

New Rights and Hierarchies: Regulating Seasonal Farm Labour (Austria, 1918–1938)

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Abstract

After World War I, temporary employment of foreign citizens, especially in agriculture, was increasingly regulated by bilateral agreements throughout Europe. Seasonal labour contracts thereby became a subject of international law and intergovernmental supervision. Using the example of Czechoslovakian workers recruited for farms and estates in interwar Austria, this chapter deals with the coexistence of new rights and minimum standards, on the one hand, and contractually stipulated control, on the other. The contracts aimed to exclude those unable, incompetent, or unwilling to work and to guarantee that those employed met their obligations and returned to their homeland in due time. In addition, different contracts for Austrian and non-Austrian workers and increasing employment restrictions on the latter deepened workers' unequal treatment with respect to citizenship. This chapter examines how administrative authorities in both countries and the competent labour office on the Austrian side monitored working conditions and enforced compliance with the contracts.

Keywords: seasonal migration; agricultural work; labour market organisation; bilateral treaties; living conditions

Introduction

In October 1933, the foreman Jan K. appeared at the labour office run by the *Österreichische Land- und Forstwirtschaftsgesellschaft* (Austrian Agricultural and Forestry Society, official abbreviation: *ÖLFG*).¹ He had been employed with a crew of Czechoslovakian seasonal labourers in the region of Lower Austria to harvest sugar beets. The farmer Josef G. had dismissed them prematurely allegedly because of their poor work performance, as Jan K. complained. In its subsequent letter, the labour office made the employer aware of the fact that he had violated the contract. Since the workers were employed until the middle of November, they were entitled to the opportunity to work until then or, alternatively, to compensation for their loss of earnings. The employer Josef G. denied having fired the party and called the lay-off only a temporary interruption of work so that he could consult the labour office. By working in a “hasty”, “careless” way, the labourers had broken off the beets at harvest, as stated by the farmer, thus causing a ten percent loss of the product. The labour office advised the employer

¹ This chapter is based on my research in the Stand-Alone Project “Organising Agricultural Labour” funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P32140-G28.

to keep the workers and closely supervise them if necessary. Moreover, Josef G. should demand an official assessment of the damage by a commission consisting of labour office representatives as well as Czechoslovakian consular officials. Depending on the assessment, he might then claim compensation for production losses from the crew. Since it was the end of the season, the matter was unlikely to get any worse, the labour office reassured him. Not much work was left, with only 3.5 yokes² of land to be harvested. The rainy weather would loosen the soil and facilitate the process.³

This scene is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows the attempts of officially appointed institutions and state authorities to intervene in labour relations in agriculture. Public labour offices had already existed since the late nineteenth century in many European countries. At the end of the First World War and in the interwar period, a labour market administration and an increasingly comprehensive network of labour exchanges was established in Austria.⁴ In agriculture, however, such centralisation was lacking. Public labour exchanges remained rare, and those institutions that did emerge were often run by private organisations with public mandates and funding.

The same also applied to the above-mentioned labour office of the *ÖLFG*, an elitist agricultural society that essentially represented landowners' interests. In 1912, it had already opened its own exchange bureau for farm servants, mostly Galician seasonal labourers in agriculture and forestry, as well as campaign workers in brickworks, sugar and starch factories.⁵ After the Great War and the founding of the First Austrian Republic in 1918, the labour office's importance consolidated and even increased. Since 1921, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry concluded departmental agreements (*Ressortübereinkommen*) with authorities in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to recruit seasonal agricultural labourers. Having been assigned responsibility for implementing the contracts and supervising employment relations, the *ÖLFG* transformed its labour office into the *Öffentliche Zentralstelle für land- und forstwirtschaftliche Arbeitsvermittlung* (Public Central Office for Labour Intermediation in Agriculture and Forestry, official abbreviation: *Öfzet*).⁶ Since 1923, the *Öfzet* not only functioned as a link between Austrian authorities and those of partner countries. By the mid-

² Yoke (*Joch*) was a unit of measurement, indicating the land that could be worked with an ox-drawn plough in one day. One Lower Austrian yoke corresponded to ca. 5,760 m².

³ Austrian State Archives (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, ÖStA*), Archives of the Republic (*Archiv der Republik, AdR*), *ÖLFG*, box 230, no. 414/4, 1933.

⁴ Irina Vana, “‘Eingereiht in die große Schlange...’. Verwaltung von Arbeitslosen und Arbeitsuchenden am öffentlichen Arbeitsamt (Österreich 1918–1934)”, in *100 Jahre Arbeitsmarktverwaltung. Österreich im internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Mathias Krempf and Johannes Thaler (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2017), 91–95.

⁵ *ÖStA*, General Administrative Archives (*Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, AVA*), k.k. Agricultural and Forestry Society (*k.k. Landwirtschaftsgesellschaft*), box 708, no. 794-4/VI/1914.

⁶ Later, the *Öfzet* was renamed “Public Central Office for Labourers' Affairs in Agriculture and Forestry”.

1920s, it had also evolved into the only legitimate institution for the placement of the bilaterally recruited non-Austrian seasonal workers. Austria thus finally caught up with its neighbour Germany, which had been both role model and competitor for seasonal workers from Habsburg Galicia and Silesia even before the First World War.⁷ In 1922, the *Deutsche Arbeiterzentrale* (German Workers' Centre) achieved a monopoly on the recruitment and placement of migrant agricultural workers within Germany. Since its founding in 1905, it had already organised and monitored Polish seasonal workers' employment in Prussia.⁸

Secondly, the *Öfzet's* intervention in the conflict between farmer Josef G. and his Czechoslovakian workers illustrates the importance of the new bilateral recruitment treaties. Intergovernmental agreements guaranteed the availability of a seasonal workforce during labour peaks and enabled administrative authorities within Austria to regulate the in-migration of farm labourers according to diagnosed labour market needs. In addition, such agreements strengthened contractual and social rights for those recruited. These labourers not only had a written contract, which many other farmhands lacked, but contractual standards were also monitored by official bodies in both of the countries involved. The workers thus had vested rights they could claim. Yet rights were not granted to the contractual parties to the same extent, for employers retained the upper hand.

This chapter deals with the bilateral agreements between Austria and Czechoslovakia on the employment of seasonal workers in Austrian agriculture, on the one hand, and the *Öfzet's* interventions to ensure compliance with contractual standards, on the other. How were minimum standards and social rights implemented and enforced? How were (new) hierarchies created and consolidated between workers with and without Austrian citizenship?

The existing research literature has hardly explored these questions. Studies focus on seasonal employment and mobility in specific (trans-)national settings.⁹ Authors discuss work relations and contracts in the context of un-/free labour and (cultural) racism,¹⁰ or deal with the importance of seasonal incomes for family survival.¹¹ Some scholars have examined how and to what extent workers could improve their conditions or seek new liberties abroad.¹² Others

⁷ Christine Schörg, "Die österreichischen Saison- und Wanderarbeiter in der Spätphase der Monarchie" (Doctoral Diss., University of Vienna, 2004), 245.

⁸ Internationales Arbeitsamt, *Die Arbeitsvermittlung. Eine internationale Studie* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1934), 101. For more detail on the German Kaiserreich, see the introduction to this volume.

⁹ Simon Constantine, *Social Relations in the Estate Villages of Mecklenburg c. 1880–1924* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁰ Nicola Pizzolato, "Harvests of Shame: Enduring Unfree Labour in the Twentieth-Century United States, 1933–1964", *Labor History* 59, no. 4 (2018): 472–490.

¹¹ Ciara Breathnach and Sarah-Anne Buckley, "Rural Youth, Seasonal Labor, and Family Income: Ireland 1890–1935", *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 103–121.

¹² Julie M. Weise, "The Bracero Program. Mexican Workers in the Arkansas Delta, 1948–1964", in *Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas. New Perspectives*, ed. John A. Kirk (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2014),

have analysed the transformation of seasonal workers' social rights in the context of the development of social security systems and labour market administrations since the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹³ In-depth studies, however, are few and this is particularly true for Austria.¹⁴ Christoph Rass has researched bilateral recruitment agreements in Europe after the First World War in detail. He emphasises their novelty in providing the basis for supranational regulation of temporary labour relations and obliging nation-states to implement minimum standards.¹⁵ Yet a discussion of how the agreements were put into practice in transnational settings or how differences and hierarchies between “domestic” workers and recruited non-citizens were re-/produced is still lacking. This chapter aims to contribute to this discussion by examining case files and documents from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry as well as from the *ÖLFG*.

Bilateral recruitment agreements and migration control

The recruitment of seasonal workers for agriculture came at a time of new employment restrictions on foreign citizens in many European countries, including Austria. Since the early 1920s, the Migration Office (*Wanderungsamt*), a department of the Federal Chancellery, linked the issuance of visas to the situation in the labour market. With the Domestic Workers' Protection Act (*Inlandarbeiterschutzgesetz*) of 1925 (in force as of 1926), this principle was legally established for the first time. Employers were obliged to apply for temporary permits to employ non-Austrian citizens, permits granted only if “domestic” job seekers were not available.¹⁶

125–139; Andrew Zimmerman, “Race against Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe. From Hegel to Weber, from Rural Insurgency to ‘Polonization’”, *East Central Europe* 43 (2016): 26–30.

¹³ Christiane Reinecke, *Grenzen der Freizügigkeit. Migrationskontrolle in Großbritannien und Deutschland, 1880–1930* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 375–378; Stefan Stegner, *Zwischen Souveränität und Ökonomie. Zugehörigkeitskonstruktionen durch die Sozialversicherung im deutsch-polnischen Verhältnis 1918–1945* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018), 2nd chapter.

¹⁴ An exception is Herbert Brettl, *Herrschaft, Hof und Hofer. Soziökonomische Betrachtung der Meierhöfe und der Landarbeiter im Bezirk Neusiedl am See* (Eisenstadt: Burgenländisches Landesarchiv und Landesbibliothek, 2009).

¹⁵ Christoph Rass, “Temporary Labour Migration and State-Run Recruitment of Foreign Workers in Europe, 1919–1975: A New Migration Regime?”, *International Review of Social History* 57, special issue (2012): 193; Christoph Rass, *Internationalisierungsprozesse auf einem internationalen Arbeitsmarkt: Bilaterale Wanderungsverträge in Europa zwischen 1919 und 1974* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010).

¹⁶ Bundesgesetz vom 19. Dezember 1925 über die zeitweilige Beschränkung der Beschäftigung ausländischer Arbeiter und Angestellter (Inlandarbeiterschutzgesetz), Federal Law Gazette (*Bundesgesetzblatt, BGBl.*) 1925, no. 457. See also Eugène Richard Sensenig-Dabbous, “Von Metternich bis EU-Beitritt. Reichsfremde, Staatsfremde und Drittausländer. Immigration und Einwanderungspolitik in Österreich”, in *Das Ausland im Inland. Zur Geschichte der Ausländerbeschäftigung und Ausländerintegration in Österreich: Fremde, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge*, ed. Eugène Richard Sensenig-Dabbous, Michael John and Sylvia Hahn (Linz: Department of Social and Economic History, Johannes Kepler University Linz, 1998), 312–313, 327–328, <https://de.scribd.com/document/356463030/>.

This measure intended to relieve the labour market as well as to impose a new way of monitoring those entering the country.¹⁷ Since economic crises recurred, unemployment in industry and trade was high through most of the interwar period. In the aftermath of the First World War and in the first half of the 1920s, this did not seem to apply to agriculture: Farmers, reformers and conservative politicians lamented the so-called “rural exodus” that diminished the available workforce on the farms but aggravated the employment crisis elsewhere.¹⁸ The relation between open positions and job seekers at farms differed from region to region. But from the end of the decade, a lack of work prospects became more generally evident in agriculture as well. With the rapid increase in unemployment resulting from the Great Depression, this situation worsened in the 1930s. Farmers were often in debt. Additionally, many of their sons and daughters returned to the family farm after losing their jobs in other branches of the labour market. The number of non-family workers therefore decreased.¹⁹

Agricultural workers were largely exempted from employment restrictions in most federal states (*Bundesland*, plural: *Bundesländer*) when such legislation was introduced for non-Austrians in the early and mid-1920s. This was a concession to landowners, their representatives in state and national parliaments and to state political authorities. Only the Austrofascist regime (1933/34–1938) extended employment restrictions for non-nationals to farm servants, the largest category of landless agricultural workers, in 1934. Seasonal labourers, by contrast, were required as of 1926 to acquire an official permit if they had a citizenship other than Austrian. The greater part of them found employment through the bilateral recruitment treaties.²⁰ Those without a citizenship of one of the partner countries – for example, Yugoslavians working in Carinthia or Styria – might hope to obtain work permits under the Domestic Workers’ Protection Act. In both cases, workers found themselves in particularly dependent positions: their permits/contracts were temporary and bound to their employers. A change of workplaces required prior permission from the Migration Office or *Öfzet*, respectively. After their permits/contracts expired, such workers had to leave Austria.

¹⁷ Kenneth Horvath, *Die Logik der Entrechtung. Sicherheits- und Nutzendiskurse im österreichischen Migrationsregime* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2014), 161–168.

¹⁸ Cf. e.g. Hermann Kallbrunner, “Die Rücküberführung von Arbeitskräften in die Landwirtschaft in Österreich”, *Berichte über Landwirtschaft* 4 (1926): 744.

¹⁹ Norbert Ortmayr, “Ländliches Gesinde in Oberösterreich 1918–1938”, in *Familienstruktur und Arbeitsorganisation in ländlichen Gesellschaften*, ed. Josef Ehmer and Michael Mitterauer (Vienna, Cologne and Graz: Böhlau, 1986), 409; Roman Sandgruber, “Die Landwirtschaft in der Wirtschaft – Menschen, Maschinen, Märkte”, in *Geschichte der österreichischen Land- und Forstwirtschaft im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1, ed. Ernst Bruckmüller, Ernst Hanisch, Roman Sandgruber and Norbert Weigl (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2002), 275–276.

²⁰ Jessica Richter, “Geordnete Wanderungen, gesteuerte Arbeitssuche? Arbeitsmarktausgleich in der österreichischen Landwirtschaft (1918–1938)”, *Austrian Journal of Historical Studies* 31, no. 1 (2020): 121–122.

Bilateral agreements were not unique to Austria and its formerly Habsburg neighbours. After the First World War, a Europe-wide network of similar treaties emerged.²¹ For Austria, the agreement between the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Czechoslovakian Ministries of Social Welfare and Agriculture based on the intergovernmental trade treaty of 1921 was the most important one. At the peak in the early 1930s, 16,270 (1930) and, respectively, 16,810 (1931) Czechoslovakian seasonal labourers were employed in Austria,²² while only a few hundred Hungarian and even less Polish workers were recruited.²³ Employers hired crews of labourers from the labour office or under its supervision in a joint employment contract. The group was recruited by a *gazda*, the crew leader and head worker, who acted as a middleman (or sometimes middlewoman) between the workers and the farmer, who often employed the same *gazda* for years. The size of the group varied greatly depending on the size of the farm and of the fields used for grain and sugar beet cultivation.

Most of the Czechoslovakian workers were from the region of Slovakia and relatively young, between 15 and 39 years old. Singles were hired as well as couples, and sometimes labourers travelled with their children. Root crop work was often considered a task for women,²⁴ which was justified with alleged female traits. For instance, a representative of the International Labour Office's Research Division explained: “[...] certain important operations, such as hoeing and thinning, demand a type of manual dexterity which seems to be more common among women than among men.”²⁵ However, even though employers sought to increase the number of female workers at their farms, women and men seem to have accounted for equal shares in this line of work in Austria, as suggested by official Czechoslovakian emigration statistics of 1926 and 1927. Statistics, though, are rare. In contrast, women were clearly overrepresented amongst the seasonal workers leaving Czechoslovakia²⁶ or Poland²⁷ for Germany. Many of the recruited were experienced sugar beet workers and their skills were in

²¹ Rass, *Internationalisierungsprozesse*, 381.

²² ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder III: Table on Czechoslovakian agricultural migrant workers in Austria 1926–1932.

²³ In 1925, only eight Polish workers were working in Austria, and the bilateral agreement was not renewed the following year. ÖStA, AdR, Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (*Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft*, BMfLuF), Kanzlei (department) B, box 601, no. 25,678/2-14/25.

²⁴ Elizabeth Bright Jones, *Gender and Rural Modernity. Farm Women and the Politics of Labor in Germany, 1871–1933* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 3.

²⁵ Georges S. Rabinovitch, “The Seasonal Emigration of Polish Agricultural Workers to Germany I”, *International Labour Review* 25, no. 2 (1932): 216.

²⁶ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 607, no. 44,081-414/29 and no. 14,969/2-14/29; *Zprávy státního úřadu statistického republiky Československé* 7, no. 32–33 (1926): table 14; *Zprávy státního úřadu statistického republiky Československé* 8, no. 27–28 (1927): table 14.

²⁷ Georges S. Rabinovitch, “The Seasonal Emigration of Polish Agricultural Workers to Germany II”, *International Labour Review* 25, no. 3 (1932): 367. The author refers to figures for 1927 published by the Polish Emigration Society.

high demand at Austrian farms. Their livelihoods during the following winter often depended on their seasonal labour abroad.

A significant share of the Czechoslovakian seasonal labourers worked at the large farms and estates in Lower Austria close to the border. Already in the nineteenth century, Bohemian and Moravian workers had harvested grain and cultivated sugar beets in this region. The new border demarcations after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire cut through their migration routes (see Figure 5.1), which added to the overall scarcity of agricultural labour after 1918. Moreover, the new state borders severed the Austrian Republic from Bohemian production areas that had largely guaranteed the monarchy's sugar supply. Before the First World War, only four of the empire's 175 sugar factories were located in Lower Austria. In the early 1920s, the recruitment of Czechoslovaks in the framework of bilateral agreements enabled the sugar industry to expand, granting the Austrian Republic some degree of independence in this sector. While production in Czechoslovakia shrank between 1925 and 1932, new factories were built on Austrian soil, and Austrian farmers and estate owners expanded their sugar beet fields. Until 1934, sugar production was massively increased.²⁸

<Figure 5.1 here>

Figure 5.1. Austria and its neighbours in the borders of 1919, after the partition of Austria-Hungary. Unknown author, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Partition_of_Austria-Hungary_1919_map.jpg. Originally published in *The Times History of the War*, vol. 21 (London: The Times, 1920), 416.

Organising new rights, obligations and disparities

The bilateral agreements and standard work contracts defined the modalities and conditions of employment specifically for these labourers. The contracts were renegotiated annually, with the participation of Austrian and Czechoslovakian government delegates as well as workers' and employers' representatives. Among other things, they determined the maximal duration of employment from March to November or December in a given year. The majority of the Czechoslovakian workers was employed between early May and November, with a peak in

²⁸ Hugo Böker and Friedrich Wilhelm von Bülow, *Die Landflucht in der Tschechoslowakei* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1935), 30; Harald Schöhl, *Österreichs Landwirtschaft. Gestalt und Wandlung 1918–1938* (Berlin: Reichsnährstands-Verlags-GesmbH, 1938), 58–59. This last title is an inventory of Austrian agriculture, prepared by the National Socialist regime after Austria's annexation in 1938.

June and July.²⁹ Moreover, the contracts specified employment conditions such as payment in cash and kind, as well as lodgings, the eleven-hour-working day and even overtime compensation.³⁰ Additional cash could be earned with the so-called “remuneration”: a loyalty bonus that workers received in full for working an entire season – or for a proportion of it, if they at least stayed on for the harvest, for example.³¹

The agreements and contracts defined rights and obligations of both parties, but this as such was not a novelty. The *ÖLFG*-run labour exchange had used standardised contracts for Galician seasonal labourers already before the war, in which it partly followed the model contract designed by the Polish Emigration Society in Krakow. Such contracts determined wages, workers’ rights and obligations as well as legitimate ways to prematurely terminate employment. Despite new state borders (instead of borders between Habsburg crown lands), the continuities with the *ÖLFG*’s pre-war activities were evident in the organisation of labour intermediation, the regulation of labour relations, and the settlement of disputes.³² What was new after the war was the integration of workers’ and employers’ representatives in negotiations of contractual stipulations and their intergovernmental control.

In the bilateral agreements the partner states committed themselves to the principle of equal treatment of “foreign” and “domestic” workforces, as was first formulated by the International Labour Office in 1901 and then standardised by the International Labour Organisation immediately after its founding in 1919.³³ As a result, the “Agricultural Workers’ Acts” (*Landarbeiterordnungen*) became effective for Austrian and foreign citizens alike. By 1926, each Austrian state had enacted slightly varying legislation that regulated the terms of employment including, among other things, compensation for lost wages in the event of unjustified dismissal of workers.³⁴

Moreover, seasonal labourers were included in the obligatory health insurance that was extended to agricultural workers in Austria in 1921. However, the insurance remained highly contested. It was not until the Agricultural Workers’ Insurance Act of 1928 (*Landarbeiterversicherungsgesetz*, LAVG, in force from 1929) that it was put on a stable, uniform federal basis. While some states poorly implemented or even suspended health insurance during the 1920s, it was successfully instituted in others such as Lower Austria. The

²⁹ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder IX.

³⁰ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract for Czechoslovakian seasonal labourers (in the following: Work contract) 1926, §§ 3–4, 6, 9.

³¹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 126, no. 30,693/22: Work contract 1923, § 7.

³² Schörg, “Saison- und Wanderarbeiter”, 245–263.

³³ Rass, *Internationalisierungsprozesse*, 308–309. See also Giulio Francisci’s chapter in this volume.

³⁴ State Law Gazette (*Landesgesetzblatt*, LGBl.) for Lower Austria 1921, no. 218: Gesetz vom 22. März 1921 über die Landarbeiterordnung, § 10 (2).

LAVG also introduced accident insurance and old-age welfare, a small benefit at least for some elderly farmhands unable to work.³⁵ The latter provision excluded foreign citizens.³⁶

These new rights and entitlements were coupled with obligations. Both parties had to comply with the contracts, and undermining their provisions by individual agreement was prohibited. This applied to the “wild” recruitment of workers, for example, or to the unauthorised extension of employment. The latter was considered a reason to deport a worker immediately at the expense of the employer.³⁷ This illustrates how sanctions hit workers harder than employers. Sometimes employers were threatened with a reduction in the number of Czechoslovakian workers assigned to them or even with a complete exclusion from placement. However, to protect farmers and their production, the authorities usually showed leniency in such cases.

If workers, by contrast, failed to leave the country after their contracts had expired or if they left their workplaces prematurely or refused to work, they could be deported and excluded from recruitment for the next two years. Those quitting early would furthermore lose their deposit, a part of the wages that was only paid after the contract was fulfilled,³⁸ and often their remuneration. Additionally, according to the Agricultural Workers’ Act (here: for Lower Austria), workers could be coerced to compensate the employer and, on his demand, to return to their workplaces.³⁹ The “freedom” of their contracts was thus clearly limited,⁴⁰ but labourers like employers nonetheless found different ways to undermine them.⁴¹

Employers, moreover, were entitled to put the workers on unpaid leave between the grain harvest and the beginning of the root crop harvest. If they did not need the workers during this time, they could arrange for their return to Czechoslovakia. Employers did have to provide them with travel expenses and food for eight days.⁴² However, the so-called “holidays” lasted often six to eight weeks, at times even longer. In some cases, there were repeated furloughs within the same season.⁴³ In 1929, about 21 percent of the workers were affected. But apparently, as the economic crisis picked up speed, employers used furloughs as an option to save labour costs

³⁵ Ernst Bruckmüller, “Soziale Sicherheit für Bauern und Landarbeiter”, in *Soziale Sicherheit im Nachziehverfahren. Die Einbeziehung der Bauern, Landarbeiter, Gewerbetreibenden und Hausgehilfen in das System der österreichischen Sozialversicherung*, ed. Ernst Bruckmüller, Roman Sandgruber and Hannes Stekl (Salzburg: Wolfgang Neugebauer, 1978), 69–76.

³⁶ Bruckmüller, “Soziale Sicherheit”, 86; Gerhard Siegl and Guenther Steiner, *Ja, jetzt geht es mir gut ... Entwicklung der bäuerlichen Sozialversicherung in Österreich* (Vienna: Goldegg, 2010), 124–125.

³⁷ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 126, no. 30,693/22: Intergovernmental agreement (*Ressortübereinkommen*) 1923, art. 2 (3-5), 5 (2).

³⁸ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 5.

³⁹ LGBl. for Lower Austria 1921, no. 240, § 13 (2).

⁴⁰ Pizzolato, “Harvests of Shame”, 475.

⁴¹ Richter, “Wanderungen”, 125–128.

⁴² ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 1 (4).

⁴³ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 16,419-2b/34: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Information on the Petition by the Emergency Technical Relief (*Technische Nothilfe*) of 15 March 1934, 2.

more frequently. Until 1934, the proportion of workers on leave rose continuously and peaked at over 61.5 percent. That share, however, shrank to 50.5 percent in the following year.⁴⁴

Yet rigorous treatment began before the workers made their journey to Austria. According to the contracts, they had to be examined by a public health officer before departure and again after arrival for the purpose of determining their health and physical fitness for agricultural work. The workers had to certify that they were “completely healthy, not afflicted with any infirmities that could hinder their work, and in particular [...] thoroughly familiar with all agricultural tasks.”⁴⁵ Ill and incompetent persons, i.e. those unable to work and/or in need of medical treatment, were to be prevented from entering Austria from the start. If they nonetheless started their journey, they had to expect to be forcibly transported home. In addition, their foreman could be held liable for expenses. Among the “infirmities” mentioned in the contract that would lead to workers’ deportation were infectious diseases and even pregnancy (of seven months or more at the time of arrival).⁴⁶

For the implementation and enforcement of the contracts, the *Öfzet* was in charge. But its responsibility was even more far-reaching: it comprised all the different tasks to effectively plan, regulate and organise seasonal employment of foreign citizens in agriculture. The *Öfzet* monitored the labourers’ performance and willingness to work, kept records on foremen/forewomen and employers as well as on those workers who had broken contracts. It settled disputes and, if deemed necessary, imposed sanctions. Moreover, it coordinated the workers’ transport to their Austrian workplaces as well as their return at the end of the season. Except for Hungarians who were paid in Austrian shillings, it ensured the workers’ remuneration in their national currency. For its funding agency, the Ministry of Agriculture, the *Öfzet* provided statistics and reports.

For a good part of the 1920s, the *Öfzet* also placed Austrian migrant workers – mostly smallholders, workers, farmhands and small artisans from the impoverished south of Burgenland near the Hungarian border.⁴⁷ These workers commuted between their home communities and the north, some to the adjacent federal states Styria or Carinthia, yet most of them found work in Lower Austria as well. Since 1929 this task was taken over by the newly

⁴⁴ Until 1933, these figures represented exclusively Czechoslovak workers. In 1934 and 1935, Hungarian workers were included, but they made up only five to ten percent of the total. Hungarians were furloughed less frequently than Czechoslovaks (about 41 and 29 percent in 1934 and 1935, respectively), but their absolute numbers were small (392 and 139 workers, respectively). ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder III: Table on the number of Czechoslovakian, since 1934 also Hungarian migrant workers on leave 1929–1935.

⁴⁵ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,122: Work contract 1925, § 2 (3).

⁴⁶ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 2 (2).

⁴⁷ In the Habsburg monarchy, German-speaking West-Hungary (which partly corresponded with the subsequent Burgenland) had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The territory became Austrian only in 1921 based on the Treaty of Trianon of 1920.

established Agricultural Labour Office for Lower Austria, Vienna and Burgenland (*Landwirtschaftliches Arbeitsamt für Niederösterreich, Wien und das Burgenland*), a publicly subsidised agency founded by the main agricultural organisations.⁴⁸ The Agricultural Labour Office was gradually able to extend its activities to other federal states on a small scale. From 1936 to 1938, it also assumed the agendas of the *Öfzet* while the latter lost its public mandate.⁴⁹ In the same period, however, the number of non-Austrian seasonal workers was significantly reduced. I will therefore concentrate on the *Öfzet* in this chapter.

In analogy to the public labour market administration, which dealt with all other branches of the economy, the purpose of both the *Öfzet* and the Agricultural Labour Office was to gain and centralise control over the agricultural labour market. Their aim was to govern and to regulate agricultural employment more comprehensively than before. The recruitment contracts were just another means to this end, consolidating the dependency between employers and workers but also establishing rights. The *Öfzet* and the Agricultural Labour Office were then responsible for enforcing the contracts in practice.

Czechoslovakian, Hungarian and Polish workers as well as those from Burgenland each had specific collective contracts. These again differed from those of local workers (*Ortsarbeiter*) who in some cases worked on individual terms and in others could refer to collective agreements. The variety of contracts resulted in differences in working conditions between these administratively divided groups. As a result, the recruitment treaties established distinctions between ‘sedentary’ local and migrant workers and between workers according to citizenship. In addition, farm workers were generally disadvantaged in relation to industrial workers who earned higher wages and often profited from more favourable conditions and extended social rights. For example, agricultural workers were generally excluded from the unemployment insurance that was introduced in 1920.

Disparities between agricultural workers concerned several aspects of their working and living conditions. Take the matter of working hours: the daily contractual working time of Czechoslovakian seasonal workers was eleven hours, while for Austrian workers ten hours a day had been set as an annual average (with seasonal workload rises and falls) in several federal

⁴⁸ These were Lower Austria’s and Burgenland’s Chambers of Agriculture, representing agricultural (i.e. predominantly farmers’) interests, the ÖLFG and the health insurance organisations on federal state level. Until it was banned by the Austrofascist regime in 1934, the Social-Democratic agricultural workers’ union *Österreichischer Land- und Forstarbeiterverband* was also involved. ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 9,601/2-14/29 and no. 15,215/2-14/28.

⁴⁹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 31,494-2b/37: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1936.

states.⁵⁰ Hierarchies were particularly observable with regard to payments in cash and kind that clearly privileged local workers over Burgenland migrant workers – and even more so over those with a non-Austrian citizenship. According to calculations of the Ministry of Agriculture for 1933, local workers received for the same amount of hourly labour only 0.66 percent more cash than Burgenland workers. The latter, however, could claim monetary wages 36.41 percent higher than those of Czechoslovakians, whom farmers actually considered the better skilled workers. With regard to payment in kind, the differences were even more pronounced. Employers spent 40 percent more on local workers' food than on that of Burgenlanders. Czechoslovakians were provided even less: for the same number of working days, boarding expenses were 47.28 percent lower than those of local workers.⁵¹

In addition, unlike Czechoslovakians, Burgenlanders were generally protected from furloughs made at the request of the employer, another factor that might lower payments. However, when weather conditions were unfavourable or for other economic reasons, the Agricultural Labour Office did indeed accept this practice also for them.⁵² Putting all expenses and payments together, the Ministry concluded, resulting labour costs for local workers were 20.31 percent higher than those for Burgenland workers and 40.86 percent higher than those for Czechoslovakians.⁵³ From the employer's perspective, therefore, employing Czechoslovakian seasonal workers was particularly attractive.

Intergovernmental inspections

The *Öfzet* and later the Agricultural Labour Office had two main instruments at their disposal to safeguard compliance with the work contracts of bilaterally recruited Czechoslovakians: inspections of workplaces and interventions in employment relationships. Both involved reminding workers and employers of the provisions of the contracts, calling for compliance, imposing sanctions if deemed necessary, but also settling disputes. These actions and their results were summarised in reports to the Ministry of Agriculture. Concerning inspections, the reports were brief, but with respect to the interventions, they were more detailed. In any case,

⁵⁰ Cf. ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,122: Work contract 1925, § 3; ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 40,407/30: Minutes of the preliminary meeting on the contract negotiations for 1931, 17 October 1930.

⁵¹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 16,419/2b/34: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Information on the Petition by the Emergency Technical Relief 1934, 2.

⁵² ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 26,786/2-14/31: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1930, 5.

⁵³ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 16,419/2b/34: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Information on the Petition by the Emergency Technical Relief 1934, 2.

they give an impression of the situation on the farms from the perspective of the officers visiting them.

As stipulated in the contracts for Czechoslovakian workers, inspections of the workplaces were conducted twice a year jointly by *Öfzet* representatives, on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, and by a Czechoslovakian delegation, consisting of Consulate officers. With advance notice to employers, these inspectors evaluated work sites and the labourers' accommodations. They likewise interviewed workers and crew leaders (although often in presence of the employers) as well as the farmers or estate administrators about disputes and conditions on-site.⁵⁴ Similar inspections were also stipulated for Hungarian and Polish crews. However, these were conducted less frequently and even omitted for several years due to the smaller number of workers employed.⁵⁵

Despite the broader purpose of these trips, accommodations were the main focus of the reports. According to their contracts, workers were to be provided with “completely impeccable rooms in terms of moral, health and fire safety, in full compliance with the official regulations and free of charge.” Men and women, including married couples, were supposed to be housed in separate living quarters. Each worker was entitled to a straw sack and a blanket, as well as washing and seating facilities. In addition, the employer was obliged to provide heating, light and firewood and a brick fireplace for cooking, along with dishes and cookware.⁵⁶ A cook, often the crew leader's wife, was chosen from among the workers and paid according to fixed rates.⁵⁷ Many employers complied with these conditions, but this was not always the case. Time and again, the living quarters were overcrowded, dirty and infested with bugs. At one occasion, for example, the *Öfzet* reported the following: “Some of the Czechoslovakian [seasonal workers] are housed in a completely unsuitable cellar and in an equally unsuitable shed. The cellar and the shed cannot be heated; especially the shed [is] extremely dark, damp and cold.”⁵⁸ Or at another farm: “The workers' accommodations and the kitchen are located in an old wooden barrack, which looks extremely fragile and is a fire hazard. The workers are not separated by gender; the kitchen has to be moved to a room with a brick fireplace.”⁵⁹ In 1929, the Ministry of Agriculture concluded:

⁵⁴ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 17.

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 31,494/37: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1936, 10.

⁵⁶ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,122: Work contract 1925, § 9.

⁵⁷ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 10.

⁵⁸ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 25,062/2-14/29.

⁵⁹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 28,532/2-14/30: Report on the interministerial inspection of Czechoslovak migrant labourers' work places in Austria 1930 (in the following: Interministerial inspection report), 13–14 June 1930, 2.

On some farms, the accommodations, if not brilliant, are adequate and meet the needs of the workers, who are in any case very undemanding. On other farms, the foreign workers' housing is so bad that one is surprised such conditions can still exist in Central Europe.⁶⁰

After the inspection, the *Öfzet* requested employers in written notices to immediately remedy the deficiencies and to report when they had finished. While many employers observed the demands, others could not or refused to promptly make improvements. Some of the latter group only promised changes until the start of the next season. Employers could be pressured by excluding them from labour intermediation of non-citizen seasonal workers for the time being – the *only* sanction they had to expect. Yet the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture opposed this on the grounds of not jeopardising agricultural production. At least in particularly bad cases, though, the Ministry's attitude met the Czechoslovakian Consulate's resistance. Its representatives insisted that employers correct deficiencies and demanded a further inspection of the workplaces before the arrival of new seasonal workers the following spring.⁶¹ In the current season, nonetheless, they could rarely push through remedies.

Austrian workers as well as foreign citizens employed with a work permit, by contrast, were left completely empty-handed. The accommodations of Austrian seasonal workers were hardly more suitable than the barracks Czechoslovakian workers occupied. In 1929, the Department for Workers' Affairs within the Ministry of Agriculture reported:

On the occasion of the inspection of the Czechosl. workers' housing, the accommodations of the permanent Austr. workers were also inspected, which left much to be desired on some farms. [...] Unfortunately, there is no legal way to intervene here, and the Department for Workers' Affairs has no [financial] means at its disposal to work towards improving the housing conditions with subsidies.⁶²

Similarly, in a published autobiographical interview a migrant worker from Burgenland reported a damaged roof in her barrack (“one could see the blue sky”) and bugs in another dwelling.⁶³ The Agricultural Labour Office also conducted inspections of farms employing Austrian workers but only for the purpose of mediating conflicts. In absence of any suitable monitoring and sanctions, miserable housing conditions were tolerated for “domestic” migrant

⁶⁰ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 25,062/2-14/29.

⁶¹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 28,532/2-14/30: Interministerial inspection report, 13–14 June 1930, 2.

⁶² ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 606, no. 10,797/RfA/30.

⁶³ Rosemarie Feistritzer, *Freud' und Leid an Lafnitz und Feistritz. Die Lebensgeschichte der Anna Prath, geb. Hartl* (Gösing/Wagram: Edition Weinviertel, 2008), 74, 102.

workers.⁶⁴ By contrast, in the case of bilaterally recruited Czechoslovakians, at least some pressure was built up on employers via intergovernmental control.

Intervening in employment relationships

Independent of the inspections, workers could issue complaints when their contractually guaranteed conditions were not met. Crew leaders, in a few cases also individual workers, turned to the Czechoslovakian Consulate, to one of the four responsible labour offices on the Czechoslovakian side, to their union (the *Slovenská Domovina*), and sometimes even to the *Öfzet*. The *Öfzet* mostly dealt with employers who either protested allegedly lazy, unable or contract-breaking workers, or were blamed for delaying or refusing payments, dismissing workers arbitrarily or failing to comply with minimum standards. However, almost exclusively workers submitted complaints, predominantly because of unpaid wages, other allowances, or expenses: of 739 complaints between 1927 and 1935, only six were issued by employers.⁶⁵

When a case was made, the *Öfzet* would clarify the situation jointly with the Czechoslovakian Consulate. While the latter usually dealt with the workers, the *Öfzet* inquired with the employers. As a first step, it contacted employers by letter, confronted them with the workers' accusations, reminded them of their contractual obligations and asked them for a statement. If it found the employers' answers conclusive and valid and if, which often happened, employers had reported workers' misbehaviour in response, the *Öfzet* recommended to the Consulate that the workers be warned or punished. Only if the dispute remained unsettled would a field officer go to the farm to evaluate the situation and to mediate. If a contractual order was restored at this stage and the workers had not yet broken the contract, no sanctions were imposed. And if still necessary, the complainant was advised to appeal to the arbitration court consisting of one member each of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Czechoslovakian Consulate and of workers' and employers' representatives. This body was responsible for all aspects of the contracts based on the Czechoslovakian-Austrian interdepartmental agreements.⁶⁶ The cases heard here almost exclusively concerned monetary payment.

⁶⁴ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 26,786/2-14/31: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1930, 5.

⁶⁵ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder III: *Öfzet*, table on the number of complaint cases with Czechoslovakian, since 1934 also Hungarian agricultural migrant workers.

⁶⁶ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,121, folder 1933: Report on the activities of the arbitration court for Czechoslovakian seasonal workers at the Public Central Office in Vienna in 1933 (in the following: arbitration court, activity report 1933), 1; ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 18.

Measured against the total number of contracts and workers recruited, the proportion of complaints was low. Between 1927 and 1935, fewer than one percent of Czechoslovakian workers were involved in grievance cases. Only in 1927 and 1931 was the proportion close to one percent; in 1930 it was just over that.⁶⁷ Slightly higher was the share of concerned contracts (each concluded for an entire crew) as indicated by statistical figures available for 1927 to 1932. On-site intervention to settle disputes was necessary in between 0.64 percent (1932) and 2.1 percent (1930) of the contracts.⁶⁸ Such cases were thus exceptional. Yet they still provide insight into how the *Öfzet* monitored compliance with labour contracts in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Czechoslovakian side and sometimes also with other parties such as gendarmes and witnesses. Moreover, these cases reveal some of the variations of employment practices. However, to place these cases in the spectrum of all possible practices, further research and a broader source basis will be necessary, in addition to covering employment relationships in which the *Öfzet* did not intervene.

While most of the recorded interventions followed the pattern described above, some proceedings illustrate how ambiguous even detailed contractual provisions were. For example, payment on a per diem basis was hierarchically graded according to gender and age. As for piecework wages, the contracts listed different tasks such as hoeing the beets (whether first or second hoe), separating the plants, mowing the winter or spring grain, etc. Every step in the process from planting to harvest was paid at a specific rate per yoke, and farmers would only pay for the work that was done.⁶⁹

Nonetheless, with work as multifaceted and variable as in agriculture, it was hardly possible to describe a task sufficiently. This was even true for the seasonal labour of foreign workers, who were permitted to do only certain kinds of work to minimise competition with Austrian farmworkers. To give an example: piecework wages were set for “fields in normal condition”.⁷⁰ But what was a normal condition when climate, weather, temperature etc. differed between regions, and when farms were run and equipped in various ways? The devil was indeed in the details. For example: did harvesting the beets include covering them with leaves after digging them up? And: in case a farmer did not leave the beets by the side of the field but removed and stored the product right away, did the rate for harvesting include piling up the leaves since the beets did not have to be covered?⁷¹ Questions like these were not irrelevant as they determined

⁶⁷ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder III: *Öfzet*, table complaint cases.

⁶⁸ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 244, folder III: *Öfzet*, table on the relation between employment contracts and the interventions required to settle disputes at the workplace.

⁶⁹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 601, no. 39,762-2/25: Work contract 1926, § 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* § 4 (12).

⁷¹ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 255, no. 324/447/34.

the wages that workers could claim. But this led to confusion and dissatisfaction among employers and workers alike, keeping the *Öfzet* quite busy. On another occasion, a crew leader at an estate in Upper Austria refused to accept the wage rate for harvesting potatoes. While one part of the crew harvested seven different kinds of potatoes at once and was then expected to sort them, the second group was spared this final step. To the workers' discontent, the first group earned a higher income. However, the estate administration and the *Öfzet* alike rejected the crew leader's appeal for equal wages. A dispute over the relatively low yields per yoke had already been averted by an earlier increase in piecework rates.⁷² The labour office answered questions and intervened to settle disputes – but it did so on the basis of its own interpretation of the contracts. Thereby the *Öfzet* co-produced contractual standards.

Conflicts over wages and other conditions could even lead to threats and violence by employers against the workers,⁷³ and vice versa. The crew leader Jan H. was accused of threatening his employer Franz S. with a knife and of assaulting him and his wife, Mrs. S. The employer asked the *Öfzet* for permission to dismiss Jan H. without notice and asked about the handling of the deposit. This had been preceded by a conflict over the employment of the crew leader's wife, Anna H. After finishing the grain harvest, the employer, as he explained to the *Öfzet*, had suggested work in the stables since there was nothing else for her to do. Shortly thereafter, Anna H. fell ill. According to Franz S., the dispute escalated when the crew leader announced a week later that the woman was fit for work again and S. did not want to re-employ her without a doctor's certificate. In the contrasting account of Jan H., trouble had been brewing since the beginning of the season. Franz S. had been reluctant to pay the workers' full wages and their food had been of poor quality. During the grain harvest, he had refused to pay piecework wages, which the workers preferred since they usually promised a higher income. The pay for Anna H.'s stable work was comparatively low and had involved excessively long hours. This situation led to quarrels, Jan H. concluded, but he denied any violent behaviour against his employers. In accordance with the applicable Agricultural Workers' Act, the couple was dismissed. Moreover, the *Öfzet* recommended excluding Jan H. from future placement in Austria and withholding the deposit. The latter sanction, however, remained contested between the *Öfzet* and the Czechoslovakian side. Eventually, the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture, the *Öfzet's* superior, decided that the deposit had to be paid out, making reference to the contract.⁷⁴

Hence, the correct interpretation of the legislation and the contracts was at times disputed even among the monitoring institutions. In each case, they had to negotiate bilaterally about how to

⁷² ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 255, no. 324/318/33.

⁷³ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 599, no. 40,714/2-14/28.

⁷⁴ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 599, no. 31,605/31, 38,252/RfA/31, and 42,399/RfA/31.

rule on a specific issue. But although these institutions during the proceedings generally recognised the rights and contractual obligations of both parties in principle, it remains unclear in the available source material how decisions were ultimately made. The records on these cases suggest that it was often testimony against testimony, without any other witnesses playing a role. When the version of one party to the dispute differed fundamentally from that of the other, the monitoring institutions usually tended to believe the employer without this being substantiated in more detail.

In the case of Jan H., at least some more information exists since the Ministry of Agriculture got involved and the *Öfzet* needed to file reports. The *Öfzet* explained it had no doubt about the employer's account, referring to Franz S.' statement and a letter from the Beet Farmers' Cooperative supporting his version of the matter. In addition, according to the labour office, the crew leader had been violent before, which he had concealed from the Consulate. The employer, by contrast, spoke "Czechoslovakian, the language of the workers" instead of German, leading the *Öfzet* to argue that he "certainly made an effort to get along well with his people".⁷⁵ The labour office provided neither proof nor an explanation why a Czechoslovakian-speaker was bound to be on good terms with Czechoslovakians. As in other cases, there was no attempt to get to the bottom of the matter. Although partiality with the employers could be expected due to the *Öfzet's* orientation as the labour office of the employer-friendly *ÖLFG*, its recommendations seem to have caused little opposition at the Czechoslovakian Consulate.

This could also mean that a workers' complaint over unpaid wages resulted in her or his punishment. Tomas S. made such an experience – even though the employer had not notified the *Öfzet*. Tomas S. had originally accepted employment at Josef A.'s farm in Lower Austria after another worker had declined the contract. Yet eventually, according to Tomas S., the employer insulted and then dismissed him after S. had replied that he did not need to work for him. The worker received the outstanding wages in Austrian shillings, which caused him losses when converted into Czechoslovakian crowns. In addition, he was not paid in full. The premature termination of his contract, three months before expiration, was also disadvantageous for him. Finally, he had been tasked with repairing the floor – an illegitimate task for non-Austrian seasonal workers and therefore a breach of contract by Josef A. The employer denied all these allegations, claiming in turn that the worker constantly demanded money from him and abandoned the workplace repeatedly for several days during the most urgent work.⁷⁶ Josef A. explained:

⁷⁵ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 599, no. 38,252/RfA/31: Letter by *Öfzet* to Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 31 October 1931.

⁷⁶ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 230, no. 447/4/33.

He wanted much more in daily wages than any Austrian, and he made a mess when he mowed. [... During a quarrel he then] got rough and shouted: He is supposed to work for free in Austria, he is not working any more, he is leaving. I told him: “If he wants to leave, Austria will not perish and neither will I.”⁷⁷

The *Öfzet* supported Josef A.’s version of the events without further investigation. Sometime later, it informed the employer that Tomas S. had been punished by the responsible labour office on the Czechoslovakian side for blackmailing him into paying higher wages and for the late return from his holidays. His certificate as a crew leader was revoked, although it was irrelevant in this case, as he had been the only worker employed. Moreover, he was excluded from placement in Austria for two years.⁷⁸

Such punishments were severe for the workers who depended on the income, as illustrated by a dispute between an estate administration in Lower Austria and a crew leader. In late November 1932, the administration had decided to replace its long-time crew leader Peter M. as they were no longer satisfied with his work. The Czechoslovakian labour office suggested employing the crew leader Anton B. instead. He was initially taken on by the estate administrator, but in January 1933 the former crew leader Peter M. persuaded the administrator to keep him on for another season. Peter M., as the administrator wrote to the *Öfzet*,

begged me to give him the post again, otherwise he, his wife and three small children would be destitute and they would be exposed to the most bitter misery. Of course, he promised me to work most diligently, to hire decent people and to always strive to satisfy us completely. I really cannot bring myself to plunge the man and his family into misery [...]. But if you had had to listen to this man’s lament for an hour, as I did, you would perhaps understand me to some extent.⁷⁹

This in turn, caused a dispute between the estate administration and the new crew leader Anton B., who stated that he had already recruited workers and now feared for his earnings. However, he was not yet entitled to the job because the contract was not yet valid.⁸⁰

The desperation expressed in this case can be interpreted at least partly as a result of the Great Depression that worsened the already harsh living conditions of migrant seasonal labourers. Competition over work opportunities for agricultural workers intensified all over Austria, something which particularly affected foreign citizens. The Ministry of Agriculture and the federal states introduced a bundle of measures to limit the number of seasonal workers without

⁷⁷ Ibid.: Letter by Josef A. to *Öfzet*, 14 September 1933.

⁷⁸ Ibid.: Letter by *Öfzet* to Josef A., 16 November 1933.

⁷⁹ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 230, no. 452/12/33: Letter estate administration to *Öfzet*, 13 January 1933.

⁸⁰ ÖStA, AdR, ÖLFG, box 230, no. 452/12/33.

Austrian citizenship. From 1932, for instance, the placement of Czechoslovakians was linked to the obligation to also hire Austrian workers, while the employment of non-citizen grain reapers was generally stopped.⁸¹ In addition, sugar beet cultivation declined rapidly after 1934. By 1936, the acreage for sugar beets had decreased by a quarter from 49,600 to 37,750 hectares.⁸² In 1935, the number of seasonal workers from neighbouring countries declined to a fourth of those employed only four years earlier. In the district of the Viennese general labour market administration (*Industrielle Bezirkskommission Wien*), which comprised Vienna as well as eight Lower Austrian districts, only 4,177 non-Austrian workers were officially registered that year – as opposed to 16,810 persons in 1931.

At the same time, the Agricultural Labour Office expanded its labour intermediation for Austrian seasonal workers. While it placed less than 5,500 “domestic” agricultural workers in 1930, it achieved an increase of about 2,000 placements per year between 1932 and 1935, from about 8,000 persons in 1932 to almost 14,000 workers in 1935.⁸³ This amplified the pressure on Czechoslovakian workers, who were increasingly forced to accept unfavourable conditions. In addition, farmers were more likely to be in debt during crises, which increased delays in wage payments.⁸⁴ While some farmers quickly resumed payments due to the *Öfzet*'s admonitions, in other cases workers waited for several months. This was especially the case when they had to call on the arbitration court. Decisions on complaints issued by the end of the season in November could hardly be expected before the following February – and the actual payment was made often after the start of the subsequent season. The workers were thus left with no or only a partial income during the winter.⁸⁵

Conclusion

With the bilateral agreements, authorities hoped to regulate and control migration and employment of non-Austrian seasonal agricultural workers while also managing their employment in accordance with labour market needs. The recruitment contracts established enforceable rights and obligations for workers and employers alike, and they introduced new

⁸¹ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 607, no. 44,478/RfA/33; ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 11,420/35: Letter by Lower Austrian Chamber of Agriculture to Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 14 February 1935.

⁸² Schöhl, *Österreichs Landwirtschaft*, 59.

⁸³ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 255, no. 26,786/2-14/31: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1930, 1; no. 10,239/35: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1933, 2; no. 7.356/36: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1934, 1; no. 26,072/36: Agricultural Labour Office, activity report for 1935, 1–2.

⁸⁴ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,121, folder 1933: Arbitration court, activity report 1933, 1–2.

⁸⁵ ÖStA, AdR, BMfLuF, department B, box 2,121.

institutionalised practices for jointly monitoring compliance with contractual provisions. Inspections, interventions and arbitration courts were supposed to ensure both minimum standards for workers and the availability of a suitable labour force throughout the season.

Unequal treatment of workers and employers, however, was already intrinsic to the contracts. For example, sanctions for non-compliance mainly affected the workers. This bias continued in the on-site monitoring of contractual minimum standards: the *Öfzet*, as the responsible body for supervising employment within Austria, tended to side with farmers and estate managers. Employers were barely penalised when they failed to provide decent conditions. Moreover, the coexistence of different contracts for different official categories of seasonal agricultural workers further consolidated hierarchies between ‘sedentary’ local and migrant labourers, as well as between those with and without Austrian citizenship. Nonetheless, the bilateral supervision of the contracts based on recruitment treaties ensured that minimum standards were at least nominally met. This was an advantage shared by neither Austrian workers nor non-Austrians employed outside of the intergovernmental agreements.

In the 1930s, the economic crisis increasingly affected agriculture, and additional restrictions on the employment of non-Austrian farm and seasonal workers were introduced. This intensified competition between labourers, something particularly noticeable in the case of those without Austrian citizenship. Czechoslovakian seasonal workers who relied on the temporary income were now under increased pressure to accept unfavourable conditions.

The experience of these workers confirms that, in the interwar period, citizenship became of paramount importance, granting access not so much to social rights per se but to the labour market itself. Bilateral recruitment agreements made it easier for workers to take up regular employment. Yet at the same time they equipped the authorities of the recruiting country with a means for regulating and controlling access in accordance with their aim of a nationalised labour market. Moreover, work contracts based on the intergovernmental treaties added administrative categories of seasonal workers distinguished by regional background, mobility and citizenship, thereby contributing to greater inequalities between agricultural workers.

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