

# Hungary's Farmers

*They Compromise with Tradition*

*but Do Not Renounce It*

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MEZOCSAT, Hungary, Aug. 19—In mid-August, northeast Hungary is reminiscent of Iowa or eastern South Dakota. Fields of corn, grown high and nearly ready for harvest, stretch on for miles. The sun is bright and hot, drying the new bales of hay that are scattered in the fields like dice after the first cutting of grass.

It isn't Iowa, though. The little stucco houses, many with thatched roofs, suggest a different world. An afternoon on a local cooperative farm confirms it. The farmers in this flat country, the descendants of one of the ancient peasant stocks of Central Europe, are living in a state of near-suspension, somewhere between the feudalism of their fathers and the futurism of Iowa corn farmers, trying to adjust to the modern age and to Hungarian communism at the same time.

This process involves compromising with tradition—but not renouncing it. It is an old Hungarian tradition, for instance, to drink a little something with a man after you have sold him some of your crops. This ritual was reenacted the other day in a village near here, under plum trees on the edge of a private vinyard owned by one of the villagers.

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The chairman of the local cooperative had invited the buyers from a state export enterprise to drink a little Polish vodka and local wine, and eat a bowl of Hungarian fish soup. The buyers had just made their annual purchase of sheep from the cooperative. The animals would be sold in Italy—without difficulty, the man from the export house said, because they were very good quality sheep.

The group included half a dozen shirtless men when uninited foreign guests dropped in. They sat around an old wooden table, having finished the vodka and waiting for the fish soup then bubbling in an old iron cauldron on a wood fire. A black mongrel dog lay sleeping under the table, a respiring magnet for flies.

In this socialist era of Hungarian history, the buyer was a collective of three men, and the seller was represented by five. The chairman of the cooperative was asked how important this sheep sale was to his annual balance sheets. It was about 3 per cent of his projected total sales this year, he replied. "But this meal isn't connected with business," he hastened to

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add, "it's out of old friendship." The senior man from the export enterprise did not smile.

The chairman, a boyish man with blond hair and a big jutting chin, was asked what problems he had running a small co-op in this part of Hungary, one of the poorest in the country. "I'll answer questions after we eat," he said. "Everybody's hungry." Bowls of fish soup, made in a stock heavily spiced with paprika, were passed around the table. Large pieces of tasty fresh fish floated in the red stock. It all disappeared quickly.

Then the chairman would talk, under a tree twenty yards from his customers and colleagues. "That's in case he wants to lie to you," an experienced student of rural Hungary explained, "or in case he wants to tell you the truth."

His biggest problem? "My people," he said with a grin, referring to the 1,000 souls who live in his village and contribute their labor to the cooperative. The chairman explained: the peasants in this area, rich or poor, felt a strong sentimental attachment to their land. This sentiment was stronger in Hungary than anywhere else in Europe because peasant's

property rights had been well protected before World War II.

He did not say—he did not have to—that the Communist regime in postwar Hungary faced terrible difficulties persuading or compelling the peasantry to accept collectivization.

But now, the chairman continued, most people realize that this concentration of agricultural resources into larger units was inevitable. Economic concentration is a worldwide trend, he observed. But still some people are not enthusiastic. Attitudes change slowly.

In fact, the Hungarians have had more success with their agricultural policy—especially in recent years—than most of the East European countries. The arrangement in this village, typical of the whole country, is a compromise between the strict collectivization of the Soviet Union, and the total dependence on old-fashioned private agriculture that continues in Poland.

The big crops, especially grains, are produced jointly by the cooperative, using machinery it has bought to cultivate the big fields that once belonged to the members, but are now community property.

A big role is also left for



private enterprise. Each family has its own private plot, and many raise livestock too. The land in north-east Hungary is not especially fertile, so life here can be difficult, but in other, richer parts of the country, the peasants can get wealthy.

A recently published sociological study described a rich and admittedly untypical village 35 miles from Budapest where the peasants worked at a killing pace to accumulate the symbols of high social status in rural Hungary.

The first of these is said to be a big house, a symbol not only of wealth, but of security and the stability of family life. A car or motorcycle, furniture and a television set are also important, although in this wealthy village, the sociologist reported, people bought TVs for show — they seldom actually took time off to watch them.

These material possessions substitute for the one real measure of a peasant's standing in the old days — the amount of land he owned.

Sociologists have identified a serious generation gap in the Hungarian countryside. In this wealthy vil-

lage, for instance, the young people seem unwilling to copy the arduous lives of their parents merely to earn more money.

Rural Hungary is now changing under the influence of the country's economic reform, a radical experiment by the Soviet-bloc standards. The reform is intended to decentralize the economy and to allow free-market forces to operate. Under the reform, rural co-operatives have become independent economic units.

The co-op chairman has become the chief executive officer. He is subject to an election every three years, and incumbents are occasionally turned out. Important decisions — how to invest profits, what new crops to grow, etc. — are supposed to be taken democratically.

"I've lived here for 20 years," the boyish chairman in the village near here commented the other afternoon, smoking a cigarette from a reclining position under a plum tree. "I know all the people personally, I know their desires and their needs. I can talk to them."

The sincerity of this cannot be measured by a visiting outsider, but the chairman's words and manner suggested that in Hungary, Communist agriculture has taken a new turn.