

Volunteer for refugees in Hamburg: “If we do not do the work, no one will”

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14 October 2015

Since early August, refugees numbering between several hundred and 5,000 have been arriving at the main rail station in Hamburg on a daily basis. Ten to 20 percent of those arriving are children. For many refugees Hamburg is just a stopover, where they wait for connecting trains to Denmark and other parts of Scandinavia in northern Europe.

People come from Syria, Afghanistan and North Africa and are fleeing war and terror. At the borders of the European Union they face further harassment, including ill treatment at the hands of the police and state forces in Hungary.

Many spend just one night in private accommodation, the local theatre, social centres, churches or mosques. In mid-September, however, up to 300 people were forced to spend the night in the foyer of the main train station. They had to sleep on blankets and mats on the bare stone floor. This situation arose due to the cancellation and late arrival of trains, the lack of proper information, and plain exhaustion. In addition, a number of refugees were forced to flee from violent clashes arising from a demonstration against right-wingers. In the course of the protest, several dozen right-wing extremists attacked refugees and protesters.

Mothers with crying children sat amongst their baggage; older refugees stared blankly into space. Those travelling by train—Hamburg Central Station is frequented by up to half a million people every day—threaded their way through the seated and sleeping people.

The refugees have been left to their fate by the Hamburg Senate, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens. In a short time, however, teams of volunteers assembled to assist the refugees. These volunteers have kept up their work for the past six weeks, working round the clock.

A community association set up two tents on a station forecourt: one to allow refugees to rest with seating, and the other for provisional first aid. The refugees are completely exhausted by their often months-long arduous passage; many are traumatised and injured. In addition to about 50 adults, babies and toddlers are also treated daily. The tents are due

to be replaced with new tents and then by a container provided by a welfare association to support the work of volunteers on site.

The voluntary helpers comprising around 220 people have come together independently and form the hub for the care of refugees in need, providing protection, logistics and assisting them with their itinerary.

They organise their arrival and transfer from the station to sleeping places and tent camps. They provide first aid, food, drink, warm clothing, sturdy shoes, and money for tickets; consult timetables; help with translation; and provide assistance for those departing to a new destination.

The volunteers receive donations, support and basic foodstuffs and commodities from individuals, official associations, groups and companies. They receive no support from the city administration or political parties. In addition, the helpers have no legal protection.

The volunteers are drawn from broad sections of the population: former refugees, migrants, younger and older people, workers and civil servants, paramedics and doctors.

They attempt to make the passage of refugees somewhat more bearable and prevent the situation from escalating to a point where tensions erupt and the refugees appear in a poor light. Occasions where conflicts have arisen among and between groups of refugees have been exploited by the German press and political parties.

Many helpers work permanently at the main station and sleep in shifts, some doing this for the past six weeks. Translators are often active round the clock, sometimes working more than 30 hours at a time.

Refugees are met by helpers at the makeshift wooden stand installed in the foyer of the main station. Behind the table sits Elif. When asked to describe her work, she says:

“The helpers bring the refugees to a central point and provide them with food and drink, so they can relax briefly. Then it is established where they want to go (somewhere in Germany or another country) and whether they have been registered. The refugees are gathered together 30 minutes before train departure, for example, to Sweden, and brought

to their train. We speak with the conductor and ensure their further journey.

“The operation resulted from migrants already here in Germany who noted that more and more refugees were arriving—but there was no information desk and no communication possibilities. When it became known what we were doing, more and more volunteers reported to help. There are now about 70 interpreters and about 150 helpers.

“The railway should be pleased we are here; otherwise, the police would simply throw the refugees out of the station. They would have to stay in Hamburg, and the city would be even more crowded, although most refugees want to move on to Sweden and other destinations.

“There are no immediate problems here, but we would like more support. No one here is from the city council; we are all volunteers. Even refugees who themselves arrived in Hamburg just a few months ago are helping out, working up to 20 hours a day and not getting a cent for it. From the little money they get from the authorities they are even expected to pay for their station tickets.

“The city authorities say they cannot give us any support because we have no proper sponsorship. We are not a club, but just volunteers. I wish they would organise sleeping accommodation. There are so many empty rooms here, why does the administration fail to make them available?

“We are also prevented from preparing any food. We are not allowed to prepare filled rolls in the tents, and no kitchen or cooking space has been provided. Very simple things that do not take much effort are not possible. When it comes down to it, the authorities at the station do nothing to support the work of the helpers.

“The initial reception centre in Hamburg-Harburg is already so crowded that 300 to 500 people sleep on the street every night—and only because there is no proper cooperation and communication.

“We get donations of food from private citizens and bakers here at the station. A nearby mosque takes in 400 refugees every night, where they are provided with food. Support also comes from the local theatre and most recently from a welfare association. Passersby press €10 notes in our hands, every euro counts. We rely heavily on donations. Sometimes we need to spend a lot of money on tickets.

“Some refugees do not even have money for tickets. We communicate with the railways regarding how many refugees have arrived and whether they can transport them further. So far, that has worked well, but some days it does not. We do not want to create problems for other passengers who have paid for their travel. As long as the cooperation and communication takes place, it works quite well.

“The extent of the refugee crisis was predictable. When

war continues for such a long time and gets closer to Europe, then it is clear people can no longer be expected to stay. This is why so many people are coming to Europe. It makes you wonder, why were the preparations not made to prevent the current chaos?

“In Hamburg-Bergedorf, camp beds were installed in a derelict hardware store and the refugees were told: take it or leave it! Once again it was volunteers who intervened. They taped the windows over and brought food. Previously everybody could look through the windows, a completely inhumane way to treat people. And beforehand the refugees were told they would receive decent accommodation.

“For us, the work will continue as long as the refugees keep coming. This will go on for the coming weeks and months. And the next step must be to provide the refugees with the best possible chance to integrate: offering German language courses, help with the authorities, how one conducts oneself in Europe. We want to definitely continue our work.

“Rejected refugees and those who have no money are left on their own and often fall into the hands of criminals. Many have sold everything for their death-defying escape. The sick, old and poor have no chance and must remain in the war zones.

“One issue highlights the contrast between the readiness to help by layers of the population and the cynicism of the establishment: Hamburg is one of the cities applying as a location for the 2024 Olympic Games. A referendum on the city’s application is due to take place on November 29.

“The cost of hosting the Games is estimated at €11.2 billion. The president of the German Olympic Sports Confederation, Alfons Hörmann, who works closely with the Hamburg Senate, expressed his concern at the end of September that Hamburg’s application could fail because ‘broad layers of the population’ were of the opinion that the money would be better spent on the refugees. The refugee crisis, he concluded, had come ‘at the wrong time’.”



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