to get a clearer view. Here we are, looking and waiting.

[SILENCE]

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] It's reflection. [UNINTELLIGIBLE] The ducks didn't like that. It's reflection, it's just, you know, back to nature. I don't think about work, I don't think about family. I just kind of live in the moment. It's when I'm sitting out here, it's just, you know, watching the ducks or watching two hare chase each other or, you know, I stare at a spot until I see something different. I try to think as little as possible, I guess. I mean, how can you not? How could you? I mean, it's – stars out, beautiful moon. [PAUSE] And I think that's what people don't understand. Most hunters don't hunt to shoot something.

**Ada von der Decken:** Fred has leased his own hunting ground a few kilometers away. There have been times in his life where he was out most nights of the year.



**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] Probably one year hunting in Germany is probably worth six years hunting in the States because we do it daily here in, you know, your area. It's daily. Especially if you've been brought into a 'Revier,' you know. In the States, you know, if you're a whitetail hunter, you know, you may have the opportunity to do it for three or four weeks a year, and then that's it. Then, you wait until the next year.

**Ada von der Decken:** When his students from the States start to go out hunting, he finds a hunting ground for them. They always get an experienced German hunter like Hubert as a mentor. And the German hunters who have to fulfill their duty of keeping the numbers of game stable benefit from it too. A difference between Germany and the States comes into play: U.S. hunters are different from German 'Jungjäger' – young hunters.

**Fred Lane:** You know, the German 'Pächters,' they really actually liked having Americans on their 'Revier' because of the willingness to shoot. Especially a new German hunter right after they get their license, they're so scared to make a mistake. A lot of the times, they just, they won't shoot. You know, they'll see stuff, but they never pull the trigger. And typically, the Americans are, you know, well trained. A lot of them had experience. So, you know, pretty much every time I'd bring them out, they'd shoot something, so it made them very attractive, you know, to the 'Pächters,' to the 'Revier leasers.' A 'Haas' just ran out. Remember I told you that'd be the first thing you saw?

**Ada von der Decken:** And this is just the beginning.

**Ada von der Decken:** [WHISPERING] I see something moving down in the field.

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] Down in the field?

**Ada von der Decken:** [WHISPERING] Yes. It's not moving now, it stands.

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] Oh yeah, it's a 'Haas.' [UNINTELLIGIBLE] I love watching 'Haas,' I can just sit and watch them all night! Especially when they start breeding 'cause they chase each other around. It's just, it's fun. I don't know how many times I've scared deer and stuff because I'll start laughing.

**Ada von der Decken:** Time flies as we watch and listen to the sounds around us.

**Fred Lane:** [WHISPERING] Oh, the fox is getting closer.

**Ada von der Decken:** But the foxes don't come out in the open this evening. And two hours later, we call it a night. We slowly begin to raise our voices again, so that the animals slowly get used to us and are able to hide.

**Fred Lane:** If you spook them, then you can forget it – your spot's dead.

[BACKGROUND CHATTER]

**Ada von der Decken:** Fred reassures me: It was a successful hunting night, although he didn't pull the trigger. I couldn't agree more.

[HUNTING HORN]

**Ada von der Decken:** Thank you for listening to this episode of THE BIG PONDER. You heard interviews with Fred Lane, Hubert Bodächtel, Georgia Pellegrini, and Fabian Grimm. Wiebke Kursawe and Gudrun Kruse were playing the horn for this podcast. Other music was from Erokia. In Hamburg for THE BIG PONDER, I'm Ada von der Decken.

**Moritz Gerlach:** And I'm Moritz Gerlach.

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