

Franz Rehbein, Farm Worker (c. 1890)

Abstract

In the German territories east of the Elbe River, landed estates dominated the agricultural sector. There, large numbers of agricultural day laborers worked for low wages and with limited opportunities for improving their lot. They often migrated when work became scarce, but more regular seasonal migration gradually became common, as was already the case for other occupational groups, including the brick-workers from Lippe mentioned in this document. The text below comes from Franz Rehbein's (1867–1909) autobiography, edited by the Protestant minister and social reformer Paul Göhre and published in 1911. Göhre had authored his own account of three months spent undercover in a Chemnitz factory and supported the publication of other working-class autobiographies. He wanted to lay bare the miserable living and working conditions of rural workers in the Prussian provinces east of the Elbe River, and Rehbein's compelling account served his purpose well. Here, Rehbein describes his life as an agricultural day laborer in the Ditmarsch, a lowland area along the North Sea coast. In order to assess Rehbein's impressions of the effects of mechanization and industrial timetables on work in the countryside, it is important to know that Rehbein had ceased being an agricultural worker long before he wrote this account. In 1895, he lost one hand in a threshing machine accident; subsequently, he made ends meet by writing for various Social Democratic journals and serving as a functionary in the Free Trade Union movement. Nevertheless, his is one of few surviving accounts of everyday life in the German countryside.

Source

Soon the winter came, harsh and severe.

[...]

To make matters worse, winter unemployment was increasing all the time. For the first time I learned what it meant to have to struggle through as a “free” and married day laborer in the “blessed marsh.”

None of the farmers had any work left for us day laborers. There was simply nothing to do on the farms. The grain had been threshed by machine; there was no chaff left to separate either; and anything else could be handled with a couple of farmhands and young boys. So we day laborers just sat around, staring out the window. Gradually, I began to feel uneasy and morose, and these feelings got worse the longer I was forced to remain idle. One can stand staying at home for a few days, even a few weeks; you go and look for others with whom to chat or play cards, and you hope that things will improve. If you're used to regular work, however, and the period of unemployment drags on, then it gets damned uncomfortable to be stuck in your own four walls. What a terrible feeling to be young, strong, and sitting jobless at home when you really want to work! You feel downright ashamed to be seen out on the streets.

It's as though every shrub and every manure heap were grinning at you with malicious glee. At the same time, the few groschen you've saved up are rapidly disappearing; you can already count on one hand when you'll have to break your last thaler, and then what? Oh, how beautiful and heavy a thaler seems when you've earned it, and how light it becomes when you're forced to spend it!

With pent-up anger, you watch as the “heavyweight” farmers drive to their “visits” and amusements without giving a single thought to the growing poverty of the day laborers. Their steaming horses are so fat that you can't count a single rib on their bodies, and here you are tightening your belt from one day to

the next. Strange thoughts appear in your mind then. Here you are, a poor devil eager for work; but those for whom you worked your fingers to the bone last summer for low wages are just shrugging their broad shoulders indifferently—is it their fault that they don’t need workers now?

Many day laborers already began living off borrowed money; they obtained credit from the village peddlers or asked a farmer they knew for a small cash advance that they intended to work off in the summer. For most of them, it was the same thing every winter, and many—particularly those with large families—had to struggle all summer long just to pay off the debts from the previous winter; when the next winter came, they were broke once again, and the whole business of borrowing started all over. Anyone who could no longer get credit, however, was forced to turn to the parish poor relief fund; indeed, it wasn’t at all uncommon for the children of day laborers to be sent from one farm to the next with a beggar’s basket.

By now, the situation that had arisen as a result of unemployment had become unbearable to me. Was I to begin going into debt as well? No, I preferred living apart from my wife and children for a while and seeing if I could find work elsewhere. So, together with a few other day laborers, I set off on an eight-hour walk to the Kiel Canal, which was under construction at the time, and I was hired there as an excavator. I stayed there until springtime, when the farmers in the marshlands once again had work to give us. But in the early summer, another period of unemployment set in. As a result, I decided to work at a brickyard until harvest time. I worked there as a finisher for 20 marks a week. The hours, though, were from four o’clock in the morning until eight o’clock at night, with a two-hour break overall—this meant a 14-hour workday. I only went home on Sundays. During the week, I ate at the company canteen with the brick workers from Lippe. Every day, God willing, I should say: the fare consisted of peas, nothing but peas! To this day, I get a queasy feeling in my stomach when I think back on all the peas.

A few weeks earlier, my former employer, the farmer “Peiter Pink,” had offered me work at harvest time. My wife faithfully lent a hand. Up to then, I had always resisted having her work alongside me, as I hated the thought of subjecting her to the very same yoke; in my opinion, the man alone had to earn enough to provide for the family, especially a small family like ours. But my wife figured there was no telling what the next winter would bring, and she insisted on working with me during the harvest. We took our little boy to the fields in an old, second-hand baby carriage and bundled him up behind a stack of sheaves, where he could sleep, play, or cry to his heart’s content; at some point, he had to get used to the fact that he was merely a day laborer’s child.

Soon the sickles could be heard in the grain fields, and the stalks fell. Together, my brother-in-law and I reaped, while my wife bound the sheaves behind us. It was the same view as far as the eye could see: grain field after grain field, and men, women, and children working busily on all of them—the men only in shirts and trousers, the women in gathered-up skirts and sun hats that they pressed down on their necks for shade. All hands were hard at work, since most of the income for the whole year was earned at harvest time. If the grain ripens in quick succession, then the reapers’ earnings reach an acceptable level, sometimes up to 20 to 25 marks per Ditmarsch morgen. The binders’ wages are half as much, since a binder can bind and stack as much as two reapers can cut. Since a reaper can average about two to two-and-a-half morgens per week, and a binder about twice that, sometimes a husband and wife can earn several hundred marks during harvest time, especially under the pressure of piecework. If, however, the different types of grain ripen in slow succession, so that there are some days of lag time between each of the crops, then it is not uncommon for reapers’ wages to only amount to 16, 14, or even 12 marks for each morgen, and half that for binders. In such cases, the worker’s best efforts are to no avail—it is impossible to scrape together even a few extra groschen for a rainy day, and many a day laborer’s family looks ahead to the winter with even greater anxiety. For that reason, harvest time always seems much too short; it’s barely started when it’s already over again. Yet as long as the harvest lasts, the day laborer knows only one rule: toil, slave away, work yourself to death. Here the old adage literally becomes true: piecework is murderous work! You drive yourself so hard that you wish the day had 48 hours instead of

I left the house as early as 3 a.m., reaching the fields after a half-hour walk. At about six in the morning, we had the first breakfast, which my wife would have delivered to me in the meantime. We supplied our own food at work, as did most of the laborers who took their families to work with them. That meant earning a few extra marks per morgen; and since it was necessary to cook for the family in any case, it was better for a married man to get cash, not food, from the farmer.

When the weather is good, the work goes quite well. To be sure, until eight or nine o'clock in the morning, the reapers are usually soaked with dew from the knee down; but after that things go more smoothly. The plight of the binder is much worse: the entire front of his clothing gets soaking wet in the process of binding the dewy sheaves. The hands suffer the most; the dew makes them soft and sensitive, they look like the hands of a washerwoman who sloshes around in water all day long. Then the fingernails get worn off and cause pain, the fingertips become raw; frequently, the binder injures his hands on the sharp stubble or cuts a finger on the flat-pressed stalks. As soon as the dew has dried, the tips of the grain get sharp, and the higher the sun rises, the worse they prick. During the first few days, the binder's hands sting so much that he can hardly bear it; but once they are covered with little pricks and cuts from the stubble, they become increasingly numb to the pain. How often I secretly pitied my wife! But to what end? You can't afford to be sensitive in the country; otherwise you don't earn anything—and you simply had to take advantage of the harvest weeks.

Rainy days are one of the most unpleasant things about the harvest. You come to work, but you don't get anywhere, try though you might. As long as it's only a drizzle, it's not that bad, you don't make too much of a fuss; but when rain comes down in sheets, or thunder-showers pour down in buckets, leaving not a single dry thread on your body, then you have to stop working after all. So you sit there in your soaking clothes behind the stacks of sheaves, waiting impatiently for the weather to clear up, but one rainstorm has barely passed when a second one, perhaps even more violent than the first, sweeps in. Your body trembles with an uncomfortable sensation; you are half sweating, half freezing. When the sun finally reappears, the most important thing is getting back to work with twice the effort, because now you have to make up for as much lost time as possible. You barely allow yourself time to eat. With renewed vigor, you swing the sharp sickle; swath after swath falls, the laborer's sweat dripping upon them. With nimble fingers, the female binders fasten sheaf after sheaf, barely straightening up to breathe more deeply. How many times does that sickle have to fall, how many sheaves have to be bound before a single morgen of grain is stacked up!

At long last, late in the evening, when your tired limbs are ready to give out, the day's work comes to an end. The sun has set long ago and a misty evening darkness hovers over the fields; only then can you finally call it a day. After all, nature demands its due; your body must gather new strength. About an hour before we men finished work, my wife took the baby carriage and headed home, where supper would be ready when I got back at nine or ten o'clock. But I often went on working through the night, resting only an hour or two in a stack of sheaves. What two reapers can cut is usually more than one woman can stack—especially when the grain is heavy, so after my actual finishing time, I often continued stacking the sheaves that my wife had not managed; and sometimes, after rainy days, I had to resort to an additional night's work to keep pace with the laborer next to me whose wife had gotten sick and could not help out.

For bringing in the harvest, the laborers received a daily wage, and food was also provided by the farmer. All available wagons and horse teams were employed to bring in the blessed harvest, and the operative question was: "What have you got, what are you capable of?" With the industriousness of bees, we load and unload wagon after wagon; and the horses trot briskly, even when pulling full loads, so that unnecessary pauses are avoided. There is no rest for the horses, none for the people either; after all, they know full well how much rides on their hard work and perseverance. And if the landowner shows up and

says, “people, the weatherglass is full, we’re in for some rain!” then hardly another word will be spoken during work. In the barn, all you can hear is the clicking of pitchforks and the labored breath of the unloaders and stackers. One wagon is barely unloaded and rolled off the threshing floor, when another one, fully loaded, comes in; outside, the loaders are doing all they can to clear field after field. And so it goes, sometimes long after nightfall. Oh, after such a day—which often turns into a day and a half—you can really feel your limbs, and you know that you’ve really done something. Afterwards, my wife was frequently so overcome by exhaustion that she couldn’t keep her eyes open while nursing our baby.

With so much exhausting work behind us, it was a great consolation to be paid our joint harvest wages. After receiving our pay, as we wandered back toward our small shack, right past the fields of stubble where we had shed so much sweat, we pressed the beautiful hard thalers into our pockets with a certain sense of satisfaction.

Right after the harvest weeks, I began working at a threshing machine.

[...]

Not every farm [in the Ditmarsch] has its own threshing machine, as they do on the large landed estates. And there are no machines owned by cooperatives, as there are in other places. Instead, the owners of threshing machines are independent entrepreneurs who buy their own machines for either cash or installments. They also hire the necessary crews on their own, traveling with their manned “gun” from farm to farm to fulfill their threshing contracts.

[...]

The threshing work itself is one of the most exhausting and grueling types of labor one can imagine. Slaving away, slaving away for hours on end—that’s it in a nutshell. The more hours of work per day, the sooner the farmer can get rid of the machine again, and the fewer meals he has to provide for the laborers. The more hours the machine operator works, the more grain he can thresh, and the higher his profit. The more hours the workers put in, the higher their weekly earnings. Work starts at 4 a.m. at the latest; quite often, however, it begins as early as 3 a.m. and continues all day long, at least until 8 o’clock at night; frequently though, the drudgery does not stop until 9 or 10 p.m., quite often even 11 or 12 at night. The breaks last only as long as it takes to eat a hasty meal, and they total only one hour a day, including the breaks for greasing the machine. Supper is no cause for a break at all, since it is eaten only when the day’s work has ended, no matter how late it may get.

During work you have to “go all out,” moving just as fast as the “slave driver’s box” can swallow the grain. Man has to keep up with the machine, becoming its slave, being transformed into one of its components. Just imagine the incessant howling and rattling of the threshing drum, and the virtually impenetrable dust it generates, and you can easily fathom what this kind of machine threshing means for the human worker. The dust sticks to the laborers in sheets, almost half an inch thick, especially when the grain has been rained on a lot; often, they can barely see out of sore and swollen eyes. Likewise, the nose becomes virtually blocked from inhaling enormous amounts of dust, and if you spit, big gobs of black slime come out of your throat. The dust sticks to skin that is sweaty from backbreaking work; it causes disagreeable itching and burning, making you feel as though your entire body were covered with ants.

Thus, if you’ve put in 15, 16, or 18 hours of work under these conditions, you’re dead tired by the end of the day. In fact, the exhaustion is so immense that you can hardly swallow your supper; you’d actually much rather stretch out and go to sleep right away. But sleeping right after quitting time is only an option if the machine remains on the same farm for several days. Very frequently, though, it is necessary to relocate from one farm to another late in the evening or even in the middle of the night, sometimes

even to a village hours away, and, as luck would have it, in the pouring rain. If, to top it off, your threshing machine gets stuck in one of the soaked, muddy dirt roads of the marshland, then any type of rest is out of the question. In those cases, levers are used to get the mobile engine and the threshing box going again, and all the men have to actively help the horses by grabbing the spokes or pulling on ropes and chains. When you've finally reached your destination, the machine is prepped for threshing by lantern light, and it's only then that everyone can look for a place to rest for a few hours.

Since the individual farms don't have enough bedding for so many people, only the machine operator, the stoker, and the two packers get individual beds; the rest of the workers have to crawl into the straw or hay or chaff, whatever is available. Imagine what we poor devils felt like sometimes, camping in the straw during cold autumn nights with soaking wet clothes. Before you settle in and get halfway warm, you can sometimes hear your teeth chattering in your mouth, and just as you've begun to sleep soundly, the steam whistle is already calling you back to work again. The water carrier takes the night watch so that we don't oversleep, and he also makes sure that the engine is fired up on time. After the wakeup call, once all the crew members have crawled out of their straw beds, each man runs his sleeve across his barely opened eyes; and a moment later the threshing begins. No one even thinks of washing up or combing his hair; after all, that would be pointless since a few minutes later this would be undone; all you might manage to do is ruin your eyes even more, as the dust collects more thickly on moist eyelids and exerts its corrosive effect.

In the morning, the first task of the engine operator is to pour each of his men a big shot of kümmel schnapps. The rotgut was supposed to revive the flagging energy attributable to a short night's rest. And indeed, the drink works wonders. Once all of the workers have had a hefty kümmel on an empty stomach, everyone's sluggish spirits revive noticeably. Accompanied by the humming of the threshing box, all hands go about their work in the same mechanical fashion as the day before: the throwers toss the sheaves toward the machine; the string cutters pull their knives through the sheaf twines; the packers feed the loose sheaves through the drum; the binders tie up the threshed straw into bundles; like machines, the grain carriers lug bag after bag to the loft; the "chaff major" weaves his way through the crowd with a full tarpaulin; and on the heap, bundle after bundle is piled up in regular rows. Finally, morning is breaking, the dim oil lanterns are extinguished, and a whistle calls the crews to breakfast: the first two hours of the new day are behind you.

After 20 minutes, everyone is back at his post again, and now the work continues without pause, with only a short break for greasing, at most, until noon. With fork and spoon flying, you devour your food; you've scarcely choked down the last bite when the whistle calls you back to work again. There's not even enough time to wash your spoon; all you manage to do is lick it or wipe it on the corner of your dusty overalls. An afternoon snack break is scheduled for 4 o'clock, but as for finishing time, only the machine operator can say.

And the very same cycle repeats itself day after day. Since most of the time, work also continues on Sundays, it may well happen that you work for three weeks straight, without giving yourself a proper washing even once or resting in a real bed. If you do risk sticking your head in a bucket of water just once, you usually have to dry yourself with your own clothes or an old grain sack, as the farmers will not give you a towel; they feel the crews aren't good enough for such a thing. After all, you're in such a state that even the grubbiest gypsy looks like a nobleman in comparison.

Source: Franz Rehbein, *Das Leben eines Landarbeiters*, herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Paul Göhre. Verlegt bei Eugen Diederichs in Jena, 1911, pp. 232–41.

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