

Refugees greeted in Germany with a wave of solidarity

By Marianne Arens
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“Refugees welcome!” This is the slogan greeting refugees travelling from Hungary upon their arrival in Germany. Hundreds of local residents have gathered spontaneously at various destinations to welcome refugees when their trains and buses arrive, offering them bottles of water, food and gifts.

More than a hundred waited for hours at Frankfurt Main central station late into Saturday night after it was announced that a train carrying refugees would arrive from Vienna. Packed lunches and cuddly toys were piled up in the main station hall. In nearby Fulda and Kassel, residents waited on platforms in the middle of the night. “I want the refugees to feel at home here,” one young woman in Fulda told a local reporter.

In Neu-Isenburg (in southern Hesse) buses with refugees arrived one after the other on Sunday. Following their weeklong odyssey, the refugees, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, are due to be quartered in the former print shop premises of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Throughout the weekend, residents of Neu-Isenburg and the surrounding area gathered outside the print shop premises. Amongst those gathered were young workers, who themselves came from the Middle East and North Africa and were ready to assist and translate.

The state government, however, had ordered that the building be heavily guarded by security staff, who prevented residents from entering the premises. A spokeswoman for the Hessen social minister Stefan Grüttner (Christian Democratic Union) declared at the opening of the hall on Sunday morning that there were “enough interpreters on site”.

Lively discussions took place and new friendships were struck when refugees emerged from the building.

“It’s a shame they do not let us in. What are they afraid of?” Franziska asked. She had come to the old print shop as soon as she heard that Syrians would be arriving. “Several of my friends spontaneously offered to help as translators because they speak Arabic and also come from Syria or Iraq. However, they were not allowed to help.”

Franziska comes from Brazil and is married to a Syrian from Homs, who works in Neu-Isenburg as a bricklayer. “I’m glad there is so much readiness to help,” she said. Her little daughter insisted on donating her ball “to the children in the hall.”

Nidal left Turkey 10 days ago. Mohammad translated his report into English. For two years, Nidal had vainly searched for work in order to support his family, before he decided to go to Germany via Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Austria. “My family is still in Turkey, and is waiting to hear from me”, said Nidal. “I have five children: three daughters and two sons, the eldest of whom remained in Aleppo because he is trying to finish his studies. But that’s very difficult. The war has destroyed everything.”

“It is the children who suffer most, that’s clear,” said Serpil from Offenbach. She heard on the radio of the arrival of the refugees and has been waiting for hours in front of Neu-Isenburg hall. “I have been collecting on behalf of the refugees for more than a week, and neighbours and friends have also helped,” Serpil said. “These people must be helped, no matter where they come from. Syria, for example, is totally destroyed, I feel really sorry for the people.”

Antje from Neu-Isenburg had already turned out the day before. She said: “I feel a great need to show people that they are welcome here. This is a tradition in Neu-Isenburg: The town was founded by Huguenot refugees. It’s important to welcome these people. They have gone through enough terrible experiences, every one of them. It is even worse, when one sees in Germany the most recent horrific photos of their plight.”

When asked about the causes of the mass flight, the subject of war comes up at once. “This is a very difficult issue,” Antje replied. “There are many examples where the consequences of government interference were catastrophic, Iraq, for example. The US invasion had dire consequences. But what about Syria, was it not the case that nothing happened there?”

When informed that in fact the United States has heavily

intervened in Syria, by systematically upgrading Islamist extremists against Assad with money from the CIA and American allies such as Saudi Arabia, Antje responded: “Yes, that’s right, I understand the argument. These questions have to be looked at more closely. “

Two students from Eritrea, Zemuy and Meron, also appeared before the entrance of the premises. They had risked the dangerous route across the Mediterranean to Europe: “We were 10 hours in a ship from Libya before we were picked up by the Italian coast guard. Then it took almost two days until we could go ashore in Sicily.” From Sicily they travelled via Bologna and Milan by train to Munich, where they arrived virtually simultaneously with the refugees from Syria.

When asked about their objectives, the two said: “Our dream is our engineering studies; we just hope to have a chance to be able to study in peace. In Eritrea we had no chance.

“In Eritrea, further education is expensive and young people are forced into military service for many years. That is why young men from Eritrea currently constitute a large proportion of the refugees who arrive in the Frankfurt-Main-Rhine area.”

Another Syrian then approached those waiting outside the hall. His name is Saleh and his family in the Syrian city of Deir Ezzor are waiting for news from him. He tells us that his wife, three sons and a daughter are still living in their house, which was partly destroyed during the civil war.

He had gone to Turkey to seek a new home for the family, but had found it “impossible to find work. I’ve tried it, but if you work without permits, then the police turn up quickly and you end up in jail. I decided, therefore, to leave Istanbul after five months and have wandered on foot through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Austria and Hungary to come here. My shoes are completely worn out.”

New shoes and clothes are plentiful in Neu-Isenburg. A fresh delivery took place during our interviews—a workforce in Hattersheim has collected clothes for the refugees. “It goes without saying,” said one of those delivering the clothes, “We are only doing what everyone should do. Just write: these things were collected by the Team Unique Hattersheim”.

There has been no end in recent days to the truckloads full of shoes, clothes, toys and other items arriving in Neu-Isenburgs. Posters are now hung with the text: “No more donations! Many thanks! Reception capacities are exhausted! “Also, there are numerous offers for every kind of personal assistance. It is noticeable, however, that virtually everything is organised privately, with people communicating via Facebook, Twitter and SMS.

With regard to the organisation in the hall, it is once again

primarily volunteers—firefighters, Maltese Red Cross—who are doing the work. This was confirmed by Dr. Werner Haag, who is himself a volunteer. Although retired, he has formerly assisted in the Philippines and South Africa as a member of the German Doctors Association. Now he takes care of the refugees in Neu-Isenburg.

“People are scared because they do not know what will happen next,” Dr. Haag said. “There are many young people here, including children. The average age is around 30. “Two patients were transferred to the hospital due to coughing and suspected TB, another one was taken to the hospital because of severe burns.”

“We’re a rich country,” says the doctor. “We can handle that easily. But what comes next for the young people. They have to be given a chance to integrate into the labour market. That is the most important thing now. “

Aynur, who has come here with his mother and sister, reported that his parents originate from Gaziantepin, Turkey, just 50 kilometres from the Syrian border. His mother added: “I come from Turkey, but I am a Kurd. Many Syrians live in my hometown, where the Syrian language is spoken today. I came here 20 years ago because my family lives there in very poor conditions. Now I have two children here in Neu-Isenburg.”

The young Aynur says he was interested in the political issues that led to flight and expulsion. “You cannot fight this war with ever new wars,” he said, and his mother agreed. “People do not want to come here actually,” Aynur continues. “The only thing they want is that the war finally stops.”

“Refugees welcome” was also the slogan of a demonstration of around 400 participants in Heppenheim, where a refugee camp was set on fire last week.

The enormous and growing readiness to help on the part of the working population stands in stark contrast to the reaction of the German political elite. On Sunday evening, the government decided to declare Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania so-called “safe countries of origin”. Next in line is naming Turkey a “safe country of origin”. This means that in future refugees will be segregated according to ethnicity and country of origin and can be deported much more easily.

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