

Background Paper on Polish Agriculture

PREWAR ERA

Prior to World War II, Polish agriculture was perceived as a stagnant industry. Poor agricultural growth was attributed to the feudal structure of the rural land. Large landowners were predominant in prewar Poland: they held more than 47% of the agriculture land, while 65% of the rural population controlled only 15 percent of this rural area. Before 1938, out of a total of 3.2 million individual farms, 1.9 million (60%) had less than five hectares (12.5 acres). In addition, it was estimated that approximately one million rural families were landless and, along with a large group of small farmers, were dependent on only 15,000 wealthy land owner families.¹

Polish agriculture was unable to take advantage of economies of scale, given the conditions of the feudal system. Underemployment in agriculture was so high that it was estimated that if one third of the rural population had left the rural areas, agricultural productivity would not have changed.² Renovation and improvement of agricultural practices were unknown concepts. Farm machinery, if available at all, was obsolete; fertilizers were used in very low quantities and without any technical assistance; and the condition in which the rural labor worked and lived was among the very worst in Europe.

Despite all this, Poland managed to be one of the leading agricultural producers and exporters of foodstuffs in Europe. Excluding the Soviet Union, Poland had the largest land

¹J.P. O'Hagan, p 69.

²Ibid., p 69.