



A story about seasonal workers, exploitation and vulnerability

Three Romanian seasonal workers were kicked out by the German farmer they were working for in Nuremberg. Their story is not only about exploitation, but also about the poverty and lack of education that rendered them so vulnerable.

Published: October 26th 2020, Teleleu.eu

Eleonora Moldovan, 44, and her two children, Gabriela, 24, and Gabriel, 22, are at the JADWIGA support centre in Nuremberg, a centre that focuses on victims of trafficking and of labour exploitation. They are here with all the luggage they brought along when they left Romania six months ago. Their large suitcases contain clothes for every season: in the summer they endured scorching heat in the flower greenhouses near Amsterdam and in the autumn they worked in the cold fields of Knoblauchsland, Bavaria. This is how Romanian agriculture workers pack their lives into bags when they migrate from country to country relying on intermediaries or acquaintances that they pay €100-€200 for finding them a job.

On October 16th, the three Romanians were kicked off the Gemüsebau Sippel farm, where they worked and had accommodation. They could not fit all their belongings into their luggage, so Gabriela had to throw away some of her clothes. They had to quickly take their food from the fridge and now the meat is thawing in one of the bags.



Their job was packaging lettuce in a warehouse. Willi Sippel, the German farmer, would regularly yell at them and all the other workers to hurry up, says Eleonora. Their order that day had to be ready by 18:30 and they had to go through six pallets full of lettuce. Eleonora complained that the assembly line was running much too fast. The German farmer got angry: “Eleonora nonstop problem, problem”. Gabriel asked “Why? Why?”, and then Willi grabbed him by the neck, held him and threw him against a container.

“I’m calling the police! How dare you hit my child?”, cried Eleonora. The farmer got even angrier and ordered them to leave his farm. He would have kicked them out that very evening (even though he knew they had nowhere to go) if the three had not contacted the Faire Mobilität support centre for migrant workers, whose representative had a talk with the farmer.

The following day they were still in their beds when Willi Sippel stormed in and told them they have five minutes to vacate the room. He stayed there guarding them “like a policeman” until they gathered their belongings. The JADWIGA support centre, which collaborates with Faire Mobilität, sent a car to bring the Romanians and their luggage to its offices.

This is the version of the story as told by Eleonora, Gabriela and Gabriel Moldovan. We tried to get in touch with the Gemüsebau Sippel farm to hear their



version. We tried e-mails, Facebook and calling their landline, but no one has answered. The questions we sent were translated into German.

We asked whether Willi Sippel assaulted Gabriel and if any of the other allegations made by the Moldovan family were true: that he yells at employees, that he is rude to them, that he pressures them to work too fast, that he only gives them a single one hour break per day (even though the law stipulates two extra 15 minute breaks), that the rooms where the workers are housed are cold, that he kicked the three Romanians out before their contract was over and that he does not follow the safety guidelines required by the pandemic.



If the German farmer was not satisfied with how quickly the Romanian workers did their job, he could have paid them based on their effective work, i.e. how many vegetables they picked or packaged. These “quota-based contracts” are a common practice on other farms in Knoblauchsland. The seasonal workers we met in Nuremberg prefer this arrangement because it pays better than working by the hour and they actually make their own choice to work faster. The three members of the Moldovan family were paid €5 per hour at the Gemüsebau Sippel farm – the legal minimum is €9.35 gross, of which the German farmer sets aside an amount for taxes and the accommodation he provides to the seasonal workers.



“As soon as the farmer thinks he doesn’t need the people anymore and has had enough of them, he kicks them out.”

Marius Hanganu, a Romanian who has been living in Germany for 13 years, works at Faire Mobilität, the support centre that took over the case of the Moldovan family. He is also one of the founding members of Integro Mittelfranken e.V., an association that offers support to Romanian immigrants. During the lockdown in spring he spoke publicly in the Romanian and German press about the problems that Romanian seasonal workers are facing.

According to Marius Hanganu, the Moldovan family was “very lucky” to be able to reach Integro Mittelfranken e.V., because Romanian workers that are exploited in Germany do not usually know who to turn to. “Many don’t know where to get help and end up going back home, hoping to pick a different farm when they return”, says Marius Hanganu. “I’ve met seasonal workers that were given the shaft at several farms in Europe, but still they say that they have no alternative other than working abroad.”

In the case of the Moldovan family, the German employer fired them in writing only after the Romanians, counselled by Marius Hanganu, insisted that a verbal dismissal is not valid in Germany. “We can see exactly how insidious the system is: as soon as the farmer thinks he doesn’t need the people anymore and has had enough of them, he kicks them out”, says Marius Hanganu.

“They only got their work contracts after explicitly asking the farmer. The three Romanians also told me that they didn’t even get an official pay slip, just some paperwork for around €300 per week. That’s €300 for 50 hours of labour! And let’s not forget that two of them are illiterate, which makes them even more vulnerable both here and especially in Romania. When you know that you might end up on the street the next day, other Romanian con artists might make you their next victim.”



Co-Funded by
the European Union



The fields of Knoblauchland are full of Romanian workers and silence.

It was by accident that we reached the Gemüsebau Sippel farm. We came to Nuremberg at the beginning of September to research the life of seasonal workers on German farms. We went around Knoblauchland (Garlic Land), one of Germany's largest farming areas, looking for farms with Romanian employees.



The fields of Knoblauchland are full of Romanian workers and silence. Some farmers are afraid you might find out about their irregularities. Romanian workers, even when exploited, do not want to talk about it, since they are afraid of losing their jobs and the money they need back home to keep their children in school or fix their roof or their fence. They feel humiliated by the pitying tone taken by the press when speaking about them and they do not want their problems to make the news at all. No one offered them any pity in Romania when they lived in poverty, did undeclared work every day, their children had no access to education and their households had no running water.

5 of 16

We got lost in the fields on the outskirts of Nuremberg and Cosmin had to turn the camper around in the yard of a warehouse. A young man we thought was a



Romanian gave us the middle finger. We stopped. The man turned out to be a German farmer, Thomas Sippel, and he had 45 Romanian employees. He showed us the 'Private Property' sign: we were not allowed to turn our car around in his yard. We apologised for not seeing the sign and he apologised for giving us the middle finger. We asked him if he would allow us to interview the Romanian workers on his farm. He agreed.

It was September 22nd and the Romanian employees were in the warehouse packaging the vegetables harvested that morning. We met Gabriel and Gabriela, two siblings from a village near Luduş, Mureş county, in the centre of Transylvania, and their mother Eleonora. The three arrived at the end of August from the Netherlands, where they had worked in the flower greenhouses.



Nobody was wearing a mask in the Gemüsebau Sippel warehouse except ourselves and we could not see any disinfectant anywhere, which surprised us. We visited the small, cramped rooms with stagnant air where the Romanians lived and there was still no disinfectant in sight.

We returned to the farm the following day to talk to the Romanian workers. Thomas was not there, instead his brother, Willi Sippel, yelled at us to get off his property. He did not allow us to get anywhere near the accommodation or the workers. He became angry when I insisted and his tone turned hostile. Cosmin was waiting for me in the car and I felt uncomfortable because the man was behaving more and more aggressively. We left and eventually found a different



Co-Funded by
the European Union



German farmer that agreed to cooperate with us.

We had Gabriela's phone number, but did not talk to her again until October 16th, when we found out Willi Sippel kicked her, her brother and her mother off the farm before their contract ended.

“If I hadn't left, I wouldn't have been able to raise my children.”

Eleonora Moldovan and her two children are from a village called Bichiş, 15 km away from Luduş, a town in Mureş county, in the centre of Transylvania. Although she is still married (her husband is in Spain), she mostly raised the children by herself. “She was both our mom and our dad”, says Gabriela. In the past 12 years she has worked in agriculture in Spain, France, Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany. While she was away, the children were raised by their aunt and their grandfather.

“If I hadn't left, I wouldn't have been able to raise my children”, says Eleonora. “Maybe I couldn't have taken it anymore and who knows what would have happened. A mother providing for two kids and for herself too... it wasn't easy.”





Eleonora cannot read or write and neither can her son, Gabriel, who has graduated eight classes. “They passed him from one year to the next just like that, just to have it over with”, says Gabriela. She has also graduated eight classes and is the only one in the family who can read and write.

We met many illiterate Romanian workers on the fields of Knoblauchslund. We even met a few in the south of Spain, where they worked on the strawberry fields. A German farmer told us that one of her Romanian employees could not count and was not able to check that she received the right amount of money on pay day. The Faire Mobilität support centre records audio files for seasonal workers in which they describe their rights in the Romanian language, so that the information reaches those who cannot read.

In Romania, Eleonora tended cows and has never had a work contract. In Romania, tending the cows “by the day” means doing undeclared work for people in the village, with no medical insurance and absolutely zero protection. Eleonora is tired of the continuous back and forth of migration and would like to permanently settle in a country, but she is unable to find a stable job and a home.



Last year, Eleonora and her children picked apples in Belgium until December 14th, when they returned to Romania. In the spring, when farm work usually



starts all over the continent, they were unable to leave due to the pandemic. They only managed to leave Romania on May 16th to go to the Netherlands, where they worked in the flower greenhouses near Amsterdam until the end of August, when they went to the Gemüsebau Sippel farm in Germany. This year they do not want to return to Romania for fear of getting stuck there during the pandemic with no source of income.

Eleonora tells us that her troubles with Willi Sippel started when she had a tooth inflammation and he refused to help her go to the doctor, even though she had a work contract and medical insurance. On other farms (including the one we visited), the Germans usually help their employees make medical appointments when the need arises. Eleonora recalls that Willi Sippel prevented her from leaving (there are always orders to process on the assembly line) and was angered that the woman skipped a day of work due to the pain.

Integro Mittelfranken e.V., an association founded by a group of Romanians in Nuremberg, helped Eleonora: Marius Hanganu got her an appointment with a Romanian dentist and another Romanian volunteer drove her there. Because she left the farm three hours early, Willi Sippel complained that she is bad at her job and works too slowly.

Eastern European seasonal workers are the people who suffer the most as a result of supermarket price policies.

In May, a local Bavarian publication wrote about the Sippel family business, which at that time had 24 Romanian employees, 10 of which had just arrived from Romania with special permits (this was during the lockdown). The Sippel farm is 50 hectares of zucchinis, celery, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes and many other vegetables (as many as 25 different varieties). In the article, Willi Sippel complained about a lack of sufficient workforce caused by travel restrictions and he said that Germans were not willing to work in such tough conditions – in the fields in the rain or in the greenhouses in the heat – for such low wages: €9.35 gross per hour.



Willi Sippel told the Bavarian publication that he had taken measures to ensure that seasonal workers comply with hygiene requirements and that accommodation is not crowded, even though five months later we saw quite a different situation when we visited the farm. He also complained that supermarkets are in a race to the bottom for the lowest price, which forces farmers to produce their wares as cheaply as possible. What Willi Sippel did not mention is that the people who suffer the most are Eastern European seasonal workers: in order to reduce production costs, German farmers have to pay low wages.

| ***“They like the money even though it’s not a lot.”***

No Romanian worker at the Gemüsebau Sippel farm intervened when Willi Sippel choked Gabriel and threw him against a container, says Eleonora.

I would have liked this article to be about the solidarity of Romanians in Knoblauchsland, but this is not the reality. Many of the Romanians we met on the farms in Nuremberg carry with them the traumas of poverty, the fear of bosses and the firm desire to keep their jobs at all costs. The wellbeing of their families in Romania depends on the money they make in Germany.





We came across much bitterness and lack of empathy in the fields of Knoblauchsland: there were Romanian team leaders that tried to get on their own bosses' good side by being rude to other Romanians, even though nobody asked them to; Romanians settled in Germany who knew the language and asked other Romanians for money in exchange for helping them do the paperwork for their children's welfare benefits (a profitable and illegal business); Romanians that bring other Romanians here for jobs and ask them money for the service.

Usually, the Romanians do show more solidarity in grave situations: when one of them falls ill or is in an accident.

“They like the money even though it's not a lot”, says Eleonora about her colleagues. Part of the Romanians present when Gabriel was assaulted laughed, others said nothing. Eleonora says that the seasonal workers are afraid of Willi Sippel and never stand up to him. The Moldovan family themselves would have more than likely not talked to us about the injustices at the farm, about the unpaid overtime, had they not been sacked and ended up in a crisis.

The Moldovan family didn't even have their work contracts. After getting their signature, the employer kept the contracts. The family only received the contracts when the Faire Mobilität support centre took over their case and contacted the people at the farm. Faire Mobilität has provided the family with a lawyer who is currently checking the contracts and will help them sue the Gemüsebau Sippel farm.

“The Moldovan family is fortunate enough to have a lawyer who speaks Romanian”, says Marius Hanganu. “They will also file for legal aid (Prozesskostenhilfe) from the German state, since right now they can't afford the costs of litigation. Even if the three go back to Romania, the lawyer can still represent them. In most of the cases where a lawyer represents you in an Employment Tribunal, the claimant's physical presence is not necessary.”



Eleonora does not know whether they were paid fairly or whether their boss abided by the terms in the contract. And there is no way she could know, because the documents she signed were in German, and Eleonora and Gabriel cannot even read Romanian. What she does know is that the employer should not have behaved the way he did: “He didn’t say ‘Good morning’, he didn’t say anything like that, he always picked on people, ‘Go work on this, go work on that’, he was awful. The whole atmosphere was awful. You didn’t work with pleasure, you just worked because you had to.”

Eleonora has been in this kind of situation before. A few years ago, when she was picking mandarins in Spain, she slipped and fractured a finger. She continued working in the field until nine in the evening, even though her whole hand had become black. She only went to the doctor when the pain became unbearable. She found out she did not have any medical insurance, as the farmer had lied to her, so the doctor notified the police. A Spanish association paid for her accommodation and helped her file a complaint against the boss, who had become aggressive. The man was sued with the help of the association, but Eleonora doesn’t know what happened in the trial because she has not been to Spain since then.

***The workers are extremely dependent
on the employing company.***



The JADWIGA support centre in Nuremberg helped Eleonora, Gabriela and Gabriela get out of their crisis. A social worker took them to a hostel and paid for a few nights, while Gabriel was taken to a hospital where he spent the night for investigations.

With the help of Marius Hanganu, the three Romanians got a job at a Nuremberg toy factory last week and rented a two-room apartment in the city, near the pick-up point for the bus that takes them to work. This is the first time that they live somewhere other than an accommodation supplied by an employer.

Per Marius Hanganu, “The workers are extremely dependent on the employing company, since it supplies them with accommodation. Many work contracts in agriculture use a template from the German Farmers’ Association. This template provides for merely one day of notice in case of dismissal. This is outrageous! Basically, this means they can fire you from one day to the next. There have been many cases of people ending up sleeping in train stations or parks because they couldn’t find transportation back to Romania on such short notice. I can’t even imagine what it must be like to be kicked out in the street in a country where you don’t speak the language and have no clue where to go. I think many [Romanians] were fired illegally, they were paid too little or without following the terms of the contract. They are frequently only fired verbally, which is forbidden in Germany: regardless of where you work, quitting or being fired can only happen in writing.”





Marius Hanganu says that the Faire Mobilität support centre, where he works, managed to reach out to Romanian workers especially during the lockdown, but he believes that more efforts from Romanian institutions are sorely needed and that the press needs to exert more pressure on the institutions. He says we should begin with a reform of the Romanian educational system.

“Many Romanian workers graduated eight classes but are functionally illiterate”, says Marius Hanganu. “We’ve been to the fields or barracks and we’ve met workers who had no idea what ‘minimum wage’ meant; they signed a contract they didn’t receive a copy of and they are not familiar with German law. They become victims of labour exploitation precisely because they don’t speak German. We frequently uncover situations where people sign blank paperwork or incorrect receipts. Many times, there’s nothing left to do in court because people sign papers that say they’ve received a certain amount of money, even though in reality it wasn’t the correct amount. Moreover, many reach out to us only after they’re back in Romania, which is frequently much too late to do anything.”

“*Oh good Mother and my Lord, give them health / For it’s better than all else, oh good Mother.*”

It’s October 17th and we’re leaving the hostel with Eleonora and Gabriela (Gabriel is still in the hospital): we promised them we’d go to walking around the city today and have a meal together, because they haven’t had a day off since they left Romania on May 16th, with the exception of Sundays, when they were too tired to do anything other than rest. In the Netherlands they never visited Amsterdam, even though their farm was 20 km away from the city.

We stroll around the city centre, where it’s full of people, street artists and music, even though it’s raining and only 7°C. We take pictures in front of St. Lorenz Church and on the bridges over the river Pegnitz. Eleonora is worried she might get lost or that she might lose sight of Gabriela, or that we might not find our way back to the hostel. We eat hamburgers and fries at a restaurant in the centre and talk about Eleonora, Gabriela and Gabriel’s future plans. Gabriela would like to settle in Germany, learn the language and continue her studies, but has no idea



how she could do this. We see several Romanian beggars in the city centre and Eleonora sighs: “Poor people.” A woman is singing a sad song. We stop to listen under the spell of her beautiful voice. Eleonora and Gabriela pour all the spare change they can find into the woman’s basket.



“Spare what your heart will allow you,
Give them health, my Lord,
For it’s better than all else, oh, oh.
I’ll kiss the hand that gives,
Spare what your heart will allow you.
Give them health, my Lord,
Oh Lord, give them health, oh good Mother,
For it’s better than all else, oh good Mother.
I pray, good Mother, I pray,
I pray with fire in my voice,
Give them good fortune, oh Lord.”

The woman’s voice fades behind us and for several seconds no one says a word. Eleonora sighs: “This is heart-breaking, really heart-breaking.”



Co-Funded by
the European Union



This material was supported by the Romanian based Mai Bine Association through the project #GoEaThical, financed by the European Union.

#GoEaThical is a global consortium comprising 16 organizations from Europe, Brazil and South Africa and is coordinated by the German organization Christliche Initiative Romero. The article was documented by the Teleleu team and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Union.

**Photos @Cosmin Bumbuț
Text @Elena Stancu**