

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Agrargazdasagi Kutató
Intezet
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Az Amerikai Vendégmunkások
Magyarországon (American
Guestworkers in Hungary)

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

Dear Peter:

Hungary doesn't normally use American guestworkers, but I can verify that on one memorable Saturday this October, there were at least two Americans harvesting crops in Hungary. That was the day that Lana and I went to work as grape-pickers at Balaton-Boglar State Farm. The Hungarian members of our crew argued that we couldn't really be classified as guestworkers, since we weren't being paid, but I held firm that immigrant labor is immigrant labor, no matter how poorly it's paid.

Recruiting friends and relatives to help out with picking fruit is quite customary in Hungary. It's especially common in the grape harvest, because more and more of the large-scale cooperative and state farms have turned the responsibility for hand labor in the vineyards back to individual workers. The vines we harvested were part of a very large field that had been divided up and assigned to individual employees of the state farm. These individuals don't own the parcels; they do all the hand work of pruning and picking, in exchange for a payment that's proportional to the yield. The state farm provides the plant materials, twine, boxes, and chemicals, and does all the mechanized labor such as transporting the grapes to the crusher.

This arrangement provides very lucrative income supplements for state farm employees who participate, but participation is limited more by the number of helpers one can bring in at harvest time than by state farm rules. We were part of a group harvesting parcels that had been allotted to two state farm technicians, each of whom had commandeered every available friend or relative to help out. Marika, one of the technicians, brought her son (a pilot training with Malev Air), her secondary-school age daughters (and their boyfriends), her boss at the state farm, and her boss's wife. The other, Gyöngy, brought her newly-hired assistant (a horticultural researcher), her ex-boyfriend (a

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nuclear engineer), two older laborers from the state farm whose obligation to her was never explained, her sister, and her sister's two American guestworker friends.

Our half of this highly assorted group met before 8:00 A.M. in Balaton-Boglar at Gyöngy's house, an old peasant cottage beside the manor house of the former estate that is now the headquarters of Balaton-Boglar State Farm. Balaton-Boglar, on the southern shore of Lake Balaton, is a large-scale farm that specializes exclusively in wine grapes, and is famous for its white wines and champagnes. As our crew assembled we had a round of refreshments, including pálinka, a traditional Hungarian fruit brandy, and loaded up several cars for the trip to the fields two or three miles south of the state farm headquarters. Because of heavy rains that had made the field roads impassable for cars, we had to walk the last mile up the hill to the vineyards, with the lunch and other necessities. Cutting tools and another round of pálinka were distributed, and we were ready to pick. The work was well-organized, with empty boxes stacked at the ends of the rows, and we began by working two-by-two down opposite sides of each row.

Although the picking was done by hand, it was unselective and required no particular skill other than not cutting off your thumb with the knife as you stripped the heavy bunches from the vines. My working partner, an agronomist who had just finished her training in Bulgaria, told me to pick anything that bore some resemblance to a white Semillon grape, no matter how withered or undeveloped. She observed that if she were making wine for herself, there were a lot she wouldn't want in the crusher, but for the state farm, it was just the weight that counted.

By mid-day we had filled about a hundred boxes, with 20 kilos of grapes in each box, and lined them up on the grass strips between the rows, ready for a tractor to bring an empty wagon. The tractor's arrival signalled a break for lunch and (of course) more pálinka while the crew members who were the youngest, the strongest, or the closest relatives of Gyöngy and Marika followed the tractor down the row, hoisting and dumping loaded boxes into the wagon.

The afternoon was a repeat of the morning, except that we switched from pálinka to wine, and the careful organization of the work teams fell into increasing disarray. We picked 3,600 kilos of grapes in the afternoon, almost double the 2,000 we had picked in the morning, even though the afternoon work stopped for about an hour when the boxes ran out. This prompted quite a few comments (to us) about socialist methods of organization, but we got underway again in time to finish an hour before sundown. This allowed us time to rest up for the real work of the day-- the evening harvest celebration.

Vintage celebrations are as traditional as a morning bracer of pálinka; this one was a pörkölt party, featuring a dish that is known everywhere else in the world as "goulash", but in Hungary as pörkölt. Marika held it at her house, in the center of the town of Boglar, half a mile from the state farm headquarters. In spite of the traditional nature of the festivities, however, this was not by any means a Hungarian peasant cottage with thatched roof and earthen oven, but a new two-story brick house as substantial as any in an American small town. Boglari's are unusually prosperous by Hungarian standards, because they have three sources of income: wages from the state farm, their earnings from the vineyard plots, and the money they make renting rooms to tourists in the summertime. State farm wages are the least of these three.

The pincer pörkölt began sedately enough in western style, with a pre-dinner drink in the living room. But we soon moved from Marika's rather self-consciously western-style living room to a spacious dining room furnished very simply, in the Hungarian style. There we sat down to an entirely Hungarian dinner, generous helpings of pörkölt and sweet cakes, with a little red wine and bread, which we finished off in short order. I began to think that perhaps, fatigued as we all were by a hard day's work, we would soon say our farewells and be off to bed. This was a mistaken conclusion: the school-age children drifted off to attend to their own business, more wine was brought, and grandmother came in from the kitchen to sit by the wall in her long black dress and assorted shawls to watch and listen. The evening's entertainment began, as we settled down for another four hours to drink Hungarian wines and sing old Hungarian songs.

An hour or so into the evening, Marika's nephew Attila, a truck driver at the state farm, introduced a drinking song that ended by wiping out the household's wine stocks and producing a state of great conviviality. The song passed around the table, with each person in turn drinking down a tumblerfull of wine while everyone else sang a set of verses (not quite genteel in translation) that ended with the lines:

"Le, le, le fenékig; le, le, le fenékig..."

(Down, down, down to the bottom;...)

Then it was the drinker's turn to start a new song, and everyone would join in to help him sing it before we moved on to the next person for another round of "Le, le, le fenékig...." As it came his or her turn, everyone was not only able to think of a new song, so that no song was ever repeated, but everyone else also knew the words to almost every song. No one (other than the American guestworkers) ever seemed to have trouble thinking up a new one, or singing along with someone else's.

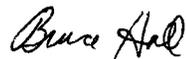
Some of the great generational differences that Hungary's

tumultuous history has produced surfaced, though, when someone, for a lark, diverged from old folk songs to workers' movement songs of the 1950's. The people in their 40's and older knew by heart every word of innumerable songs that they would happily have forgotten, from the grim days of the Rakosi era before 1956; songs with choruses of "Long Live Comrade Stalin," and the like. The people under 40 knew not a word of any of these old classics.

As the party broke up in the late hours and small groups trickled off, still singing "lefenékig", it was generally agreed that this was one of the better vintage celebrations. But since then I've learned that there are actually two types of vintage days. One is the type in which we participated, where one is expected to harvest the grapes as well as drink the wine. The other is the type where one only drinks. Fortunately, the increasing market orientation of small producers in Hungary is making the second type less common, because I doubt if American guestworkers have the stamina for it.

In fact, the financial rewards for individuals who have vineyards or orchards have become important enough that they are thinking more and more about getting their grapes to the crusher rather than harmonizing on the old harvest songs as they pick. Gyöngy, for example, has her own small private vineyard, from which she keeps 100 percent rather than only a portion of the yield. In that vineyard, which she had harvested (with the help of friends and relatives) a week earlier, the grape-picking is done under a much stricter pálinka ration. So the harvest celebration may be fading a bit. But until the mechanical harvester really arrives in Hungary, vintage days will certainly continue many of the old traditions.

Sincerely,



Bruce Hall