

“Nobody can live like this”: A young refugee in Hamburg speaks out

By Ute Reissner and Benjamin Hader
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Around 800 refugees have been living in a tent city since July in the outlying and impoverished Hamburg suburb of Jenfeld. The tents were erected in a park on the edge of a residential area, one of several temporary camps in which 10,000 people have been confined in the northern German city this year. The majority of the people, around one third, come from Syria, followed by refugees from Albania, Iraq and Eritrea.

While a right-wing initiative protested against the establishment of the refugee camp in Jenfeld's Moorpark, receiving high-profile coverage from the media and politicians, many local residents and local institutions are making great efforts to assist the new arrivals.

A local school set aside one of its rooms at its own initiative as a store for donated clothing. By contrast, a sign hangs at the camp's entrance refusing donations.

In the large tents put up by the German Red Cross, lines of fold-up beds are available for sleeping. There is no other space for the refugees.

In August, all camp residents had to be sealed off from the outside to treat the skin condition scabies because the outbreak had been ignored for weeks until medical treatment was provided. Doctors and other helpers have repeatedly protested over the inadequate treatment available for other infectious diseases.

The camp is surrounded by fences and heavily guarded. Visitors and the media are not allowed to enter. Through the material covering the fences, it is possible to see shameful conditions: small groups sitting around on wooden benches and others walking around. Prams are pushed across the square, while older children ride bicycles or tricycles. Several washing lines have been put up, and blankets and sleeping bags hang on the fences. Inside the fence, several containers have been set up where offices for

the camp's administrators and sanitary facilities are accommodated. Uniformed guards patrol the location and control the only entrance.

On the ground in front of the gate, some young men pass the time by playing ball. Others sit under solitary trees or on the ground, obviously trying to get some space to themselves, since there is no privacy in the camp.

Here we spoke to a young man who told us that he comes from Syria. He fetched Lieth, his friend, who speaks English and told us his story.

Lieth is only 19 years old, but appears younger. The young man made it from Damascus to Hamburg with his 16-year-old brother. He said that, in a year, he would have been finished school.

“We didn't want to join the Syrian army, that's why we fled,” he explained. Government officials came to his house and confiscated his passport so that he could not flee the country and avoid military service. His parents subsequently said, “If you have to go to war, you will die, either in the government's army or one of the militias. Someone will force you to fight. There is only one way out, you have to get out of here.”

The two boys travelled first to Turkey and searched for a ship to take them to Greece. They took a train from Athens to Macedonia. The local police sold them expensive train tickets to travel towards Serbia. Roughly 6 kilometres before the border, they were offloaded in a small town.

In the middle of the night, they crossed the Macedonian-Serbian land border on foot. Then they waited for three days until they had the necessary papers to travel further. Again on foot, they walked across Serbia to Hungary.

They had barely arrived when they were detained by the Hungarian police, who wanted to identify them.

When they refused to give their fingerprints out of fear, they were threatened with six months in jail. So they eventually relented. It was all in all a very bad experience, Lieth said.

After a few difficult days in Budapest, they were able to travel to Vienna on a packed train. They then obtained a ticket to Munich with great difficulty.

Friends had advised them to travel on from Munich to Hamburg. It was surely better there, not so overcrowded as in Munich. Lieth never expected to end up in a tent camp in Hamburg.

“In Damascus,” the 19-year-old said, “it was dangerous, but we at least had a house. We had a roof over our heads. I did not expect this from Germany—that one isn’t allowed to live in a house here. Twenty people are accommodated in one tent—men, women and children, all together. There is even a small baby in my tent. It is six months old.

“It is so cold at night that we cannot sleep. We walk around the whole night so we do not freeze. Many can’t cope. Every day between five and six people are taken to hospital. If one needs a doctor, it takes a long time before someone comes, if at all.

“We get something to eat here, but no money. Therefore, we can’t do anything. We can’t leave the camp, we can’t even go into the city, because we have no money for the travel ticket.

“We have no idea what is going to happen next. I always say I would like to learn German. But they always put me off—not now, another time. That’s what happens all the time. Nobody tells us about anything, they say something different each day. This is not only my experience. Friends I have made here are in the same position. We just want to learn and work.

“After all the money we spent, all the effort, after the difficult journey, we are sitting here in a tent camp and have absolutely no idea what will happen. Nobody can live like this. Occasionally I am able to speak with my mother in Damascus. She now regrets sending us to Germany.”

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