

Choosing Life

By Chris Hedges



AP / Carrie Antlfinger

MINISINK, N.Y.—The affable, soft-spoken dairy farmer stood outside his 70-stall milking barn on his 230-acre family farm. When his father started farming there in 1950 were about 800 dairy farms in New York state's Orange County. Only 39

survive. Small, traditional farms have been driven out of business by rising real estate prices, genetic manipulation of cows, industrial-scale hormone use that greatly increases milk production, wildly fluctuating milk prices and competition from huge operations that have herds numbering in the thousands.

For a look at conditions in large-scale dairy farming, **click here**, scroll down to a picture of an array of meats under a heading that begins "Watch undercover videos ..." and activate the video above the words "Milk Cow."

I grew up in the dairy farm town of Schoharie in upstate New York. The farmers would let me pick through the rocks in their stone walls as I searched for fossils of Crinoid stems, Trilobites, Eurypterids and Brachiopods. I was in numerous cow barns and pastures as a boy. I have a deep respect for the hard life of small dairy farmers. They are up at 5 or 6 in the morning for the first milking, work all day and milk the cows again in the late afternoon. This goes on seven days a week. They rarely take vacations. And their finances are precarious.

When I was in Minisink recently it was the first time I had been on a dairy farm as a vegan. I do not eat meat. I do not eat eggs. I do not consume dairy products. I no longer accept that cows must

be repeatedly impregnated to give us milk, must be separated immediately from their newborns and ultimately must be slaughtered long before the end of their natural lives to produce low-grade hamburger, leather, glue, gelatin and pet food. I can no longer accept calves being raised in horrific conditions before they are killed for the veal industry, developed to profit from the many “useless” males born because dairy farms regularly impregnate cows to ensure continuous milk production.

Once the right of the powerful to exploit the powerless—whether that exploitation is of animals by humans, other nations by an imperial power, other races by the white race, or women by men—once that right is removed from our belief system, blinders are lifted. On my visit to rural New York state I saw dairy farming in a new way—as a business that depends on the enslavement of the female reproductive systems of animals, animals that feel pain, suffer and love their young.

“As long as they keep breeding back they [the cows] can stay here,” the farmer said to me as he stood in mud-splattered rubber boots. “That is three to four lactations. We get a few that get up to eight or nine lactations. They don’t calve until they are 2-year-olds. You add about four lactations to that and it is about seven years. We try to breed

for better production. The biggest reason for cows leaving the herd is not breeding back. Then we send them to a livestock market and they are sold for beef.”

The normal life span of a cow is 20 to 25 years. The life span of a cow on a dairy farm, one whose reproductive system is often speeded up through administering hormones such as estrogen and prostaglandin, is five to seven years. At points during the final four or five years of their lives, ovulating cows are restrained in a “rape rack” and inseminated with a sperm gun that is thrust deep into their vaginas. Once their milk productivity decreases, usually after a few pregnancies, they are killed.

As I talked with the farmer he lifted a bag of powdered milk inside the barn. He explained that if a cow gives birth while other cows are in the milking stalls the mother is separated immediately from the baby and is milked. If a cow gives birth at night it is milked the following morning.

“When you separate the calf from the mother, isn’t it difficult for the mother?” I asked.

“The animal rights people think so,” the farmer said. “I don’t really notice.”

He conceded that the calves cry when they are taken from their mothers but said it was “because they are hungry.”

Removing the calf “is the way it has to be done,” he said. “If the cow gets dirty and the calf suckles the cow, it can ingest manure and mud. There are different types of diseases it can get. There is one, Johne’s disease, that is really bad.”

I have been on enough dairy farms to know that at least some mothers bellow, cry, refuse to eat and exhibit anxiety when their newborns are taken away. And I know that newborn calves cry when they are separated from their mothers. I can’t blame the farmer for not acknowledging this suffering. I myself did not acknowledge it before I became a vegan. I too witnessed, but overlooked, the suffering of cows on dairy farms. I reasoned it “had to be done.”

Farmers often display genuine affection for the animals they abuse and send to slaughter. They do this by normalizing the abuse, believing that it is a practical and unquestioned necessity, and by refusing to emotionally confront the suffering and fate of the animals. This willful numbness, this loss of empathy and compassion for other living beings, was something I encountered frequently in the

wars I covered as a reporter. Prisoners could be treated affectionately, much like pets—the vast disparity of power meant there was never a real relationship—and then killed without remorse.

A culture that kills, including for food, must create a belief system that inures people to suffering. This is the only way the slaughter of other sentient beings is possible. This numbness allows us to dehumanize Muslims in the Middle East and our own poor, unemployed, underpaid and mentally ill, as well as the more than 9 billion land animals killed for food each year in the United States and the 70 billion land animals killed for food each year across the world. If we added fish, the numbers would be in the trillions.

Gitta Sereny in *Into the Darkness*, her book based on interviews with the commandant of the Nazis' Treblinka death camp in Poland, Franz Stangl, who was apprehended in Brazil in 1967 and sentenced to life in prison, describes how Stangl fondly recalled certain individual Jewish prisoners who worked in the camp before they were exterminated. When she asked him what happened to those Jews, "the answer was precisely the same, in the same tone of detachment, with the same politely aloof expression in his face. 'I don't know.' "

Sereny wrote:

Would it be true to say that you finally felt they weren't really human beings?

“When I was on a trip once, years later in Brazil,” he said, his face deeply concentrated, and obviously reliving the experience, “my train stopped next to a slaughterhouse. The cattle in the pens hearing the noise of the train, trotted up to the fence and stared at the train. They were very close to my window, one crowding the other, looking at me through that fence. I thought then, ‘Look at this, this reminds me of Poland; that’s just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they went into the tins. ...’ ”

“You said tins,” I interrupted. “What do you mean?” But he went on without hearing or answering me.

“... I couldn’t eat tinned meat after that. Those big eyes which looked at me not knowing that in no time at all they’d all be dead.” He paused. His face was drawn. At this moment he looked old and worn and real.

“So you didn’t feel they were human beings?”

“Cargo,” he said tonelessly. “They were cargo.” He raised and dropped his hand in a gesture of despair. Both our voices had dropped. It was one of the few times in those weeks of talks that he made no effort to cloak his despair, and his hopeless grief allowed a moment of sympathy.

“When do you think you began to think of them as cargo? The way you spoke earlier, of the day when you first came to Treblinka, the horror you felt seeing the dead bodies everywhere—they weren’t ‘cargo’ to you then, were they?”

“I think it started the day I first saw the Totenlager [the subcamp that housed the gas chambers] in Treblinka. I remember Wirth [Christian Wirth, the first commandant of Treblinka] standing there, next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity, it couldn’t have; it was a mass—a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said, ‘What shall we do with this garbage?’ I think unconsciously that started me thinking of them as cargo.”

“There were so many children, did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?”

“No,” he said slowly, “I can’t say I ever thought that way.” He paused. “You see,” he then continued, still speaking with this extreme seriousness and obviously intent on finding a new truth within himself, “I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the tube. But—how can I explain it—they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like ...” the sentence trailed off.

“Could you not have changed that?” I asked. “In your position, could you not have stopped the nakedness, the whips, the horror of the cattle pens?”

“No, no, no. This was the system. Wirth had invented it. It worked and because it worked, it was irreversible.”

“Because cruelty is inescapable in confining, mutilating, and slaughtering animals for food, we have been forced from childhood to be distracted and inattentive perpetrators of cruelty ... ,” **Will Tuttle writes in *The World Peace Diet***. “As infants, we have no idea what ‘veal,’ ‘turkey,’ ‘egg,’ or ‘beef’ actually are, or where they come from. ... We find out slowly, and by the time we do, the cruelty and perversity involved seem natural and normal to us.”

The veal industry was created solely to profit from the 4.5 million male calves born and at one time discarded on dairy farms each year. Female calves go into the same system of reproductive slavery as their mothers or, if there are too many, are also sold for veal. When they are only a few days or weeks old, veal calves are chained at the neck and locked into crates so tiny they cannot move and develop their muscles. This makes their flesh more tender. They live in darkness, immobilized in these crates, for three or four months, fed a liquid diet

filled with a heavy infusion of chemicals to prevent disease before they are slaughtered.

The animal agriculture industry is an integral part of the corporate state. The corporate state's exploitation and impoverishment of workers and its poisoning of the environment, as well as its torture and violence toward animals, are carried out because of the obsession for greater and greater profit.

Cows on U.S. dairy farms once produced an average of 10,000 to 15,000 pounds (milk is often measured in pounds) a year but now are bred and engineered, often through hormones, to produce 30,000 to 40,000 pounds a year.

"When my parents first started, most of these farms had 30 or 40 cows," the farmer at Minisink said. "People milked by hand or the early milking machines. Everybody started switching over to automatic milking machines and vacuum systems. The cow was milked in the pail and then the milk was dumped into the milk can. The can held 100 pounds, 12 and a half gallons. The cans were put in a cooler and then you took the cans to the local creamery. There was a creamery here in Unionville, one in Westtown, one in Johnson, one in Slate Hill. Slowly the creameries started closing up. In the early '60s they switched over to the bulk

tanks. Instead of cans the milk was piped into a bulk tank that cooled it off. A truck came and picked it up. When that happened, a lot of farms went out of business. People did not invest in the bulk tanks. They just quit.”

Sherry Colb writes:

“The animal we consume may already be dead, but other animals who will be created and used for food in the future are not. By consuming the dead animal (or products, such as dairy and eggs, that necessarily involve the killing and hurting of animals) right now, we demand that more animals be killed tomorrow. ... In essence, buying and consuming products is how we communicate as consumers to producers, and the message is this: ‘Keep making your product, and I will keep buying it.’... [W]hen a person demands a type of product, he becomes morally implicated in the production of that type of product.”

“[W]e are invested in seeing the consumption of animal products as normal ... ,” Colb writes. “We are inclined to rationalize what we do, and we experience what social psychologists call ‘cognitive dissonance’ when we sense a conflict between our

own regular, day-to-day behavior and our deeply-held values.”

A society that sees all life as sacred, including the lives of animals, no longer exploits life, including that of other human beings and the ecosystem, for personal empowerment, pleasure or profit. Ceasing to be omnivores, we cease to be numb. We restore balance not only to the earth—animal agriculture is the primary engine behind the ecological devastation of the planet—but to our lives. We break down the emotional walls that permit us to exploit living beings and kill them.

Source: *TruthDig*