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Big rabbits are sought as food for N. Korea German breeder sends 6 to start

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By Craig Whitlock, Washington Post | February 4, 2007

EBERSWALDE, Germany -- Few people raise bigger rabbits than Karl Szmolinsky, who has been producing long-eared whoppers since 1964. His favorite breed, German gray giants, are the size of a full-grown beagle and so fat they can barely hop.

Last year, after the retired chauffeur entered some of his monsters in an agricultural fair, word of his breeding skills spread to the North Korean Embassy in Berlin. Diplomats looked past the cute, furry faces with the twitching noses and saw a possible solution to their nation's endemic food shortage: an enormous rabbit in every Korean pot.

The North Koreans approached Szmolinsky in November and asked whether he'd advise them on how to start a rabbit breeding program to help "feed the population," the 67-year-old pensioner recalled in an interview at his home in Eberswalde, an eastern German town a few miles from the Polish border.

Sympathetic to the Koreans' plight, he agreed to sell some of his best stock at a steep discount and volunteered to travel to the hermetic nation as a consultant.

"They liked what they saw, and they liked how big they were," he said, as he showed off other bunnies that he raises in weathered hutches in his back yard. "It's harder than you think to raise them. They need a varied diet, but they have to be fed like pigs, basically, to get that big."

In December, Szmolinsky stuffed six of his rabbits into modified dog carriers and took them to the airport in Berlin, where they boarded a flight for Pyongyang via Frankfurt and Beijing.

Robert, a 23-pounder, was the largest of the bunch, which included four female rabbits and one other male carefully selected for their breeding potential.

How, exactly, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea intends to parlay the small herd of German Flopsies into hunger relief for its 23 million citizens is unclear.

An official at the North Korean Embassy in Berlin, who would not give his name, confirmed that the Asian nation coveted the German rabbits for their gigantism. But he refused to answer any other questions about the breeding program.

In the hands of a skilled butcher, a German gray giant can yield up to 15 pounds of meat, according to Szmolinsky. "There's not much fat, and it's very tender." Their gray-and-white pelts are soft and supple but are generally worthless on the European market, he said.

Karl-Heinz Heitz, chairman of the State Association of Rabbit Breeders in Berlin-Brandenburg, said German grays are hard to beat for size but they aren't cheap to fatten up. It takes wheelbarrows of hay, vegetables, and rabbit chow to bring them to maturity. ■