

Visit To Russian Poultry Farms Results In Cross-Cultural Friendships

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**Lancaster Farming Staff
BELGROVE (Lebanon Co.)** — "We went to help Russian farmers by giving practical help, not with the intention of setting up a foreign business," said Mel Gehman.

Mel and his wife Ann, who operate Heritage Poultry Management, heeded the request that came from St. Petersburg, Russia for poultry producers to visit area poultry farms through the U.S. Friendship Force. In September, a group of eight members from the Lancaster area spent 10 days touring Russian poultry operations and offering their perspectives on making the transition to free-market enterprise.

The Gehmans enthusiastically reported on the friendships knit through this exchange. The Gehmans communicated mostly by using a Russian-American phrase book, and said that they were usually able to eventually grasp the meaning of their host family's conversations. The host family served "plenty of good food similar to Pennsylvania Dutch cooking," Mel said.

The host family's two-room apartment on an eight-story flat overlooked the Baltic Sea. The husband was an elected chief technologist of the poultry complex that had been managed by the government until this year. Now it is privatized and owned by employees who are considered shareholders. There are 300 employees for the 500,000 layers.

The poultry operation uses cages that are 13 years old and should be replaced but there is no money. The buildings were built in the 1940s. Every farm is self-contained from raising baby chicks to fowl slaughter and an egg processing plant.

"The Russian people don't like the idea of a middleman and that creates problems such as the equipment sometimes being idled because the complex processes only its own eggs.

The Russians' aversion to middlemen stems from their not being accustomed to working together in a free enterprise market.

"I don't think it is right to make money on another man's animal," the host said of an incident where one man was selling another's cow

at his market stand.

The Russians asked many questions about poultry nutrition and feed. The Americans were not shown any records of how the poultry is fed in Russia, but the team determined that feed is made from different types of grains and grasses than those grown in the U.S.

Because of an inadequate supply of protein and feed, poultry production suffered a 30 to 50 percent decrease in meat and eggs this year.

Mel estimates that it takes the chickens two to three weeks longer to reach production than American-fed poultry.

"It is difficult to compare profit and loss because the finance system is so different in Russia," Mel said.

After much questioning, the team determined that the interest rate in Russia is 113 percent a year. The stockholders need to pay back the government within five years.

Overall, the Gehmans thought the chicken farm was well managed, but some team members had a different impression of the farms that they visited.

Ann said that St. Petersburg is the most westernized city in Russia and more upscale than most other areas. The city is built on 100 islands with bridges that connect the areas. The five million population lives mostly in apartment buildings that are seen for miles and miles as one travels in the area. Some single-dwelling homes, mostly built in 1920s-style, are lived in by lower-income families. The host family seemed appalled to think of wanting to live in a single-family home because they are poorly insulated and would be too expensive to heat.

The outside of the apartment buildings, or flats as they are called in Russia, are largely unkept. Because grass is cut with a scythe, the grass is long, uneven, and results in a sloppy appearance. But inside, the apartments are meticulously clean and well kept.

The Gehmans surmise that the outside appears sloppy because everyone assumes it is someone else's responsibility to keep it clean.

Pedestrians walking on the sidewalks often appeared to be



Mel and Ann Gehman say that their trip to Russia with the Lancaster Friendship Force Poultry Exchange built strong friendships between them and their host family. Ann wears a shawl and shows the Russian nested dolls that were purchased on the St. Petersburg streets. The stands demanded fresh, crisp American dollars. Bills that were worn were handed back to the Gehmans with the protest: No good. No good. To you it may not be a problem, but to us, it is a problem. The ornamental chickens were made at the poultry complex from dyed chicken feathers.

sad, but the Gehmans found the people extremely friendly when spoken to.

In fact, they seemed delighted to meet Americans. Upon questioning, the host family reported that they had never been taught to despise Americans. Instead, they had been taught that American people are good people, they just have bad leaders.

Store shelves seemed to be well stocked in the stores that the Gehmans visited.

"The stores do not have a variety of brand names. It's similar to a Mom and Pop store in the states. Usually one family operates the store. Customers cannot help themselves to the items they want but must rely on a clerk to pick up the items for them," Ann said.

The host family had two cars plus a work vehicle. The host could drive but most often used a chauffeur. Mel went along to park the car that was placed in one of 800 garages built together. His host had an office in the garage. Mel was puzzled by the reason for the office.

The Gehmans presented many "humanitarian" gifts to the host family. A suggested gift list had been given to them before the trip. The gifts were mostly food items, cold remedies, blank cassette tapes, and peanut butter. When Mel handed a Bible to the family, the wife cried and hugged it.

The host family took the Gehmans to one of the city's large cathedrals, but the Gehmans did not stay for the service since it was spoken completely in the Russian language and the church was cold and damp. The congregation stood because there were no pews.

According to the Gehmans, the churches were not used for religious purposes from 1935 until 1989 but for swimming pools, warehouses, and offices. Now the government has restored the exteriors of many church buildings,

which are large, elaborate structures.

Although most families do not live in single-family dwellings, many build summer houses near their gardens. The government gives a plot of land to each family for this purpose. These houses are almost always built by families, not professional builders. The summer houses are not insulated and do not have electric and plumbing.

While the team was in St. Petersburg, Yeltsin was fired from parliament and the Kremlin was burned.

Despite this turbulent situation, the Gehmans' host family remained calm and summed up the situation by saying, "It's a bunch of wind. The tree tops are swaying but underneath there is calm. When it is over, it will remain the same as before."

The host family also expressed that they feel the country has progressed so far to a free enterprise government that they do not foresee a return to Communism.

The trip enabled the Gehmans to see the Russian families as similar to those in the U.S.

Of all the trips that Gehmans took to countries such as British Columbia, Bermuda, and European countries, Russia is one of their favorites.

In addition to the Gehmans, participants on the tour were Sally Bair, tour leader; Frank and Ellen

Baber, DeKalb Chicks; Harold Esbenshade, Shady Brae Farms; Dr. Richard Peacock, Pennfield; and Robert Zimmerman, broiler farmer.

When the Gehmans first arrived in St. Petersburg, the host family gave them flowers and called them "most welcomed guests."

In April or May, the Gehmans will have the opportunity to reciprocate the hospitality shown them because a tentative visit is scheduled for St. Petersburg poultry shareholders.

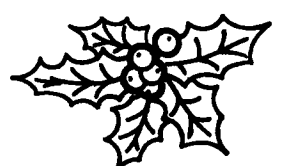
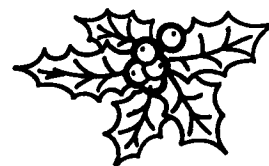
Mel and Ann began Heritage Poultry Management in 1982. Their business serves independent poultrymen with feed formulation and flock management software. The company also manages joint ownership flock contracts with investors. Previous poultry experience includes having their own flock and Mel had worked as director of producer services for R.W. Sauder and in poultry nutrition research for USDA.

Friendship Force is planning a trip to Russia next summer for those in the poultry industry. The Friendship Force was founded by Wayne Smith and former President Jimmy Carter and his wife with the belief that public relations can be improved through international friendships of people befriending people.

More information about Friendship Force and future trips can be obtained by calling Sally Bair at (717) 285-4926.



Poultry Association members who participated in the tour, from left: Robert Zimmerman, Dr. Richard Peacock, Frank Baber, Harold Esbenshade, and Mel and Ann Gehman. Tour guide Sally Bair is missing from the picture.



To prevent marshmallows from becoming firm and stale, store in plastic bag in freezer. Once marshmallows become hard, there is no

way to soften them. However, they can be used in overnight fruit salad, hot cocoa or for cooked frosting or bars.