



Our Hen House

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Interview with Mahi Klosterhalfen

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **MAHI KLOSTERHALFEN** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 239.*

JASMIN: Our first guest today is Mahi Klosterhalfen, who runs the Albert Schweitzer Foundation in Germany. And though he recently joined us on our TV show, we wanted to dig deeper. And we're excited that he gave us the opportunity to do just that when he agreed to share a bit more of his personal story on our podcast. Mahi is making some very strong waves in the animal rights scene in Germany, the ripples of which are reaching all over the world.

Mahi Klosterhalfen has been an animal advocate since he was a university student. He continually seeks out successful approaches to changing the world for animals worldwide and he ultimately introduces those initiatives to Germany. Since 2007, Mahi has been managing the Albert Schweitzer Foundation. He has been inspired by the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi and the late Henry Spira. Learn more at albertschweitzerfoundation.org.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Mahi!

MAHI: Hi, Jasmin, thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We're so excited to have you. I know we have previously spoken with somebody else from your organization, the wonderful Celia. And we're really excited to have you as well. Let's actually start with a general question about your organization. When was the Albert Schweitzer Foundation founded, and what is its mission?

MAHI: The foundation was founded in the year 2000, so it's not that old and it hasn't really been very active until the year 2007 or 2008. It's when I joined and I was the first employee. And our mission is basically to end factory farming and to promote animal rights. And we do that in two ways. First of all we fight the worst abuses of animals, like keeping laying hens in battery cages. And the broader mission is to promote veganism and just to reduce meat consumption and the consumption of animal products.

MARIANN: Can you tell us a little bit about Albert Schweitzer, for those who aren't as familiar with his work, and who he was and why he was such an important figure for animal advocates?

MAHI: Sure. Well, Albert Schweitzer is, in Germany at least, widely known for, he wrote many, many books and he had a hospital in Africa, and that's what he's most known for. He also won a world Nobel Peace Prize. And what many people don't know is that he and his

ethics always included animals, so he was very conscious. Every time they built a new building for instance, they made sure that they weren't hurting any insects even. And he also became a vegetarian late in his life because he realized that his philosophy of protecting all life basically demands that. And I think by now we can say that it also demands veganism, though back in his days that was a concept not very well known. But my guess is that today he would be a vegan. So he's very important I think for the movement, also because he's very well known in Germany. In fact, there was a whole recently -- and Albert Schweitzer turned out to be still one of the top five idols sort of when it comes to Germans and influential Germans.

JASMIN: And what about you, Mahi? How did you personally get involved in animal issues?

MAHI: I became a vegan in 2005, and after about a year I wanted to do more than just not eating animals or their products. And I listened to a podcast that was Erik Marcus's vegan.com podcast. And he had Josh Balk on the show from the HSUS, and he ran the Cage-Free Campus campaign. And first of all I thought, wow, if that campaign was in Germany I would definitely join it and try to convince my director of dining at the university to go cage-free. And after a while I realized, well, it's not there, but maybe I can just make it happen myself. So I reached out to Josh, Josh told me everything I needed to know, and I got my first university to go cage-free. And things just went on from there. I got to know the founder of our foundation, he asked me to join the board, and all of a sudden I was a fulltime activist.

MARIANN: It's so wonderful to hear 'cause so many people find out what's going on with animals and go vegan but they don't take that next step into becoming an activist. But let's take a step back actually, and what was it that first compelled you to go vegan? How did you find out about animals? At what point in your life did that happen?

MAHI: I didn't plan it. I didn't plan that at all. Actually I grabbed a book from Mahatma Gandhi, his autobiography. And I was keen on finding out about his work about human rights. I had no idea that he also was a vegetarian, and he described in this book a scene where he was very, very ill and his doctors told him that he needed to eat chicken or drink chicken soup in order to survive. And Gandhi's reply to that was that he'd rather die than to be responsible for an animal's death. And that really struck me 'cause I realized, hey, what's going on in my life? I don't need to eat chickens to survive. What's my excuse? And I realized I didn't have any, so I thought maybe I could give vegetarianism a shot. I told myself I'll be a vegetarian for one month and see how that goes and then I'll decide how things move on from there. And being a vegetarian worked very well for me.

And after this one month, for the very first time, I seriously asked myself, what's going on with these vegan people? Why are they vegan? I thought being a vegetarian means that I'm not responsible for animal suffering anymore. I bought organic eggs and drank organic milk and I thought it was all fine and ethically as pure as can be basically. So I checked online just to find out why these crazy vegans don't eat eggs and milk. And I found out what's happening and that the male chicks are killed in the egg production, that the hens themselves have to suffer, that they are killed after about a year of laying eggs because their bodies just can't deal with all the stress, and that similar things happen in dairy production. And so on the spot in front of the PC, I decided to become a vegan. And I thought it would be a huge sacrifice, I thought it would be the toughest endeavor of my life, and it turned out to be just fine and it was great for my health, it was great for my cooking

skills, it was great for my taste buds. And it was probably one of the best decisions I ever made in my life.

MARIANN: Aw, that's a great story and I think it's one that so many of us share. We all think vegans are crazy until suddenly we are one. Were you in university at that time?

MAHI: That's right, yeah. I was in university.

MARIANN: So did your studies ever come to include any courses about animals and animal issues? Were they available at that time?

MAHI: No, not at all. Actually when I decided on the subject I wanted to study, the only mission in my life was to become a rich businessman. And my plans drastically changed after I became a vegan.

JASMIN: You mean you're not in animal rights for the money? 'Cause that's why I'm in it.

MAHI: Oh, yeah. I make millions. No, actually some of my friends now that graduated with me earn about three or four times as much as I do, but I really don't care. It's the job of my life, it's what I want to do, it's my mission in life. And I think I earn a lot more in these areas than just -- and yeah, it's just what I want to do. And achieving all these victories, maybe we can talk about this a little later, that really means a lot more to me than having a big house or having a fancy car, so yeah.

JASMIN: Now, Critical Animal Studies, which looks at the human-animal relationship with a critical eye is growing as an area of study in American academia. Is that true in Germany?

MAHI: Yes, we have basically one group that is promoting that and it's basically run by students, so it hasn't reached the professor level as far as I wish it did. But I think it's only a matter of time until I think it will just keep on growing and there might be more courses on that, et cetera.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think it's the same here. All of these things start with the students. All of the animal programs, including the animal law field, it all starts with the students. Why did you decide to focus particularly on farm animal issues when you found out that you cared about animals?

MAHI: So what I brought from my decision to study management and economics was a strategic perspective on things. And I sort of analyzed how many animals are killed in which area and how big the suffering is, and I just realized that in factory farming it's just so many more animals than in any other field. For instance, in Germany, we/the German factory farmers kill about 700 million animals every year, and it's about 3 million animals in labs that get killed every year. So I just decided I wanted to go where the max amount of suffering and death happens and try to make a change there and make a bigger impact.

JASMIN: How do you answer the question which we all get asked pretty regularly, "With so many people suffering in the world, why do you focus on animals?"

MAHI: I think first of all it's very complicated to help humans. For instance if you take a look at what's happening in Africa, I'm not sure if they really want or should have the kind of lifestyle we are having. That seems to be sort of the mission of a lot of organizations. I don't

know if that's the right approach or if they can be helped in a different way or if we can enable them to help themselves in a different way. So first of all I think it's a lot more simpler to help animals and the impact is a lot more clear on what you can achieve. And then my answer is that helping animals, especially if you work in the field of factory farming, always helps human beings. For instance if you look at all the grain and soy that is produced just to feed the animals, that's like taking away food from the poor actually. So that's a big part. Also the environmental impact of factory farming is huge, so if we work in that field we can have a huge impact on several issues. In fact I hear that a lot of people from the environmental and human rights movement are now switching to vegan activism because they realize that they can have a bigger impact on humans and the environment when focusing directly on these issues.

MARIANN: Well, I certainly hope that's the case, though I have to admit I'm not seeing a lot of signs of it here in the States. But that certainly is the way to go. You're right, it's an easy fix for so many problems. Clearly you've thought deeply about a lot of these issues and you've come to some concisely stated but complex conclusions. Who have some of your influences been in the way you think about animals?

MAHI: I think the biggest influences definitely have been Mahatma Gandhi, also Albert Schweitzer, and last but not least, Henry Spira. He was one of the first animal activists in the United States and I read Peter Singer's book about his work and I was very impressed. And that also until now kind of influences the way we approach companies when we want to work with them. We don't see them as the villains but as potential companies to work with and to find common goals.

JASMIN: Mariann has been in the movement long enough to have actually known Henry Spira. And she was at his house once which I'm wildly jealous of and she likes to bring it up at least once a week.

MARIANN: Yeah, I can definitely see in your activism that you take that -- and that was his genius, that he could turn these huge thoughts that were hugely world changing into just practical actions that people could actually take, and that's exactly what you're doing. So I definitely see that influence. I want to get -- we are gonna talk about your campaigns but I want to do it briefly because we talked about that on the TV show and I'm sure people can tune in there. And I'm really interested in finding out how you think about these issues in addition to hearing about what you've accomplished. So just let me ask you, this is the question I think we struggle with all the time and I'd love your thoughts on it. Why is it that so many people who clearly do care about animals in some way, who clearly are horrified by their suffering if they witness it, why do they not feel the need to do anything about it and continue to eat them?

MAHI: I think I can speak for myself there in the past. I knew a little bit about factory farming. I think it's a topic that people know about in Germany a lot more so than they do in the United States, even though you guys are now catching up. And I always kind of thought, well, I bet this meat that I buy now is not from the gruesome factory farms I saw on TV. And I didn't really want to realize that it's basically all the same everywhere. I think the impact we have, we tend to shift it away to other people, for instance the grocery chains. There are polls in Germany, and people tend to believe that grocery chains take care of animal welfare so they won't support the worst kinds of suffering. And I think it's just a matter of understanding the issues, but then also realizing that you yourself can have a huge impact

by your own decisions. And that takes time, and I realize that in my life, when it comes to other issues than animal issues, that I also can do more and that I'm sometimes a bit slow about it. And I think it's important to us, for us to understand that a lot of people, animal issues, they are just not a top of the mind topic. So we need to understand that it's first important to make the issue a more at the top of the mind topic, and then also show people what exactly they can do to prevent animal suffering.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think those are really, really important insights and they do give a lot of ideas for the work that activists can do to create change and to open up people's minds to the fact that they can make a difference in this particular area. There are so many things in the world that we can't make a difference in individually, but this one we really can. And so tell us about some of the campaigns that you have accomplished in your short but incredibly dynamic career in animal rights.

MAHI: Well, thank you! It all started as I said with the Cage-Free Campus campaign, and it went on kind of with the idea that if I can get universities to switch to cage-free eggs maybe I can get supermarket chains to switch to free-range eggs too. Our founder actually had already convinced the first German supermarket chain back in 2003, so that was way before I entered the movement to go cage-free. And my idea was to ask everybody else to do the same, and this was actually my very first campaign in the field of companies. And it turned out to be an instant victory. So within just a couple of months' time, all the supermarket chains had agreed to going cage-free. By now you can't find a single caged egg in Germany if you go to the grocery store.

So that was my first campaign. And then it was always important to me not to do just animal welfare work, but also to do vegan work. So, every time we work with a company it's always an easy first step to approach them with an issue that they fully understand, and battery cages certainly is one issue that everywhere in Germany everybody knows about it. So the second step is to bring in the more crazy ideas, and that is meat reduction and having more and better vegan options. And so after getting all the universities -- we by now have 98% of all universities that are cage-free in Germany -- after getting them there, we always try to work with them on vegan issues, and that has been going very well. So we first establish good relationships, and then we work with them. They have for instance vegan chefs coming over to train them in having better vegan options. Students are asking for more vegan options. Sometimes they work with us to hand out leaflets in front of the universities so students understand why meat reduction or even going vegan is a good thing. And it's the same for instance with the supermarket chains. We now work with several chains on having more and better vegan products on the shelves.

JASMIN: So you have clearly dealt with corporations and government entities in your activism over the years. Do you feel that they have changed or maybe are more receptive than they used to be?

MAHI: Definitely. I think when I entered the movement they had already been open to animal welfare issues, and they were not very interested in vegan issues or animal rights issues at all. I'd say they're not interested in animal rights still. However they understand that vegan products can be a market opportunity and also can reduce their environmental footprint, which they are very interested in. So we work with what we've got. We realize that they won't be open for animal rights issues, but if the result is the same, they have more vegan options, I think that's the way to go forward. So actually all the time during the last

couple of years, I've again and again approached supermarket chains about the vegan issues, and the responses I got were not very good. However, this year for the very first time, most supermarket chains invited me to meetings where we discussed vegan options. So I think that shows that there is a true shift going on.

JASMIN: I'm really glad to hear that your bottom line is veganism and the bottom line of your organization is veganism. I have to admit, when I hear things about cage-free campaigns I get a little nervous because I don't know the answer, I don't claim to know the answer, but I worry sometimes that people think that that's okay and that that's just the way it should be. I know that there is a lot of different ways of looking at that, and so it heartens me to hear that you have had success using the cage-free campaigns as a gateway into vegan issues and that people have been more receptive about it that way. Like, I personally don't think that I would focus my activism on that, but I recognize that there are organizations such as yours that are using that for the greater good and I just wanted to kind of put that out there. I know people come at this from a variety of different very strong viewpoints on it. So again I don't claim to know the answer of what works and we only can try and do the best in our lifetime, and I'm excited to hear about all of the successes that you're having. Do you feel that the climate change arguments regarding meat eating are having an effect in Europe?

MAHI: They are actually, yes. I think we even had Paul McCartney speak in front of the European Parliament. I'm not sure about all the details but he talked to European decision makers about these issues, and they invited him to speak there. So it's a clear sign that the issue is getting out there. The German Vegetarian Society has done a lot of work on that front, also some other vegetarian societies throughout Europe. And yeah, they kind of frame the argument that meat consumption has to go down in order to help the environment, and I think it's important.

MARIANN: Yeah. I think somehow the climate change arguments, though they're incredibly completely real and important, I think they also just create covers sometimes for politicians who don't want to go out on a limb on caring about animals, but everybody can -- well, in the United States nobody cares about climate change, but in the rest of the world it's an important issue, destroying the planet.

JASMIN: Yeah, totally. Mahi, Mariann and I were recently in Basel for the animal law conference there, and I know that's just a stone's throw from Berlin. It's like down the street kind of, sort of, at least when you're comparing it to New York City. But anyway, we were really excited about having some traditional German food, but the vegan variety of it of course, while we were in Basel, and I was wondering what your favorite places to eat at were in Berlin.

MAHI: Oh, in Berlin, it's getting harder and harder to have a favorite restaurant because there are so many openings. I think right now we have about 15 all-vegan restaurants. And in the early days when the first ones opened, I had been to every opening party and been there every week. And now it's so hard to even keep track of who just opened a restaurant. So I will say that there are a couple of great ones, one that's run by a friend of mine, Mio Matto. Björn Moschinski wants to train some university chefs for and with us, which is great. There's a place called Viasco that I like to go to. There's the vegan supermarket chain we have in Germany, Veganz. So if I had to pick one favorite restaurant it would probably be Lucky Leek.

JASMIN: Lucky Leek? Okay. What kind of food is there?

MAHI: It's fusion cuisine, that's a new word I just learned in English. And it's very creative, so the head chef there is probably one of the most creative chefs in the world, so I encourage you to check it out.

JASMIN: Well, it sounds like there is quite a lot of vegan action happening in Germany, and I'm really excited to have the opportunity to chat with you again. I'm super jealous of Veganz, I have to say. I wish it was here. I know it's coming to Portland, Oregon, but that's not where we are. I want it to come to Brooklyn. Anyway, thank you for everything you're doing with the Albert Schweitzer Foundation and with your activism. And you're very inspiring to us and I'm excited that you're here in the United States speaking at some conferences, and I know you have a lot of speaking engagements coming up so I hope that our listeners follow you. I know your website is in both German and English. So I appreciate all that you do to change the world for animals, Mahi, and we look forward to staying on top of your campaigns.

MAHI: Thank you very much for those very kind words and also thank you for having me on the show. I had a really great time.

JASMIN: That was Mahi Klosterhalfen. Learn more at albertschweitzerfoundation.org.