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The Red Banner Farm

Berlin-Grünwald  
Hönnmannstrasse 13  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 21, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Next on our schedule was a visit to a collective farm. Before-hand we stopped in Rostock. At our behest, Herr Kühn renewed his attempts to set up an interview with Karl Mewis, the renowned Party Secretary of Rostock District. However, the mightiest man in Mecklenburg was unavailable.

Lawson and I contented ourselves with a glance at noontime life in the city - a school class marching in two ranks behind the teacher; children sledding down the sides of the old city moat; horsedrawn wagons and handcarts clattering over the icy cobblestones. Women with heavy handbags paused before the fruitstands of the Christmas Market. Across the square the renovated facade of the Rathaus gleamed. It was decorated with a red banner. "Plan With - Work With - Govern With" said the white-lettered slogan.

"We must leave now," said Herr Kühn. "They are expecting us for lunch at one o'clock."

Route 105 took us over a sparsely settled plain. Soon we skirted the edge of the Rostock Heath, the remains of a large forest that still shields the plain from sea winds. Seven centuries ago it was the sylvan home of Wendish tribes. In the 12th century, Germans migrated to the woods, felled the timber, and founded the "hagen" villages.

We passed through them now; Mönchhagen, Rövershagen, Willershagen. There were new houses in all of them - some brick, some cinderblock. Nowhere in the DDR had I seen so much new construction in the countryside.

To the left, a lone farmer paced behind his horse and plow, cutting black furrows in the snow-covered field. "That's probably the last Einzelbauer ("single peasant" a term applied to those farmers who still hold out against collectivisation) in Mecklenburg," said Herr Kühn with a scornful snicker.

"If he had joined a collective he wouldn't have to plow so late. Tractors would have done it for him. Some people are really backward."

Herr Kühn was prepared for the detour we had to take after the town of Damgarten. But I wasn't. He directed us onto a narrow and bumpy road. After ten miles the pavement ended. We pulled over to the side while a Soviet troop convoy rumbled past. Then we turned up a muddy washboard lane and cantered onward. The axles groaned and so did Colin Lawson. The ruts got deeper and deeper.



"The last Einzelbauer"

We bounced through several tiny villages in first gear. At last the road curved into a courtyard formed by green-painted barns. A sign on one said: "Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft Rote Banner" - (Agricultural Production Cooperative Red Banner).

This was the "LPG" at Trinwillershagen, with 6,500 acres one of the largest collective farms in East Germany.

The LPGs belong to the third phase of the agricultural revolution now going on in the DDR. The first phase involved expropriation of large land owners, which meant redistribution of nearly one third of the land after 1945. The second phase was an offensive directed against the "middle farmers" - those with more than sixty acres of land. They were branded as "Kulaks" starting in 1948 and suffered great discriminations. Many of them fled West.

The third phase began in 1952, when the Socialist Unity Party (Communist) resolved to "build up Socialism systematically" by collectivisation of the remaining privately owned farm lands. This program projected collectives of three types - one, where the farmers joined their fields together; two, where they joined fields, machinery, and draft animals; and three, where virtually everything was collectivised. At the same time, the number of Machine Tractor Stations (MTS) was increased in order to control mechanised farming more effectively on the collective basis.

Meanwhile, the government continued to expand the "People's Own" farms which had been created through confiscation from the Junkers and other large land owners.

Despite grave crop failures in 1953 and painful production losses due to sloppy collectivisation, the East German regime pushed its Kolkhoze program relentlessly forward. Today, fifty per cent of the arable land in the DDR is collectivised in one or another form.

The LPG we saw at Trinwillershagen is a forerunner of the fourth stage in the East German agricultural revolution. This might be called the "big enterprise" phase during which the smaller collectives are absorbed into large Kolkhozes.

I was given a hint of this by an East German friend shortly before. He described a meeting of top Party officials in his district where LPGs were discussed. One of the agricultural specialists stood up and said, "They simply won't work. These small collectives always end up with the farmers fighting each other and low production. The only thing that will work in this system is big State-run farms with an inspector and skilled technicians."

My friend reported that the functionaries were outraged by this criticism. No, no, they retorted. The LPGs are correct. Just as they are. Anyone who criticizes them is ideologically false. The specialist was then given "personal cultivation" by the Party to correct his "errors".

Yet six weeks later, these very officials were saying the same thing: that the smaller LPGs would have to be absorbed into big collectives as soon as possible. The word had come from on high. More about this later.

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We were received by Kollege Kurt Dehne in his beaverboard-walled office. He introduced himself as the deputy chairman of the "LPG Red Banner". A plump-faced young man joined us. He shook hands all around saying "Ratsch, Culture Director."

"We've been waiting for you," Dehne smiled, showing a lot of sharp teeth. He ushered us out of the office and into a drafty room. We sat down at a long table.

Lunch was brought in by a buxom red-cheeked girl - heaping platters of beans, potatoes, pork chops, and beef roulades. The girl filled our glasses with Hungarian tokay and Russian vodka.

During the meal, Dehne explained that he was a bookkeeper by trade and training, not a farmer. I didn't realize the significance of the remark until much later when I read the Soviet novel of Daniil Granin called "Trailblazers". The bookkeeper is often the most puissant figure of all, in a Communist enterprise, and the one who usually survives the purges. Perhaps because he knows too much.



Dehne described the "Red Banner" farm in statistical terms first.

It was begun in 1952 when the "large land owner" Matthis was dispossessed.

"Matthis died "a while ago" as a pensioner in nearby Stralsund. There were eight farm houses on the land when the LPG started. "We have built seventy more," Dehne said.

Gradually, neighboring farms were drawn into the collective; along with them the tiny villages of Langenhanshagen, Neuen Lütke, and Lietzenhagen.

These five units include arable lands totalling 2,500 hectares. The State invested nine million marks (\$4,099,999) in the collective. Dehne said the LPG members brought in land and cattle which added up to another million dollars in capital.

"We only pay one per cent annually on the State credits," he added, grinning. "We have very favorable conditions."

The benefits accruing to the 500 farmers who entered the "Red Banner" are not to be sniffed at. For the time being at least.

Dehne said the members of his collective get 13 marks per "work unit". That's nearly twice as high as the minimum unit wage for the whole DDR. At Trinwillershagen, the farmers work at least 380 units a year.

The resulting wage of 4,950 marks is matched by an equal sum which the farmers earn on privately owned chickens, pigs, cows, and grain fields. This makes the average annual income on the "Red Banner" 9,000 to 10,000 marks, according to the bookkeeper. Moreover, when the farmer's wife and son are LPG members, the family income may run as high as 20,000 marks.

(One had the feeling that the bookkeeper was exaggerating on these figures.)

"It shows too," he said. "On this LPG we have forty motorcycles, sixty 'mopeds', three cars, and twenty-seven television sets."

"The working class is glad to invest something in farming when something comes out. These peasants get accustomed quite rapidly to the LPG."

I pressed the bookkeeper on this subject. Dehne grew pensive. He spun the vodka bottle slowly in his fingers. Suddenly his tone changed. He became very frank.

"I don't agitate for the LPG," he contended. "Take the old farm village of Lietzenhagen for instance. Our example radiated so that they are coming in (to the collective) faster than we can take them."

"It is a racket for the farmer...When he comes in now (winter) he gets all the profits on both sides."

Dehne refers here to the private farmers who gain the profits of one last big harvest before entering an LPG. Then they get the harvest income as well as the high premiums set up by the State for those who join a collective.

"In many cases," he conceded, "the reason for joining is purely materialistic."

He sighed. "It is quite a job to bring all these individualists together under one hat. The material aspect is the main thing for them. Ideals come later. Someday they will see what materialists they were. It is a psychological matter."

"Of course we try to interest them in expanding production - with premiums and so on... But we are bad on conviction. These Mecklenburgers are harder to get at than we Saxons. It has taken me years to make contact with them."

(The Saxons seem to carry the mark of Cain in Communist East Germany. They have long been known as the "helle Sachsen" the bright Saxons. They catch on fast. But since the war, it has been the Saxons who caught on fastest to Communism - led by the Saxon Party Boss, Walter Ulbricht. In Mecklenburg as in East Berlin, the Saxons are known contemptuously as "The Second Occupation Power" - after the Russians. Like Kurt Dehne, they usually fill the key Communist posts.)

The other Saxon at Trinwillershagen was Kollege Wolfgang Ratsch, the 30-year-old man of culture. He has been at the LPG only a few months. While Dehne fell silent, Ratsch talked about himself and his work.

With a thumb poked in his pudgy cheek he said: "Actually I was trained as a musician - a choir leader. My father was a schoolteacher...I would have been in the Hitler Youth but I was too skinny."

Ratsch said his work stretched over a wide "cultural program" ...libraries, sports teams, lectures, film evenings, and handicraft courses.

The keystone of the program, he said, is a kind of farm extension scheme. Specialists are brought in regularly to teach the farmers about new methods in raising pigs and chickens. Typical lecture titles are: "How do I plan my vegetable garden." and "Cattle tuberculosis and its prevention."



"How about it," I asked Ratsch, "a Mecklenburger told me only the worst farmers join LPGs around here. The successful ones stay out."

"That is completely possible," he replied. "The LPG was a lifesaver for the lazy ones. It is best of course when the weakest and strongest go in together. We are trying to improve the bad ones with these extension courses."

"Another thing," I said. "There are constant reports from this district that the LPG farmers spend most of their time arguing with each other about who does the most work. The milker complains he has more to do than the tractor driver, and vice versa..."

"Ja," Ratsch replied. "There is arguing."

By this time, Kurt Dehne had revived. "That's one thing," he said earnestly, "it's obvious that the men are limping behind the technological development."

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A horsedrawn wagon rattled past as we started our tour of the farm. "That's our national prize-winner at the reins," said Dehne. "Herbert Neitz. He is only 23." The driver waved as he sped on with his load of sugar beets.

What did Herbert do to win a national prize? we wanted to know.

"He showed Socialist tempo in recruiting Einzelbauern and youngsters for the LPG," said Dehne.



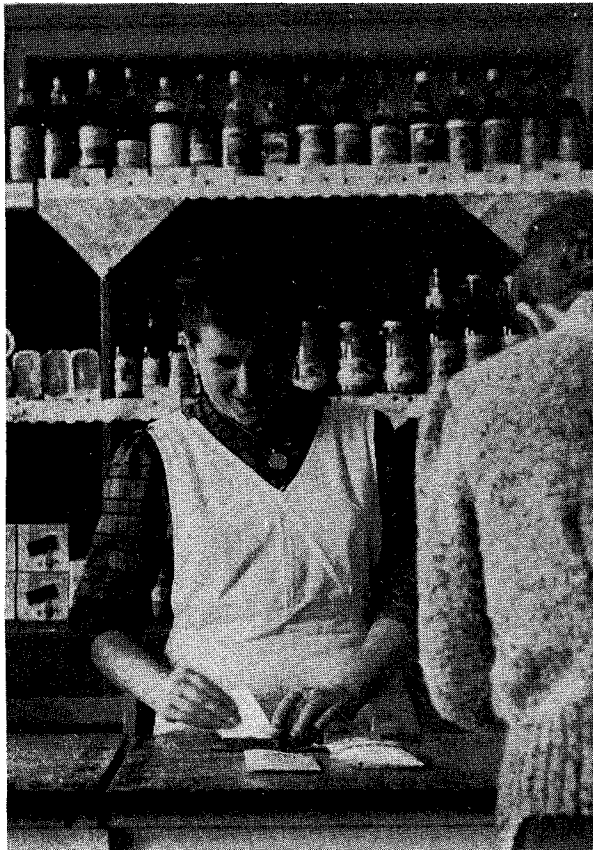
Ratsch led the way along a snowy path to the "Red Banner" Culture House. It was a one-story barrack painted white some years before. The building was unheated.

"That is our library," said the culture director, and pointed to a small window in the bare-boarded wall of the lobby. A middle-aged woman in an overcoat sat behind the window. We peered in. There were twenty books on the shelf beside her.

From inside came sounds of trampling. We moved towards the noise. In the main hall was a group of boys and girls in gym suits. They were running around on a serpentine course between the white-washed supporting posts, led by a vigorous, balding trainer. You could see their breath in the frigid air. "That is our FDJ (Free German Youth) group," said Ratsch.

He took us out to the next building, which housed the kindergarten. It was packed with children, some of them still of nursery age. "Our other kindergarten was too cold," said Ratsch, "so we moved them all in here."

Then we stopped in the "Konsum" store, a state-managed grocery which sails under "cooperative" colors. It was a tiny one-room affair with a sparse display of canned and bottled goods.



LPG Girl

This same brick building, a remnant of capitalist days, also contained a first aid station, which the circuit doctor uses as a consultation room. The nurse who showed it to us said they used electric light bulbs to heat it.

What about schools?

Kollege Ratsch said Trinwillershagen has a school population of two hundred. There are three grade schools on the collective. When the pupils finish the sixth grade they must transfer to town schools. This situation did not appear to correspond with the "principle of the collective" which is to create a completely self-sufficient social (and Socialist) unit.

We were walking along a road, stepping carefully over the deep, frozen ruts. Lehne pointed to another barrack. "That is our bachelor home," he said. "Fifty boys and girls from the Rostock university."

"They work here as apprentices," he added. "Doing their Praktikum." (This is the 12-month term during which every East German student must work "in the production." The professed ideal is to combine classroom theory with practice in the field. Actually, the Praktikum serves more than anything else to relieve the DDR's critical labor shortage.)



Next to the barrack a girl in ski pants was filling a bucket from a large tank mounted on wheels.

"What's that?"

"That is our water supply," Dehne answered. "We don't have running water here."

"It's that way all over this district," Kuhn interjected.



"Look over there," said Dehne, indicating a snowy field. "The sports field we are constructing. We have invested 15,000 marks already...Of course you can't see anything yet."

The interior of the bachelor barrack was uninviting. It had a military barrenness.. Three to a small room. And colder than a dog's nose.

We proceeded to the housing project - a series of individual homes for the farm collective families. Dehne showed us his own, a two-story stucco house such as you might see in any German village. It was modestly but adequately furnished - mostly with old-fashioned plush chairs and couches.





The bookkeeper remarked that each family had its own little garden - with chickens, ducks, and a couple of pigs as well. We leaned on a fence bordering a field. "As far as you can see it's LPG," said Dehne, and swept his arm along the horizon.

"Tell me," I said. "What do you think about the Chinese People's Communes? Do you think they might be adopted here?" (This was a few weeks before the East German press had dared to mention the controversial Chinese projects. But Party functionaries had been following the development with fervent and fearful interest.)

Dehne swallowed. "Well you see we can't do things the Chinese way because we had a capitalist past here in Germany while the Chinese had a feudal past. The conditions are different." He seemed very pleased with this answer.

On the way to the barns, the bookkeeper made a startling revelation. We had asked him to explain the relationship between his collective and the local machine tractor station. In other words, what was the system for ordering farm machine aid from the MTS?

"We don't order it at all," said Dehne. "We rent twenty-six tractors from the MTS, and in return we pay off their debts. We will keep the machines."

He was disclosing the fact that the East German regime had already decided to follow the Soviet example: that the tractor stations should be dissolved and absorbed by the big collective farms. Three months later, at the Fifth LPG Conference in Leipzig, this was proclaimed as the new official policy. And Party Secretary Ulbricht praised the Trinwillershagen LPG as a model example of Socialist progress in this respect.

We entered the first cow barn. It was dimly lit and slovenly. The 450 cows were crowded together - eighteen of them to a row only fifty feet long. They had no running water either.

Lawson said: "They look pretty skinny. What do you feed them?"

"Silage, sugarbeets, and maize. Cabbage leaves sometimes."

Above each cow hung a blackboard registering fat content and the daily quantity of milk. The fat content ranged from 3 to 5 per cent, and the quantity from 7 to 11 quarts. Not bad, if true. But these scrawny Holsteins and imported Red Danes seemed hardly capable of producing that much. Not on cabbage leaves anyway. "I thought cows liked to be comfortable," I said to Lawson. "These don't even have enough room to lie down."

Dehne ushered us out of the barn. It took him a minute to get the door unstuck.

It was the same with the door to the pig shed. A ramsnackle murky hut with 600 squealing hogs. The noise was deafening. Like the cows, they were jammed in tight - twelve to a diminutive sty.

The "hog brigadier" was giving them their second and last slops for the day and they were starving. He slopped milk in the troughs and then dumped meal over it - instead of mixing beforehand. Most of the meal landed outside the trough or on the struggling swine.

"Helluva way to feed them," Lawson commented.

The sun was down as we ambled back to the administration building.

Dehne brought out another bottle of vodka and some more wine. Herr Kuhn had recovered his Socialist conscience and he sternly forbade me to drink. "Remember, you must drive us safely," he warned.

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What sort of Perspektiv does the "Red Banner" collective have in the current seven year plan, we wanted to know.

The bookkeeper liked this question.

He talked of 200 more acres planted with vegetables, of 750 more head of cattle, a silo, streets, a community laundry, a smokehouse, a clubhouse for the youth, a community center, a department store, a school with ten grades, fifty new houses...

How much will it cost? "Eleven million marks."

"The decisive thing here," he continued, eyes glowing, "is what happens to the people. The people. That's the problem. They already look optimistic, don't they?"

They had looked sour and taciturn to us, so we didn't answer.

"We have the youth," Dehne insisted. "The cadre that will be able to carry on."

"Of course you get constant clashes on the religious question nowadays. The boy who wants to go to the Jugendweine (an atheistic consecration ceremony being pushed by the Party) - and the mother wants him confirmed in the church. Lots of fights. But the mothers finally give in."

The vodka bottle was empty. Ratsch uncorked another for the boss. Dehne became more and more loquacious. It was time to ask him the key question:

"How are you getting on with your plan quotas?"

"We will fulfil the norm. But only just barely," he admitted. "It was an uphill fight all the way. Mainly because of the vegetables. We only produced 4,000 tons, not the 6,000 the plan called for."

"How do you make up for the shortage?"

Dehne's grin was crafty. "We allowed 'reserves' in other parts of the plan. We just made it. We always build in reserves."

This was an amazingly frank disclosure. It is common knowledge that the bureaucrats in Communist states spend most of their careers creating loopholes and "space" so as to be able to fulfill the ambitious quotas set them by the stern State Planning Commission. But few admit it. After all, it is a punishable crime to be caught "juggling norms."

"What about political activity here?" I asked.

"Well, we have eighty SED (Communist) members, and fifty in the Farmer's Party." Which is to say that political activity was nearly absent on the "Red Banner". Eighty Party members out of 500 isn't very much; not when you consider that this is one of East Germany's model collective farms.

"Are you sending some of your people to college?"

"So far," said Dehne. "we have one youngster attending a Workers and Peasants Faculty. And we have ten children going to high school." (Again, a low percentage.)

"Have you any major complaints?"

"One thing. The (agricultural) scientists are limping behind the development. They aren't 'with' Socialist agriculture. We don't get anything in the way of help from them."

Another shortcoming involves medical aid for the 800 cows, 2,000 beef cattle, and 600 hogs of the "Red Banner". Dehne said the collective had a contract with a "circuit veterinarian" - simply not enough for so much livestock.

Finally, the bookkeeper prattled about himself.

"I come from a bourgeois family," he said. "My father was a merchant. I was in the (Nazi) Labor Service before the war. And the Hitler Youth, and the Party."

"I was an infantry sergeant in the Wehrmacht - France, the Soviet Union, Poland. Wounded three times. Prisoner of war."

Then the familiar German phrase: "I got a noseful." (One wonders always, did you really get a noseful?)

For Kurt Dehne described his participation in a Betriebskampfgruppe (Factory Fighting Group - a Communist militia that has 300,000 men under arms in the DDR today) with great relish.

"I am company commander of our unit here," he boasted. Again the weasel grin. "Of course it is strictly an internal force; to protect our Socialist accomplishments. We couldn't fight against nuclear arms."

With an eye on the gleaming SED button in his lapel, I asked him about his Party membership. Once more, a startling admission: "I was in from 1945 to 1951. And then again since 1956.

"What caused you to be tossed out for five years?"

"Something happened to me... I slipped. You can say that the 'development' went faster than I did..."

"Hmph," muttered Colin Lawson, once we were outside. "This man is nothing but a criminal."

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We bumped off into the darkness towards Pommerania, after a hearty hail and farewell from Kollege Denne and Kollege Ratsch.

The few short hours at Trinwillershagen gave much to think about:

Those filthy barns, surely the result of the acute shortage of farm hands in East Germany and of the low morale among the collectivised farmers.

Those imported cows at the "Red Banner" being fed low grade fodder. Some say this is to "harden them up" before shipping them on to the steppes of Russia.

Those stories from other LPGs in the area; farm machinery lying idle for lack of spare parts, starving cows breaking down the electric fence and eating up a ton of precious sugar beets...

The observation of one Mecklenburger: "Out of nine LPGs in this district, only one makes a profit, and that one just barely." And the statistical proof; farms in the Rostock area still haven't attained their pre-war production levels, which were not high - (about 40 per cent below American farm production standards.)

A grim spectacle.

What was it Kurt Denne had said? "Come back in ten or fifteen years when we have a solid foundation. Then we will be in shape..."

By that time, the "Socialistic Revolution" in East German agriculture should be finished.

Whether that means economic progress or not depends on such cynical and opportunistic functionaries as Kurt Denne.

