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CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND ITS BEEKEEPING

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The forthcoming International Beekeeping Congress in Prague has made many western beekeepers who have not yet penetrated the Iron Curtain think of doing so. This article explains some of the differences they will find between Czechoslovakia and their own countries, in beekeeping and in other activities.

Everything I had read about beekeeping in Czechoslovakia gave me the impression that its official administration and voluntary organization must be more highly organized than in almost any other country. Dr. Svoboda's account in *Bee World* (June 1958) described a planned beekeeping economy in which many departments worked together for the good of beekeeping: the Ministry of Agriculture, beekeepers' associations, research, education, and so on. An opportunity to see this at first hand came in 1960, when my husband and I spent a week as guests of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Agriculture; characteristically, officers of the Beekeepers' Associations also accompanied us all the time, and we were able to see at first hand the close and friendly co-operation between the different organizations concerned with beekeeping.

In Czechoslovakia, as in other countries of central Europe, beekeeping has a long and respected tradition, with the result that it occupies a more favoured place in the current economy than is the case in some other parts of the world. It has a strong national beekeepers' association, which works in active day-to-day co-operation with the Ministry of Agriculture, and whose education programme keeps the public bee conscious: the postcards shown on page 19 are one example of this activity.

Czechoslovakia is made up of four regions, based on past kingdoms: Bohemia in the west, with Prague as the capital, Moravia in the centre with Silesia to the north of it, and Slovakia in the east. Slovakia is mountainous, and has its own language (Slovak); its people are by nature more independent than the Czechs. In many ways Slovakia is the 'Scotland' of Czechoslovakia, and to refer to a Slovak as a Czech is as bad as calling a Scot an Englishman.

The Slovaks have their own Beekeepers' Association, *Svaz včelařů na Slovensku*, which is a branch of the Association for the whole country, *Svaz včelařů*, whose headquarters are in Prague. The combined Association has about 100 000 members, which includes most of the beekeepers in the country. There are some beekeepers outside the Association, who are referred to as 'unorganized'; and this word expresses strong disapproval when used in 'organized' circles in Czechoslovakia.

There are about a million colonies of bees in the country, 80 for every thousand human inhabitants and 7 to the square kilometre on the average (20 per square mile); corresponding figures for Britain are 7 per thousand inhabitants and 4 per square mile. Over 80% of the colonies are still in private ownership, simply because the collectivization programme cannot deal with everything in the space of a few years. These are referred to as the 'private sector'. The 'socialist sector' covers the apiaries on collective farms, and State apiaries in the forests and farms administered directly by the State. A full-time State beekeeper looks after 80-100 hives. This figure will seem very low to beekeepers in some other countries, but it

is similar to that in the U.S.S.R., and in keeping with the level of productivity in other branches of agriculture in Czechoslovakia; for instance it is regarded as a full-time job to look after 500 laying hens.

Many colonies are kept in free-standing hives, especially in the socialist sector, but the traditional apiary is a bee-house. Czech and Slovak bee-houses differ from those in Germany and Austria in various ways. They are more colourful, the variously painted hive fronts often forming a brilliant patchwork. The buildings are also more elaborate, and may be two or three storeys high, each storey accommodating several layers of hives. Some of them, for instance at the Bumble Bee Research Station at Filipov and at the Slovak Beekeeping School at Králová, are more like pavilions or bee-palaces than simple bee-houses.

The extensive network of beekeeping education in Czechoslovakia will surprise and impress many visitors. Basic beekeeping instruction is given in schools, technical colleges and universities. Both existing beekeepers and beginners are taught — by beekeepers' associations, by research institutes and by beekeeping stations. Even the four-year training at the fishery school includes a compulsory course on beekeeping! One gets the impression that there can hardly be an adult in the country who has not at some time received a course of instruction on bees and beekeeping. One of the specialized beekeeping schools we visited, at Nasavrsky in Moravia, holds numerous residential and day courses, some lasting several years and reaching a very high level: the Director had only one request to make of me which, alas, I have still not been able to fulfil. Could I get him a copy of Nelson's *Embryology of the honey bee*, which he needed for teaching the more advanced students?

One of the beekeeping schools in Slovakia is next door to the Slovak Bee Research Institute at Liptovský Hrádok, and works in close co-operation with it. The other, near Bratislava, is run by the Slovak Beekeepers' Association. Here we were given a wonderful banquet, and talked bees until the small hours in the common room, sitting under a bust of Lenin flanked by the most handsome aspidistras I have ever seen. We were then assigned the best bedroom in the school — while our hosts slept in the students' dormitories. No trouble or inconvenience was too much for the Slovak beekeepers, and their great hospitality is one of our warmest memories of the visit.

In Slovakia we also visited the State Bee Venom Apiary at Radošina, and here we watched the process for extracting the venom. The bees get a slight electric shock as they leave the hive, and as a result sting into a rubber sheet so thin that the sting can be retracted; the venom is subsequently collected without difficulty from the underside of the rubber, and processed and packaged in a government pharmaceutical factory.

The two Bee Research Institutes are at Dol (near Prague) and Liptovský Hrádok, and are run by the Czech and the Slovak Academy of Sciences respectively. They work wholeheartedly for and with the beekeeping industry. Useful contact is also maintained with other branches of agriculture, with beneficial results for beekeeping: at one State Forest apiary we asked the purpose of a triangular wooden bench painted yellow, some yards in front of the hives. Was it a miniature demonstration table? No — it was a warning sign visible from the air, to show the pilot of any aeroplane spraying or dusting the forest trees that an apiary was present and that he must avoid the area to prevent damage to bees.

There is an efficient government honey marketing organization, and a visit to one of the processing plants provides an opportunity to see the world-famous industrial Czech glassware in use. On the other hand many visitors from western Europe, America and Australia may well regard some of the beekeeping equipment and methods as clumsy and time-wasting. Visitors can, however, hardly fail to be impressed by the way in which the various facets of organized beekeeping are united for the good of the industry. This is no new thing in Czechoslovakia, initiated by the present political system. It is part of the country's heritage from the past which, fortunately for beekeepers, is still actively fostered by the present government. (Even the price of honey is kept high by the government, to provide a sort of subsidy for beekeeping, in view of its importance for pollination.)

I have no first-hand knowledge of the small 'unorganized' sector. In many other parts of the world this is, of course, the largest and most important part of the industry. When in Czechoslovakia, we were conscious enough of our own shortcomings in this respect. But it was only when in the Soviet Union two years later that I realized just what 'unorganized' guests we must have seemed to our kind and patient Czech and Slovak hosts. In so many little ways the approved code of behaviour is exactly opposite on the two sides of the Iron Curtain, and I know that some of the western members of the Congress in Prague next August will be a puzzle and a trial to well disciplined Czechs. I can only ask for tolerance, and an acceptance of the fact that we have been brought up and trained to act as independent individuals — like bumble bee queens in the spring — and that we have little or no personal conception of the duties of a worker in a honeybee colony.