

Article in El País by Belen Dominguez Cebrian

GERMANY MOVING TOWARD THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEE MINORS (28/10/2016)

Host families, guardians, work placement, flat-shares, such are the methods civil society has found to promote the coexistence of Germans with asylum seekers across the country. Against the backdrop of the greatest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, the concept of integration has penetrated German civil society like a vaccine, in spite of exceptions, mostly in the eastern part of the country. The country received 890,000 asylum applications in 2015 alone, and 210,000 in 2016. According to the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM), 52,000 are minors who crossed this year, some using only the Balkan Road, others surviving the immensity of the Mediterranean. According to the Federal Statistical Office, Germany last year took charge of 42,300 minors who fled their country alone. After living in a completely foreign land for a year, the youngest only have one concern: providing for their future.

“The first thing to do is learn German”, explains Ali, an Afghan lighting technician at a local amateur theatre who, after having lived as a refugee in Iran, arrived in Bremen (north-west Germany) fourteen months ago with his older brother. “In Turkey, I worked 15 hours a day on a farm”, he complains, while showing the middle finger of his right hand: “It was cut while I was cleaning one of the machines”, an incident that marked the beginning of his journey. “My mother paid the mafia 1000 euros and they put me on a small boat to Greece with 40 other people. It was hell”, he relates.

Ali just turned 18. He has “finally” been able to leave an old hotel turned into an apartment building for 120 other refugee minors, and begin living in a flat he shares with two German students from the University of Bremen. “This is my home from now on”, and he looks around him through his dark glasses. Similarly, for the most part, the tens of thousands of young people who arrived alone in Germany between 2015 and 2016 have already resigned themselves to this idea. Going back is not part of their plans.

Entering the job market

Lomine, a 17-year old Algerian, is completing work placements in a Peugeot garage; Ali, the Afghan, in an IT company; Mohamed, in a construction company where he repairs chalet roofs in a small town in Lower Saxony; Omar, in a bakery... “Now that’s integration”, exclaims Uwe Rosenberg, smiling. He is a former postal worker who, since summer 2015, has been investing his retirement in giving back a future to unaccompanied minors, the one that they themselves thought they had lost on the way to the EU.

And the fact is that, according to UNICEF (the UN programme for the protection of children), “[unaccompanied] minors are the ones who, along the way, are at highest risk for abuse. They could fall into the hands of mafia organisations linked to child labour, sexual exploitation or even organ trafficking”. In Germany, according to the most recent official data published in August by the Ministry



of Family Affairs, 5,835 minors have been reported missing. Many [of these minors] were probably kidnapped for child labour, sexual exploitation or organ trafficking”, social workers believe.

More than 13 months after the wave of arrivals of families and young people who sought to find refuge in Germany, Uwe has managed to guarantee the future of hundreds of them with organisations such as Seehaus, and projects that the King Baudouin Foundation has around the country. “I visited 100 businesses, one at a time, in Bremen and Lower Saxony to offer the services of the young people who had one job or another in their country of origin”, relates this sexagenarian as he drives through the harbour landscape of the Bremen suburbs. The task “is not an easy one”, he admits, because many employers are prejudiced against foreigners. “But when you see one business take a chance, others follow”, he explains, shedding some light on this whole process. And it was he, an amateur actor, who hired Ali as a lighting technician in his small local theatre.

Maximum integration

Germany sets itself apart. It does not have a Calais like in France, a Molenbeek like in Belgium, nor a Ceuta or a Melilla like in Spain, where forced deportations - illegal in the EU - occur repeatedly each day. On the contrary, the country is rolling out efforts at all levels to be able to use the human capital that these refugees can contribute to growing the Germany economy. Last summer, Chancellor Angela Merkel herself interceded by asking businesses to hire refugees. In the absence of official figures, the result is almost invisible. However, at the grass-roots level of society, small businesses and municipalities, it is more than noticeable.

In Leonberg, a town of 45,000 on the outskirts of Stuttgart where the streets are all but flat, more than 15 families have launched a project that is one of a kind in the country and, probably, in the entire EU. “Germans and refugees living under the same roof”, explains Thomas Röhm, smiling. He is the project head for the Hoffnungsträger Foundation, which has public and private funds totalling over 20 million euros. This father of four, whose children are between three and twelve years old, moved into the first floor of this special building two months ago. An Afghan family of six lives on the same floor. On the landing above lives a Syrian family. In all, 35 people - 18 refugees and 17 Germans - experiment with maximum integration on a daily basis. In the basement, they take two language classes together and in the backyard, the children, intermingled, play and laugh together.

According to one of its residents, the Hoffnungsträger Foundation project is being expanded in the south of the country, despite the obstacles raised against the building of these houses by the xenophobes of Alternative for Germany (AfD, by its German acronym). “We know that there are AfD members and supporters who are attempting to persuade the justice system not to grant us a building permit.”

Searching for families

However, for the youngest, guaranteeing themselves a place in German society constitutes a much greater challenge. Indeed, they need a guardian, someone to guide them, they actually need parents. “They need a family structure” instead of always meeting up among themselves, in centres for minors, where they neither learn the language nor the culture. In Altensteig, a village bordering the Black Forest, Sarah, a young Syrian with a story full of contradictions, has found the starting point to begin her new

life. “I want to think like a German. They are very different”, she jokes, admitting that she has had to change her attitude to become “a little more serious”. At this time, she has six more brothers - two Afghans and four Eritreans - and new parents: the Becks: Bärbel, 49, and Martin, 58. Deeply religious and with ten years of experience working in Afghanistan, they manage a house belonging to the Church in this small town of 12,000. The State knows that this is the only way for these minors to become fully-fledged citizens in the future. Thus, it pays the Becks 10,000 to 15,000 euros to take care of each of them, including their health and education.

Seehaus, the organisation led by clergyman Tobias Merckle, finds families who will care for these young people who arrived alone in this foreign land a few months ago. “It is a very significant challenge,” Bärbel points out just before ringing a bell in the kitchen. It’s time to eat and - she says apologetically - “we only speak in English or in German”. Those are the rules.

Like these six children, Haleed (fictional name), 17, now lives with his new family, who is asking for anonymity to protect the minor and the family he still has in Afghanistan. “We saw the problem on television and on our streets and we decided to go to Freiburg [in south-west Germany] so that we could host a minor in our home,” they explain in a room next to the child. “[Hosting] is out of the ordinary, but in the end, everyone accepts it,” says the host father after listing the innumerable obstacles encountered when trying to integrate a 17-year old Afghan into German society: language, religion, food, culture, customs, etc.

In civil society, across the country, the message is similar and Thomas, the leader of this unique coexistence project, sums it up clearly and concisely: “Germans will finally need to understand that we will live with refugees whether we like it or not.”

REFUGEES IN GERMANY (AND IN THE EU), IN FIGURES - B. D. C. (GERMANY)

- In 2015, over 250,000 migrant children arrived in Italy and Greece. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in Italy, 12,000 were unaccompanied minors.
- In 2015, 1.26 million first-time applications for asylum were filed in the European Union. Among those were 365,000 for minors under the age of 18, 90,000 of whom were alone, says the UNHCR.
- In 2016, 70% of children applying for asylum in the EU are from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, all of them conflict zones, specifies UNICEF.
- According to UNICEF, one migrant child out of six in the world lives in Europe. Also, among all the countries with a high number of refugee children in Europe, only Germany and Serbia publish official numbers.
- At the end of January 2016, 60,000 unaccompanied 16 to 17-year old children arrived in Germany, reveals the Federal Association for unaccompanied refugee minors (BumF). Most came from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Iraq and Somalia.
- In 2015, Germany took in 42,300 unaccompanied minors, a 263% increase compared to 2014. 91% were boys and only 3,600 were girls.

- The German government estimates that 500,000 migrants could reach the country in the next four years.
- Among all the children who applied for asylum in the European Union in 2015, 25% were from Syria, 18% from Afghanistan and 6% from Iraq. According to the IOM and UNICEF, the others were from Kosovo, Albania and Serbia.

Last August, the Germany Ministry for Family Affairs brought up the disappearance of 5,835 unaccompanied minors. However, it later emphasised that this number could be related to duplicates generated during the registration process.

The ideal city for a young refugee

Germany not only invests in integration, it also rewards it. Last week, Stadtentdecker Merhaba, the organisation where Maria Tramountani and her boss have been working for several months, received the second-place prize from the Renate Lingk Foundation for Childhood in Germany. This award is 25,000 euros they can spend on activities relating to their main task: entertaining the children of refugees with cultural activities in the centre of Stuttgart.

Cinemas, museums, restaurants, parks, etc.: over 40 volunteers devote their free time to showing these young people who fled conflict the positive side of life in a country with a different culture. Opposites in many ways.

Upon receiving the second-place prize of 25,000 euros - first place was 60,000 euros -, the director of the initiative explains that he will invest it in creating and printing a map of Stuttgart showing the favourite places of these young refugees who have almost become family members.

“They will let us know in which neighbourhoods in the city they feel the most comfortable, where they forget their traumatic experiences and what they find most interesting about the culture. With the help of designers and architects from the University of Stuttgart, we will create and print a map. Their map”, relates Maria, the organisation’s spokesperson. “We will print thousands of maps, which they will distribute among their contacts, refugee or not, with the goal of becoming familiar with our city and becoming a part of it”, concludes the project’s director.