Animal Rights in Eastern Europe

Today in Slovakia, a new wave of concern for the rights of animals is gathering momentum. In Bratislava, Ian Gottstein talked with Laco Durkovic, the energetic leader of Sloboda Zvierat (Freedom of Animals) to find out more about the movement that is heading the changes.

{mosgoogle} NR: Laco, please tell us a little of your background and what was your inspiration to start Sloboda Zvierat (SZ). LD: When I finished my schooling, I spent a lot of time outside in nature. I was thinking about our society and the relationship between plants, animals and people. I dreamed of creating an organisation which could do something to improve the lives of animals in our country. After talking about this with my friends one evening I decided to launch SZ with a big concert in my hometown, Kosice. We had twenty-six bands and videos about animal rights, vegetarianism and different environmental issues. We had had very little exposure to these ideas in Slovakia before then and people were very moved. After this the word started to get around and people who wanted to do more for animals started to contact me from around the country. SZ was born in this way in 1992. NR: Today, some three and half years later, how big is your organisation? LD: Today, we have around seven thousand members and twenty branches around the country. We run four shelters for homeless animals and have two centres manned by sixteen full-time staff members. NR: SZ quickly established a reputation for its dynamic and effective campaigns. What were your first campaigns about? LD: We made a secret investigation into one particular slaughterhouse in Kosice who were killing in a most brutal way. They were killing without anesthetic, by beating cows on the head with a pickax. We made a protest outside the ministry and our press release was printed in eight newspapers. As a result, this slaughter technique was declared illegal throughout the nation. This was the first time the press wrote about animal protection. Our members demonstrated against fur shops in twenty four cities. This also caused a lot of thought and discussion. Then we had a successful campaign to ban bull fights throughout Czechoslovakia. In 1994, we gathered 75,000 signatures on a petition protesting the use of live animals in school experiments. After a big rally in front of the ministry of education and a one year long direct mailing campaign the ministry responded positively and live experiments were banned in schools throughout the nation. NR: It is interesting for me that all of the people I have met so far in SZ are young and yet you seem to be having a significant effect on your society and your government. LD: Yes, young people are more ready to respond to something that touches them, or to go out on the street and take action. Our institutions only respond when they can see something big so we have to give a lot of pressure. NR: What work is the organization engaged in today? LD: We work in three areas. The first is education. We are running information campaigns against meat-eating, against fur, against circuses and other mistreatment of animals. Secondly, we are lobbying the government to create and strengthen the laws that protect animals. The third part is the shelters I have mentioned, through which we directly rescue and save lives. The main shelter is here in Bratislava and there are three others in other cities. NR: After these few years of trying to educate people do you find evidence that some are changing their behaviour? LD: We receive letters every day from people telling us that they have decided to become vegetarian or that they will stop using fur. Although we still have a long way to go, already we feel a big change from a few years ago. NR: And with the government? LD: We started after the collapse of the totalitarian system when our government did not know the words "animal protection". They had no idea about dealing with NGOs either. And we are young. At first they either opposed us or ignored us. Then we made big demonstrations in front of the ministry of agriculture demanding laws for animal protection. After our information started appearing in the newspapers and TV, they had to surrender their arrogance and deal with us seriously. In fact, we were invited by them to discuss our proposals when they prepared the first laws for animals here. Ten out of our thirteen proposals were accepted and so in 1995 Slovakia became the third Eastern European state to introduce laws for the protection of animals. For example, cosmetic and tobacco testing on animals is now completely banned and no tests are allowed on animals in Slovakia without ministry approval. Also, cities of over thirty thousand people must manage animal shelters. NR: So then, are you satisfied with the action of the government, or do you still feel that more is required? LD: No, it was only a beginning. The protection for animals in agriculture is still very poor and there is very little wildlife protection. We want to see a system of inspectors with more humane attitudes set up by the government. Now we are consulting with sympathetic lawyers and thinkers to create more proposals. This will affect the lives of millions of animals here. NR: Have you also been successful in altering the behaviour of businesses in Slovakia? LD: No, not directly. NR: Tell us about your Bratislava animal shelter and how it differs from the normal state-managed facilities. LD: The shelter was opened six months ago and has already saved more than five hundred animals. We have advertised our phone number widely and the public has been very helpful in rescuing the animals. We have rented billboards to advertise the shelters number to the public. The shelter holds around forty animals and we have found new homes for about four hundred and sixty. We have not found it necessary to kill a single healthy animal. This is quite a difference form the record of the city council. Last year they killed five hundred and eighty animals and provided new homes for only about eighty. NR: What will SZ focus on this year? LD: We are preparing to participate in April 24 World Day For Laboratory Animals. This will help us with our campaign against cosmetic testing which started on April 24 last year. We also plan to strengthen our branch structure and get many new members. Our biggest action will be around World Animals Day, on October 4. We will tour Slovakia. We will also start a big campaign against Sharha, a professional company employed here to kill street animals. They kill thousands every year. NR: Fur still seems popular here in Slovakia. Is the fur industry very powerful? LD: Yes, but I think they are becoming afraid of us. NR: What relationship do you think humans should have with animals? Do you think that any uses of animals by humans are justified? LD: I think that animals have the right to lead their natural lives without being exploited by humans.

We can live in harmony with all living creatures. NR: What about in the case of medical research where it can lead to the saving of human or animal lives? LD: I think the best idea is to use natural cures from flowers, etc., as was done traditionally. There are societies were the people are vegetarian and they lead active lives for over one hundred years. We don't need to use animals for our health. Modern medicine is mostly just a business to cure people of the diseases of modern civilisation. We smoke and then we search for drugs to cure our cancer. This is madness. We must change our lives, not the animals lives. NR: Do you see SZ's work as only benefiting animals or do think that humans also benefit? LD: When we protect animals we produce compassion in our hearts and that makes us and our society healthier in so many ways. NR: Where do you get your materials and funding? LD: From our members here in Slovakia, but also we have received some money for specific works from abroad. We correspond with Animal Rights groups in many countries and receive their printed materials and videos. We ask for donations of materials and have had a reasonable response. Many of our staff are volunteers or just work for food money, like myself. NR: What recourses do you still need to fulfill your programs? LD: To equip one shelter will cost us about (DM 5,000) If we had more money more we could have more staff. We have no shortage of work. We can always use more materials from other countries. We need cars to pick up the animals for our shelters. NR: In one line, what is your message? LD: Our tears were not enough. It is time for concrete action.

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