

CHAPTER 13

SOME PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS FROM INSIDE OF *WIR SCHAFFEN DAS (2015)*

Dirk Bustorf

District manager and team leader for a holistic project in a Hamburg Sinti

Abstract

This contribution is a narrative text written by an anthropologist who, after years researching and lecturing in Ethiopia, has now devoted himself to managing refugee shelter in Hamburg (at *Fördern und Wohnen AöR*). The text reconstitutes his personal memories and his growing involvement with this cause, in the early and hectic period of the 2015 German humanitarian response to the incoming flow of people fleeing conflict and disaster in the Middle East and Africa.

Keywords: refugees, emergency response, *Wir schaffen das*, personal account

Prelude: first half of 2015 (notes from my memory)

“My first 2015- refugee” is a young man from Eritrea. As I wait for my train at the Hamburg main station, I see him fall (or jump?) from the platform onto the rails and then lie there motionless. For a moment, I check if any train is approaching. Quickly, I climb down onto the rail bed. The young man is only half conscious and weighs almost nothing. I lift him up, and another passenger takes him from above and pulls him onto the platform. I guess the man is dehydrated and didn’t eat for a long time. Maybe, he travelled unnoticed on a freight train on his way from Italy, or so; like in a certain story of John Steinbeck, I once read. I’m in a hurry climbing up because a train comes into view.

In the news I watch thousands of exhausted and displaced people, men, women, children, young and old, full of hope or almost broken. They run through the night, nearly without any luggage. They wait in overcrowded camps, sitting behind barbed wires. They pour out of trains and busses to be transferred further on the next day.

Asylum applications in Germany in 2015: 441.899

Refugees who came to Hamburg in 2015: 40.868

Refugees assigned to stay in Hamburg for their asylum procedure in 2015: 22.315

In Germany, the atmosphere is kind of electrified. For a brief historical moment Germans turn into enthusiastic citizens, again. They greet the newcomers at train stations as if they were from another part of the country which had been locked behind an iron curtain for decades. The wave of voluntary support and political backing from the public is extraordinary (and still hasn’t ebbed completely in 2021). The administration is under a stress test on all levels. Sometimes even administrative rules and procedures are shortened (in Germany!) to be able to organize accommodation and infrastructure for the support of the masses of refugees. However, in the shadow of these developments, destructive powers are preparing for their time to come.

I feel a strong inner need to do something meaningful in this situation. This is history in the making. I don’t want to be just an amazed couch potato in front of the TV. Shall I start an anthropological research project on this? No, the administration needs practical support. They will not manage these numbers without a strong engagement of the citizens. We must do everything to facilitate a smooth welcome process. Then, we need successful integration to prevent the xenophobic mob to take over.

Some days a week, I go to the big exhibition halls of the Congress Centre which serve as temporary central refugee accommodation. One of the halls is filled with cartons and plastic bags stuffed full of cloths, hygiene articles, toys and bits and pieces donated by the citizens of Hamburg. One would just go there and would immediately find something practical to do. The main task is to bring order into the chaos: cloths must be sorted by type and size, boxes must be carried and labelled, corridors through the storage piles must be established or cleared, and useless things are to be identified and put into the garbage.

Amongst the garbage I find a necklace made of huge ambers, beach finds, perhaps donated by an old lady. I am proud of her and of all the donators who took the opportunity to clear their wardrobes and at the same time to do some charity. I will sell the amber later and donate the money to some refugee-related project.

There is not much talk in the hall. Volunteers are busy and concentrated on their task. From the other exhibition halls, which function as provisory accommodation, we hear the litany of the announcer: “Mr. Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad, please come to section A.; Mr. Parviz Haidari, please come to section D; Mr. Abdurasaq Abdullah Muhammad, please come to section C; Mr. Gebre Hailemaryam, please come to section E; Mr. Ali Abdel Fattah ...; Mr. Hajji Ali Umar....”¹ The announcer is to become my colleague later in the year. At this very moment, however, I have no clue that this could ever happen.

Emergency accommodation (subsequent notes from November and December)

On 1 November 2015, the so-called refugee crisis in Europe is at its peak, I start a new professional life. Before, my last proper job was teaching social anthropology in Gondar, Ethiopia. After that, I had some assignments as a freelance anthropologist. Now, I enter the foggy terrain of the academy of the fire brigade with a small bunch of yellow flowers in my hands, a thin folder with basic information on my new employer (including a very important list of abbreviations) and a very vague idea about what to expect next.

After having passed the seminar buildings of the Centre, I surround burned-out car wrecks and Potemkin houses for firefighter training purposes. Then, I discover the building with the huge training hall made available by the fire brigade to host an emergency accommodation unit for 300 refugees.

¹ All are names in this paper have been changed to protect the anonymity of the data subjects.

My new colleagues recognise me immediately because only some weeks before they as well had been welcomed in their new positions with such yellow flowers. My colleagues seem to be very likeable but there is not much time to talk. They are surrounded by crowds of people with needs, questions and complaints of all sorts. I find my way to our office alone – a small container with one chair, two tables, a drawer, and a laptop without internet access. I cannot find time to put my flowers into a non-existing vase but immerse myself immediately into the reality of *Wir schaffen das*.²

We are so busy that we hold urine for hours. We forget to eat. We run into the hall in search of someone whom we usually do not find. In the hall there is always a crowd around each of us. Everybody wants to be heard, tell his or her story, ask about anything, complain, or – above all – urgently demand “TRANSFER” to a better accommodation. Sometimes the crowd loses patience. Some people shout at us or come physically much too close. For this reason, we do not go into the hall without security guards in the background. In case we would find the time for a cigarette or coffee break, we would stand together in the cold, behind a corner, in the fog, and report to each other. If we do not miss the time, we can get food in a garage together with the refugees. We are exhausted, we care for each other, and we sometimes burst into laughter like crazy – laughter of exhaustion, of disbelief, of despair, of compassion, of doing something great.

Most of the refugees in the hall are very friendly. They have time to observe us working, and they understand how difficult it is to organize the camp³ and to listen to everybody. They try to support us by translating; by trying to find the people we are searching for, or by helping to move bunk beds and mattresses. They try hard not to complain. They are wonderful.

There is an Iraqi architect who built skyscrapers in Bahrain in his former life. When he reached Germany, he decided to go to Hamburg because he saw photos of its interesting architecture. There is a young man who lost his mother, father, and siblings just a few weeks ago. They drowned in the sea on their way to Greece. Now, he sits on his bed the entire day and tries to learn German with his smartphone.

² *Wir schaffen das*, Engl. “We can [or will] do it”, “We’ll manage it”, “We’ll make it”. The complete sentence of Angela Merkel on 31 August 2015 was, “I say very simply: Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these things must be: We have achieved [managed] so much – we can do it! We can do it, and where something stands in our way, it must be overcome, it has to be worked on. The federal government will do everything in its power – together with the states, together with the municipalities – to achieve just that”

³ Informally, everybody uses the English word “camp” for such a place in order to avoid the historically spoiled German word “Lager”.

He puts all his grief and all his energy into it. There is an old man from Aleppo who sits on a chair at one of the entrances, constantly praying with his *tesbi*. He greets each of us whenever we pass him with his hand at his heart and with a friendly smile – *as-salāmu ‘alaikum*, grandfather. There is the lady from Aleppo who suddenly lays down on the floor at the entrance in protest. Her family had a big house with servants and two cars. Her husband was a businessman. Now, her house is in ruins, and everything is gone. She acts as if she has a mental disorder, but I think her reaction is pretty normal under such circumstances. People show us photos of their homes in Syria on their smartphones, photos of their relatives in the UK, in Sweden, or still in Afghanistan. Children play everywhere in the hall and on the square in front of the garages of the fire brigade.

Note: A resident received a call this morning. He told his friends that his uncle called him and said his mother and brother were hit by a land mine in Afghanistan and were torn to pieces. The resident went into shock and had a spasm of the whole body, similar to an epileptic fit. The cramp lasted almost 30 minutes.

The social managers open an “office” in the hall, two tables and some chairs. The parents of one of our team members were refugees from Afghanistan in the 90s. Now, she is our translator. We may also use the security guards as translators into Arabic or Turkish. But we prefer to communicate without intermediary. Each team member has some special language skills and experience in communicating without common language. I start collecting important Dari vocabulary from the people but never find time to learn more than a few phrases. The Eritreans know some Amharic. My more-than-half-forgotten four semesters of Turkish turn out to be helpful. Even my Portuguese is of some use.

Note: Mr. M. is psychologically stressed. He also suffers from diabetes (see note by the Red Cross). The doctors at our facility examined him: it was found that he had severe back pain (chronic). He also suffers from tinnitus (see file).

Note: Mr. H. has an aunt and cousins in camp XY. He would like to be moved to this place so that he can be with his family. He is already on an internal waiting list there. Our contact person at camp XY is Mr. X. It would be great if you could establish contact with Mr. X. (see file).

Note: Mr. A. has a diploma from a university in Afghanistan. This would have to be translated and recognised. I think, at this stage of his procedure it is too early to focus on such a question,

but we could send him to the university welcome centre for general information – I guess they are quite busy at the moment ;-)...

Note: Mr. J. has received his rejection letter regarding the asylum application (unfortunately there is no copy of this in the reference file). According to his own information, he already established contact with a lawyer which he would prefer to use. So far, no feedback from Mr. J. regarding the current status of his affairs.

Note: Mr. Y. states that he is only 17 but was estimated to be 18. Maybe you can follow up on that.

Our biggest problem is not losing overview of who stays with us. Many people try to move forward to Sweden, but they do not give us a note when leaving.⁴ People regularly move their bunk beds when we aren't present during night-time. Every morning, the beds are arranged in a different way. The only method to find somebody is to shout the name as loud as possible. I'm good at this.

We start to give numbers to each bed place and ask people not to change beds, but in vain. Changing beds and moving beds is the best way to avoid conflicts between the different characters and the different nationalities in the hall. Therefore, the security guards – against our will – are involved in this constant rearrangement. During night-time they try to manage conflicts in this way.

Our new system is to climb up to a kind of balcony directly under the high roof of the hall. From there, we take a picture once a week. From this picture we produce a rough map and fill in the numbers of bed places, hoping that most people didn't move to other beds.

The Arabs and Afghani people tend to arrange the bunk beds of their families in a way that they each form a kind of yard. These yards are connected to each other according to kin ties or places of origin by narrow pathways between veiled bunk beds. From above, the clusters of beds resemble the layout of Oriental bazar quarters or the backyards of Merkato in Addis Ababa. The Eritreans have pushed together all the bunk beds to form a large continuous sleeping area. They entirely shield this area from the outside with cloths. They sleep on the lower bunks using the upper slatted frames and mattresses as a kind of roof. It is easy to find an Eritrean because they tend to stick together in this sleeping area or "tent". For security reasons, we arrange beds near the exit of the hall for the few Eritrean women and African single mothers with their babies. At least we should keep the emergency escape routes free.

⁴ Refugees were permitted to temporarily leave the camp.

Note: This week a shisha was pulled in by the security personnel after residents had glowed coal on a stove under(!)the bed. There was heavy smoke development.

For the refugees the only thing to do is to wait for their registration. Some have already applied for asylum when they entered Germany, others were directly transferred to Hamburg without a proper procedure. The authorities near the border are overstrained. Thus, things are driven forward by the Hamburg immigration authorities who are supported by soldiers. The latter would come to the “camp” for some hours from time to time. After registration one must wait for the day of transfer to the next category of “camp” or accommodation unit. Some people must wait ages for their being registered others get their papers ready at an instance. The same is true with transfers. No matter how long or short one must wait, it is too long, anyhow. The hall is not an acceptable place to stay for more than a few nights. However, it takes weeks for most until they are declared “ready for transfer”. The provisory heating doesn’t work well, it is too loud to find sleep, and there is almost no private sphere.

According to the distribution key that defines the number of refugees to be distributed among each of the German states, some people are transferred to other places in the country. Some are happy about such a transfer because they expect to meet relatives in the other place. Most people, however, seem to prefer to stay in Hamburg. They expect that it is easier to find work and support from countrymen in a big city. In any case, it’s not their decision and it is not ours. There is nothing they, or we, can do about it. Still, we are urged to discuss it repeatedly with most of them. Especially the Eastern German states aren’t popular among the refugees who are already informed that – in tendency – the East is more racist than the West. Those who get a transfer within Hamburg do agree most of the time.

The atmosphere in the hall is thickened with emotions. We have such an intensive contact with many of the refugees. Therefore, it is important to us to say goodbye to each and every one of our “guests”. We would wish them luck, shake hands, and wave after them. In December, the camp must be closed down because the provisory heating of the hall doesn’t function well enough. After all the refugees left and the hall is empty, we ourselves are “transferred” to other “camps” to support other colleagues.

Final remarks (2021)

In retrospect, the question if Chancellor Merkel’s statement *Wir schaffen das* could hold water is a matter of perspective and interpretation.

On the ground, during the initial phase of refugee management this paper is dedicated to, the main task was the practical management of, and primary care for, people who entered the country in masses during a relatively short period of time. The basic assignment for refugee managers was to facilitate a sufficient quantity and quality of accommodation and basic medical as well as social services. Additionally, from the beginning onward, it was important to give refugees orientation in their first steps in Germany and to support their cultural learning. They had to be directed to institutions that would support them in their legal affairs and asylum procedures. Furthermore, it was crucial to generate public acceptance and to attend the forming of supportive local networks around accommodation facilities newly stamped out of the ground. In Hamburg, a relatively well organised city state with a public social enterprise with great expertise, I suppose, *haben wir das geschafft* or “we did manage this”. After the initial phase of refugee management other phases follow. They include facilitating and maintaining a relatively higher standard accommodation, supporting integration into the standard welfare and educational systems, giving orientation concerning language and integration courses, professional training, and jobs. Unfortunately, from the side of the immigration authorities, these phases also may include structural chicane and/or deportation, sometimes even into war zones.

To many Germans of different political backgrounds, but most explicitly among conservatives and right-winged people “the 2015-refugee crisis” became synonymous with a temporary loss of control of the state over its borders. On the one hand, successful integration processes strengthened the general acceptance of immigrants and Germany as a country of immigration, on the other hand anti-migrant as well as racist sentiments were “refined” and politically “better” organised. On both sides, there are voices claiming that Germany “did enough and now it is the turn of other European countries”. During the 2021-election campaign, politicians of centre-left as well as of centre-right parties stated that “2015 must not be repeated”. This sentence had a calming effect on the electorate which already felt overstrained by the challenges of the pandemic and by anticipating the drastic measures that are necessary to mitigate climate change. However, while the so-called “2015-refugee crisis” may have become history already, along both sides of the EU borders as well as in many refugee camps, on Greek islands and elsewhere, or on tiny boats on the Mediterranean Sea, a terrific humanitarian crisis proceeds for hundreds of thousands of refugees until today and challenges all claims of “European values”. Anyway, I’d guess if one would ask my colleagues of 2015 if we would be prepared to “manage it again”, their answer would be “yes, sure”.