

REPORT ON THE FARMERS' DIALOGUE at REINHARDTSGRIMMA, GERMANY

11-13 FEBRUARY 2000

By Ekkehart Knoenagel

In 1998 at the Farmers' Dialogue in Plonsk, Poland, the desire had already emerged to continue the conversations in Germany in view of the imminent entry of Poland into the European Union.

This was facilitated when Herr Ekkehart Knoenagel was asked to organise such an event. A participant at the Plonsk meeting, he was head of a government office for agriculture in the Federal Province of Saxony. Invitations went out to farmers in Canada, France, England, Germany, Poland, Romania and the Ukraine.

Unfortunately it was not possible for all those invited to undertake the journey. Apart from, problems of health or time, it was for example the refusal of visa permission which prevented our Ukrainian colleagues from attending.

In the end, in addition to their German hosts, 17 Polish, 7 French and 2 English guests reached Reinhardtsgrimma by road, rail or air. In addition, the Canadian farmer John Bocock arrived, having made incontestably the longest journey from the Edmonton area of Alberta.

The little village of Reinhardtsgrimma, lying some 20km south of Dresden, is the site of the State Further Education Centre for agriculture. This is normally available as a training place to employees of the agriculture dept. of the Free State of Saxony, but served as an ideal conference centre for these days of "dialogue".

In accordance with the proposed programme, the weekend began with supper in the splendid baroque palace.



The guests were warmly welcomed and briefed on the programme for the coming days by the organiser, Herr Knoenagel.

Opening the session Herr Alfons Weisz spoke for the host federal province, the Free State of Saxony, and explained the structure and level of development of its

agriculture. Herr Weisz was formerly a member of the agricultural administration of the Free State of Bavaria. He came to Saxony after the political change in the GDR and the reunification of the two German national states. Before he became departmental chief in the Saxon Ministry for Agriculture and the Environment, he was for some years Head of the Further Training Centre and through this he had a big part in making it possible for the magnificent meeting rooms to shine again in all their old glory.

Following the remarks of the expert from the ministry, Dr. Lutz Goepel, MEP, took the floor. This highly qualified agriculturalist has been a member of the European Parliament since 1991 and functions within the Christian Democrat group as spokesman for agrarian affairs. He compiled a report for the Parliament on the "Agenda 2000" regulations in the milk sector. He described his activities to the Dialogue and outlined the main focus of the future work of the Commission and the Parliament.

According to his assessment, we can expect a continuation of the WTO negotiations. Despite the failed efforts in Australia, there is no way we can do without a further liberalising of world trade. The results, which we shall have to await, will have an influence upon agriculture.

In this connection demands are arising that an assessment should be carried out of the effect of the "Agenda 2000" measures in the cereals and milk sectors, approx. 2 years after their introduction.

Of special importance, he declared, would be the forthcoming government conference which is to deal in quite practical terms with the eastward expansion of the European Union.

In the discussion which followed questions were put to the MEP, particularly by the Polish participants, about the timing and conditions for the entry of their country into the EU.

Herr Dr. Goepel indicated the next steps he thought necessary. "The widening of the EU is a difficult chapter. The road to equality and unity in Europe is a long one and it is a great challenge for everyone."

By the first evening it had become clear how different were the respective starting positions of East Germany and Poland as they face the question of EU entry. However, what links the two countries is the similarity of their postwar history and the common experience of a 45-year-long Communist dictatorship.

In no other part of the EU did such a switch have to be made from socialist conditions and production

requirements to those of the free market economy. It put a tremendous pressure upon East German farmers to adapt.

Friedrich Hesse, Germany, outlined how one could cope with the large competition emerging and the incipient price war. He expounded the advantages of forming primary producers' co-operatives (EZG). There are 63 of these at present in Saxony. Herr Hesse, himself a farmer from E.Saxony, explained that considerable advantages in pricing could be achieved through the pooling of purchases and sales. More than 30 producers of the most varied size and legal structure in his region had banded together in this way, without having to surrender the independence of their own businesses. The combined areas involved amounted to 25,000 hectares. Assured quality of seed and grain would help in the future to retain both customers and price levels.

The conference members ended their first day at 22.30.

The second day began with a "time of quiet" as is usual at a "Farmers' Dialogue". Sitting in a large circle in the splendid ambience of the palace hall made the participants feel closer to one another in more than a purely spatial sense.

During the morning they heard about the problems which arose for East German and especially Saxon farmers with the transition to a different political and economic system.

Ekkehart Knoenagel explained to the international guests the consequences that agricultural concerns had to contend with as a result of the opening of the borders and the introduction of the D-Mark. Collapsing markets, difficulties in selling, slump in prices, the need to restructure the massive socialist organizations (in the form of agricultural collectives or LPG), uncertain property and legal relationships, the re-establishment of one-farmer businesses: - all these and many other factors were putting both the agricultural and processing industries into an extremely difficult situation.

To make all this better understood, the speaker made an excursion into the history of East German agriculture over the last 55 years. The participants learnt something about the land reform carried out there after the War: how farms belonging to Nazis and war criminals and all properties over 100 hectares were expropriated without compensation, the measures of enforced collectivization and the development of LPGs thus formed.

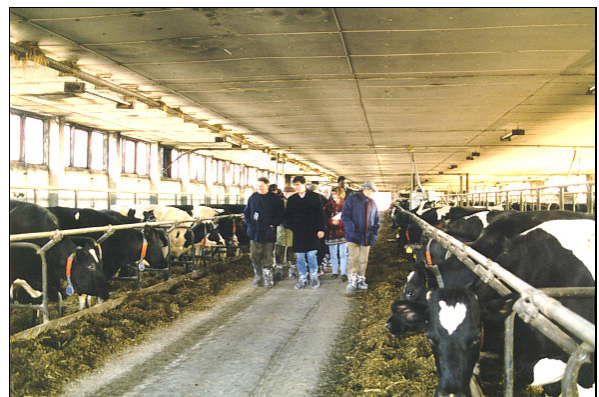
Herr Knoenagel tell of the difficult new start which followed the political change. As a production chief of an LPG himself up to 1990 he was able to speak from

his own experience. The scope of his address included the effects on agriculture of the introduction of the EU agrarian reforms of 1992/3 and the effectiveness of the "Agenda 2000" controls.

As a government official, he mentioned briefly the tasks of his Authority in implementing this programme and the struggles which farm businesses have with the provision of applications and proof. The Polish guests were not a little astonished to hear about describing property accurately to the nearest square metre and furnishing verifiable proof (of ownership) to the responsible departmental authority.

He assessed as very positive the help that the Free State of Saxony grants its farmers. Everyone can avail himself of a free advice service. In all 14 Saxon agriculture offices there are advisers in all kinds of specialized areas such as business management, technical details of production, plant protection, building and land technology, further education, social economics etc.

In the afternoon the participants travelled to the Colmnitz Agrargenossenschaft where the chief, Dr. Voigt, and the woman head of the stock dept. took the guests through the rebuilt milk cattle plant. They explained the changes in the buildings and



answered questions. The discussion was continued over coffee, cakes and sandwiches. Dr. Voigt showed his guests the 2000-hectare farm and spoke of both the problems and the method of restructuring after the political change, pointing with pride to what had already been achieved.

Questioned by the guests, he expressed the view that there was no viable alternative to large concerns with high productivity.

There was much debate in the evening back on the conference floor over everything heard and seen so far. Since different conditions prevail in each of the participants' home countries, some good examples were put forward of the ways in which farmers have

found opportunities for themselves and their businesses.

Stanislaw Choma from Poland reported on his initiatives: the creation of a large agro-business which has opened up marketing opportunities for itself through careful production methods. Even keeping a good number of domestic animals and opening the farm to visitors (first and foremost children) could contribute to achieving an assured income.

Jean-Pierre Emeriau (France) spoke about his 80-hectare farm specializing, among other things, in milk and poultry. He gave interesting accounts of his co-operation with other farmers in the communal purchase and use of expensive technology, achieving considerable results in this way.

All then went to bed, tired and overwhelmed with a multitude of impressions !

Day 3 began as before with a "time of quiet" in the garden room. At the end of 15 minutes the Lord' Prayer was said in 4 languages. The guests then gathered in the conference hall for the final debate.

Herr Knoenagel recalled the significance of the date: the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombers took place on February 13th 1945. Conscious of the disaster brought upon Europe by Hitler's Germany, he asked forgiveness from the Dialogue members present. Everything should be done, he said, so that the nations could live in peace with one another in the future.

For the rest of the morning the discussion of the previous days was resumed. The important point became clear that there are alternatives to over-large structures.

Joachim Bonitz, a farmer from Saxony, gave the guests a glimpse of his life-story, from agricultural student to the stage of being leader of an LPG and later of the agrarian co-operative. Relatively late he decided to set up his own one-man farming business.

John Bocock, the Canadian visitor, described how his struggle against a big oil company brought results. Even one individual can absolutely hold his own like David against Goliath. But he needs a lobby: that's a decisive factor.

Dietrich Eckhardt (Germany) also recounted experiences from his life.

He referred to the fact that through a strong trust in God many seemingly intractable problems became capable of solution.

Charles Danguy (France) spoke as one who knew much about the EU. He referred to the work he has done in recent years to bring European farmers' problems to the attention of MEPs and the European Parliament. The envisaged entry into the EU of the former socialist states formed a special focus for his activity. He assured the Polish guests that he would make redoubled efforts in this direction.

Claude Bourdin, also from France, encouraged the Polish participants to view joining the EU as an opportunity and referred to experiences heard and seen. The size of businesses was not the only decisive factor: good ideas were called for.

Pat Evans and Jim Wigan (Gt. Britain) also took the floor and stressed the significance of the Farmers' Dialogue. It seemed ever more important that farmers from across the world should meet to share their problems and experiences.

Many other points were touched on in conversation: for reasons of time much had to remain unsaid.

Finally, it was clear to all participants that there are no patent remedies for the immediate solution of economic and social questions.

In Poland they can use the interval before EU entry to good effect through dialogue, tours of inspection and learning from the experience of others, so as to prepare for the conditions and challenges of joining the EU.

The general conclusion: contacts should be cultivated and discussion continued. Readiness for this was expressed on all sides.



The Polish-, French- and English-speaking guests, who had travelled by train or plane, had a special experience on Sunday afternoon. In a ceremonial act the Duke of Kent handed over to the people of Dresden the 7-metre high cross for the very top of the Church of Our Lady, which was destroyed in the War (* and is now being rebuilt). We saw in this a great symbolic significance, as people from across the world. were gathered under the Cross to rewrite a bad chapter of history.

Translated by David Hassell