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Bulgaria's Socialist Agriculture:
Sheep's Milk and Promises

Mr Peter Martin
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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter:

Among the East European countries, Bulgaria's agriculture is probably the least studied by western analysts, and I can see why. It's in the most remote corner of Europe and the Bulgarians are not always eager to show outsiders what's really going on in their agriculture. They prefer to make well-orchestrated, official presentations to large delegations.

Bulgaria seems particularly closed in comparison with Hungary, where people at all levels were eager to tell you about their agriculture, not only its good side, but the problems as well. Bulgaria however is much more centralized and tightly controlled, both economically and politically. In fact it's been called "Prussia in the Balkans", and I was surprised to find such a highly ordered society on the Asian corner of the Balkan peninsula.

After a month here, studying Bulgaria's agricultural economy, I can say that the system is indeed extremely hierarchical. You never have a meeting with anyone unless two or three subordinates are also there, but only the most senior person in the room seems authorized to tell you anything, and even that's usually couched in glowing generalities. If an individual is persistent, though, and can penetrate below the propaganda cloud level to the actual researchers and managers, it is possible to learn something about Bulgaria's agriculture.

Things get more relaxed too, out in the countryside and in the smaller towns, where the bureaucracy of Sofia is less oppressive. Here people seem more inclined to answer questions as well as ask them. In the town of Veliko Turnovo, in northern Bulgaria, where I've spent several days, I've been surprised not only by the number of questions people

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have about the U.S., but also by how little they seem to know about how a market economy works. I was asked, for example, how the central wage board of the U.S. sets wages, how much people are paid for having children, for which products must consumers queue up, and do we need a special passport to move to the city.

Their information on technical aspects of American agriculture too was rather limited, particularly compared with the people I met in Hungary and Yugoslavia who seemed to know all the statistics on our crop and livestock yields and were up on the latest farm innovations. The official position in Bulgaria is that it's not important to compare their agriculture with other countries. What's important to look at is the progress they've made since the War. It's clear that they've progressed. One farm manager pointed out that their grain production is now 100 percent mechanized, while his father had plowed with horses (as had mine, but I didn't point this out).

It's useful to compare Bulgaria with Hungary though, particularly as both countries are similar in size and population. Looked at from this perspective, Bulgaria's agriculture does lag. Corn yields (4.04 tons per hectare) are 20 percent lower than Hungary's and wheat yields, at 3.74 tons per hectare, are 10 percent lower (based on a 4-year average, 1976-80). And to reach these yields Bulgaria had to use 8 percent more seed per hectare in planting wheat, and 43 percent more seed for corn than did Hungary, although it also used less fertilizer. Bulgaria in 1980 got on average only 2,577 liters of milk per cow, while Hungary got 3,557 liters, i.e. 38 percent more.

These objective data tend to confirm my own impressions from a series of visits around the countryside and to several farms. Whereas on official farm visits I was taken to farms that are extremely well-kept and modernized, a drive around the countryside told a different story. Barns and livestock facilities are generally old and fairly dilapidated, and I saw no evidence that the old-fashioned brick-and-plaster barns are being phased out as they are in Hungary.

It was hard to judge the technical level in crop production-- Bulgaria has been hard hit by a drought this year and grain yields are substantially below normal. One manager told me that wheat yields on his farm are less than half of last year's. And since most of the corn had already been cut for silage rather than grain, there was little to see of crops in the field by early September. Since many of the

fields were being plowed for replanting, one could observe some machinery at work; it seemed to be a fairly common practice here to plow down the hill rather than across its contours, which isn't too good for soil conservation. It's also clear that Bulgaria uses a lot more labor in its agriculture than does Hungary. With 37 percent of its labor force in agriculture, food output per capita is lower than in Hungary, where in 1983 almost twice as much meat per capita was produced as in Bulgaria. Yet Hungary has only 20.5 percent of its labor force in agriculture.

Bulgaria's standard of living reflects these production results. By 1983 official sources estimate that Bulgaria's per capita meat consumption had reached about 90 percent of Hungary's level, and I was told that milk supplies are now sufficient to meet all domestic needs. But judging from the way people actually live, shop, and eat, the gap between here and Hungary may be greater than the statistics indicate. Yogurt, the most important staple dairy product for Bulgarians, is fairly readily available, but it's difficult to find fresh packaged milk. When you do find it the quality is such that it may spoil on the way home.

Poor quality is pervasive in the food industry, here as elsewhere in eastern Europe. As Bulgarians are quick to point out, it's not that the biological quality of the raw products is necessarily lower than elsewhere, but there's too little attention paid to processing and packaging. Unfortunately these are factors that are very difficult to change in a socialist economy, where consumer preferences are valued so little. A common point of view was expressed by the director of one food industry research institute, who told me that at least until recently there's been no need to improve the quality of products offered to the consumer, since they buy up everything that's on the shelves anyway.

Because meat supplies are limited, people tend to substitute vegetables, bread, and yogurt for meat in their diet. The Bulgarian climate provides good conditions for producing tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant, and these are the staple vegetables. But people don't buy them so much in processed form; they'd rather pay the higher prices for fresh vegetables in the private peasant markets, and do their own canning at home, which in itself says something about the quality of the food industrial products. This time of year you can see people lugging enormous sacks of peppers and tomatoes home from the private markets for home processing. This dietary pattern is healthy and can be very tasty, as I found eating several times in peoples' homes, but it doesn't mean there's no pent-up

demand

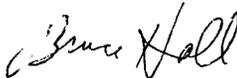
for meat. Everywhere that meat's available, there are long lines of people waiting for it.

As elsewhere in eastern Europe, Bulgarians rely on their own resources rather than on state food supplies to maintain their standard of living. I was told by one agricultural institute director that people spend only one percent of their food budget in the private peasant market, but I frankly find that difficult to believe. Peasants produce privately some 40 percent of the meat, more than half the eggs and potatoes and about a third of the vegetables and fruits in Bulgaria. All the meat must be sold to the state (often under contract with state farms or processors), but a good portion of the other products is sold directly (at regulated prices) to consumers. Individuals sell their private production from stalls that are rented to them by the state, in private marketplaces found in all towns and cities.

What they don't sell on the market goes for home consumption or is bartered for other goods and services. The best meals I had were with a family living in a village near Sofia, where only the very small quantity of meat served had been bought from the state. The sheeps-milk for yogurt was purchased from the neighbors, pears and peaches were gifts or barter from other neighbors, and the vegetable purees were home-grown and processed. A brother-in-law contributed home-made wine and spirits.

This way of life is typical for eastern Europe. To survive in a socialist economic regime, people tend to retreat into their families. The official economy offers few choices for the consumer and in order to achieve some quality of life and avoid standing in lines one relies on home production and barter. It's a "back-to-the-earth" lifestyle, but it stems from necessity rather than choice.

Sincerely,



Bruce Hall

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