



When the first snow hits, that's when my daddy comes home.

A Romanian family that works 10 months a year in the fields around Nuremberg, Germany, is getting ready to come home for Christmas.

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Oana finished breastfeeding Lucia and set the baby to sleep beside her, just as she did every evening. In the morning, she woke up early, gave her little girl a kiss, loaded up her luggage in the car and went to work in Germany with her husband, Stelian.

When Lucia woke up, she looked for her parents everywhere in the house. She could not stop crying during the first week. She could not talk yet, but she kept screaming “Mommy, mommy, mommy!” Little Lucia and her older brother, Stelian, were left in the care of their grandmother, who was already overwhelmed: the little girl refused to drink milk from the bottle and also said no to soups or broths. She had been weaned and her parents had left home all within the same day. To get her to sleep at night, the grandmother would set Lucia on her chest and the girl would suckle at her breasts, even though there was no milk.

This was in 2017, when Lucia was one year and eight months old and Oana, her mother, was 24. They lived in a village called Borlova, in Caraş-Severin county, in the West of Romania.



Oana's breasts were hurting and she had a fever when she reached the farm near Nuremberg where she still works to this day. Her mother-in-law would give her frantic calls because Lucia would not eat. Oana would cry and wonder how she would make it through.

She kept working in the cucumber greenhouse even though her breasts were painfully swollen and she had wrapped them in a towel. It took a full two weeks for the swelling to recede. Her husband, Stelian, was worried for the children, whom they had to leave behind in Romania with their grandmother, but he was also worried for Oana, because he could see her suffer.

Oana and Stelian went back home to Romania 10 months later. Lucia was able to walk upright and also started talking, but they had missed all these moments.





“Look, this is how tiny she was when we left”, says Oana while showing us pictures on her phone. “When she woke up all she could say was ‘Mommy, where’s mommy?’ Her brother, he’s older, but I could see he was also hurting. I was hurting. Look at her, look right here, see how much she suffered: she could only sleep like this, with her head on granny’s chest. Look here: my little princess, my beautiful little girl.”

Oana is now 28 years old and her husband, Stelian Stângu, is 38. Their two children, Lucia and Stelian, are five and 11, respectively. Oana has not seen them since February 16th, when she left Romania.

We keep looking at photos: birthdays, school celebrations, parties – life is following its course, even though the parents are absent. The boy will soon turn 12 and his parents will wish him ‘Happy Birthday’ on WhatsApp, the same as on every other birthday in the past several years. He would like a new bike, because he broke the five other bikes he has had until now, as well as all the tablets and phones his parents bought him.



In November, the boy cannot wait any more and calls Oana: “All moms come home, you’re the only one who doesn’t.” In the autumn, Borlova village comes back to life as parents come back to Romania, back to their children. Stelian is among the last to leave Germany, because he is a team leader and he needs to clean and disinfect the greenhouses.

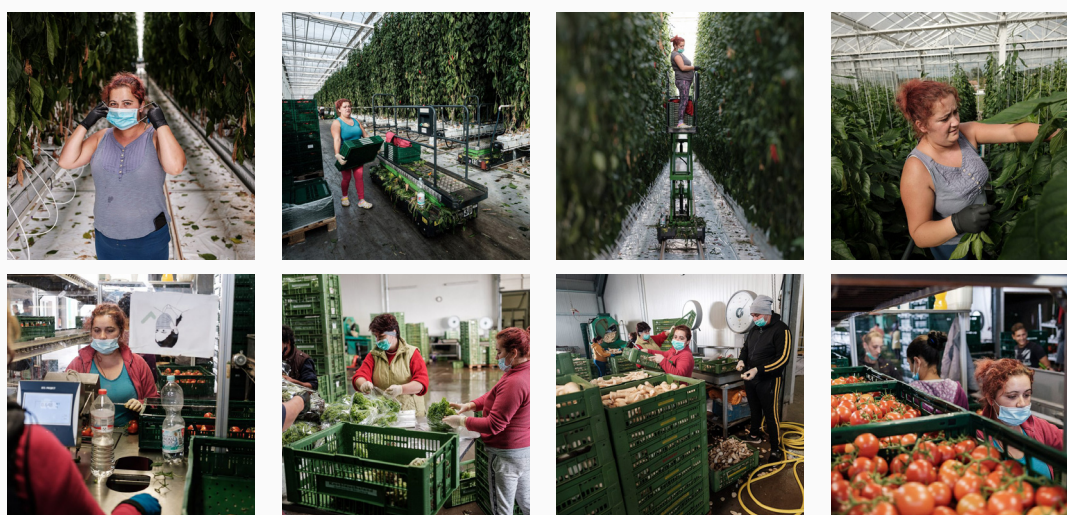


“When the first snow hits, that’s when I’m coming home” Stelian tells his son. The boy waits for the first signs of snow and then he tells everyone: “My daddy is going to come home now.”

The kids cannot sleep when they know their parents are on their way back and keep calling them: “We made a nice fire in the fireplace in your room, daddy, and we made a soup with granny. Why is it taking so long, daddy?”

They came to Germany to save some money for the roof, for a heating system or for a “modern bath.”

Thousands of Romanians work in the fields around Nuremberg, Bavaria, from the beginning of the year until November or December, when the cold weather sets in. These people are called “seasonal workers”, even though many of them stay in Germany for ten months every year. Some pick strawberries or asparagus in a work season no longer than two to three months, while others work in greenhouses and thus are only able to go back home to their families around Christmas.



Most of them have a net income of about €330-€350 per week. In the summer, when they do overtime, they can even earn as much as €400-€500 per week. They live in accommodation provided by the German farmers, sometimes huddled together in chilly rooms, other times in conditions that are better than back home, where they lack running water and sewage facilities.



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

Many have come to Germany in the past six years, ever since the lifting of the labour market restrictions that Romania and Bulgaria were subjected to after they joined the EU. They replaced Polish workers, who used to work in agriculture but in the meantime managed to find better jobs.

The Romanians are here to save money: they want to fix their roof, buy a home heating system or build a “modern bathroom”, i.e. with a shower and toilet inside the house. When you ask them, many say “That’s it, next year I’m definitely not coming back”, but in the end they do come back to Garlic Land (Knoblauchland) in Bavaria. The reason is simple: back home they cannot support their families on a 1,500 lei (approx. €320) monthly salary, which is what most of them earned before coming to work in Germany.



“Home” means Romania, not the German farms where they live in hostel-style rooms that they pay for with a percentage of their salary and where they cannot bring their families. They have seasonal worker contracts, so they cannot take out a loan or rent an apartment in Germany. Most of them send the money back to Romania, to their children, “so they have everything they need.”



Integro Mittelfranken e.V., an association created by a group of Romanians in Nuremberg, estimates that approximately 180,000 Romanian seasonal workers are active every year in agriculture in Germany. They are not all included in official statistics because they are not all registered.

| ***“We had a rough life in Romania.”***

Stelian Stângu lived in Caransebeş, in Western Romania, until he was 19. After his stepfather died, he and his mother lost their home. They had to move to back to Borlova in his mother’s parents’ old house, together with an uncle. Stelian graduated 11 years of vocational training in Caransebeş, specializing as a mechanic, tinsmith and painter.

He left the country for the first time when he was 19 and stayed for five years in Vienna. “I didn’t do any work: I was just a bum, doing this or that, business was different back then, there was this thing with magazines and newspapers... Stupid stuff”, he recalls.

He came back to Romania but had nowhere to live, so he started building a room and a kitchen in Borlova, in his uncle’s yard, and eventually moved there with his mother. Money was running low, so he went to Czechia to pick asparagus. When he came back, he built a bathroom. “I was the happiest man on Earth because I was able to go to the bathroom indoors instead of the outhouse”, he says.



After that, he worked in a wood processing factory for several years, handling the circular saw. He had an accident at work and cut his fingers. The Plastic Surgery Department at a hospital in the nearby city of Timișoara managed to reconstruct his fingers, but he did end up losing his little finger.



After his marriage to Oana and the birth of their son Stelian, he went to Belgium, where he drove a minibus and earned €700 per month in undeclared work. He also picked strawberries in Spain and worked in a cable factory in Romania.

“When I saw things weren’t working out, I started looking for a job as well, but it was almost impossible”, says Oana. “We had a rough life in Romania.” Oana also worked in the cable factory and in the wood processing factory, where she handled solid wood plaques and earned 750 lei (approx. €175) per month plus meal vouchers. The money was not always enough to afford fruit for the children, so Oana would often ask madam Florica at the store to write her name down in the debtor’s book so she could pay later.

“If I’d had more education, maybe life would’ve been easier for me.”

Oana and I are on an elevator-trolley rising steadily between the pepper stalks, five to six metres in the air. The space is tight and I try to be motionless between the two boxes that Oana’s deft hands have already filled with peppers. Up here it is getting warmer and warmer, even though the temperature outside is a mere 7 or 8°C. In the summer the temperature in the greenhouse can be as high as 50°C. We hear sounds echoing through the greenhouse: the snapping of pepper stalks, the cheery voices of the Romanian women and the Christian music that Oana, who is a Pentecostal, listens to. The fresh vegetable smell is quite pleasant and the atmosphere is so humid that you can never dry up all the sweat.

Oana has severe short-sightedness (-12 dioptries) and cannot see clearly further than 10 cm in front of her, but she still manages to clean dry leaves and pick vegetables off the stalk without glasses. She peers closely at the plant and checks if the peppers are ripe. The heat is suffocating, I’m afraid of heights and I feel I am getting dizzy, but I am in no position to complain.

Two years ago, Oana had some kidney problems because she worked for hours on end and did not go to the toilet. She ended up in the Emergency Room at the



hospital in terrible pain. Every evening when work is done her feet hurt, because the space in the elevator-trolley is cramped and she stands in the same position for hours at a time.

Oana comes from a large family with 6 other siblings from Borlova. Her parents could not afford the transportation costs to Caransebeş high school, so she only graduated eight classes. She did day jobs in the village picking plums or potatoes and earning 15-20 lei (approx. €3-€4) per day. When she turned 16, she got a job as a cleaning lady at a company in Caransebeş.



She met her husband when she was 16, and she gave birth to Stelian, her son, at 17. “If I’d had more education, maybe life would’ve been easier for me”, she confesses. “But in the countryside, girls get married when they fall in love for the first time. My girlfriends told me: ‘You got married, you’re in your isolated world with your family, all you think about is your children, your house, nothing else.’ And it’s not that great. You see... years pass and a woman’s thinking changes. But I don’t regret it, because I have two wonderful little children that I love very much.”

She frequently cries because she misses them. The hardest part is when they are ill. “You can feel they need you and you’re not there for them. But it’s even harder when you’re with them but can’t give them something they want. Kids these days aren’t like we used to be. When we wanted something, mom said ‘I don’t have any



money' and we understood. If my kids want something nowadays, for example pizza... I didn't eat pizza until I was 16.”

Oana had pizza for the first time when Stelian took her out on a date. To this day she remembers exactly what kind of soda she had and the taste of the pizza capricciosa they ordered.

A whole village moved to work on the farms near Nuremberg, leaving only grandparents and children back home.

We spent a week on the Höfler Gemüse farm near Nuremberg, where we found a spot to park our camper, our little home that we use to travel around Europe in order to document the lives of Romanians abroad. It was very difficult to find a German farm owner who would allow us to talk to the workers, go to into the greenhouses with them and see the rooms where they live. Our first experience in Nuremberg was when we were kicked off a different farm, that later turned out to be exploiting its Romanian workers.

Höfler Gemüse employs 100 workers during the harvesting period, of which 70 are Romanian and 30 are Polish or German. Most of the Romanians are seasonal workers and therefore do not have unlimited duration work contracts, so many of them migrate between Romania, Germany and other European countries.

The farm is 250 years old and is a family business passed down from father to son. The first greenhouses were built in 1965. The Höfler brothers, Thomas, Peter and Simon, are in charge of the farm today. They grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, rucola, lettuce, onions, radishes, celery, carrots, beets, parsnip, broccoli, turnips, cabbage and many others, which they sell to the large supermarket chains in Germany.

This is one of the farms where Romanians are treated fairly and this is probably the reason why they allowed us to come in and talk to the greenhouse workers. You can clearly see disinfectant devices in the greenhouses, in the warehouses, in the toilets and in the yard. Workers have their temperature checked on a weekly



basis and they are asked to wear masks (even though most take the mask off or put it on the chin when the German owners are not around).

This summer, two coronavirus cases were found at the farm, but fortunately the tests were made in due time, the people were quarantined for two weeks and no one else was infected. The German owners asked us to take a test and allowed us on the farm only after showing a negative result.

Most of the Romanians we met at Höfler Gemüse are from Caraş-Severin county (Western Romania) or Bistriţa-Năsăud county (Central Romania). They come from neighbouring villages and they are all relatives, friends or neighbours. They have divided the rooms based on kinship or friendship, villages or counties.



Most of the workers are from Borlova, a village of some 1,400 inhabitants from Caraş-Severin county. During our first few days there we tried to remember who is whose brother-in-law, brother or second cousin, but there were too many to keep track of. It seemed that a whole village moved to the farms around Nuremberg, leaving only grandparents and children back home. The parents show us their loved ones' faces on their phones when they take a break: “This is his birthday”, “This is our backyard”, “This is my sister-in-law taking them out for pizza.”



The village was very poor until 15-16 years ago, when the Borlovans started going to work in Germany. The locals used to earn meagre wages working at a cable factory and at a wood processing factory, the same as Oana and Stelian. Many also used to go to the forest to pick mushrooms, blueberries and raspberries that they sold for extra income.

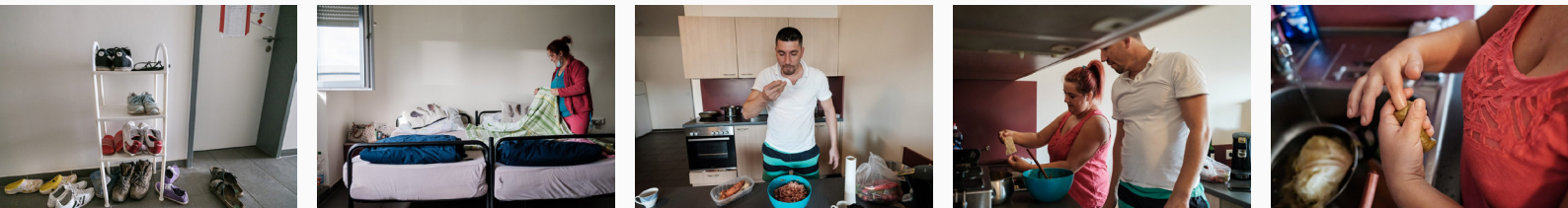
Stelian tells us how in the past few years things have been looking up for the village. People have built big houses, with modern bathrooms and running water, and now you can see cars parked in front of their houses. Stelian has been working in Germany for the past five years, and in that time he brought with him 30 seasonal workers from his village. Some still work with him on the same farm, while others found work on nearby farms.

| ***“Didn’t I tell you not to leave? Why did you leave me?”***

Sunday is the only day off the workers have and the hallway of the building where they are housed is full of clothes and towels hung out to dry. A distinct smell of something frying wafts onto the hallway, as well as the sting of cigarettes and a whiff of laundry detergent. You can hear the sound of manele music and vacuum cleaners coming from the rooms. There are shoes, rubber boots, mops and water buckets everywhere.

The workers on the farm are housed in several buildings. Oana and Stelian are in the “hotel building”, i.e. a building for couples, where the studios have their own bathrooms and kitchens. These are the most sought-after rooms and they are reserved for the most senior and important employees. Workers that have been at the farm for less than two years are housed in the “common building”, where the bathrooms and kitchens are shared.

Oana and Stelian invited us into their room to share a lunch like they used to make back home. This includes noodle soup, sarmale (stuffed cabbage rolls), roast chicken, mashed potatoes and schnitzels. While Oana is busy preparing the meal, Stelian is videocalling the kids and his mother on WhatsApp. Lucia and her brother Stelian, all smiles in the centre of the screen, are nibbling on a snack made of edible pigskin.



Lucia is in kindergarten and Stelian is in the second year of secondary school. They talk to their parents every day, although lately Lucia has not been answering her phone when her mother calls – she has had a phone for three years and she spends a large amount of time on TikTok. “My girl, she doesn’t really want to talk, she just says ‘Mommy, aren’t you coming home?’ She’s upset, I can feel it. She’s also upset I wasn’t home for her birthday. People think that kids are too small to feel these things, but they feel it the most, they suffer the most”, says Oana.

When they do come back to Romania, Oana has to bring Lucia with her everywhere. Otherwise, Lucia will cry even if she just sees her mother getting dressed to step out. “She even follows me to the bathroom – she’s afraid she won’t find me anymore. When I come home, my son wants me to sleep in his room, Lucia wants me in her room. I stayed with her one night until she fell asleep then I came back to my room. She woke up, opened my door and said ‘Didn’t I tell you not to leave? Why did you leave me?’”

Lucia is saddest when her parents have to go back to Germany. “The first day is the hardest. I call her. I leave her a present. She likes makeup. I always leave at 5 AM, so she doesn’t see me. Last time she saw my luggage she said ‘Mommy, what are you doing?’ ‘I’m packing my bags, darling.’ ‘Are you leaving again?’ ‘I have to, my darling, we need to go earn money. Mommy’s gonna get you a pool.’ I bought her an inflatable pool. I bought her one of those trampolines that kids jump on – she loves it.”

We sit down around the table and have a large serving of soup. “When you’re with more people at the table, it’s like the food is better, especially when you’re home with the kids”, says Stelian.

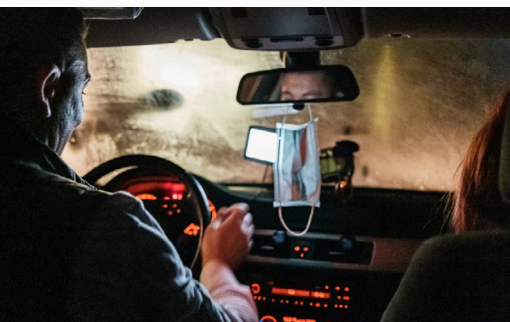


He misses the forest behind their house and the kids' voices as they run around the yard. "I loved the mornings, it was gorgeous. The whole forest was in bloom and you could smell the acacias. Oana and I had used to have our morning coffee there. It was God's blessing for us to have such heavenly peace in that place." Stelian has not seen the blooming acacias at all in the past five years, since he has been working in Germany. His voice is shaky and I feel sorry for asking the question.

Their house has two rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. This year they changed the roof and they intend to do some work on the attic as well. They invested €15,000 in the roof, a large part of the money they earned in 2020.

The tiles on the floor and on the walls, the roof, the bathroom, the bedroom, the concrete pathway through the yard, the gate, the hardwood floor – each of these things meant a year of work abroad.

"We'd like to stop investing all the money we're making into walls. We'd like to be able to go on a holiday or to the seaside." Stelian says they are not the kind of people who go out of their way to save every last penny, and gives the example of a Romanian colleague who only ate bread and Nutella to save money, until he fell ill. However, both he and his wife Oana were poor and started from scratch. "We're happy with what we've accomplished", he says. "I'm extremely grateful that God has helped us pull ourselves out of poverty."



On December 31st 2019, a total of 813,000 Romanians were registered in Germany (398,000 men and 415,000 women), according to the German Statistics Institute (Statistisches Bundesamt). This number does not include children that were born in Germany, Romanians that have obtained German citizenship or those whose



parents have Romanian origins. The number only includes Romanians “with a migratory background”, i.e. those coming from Romania, Spain, the UK, etc.

Romanians are the sixth largest immigrant community in Germany, after the Poles (1,638,000), Turks (1,339,000), citizens from former Yugoslavia (1,294,000), Russians (1,076,000) and Kazakhs (926,000). There are more Romanian immigrants in Germany than Syrians (721,000).

The total number of citizens of Romanian origin that live in Germany is 1,018,000. This number includes children born in Germany, Romanians that have obtained German citizenship and those whose parents have Romanian origins (i.e. the first generation that was born in Germany, since from the second generation onwards they are considered German).

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of Romanians living in Germany rose on average by 77,600 per year, with a peak of almost 100,000 in 2015.

Last year, 5,830 Romanians obtained German citizenship. This number was 4,325 in 2018; 4,238 in 2017; 3,828 in 2016; 3,001 in 2015; and 2,566 in 2014.

Nuremberg is officially home to 14,905 Romanians, and the surrounding region of Mittelfranken is officially home to 36,270 Romanians.

The Facebook group “Romanians in Nuremberg” (Romani in Nürnberg), with daily posts about jobs, housing, documents and other issues about the area, has 42,500 members.

| ***“We have everything we want here, except for the kids.”***

Oana and Stelian earn a total of about €3,000 per month, plus the children’s benefits of about €408 per month, which they receive from Germany because this is where they work and pay tax. They send money back home to Romania every month to cover the children’s expenses, utilities and the grandmother’s medicine.



“When we were finally allowed to come [to Germany] we swarmed here like ants, because we knew this is where the money was”, recalls Stelian. “We are very hardworking people and the Germans would have had a tough time without us here. No one could have done these jobs. The Germans aren’t as tough as we are and don’t work the way we do. They don’t work longer than eight hours. We can work as long as 10 hours, sometimes even 11 or 12.”

Stelian has worked in many places abroad, but he feels the best in Germany. When Oana had some dental problems, the farm staff made an appointment for her at the dentist’s office. All the costs were covered by her health insurance.

This summer, the German Zoll (a sort of tax office with more complex responsibilities) carried out checks at the Höfler Gemüse farm. They looked at workers’ contracts and accommodation conditions. The Zoll team interviewed employees, including Oana, whom they asked whether she feels safe at the farm and whether she receives payment for any extra hours she works.

The differences in comparison to Romania are striking. In Romania, Oana did undeclared work picking potatoes and Stelian lost a finger because the factory he worked at did not respect safety standards. “We have everything we want here, except for the kids”, he says. “If we could have had a more or less decent living in Romania, we wouldn’t have come to Germany.”

Stelian thought about bringing the children and his mother to Nuremberg, especially this year when he was worried about this pandemic. However, it is very complicated for a seasonal worker to rent an apartment. The German farmers hold part of their salary to cover accommodation expenses. If they were to leave the farm, the workers would have to pay more. Moreover, landlords do not rent out to workers with seasonal contracts.



In a few days' time, Oana will be going back to Romania with other people from her village. Stelian will continue working until December 15th. The 20 Romanians staying behind have a lot of work to do: they need to disinfect all the greenhouses and set up new plastic foil on the rows where the plants will grow. They wake up at 4 AM and work until 5 PM.

The children know their mother will soon be back. Lucia asked for a doll and Stelian asked for a new PlayStation game. Oana is going to buy all the presents next week. She will also be bringing sweets, but not too many, just enough for a bit of variety. She cannot get them any clothes, because they have grown since she last saw them and she does not know their sizes anymore.

Lucia can't wait. Every morning when she wakes up, she asks her grandmother: "How many more days until mommy is back home?"



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