

The sad sledge dogs from Greenland

Or: When the hearts freeze in the summertime

(travel report Robin Hood 16.08 – 30.08 2015)

16th of August

Once again an odyssey across half of Europe. Vienna, Dusseldorf, Kevlavik, Rejkjavik, where we spend the night. We, because this time I'm not alone. Herman, a nice animal rights activist, comes along with me.

17th of August

We also meet Jochem, the travelling veterinarian from <http://travellinganimaldoctors.org>, he attends us to the airport of Rejkjavik. Finally Greenland, Kulusuk airport with the bumpy dirt road at the end of the world and by helicopter above the polar sea, the colourful cottages from Tasilaq appear and near the heliport I can see the first dogs. But my heart begins to freeze, even though the joy about the reunion. The first way leads us to the big dog areas beyond the city, that has only a population of 20.000. We are informed, that the winter had been long and the summer dry.

Many dogs have no water. Meanwhile this aspect is well known, but I can't get used to it. What stunning beauty, the fjord is full with ice in all shades of blue, the sun shines and the sky is illuminated as if there would be no tomorrow. It's a picture-perfect scenery. But immediately we are brought back to reality. There is a dead dog, his body is already bloated. Everywhere are dogs, viewing us with curiosity, howling and pulling on the chains. They all want us to come to them. We climb over the rocks. There's another dead dog. He strangled himself, a female dog is tied short of him, the chain has tangled. His body is still warm. Jochen and I release the tangled chain, while Hermann informs two men, who come along.

18th of August

We meet Ulrich, he's responsible for the whole building industry and also for the dogs... His workmate Wilhelm controls the dogs. Both are Inuit, that's very good. It's better, when changes are initiated with and by Inuits instead of Danes or other foreigners.

Ulrich is a young, engaged man, he immediately drives with us to the dog areas and measures, how many metres of pipes are needed for the water conduit. He reflects, where we could plug in and so on. I'm very eased about it. Wilhelm wants Jochen, the veterinarian, to teach him somehow. That's great. I'm very glad, that they give us such a warm welcome after all these

years of struggle. Meanwhile Robin Hood`s help is accepted. And Ulrich promises a meeting with the dog club and the hunters, I wonder if (oder I`m curious about) it will really happen... In the evening Jochen and I travel with Gert to Tinniteq in his boat, we spend the night in a woodhouse on the mountain, because in the next morning we want to travel with the boat to outlying villages, where many dogs are waiting. We really see a humpback whale in the polar sea, he`s waving goodbye to us with his fluke. And we can see the beginning northern lights in the late but still light night. We set the alarm to wake up in one hour, move into the sleeping bags and really stand up one hour later. Now we really can see the northern lights. What a night!

19th of August

We are still in Tinniteq, one of the villages in East Greenland. And the dogs are relatively well, they even have dog tags, showing that they are immunized.

We boat across the polar sea to Kummiut, unbelievable icebergs are piling up in front of us, a bizarre world, so beautiful but also how dangerous for us vulnerable creatures.

Kummiut is a nice village and also the dogs are already held fairly good. There has already changed a lot. We don`t have much time, because it`s a long way to Sermiligaaq. And the situation there is awful. It`s called the „ass of the world“, but I don`t think so, because the village looks beautiful. But the husbandry of the dogs is miserable. Ahead of us is a big dumping ground piling up. Therefrom a small creek runs down and that`s exactly the place where the dogs are sitting on sharp stones. A small female dog with a completely tangled chain is sitting on these stones, unable to lay down. Jochen helps her, he brings a piece of wood looking like a table top, he tries hard to arrange it for her so she can lay down. Also the dog beside her gets such a piece of wood. It`s so simple, to make their life easier. I`m so thankful to Jochen for what he does.

Time is short and we have to go back to our boat. We`ve got to face the long return to Tasiilaq. We`re glad to have warm clothes with us, because it will take some hours. Because of the frozen water it`s not easy to return. Gert, the experienced boatsman, circles around the large blocks of ice. He knows, what he is doing and I`m glad, that he`s our boatsman. In the meantime his wife is knitting below and his daughters are playing with balloons and are happy about the Robin Hood key chains and the bookmarks. It`s everyday life for them.

And then Gert is landing on an ice floe and we risk some steps on the floe, that we don`t really trust, even it`s inaprehensible thick. But godness knows it`s not advisable to fall in the polar sea.

Back in Tasiilaq I ask Gert, if he could also bring some of our dog houses to the villages and he agrees, he laughs and is broadly positive about it. I like those people more and more.

20th of August

We visit Robert Peroni in the Red house, I've brought him a glass of apricot jam from my mother. He's pleased about it and apologizes for never sending a letter even he has sometimes thought of me. He tells us, that at the moment there would be 6 polar bears in the region; that has to be the reason, why I've seen so many wanderers with rifles. We want to meet again for coffee.

Then I visit the dogs behind the Red house, the same like last year. There's also a problem with water, it's rotten and dirty.

Hermann takes a book and walks to the sea. Jochem follows his own course and I visit other dogs. And I find one with a lame leg. And I also find other dogs.

Back in the house I showed Jochem a video about the dog, but he explains, it looks like an elder injury and in that case it's not possible for him to help. But we look for the dog and Jochem examines him. I take my heart and knock on the door of the owner. A lady opens. She tells me, that the dog has the problem since the day of his birth and he's already three years old. Wendy, the lady, is half Englishwoman and half Danish. She lives here for her whole life and she loves her dogs. I'm glad, this dog won't be shot. We are talking for while and then we hear something new. On the end of the road there's a pack of dogs with puppies.

One female dog is totally dehydrated. She needs water immediately. But from where? For that case it's helpful, that waste lies around everywhere. We find a can. Now we still need water. There's a thick pipe near the supermarket and we fill the can. On the way back we look for some vessels and return to the dogs. They drink like mad, also the mother dog. It seems, that they also don't have enough food.

We have to return.

21st of August

Otto Juliussen, the project manager of the dog house project, is on holiday. Lars is here, he speaks only little English, but we visit him and the youths, who are just painting pictures on wood panels. Bashfully they pose for the camera, snicker and laugh.

Afterwards we visit the dogs from yesterday again with the watercan. Beforehand we buy food in the supermarket. We find something, that's produced from a Dane in Denmark and

Robin Hood pays the freightage for it. That's the reason, why the food can be sold for a low price.

Back by the dogs an Inuit starts to talk with us. We ask him for the owner. He says, he has already called him and he's on the way. We are a little bit nervous, cause we don't know, what will await us. I repeat my usual story, that we're no tourists, we are here for the dogs. We're also not interfering, we just want to help. We organize the water pipeline and bring water cans. I'm talking nineteen to the dozen and Dines, the Inuit, understands and appreciates. We realize, that they are always watching us very well, he has noticed Hermann a few days ago and he reminds me from former times. We shouldn't think, that they don't know, what we are doing here. And we feel like whenever we photograph the dogs, release the chains, take notes, then the dogs have food and water on the next day. But maybe, that's only an imagination. I don't know.

Thomas, the dog owner is coming. We give the food to him. He's a fireman. I ask him, if the fire brigade could fill the water cans, that we will bring. He wants to ask. And I recognize, the more people I meet the more our mission will be succesful.

We visit Lars Anker and his wife Margit with their little daughter. They've got more than 30 dogs. Lars supposes, that the puppies have canine parvovirus, four of them have already died. There are serums and the anti-rabies inoculation is obligatory, but there's no veterinarian. Only Wilhelm vaccinates the animals and shoot them, when they are too sick. Jochem offers to help him and to tell him, what he could do and what effect the medicaments would have.

We drive to the big dog areas. Lars and Margit also have to resettle their dogs, cause the law don't allow dogs in the village anymore. You can get an exception permit, when you have only one dog.

22nd of August

Today we walk to the port, because on Monday we will try to bring the 20 water tanks from Kulusuk to Tasilaq, or more precise: we will initiate it. The airport from Kulusuk wants to provide the disused 1000 litres cans. It would be a very great moment for me if it could already happen while we are here. In the port there's a lively ambience, colourful ships and icebergs floating around without a system. Tourists feel the wind in their faces. Summer in greenland. Meanwhile I love this country as much as I hated it only a few years ago. Even if I still can see so many dogs suffering, here and in the villages. Especially the little Unique, as I named her, in Sermiligaaq is in my mind. On sharp stones, bathed by dirty water from the

dumping ground. And no escape since the last but one year, because there was no ice and the sleds couldn't be used, at least that's what I've got told. Always, when I'm alone and think of her, I'm moved to tears. But that motivates me to go ahead.

Tomorrow I'll have to negotiate with the dog club and it's Boss Ulrich, he's responsible for the dogs. Maybe, Gert can transport the dog houses with his boat. My network is spreading. Where have I been in 2007? Alone with my sadness, hopeless. And how far have I come in the last years... This project has taught me, that I will never give up. Never. I'll never leave these dogs. And I won't judge the Inuit, who could survive for thousands of years in a world, where we, who don't have the right to be arrogant, would certainly fail. I've learned to respect and to understand the Ivy (that's how the Inuit are named in East Greenland). But I can't accept, when the dogs are suffering. That's why I'm here. Step by step over the ice, careful for not to stumble and to loose the things, we've managed in the last years.

And one thing I already know, I will return soon, in march, when the dog racing will start, then I can find them all on the right place. And maybe, that could be a big piece (stone) of the puzzle. But now it's still summer and I'm still here.

23rd of August

We walk across the mountains, until we reach the sea again. Mystic of the East. An unreal world like a drop from the polar sea, that was just kissed by an iceberg... poetry in the freshness... passing the dogs, who feel better under the cold clouds than in the heat of the summer. We see two weeks old puppies, they look like small polar bears and discover the world on weak legs. The mother dog is small and thin, I approach with calmness and respect. She accepts to be tickled on her belly and lays her head on me. I could spend hours with her.

We meet Ulrich and Gudmund from the dogs union. Gudmund explains to me, what they need for the dogs in the moment. Good and broad collars, food. The water supply is welcome and also the dog houses. But we also have to take care for the dogs in the villages, I interpose. Ulrich is responsible for all, but as a construction manager he's absolutely overworked. We arrange, that I will communicate with Gudmund, he can't speak English, but anyhow it has to work (in the meantime we already communicate with the help of translators). I'm glad about this meeting, every meeting is important. The more people, who are responsible for the dogs, I get to know, the merrier (the better, oder: so much the better).

24th of August

A sunny day, different to yesterday, when the sun was hidden. Unfortunately there's no rain, that's bad for the dogs. Dines has invited us to come with him and his dogs. But unfortunately we can't do that, first I've to go to the port to organize the transport of the water containers, that should come with the ship from Kulusuk with the „Kristina Johansson“ from Royal Arctic. I phone a lot, from the port office to Kulusuk airport, to the booking office and back from the start. I need the bar-codes, after a long period of twisting and turning I can get them and write a mail to the booking office, I send it with a picture of a container, fortunately there's one in the port. And now I have to wait for the booking number, that I give to the harbormaster again. If everything works, we've really made good progress.

We look for the dogs, we've bought food for. Again they don't have water and they look hungry. A dead puppy lays between the rocks. No good place, no good owner.

To be here nearly means to forget the rest of the world. It has become increasingly evident to me, that I want to stay here for a longer period. A world, I can't get out of my head and has found a place in my heart. Frozen hearts are defreezing. I walk alone in the direction of the mountains. What if I would meet the polar bears, that should run around? I find other chained dogs, it's law now, that the dogs have to stay outside of the town. Exception permits exists for individual housing. Two puppies dangle after me, they enjoy being cuddled and their white teeth sparkle in the sun. They are free yet. I've already visited their mother, her chain is tangled with the chain of another dog. I try to solve the problem, it works, but unfortunately only for a short time. I have to find a solution for that tangle problem...

I walk on in the direction of the mountains. There's a light breeze, it's soft. You won't feel so well in Austria by a temperature around 7 degrees.

The puppies toddle off again. I'm alone. And feel already at home. I don't want to think on my return journey, it makes my heart feel tied. I want to stay here. Who knows, maybe this country is my destiny. I have to think about it. But for the moment my sensitivities are not important, it's rather important to make the life of these furry creatures more tolerable. I understand more and more, that they belong here, that they are dogs not comparable with any other race. But I also understand, that they have basic needs, that have to be satisfied. This bad deficiency of water in the summery drought has to be stopped. And indeed, I've initiated the shipment of water containers. I must confess, that I never thought I could take it in my own hands. But here you have to be active, also as a foreigner, no matter, with whom you have to phone, noone else will do it for you. Here you have to slap through, the northern

mentality is different. And I like it anyhow. It fits to me. It's one more reason to feel homelike.

25th of August

It's raining. The first time in three months. How good for the dogs. Hermann flies back, the good friend, I feel a lump in my throat. Jochem and I wave to the red helicopter...

Then we have to go on, to check the dogs. We find one female dog, that has nearly strangled herself, she and also the male dog beside her are pulling hard on the chains. It's a challenge for us to help. I hold the dithered female dog, Jochen worries with the male dog and the completely knotted chains, but finally it works. We inform the owner, whom I already know. He thanks and promises to change something.

We visit Dines and his well held dogs.

26th of August

It's raining again. We meet Wilhelm, who is responsible for the control of the dogs. Anna translates for us, we recognize, that there are big knowledge gaps from a medical point of view. I think, we should start with clarification and immunization schedules.

There are still problems with the bar-codes.

We visit other dogs, talk with people and meet more and more persons, they already know us, greet us... Somehow I feel homelike more and more. In the afternoon we walk with Dines and his dogs across the mountains. Everyone of us leads a sledge dog with an abdominal belt, they are pulling like mad, they want to run, run... It's hard for us to follow... but the dogs are responding. Dine always speaks very calm to them, when they should stop or slow down. In the rain we cross the area for hours, an unique experience. I can see, how these dogs really love to move and how excited they are. I wish that feeling to all sledge dogs and that they would be released from their chains from time to time.

27th of August

For the first time I'll do something on this day, what's rather usual for typical tourists. I want to come with Gert, whom I already know for a lot of years, to the „Whalewatching“. It's so unbelievable, and even though I'm seasick because of the strong swell, it's a great experience. We can see finbacks and humpback whales within one's grasp. We can hear the whistling from their breathing holes. Gert as an experienced Inuit knows, where you can find them.

Around us, three human beings in the boat, there are only icebergs, birds and whales. Greenland, what a country of silence, beauty, suffering and pain – a country full of opposites.

In the evening we're invited by Margit and Lars, the two Danes. They are living here for a long time. Margit has cooked something vegetarian for us, and even if I'm a vegan, I'm pleased about it and accept it gratefully. You have to appreciate that in a country where vegetarians are nearly inexistent and vegans unknown. In countries like that I make an exception and I'm pleased for this symbol of appreciation and don't want to over-egg the situation. For me it's also a sign of respect to accept it.

28th of August

We visit the youths in the factory, where the dog houses are built. There's one small change, the doorways are smaller now, to protect the dogs from the weather in a better way. Two guys are painting the dog houses with white varnish. You can see more and more of that dog houses in Tasiilaq, one day it will be a white dog town. I implicitly want to bring these houses to the outlying villages, that will be my next challenge.

Then we visit Margit, who shows newborn puppies to us, cuddling their mother. The mothers can be stroked and the fathers also accept that. Again and again I'm asked, why the dogs are not castrated, but here offspring is still welcome. There are some dog owners who want to let their dogs castrate, maybe it will be realized in the future.

Dines comes along and introduces me to the champion of the dog racing. It's important to show my face, they have to know, who's here for help. They are glad about the water supply, the food, the dog houses. These men are the masterminds, many things depend on them, because they own the dogs and with the dogs union they have influence to other dog owners.

Mist appears and also my sadness... because now it's time to say goodbye. Soon, tomorrow... I sneak through the village and also say goodbye to the dogs, with tears in my eyes. Every year it's the same drama. But now I want to return earlier for the dog racing in march to meet them all together.

29th of August

The day of my departure. The flight with the helicopter is shifted. We've got still time... then the heli starts. I'm crying and beside me a young Inuitwoman also cries, because she has to leave her husband, the children are also crying. We all cry... for different reasons.

The colourful Tasiilaq appears once again with its dogs and icebergs. Then we fly over the polar sea to the airport of Kulusuk. We fly to Iceland, where I have to say goodbye to Jochem. He also wants to return to help as a veterinarian. Perhaps we could meet each other in Greenland again, maybe in March.

Meanwhile the water containers arrived, but we need more. And Ulrich has ordered the water pipeline. Finally, troublesome, there's a progress, I'll have to continue my efforts and that's, what I'm doing, thinking of all the dogs I've met.

On this point I want to thank all the donors, who've made it possible for me to help.

Thank you!

Marion Löcker

Robin Hood (animal protection organization)