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GRATEFUL TO BE THERE BUT THE NIGHTMARE CONTINUES: LIFE IN A GERMAN REFUGEE CAMP

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ABSTRACT: *Over 2 million refugees have come to Germany over the past few years. When the first wave of refugees arrived, Germany and German authorities were utterly unprepared for the task at hand. As a result, many new arrivals suffered needlessly. Students from South Dakota State University had the opportunity to work with refugees in southern Germany and learn about their plights, their hardships, their perilous trek to Germany, and the problems they faced after their arrival. They also investigated living conditions, support systems, the general treatment by government officials, and conducted interviews to learn about their treacherous journey to Germany. Many of their findings were later confirmed by the media. This article gives insight into life as a refugee in Germany.*

KEYWORDS: Germany, refugee crisis, asylum seekers, abuse, refugees

INTRODUCTION

Between 2015 and 2021, around 2 million refugees and asylum seekers made the long and often treacherous journey to Germany. For many people from war-ravaged countries, finally arriving in Germany after years of hardship and traveling, was a dream come true, especially since there were rumors the government provided every asylum seeker with an apartment and a job. These displaced persons looked forward to safety, security, an abundance of food and consumer goods, and many thought life would be much better in Germany, if not perfect. Unfortunately, for many, the reality was not as rosy as expected. Germany and the German government were unprepared for the number of refugees and consequently, many unforeseen problems arose.¹

REFUGEES VS. ASYLUM SEEKERS

Before we discuss the obstacles refugees faced in Germany, we have to define the terms Refugee and Asylum seeker. Though these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a marked difference. According to Amnesty International,

A refugee is a person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it.²

Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker. Some refugees ask for asylum with the possibility of staying in their new host country forever, others are just looking for a temporary safe country where they can wait out the conflict in hopes of returning home soon.

INITIAL EUPHORIA

As the first wave of refugees arrived, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel was very optimistic. Her words spoken to the German people will forever be burned in their memories; who can forget her famous declaration: “Wir schaffen das” – we can do it.³ The majority of Germans welcomed these refugees and asylum seekers with open arms. One reason might have been the collective guilt of World War II but also many Germans are descendants of refugees themselves and have heard the harrowing horror stories from their parents or grandparents. Moreover, Germany is in dire need of skilled labor and here was a chance to fill many vacant positions with young and eager workers.

Though the euphoria was great amongst refugees and the general population, the tide started shifting when the steady stream of immigrants did not subside and eventually a tipping point was reached. There were no places to house the newcomers, municipalities were overwhelmed by the onslaught, government agencies were not equipped to handle this many people, and the general public was also overwhelmed by so many strangers with different traditions and needs in their communities. Right-wing and radical groups predicted a “muslimification” of Germany, and there were unfounded rumors of Sharia law being instituted in certain German cities.

PROBLEMS

Due to the lack of suitable facilities, problems arose for the communities and for the refugees. Camps were quickly built, tent cities erected, old factory buildings leased, just to put a roof over the refugees’ heads. To be fair, the government was not equipped for and was overwhelmed by such an influx of people into Germany where a severe housing crunch was already affecting house or apartment hunters. As a consequence of supply and demand, prices increased to astronomical heights when the refugees arrived. Being unprepared, the government struggled to find places and to hire security personnel. In that rush, many mistakes were made, and Germany turned out to be not a welcoming land of the free but a dark place for many new arrivals.

As families arrived, children were not separated from their parents, no one was imprisoned or put in cages, and the media portrayed a rosy picture of happy refugees who finally arrived in the land of the free – safe and sound. Many Germans, ordinary citizens, and government officials alike, patted themselves on the back for a job well done when the reality was quite different from the initial portrayal of the situation.

OUR EXPERIENCES

In 2016 and 2017, I had the opportunity to travel to Germany with 20 students from South Dakota State University to explore the refugee situation and to volunteer in a facility. Our contact was limited to young men, and we had unprecedented access to them. We met and

befriended refugees from twelve different nations and in the following I will present a few of our findings:

As immigrants came to Germany, they were split up into different groups and sent to so-called *Auffanglager*, nothing more than primitive refugee camps. Local governments leased any vacant space available – from houses and apartments to abandoned factories, hotels, warehouses, indoor tennis courts, gyms— and if nothing was available, they put together modular buildings, which the locals called “Container Villages.”

Refugees were and still are separated into four distinct groups: Families, single males, single females, and unaccompanied minors –generally boys. The unaccompanied minors are the lucky ones since they are often housed in the nicest places. They live in group-homes, 6-8 to a house with a social worker on the premises 24 hours a day. The so-called dorms for adult males are, however, not as nice since affordable housing was in short supply. One often criticized tactic by the federal government was to simply assign groups of refugees to different cities, towns, and small villages and the municipalities had to find space, any space. Towns that did not have any empty capacity simply erected tent cities in city parks and housed refugees there. That might be fine in the summer, but winter is cold, and it is difficult to heat tents.

Refugees are not allowed to work until their asylum request has been granted, so there is very little to do. Many are traumatized from the horrific experiences on their journey and the trek itself, their loss of family, most suffer from some degree of PTSD, and there is little help available. Many ethnicities are cramped together in the same room, and some of these groups are historically not very welcoming of each other. The noise level is always high, day and night, and it is difficult to relax. As a result, the stress level is elevated, especially in young men, and conflicts are unavoidable.

We tried to obtain permission to visit one of these adult facilities but were turned down, even when we tried through the Catholic Charity *Caritas*. To explore the situation at these adult camps, we had to rely on anecdotes told to us by the young men and others we met through connections. In the meantime, investigative reporters have confirmed our findings as we will see.

Family dorms are, unfortunately, not much better. Quarters are cramped, uncomfortable, and often unsanitary. They range anywhere from small apartments to rooms in abandoned hotels or military barracks. If hotels or apartments are not available, cities often put up these so-called containers for families.

During our visits, we learned of many problems with most housing arrangements:

Twenty to thirty people often have to share a kitchen supplied with one or two stoves. One bathroom might serve the same number of residents. For laundry needs, washing machines are provided, however, due to the expense of electricity, dryers are seldom available. The tenants must hang their clothes to dry in their rooms, which in some cases, causes mold to grow on the walls.

Within these compounds, there is generally a distinct hierarchy which was very noticeable amongst the teenagers. We observed that the Syrian boys often made the rules and gave orders,

and the African young men, especially the Eritreans, were the lowest ranking. They seemed to do the more labor-intensive work, while others supervised. To our surprise, there is also a good amount of racism within those communities. We watched a number of boys from Iraq and Afghanistan making fun of the African boys and even referring to them as monkeys. On an excursion, we saw a group of Asians, and to our great surprise, several young men immediately started mocking them by pulling the corners of their eyes and trying to mimic them.

More than a few refugees are in Germany because of gender orientation, and many of their fellow boys and men do not approve of such behavior, so the persecution continues even in a place where they believed they would be safe. There have been many reports of refugee men beating others for their sexual orientation, with the argument, that such behavior is unacceptable. Tragically, the government does not provide any protection for these men. Tensions between Muslims and Christians do not end in these facilities either and Christians have complained of being threatened and mistreated by their fellow citizens. Another problem is the fact that Mafia-like organizations have infiltrated some of the facilities, a problem we will address later.

An enormous dilemma is that the government and many government employees are not sensitive to cultural differences and needs. They are not interculturally competent and some government employees are quite narrow minded, insensitive, if not racist. Many people in charge treat refugees like dumb little children who must be cultured and educated, even though many are better educated than the government workers.

This insensitivity applies to food services and food choices as well. In many large facilities, feeding of refugees is contracted with catering services. They receive a flat rate for every person they feed and, to maximize their profit, they often serve cheap meals, without considering cultural differences. In one camp, two pork sausages were served to the Muslim resident – who don't eat pork – together with three slices of bread. It was a sorry excuse for a meal.

Children are required to attend German schools and many teachers are unaware or ignorant of cultural differences. Shaking hands is a well-established tradition in Germany and often boys are forced to shake their female teacher's hand against their will and belief.

PRIVATE SECURITY

It quickly became clear that there were serious problems in many camps, with men from different ethnic groups and religious backgrounds physically and verbally fighting. Many towns and cities hired private security firms to keep the peace. Unfortunately, private Security Forces cause major problems even though they are hired to protect the refugees from outside attacks by right-wing groups and to keep order within the camps.

The sudden need for security personnel caused security firms to lower their already low standards and hire just about anyone. These minimum-wage jobs do not attract the brightest people of Germany and many, if not most, have no cultural sensitivity or knowledge. Companies offer a maximum of 40 hours of training and then recruits are sent out to deal with people of a different color with different customs and traditions. These jobs were a god-send for many ex-convicts who had been unemployable for years. Several Neo-Nazis have also been identified amongst security personnel who suddenly had tremendous power over people they

hate. One under-cover reporter applied for a security guard job, and he was told he could start the next day without any training.⁴ Many problems with security guards were reported to us by the boys and in the meantime collaborated by undercover investigations.⁵

PROBLEMS WITH SECURITY

Security guards have been accused of stealing from the people they are supposed to protect, female refugees have been raped, and the treatment is often rough and arbitrary and there are even reports of guards torturing refugees. We experienced the ever-presence of these private security forces at a *Volkfest* in Ingolstadt. Many people danced on the benches and on the floor, but as soon as some of the refugee boys started participating, security guards appeared. Within minutes, there were 4 or 5 in the vicinity for no apparent reason. The teenage refugee boys were extremely nice and respectful; nevertheless, these heavily tattooed security guards in their black combat uniforms and often with shaved heads, postured themselves around us, seemingly ready to take control.

There are disturbing reports that guards drink heavily on the job. One reporter heard and recorded terribly frightening conversations and noted:

Some guards had brought weapons, others were drunk. Over and over, anti-immigrant slogans could be heard, such as: “We have to knock out their teeth with our batons.” Another one testified hearing statements such as “How I would love to fu** the asylum bitches.” The manager of the security firm claims that he has no knowledge of such accusations. He alleges that the city thoroughly checks his employees.⁶

With little or no supervision, these guards have complete power over these traumatized and already abused individuals and many relish this power. Diana Hennings stated (chairman of the organization *Moabit hilft*) stated:

There are so few accommodations that many operators of refugee camps can do as they please. Some of these camps are lawless spaces where security and catering companies run drug and prostitution businesses.⁷

THE “REFUGEE BUSINESS” AND ABUSE

The “refugee business“ became a lucrative enterprise for many dishonest companies and individuals and enriched criminals at the expense of the most vulnerable members of society. In one small southern town, refugees lived in a hotel that had gone out of business and had been vacant for three years before the owner realized that the government would pay him to house refugees. Residents in town there told us it was so dilapidated that no one wanted to buy it, but the government leased it from him and paid him to be in charge. When the heating system broke in the winter, he refused to fix it and the families with children were cold for two weeks until the local government relented and paid for the repair. Women complained about being harassed by the property owner and his friends, and there were reports of prostitution. Many women there confirmed that some of the females owed their smugglers money, and they were working off their debts through prostitution. When neighbors called the local authorities, they were met at the hotel by two large African men in business suits who suggested they worry

about their own problems and stay out of their business. Unfortunately, local authorities will not act on a veiled threat by the Nigerian mafia.

A report by the magazine *Focus* claims that conditions for women were worst in Bavaria. There are accounts of rape and in one Bavarian Camp where women could not lock their doors to keep guards out.

The *Münchener Frauennetzwerk* is aware of the situation in refugee camps for women in Munich: "Observations in the *Bayernkaserne* show that every day women are raped, sexual favors are exchanged, and prostitution is present" writes the organization according to PR in a press release. According to the *Netzwerk*, women in the *Bayernkaserne* allegedly have no way of locking their doors. Male guards have to unlock bathrooms."⁸

Women, young and old, who have been exposed to sexual exploitation on the long journey to Germany now continue to be raped instead of receiving psychological help and assistance.

Another problem reported to us by the young men and now confirmed by reporters is the use of unqualified translators who are often hired without being screened properly. Muslim translators have been found to refuse to translate transgressions perpetrated by other Muslims, especially against Christians and women, who wanted to report abuse.

Hassah said: "They wanted to beat us, they insulted us. And the translator denied all that during the interview and insisted that nothing like that had happened."⁹

Shockingly, in a few cases it was discovered, that soldiers of Assad's Army were inadvertently hired as translators. When a Syrian asylum seeker was interviewed and wanted to report torture by Assad's forces, the translator simply changed the story and consequently, some genuine asylum seekers were denied asylum because of these tactics and sent back to the country where they were tortured.

A court in Salzburg convicted a jihadi, who had fought for the Al-Nusra-Front in Syria, to two years in prison. It also became known that "the 29-year-old man had arrived in Salzburg as a refugee in October 2015 and helped as an interpreter at the border crossing in Freilassing."¹⁰

The interpreters who are members of the Islamic religion often side with the accused. I am aware of statements that interpreters, on the way to the police station, pestered the Christians saying: If you press charges, you might as well forget your asylum application. I often noticed that charges were dropped, the accusation was recanted because Christians were threatened. Translators also have been accused of helping people who are not eligible to be granted asylum. [. . .] In the summer of 2014, a man by the name of Mohamed A. is believed to have received asylum in Bremen. But contrary to the translator's statement, the man was not a Syrian national but Rumanian and he also had a different name.¹¹

During our visits, we learned that life as a refugee can be hell: the conditions, the waiting, the idle time, the uncertainty and unfortunately, the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany and crimes perpetrated against refugees by Germans.

CONCLUSION

The experiences we had with refugees were life changing for everyone. Pampered middle-class students from South Dakota learned how hard life can be for some people in the world. They became aware of the effects of far-away wars and the toll they take on human beings. During our stay, they developed intercultural competence and compassion for less fortunate individuals. We became close with many, who shared their experiences from their treacherous journeys to Germany to their trials and tribulations living as refugees in a foreign land. We learned of torture on the long journey, imprisonment in Libya, being hunted in Romania and Hungary, robbed, assaulted, and in some cases kept as slaves, especially in Libya, where open slave markets sprang up during the height of the migration. Though physically safe from the turmoil and danger of their home countries, they now have to deal with German bureaucracy of which they know nothing, with indifferent and ill-trained civil servants, and often hostile fellow humans.

The refugees we befriended were extremely grateful to us for traveling far to be with them, keep them company, and make friends. If every German had the opportunity to listen to refugees and learn about their travails, they would most likely change their tone and be more open and welcoming to any refugees and asylum seekers. It is my hope that anti-immigrant people around the world could see and experience what we learned and experienced.

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ENDNOTES

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⁵ Maximilian Holscher. "Security in Flüchtlingslagern: Im Schnellkurs zum Wachmann." *HNA*. <https://www.hna.de/politik/schnellkurs-wachmann-5931949.html>

⁶ Anette Dowideit. "Gefährliche Beschützer." *Welt*. <https://www.welt.de/print/wams/politik/article153482537/Gefaehrliche-Beschuetzer.html>
All translations from German to English are mine.
"Einige Wachleute hätten Waffen eingeschleust, andere sich betrunken. Immer wieder habe es fremdenfeindliche Parolen gegeben: ‚Denen muss man mit einem Schlagstock die Zähne rausschlagen‘ sagte einer laut Protokoll. Ein anderer: Wie gerne würde ich die Asylantenweiber ficken.' Der Chef der Wachfirma sagt, von den Vorwürfen sei ihm nichts bekannt. Das Ordnungsamt überprüfe seine Mitarbeiter sehr genau."

⁷ "Sexuelle Gewalt in der Bayernkaserne: Flüchtlingsfrauen leiden unter katastrophalen Zuständen." *Online Focus*. https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/auch-waechter-unter-den-taetern-spd-klagt-an-in-der-bayernkaserne-werden-fluechtlingsfrauen-missbraucht_id_4617494.html
"Es gibt so wenige Unterbringungsmöglichkeiten, dass viele Betreiber machen können, was sie wollen", sagt Diana Henniges, Vorsitzende von Moabit hilft. „In einigen Unterkünften gibt es rechtsfreie Räume, in denen Security- oder Cateringunternehmen ihre Nebengeschäfte mit Drogenhandel und Prostitution führen."

⁸ "Sexuelle Gewalt in der Bayernkaserne: Flüchtlingsfrauen leiden unter katastrophalen Zuständen." *Online Focus*. https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/auch-waechter-unter-den-taetern-spd-klagt-an-in-der-bayernkaserne-werden-fluechtlingsfrauen-missbraucht_id_4617494.html
Auch das Münchener Frauennetzwerk kennt die Situation für Flüchtlingsfrauen in München: "Beobachtungen in der Bayernkaserne zeigen, dass tagtäglich Vergewaltigungen, sexuelle Gefälligkeitsdienstleistungen und Prostitution stattfinden", schreibt die Organisation laut BR in einer Pressemitteilung. Dem Netzwerk zufolge hätten die Frauen, die in der Bayernkaserne untergebracht sind, keine Möglichkeiten ihre Zimmer abzuschließen. Sanitäräume müssten sie sich von Männern aufschließen lassen, heißt es beim „BR“.

⁹ Stephan Frank. "Deutschland: Die (un-) heimliche Macht muslimischer Dolmetscher." *Gastone Institute*. <https://de.gastoneinstitute.org/8523/muslimische-dolmetscher> Hassan: "Sie wollten uns schlagen,

haben uns beschimpft. Und der Dolmetscher hat dies während des Übersetzens alles verneint und hat behauptet, dass dies alles nicht passiert sei."

¹⁰ "Deutschland: Die (un-) heimliche Macht muslimischer Dolmetscher." *Gastone Institute*.
<https://de.gatestoneinstitute.org/8523/muslimische-dolmetscher> In Österreich verurteilt das Landesgericht Salzburg im Juni 2016 einen Dschihadisten zu zwei Jahren Haft. Er hatte für die Al-Nusra-Front in Syrien gekämpft. Nebenbei wird bekannt: "Der 29-Jährige war im Oktober 2015 als Flüchtling nach Salzburg gekommen und half am Grenzübergang Freilassing als Dolmetscher."

¹¹ "Deutschland: Die (un-) heimliche Macht muslimischer Dolmetscher." *Gastone Institute*.
<https://de.gatestoneinstitute.org/8523/muslimische-dolmetscher> "So habe im Sommer 2014 ein Mann namens Mohamad A. Asyl durch die Außenstelle in Bremen bekommen. Doch anders als angegeben stammte der Mann nicht aus Syrien, sondern aus Rumänien und hatte auch einen anderen Namen."