

How I Became a Georgist

By LAWRENCE REP

WHEN I was a little over two and a half years old a very important incident occurred in the small peasant town in Croatia where I was born. Occasionally in the next few years I heard some of the men bragging of their success in preventing the governor from collecting undue taxes. After that the incident dropped to the bottom of my mind and was soon forgotten.

As I began making my own living (I am a realtor in Cleveland) a certain pressure in my mind compelled me to look for some hidden, missing or lost object. Any rabble-rousing speech with the viewpoint of social injustice caught my attention. It seemed as if something was trying to free itself from my brain and was long overdue.

It Happened in November

One November night in 1939 I was reading a book by Henry George, *Social Problems*. I was gripped by the story of the Irish farmers displaced from their land and their homes, then forced to migrate and compelled to live on the narrow strips of land alongside the seashore where there was nothing but seaweed to live on. Even for this poor privilege, after their government discovered they were making a livelihood, they were compelled to pay high taxes.

At this point there was a bang in my head. A sound like a bullet went through my brains. For the moment I was frightened. Am I taking this book too seriously, I wondered. I decided to relax, but just as I was about to close the book the something that had been germinating in my head since childhood sprouted out, clean as a whistle. The filmed package was delivered when the light of truth was placed before me. After all the intervening years the incident emerged clearly enough for me to tell it.

The Incident

In the autumn of 1890 the king appointed a new governor to our province. This coincided with the time when all peasants were paying their annual taxes. Then the governor decided to take his vacation visiting various capitals — Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London as well as Monte Carlo. On his return in 1891 he was broke. In his desperate plight he remembered how generously the peasants had responded in autumn, and concluded there would be nothing wrong in asking them to pay their taxes again, even though his subordinates informed him that the peasant population had no money at that time of the year.

This was April, the month when all able bodied peasants are in the fields, working, digging and planting seeds in their fields. Only the old and sick people with under-school-age children are left alone at their homes. My mother, before leaving for work, gave my two-year-old sister the order not to let any stranger walk into our house.

I was playing in the yard with my sister when a big wagon stopped in front of our home. Four men got off, two of them pointed their guns toward the rear of our yard while the other two ransacked our barn, pig house and the chicken coop. Nothing was there. Then they broke into our house. My sister ran after them asking what right they had to break in, but one of the bullies slapped her so hard she fell upon the lawn helplessly weeping.

In a few hours the courtyard of our city hall

was full of primitive farm implements, young colts, calves, pigs and fowl of all domestic species. The rooms inside were loaded with mattresses, stoves, tables, chairs and other household goods stolen from the homes of the hard working peasants.

Evening came, and inside the city officials were rejoicing over the success of their day's work. As night approached pandurs, (blue clothed police) were stationed at the doors. Clerks were placed at their receiving windows. Everything was ready for a peaceful collection of taxes. The governor wore a big smile on his face, thinking soon his problems would be over. The peasants would soon be coming home, they would dig into their hidden treasuries, then rush to the city hall to pay their taxes and release their confiscated goods (the loot).

Miles away from their homes, with hands full of blisters, barefooted peasants, happily digging the soil with the hopes of a good harvest, began putting their farm machinery over their shoulders. The water left over in the jug had to be sprayed over the worked fields. Lastly on bended knees they prayed, "God bless our hard toil of today. May the seeds grow and multiply to supply our daily needs. O Lord, save us from drought and floods. Give us a good harvest."

The Homecoming

Soon they could be heard singing their folk songs on the homeward journey. Suddenly, like a stroke of lightening, the news went over the town. Without any preparation or propaganda, a meeting was organized. Men, young and old, healthy and husky, with pitchforks and axes, with clubs, sticks, stones and bricks, assembled and surrounded the city hall. Their prayers, said in the fields less than an hour ago, were forgotten. Curses, stones and bricks were in use, and in no time our city hall stood like a sick ghost. As we lived within a block of the scene I sneaked along with the crowd, but one man had to spoil my fun and turn me over to my mother. Then I had to go home.

The governor was so scared he jumped a high fence, where a stooge was waiting for him with a horse. He barely escaped with his neck.

With continued existing conditions of this kind the people of that town, and other peasants of Croatia, then dominated by Austria-Hungary and now a part of Yugoslavia, decided to better themselves by turning their politics and economics over to the Communists. Of course they found themselves even worse off. Under the old tyrannic system they were free to exercise the strength of their combined power—to rough handle a slick governor, or any other public official. Under their new and friendly tyranny even this flimsy freedom was abolished. If any one dares to exercise it now he will be punished by a long jail sentence or death. Today they have no freedom, no food, no clothing, no work, and no land to live on. Like the poor Irish, the seaweed, if they had a seashore, would be a luxury.

Despite all the books and periodicals, religious and radical, that I had previously read, I was never able to apprehend the correct meaning of our social science. Not until I became acquainted with Henry George's philosophy was I enabled to discern the true cause of all social evils. I am grateful to the two friends who led me to read George's books. Without them I believe that incident of my childhood would still be boring my mind, forcing for its revelation. And this is *how I became a Georgist*.