

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Burgenland:
Landscapes and Local Problems

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Metternich was fond of saying that "Asia begins on the Landstrasse" - the road to the east from the Vienna Ringstrasse. This may be something of an exaggeration, but there is no question that beyond Bruck-an-der-Leitha, just 23 miles from the Ring along this same road, is a world quite different from that of Western Europe. Hungary used to begin here, and the land beyond is East European.

The Burgenland is a natural borderland. The mountains, crested with the castles that give the province its name, run out into the plains, and the Seewinkel in the northeast is the only Asiatic steppe-land west of the Iron Curtain. The Neusiedler Lake, third largest in Europe (after Lake Balaton in Hungary and Lake Constance between Austria, Germany and Switzerland), is a lake of the steppes, shallow (average depth, five feet), mud-bottomed and surrounded by a mile-wide girdle of reeds. This is Puszta land, part of the dead-flat Hungarian plain, virtually treeless, its salty soil supporting only grasses and marine vegetation and a unique collection of western- and eastern-European and migratory water and land birds that make it an ornithologist's paradise. In the south, isolated hills rise from gently rolling farmland, each topped with a dark and vaguely mysterious forest - like the pictures one sees of central Hungary or parts of Transylvania.

The villages, too, are different. A single street, or perhaps two, widen into an oblong village green, which in the flat north will be treeless. Along the sides a uniform row of one-storey, gabled housefronts, whitewashed and pierced by one or at most two windows, alternate with arched entranceways, wide enough for a farm cart or tractor and frequently ornate. Looking inside, one is surprised to find a whole row of door-steps opening into the mud court that is also a barnyard: half a dozen peasant families live here, gathered together centuries ago for protection in a defenceless plain that has known many invaders. The village churches are often small and square, also built for defense as well as for worship. There is a tendency to build campaniles separate from the church, as the Italians do.

The village green and the farmyards are filled with geese, ill-tempered and stubborn, another sure sign that this is the East.

There are variations on this architectural theme, of course. In the hillier south the farms are more like those of Lower Austria or Styria - but the difference, and the geese, are still there.

Each village has its own personality. One soon learns to distinguish the German one from the Croat (of which there are 42, scattered from one end of the country to the other). There are religious differences, too. Because the Counter-Reformation was never as harsh in Hungary as in Austria, there are more Protestants - 13% of the population - but they were gathered, as the result of various Imperial pressures, into villages of their own.

Occupations of the farmers also vary greatly. In the Puszta-land there are only cattle and corn, a little tobacco, and - disappearing rapidly - horses. Around Neusiedler Lake and the smaller lakes of the Plain the cutting of the reeds, which are much valued in the building trades, is a major industry. In Eisenstadt District, between the Leitha Hills and the Neusiedler Lake, the best wine in Austria is made, and a day spent talking to the farmers and village officials here can leave one in no condition to drive back to Vienna. In central Burgenland are orchards and pastures, and in the hillier south wheat, tobacco, truck farms, cattle and pigs.

The Burgenland peasants do not share the political conservatism of their Lower Austrian neighbors. In the May elections this year they gave 76,786 votes to the Catholic People's Party, 75,584 to the Socialists (plus 8,153 to the nationalist Freedom Party and 1,901 to the Communists). A majority of the German-speaking Burgenlanders voted conservative, a majority of the Croats voted Socialist.

Their most serious problem is home employment. This is Austria's Underdeveloped Area, without natural resources, without a developed tourist trade, without industry. Many of their menfolk have always worked outside the province, in the farms and factories of Lower Austria and in Vienna. The rapid mechanization of the farms in the last four years is sharply increasing this number, and some 16,000 now are employed as seasonal labor. On Friday evening the roads from Vienna are choked with long lines of busses, bringing the workers back home for the weekend with their families.

In answer to this problem the provincial government has devoted much of its energy in the past two years to encouraging the settlement of industries in the villages. This is fully in keeping with the Austrian tradition, in which almost every town sports at least one small factory and a nearby workers' housing project. Economically inefficient, the tradition certainly suggests more relaxed and pleasanter working conditions, and less social problems, than the teeming, dirty industrial cities of Germany or Britain.

As an added hurdle in the way of this planned industrialization, the traditional non-agricultural products of the Burgenland - textiles, brown coal and lumber - have failed everywhere in Europe to share in the current boom. For textiles there seems at present little hope. To consume Burgenland brown coal locally, a new thermal power plant is being built in the south of the Province - which alone of the Austrian states has little harnessable water power. The timber industry its sources damaged by the war and by ten years of Soviet exploitation, its traditional market in Hungary closed to it - faces a long struggle back to viability.

Meanwhile, the Association for the Furthering of Burgenland Economy, an agency of the government, is seeking to bring a variety of consumer-goods and light machinery industries to the area. With the financial backing of the Provincial government, the communities are making industrial land available free or at nominal cost, and there are the usual sorts of tax encouragements. A Community Credit Bank has been founded, partially financed out of ERP funds, to help the villages provide electricity, access roads, water and sewerage to the new industrial sites.

The Federal Government, the Burgenlanders complain, has given very little help. The only conspicuous contribution from Vienna has been the new Federal road system. Once famous for the worst roads in the country, the Burgenland now has some of the best, and the main north-south arterial road, when its reconstruction is complete, will be a minor Autobahn. This development is also welcome to the Provincial tourist bureau, making strenuous efforts to turn the northern districts, around the Neusiedler Lake, into a popular day-excursion area for the Viennese and foreign tourists in Vienna. (For more extended holidays the Burgenland is still not recommended, since it is virtually without modern hotels, and so far only bargain-hunting German tourists - and Institute fellows - find its plumbing-less inns agreeable. But this, too, will change rapidly.)

Of the industrial concerns so far settled in the Province - 17 are now in the process of construction - most are small and medium-sized undertakings - which in Austria means firms employing from two dozen to two hundred employees. This is what the local officials want, since larger factories would only create housing problems and local labor shortages.

One of the best examples of the new development is the Croat town of Parndorf in the northern plain district. The village now boasts a factory making fire-fighting equipment, a Turkish towel factory, a rolling mill and a small foundry. For the communities in this area industrialization is proceeding more rapidly than in the south - the northern areas are near Vienna (Parndorf is 30 miles from the capital), and transportation expenses are low.

How soon and how much these efforts will change the rural, East European and sometimes primitive appearance of the country remains to be seen. A pair of factory chimneys rising near the church tower has been for a hundred years an accepted part of the skyline of an Austrian village, but community-built workers' housing projects in the form of modern, six-and eight-storey apartment buildings, Italian influence predominating, are new east of the Leitha. They are going up everywhere, in the charming hillside capital of Eisenstadt, where most of what is older remembers Haydn and his Esterhazy patrons, in the central market town and county seat of Mattersburg, which is assuming the functions that Odenburg once fulfilled for this area, and in the rich farming district of Oberpullendorf County in the south.

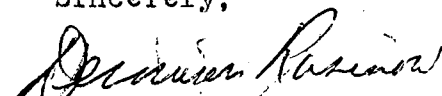
In the countryside, too, there are changes. On rural roads one is held up less often by cow-drawn haywagons and more often by huge, bright-painted and efficient-looking combines, lumbering from one field to the next. Sometimes they bear the label International Harvester, more often they are manufactured in Austria - the latest mechanical monsters, useless on the mountain farms of the west, invaluable in the flatlands of the east. Neutral observers, passing this way on their return from Hungary and points east, report that the much-vaunted industrialization of the East European farms cannot equal that of this most backward part of Austria, where only ten years ago the horse, the cow and the farmer's wife still carried the burdens and ploughed the fields.

Life is less picturesque in the Burgenland today, but more profitable.

In the village homes, progress is slower. The wife of the city manager of Mörbish still has to take her children to an outhouse across the farmyard to bathe them in pumpwater, and her house, which is downtown, has been electrified for only four years. Indoor toilets remain a luxury, and town pumps, each serving a dozen households, are still in regular use. By contrast, both Mörbisch and the stork-town of Rust have installed the latest (German-manufactured) mechanical winepresses in their town cellars. One man, operating one of these presses, produces in an eight-hour day what five men, working around the clock, had squeezed out of the three centuries-old beam presses. Productivity before plumbing. There are still very few bathrooms, but wine production is up. 16,000 hectoliters from Rust, 27,000 hectoliters from Mörbisch; but the quality remains gloriously unchanged, as I can happily testify after an afternoon and evening of intensive research.

Back in Vienna I am accused of having sold out to the Burgenland Chamber of Commerce. Perhaps this is because everybody sings the praises of Tyrol and Salzburg, but almost nobody goes to the eastern border province except to look at Hungarian barbed wire. This is a pity. There is much to see here, and also much to learn in a country where the landscape belongs to Eastern Europe, but where a Western European people are finding out what can be produced - in freedom and with a mixed economy - on the borders of Communism.

Sincerely,


Dennison Rusinow