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Land of the free

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A Digest Exclusive

In doing research for a story about the possibility of selling red meat to the former "red empire," I met someone who gave me a far more significant story. Petko Kadiev is a movie producer who was born in Bulgaria but has lived and worked in this country for the past three decades. Petko got his start in the movies working with Walt Disney — not the studio, the man himself. He has since worked with mega-stars such as John Huston and Jack Nicholson. His life's work consists of over 100 feature films and documentaries, many of which have won both awards and critical acclaim. You have no doubt seen his work. Petko is now working on what may be the most important film of his career . . . and you are the star.

Petko is one of the lucky Bulgarians who was able to escape his country after the Communists took over in 1947. Before the Communist takeover of Bulgaria the country was a veritable truck garden for western Europe, producing vegetables, fruits, grain and meat. Seventy-five percent of the population lived in the country on their privately owned

farms and ranches.

Today those same fields are dead and the countryside is deserted. Of the nine million people who live in the country today, only 20 percent of them live in rural areas. Back in 1947, the first thing the Communists did was to take away the right to own private property. The land was owned instead 100 percent by the state. "The peasants were made workers under a militaristic type system on collective farms," recalls Petko.

"The peasants worked constantly under the fear of prison, of starving and of losing their jobs. If you don't work you don't eat . . . that was the rule," says Petko. "Everything was controlled from the central government. The workers were ordered to produce a certain quantity of agricultural goods and deliver them to the government.

"The government kept the price of food artificially low to the 80 percent of the population that lived in the city fortresses. Choice was limited; only small amounts of meat were available, mostly lamb. You were lucky indeed to have old peo-

ple in your family so that they could wait in the food lines all day while you worked."

I asked Petko, "Under this system where everything is owned and controlled by the government, weren't environmental standards higher than in this country where private property rights are guaranteed by our Constitution?"

"Oh, no," he said. "The country was devastated by government control. The fields were over-fertilized, the ground water was contaminated and the rivers are dead. There are no fish in the Danube." The Black Sea really is. "Environmentally it was a drastic situation. Only with the return of freedom and of private property has the environmental movement taken off in Bulgaria," Petko told me.

"How about the poor," I asked, "weren't material things more evenly distributed under a government controlled system?"

"Not at all," he said. "The last time I was in Bulgaria I went to a dam and on one side of the dam there were trees and a forest. Deer and gazelle. The area had been a

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private hunting reserve for one man, a member of the Communist party. These top Communists lived like barons and lords. Communism concentrated the wealth of our country in the hands of a few."

What has happened in Bulgaria is of special interest now because of what is occurring in the former U.S.S.R. Bulgaria went through the same growing pains only a year earlier. In 1989, the day after the Berlin Wall came crashing down, the people in Bulgaria went to the streets and took back their country from the Communists. One of the very first things the people tried to do was to return the private property rights to the people. But they ran into a small problem. They decided that the land should be returned to the families that owned the land prior to 1947. If the parents were dead the land would be given back to their children, who now lived in the cities. But when the new government tried to return the land to the children, they did not want it. "They did not want to go back to the villages, to work in the dirt amongst the animals," says Petko. "To this day, only 5 percent of the land has been returned to private ownership in Bulgaria. This is the biggest problem in establishing a healthy free market economy."

So Petko is making a movie. A movie about how enjoyable and prosperous it is to be a farmer or a rancher in America. "We want to show our people in Bulgaria," says Petko, "that educated young people do work the land in this country."

In America farmers, ranchers and other private property owners are treated as the scourge of the earth, but in the countries that have thrown off the yoke of government

control these same farmers and ranchers are the role model. "Most countries want to be like America," says Petko. "Cowboy hats and blue jeans are the universal symbol of freedom," he says. "In Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, there are American flags in the windows of the taxis as a show of support for your system of free enterprise and private ownership, and also as a sign of the anger and hatred felt towards the Communists."

One of the first things that America did to help the Bulgarians was to send a team of economists to study the situation and make recommendations to the new Bulgarian government. Last March for the first time price controls were lifted and immediately prices for food skyrocketed, as is now happening in Russia. But another funny thing happened. Shelves that had been empty began to fill as farmers and ranchers began to sell the produce and meat they had been hoarding. "Today the marketplace is filled with food," says Petko, "and little coffee shops are springing up and besides food there are now flowers in the marketplace, something not seen before. There is now great joy in the cities," says Petko.

But back on the farms and ranches there is still much trouble. Although the privately owned farms and ranches are now producing 10 times the food their collective counterparts did, the Communists are lurking in the shadows, attempting to sabotage the farmers' efforts. For they know that if the privately owned farms and ranches are successful, Communism will remain comatose. If the farmers fail, on the other hand, the Communists may one day return to power. Petko worries that if they

cannot get the young people to return to the land, this experiment will fail and a lot of blood will be spilled. Instead of a free country, Bulgaria will fall under a totalitarian state like Nazi Germany. "Russia got Lenin and Stalin after periods of despair, and it could happen again," he warns.

That is why the movie he is now working on is so important. "We must teach the Bulgarians how a modern farm or ranch functions. We must teach them about the concept of private property, about food subsidies, about banks and bank loans. There is presently no marketing system for agricultural goods and so there is much to be done. And the answers are here in America. In this country you have 2 to 3 percent of the population involved in farming and ranching, and yet you feed 97 percent of the population and have enough left over for export to sell to foreign markets, to raise capital. In addition you are able to aid impoverished countries. How do you do that? That is what we are trying to teach."

These days we are constantly reminded that we must sacrifice individual rights for those of the common good. Today's politicians have little regard for the rights guaranteed their constituents by the Constitution they are bound to uphold. Isn't it an irony that while the countries held in oppressive government control for so long are now trying to emulate our system at the same time in this country the private property rights of farmers and ranchers are being systematically destroyed?

It is too bad that Americans will never get to see the movie that Petko is making.