



Down On the Farm

By Marquis Childs

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The visitor from the West who may suspect that he will be shown only the prize exhibits is immediately disarmed by the 75,000-acre Testament of Lenin Collective Farm.

It has all the earmarks of the transition through which Soviet agriculture is passing in an effort to increase production and to make good Premier Khrushchev's boast that the Soviet Union will in a very few years surpass the output of the U. S. in butter, meat, milk and other high-protein foods that have been in scarce supply.

In the cow barn are the familiar slogans calling on the workers, whose income depends in part on output, to produce more and more and thereby outstrip the U. S.: "Comrade cow attendant: Our team is fighting to get 2,800 liters (612 gallons) from every cow! Let's fulfill this goal with honor."

Such patriotic invocations have long been standard inspiration for the Russian farmers, who make up well over half the population. What is new on the Testament of Lenin Farm is the director, Genady Alekseevich Shkuro. Trained as an engineer with experience in industry, Shkuro is a lean, capable-looking man with a determined glint in his steel-blue eyes.

His immediate task is to make sure that the major shift in the Soviet system of agriculture ordered by the Supreme Soviet under Khrushchev's direction is carried out as efficiently and as quickly as possible. Under that shift the separate authority of the machine tractor stations was abolished and responsibility for the harvesters, the tractors and the other complicated machinery essential to mass farming was put on the collective farm itself.

Shkuro says he is convinced this will make for much greater efficiency, since it will end a bureaucratic division of authority that could only be time-consuming and frustrating.

When they were operated under separate authority, the machine tractor stations were paid in a share of the produce of the collective farm. This made for an elaborate bookkeeping system and for waste in the distribution of the nation's food supply.

But for men like Shkuro the job is to incorporate the machines taken over from the tractor stations into the operation of a large-scale business with 900 full-time workers and 400 to 500 additional part-time employes. He talks frankly of the deficiencies of the combines with which the harvesting of the winter wheat crop must shortly begin. The combines are not the newest types and there is a problem of spare parts.

One of the things he must do in the first weeks, he says as we stand talking at a corner of the field of grain that stretches off toward the horizon like a sea that is alternately green and gold in the wind, is to get a shelter built. Such costly machinery should not stand out in the rain and snow.

But if his task is formidable, Shkuro shows no signs of being intimidated by it. On the contrary, he seems to enjoy the challenge and he concedes that the strain is less than it was in industry. He was "recommended" for the position of director and his election by the members of the collective followed.

This is one of the new men who are coming in under Khrushchev's impetus to try to bring a great forward advance to agriculture. They are more concerned with practical results than with ideology and dogma. They are shrewd, hard-headed, realistic, and not a little of the future depends on their success.

In the reorganization going forward, the individual peasant has been given a greater incentive by being allowed to sell on the free market the produce from his own plot of an acre or so. He can keep a cow and a calf, poultry and a few pigs. Visiting the crowded markets in each city, you quickly get an idea of how important this free market is.

The decisions recently taken by the Communist hierarchy appear to have enlarged the responsibility of each collective farm by ending the system of forced deliveries and wiping out the arrears on those deliveries. It should be added that these matters are difficult for the outsider to construe.

Work is going forward on the road, deeply rutted by recent heavy rains, that is the main street of the old village and the site of the headquarters of the collective. Shkuro explains that these badly needed repairs are paid for, not by the collective but by the municipality. The dust swirls up from the road in the hot, windy air and the wooden houses along the street have an ancient look. They are in sharp contrast to the modern housing in the new village built a mile and a half away for part of the farm families. It is a village out of the past—a past that has transmitted deeply rooted habits, habits engrained in a peasantry that has struggled up the long, hard way from serfdom.

The transformation being undertaken on thousands of collective farms—80 per cent of Russia's agriculture—is another phase in the struggle.