

# Hesse, Germany: 4 tannery workers killed in workplace accident

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24 April 2026

On Thursday afternoon, April 16, five workers at an old tannery in central Hesse were found lifeless in a pit. Two were able to be resuscitated, but for the other three, help came too late. A fourth worker died in hospital a week later, on April 22.

The workplace accident deprives the old tannery of almost its entire workforce. The Beuleke leather factory and fur tannery has been in existence for 200 years. It is a family business with only half a dozen employees, located just outside the small town of Runkel (Limburg-Weilburg) on the river Lahn. The company website states: “Closed due to bereavement!” and all flags in the town are flying at half-mast.

The autopsy results were announced Thursday, determining that the men were the victims of hydrogen sulphide poisoning, an extremely toxic gas that can cause death very quickly. It is denser than air and accumulates on the ground and in pits. The treacherous nature of the gas is such that the characteristic warning smell of rotten eggs may not be noticed, as hydrogen sulphide has the property of numbing the olfactory receptors at higher concentrations.

It is suspected that one or more men climbed into the pit while working and fainted, and the others tried to come to their aid. The fifth seriously injured worker was a fitter from a pipe cleaning company who just happened to be present.

Public sympathy is enormous. A fundraiser was set up for the bereaved family of one victim, 35-year-old Yuri, who leaves behind a wife and a five-year-old daughter. On the initiative of a mother at the local nursery, €37,000 was raised for this family in just a few days. The mayor has now encouraged further fundraising campaigns.

The emergency services, who were called to the tannery quickly, detected a high concentration of

poison in the pit and reacted accordingly. They carefully recovered the victims, had them flown by helicopter to several hospitals, and ensured the decontamination of everyone involved on site. The emergency responders are volunteer firefighters from the town who also knew the victims personally, as one of the deceased was himself a member of the local fire brigade.

Tanning, the processing of animal hides into leather and fur, is a very old, complex craft that involves numerous special steps. The greatest dangers to humans and the environment, however, do not stem from the production process itself, but from the waste products.

Waste residues of animal hides that are temporarily stored in septic tanks can form highly toxic substances such as carbon monoxide, digester gases and hydrogen sulphide during the fermentation and rotting process. The most toxic, hydrogen sulphide, which can paralyse the sense of smell, is the most common cause of fatal accidents in such production worldwide.

On its website, the Beuleke tannery emphasises that while it places “great value on tradition” (and partly works with machines over 100 years old), nevertheless: “[It] has always been important to us to include ecological aspects in our work as well. We therefore dispense with questionable tanning processes and manufacture with our own sewage treatment and neutralisation plant for our production wastewater.” The sewage treatment plant has been pumped out and emptied since the accident. The investigation into the exact circumstances of the gruesome workplace accident is still ongoing.

For many years, the central Hesse region was world renowned for its tanneries, to which the Leather Museum in Offenbach still bears witness today. With globalisation, however, the profession of tanner has

almost died out in Germany. At the same time, the processing of animal hides has developed into an industrial process worldwide. Large tanning operations have emerged in North and South America, China and India.

As Human Rights Watch notes critically, in parts of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the profession of a tanner goes hand in hand with enormous occupational risks. In a suburb of Dhaka, 11-year-old boys have fallen ill because they were exposed to dangerous chemicals during tanning. Leather production for expensive luxury goods is associated with exploitation, environmental pollution and the risk of workplace accidents and poisoning.

In Germany today, only about 10 large tanneries are left, alongside 20 medium-sized and 40-50 very small businesses; in total, around 2,000 employees still work in this profession. They have mostly specialised in niches, produce a particular quality, or produce for the high-end market. The business in Runkel specialised in the production of animal pelts as rugs and for decoration, and processed animal hides from shepherds and hunters from the region.

Theoretically, every tannery is subject to strict environmental and occupational health and safety conditions. There are legal regulations, accident prevention rules, and supervisory authorities. In practice, however, these rules are systematically eroded and undermined. Hardly any authority, municipality, city or region still has the capacity to effectively monitor compliance with the rules.

The political attitude towards this is exemplified by the handling of the supply chain laws in Berlin and Brussels. The attempt to make corporations liable for occupational health and safety and environmental protection in supplier companies and countries as well, was watered down and torpedoed in the EU at the end of last year. The supply chain law is now only supposed to apply to a few large corporations and will only come into force across Europe from 2028. Since then, the Merz government has also been working to abolish the same law in Germany.

Corporations and governments increasingly have their sights set exclusively on two issues: rearmament for a war against Russia and profit maximisation for shareholders and the super-rich. Issues like occupational health and safety and accident prevention

inevitably fall by the wayside. The consequence of this is more and more fatal accidents and increasing danger in the workplace.



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