

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Becej

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Mr. Peter Martin
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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

A good rule of thumb for setting up short-term agricultural studies is to find a recently retired professor who now has enough time to help you in organizing meetings and tours, but whose contacts are still fresh and current. I was lucky enough to find such a person this summer in Novi Sad, Dr. Stevan Reljin, formerly Professor of Agricultural Marketing and Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture in Novi Sad, one of the three or four most important agricultural research and teaching institutes in Yugoslavia. Although I was formally welcomed by the Institute, it was Reljin who really took over making the arrangements.

Professor Reljin retired nine months ago, but he doesn't appear to have slowed down perceptibly. He still has an extensive network of former students working in agriculture all over the Province of Vojvodina, and also from working in the field of marketing, he has contacts in every part of agro-industry. This meant he could set up visits to cooperatives, kombinats, farms and food processors relatively easily.

Reljin is a pragmatic marketing economist and reminded me very much of agricultural marketing economists in the U.S.--he's a strong believer in economic rationality and in the importance of markets. But he's also a long-time member of the Yugoslavian communist party. Yugoslavia, unlike perhaps Hungary and other countries in eastern Europe, is a place where people often seem truly enthusiastic about their political and economic system. They may have trouble explaining just exactly how Yugoslavia's decentralized system really works, but they seem enthusiastic nonetheless because they feel it's their own system rather than one imposed on them. They're usually aware that the system makes for some inefficiencies

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in the general economy and in individual enterprises, but they excuse this on the grounds that the enterprises have to serve other social needs (which they may or may not be able to specify).

I found some particularly enthusiastic advocates of the system at the Center for Marxist Studies and Research, including some of Reljin's former students. The Center's research focusses on ideological questions such as class influence in society as well as on questions of agricultural development in Yugoslavia, which they thought would be of more interest to an American agricultural economist. The Center has recently completed a study on the problem of how to reverse the rural-to-urban migration that's causing urban unemployment and housing shortages and holding down agricultural output. The Center's solutions to the problem, however, seemed fairly academic, concerned more with the vague concept of improving the quality of village life than simply raising agricultural prices to improve farm incomes.

Reljin's best contacts, though, were in the town of Becej, where he was born and grew up. Becej is a town of 45,000 on the right bank of the river Tisa, a major tributary of the Danube that drains the eastern part of the Hungarian Plain. Until 1919, it was part of Hungary and even today the town marks the southern edge of the region in which children must learn Hungarian as well as Serbo-Croatian in school. Many people in the area speak Hungarian, as well as Serbo-Croatian, and even Ruthenian. The different ethnic groups get along very well today, but there are some bad memories from the past. During the War, Becej was occupied by Hungarian fascists, who, on three days in January, 1942, killed 206 local residents and threw their bodies into the river. A memorial, listing the names of those killed, stands on the river bank, and it's a favorite spot to bring visitors and point out the names of friends and relatives.

My knowledge of Hungarian came in handy on my second day in Becej, when we had lunch at an isolated farmstead, where the farmer and his wife both spoke Hungarian as well as Serbo-Croatian. They were delighted that they could speak to us directly. A local cooperative manager had picked out this particular farm, I suspected not because it was an especially progressive one (it had no running water or electricity), but because the farmer's wife was a particularly good cook. I've rarely seen a more accomplished eater than this particular cooperative manager, who polished his chicken bones to a really exceptional degree. I also appreciated the food and traditional hospitality, but especially the chance to see a traditional farmstead in this region. Except in the Yugoslavian Vojvodina and in the neighboring part of Hungary, it's rare to see farm-

steads outside of villages in eastern Europe. Even in this region it's becoming less common because either the land has been redistributed, eliminating these isolated farmhouses, or people have moved to the village for better access to water and electricity. After we left, Reljin remarked that he hadn't seen such a lunch and farmstead in thirty years.

There are quite a few colorful characters in the countryside around Becej, though. One evening we stopped in at the farm of Reljin's 79 year-old uncle. Shortly after we pulled into the yard, he arrived driving an antique horse-drawn wagon, looking like a picture straight out of the 19th century. He seemed just as energetic as the rest of the family and we soon found ourselves tromping through tall corn so he could show us where his neighbor had missed some spots in doing the planting for him. He no longer does much of the work with field crops, but still keeps horses as a hobby and to provide transportation into town.

His farm typifies what they call "old-man" farms in Yugoslavia, that are still owned and operated by people well past retirement age, but aren't farmed as intensively or productively as they could be by younger people. His grandson, who was at the farm tending the goats, hopes to inherit the farm, but it's not clear that even if that happens the farm will be operated full-time, because the grandson does have a full-time job in the city.

We spent the next day at the Becej kombinat, where we met more of Reljin's former students; one is the manager of the company vegetable canning and freezing plant, the other manages the brewery. These enterprises are just two of the 16 Basic Organizations of Associated Labor, the worker-managed units that form the basis of the Yugoslavian economy, that belong to the Becej kombinat. Their Basic Organizations include a feed mixing plant, a slaughterhouse, a mill, two farms for crop production and one each for cattle, pigs and poultry.

I was most interested in comparing the cattle farm to similar large-scale farms I'd seen in Hungary. With 1,000 dairy cows and 4,000 beef cattle, the Becej farm ranks as a pretty big farm, even by East European standards. They operate the farm with about 90 full-time employees and this gives them a labor-output ratio somewhat better than similar Hungarian farms, but the farm in general has many of the same problems I saw in Hungary. Years ago they over-invested in barns that are unsuited for today's needs. For example, they're still having to use outmoded confinement stalls for the dairy cows. More importantly, for the long-term viability

of large-scale animal production, they're also finding that the profitability of cattle production can't compete with crop production. As a consequence, they're inclined to reduce animal production and expand crops, not necessarily a good thing if Yugoslavia's future demands for meat are to be met.

I'm not sure that all the new ventures the Becej kombinat has started will be profitable, though. The kombinat has recently opened a hotel after renovating an old estate in the countryside three miles north of Becej. The hotel itself is very charming, built in the 19th century as a sort of fantasy castle, and it's combined today with a stud farm owned by the kombinat. But the hotel seems to serve mainly as an accommodation for the kombinat's business guests and I don't see how it will ever attract much tourist business. The hotel follows the general Yugoslavian hotel practice of charging foreigners approximately ten times as much as they charge Yugoslavs, and since they don't advertise or give directions to the hotel from the main highway, it's extremely difficult to find.

On the other hand, maybe the kombinat is not that interested in having a big foreign tourist business. The Hotel Fantast may serve mostly as a fringe benefit for people associated with the kombinat, a chance to stay at a country manor house and ride and hunt like the nobility once did. Although I didn't do any hunting, other than the usual hunt for information, I enjoyed my stay there. It was a chance to see the Becej region at the height of the wheat harvest season.

Sincerely,



Lana L. Hall

Received in Hanover 9/13/85