

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Intezet
Budapest, Hungary

The New Hungarian Peasant

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Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter:

Traditional peasantry still exists in many parts of eastern Europe, but has largely faded from the scene in Hungary. Few people in Hungary today cultivate their own parcel of land as a sole or primary occupation. Rather, the large-scale cooperative (i.e. collective) and state farms have supplanted the small-scale peasant farms of pre-war days and now employ most of the agricultural labor force. These employees now constitute a new type of peasantry -- worker-peasants, who cultivate plots loaned to them by the large farms and fatten their own animals using fodder provided to them. (The term "worker-peasant" is my own. The question of whether a peasant class does still exist in Hungary is generally avoided by Hungarian writers on agriculture.)

These worker-peasants can use their household plots, plus whatever additional land they might own, to produce a wide variety of crops and animals. The average size of the plot is small--only about .76 hectares, but it's cultivated very intensively. Worker-peasants, together with the few strictly private farmers in Hungary, provide 34 percent of Hungary's total agricultural output, and account for more than half of the production of pigs, poultry and fruits, as well as almost 40 percent of wine grapes.

A worker-peasant must fit his own land cultivation and animal husbandry in with his 8 to 9-hour working day. But unless there's close supervision of work time in the cooperative or state farm, there's a tendency to shave time from the regular job to devote to the household plot. It's a rational thing to do. The Hungarian economic reforms since 1968 have allowed workers to cultivate their own household plots as intensively as possible, and have removed the restrictions on the number of animals they

Lana Hall is an agricultural economist and a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs

may keep. Since workers may now sell commercially as much produce as they want, either on the local market or through the cooperative, the new peasant farming has become very lucrative. Indeed, many workers receive incomes from their household plots that equal or exceed their wages from the cooperatives and state farms.

Twenty years ago the situation was very different. Wages were low but there were few opportunities to earn additional income. A worker was allowed to keep only a few pigs and chickens for individual use and keeping horses was totally prohibited. When, from 1968 to 1972, the restrictions on privately-owned animals were relaxed, when the cooperatives began to sell fodder, and encourage workers to make use of the productive potential of their household plots, most workers were quick to take advantage of these new possibilities for making money. Private pig production became especially popular.

In my interviews with farmers in Hungary during the past year, I've noted a marked contrast between older and younger worker-peasants in how they use their household plots and in how much initiative they take to maximize income from farming. Many of the older worker-peasants, in their 50's and closer to retirement, gave up their private land when they became members of the collective farms between 1951 and 1961. As former landowners, they were often given jobs of relatively high status within the cooperative, driving tractors or managing production branches. These workers have exploited some of the new ways to earn extra income from farming, but they haven't been as aggressive as the younger workers. In particular, older people don't view private farming as a potential substitute for wage-work in the cooperative, perhaps because they do have better positions there or perhaps because they're afraid to jeopardize their relationship with the cooperative by engaging in too many private activities.

A good example of an older worker-peasant is Ferenc Toth, a member of Rakoczi Cooperative in eastern Hungary. Now in his late 50's, he was a founding member of the cooperative in 1951. He helps manage the cooperative's feed mill; his wife works in the cooperative's flour-processing plant. In their small backyard, they raise about 150 pigs per year and sell them to the cooperative. They also grow wine grapes and potatoes for home consumption. They've used the income from selling pigs as a supplement to their wages to acquire a few luxuries--they've rebricked their two-bedroom house, and bought a television and a refrigerator, but they haven't tried to make enough money to buy a car.

The family of Istvan Szendrei, who is about the same age as Toth and is a member of the nearby Bocskai Cooperative, is

roughly at the same economic level. Szendrei and his wife earn about one-third of their total income from raising 65-85 pigs per year. They also cultivate poppy on their household plot, which is located a few kilometers away from their house. (Poppy has been a very profitable crop for members of the Bocskai Cooperative; the Cooperative plows, plants and fertilizes the plots and at harvest time, purchases the poppies from the members to sell the hulls to a morphine processing plant.) But even with the income from the poppy, the Szendrei family feels their standard of living is modest. They say they're willing to work their household plot and raise pigs only to the point where they can live more comfortably than they did in the early post-war years. They don't view the new opportunities in agriculture as a way to get rich.

Younger cooperative members often have a very different attitude. They're taking advantage of all available opportunities to increase their income. Some of them are even finding it more lucrative to leave the cooperative and become independent producers. Imre Vince, a private farmer in the town of Hajdubaszormenyi, is an extreme example of the younger, more aggressive worker-peasant. He independently produces 500-600 pigs per year in a back-yard about half the size of an average suburban backyard in the U.S. Eight years ago, Vince was a member of an agricultural cooperative but he left because he decided he could do better on his own. He's made it a point to remain on good terms with the cooperative and is able to buy fodder from them, but he's certain he and his family have done better financially than if he had continued working for the cooperative. The family is proud of the fact that they can afford many luxuries, including no fewer than three cars. Financial success through pig raising has had its price however, as the work is difficult and flies are a continuing problem around the house. But the Vince family feels it's been well-worthwhile.

Horticulture can also offer good financial rewards, especially because it enables a family to take full advantage of its labor resources. Fresh Hungarian peppers for example, demand a great deal of labor. One private farmer I met, in the Puszta (the sandy-soil region southeast of Budapest), has solved the labor supply problems in pepper cultivation by combining his family's labor resources with those of his brother's and sister's. Together, they cultivate three large plots, selling their peppers under contract to the state food store chain. He used to be a worker in an agricultural cooperative, but with the small piece of land (about one-quarter hectare) that he inherited from his parents, plus the joint pepper farm, he's been able to strike out on his own. The family now has two houses plus a car, so his ventures can be accounted a financial success.

Among those workers I've talked with who are still in cooperatives, only the younger ones are seriously considering leaving and becoming full-time private farmers. Lajos Kovacs is an interesting case because his father was a fairly prosperous land-owning peasant before collectivization. Now Kovacs is thinking about giving up his fairly low-level job as an animal health care worker and leaving the cooperative. He'd like to raise beef as a private farmer, but on land leased from the cooperative and with a contract to sell the fattened beef to them. Kovacs says that even now, he can earn as much in two hours of work on his household plot, raising pigs, as he can working 8 to 9 hours at his job in the cooperative. With these kinds of incentives, it's no wonder that younger worker-peasants are tempted to quit the cooperative and set up in private farming.

Some will have the courage and resources to do so, thereby creating perhaps a peasant class more closely resembling that of the pre-war era. But it won't always be easy to go it alone--most will want the cooperative to continue to help in marketing their produce and to supply fodder and seed. This means maintaining a good relationship with the cooperative. Thus workers who do decide to leave the cooperative will make sure that the break is harmonious.

Sincerely,

Lana L. Hall

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