

Agriculture in independent Lithuania — Its progress and problems

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GEOGRAPHICAL conditions, natural resources, and the course of history are the main factors determining the type of national economy in one country or another. These factors gave to Lithuania's national economy its predominantly agricultural character. About three-fourths of Lithuania's working population is occupied in agriculture, and the greater part of the national income is derived from farming.

When, after the First World War, Lithuania regained its independence, her national economy was in a deplorable state. The country had been devastated by both occupants — Russians and Germans. The remnants of prewar industry were very poor and unsuited to the needs of the new republic; agriculture was underdeveloped. Several shortcomings of that time were due directly to the war and its after-effects. However, the most tragic thing in that situation was the result of the last 120 years (1795—1915) under czaristic Russia's occupation.

Throughout the whole nineteenth century and during the early years of the twentieth century in several Western and Northern European countries, very great progress toward the improvement of rural life was made, and the medieval village economy was transformed into modern enterprise on the family basis. Pre-war Lithuania stayed almost untouched by those developments. The Russian rulers at that time were not interested in the economic and social welfare of occupied nations, and they even tried to keep away the penetration of new ideas from the Western World.

The result of the detrimental policy exercised by the occupants was such that, in the second decade of the twentieth century, the majority of Lithuania's peasants lived in villages which had tightly-packed farmsteads, an irrational layout of buildings, and open field system, primitive crop rotation, and scattered land parcels in numerous narrow strips. A few hundred big landlords in the country owned almost one-quarter of all the land. On the other hand, the number of landless agricultural laborers and small landowners was disproportionately high.

At that time, in Lithuania, there were no central marketing organizations for agricultural products, almost no processing enterprises, no agricultural research stations, practically no extension work, and no institutions of higher learning. The list of shortcomings and unaccomplished deeds in the agricultural field can be concluded by a general remark: a meager estate encumbered by a heavy mortgage more than one hundred years old.

In the period between the First and Second World Wars Lithuania enjoyed her independence and had the opportunity to manage all economical affairs, as well as agricultural, as it pleased. What are the results of the efforts in the agricultural field?

The first great problem after the First World War was the establishing of sound land-tenure relationships. It was found that conditions in the country were highly unsatisfactory, and it was decided to act quickly by launching a land reform on a large scale. This reform was carried out in two directions: (a) parceling of big estates and creation of peasant farms; and (b) breaking up of former villages by the consolidation of scattered parcels to single-farm tracts.

According to the Land Reform Law, which was proclaimed by the National Constituent Assembly in 1922, the upper limit for privately owned land was fixed at 80 hectares (198 acres)* for one holding. (In 1929 this limit was raised to 150 hectares or 371 acres.) The area exceeding that limit was taken over by the state and distributed among the landless peasants and small landowners. The size limit for the farms created during the parcelation of estates was fixed from 8 to 20 hectares (approximately from 20 to 50 acres) per unit.

- 1 hectare = 2.47 acres.

The parcelation of big estates was executed in a comparatively short time — the greatest part of the work had been done in the period of 1922—26 and it was finally completed in 1935.

The consolidation of land in the villages could not be executed at a very fast pace, but before the beginning of the Second World War, in 1939, this part of land reform was approaching its final phase, too.

Land reform created about 40,000 new farms; 26,000 small farms received additional allotments of land. Various cultural, social, and public needs received favorable attention during the execution of land reform, and part of the land was assigned to satisfy those needs.

By the subdivision of former villages, 4.2 million acres were consolidated into single farm tracts and 159,000 individual farmsteads were established.

The agricultural census of 1930 showed that the total number of farms in Lithuania at that time was 287,000 with a total area of 10.7 million acres.

The execution of the land reform required great efforts and considerable material resources from the young republic which was scarcely supplied with capital and other types of goods. It is quite clear that land reform, itself, does not produce any goods — it creates only the framework for subsequent production. This framework embodies certain social and technological ideas of the original planners and executors.

The main ideas behind the Lithuanian land reform were the following: more equal and more equitable distribution of the land by breaking down the unsound and, in some cases, unjust land concentration; creation of medium-sized farms; and the removal of the outgrown barriers of past centuries which blocked the introduction of modern farming methods. The greatest productivity on the farms and sound socio-economic relations in rural communities were leading goals in this whole endeavor.

The land reform created the basis for subsequent measures and efforts in raising agricultural performance and in developing new enterprises. These efforts were shown individually by thousands of peasants all over the country — by their forming voluntary organizations, such as hundreds of agricultural cooperative societies (purchasing, marketing, credit, and others) and dozens of various unions and associations — and by governmental and other institutions.

It has basically changed the type of farming in the country with respect to the manufacturing of market products. Instead of selling grains, as was done before, the switch was made to the marketing of the products of animal husbandry (mainly dairy products, eggs, and bacon). This type of farming is best suited to Lithuanian climatic conditions, and because of the necessity of exporting agricultural products in an agrarian country, it was a wise alternative.

Some new crops, e.g., sugar beets, certain vegetables, drug plants, forage grasses, which never had been grown before in the country, were successfully introduced.

All these changes required several adjustments on the farms and the establishment of corresponding processing enterprises for the agricultural products. More than 200 cooperative dairies, about 2,000 cream-separating stations, 5 big slaughter-houses, 3 sugar refineries, 3 terminal grain elevators, and several other plants were newly built and modernly equipped.

Great attention was paid not only to the quantity but also to the quality of agricultural market products. Efficient marketing organizations were created, such as the Central Union of Agricultural Cooperative Societies ("Lietūkis"). Central Union of Cooperative Dairy Societies ("Pie-no Centras"), "Maistas", Inc. (meat packing corporation), Central Associations: "Linai" (Flax). "Sodyba" (Farmstead), etc. Abbreviated Lithuanian names of these organizations (e.g. "Lietūkis" "Pieno Centras", "Maistas") were well known in all important European markets and they were accepted as a guarantee of the quality products which these organizations sold abroad in ever greater quantities.

Not only the type of farming was changed, but the productivity of field crops was considerably increased. The total yield of crops, expressed in grain equivalent units, prior to Second World War was about 86 per cent greater than it was before the First World War. This was due to better soil care and better tilling methods, greater use of fertilizers, and improved seeds.

Land reclamation and drainage received particular attention during the late '30's. Time was too short to achieve full swing in this direction, but several completed projects showed spectacular results — former swamps, peat bogs, and useless areas were converted into excellent meadows and pastures.

The living standards and nutrition of the rural population improved considerably during the '20's and '30's.

The hardships of world depression in the early '30's painfully hit Lithuanian agriculture, but the recovery after 1935 was remarkable.

Last, but not least, the following institutions which played an important role in the agriculture of independent Lithuania should be mentioned: College of Agriculture at Dotnuva (established in 1924) ; several agricultural vocational schools of various types; Plant Breeding Station at Dotnuva (established in 1922); 9 agricultural experiment stations; Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture, carrying the whole load of extension work; more than 1,000 4-H clubs, etc. All these institutions were "terra incognita" in occupied country.

This is a very sketchy and incomplete summary of the manifold achievements of Lithuanian peasants and their institutions. No matter how one measures performance, their progress cannot be concealed. The moving force behind the events leading to this success probably cannot be precisely defined, but seems to be composed of several ingredients — the most important of which is the spirit of free and zealous man trying to reveal itself in a creative and inventive way. If the outside environment (the political organization and the whole philosophy dominating the life of a nation) helps the individuals in their efforts, the road to progress is wide open, and the results often are very impressive. On the other hand, if the outside environment is adversely orientated toward the creative efforts of the individuals, various conflicts arise which lead to stagnation and recession.

Even great progress in one field or another usually does not solve all of the problems. Agriculture in independent Lithuania had certain unsolved problems, too, e.g., the existence of a certain number of submarginal farms, the need for greater mechanization and simplification of farm works, problems of rural electrification, better farm buildings and roads, the productive employment of the increasing rural population in urban industries, and so on. These problems are quite complicated, and almost all the agrarian countries of the world are permanently worried by them. There are no easy solutions, but there are certain patterns by which politically independent countries approach the problems and try to solve them gradually, carefully, and expediently.

The peasants of independent Lithuania were aware of the unsolved problems confronting them and had long-term plans to meet them, but the events of the Second World War threw those plans out the window. Since 1940 the country has been occupied by Soviet Russia, with the exception of 1941—44 when it was under the German Nazis.

The occupants have completely abolished the land-tenure system established by the independent Lithuanian state and, after several tricky movements, in 1948—50, they collectivized Lithuanian agriculture according to the strict Soviet Russian pattern with their kolkhozi, sovkhosi, and machinery stations, with political supervisors, with compulsory deliveries of agricultural products, and with all the other attributes of the Soviet farming system.

When the Russian Communists started to collectivize agriculture in their own country, or when they later repeated the same experiment in occupied countries, they always claimed that the goal of collectivization was greater efficiency on farms, mechanization, electrification, better living, and a lot of other good things, in new surroundings and in reformed rural communities. What actually happened was the exploitation of collectivized peasants, terror, and deficiency, resulting in dire hunger in some cases.

As a result of collectivization, the productivity of Lithuanian agriculture catastrophically fell during the initial phase of compulsory experiment. Since then it has never reached its 1939—40 level, when farming was based on an individual enterprise system.

It is a question beyond the scope of this article to explain how it happens and why it happens so in the Soviet system, but once this has happened, it is quite clear that the problems of Lithuanian agriculture after its collectivization became quite different from those which confronted it before the Second World War. At that time problems existed, but they were clearly defined, solutions were sought or foreseen, and the course of action was in a right direction. At the present time, the problems in Lithuanian agriculture have been immensely increased and a kind of confusion has been created in farming conditions which never existed before in the history of the country.

It is to be hoped that, when the time of liberation arrives, with the expert help of advisers and with the possibility of aid, in the initial phase, from the free Western World, will restore a sound land-tenure system and, once again, will create favorable conditions for agricultural progress in tomorrow's free Lithuania.

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