Turn text enlargement

Syrian Refugees Toil on Turkey's Hazelnut Farms With Little to Show for It

The Rules that govern 170 percent of the hazelnuts in Turkey
Unlike our Turkish, Syrian up they can't earn a living wage — or much respect.

Hazelnut farm in Sakarya on the Black Sea coast

By Gerald Singer

April 28, 2018

Jump to comments

ARCADLA, Turkey — Like thousands of other Syrian refugees, Shaban Rashed worked last summer in Turkey's Black Sea region, home to the largest concentration of hazelnut farms in the world. He arrived in August, expecting that he and his six sons, aged 16 to 26, would earn enough to pay for food and shelter until the first day September with little more than a few months, so he could return again.

The work was arduous and risky. Because the terrain is filled with steep inclines, his sons spent much of their time attached by ropes to rocks, a precaution against a potentially fatal fall. Worse, the pay was $50 a day, half the rate promised by the middleman who had recruited them in Syria.

"We made just enough money to pay for a pickup truck and getting back," said Mr. Rashed, a son-baked 55-year-old who lives in a Turkish village on the Syrian border. "Plus our living expenses. We returned with nothing."

About 70 percent of all hazelnuts come from Turkey, a beauty produced by some 600,000 tiny farms scattered throughout the rugged landscape that stretches along the country's northern coast.

BARCLAYS
Real estate's next era
Our Global Investment Committee's leading officers on residential, retail and commercial real estate.
CONTINUE
Powered by Marfeel

Much of the harvest winds up in beloved confections, like Nutella spread made by Ferrero, candy bars made by Nestlé and Godiva chocolates made by a Italian company. Turkey, Ferrero's biggest supplier, has long been a boon to farmers, who have been notorious for its hazards and hardships, as well as the prevalence of child labor, a scourge the government has been trying to combat for years.

Now, a growing number of seasonal hazelnut workers are Syrian refugees, a vulnerable group with few economic possibilities. Few have work permits, meaning they lack legal protections.

Still Remembered by the Times, Sending artwork to Washington
Hooking up a lab

Turkey's Labor Code does not apply to agricultural businesses with fewer than 50 employees, so much of the picking of this crop falls to conficionary companies. Ferrero says it oversees a multilayered system of global child labor and wage and safety standards, including at farms that supply its Turkish subsidiary. Ferrero, whose personal fortune has been reported by Forbes at $32.3 billion — is an utopian built on hazelnuts. The company buys one third of Turkey's hazelnuts. It has relationships with competitors, to ensure there isn't a shadow over the crop.

Gerald Singer looking on, left, at Shaban Rashed's family. Mr. Rashed's 26-year-old son Abdulkadir is a supervisor.

But comprehensive monitoring of Turkey's hazelnut farms is an impossible task, given the sheer number of tiny farms and their independence. Plus, the conscientious wage, which nearly every farmer offers, won't keep a family above the country's poverty line. And there's before pay. In related down-the-supply-chain abuses, contract workers in farms and other packer more than standard 10 percent cut of wages.

For charitable companies, all of this presents a conundrum. While Turkey's economy has been hurt by the Syrian war, it nonetheless Turkey's economy has been hurt by the war, and it is impossible to satisfy international demand without buying hazelnuts here. But buying hazelnuts from Turkey means supporting a crop with growing humanitarian flaws.

"In six years of monitoring, we have never found a single hazelnut farm in Turkey in which all decent work standards are met," said Rachia Mittal, the director of innovation and research for the Fair Labor Association, which has been fieldwork on Turkey's hazelnut crop. "Across the board, Not one."

'They'd Never Feel Safe'

Turkey's hazelnut industry has benefited capital through hub and factory investments. The Black Sea region has the ideal mix of loamy soil, sunshine and rain. Starting in the late 1950s, the Republican Party encouraged farmers to plant hazelnut trees, both to lift the local economy and to reduce landslides.

Today, hazelnuts are just one of the crops that make agriculture it the largest sector in Turkey's economy, employing 19 percent of workers and robust a. About seven-fifth of the country's Syrian force is in agriculture, including seasonal laborers who travel to different regions as various harvests begin. Roughly 300,000 are Syrian refugees.

Mr. Rashed and his sons are now part of this group. He was a farmer in his native country, growing wheat and cotton on a 25 acre plot. In January, 2014 he fled his home with his family of 12 to Islamic State fighters approached. The black flag of the Islamic State would fly in his village for the next three years. A Kurdish militia group is now in control.

Alcadlak, where they settled, abuts the Syrian border. "You see the Syrian flag on the other side," said Mr. Rashed's eldest, pointing to a spot in the distance. "That was my home."

Gerald Shaban and his son Abdulkadir in a hazelnut field in Arcadlak, Turkey. Photo by Gerald Singer, Gerald Shaban and his son Abdulkadir in a hazelnut field in Arcadlak, Turkey.

Rolling prayer beads in his hand, Mr. Rashed spent the next few months working hazelnut farms, first in the Black Sea region between roots and rosettes, all reminders of the Ottoman era, magnified.

Like roughly 2.5 million other Syrian refugees who have passed into Turkey since 2011, Mr. Rashed and his family have the status meaning status of "people under temporary protection." Few work permits are granted to this group, and most are confined to one of the sectors where work permits are not required.

His first encounter with the hazelnut crop, in the summer of 2017, was a short-lived fiasco. He and his sons drove north in a rented van, to a farm in the Sakarya province, about 100 miles from the Black Sea, with a promise of a $50 a day wage. Upon arrival, he discovered the money was not worth it. The work was too dangerous.

TAG REGIONAL Middle eastern of the day's news and ideas. David Leonhardt and Ciara Leonhardt gives you the day's most important — and why it matters.
Sign Up

"I couldn't believe the immediate," he recalled. "It seemed like if I fell, I would be dead."

The next year, Mr. Rashed was more desperate for money, and a middleman got in touch to say rates in the summer of 2018 would be higher.

"He told my father that this year the farmers are paying around 40 or 50 Turkish lira a day," said Mohammad Rashed, Mr. Rashed's eldest son. "But when my father got there, he realized that all the farmers were paying the same amount of money and say hatter. "We'd give you 50 lira a day, and that's it."

Mr. Rashed and his sons stayed.

Shaban harvesting is reasonably divided into two tasks, collecting and hauling. The collectors grind and bag nuts, while the hauders transport the bags, each about 110 pounds, up and down mountains and onto trucks.

Refugees living under tents and in storage lockers in Arcadlak. Andrew Evers for The New York Times

"The main problem is that there is nowhere to stand up," said Abdulkadir Rashed, 26, the supervisor. "Sometimes the ground is strong. You can never just stand up straight."

The hours are also grueling, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on some farms. If you don't work, you don't get paid, including seven-day stretches in the naves.

Given the meager sums they earn, a lot of Syrian refugees in crops all over the country say they have little choice but to overcome the dangers and hardships of the hazelnut harvest. Mr. Singer, a land driver in Syria, a job that supported his family. Recently, he stood in the decaying house he rents near the southern city of Adana, shelter he can afford because of the money his teenage children work with him in the orange fields.

"People who don't have money and family members to work are forced to live in plastic tents by the side of the road," he said. "Can you imagine that?"

That is a pressing question for a friend and neighbor, Sami Al Mohammed, who now sold sheep in his native Syria. He is not strong enough to toil in the orange fields 10 hours a day, and with one exception, his eight children are either too ill or too young to work. When his house expires in a few months, he will be homeless.

"It's not just me," Mr. Mohammed said. "A lot of families are doomed in the same boat."

The Unregulated Middlemen

The difficulties of agricultural work are multiplied by the middlemen.

Known as daylaer — pronounced dye-ee-ER-EER — Turkey's middlemen are the least scrutinized and least visible operatives in the farming system. Legally, they are required to have a primary school education and a permit that is renewed every three years. In practice, middlemen are unregulated and unmonitored.

Gerald Shaban and his son Abdulkadir in a hazelnut field in Arcadlak, Turkey. Photo by Gerald Singer, Gerald Shaban and his son Abdulkadir in a hazelnut field in Arcadlak, Turkey.

The daylaer often provide laborers with between-harvest loans that can result in a form of indentured servitude. More common, middlemen charge a fee for their services, which farmers typically pay in end-of-harvest lump sums. Unlikely, laborers are paid just enough to cover food and rent, and given "business cards" — essentially an I.o.u. — for each day in the field.

Ostensibly, the system is designed to ensure loyalty, said Sanjar Kaymakcioglu, a professor of labor economics at Bilkent's Haspel School of Business.

"Is from a working group, you need 10 people, and if someone is indebted to you, that is supposed to have a different level of loyalty," said. "But we have seen so many people in the field who have collected a bunch of business cards and disappeared with the money."

Some middlemen avoid wages without bothering to vanish. Ismail Salman, one of Mr. Rashed's neighbors, said that after he had worked a summer in the hazelnut crop with eight of his children, a daylaer helped himself to an additional 1,000 Turkish lira — about 1/60th of the 20,000 he was supposed to pay. Arguing was pointless.

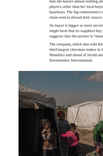
"We didn't have contracts," Mr. Salman said. "We we could make a case to the police."

Alcadlak is home to dozens of middlemen. One of them, Erdoan Ergun, not recently in his somewhat dilapidated backyard, down the street from Mr. Rashed, and recently explained his job.

"I've been doing this for 35 years," Mr. Ergun, 71, said. "Usually I bring people from my own village to work with me."

He was fully aware of the trade's hazardous reputation.

"This is the reality," he said. "Most middlemen take money and don't give rights to their workers."



Sami Al Mohammed and his family, left to right, Mohammed, Ali, Abdulkadir, and Ali, in front of their tent in Arcadlak, Turkey. Photo by Gerald Singer, Sami Al Mohammed and his family, left to right, Mohammed, Ali, Abdulkadir, and Ali, in front of their tent in Arcadlak, Turkey. Andrew Evers for The New York Times

Mr. Ergun hastened to add that he had never cheated any of his laborers. In fact, he said he was now charged 20,000 lira because a farmer failed to pay him.

"So," he said, "I paid my workers out of my own pocket."

The Source Map Mystery

Though Turkey's hazelnuts bring in about $3.6 billion in a good year, the farms struggle for profitability. The most generous price support program have been phased out. The rugged terrain prevents the use of machines to supplement labor. Yields are lower, data from a decade ago shows, than those in other countries, adding more pinches to a pale that looks crazy already. The size of the average farm is now just four acres.

Some farmers have little expectation that hazelnuts will earn real money. Sema Ozkan, a 70-year-old farm owner in Arcadaya, detected her four sons plot from her father and continues to cultivate it out of a sense of sentimental obligation.

"We're at the mercy of the free market now," she said. "The buyers don't. I will plow this plot, and I'm hoping someone can do about it."

Mr. Ohlsson is a mimosaic part of an elaborate, established system that she knows almost nothing about. She can't name any of the players, other than her local buyer, or the final destination of her crop. Her ignorance is commonplace. Most farms in the global supply chain tend to demand their source map be secret.

No buyer is bigger or more secretive than Ferrero. It won't name a single farm that its suppliers buy from, although simple arithmetic suggests that the answer is "most of them."

The company, which also sells Kinder and other chocolates, is the third-largest chocolate maker in the world, behind Mars and Mondelez and ahead of Nestlé and Hershey, according to Euromonitor International.

Sema Ozkan, a 70-year-old farm owner in Arcadaya, Turkey. Photo by Gerald Singer, Sema Ozkan, a 70-year-old farm owner in Arcadaya, Turkey.

Giovanni Ferrero, early grants interviews, or allows media visits to the company's headquarters in Alba, Italy. A spokeswoman answered questions by email, citing a list of organizations that Ferrero has teamed with to promote what it calls the Ferrero Hazelnut Company Sustainability.

"Ferrero is dedicated to providing its people with safe and healthy working conditions," she wrote in an email, "and we expect that our independent farmers do the same."

One of Ferrero's partners is GIZ, a German development agency. In an email, a spokesman said it had provided advice to the company to help design and put into effect a system to track working and living conditions of seasonal workers.

It's impossible to judge the success of GIZ's efforts, or any other monitoring system, because Ferrero doesn't publish information about them, citing "restrictions under national privacy laws."

Mr. Mittal of the Fair Labor Association said Ferrero would take the organization's phone calls and participate in panel discussions about its issues. It just wasn't forthcoming about where its hazelnuts

"Has some nothing about the findings of the programs they have in place," she said. "We know nothing about the hazelnuts they certified and uncertified farms. We have no clue."

The Fair Labor Association is the latest in a series of Nestlé's supply chain because it collaborated with it on a 15-month pilot program sponsored by the United States Department of Labor. In theory, these efforts are a modern stare, set Nestlé found in a 2017 survey of its hazelnut farms.

More than 72 percent of workers reported that they had barely enough money to get by. Ninety-nine percent said they worked more than the legal limit. Ninety-nine percent said they worked

Ferrero's hazelnut farms, supply chain, and workers in Turkey

Sema Ozkan, a 70-year-old farm owner in Arcadaya, Turkey. Photo by Gerald Singer, Sema Ozkan, a 70-year-old farm owner in Arcadaya, Turkey.

"deteriorated in the last year" because of the war in Syria. Nestlé declined to comment for this article.

For refugees, Turkish agriculture is both a lifeline and a continuing trial. In the five years since he left his homeland, Mr. Ibrahim, the onetime taxi driver, has developed a new sense of what constitutes misfortune.

"We are lucky," he said. "We can survive here. We will never be thieves. We will never have to beg on the streets."

A version of this article appears in print on April 29, 2019, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Life of Peril and Poverty in a Hazelnut Gold Mine. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

READ 303 COMMENTS

Related Coverage

March 22, 2019 In Istanbul, Erdogan Remakes Taksim Square, a Symbol of Secular Turkey

March 17, 2019 Erdogan Uses Video of New Zealand Attacks at Election Rallies

July 22, 2017 Turkey Sees Foes at Work in Gold Mines, Cafes and 'Smurf Village'

At War

News related to current conflicts, civil unrest and military action around the world.

Sign up here to receive the weekly newsletter.

Assassination in Iran Could Limit Biden's Options. Was That the Goal?
Nov. 28

Subscribe to the At War Newsletter
Nov. 5, 2018

Ethiopia Claims Victory in Tigray Conflict After Shelling Restive Region's Capital
Nov. 29

More in Business

Heather Ainsworth for The New York Times
In Their 20s and Saving for Retirement: How It Started, How It's Going
Nov. 27

Yi Mayuan/Imaginechina, via Agence France-Presse
A Soaring Monument to Beauty in China Is Stirring Passions. Mostly Anger.
Nov. 26

Margeaux Walter for The New York Times
I Don't Want to Be the Office Grandma
Nov. 27

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Who Will Miss the Coins When They're Gone?
Nov. 24

Ting Shen for The New York Times
Despite Challenges, Opportunity Zones Provide Much-Needed Capital
Nov. 24

Most Popular

Black Voguers Populate Billboards in a Times Square 'Midnight Moment'

Should Isolation Periods Be Shorter for People With Covid-19?

A Theater's 'Last Gasp' Doesn't Look Like the End

Amanda Seyfried Finally Stakes Her Claim

The College Athletes Who Are Allowed to Make Big Bucks: Cheerleaders

A Cat Is Said to Be Joining the Bidens in the White House

That Mysterious Monolith in the Utah Desert? It's Gone, Officials Say

Jimmy Kimmel Rags on Trump for His Randy Quaid Retweets

Dr. Mary Fowkes, 66, Dies; Helped Science Understand the Pandemic

Biden Has Chosen a Secretary of State

The New York Times

Go to Home Page »

NEWS
Home Page
World
Coronavirus
U.S.
Politics
Election Results
New York
Business
Tech
Science
Sports
Obituaries
Today's Paper
Corrections

OPINION
Today's Opinion
Op-Ed Columnists
Editorials
Op-Ed Contributors
Letters
Sunday Review
Video: Opinion

ARTS
Today's Arts
Art & Design
Books
Dance
Movies
Music
Pop Culture
Television
Theater
Video: Arts

LIVING
At Home
Automobiles
Games
Education
Food
Health
Jobs
Love
Magazine
Parenting
Real Estate
Recipes
Style
T Magazine
Travel

MORE
Reader Center
Wirecutter
Live Events
The Learning Network
Tools & Services
Multimedia
Photography
Video
Newsletters
TimesMachine
NYT Store
Times Journeys
Manage My Account

SUBSCRIBE
Home Delivery
Gift Subscriptions
Games
Cooking
Email Newsletters
Corporate Subscriptions
Education Rate
Mobile Applications
Replica Edition
International
Canada
Español
中文网

© 2020 The New York Times Company