

Irwin's Extension Work In Poland Helps Transition To Free Enterprise

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Lancaster Farming Staff

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.) — For six months Jay and Betty Irwin called a Polish palace their home. It was the place where the Irwins learned to understand the complex problems that face Poland. It was also the place that the Irwins learned to appreciate little things like a glass of cold milk, a lamp, and the afternoon sun streaming through the window. But, most of all, it was the place where the Irwins learned to love the Polish people.

The Irwins were part of a team of American Extension specialists selected to assist the Polish agricultural sector in its transition to a free market economy.

"We did not go to teach them to farm, but to work with them to market their products and to increase economical profits," Jay stressed.

Jay, who was director for Lancaster County Extension prior to his trip, said that the 95,000 farmers located in the southeastern region of Poland average farms about eight acres in size. Because the acreage has been passed down through the generations, the eight acres usually consist of two-acre plots scattered across the countryside.

Although Jay tried to encourage the farmers to trade acres in order to have adjoining fields to save time, the Polish people are skeptical of giving up land that has been in the family for years.

While this idea was not receptive, other suggestions from Jay are being implemented.

One of these suggestions was using advertising to sell their products. When the Irwins first suggested advertising, the Polish people were puzzled. They held the preconceived idea that people who advertised had an inferior product. After Jay's explanation on the benefits of advertising, handmade signs began popping up and by the time the Irwins returned to the U.S. in December, signs listing products and services were commonplace in Poland.

"Granted the signs were not professional and the wording too crowded, but it is a start," Jay said.

He sees great potential for Poland as they seek a free market economy after struggling under communist rule until 1989.

"The changes in government have left a mark upon its people," said Jay. "They are not sure there really is a better tomorrow."

Banks charge interest rates of 50 to 70 percent, which causes a severe money shortage to make improvements on the farm.

The older generation, accustomed to being told what and what not to do, find it terrifying to make decisions. They found the old system more secure.

The Irwins said that Poland was very tense during the Russian Coup in Moscow. It was then that the Irwins learned that there were 120,000 Soviet troops that remained in Poland after the revolution because they don't want to return to Soviet territory. Poland does not appreciate that the troops stay and eat their food.

The Irwins stressed the need for the people to think positive. "Instead of concentrating on all the bad things that have happened in their country and the things that might happen, they need to look at the positive things that are happening and have vision of the future," Jay said.

The Polish are suspicious of new ideas and new governing methods. Many of the younger generation long to come to the U.S. either permanently or long enough to accumulate some money and take it back to their homeland where the purchasing power with U.S. dollars would help them get a good start in their country.

"Within the last 10 years, 500,000 Poles have come to the U.S. Most of the people we talked with had relatives in the U.S. They claim that the largest Polish city in the world is Chicago," Jay said. "The Polish are hardworking people and many who come to the U.S. do send money to their relatives who remain in Poland."

Poland is comparable to the size of New Mexico. About 40 percent of the population lives on a farm compared to two percent in the U.S. About 39 percent of a Polish family's income is spent for food. If alcoholic beverages are included in the food income, it takes 51 percent of their income.

"The people have a lot of problems with alcoholism and depression," Betty said. Other than alcohol, drugs are not a problem in Poland because drugs accompany a more affluent society.

Since the Communist overthrow in 1989, the Polish have lost their market for agricultural products, which had been shipped to the former U.S.S.R.

Poland does not have money to subsidize farming and farmers have a hard time competing in a free market," Jay said.

Poland has huge coal mines but it is soft coal that causes air contamination. The Polish are extremely concerned about environmental and health issues, and these concerns are sometimes detriment to farming.

For example, the Irwins had a difficult time persuading

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After a six-month stay in Poland, Jay and Betty Irwin's first request when they reached Washington D.C. was a glass of cold milk. Jay, former director for Lancaster County Extension, searched for methods Polish farmers could use to upgrade milk and other agricultural products.

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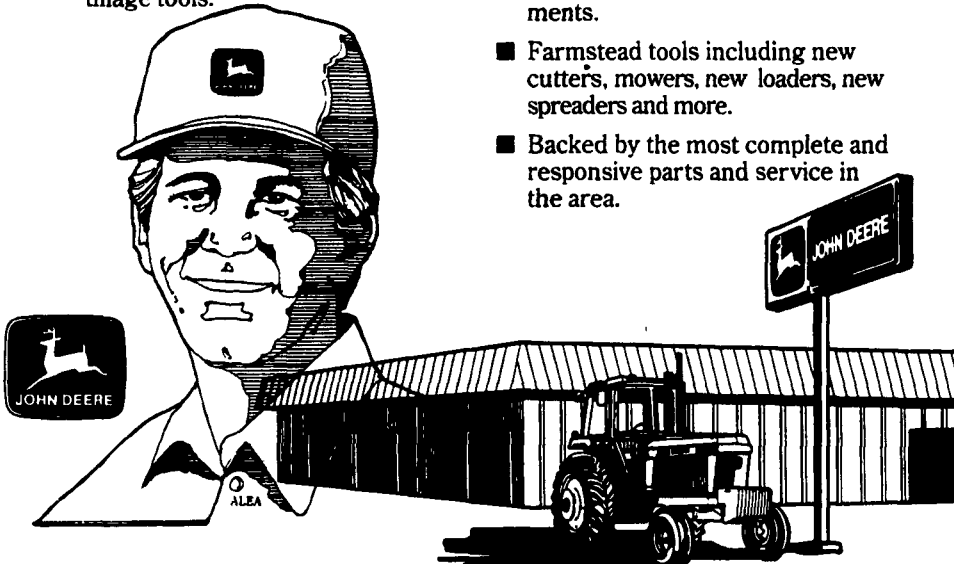
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