

Why Our Ancestors left Prussia Or Life on the Manorial Estate

In many areas of northern Europe, Germans lived on manorial farms. In this article, I will try to describe how these farms worked and why there was a large out migration from these farms. The information provided is based on a book called Ordinary Prussians by William Hagen and published in 2002 by Cambridge University Press. It is quite a wonderful resource with detail far beyond what I will report below. It is 700 pages and costs \$100 so try interlibrary loan. Do note that Germans ran the villages described and the residents were largely Germans. In some areas of Prussia, the manorial farms differed when Polish nobility ran the farm and there were a large number of Polish serfs.

What is a manorial farm?

Manorial Farms are remnants of the middle ages in northern Europe. Historically they resulted from land grants from the king to nobles who supported the king. The nobles then were expected to establish a viable manorial estate based on farming. The land needed to be cleared, workers recruited and buildings erected. The noble and his workers were expected to fight on behalf of the king should soldiers be needed.

In the Pomerania, manorial estates were created by the Dukes of Pommern in the 13th century. Some estates remained the property of the Dukes (royal villages), some were granted to the nobility (largely German and Slavic Knights) that supported the Duke (noble villages), and some were granted to the church. The church-held villages might contain a monastery or might be a manorial farm controlled by a church official like a bishop. In the royal

villages and church villages management was generally contracted out.

Manorial Farms consisted of a manor house (gut) usually owned by a noble family, many large barns, and residences for the workers. In many cases there was an adjacent village owned by the manor in which there were small homes with gardens for the workers. Other workers lived in the manor house or in nearby structures.

Here is a picture of the gut in Gross Konarszyn in Kreis Schlochau, West Prussia:



Note that this is not a terribly impressive building (at least for those of us who watch Masterpiece Theater on Public Broadcasting). This is because the noble lord of the manor often

owned many estates so the gut resident was often the manager of the farm, not the noble. Sometimes the resident was a poor noble cousin. Other times the gut resident was a hired professional manager. In other cases the right to manage was purchased from the lord of the manor by an entrepreneur.

The land held by the noble family was often very large so many barns were required to house the equipment and produce of the land. Note the worker residence in the front part of the first barn shown below. In the second picture at the far end of the barn, there is a smoke stack from the distillery. Here are two big barns from the manorial farm in Gross Konarszyn:





Who worked on the Manorial Farm?

The manorial farm had three kinds of workers:

- The small farmer who had hereditary tenure on the estate land but was permanently attached to the estate.
- Farm servants who worked an annual contract and
- Day Laborers

as well as supporting people like millers and tavern keepers.

The small farmer had a one or two room house, outbuildings, and land for a small garden. He might also have land for cash crops such as rye, barley, or oats in the old days (and potatoes after 1750). The small farmer also had access to common land for pasture. The small farmer would pay his rent in grain and in unpaid work on the manorial farm (often 3 days a week). In medieval times, this person would be referred to as a serf.

To be successful, the small farmer needed a capable wife to share the tasks and produce little workers (children). The eldest male of resulting offspring typically inherited all the property rights. The

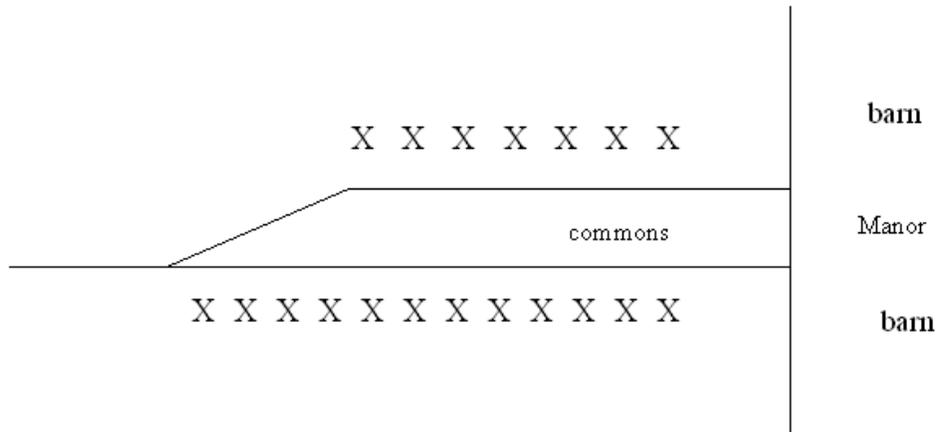
marriages were not based on good looks and romantic love but would be best thought of as a business partnership. The financial deal included gaining inheritance rights, a woman's dowry, gifts from both families, the right for the man's parents to retire and live in an outbuilding on the land, and payments to disenfranchised siblings. Marriage occurred after confirmation at age 13 or 14 but often before 20 if there was inheritable farm. There were variations on this inheritance arrangement when there were no male children or the children were quite young. Divorce was virtually unknown. (Marrying a first cousin was not a bad idea since it kept the inheritance in the family - and after all marriage was a business deal.)

A manorial farm typically had upwards of 20 farm workers doing tasks like cooking, cleaning, and working in the dairy. These farm workers were usually hired on an annual contract after they reached the age of their confirmation and were often children of the small farmers attached to the estate. The lord of the manor could require compulsory service from the children of the small farmers for up to three years. This type of work provided a good bridge between childhood and marriage, particularly for non-inheriting children. These farm workers received food, clothing, housing, and a small amount of money.

There were also day laborers on the manorial estate. These were usually people without inheritance rights and who would be otherwise impoverished. They often roomed and boarded with a small farmer providing him a supplemental income source. They would receive some pay for work but also had to perform unpaid work for the estate; they had to work especially long hours at harvest time. They could be hired and fired at any time. If these people had no source of income, the local church had to provide support for them.

How was the village organized?

The village layout was often set up to facilitate access to the manorial estate. The following is a common village layout:



The above map shows the village centered on a common area which all can use. The manor house and its many barns are at the head of the village. The large tract of land behind the house and barn was owned by the noble family and the yield of these fields was the main source of income for the estate. These estates largely produced grains for market.

Each worker's house has a small garden behind it and then outside the village are small plots of land for the workers to grow the food for their families. Given that the Prussian plow used during this period were very heavy and hard to turn around, the land outside the village was subdivided into long strips, each associated with a small farmer.

From all the above, it is clear than the non-inheriting children of the small farmers as well as the day laborers often had to move elsewhere (like Volhynia or new farming estates) in search of land to farm.

There were a number of special functionaries associated with the estate. There were millers who ground the grains into flour and other products; villagers typically paid the miller 10 percent of the resulting flour. Millers often purchased this right from the lord of the manor plus they paid an annual fee in grain. Tavern keepers (krugers) purchased or leased the right to brew and to run an inn; additionally the kruger might pay fees in beer or money. Both millers and krugers often had land for growing food for their own consumption.

How was the estate administered?

The lord of the manor had the right to be judge for minor infractions committed by people on his estate. This was often done indirectly by appointing a judge. The parameters of justice were fairly well defined and limited by the Prussian government as earlier there had been abuses of the system.

Often the villages had village heads (schultz). Schultz were powerful in villages of free farmers or where the schultz privilege was inheritable. However, in manorial villages the schultz were unpaid and disenfranchised; they were caught between the interests of the lord of the manor and the workers in the manorial village.

Most manorial estates in Pommern and Brandenburg had churches in the village or nearby. They were built by early nobles who owned the villages and priest or pastor paid by the current noble. In addition a house and small garden space was provided. Beside a standard annual stipend, the pastor or priest might be paid by the noble for each baptism, marriage, and death service provided. If the village was small, the pastor or priest might be shared by several manorial estates.

The end of Manorial Farms

In 1807 the world of the manorial village changed. Napoleon defeated the vaunted Prussian Army and a reform minded Prussian government took over. The new government began the process of disbanding the manorial farms and dividing up the property between the manor and the farmers with hereditary rights. The time this disbanding took varied widely and could take decades. The rules were such that many farm sizes were uneconomical and the small farmers did not have enough food to eat; they migrated. Many villagers had no opportunity to buy land and migrated. Some workers remained on a contractual basis. Some workers went to the developing industrial towns looking for a job. Other workers went to Volhynia and other parts of the Prussian, Russian, and Austrian lands in Eastern Europe. And some came to the Americas and Australia.

The manorial farms continued to exist. Initially they became more like a business with hired employees. When Poland became an independent nation again following the First World War, the Polish government took over many of the farms inside their new borders and broke the manorial farms into smaller farms which they distributed to Polish farmers. You will see a lot of these small farms in the area of old Prussia that became a part of Poland following the First World War; the only way you would know a manorial estate existed would be to consult old maps. Following the Second World War, many of the manorial farms were converted into state owned farms. The manor house was often destroyed but the barns and workers housing retained; workers were hired by the state to work on the state farm. Following the fall of Communism, the workers left the state farm when better options arose.

For those manor houses and estates that survived communism, their glory was sometimes reinstated. Wealthy Poles and Germans bought the old estate houses and restored them. Here is a picture of the restored estate house at Podel in old Pomerania:

