

Account by a *Hofgänger* in Mecklenburg (1896)

Abstract

Workers were not merely those who toiled in factories. Even in an age of urbanization, the number of German agricultural laborers rose in absolute terms on account of overall population growth. Agricultural laborers suffered some of the same types of exploitation as their industrial brethren and appealed to a community of Germans and workers in which they felt marginalized.

The following excerpt describes the hardships, sufferings, and injustices experienced by an ancillary farmworker in a rural corner of Germany. It was taken from an 1896 account entitled *Hofgänger Life in Mecklenburg. As Experienced and Witnessed Firsthand by an Unemployed Berlin Man* [*Hofgängerleben in Mecklenburg. Selbsterlebtes und Selbsterschautes von einem Berliner Arbeitslosen*]. The book included a foreword by German socialist politician August Bebel (1840–1913) and was published by Vorwärts Verlag, the press operated by the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

Source

On the Estate – The Workers’ Kitchen.

[...]

This room, in which the *Hofgänger*^[1] and maids spent their evenings and Sundays, looked quite pitiful. Dirty, smoke-blackened, with broken windows, it left a most unpleasant impression. A rickety table, almost as old as the estate itself, two matching benches, and walls lined with cupboards in which the *Hofgänger* and maids kept their bread and preserves. Then, for every *Hofgänger* there was a pair of oiled boots which filled the whole room with the odor of fish oil. That’s the interior of the workers’ kitchen, and it is much the same on nearly every estate. We then took our place on one of the benches and waited for whatever might come. We were ravenous. After some time one of the maids brought coffee and two pieces of bread with lard for each of us. Despite all the cows on the estate, the *Hofgänger* and maids rarely get butter. Only on holidays. The lard is almost American, to ensure that it isn’t too expensive. The “hardship” of the great landowners does not permit them to feed their servants properly.

The *Hofgänger* Draw Lots.

The *Hofgänger* returned shortly after 5 o’clock, for it was the end of their working day. First, they scrutinized us, asking this or that, but we noticed that they only treated us with condescension. They were served dinner soon after entering the room. This dinner consisted of leftovers from the midday meal, since they cook everything at once for the entire day. At midday they receive meat, however, which is not the case in the evening. The day laborers finish work later; when their work was done, the inspector arrived with three who drew lots for us, that is, each drew one straw out of a handful and the one with the longest straw got the *Hofgänger* assigned to it in advance. When each of us had his “master” we had to follow him home, of which we were glad because although the *Hofgänger* kitchen was heated, we nevertheless felt cold.

A Day Laborer’s Life.

We then followed our day laborers, whom we were subordinate to as servants, to the village. The entire village

consisted of some 12 houses, with three or four families living in each. Such a home, inhabited by one family, generally consists of a parlor, another small room, a kitchen and a cellar or, where there is none, another small room and the stable attached to it. The room we entered was very simple, but rather clean, which is not the case everywhere. On the square wooden table stood a small kitchen lamp of the kind used by most families. Around the table sat two children and an old man, the husband's father-in-law; he had a life tenancy and still had to work although he was very frail. The wife was just entering the room when we did. I bid them a good evening, which they all returned in a friendly manner. After a while the wife served the food and gave each of us a spoon. There were no dishes. Everyone took his or her spoon and reached into the bowls standing in the middle of the table. Of course, I did the same. I didn't recall ever eating something like it. I learned the name of the dish later; it was known in Low German as *mangeten*. Well, there was something (a)mong it: a few broad beans, a few peas, whole or half carrots and parsley roots, celery, leeks and a large quantity of potatoes. In Berlin I had often heard of the large pieces of bacon or ham in the countryside, but however hard I looked, I could see not a one. The next day I learned that there is never any meat in the evening and in many places only very little at midday. Once we had eaten, we all began peeling potatoes. It is the custom in winter for the whole family, except for the wife, to peel potatoes from the 24th of October and sometimes earlier until May. My feet, on which the ice had melted in the meantime, began to feel mightily cold. I didn't have any other stockings and didn't get any either. Finally, this work was done and we went to sleep.

This continues for the whole winter; as soon as the potatoes are peeled you go to bed. As a rule, this occurs at 7 o'clock, sometimes a bit earlier. The people have no entertainment. Very few day laborers take a newspaper, and none have books. *Hofgänger* are even less able to take a newspaper out of their miserable wages and even if several wanted to pool their resources, they wouldn't have the money for a subscription. At the beginning, at least three months, the *Hofgänger* receives no money at all. The only literary entertainment they have, if they do not prefer to dispense with it altogether, is the weekly *Mecklenburgische Sonntagsblatt* and the books the pastor loans them for 20 pennies from October 24th to Easter! The books may be quite good for children, but they are useless for someone who is not moved by pious children's stories.

Before going to bed I received a clean shirt because many *Hofgänger* bring vermin with them, otherwise they would doubtless not be given even that. I had to pay dearly for it when I left, although it was the husband's oldest and worst one. Then I was shown the little room where my bed stood. This room was very damp, for when my shirt had been hanging there for some time it was quite mildewed and ripped in two when I tried to put it on. The mattress was also very thin. Nevertheless, I slept very well after all my travails. The next day was a Sunday, so I had a day to rest before starting work. When I woke up on Monday morning it was already quite light. I dressed quickly, since it was rather cold. When I entered the parlor, a strange sight awaited me. The entire room was full of brushwood; in the middle sat the day laborer and his father-in-law, binding the brushwood into brooms. I wished them a good morning and went to the kitchen to wash up. There I met the wife who gave me what I needed to wash myself, except for soap. When I asked about soap the woman looked at me with astonishment and said (in dialect) "Soap? We don't have any either! If you want some you will have to buy it yourself!" It took me a few moments to understand what she was saying, and then I had to laugh. In the meantime, the woman had nothing more pressing to do than to tell her husband and nearest neighbors that I had asked for soap. "He's a very dainty fellow, asks for soap straight away and hasn't even done anything yet."

[...]

Lunch was the Mecklenburg national dish, "dry" potatoes and bacon. The recipe is as follows: "Boil peeled potatoes until cooked, drain them and serve." The potatoes came with bacon. My piece lay separately and was pointed out

to me right away. I could not complain about the size.

[...]

How the *Hofgänger* are Treated.

We greeted each other and each one had a burning question, which I answered as best I could. All of the *Hofgänger* were from Puhlmann, that is, released prisoners. But not one of them could truly be referred to as an ex-convict in the usual sense of the word. It was the misfortune of the time that had rendered them unemployed and penniless. They had either begged to still their gnawing hunger and been caught or had been “shifted” by the “coppers”. Masons, painters, glaziers and nearly every trade were represented, since there were 21 such *Hofgänger* from outside on the estate; perhaps 6 were local, and they were nearly all girls. Of the 21 men, 18 came to me. After the first greetings were over, they all simply took their places, wherever they wished. The Mecklenburgers are used to that, since they do it that way too. The day laborer and his wife sat among us and listened openmouthed to our stories of Berlin.

The *Hofgänger* were all undaunted and hoped to work in their trades again someday. But how many of them were deceived. During my time there more than half of them marched off, some of them, who would not put up with just anything, were chased off. Just one finished his whole year there. The reason for leaving was that most *Hofgänger* were treated not as human beings but as beasts of burden. They are easy to replace, since Puhlmann supplies enough of them, at least in the winter. There are also many unscrupulous people who treat the *Hofgänger* so terribly after a quarter or half year that it is utterly impossible to take it anymore. Only the completely determined among them meets rudeness with rudeness, and it isn't long before they are chased off. They have, however, salvaged at least part of their wages, even if they are reduced as much as possible. They subtract travel money, *Klebegeld* and compensation for all the things the *Hofgänger* ever borrowed, charging almost as much as he would pay to buy them new. After all, the day laborer seeks to benefit as much as possible from his *Hofgänger*. If a *Hofgänger* leaves, the day laborer retains all the hard-earned money owed the former. And precisely those people who have made themselves popular among inspectors or landowners always treated *Hofgänger* the worst. Many of them told me that they received no breakfast or evening meal at all on Sundays. Many of them wept as they recounted their hardships. Nearly all those who “marched off” had to hire on as *Hofgänger* again, frequently ending up in worse hands than before or in the clutches of the village police straightaway. Naturally they were then punished for being work-shy, and if they already had a record, they were quite likely to end up in the workhouse. Some I know claimed that it was better to be in the workhouse than to play the *Hofgänger*. Except that they were convicts and had no freedom. Now, as for freedom, the *Hofgänger* has precious little of it. First, he must work on or for the farm, and then when he goes home to the day laborer, there are many things to do after which he wishes to go to bed. The only exceptions are a few winter months, but then we must go to bed all the earlier. Where else could we stay? It is cold outside, and we cannot sit in the parlor, consequently we must go to bed! We only stayed together until 10 o'clock in the evenings on Sunday. We would have liked to spend more time together, if the people had not complained so loudly that it cost “too much oil.”

The *Hofgänger's* Work.

[...]

Finally, the farm bell rang, the signal calling us, and now it was off to work. One *Hofgänger* with whom I had to muck out the stalls started to laugh when he saw me. “Good grief, doesn't your old man [his boss, the day laborer] have any knee boots he can lend you? You won't get anywhere with those shoes!” Now I looked at him. He wore blue linen trousers, stuck into a pair of stout knee boots. We didn't have much time to talk, since everybody had

already left for the farm and we had to hurry if we didn't want to be late. When we arrived in the cow shed a curious scene presented itself to me. At some fourteen food troughs built of stone and cement stood 2 rows of cows, with 15 cows to each row. There were more than 200 cows in all and around 40 or 50 calves. We six men were supposed to muck out the manure of all these cows, and the best thing was that we were supposed to manage this in the morning. Those who didn't manage it had to continue carrying the manure out and could only go home when they were finished but would be paid nothing. The *Hofgänger* receives 20 pfennigs from his day laborer, but what the farm pays the day laborer is subtracted. And the *Hofgänger* is completely powerless to change this. It is all those who are less powerfully built can to do to finish half the stall by noon. If the day laborers muck out the stalls instead of the *Hofgänger*, the same number work for the same period of time and yet the *Hofgänger's* wages are not proportionate to those of the day laborers. As a rule, the stalls are mucked out every day but Sunday. Then on Monday two extra *Hofgänger* come to do this work. Nevertheless, people dislike it more than otherwise. If you aren't familiar with cow sheds you have no idea what "mucking out" means. Even the Mecklenburgers try to avoid it. As I said, it is worse after a holiday. As soon as we started my shoes were full of muck, and what was worse, my hands, face and clothes were completely bespattered. The Mecklenburgers wear their oldest things for this work. But we? We had to work in the same clothes we wore every day. Often, we slipped or dropped the "patties" because of their weight and stumbled over them. It is difficult to handle the cow dung and frequently the patties were so heavy we could scarcely lift them.

[...]

In general, the *Hofgänger* have it much harder than the day laborers, despite the fact that the latter earn at least twice, and on the threshing machine four times, as much as the former. The day laborers usually receive the 20th bushel when threshing. But there are also estates where it is only the 25th bushel.

[...]

A Model Estate Owner.

This gentleman had bought a new threshing machine. It is set in motion by eight horses, while previously only four were needed. Since people earned a bit more than with the old machine, he lowered the payment from one 20th to one 25th of a bushel. I never met anyone who was so adept at exploiting his people and who treated them so miserably as this head forester. And on this estate the people are so pious and God-fearing that it must delight him. On many estates the day laborers have already heard something about the Social Democrats and agree with them, but dare not admit it openly, for fear of dismissal, but on the head forester's estate of all places the day laborers want nothing to do with the Social Democrats. After all, the head forester, the pastor and the dear Mecklenburg Sunday paper all preach vehemently against Social Democracy: one should hate and abhor the Social Democrats. According to these gentlemen, the Social Democrats want to rob the day laborers of their hard-earned savings to distribute them to layabouts and vagrants.

From earliest childhood, Mecklenburg workers are raised and kept in ignorance. Religion is the main subject in school. There are many, many workers who can barely read or count, but who know pious songs and sayings and the rather long Mecklenburg catechism by heart. They can recite entire passages from the Bible, which must make the hearts of the authorities sing. And they have such fear of the village police [*Gensdarmen*] that it is hardly believable. For country folk, the village policeman is supreme.

I would like to take this opportunity to describe how the Reichstag is still elected in many parts of Mecklenburg. The inspector or landlord summons the day laborers who are eligible to vote to the parlor. There, the gentleman in

question gives a brief speech and then distributes sandwiches and brandy. Then each man gets a slip of paper (naturally with the name of the landlord's preferred candidate) and now they go into the inspector's room, where the wheelwright and governor are already sitting at the ballot box as observers. Each man sticks the paper they have just received into the box. In cases where the inspector deems the men to be not quite trustworthy, these papers are also unfolded. I have heard from many people that this procedure is a universal custom.

[...]

There is no evening meal from October 24th until Shrove Tuesday; we then have to work through from noon until the end of the workday. The day laborers take some bread along to eat while walking, and the Mecklenburg *Hofgänger* receive some bread for dinner, but *Hofgänger* from outside rarely get a piece. No wonder people feel quite famished with this heavy labor. The day ended around five-thirty and we went home. Soon after arriving we received the "dry potatoes" left over from lunch, but with no bacon. The taste is improved by hunger, however. Yes, I still felt hungry when the potatoes were finished. After the meal we peeled more potatoes, then went to bed. Mucking out alternated with threshing and so it went every day until the snow melted and the earth thawed and the fields could be tilled for the spring cereal crop.

Spring Work.

The work with horses is the best of all. We received 10 pfennigs extra for every day we plowed or harrowed. And the work was less taxing. But usually they gave preference to the locals, even the girls have to work with horses, which they like very much. Overall the Mecklenburgers were preferred for every type of work. There is only one kind of harrowing where outside *Hofgänger* are used almost exclusively, and this is so-called shaking [*Schotten*]. Here one line is harrowed at a fast walk and the other at a trot. There are estates where those who have to harrow sit on horseback. But many estate owners feel sorry for the horses, so men have to run instead. There is one foreman, but he sits on the horse, and the others are all "outlanders," and they can run, even if they end up going under. The inspector rides alongside on horseback and drives them on. Since the harrowing is usually done by four or five men, it sometimes happens that the riding whip comes down on you, making your head swim. This is not easy work. The horses kick up so much dust you can hardly see, and you often sink to your ankles in the dust; the sweat dripped down from our foreheads and our shirts stuck to our backs. By noon you look like you had rolled in sand. If a Mecklenburg *Hofgänger* is chosen by chance the women say: "My boy won't stand it; he can't do it, if he doesn't get another job he can stay home today!"

But the outside *Hofgänger* can't stay home, he has to work, and even if he collapses, he is dispensable, there are more of his kind, but Mecklenburg *Hofgänger* are scarce.

The days are getting longer and now we already work until 8 o'clock; and if it is a bit later, no matter. The work becomes harder and harder until reaching its peak at harvest time. This is already true of the hay harvest. Even if haying isn't that difficult, we work very long days, especially when we have to finish haying a meadow. As a rule, the haying is done by the *Hofgänger* and the women. Meanwhile, the men, known as "mans," mow. These *Hofgänger* are accompanied by a man who supervises them and bears the lofty title of "governor." They are well aware of their high dignity, but they are so afraid of the inspector that they scarcely dare to arrive home punctually with the *Hofgänger*. We generally work a quarter hour longer at midday and even longer in the evening. Once a Mecklenburg farm laborer gets a position as a governor, he clings to it, since it would not be easy to get a second position.

When the hay is sufficiently dry it is loaded onto wagons and driven home. Sometimes at 9 in the evening we were

still loading hay on a meadow $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour from the house, so that we often didn't arrive home until 10 o'clock. After eating we were usually happy to go to bed.

When I was on the meadow for the first time and had to load the wagons, the work did not seem too hard for me while we were loading. Only when we arrived at the barn to unload did I realize how hard the work was. The hay was stacked in steps in front and each of these steps was called a "foot." On these steps stood two day laborers alternating with two *Hofgänger*. Actually, one day laborer and one *Hofgänger* were supposed to stand on each foot, but since it was easier to chat that way, the "mans" stood together, and they didn't have to work so hard, since they were more accustomed to this task than the *Hofgänger*. It was rather hot outside, and in the barn the heat was so oppressive that we sweated just standing still, although we were dressed in just trousers and a shirt. It was more or less bearable until breakfast time, but as the sun rose higher in the sky it became far worse. Wagon after wagon was unloaded, we remained constantly in motion, without time even to wipe away the sweat. We had to keep lifting the pitchforks of hay. Woe unto us if we didn't hold onto the hay or lift it high enough for the men above us to grasp it and it fell down again. We were literally trapped, pitchforks striking from above and stabbing from below. The other *Hofgänger* could not come to our aid or we to theirs, since the day laborers would not let us pass. There was no use in complaining to the inspector, either, since the day laborers merely said they hadn't struck us, and we were lazy anyway.

After 8 o'clock in the evening was the worst. Every time a wagon was unloaded, we thought we could stop working. But another wagon always rolled up. Our knees were trembling and our sweat dripped heavy into the hay. We were tormented by an awful thirst. Our supply of water was gone by dinnertime and we could not get down to drink. They hayseeds had fallen into our collars when we lifted, causing a constant itching and burning on our sweaty skin. To the extent that they were not loading wagons on the meadows, the Mecklenburg *Hofgänger* are clever enough to climb to the very top, where they merely have to push the hay up, and they stand so close together that they can do it easily. When we realized that, the next day we also climbed to the top, but were sent down by the day laborers. On the first day it got so dark while we were working that no one could see the others, nevertheless we were still supposed to stay up there, but so much hay fell down that the inspector finally admitted that it was impossible.

[...]

Grain Harvest. – A Second Riot – The Workers' Marseillaise, an Unpleasant Song.

[...]

It goes on this way for days and weeks, and the grain harvest was even worse. The "mans" walk ahead and mow, the *Hofgänger* must immediately bind the sheaves behind his day laborer. Since on many estates the day laborers are paid a piece rate for mowing, the *Hofgänger* must bind as much as he can. Your hands are full of thistles, and it is exceedingly painful to touch anything. Usually your hands blister as well, but you have to keep working. "We used to have that too!" say the day laborers and we have no choice but to go along and grit our teeth against the pain.

[...]

Poetry and Prose in Agriculture.

Agriculture did not seem nearly as poetic to us as it is frequently depicted in literature. How often we drank ditchwater! We often had such terrible headaches from much bending under the blazing sun that we thought our

heads would split in two. If binding the sheaves of grain was already hard work, driving it in was even more laborious and perhaps even worse than bringing in the hay. Here, each of us had to pass on his rather heavy sheaves alone. You need a good bit of practice to pass on the sheaves as soon as you receive them. The barley was the worst; the awns went everywhere: into our stockings, our trousers, our throats, in short, there was no avoiding them.

Some of the grains were already threshed out in the field. Since this was the busiest time for work, the women had to help the day laborers. In order to bring along as few women as possible, the *Hofgänger* had to take the hardest positions and do the work of two. The worst post was at the straw elevator, known as the “stoker.” Here a *Hofgänger* had to stand and carry away what two men exerting all their might could stuff into the machine. This was probably the hardest work I ever did, especially when the sun was glowing in the sky.

[...]

Mecklenburg Agricultural Education.

[...]

We *Hofgänger* were supposed to dig potatoes at a piece rate, but we could not find out how much we earned per bushel. The governor informed us that the inspector had said we should get enough to earn 1.50 marks a day. But we did not know whether this was our wage no matter whether we dug up 1 bushel or 10 bushels. It was only after digging for 8 days that we found out what we would earn. Apparently, they wanted first to see how much we would manage.

We received a small token for each small basket and a large one for 8 baskets. In the evening, the number of tokens was noted for each of us. One evening, one of us said $6 \times 8 = 72$ and then counted another three small tokens, so that 75 baskets in all were noted down for him. In reality though, he had only 51, so he got 24 extra baskets. He told this to one of his buddies, which led others to try out such arithmetical tricks frequently. And they succeeded. It was hard for me to contain myself when I saw the brazenness with which things were claimed that no child would have gotten away with in our house. One claimed that $5 \times 8 = 90$. Another, though, said that $6 \times 8 = 82$, and it was noted down just so; when the potatoes were out of the ground the money was paid out too. How astonished the Mecklenburgers were that we had dug so many, when their children scarcely managed half the amount. The *Hofgänger* excused their wrong behavior with the argument that they had also suffered much injustice; they told themselves: We merely took by guile what was rightly ours.

Harvest Festival.

[...]

When everything has been brought in from the fields it is time to celebrate the harvest festival, known as *Auskost*, with dance music, brown beer and watered-down liquor. There are also cigars on this occasion, but they are distributed by rank. The day laborers and farm servants receive four cigars each, while the *Hofgänger* on the bottom tier receive only two. Thus, even on this occasion, the *Hofgänger* are not equal. The dancing takes place either in the barn, the granary or the milk cellar. The festivities begin around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and by 5 the farm servants are usually drunk, crowing and kicking up their feet like horses. The festivities end towards 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. On some estates there is dance music four times a year, on others only once: in the end it might cost too much and make the workers too hedonistic.

Immediately after New Year's 2 or 3 large loads of wood had to be sawn and split. We stand there after work by lamp- or moonlight and saw like nobody's business. On Sundays we split the wood. Once this work is done, and it takes several weeks, it is time to start carting manure into the garden. In some cases, the garden is more than a quarter-hour's walk from the house. Several more weeks pass. Then the garden beds are turned over, the potatoes planted, weeds pulled up and so on. Those who aren't employed on the estate have to work every day for their day laborers. They only have a few Sundays a year free, and even then, only for a few hours.

***Hofgänger* Christmas.**

Winter arrived and with it Christmastime. On December 24 work generally ends, with no lunch break, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. After the meal and all manner of preparations for the holiday it is time to decorate the Christmas tree, a fir tree about half a meter high. A few apples, nuts, some cookies and 3 or 4 candles constitute the entirety of the decorations. The gifts for the children, consisting of brightly-colored cloths and other small useful items are laid among the branches and then the whole thing is suspended from a hook in the ceiling in the middle of the parlor. The children are all too familiar with the gifts and not particularly excited by them. The service in the nearby church begins at 5 o'clock and everybody who can still walk flocks there. Even we are invited to come, but gratefully refuse. In the meantime, we had warmed up the *Schnitterhaus* (reaper's house) and celebrated our own Christmas. We eat dinner when the people return from church. There is a cold buffet to mark the occasion, for the first time all year. A pig had been slaughtered shortly beforehand, and as a consequence we can all indulge in boiled ham, bacon and such. A few neighbors gather and now speak about pigs or cows until the servants arrive from the farm. One of them is dressed as a white horse and now people tell dirty jokes. The children scream and yell and the old folks laugh. Then the man of the house brings out the brandy bottle, and everyone has a hearty snort. "Drink up Otto! It's Christmas! Take a good slug!" That was all I received for Christmas, except for a few apples. The local *Hofgänger*, even if he doesn't live with his parents, receives a taler, but we outsiders are riffraff, we would just spend the taler. And yet we thought the day laborer owed us something at least, since we had worked for him all year.

The *Hofgänger's* Wages.

And what wage does the *Hofgänger* actually earn for all this work at the end of the year? When I left, I was paid **16.32 marks**. The rest had been subtracted for outlays, or rather for items that had been tattered long ago. I couldn't take any of it with me, except for 2 old shirts and 2 pairs of old stockings!

What was I to do? I had to hire on as a *Hofgänger* again, since what I had earned left me at the same point where I had begun. And how many *Hofgänger* are in a worse position, since they are paid but a few pfennigs?

Sixteen marks and thirty-two pfennigs! That was my reward for working so long and so hard! I would have earned as much at the workhouse, but for far less effort, and I would have been despised less than here as a "free" man doing honest labor.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Translator's note: I kept the specific term *Hofgänger* throughout and translated *Tagelöhner* as day laborer. The terminology was specific to the system of agricultural labor in eastern Germany (in this case Mecklenburg), where the day laborers occupied a higher position in the status hierarchy than the *Hofgänger*, or ancillary farmworker, who usually came from elsewhere. Day laborers were permanently employed by one

landowner, while the *Hofgänger* were hired for shorter periods and worked under the day laborers.

Source: *Hofgängerleben in Mecklenburg. Selbsterlebtes und Selbsterschautes von einem Berliner Arbeitslosen*, with a foreword by A. Bebel. Berlin: Vorwärts Verlag 1896, pp. 14–24, 26–29, 31–35. Available online at: <http://purl.uni-rostock.de/rosdok/ppn769915744>

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