

Sample Translation (Preface, Chapter 1, Chapter 51)

From Merkel's "We can do this" to Germany's "We're doing this". My Year in the Emergency Shelter for Refugees by Holger Michel

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Publication: March 2017 (Hardcover)

288 pages

ISBN: 978-3-462-05009-7

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Preface

Did you have anything to do with refugees before September 2015?

No? Neither did I.

Were you planning on getting involved with them more closely, getting to know them, even?

No? Neither was I. After all, you can't take on everything.

Yet, as a result of chance, providence or spontaneous proactivity: On September 5, 2015, I found myself ó unexpectedly, unprepared and moderately motivated ó in what is now one of the largest emergency shelters in Berlin, on the very day that Austria and Germany allowed refugees stranded in Hungary to travel onwards to Germany. I was planning to stay for a few hours, experience something new, take a look around and then leave again. But, in fact, I came back again the next day. And the day after. And the day after that, too. And in the following days, weeks and months.

Why?

For one thing because here, before me, were the people we had heard so much about in the papers and on television. Suddenly they weren't just pictures, stories, anymore, but real people, with real destinies, needs, dreams and hopes.

And, for another, because here, before me, were these people pitching in and helping out: straight out of society, from different education and income levels, political and cultural backgrounds, generations, social views and aspirations. All merging into one big öWe.ö And I decided to join up with this öWe.ö

Anyone who was hoping I'd tell an idyllic tale, describe an emergency shelter where everything was only ever nice and there were never any problems, will be disappointed. As will anyone who was hoping I'd write about how terrible everything was. Because it was a multifaceted year of hate mail and hostility, tortuous bureaucracy, sleeplessness and exhaustion, visitors from Hollywood, bright children's eyes, problems with Harz cheese, scabies that don't itch, spontaneous weddings and Christmas with the refugees, exceptional circumstances that became the norm and a great deal of laughter.

It was an exciting year during which I learned a lot. About myself, about our country, but most of all about people: those who needed help; those who gave it; those who were against us; those who doubted. I finished this book before the terrorist attack in Berlin on December 19; it was printed afterwards. Already on the morning after the attack, which took place in the district of our emergency shelter, I was asked if we were going to change our approach to refugees now. If we saw them differently than before. If I wanted to rewrite this book. The answer is: no!

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee for security, anywhere in the world. Not even if we throw all refugees, all öforeigners,ö out of the country, build a wall around Germany and keep to öourselves.ö We're even less likely to achieve security if we seal ourselves off, isolate the

refugees and abandon them to those intent on terror, whether in refugee camps in Beirut or in emergency shelters in Berlin. The world and our present is not black and white, not divided simply into good and bad. Reality is and this is probably our greatest challenge is much more complicated than we wish it were. But it has also shown us that we can achieve much more than we often believe we can, if we do it together, are brave and inconvenient and don't take the easy route.

New situations can't be tackled through political slogans alone and not if we wait for someone else to do it. Rather, the only way to tackle them is for us to become active ourselves. That's how "Wir schaffen das" or "We can do this" became "Wir machen das" or "We're doing this."

1. See you tomorrow

This whole refugee thing wasn't easy. There you were, wanting to help, and then you couldn't find them anywhere. I'd been fighting my way through the Internet for an hour now already, trying to find some place where we could do something. Aspirin wasn't helping, coffee wasn't helping, and I already wasn't in the mood anymore.

The night before, my friend Ida and I had decided spontaneously to go help out today. We were sitting on one of the countless roof terraces in Berlin-Mitte, enjoying one of the countless parties thrown by one of the countless advertising and PR agencies, having fun on a Friday night when our conversation – like every conversation eventually did in those days – turned to refugees. For weeks, the number of refugees in Europe and Germany had been rising; dramatic scenes were playing out in Hungary, at the train station in Budapest; hundreds of thousands of refugees were walking across Europe, running up against border fences again and again, being chased, beaten and tortured by police and soldiers. Two days earlier, on the beach in Bodrum, three-year-old Aylan from Syria had washed up dead; for a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. In light of the emerging challenges facing Germany, a few days earlier, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel had delivered the encouraging slogan "Wir schaffen das" – "We can do this." A new feeling was in the air, something mobilizing. Anyone with even just a scrap of empathy felt asked – downright called upon – to pitch in. It was impossible to avoid this atmosphere if you didn't want to avoid it; by this point it had even reached those of us partying up here on the roof.

Ida furrowed her brow. "We should really be doing something. The way things are just isn't ok!"

"You're right. Want to go there together?"

"Good idea. What're you doing tomorrow? I have the afternoon off."

"I have to go to my godchild's first day of school. I'll be free after 12:30."

"Ok! . So two o'clock? Where're we supposed to go?"

"To that LAGeSo? After all, it's in the news every day."

"True. The pictures from there are really sick. It's pretty absurd that LAGeSo stands for Regional Office for Health and Social Affairs. It should really be called the Regional Office for Inactivity. Where exactly is it anyway?"

"Somewhere in Moabit. Lemme google it quickly! Um, actually, it's kind of far away. I'll pick you up in my car."

"Nah, we'll take our bikes. We'll go on a little Saturday afternoon outing and then go have coffee."

"Fine, but I have a dinner at seven o'clock. And it's pretty far away."

"No worries. –We can do this. –" Laughter.

"Cool. Want another gin and tonic too?"

That night, after speaking on the phone, Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann and Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that refugees in Hungary should be allowed to travel on to Austria and Germany. The trek of thousands of refugees – which would go down in history as the “Train of Hope” – was set in motion.

So, here I was now, sitting in front of my computer with twenty minutes to go before I, as a good godfather, had to drive to this school, and the Internet simply refused to tell me where we were supposed to go. The LAGeSo, which is where we really wanted to go, was reportedly closed on weekends. I’d texted Ario. Ario was active in the refugee scene and had recently taken in an Afghani. Or was it a Syrian? A refugee, anyway – he would definitely know where to go. Ario called and laughed: LAGeSo on the weekend? What government agency is open on the weekend? Um, maybe the LAGeSo? There’s a refugee crisis, after all, so how’re you supposed to stick to a Monday-to-Friday, eight-to-four schedule?! More laughter. We’re in Berlin. Ok, fine – no LAGeSo. So where are we supposed to go then?

“Try going to Wilmersdorf. They opened a shelter in the former town hall there two weeks ago. I don’t have the exact address – somewhere near Fehrbelliner Platz. Haven’t been there yet, but apparently it’s pretty big.”

Wilmersdorf? That was way across town. Wasn’t there anywhere in Kreuzberg where we could help out? Or in Neukölln or Mitte? Apparently not. Wilmersdorf it was. A quick glance at the map: 10.4 kilometers. That should take about 40 minutes by bike.

Text to Ida: “We’re going to Wilmersdorf. 13 or 14 kilometers, maybe more. An hour by bike. Maybe go by car after all? Take us half as long.”

“Nope. Not a problem. No car. Peddling’s good.”

In a mediocre mood, I was now waiting in front of Ida’s house at 2:10 in the afternoon. She, unlike me in the best of spirits, pushed her bike out of the driveway and looked like she was on her way to go shopping: tall black boots, wool tights under a miniskirt, snow-white trench coat, short hair neatly blow-dried and perfectly styled. I, on the other hand, had dark rings under my eyes and, in wise anticipation of two hours of work, was dressed in a hoodie and jeans. We were a dream team.

Behind Ida, Wassef appeared. After living alone for years in her much too big apartment, Ida had recently decided to find a roommate. Wassef, an architect from Lebanon, wanted to come with us. The whole thing promised to be even more entertaining as a threesome, and presumably Arabic speakers wouldn’t be unwelcome there either. And so our outing began. It was windy – headwinds, naturally – raindrops fell from the sky now and again and, after five kilometers, my motivation had sunk to an absolute low.

Why did we have to go there again? Because of the atmosphere in the country, because everyone suddenly wanted to get involved? I saw refugees everyday anyway: the drug dealers in Görlitzer Park outside my living room window and, right behind it, the Gerhart-Hauptmann school, which had been occupied by refugees for months and was at the moment off limits for outside

volunteers, and the Lampedusa Camp on Oranienstrasse outside my office. Sure, of course I understood why they had fled their countries. Anyone who saw where they were coming from and didn't understand had to be a bit soft in the head. Sure, of course Germany had to help. I was happy to pay taxes for that. Sure, I was also someone who liked to argue a lot and tell other people how small-minded they were. That should be enough, shouldn't it? Why exactly was I sitting on this bike now, peddling across the city?

After almost 40 minutes, we stood in front of a monumental, five-story building with white walls and high windows. With its semi-circular façade, it reminded me of the Tempelhof airport, just smaller and less dilapidated. If there was a God, He must be a comedian: Here was a building the Nazis had built for the Arian master race where Muslim refugees now lived. My sense of humor to a tee.

But where were they? The gate was locked; there was nobody there. We rode around to the other side of the building. And, here, at Brienner Strasse 16, we reached our destination. A large gateway guarded by grim-faced security people. To the right, a large white container, marked "Info Point," open on the side like a market stall. Inside, four people whirling back and forth; out front, dozens of refugees and apparent volunteers, a profusion of voices, a confusion of different languages, children running all over the place, people walking around carrying bags from point A to point B, cars idling, bikes stopping, donations being dropped off.

We got in line. And eavesdropped. Again and again, the same sentence, with slight variations: "Hello, nice to see you. Your name?" Or "Hi Martin, it's great you're back. What division did you register for?" "Has anyone seen Philipp?"

Wait, what divisions? It was our turn now. "Hi, it's nice to see you here. What're your names? What division did you sign up for?"

Putting on a big smile: "Hey! We didn't know you could sign up somewhere. We just heard we could help out here. There must be something we can do?"

Christoph, as his nametag revealed, gave us a friendly but distinctly no-nonsense look. "We ask everyone to please sign up in advance for the shifts on www.volunteer-planner.org so we have an idea of how many people are coming when. Here's an info sheet. We're only allowed to let a limited number of people into the building and need to keep track at all times. Just a second, Sima, Jochen, have you seen Philipp?"

"Shifts? Volunteer Planner? We never heard anything about that. Sorry." That was a lie, of course. Typing "Wilmersdorf town hall" into a search engine automatically took you straight to this very Volunteer Planner, with its clear instructions to please register and sign up for a shift. I had found it after my phone call with Ario and had even registered, but hadn't signed up for a shift. All that effort for just one afternoon had seemed a bit excessive to me in the end.

"We just came here from all the way across town. And now you want to turn us away?!" I was a bit annoyed.

Katja took over. Next to her was a woman speaking pretty loudly and emphatically in a

language I couldn't place; it wasn't Arabic. Katja had the aura of a maternal company sergeant major of sorts who secretly worked as a bouncer at night. "Ok, fine. We'll find something for you. Whaddya wanna do?"

Wait: *Berliner Schnauze*? The infamous Berlin dialect? This promised to be interesting; being a native Berliner myself, she had nothing on me if I chose to let loose. What did we want to do? No idea. That's exactly what we were hoping someone would please tell us already. I looked at Ida, who also didn't seem to have any idea what exactly we wanted to do. This helping-out business was already proving exhausting. "Listen, I don't have a clue what we should do. We just came here. Whaddya need? We do everything," I replied, showcasing my Berlin accent.

"You a Berliner too?" I'd cracked her. "Where from? Kreuzberg? What're you doing over here in the West? Whatever. Doesn't matter. We take everyone here." I was in love. Never mind that Kreuzberg was in the East at most geographically speaking; I'd let it pass for an old West Berliner like her.

"Wanna sort donations?"

Um, ok, sure, we'll sort donations.

Our hard-won admission badges – with "REFUGEES WELCOME" printed on them in big letters, then a space for adding masking tape with your name and division, and the word "STAFF" in fat letters at the bottom – were finally hung around our necks. The first time we passed through the raised barrier in the large gateway to the Wilmersdorf town hall we felt like we'd managed to sneak our way into a coveted party.

But then, suddenly, we ran up against it again: Stop. "Your names?" A grim-looking security guy stared at us. We showed him our badges. He riffled through his papers. "You're not on the list from the Planner." Christ, were we starting all over again with this? Yes, we should have signed up in advance, we understood that now. "If you're not on the list, you can't come in."

"Those two are cool. A mistake on the list." That was Christoph again, who had only just admonished us and was now smuggling us into the building.

"What kind of shit is it with these lists anyway? How am I supposed to keep track of things if they're constantly wrong? So what're your names again? I'll add you now." He looked at our badges. In the column for first names, he wrote my first name, Holger; in the column for last names, "Staff." Seriously? Didn't this guy notice that hundreds of people here had the same last name? I was just about to say something, but Christoph shot me a look: Keep your mouth shut, smile, keep walking. I kept my mouth shut, smiled and kept walking. We'd made it past the second security check as well.

Finally. So, here we were. To the left, three steps led up to a short hallway; to the right, another three steps led up to an endless corridor with vinyl flooring and dozens of doors on either side – in other words, a large former town hall. In front of us, at the end of the dark gateway: the enormous inner courtyard, crammed full of large tents with mobile kitchens and showers and surrounded by

parked emergency vehicles, people rushing around, kids playing soccer. A scene like out of a movie.

While we were still looking around, gaping, an exaggeratedly cheerful voice called out: "Sorting donations? This way, please, to the left here. Straight ahead. You can't miss it. Have you seen Philipp?" Annoyed, we shook our heads. The woman laughed and kept walking. Who the hell was this Philipp guy anyway? And where was he?

Up the steps we went and down the short hallway with its four shabby little offices, which still had the old administrative signs indicating "Audit Office" screwed onto the doors under Plexiglas. At the end of the corridor, an enormous hall with piles of bulging trash bags, plastic bags and cardboard boxes surrounding table-islands on which the stuff was dumped, sorted, folded and distributed. Under every table, a carton marked "Trash"; around the tables, boxes neatly marked "Children/boys, trousers, S," "Children/boys, trousers, M," "Children/boys, trousers, short" and the same thing for "Children/girls," "Women" and "Men."

I'm occasionally accused of being a neat freak, nitpicking even, with a penchant for sterility. Now here I was, standing in the middle of my personal nightmare. Used trousers, dress shirts, t-shirts, undershirts, shoes, socks, blouses, coats, skirts, toys and many, many loud people scurrying around like ants. Damn. This stuff had to be sorted hence "sorting donations." The thought alone of having to touch hundreds of worn duds made me feel slightly queasy. But a hospital scent in the air allowed me to find peace: high-quality disinfectant, fat bottles on every table. It was all good.

"Got toys! Who's handling toys?" Once again, one of the many ants ran past us to where someone else was already waiting in the back, to the left, and deposited the load, which was immediately picked apart by other hands and redistributed into further boxes: teddy bears, dolls, cars, games! And, once again, I was shooed away by a half-sung "Heads up, out of my way, please!" This must be exactly what Santa's workshop looks like. Just with elves. And cotton candy. And new things.

"Hey, I'm Marion. Have you been assigned yet?" A very tall, very blond woman with a very large, laughing mouth yanked me out of my thoughts. Before I could even answer her, she shouted out over our heads: "Three newbies who still needs someone?" And just like that we were given our assignments. Ida translated for Wassef, telling him where he'd been assigned to go, but he never made it anywhere near any of the tables.

"Do you speak Arabic?"

"Yes, I do."

"So what're you doing here? I need you. Come."

And just like that he was gone, the masking tape marked "Sorting donations" replaced with "Translator, Arabic." Interpreters were in very high demand, no doubt.

Marion's instructions were simple: "Dump the bag on the table, look at the stuff, sort the stuff and pack it into the corresponding boxes." She handed me a big box of rubber gloves. "Put

these on. I want to keep you around for a bit after all.ö And just like that I began sorting.

The disgust Iød feared failed to materialize. Not only did I have my redeeming rubber gloves on, but the stuff was also really good. There was nothing wrong with it and, besides, moving at this pace, there wasnøt any time for disgust anyway. Because everything landed on the table, there were boxes all over the hall, voices shouting over my head in all directions. øHere, can you take this? Two small trousers and one medium shirt.ö ó øOne blouse, more for someone older, size 42.ö ø øGreat dress, I saw a matching bag earlier. Whereøre the bags? Letø pack these up together.ö ó øUm, sorry, I have new thong underpants here. Do we give out thongs?ö ø øGot a t-shirt here that says ÷Super Pussy,ø do we really want to offer that?ö Laughter. There really was a lot of laughter. A bit paradoxical, considering that we were in a big building with refugees; you could see them out in the courtyard, walking around or getting interpreters to explain papers to them.

I dumped what felt like the hundredth bag onto the table to examine, sort and pack up the stuff, when two very obviously worn and unwashed underpants fell onto the table, wrapped in a dirty t-shirt with a big fat hole in the front. I felt queasy again, but Marion just called out: øTrash!ö She pointed to the box under the table. øSome people canøt tell the difference between donations and a trashcan. Happens. Donøt let it get to you. Just keep going.ö She laughed out loud. It really was nice here.

In the meantime, Ida had moved ó or been moved from ó sorting donations to working in the storage division ó it wasnøt entirely clear which; all you had to do was make some meaningful hand gesture and suddenly youød find yourself with a new job, in charge now of storing donated items. From a distance, I saw her whirling and delegating ó sheød moved up the career ladder in no time.

After two hours, I set out to look for her. The building was a labyrinth of yellowish hallways and brownish staircases. The former administrative, faction and representative-membersø offices now housed people, or served as storage or treatment rooms. Through the open doors, in the small rooms, you could see three, sometimes four cots set up, with clothing, sacks, torn old bags, backpacks, even the occasional suitcase, and other belongings on the floor between them.

A disgusting smell wafted out into the hallway from the toilets, a smell of too few toilets shared by too many people that called to mind a club in the early morning hours or day two of a festival. The stench of clogged pipes mingled with the unmistakable smell of a repellent old Berlin government agency whose residents already greet your arrival with øYouøre in the wrong place here, please keep going!ö Everywhere, kids were running all over the place, fighting loudly over toys in foreign languages, security people swiftly paced the hallways, constantly running into volunteers carrying bedding, pillows and clothing somewhere, translating and explaining.

In the first part of the seemingly endless hallway, volunteer doctors and nurses from the organization øMedizin hilft Fløchtlingenö (øMedicine helps refugeesö) had set up camp, dozens of them busy briskly applying bandages, cleaning wounds, putting on Band-Aids and treating colds,

headaches and skinned knees. Through a crack in the door, I saw an enormous medical supply storage space, where doctors were just in the process of sorting a drugstore donation onto shelves, behind which was an examination table.

The hallway was interrupted by a majestic staircase, with steps leading up to the other floors on the right; behind it, the hallway continued. Here was the realm where donations were received; large signs on the right and left indicated "Donations men," "Donations women," "Donations children," "Donations hygiene." This was where our sorted boxes ended up.

The end of the hallway formed a large room with a terracotta-colored stone floor, which had probably once looked elegant but was now covered with piles upon piles of boxes. Dozens of volunteers moved about in a bustle of confusion, dumping, sorting, separating out and storing things. It was an incredible scene that either scared you off or sucked you in. In another hallway, refugees stood in lines outside the clothing room, where the previously sorted donations were distributed. Interpreters translated when communication via hands and feet failed, Arabic-speaking volunteers with their hair down, low-cut shirts and tight pants explaining to Arab refugees with headscarves how much of what they were entitled to.

And, in the middle of this impenetrable chaos: laughter. Everywhere people were laughing, joking, clowning around, engaged in heated yet surprisingly friendly and charming discussions about the perfect way to stack boxes. And everyone spoke to everyone else informally. Sure, Berlin is a city of the informal you; addressing someone your own age or even someone younger than you using the formal you immediately outs you as a non-native "ó with whom we've been known to have certain problems of tolerance. I always used the informal you when speaking with the lady at the bakery, waiters in cafés and vendors in kiosks and supermarkets, of course. It was the same here: the dreadlocked 16-year-old spoke to the 70-year-old lady in a Chanel suit using the informal you; she, in turn, addressed a man in his mid-60s, who seemed to be something between a history professor and lawyer, using the informal you; and he, again in turn, asked the 30-year-old how she had sorted this or that, who then told the 40-year-old "and so on. Age didn't seem to matter here either.

I had now arrived once and for all in the middle of a movie that thrilled me but was also exhausting. I was bombarded from all sides. A helping hand was needed everywhere; you were expected to and wanted to pitch in everywhere at the same time, were literally torn and had to be careful not to leave half of what you were doing unfinished from being pulled in so many different directions. This was not what I had imagined. Ida came towards me balancing a box on her head, laughing and shouting something to me that was lost in the hubbub. It seemed like she had never done anything else her entire life but stack boxes here. I signaled to her that I wanted out, wanted some fresh air.

We stood in the archway between the entrance and inner courtyard of the town hall. It was raining. The enormous inner courtyard was taken up not only by all these tents and vehicles, but also by a wondrous, large metal building as tall and big as a small single-family home, surrounded

by a fence and equipped with cameras.

I leaned against the building wall and tried to sort my thoughts. I was overwhelmed, euphoric and exhausted all at once, was having an unbelievably fun time and asked myself if that was ok. After all, there was nothing fun about the situation here, and the refugees we saw here didn't exactly give us the impression that their situation was particularly entertaining either. Even so, it was great. There was something of a happening about it. The chaos here, without hours of deliberation, was productive. Here, everything had a result, and the volunteers radiated a downright mysterious positive energy.

In contrast to another group. Because there were also the emergency workers. They seemed more leisurely, dressed in their safety vests and outfits, drinking coffee, smoking, dumping canned food into pots in the mobile kitchen at mealtimes and generally moving at a pretty unhurried pace. I only found out later that the emergency services hadn't just done a lot, but also that the workers active here were volunteers as well, though they were organized through an agency and, unlike us, insured. Their image wasn't the greatest, though, and they struck newcomers like me as idle; it was impossible to ignore their distinctly tense relationship with the volunteers – almost regardless of whom you talked to: There was 'them' and there was 'us,' and 'we' set the pace – not least because there were ten times as many of us.

Ida whispered to me: 'The way donations are sorted is too chaotic. They should move step three up to the front.'

'Step three?'

'We dump everything into one pile, sort the stuff and then run over to the corresponding boxes. We should pre-sort everything into men's, women's and children's stuff. Then trousers, sweaters, underwear and so on. And only then according to size. That would make way more sense. If we restructured the system, we could save a lot of manpower and time and improve efficiency.' That was Ida. A management consultant to the core. The suggestion made sense, but should we, as newcomers who didn't know anyone here, start suggesting changes right off the bat? I glanced over to the opposite wall, where a group of volunteers stood around. One of them was sitting on the ground, youngish, tall, blond, somewhat pale, head – eyes half shut – leaning against the wall, denim shirt, black sneakers, stonewashed jeans, cigarette in hand. Everyone was pestering him; people ran up to him, asked, received an answer and ran off again. There was no doubt: This was Philipp! We'd found him. Slowly, we inched our way towards the group.

Philipp, it very quickly became clear, was in charge here; nothing was decided without him, the entire plan seemed to exist in his head. Everything he said sounded good, but also made me a bit anxious: He spoke so slowly. I mean r-e-a-l-l-y slow-ly. Someone wanted to know where she should bring this or that. Philipp looked up briefly only to then state not just the room number, but also what to keep in mind on the way there and in the room and in general beyond that. And all of this very slowly. Just listening to him made me anxious.

It wasn't long before we managed to insert ourselves into a conversation, only about half of

which we understood ó not that that stopped us from participating eagerly. Ida carefully brought up that she had a few ideas for optimizing the sorting of donations while I made it clear that, while I thought the two hours Ið spent sorting had been great, we were also good at organizingí Critical looks from all sides and then a short, painfully slow õJust start by coming back again tomorrow and the day after that and then weðl seeö put an end to our short presentation. We had just made ourselves really, really popular: Two newcomers, still well rested from their summer vacation, participating for the first time, giving good advice.

It was past five p.m. at this point anyway and we had meant to be on our way for a while already, but we couldn't just leave now. We were in the flow and leaving now would be like getting up in the middle of a meal weð just started. We set six p.m. as our new deadline, õbut for real this time.ö While Ida disappeared back into sorting and storing somewhere, I landed first at, and finally ó without being asked ó in, the Info Point.

The container was a jam-packed mini-office. Along the open side lay the printouts from the day's Volunteer Planner, staplers, hole-punchers, Sharpies, masking tape, rolls of Scotch tape, which were used constantly to tape information in various languages to the outside of the window, paperclips, info sheets, city maps, maps of Berlin's BVG public transportation system, rolls of cookies and little bags of gummy bears, water bottles and plastic cups, a box with key chains, to which the laminated and perforated badges for the throng of volunteers were attached ó those helpers who obviously ran the place had their names and photos printed onto the badges in the space where the rest of us had masking tape. Behind me, an accumulation of piles of paper, printers and laptops. In this smallest of spaces, there was everything.

But what was most fascinating were the people crowded in here with me: in their early to late forties, on average, some slightly older. Katja worked for a union, Christoph was a lawyer ó Ið guessed that much right. Jochen worked for the civil aviation authority, Maria did IT for some federal agency. The older age groups were represented here by Sima, an energetic and amiable interpreter who was retired already, the younger ones by Philipp, who was using the break between university semesters to be involved here from morning to night, and by Manuel, about my age, who worked his way through a pile of lists and was loud, snippy and ironic. They seemed to know every refugee personally, which, with a total of some ó as I now knew ó 600 people, hardly could have been the case.

Now it was me who was asking the new arrivals for their names, exhorting those who hadn't done so to please enter themselves into the Volunteer Planner, handing out badges, explaining where which division was located ó although I was constantly sending people off in the wrong direction. We answered questions, studied papers, handed out Band-Aids, sent refugees to see doctors.

Again and again, we were asked for SIM cards. The first time it happened, I looked annoyed and wondered where they expected us to get those from, but Katja took a SIM card out of the drawer and explained the procedure for activating it. Hundreds of SIM cards and cell phones had

been donated; for the refugees, they were the most important means of communication for keeping in touch with their relatives, who were either still back home, or in shelters or on escape routes somewhere in Europe. Just as often, we were asked for BVG tickets ó thousands of which had also been donated, since the refugees found themselves in an absurd situation: They were expected to go to various government agencies constantly, but they didn't have tickets for public transportation or the money to buy them. As a result, those who didn't have donated tickets were forced to ride without paying, a situation that ultimately ended up keeping the BVG's fare office ó as well as public institutions, volunteers and government agencies ó busy for months. You learned something new every minute here. Above all, you learned to communicate creatively with your hands and feet.

Many of the Syrians spoke English. The Afghanis on the other hand were more dependent on help from interpreters. Translators like Sima were in constant demand. I watched. The refugees were different from what I had imagined, though I didn't even really know how I had imagined they'd be. What they had in common was obvious exhaustion and inner turmoil. And they wore flip-flops. And shorts. While my own tendency to feel cold was perhaps somewhat exaggerated, today most definitely wasn't flip-flop weather. Didn't shoes get donated? Were they wearing flip-flops by choice? I had no idea, but just looking at them made me shiver.

Despite the incessant questions and discussions ó people here in the container knew, with an accuracy that was beyond me, who had already been given tickets or SIM cards and who had what problems ó the mood was upbeat. But many volunteers also just looked tired. How long had they already been here today? Since seven, eight, nine in the morning. Philipp entered the Info Point, sized me up critically, sat down on a folding chair and propped his head in his hands, deep shadows ringing his eyes. Asked how long he'd been here the last few days, he just smiled and said: "I'd just really like a coffee now." For 22 days, he ó like many others ó had been here almost round the clock ó morning, afternoon, evening, night. Some were using the break between semesters, others their annual leave. And all he wanted was a coffee? Well that shouldn't be a problem. But it was. Everyone was so busy here that they had forgotten their own needs. The closest café was too far away, so the volunteers subsisted for 12 hours on what they brought with them in the morning: sandwiches, Coke, chocolate and granola bars. And gummy bears, of course, which you could leave lying around anywhere at any time since none of the kids here had any interest in eating these pork-gelatin gummies. Grandiosely, I announced that I'd take care of finding a coffee machine and bring it by at some point. Katja told me sternly that I was not to buy a machine myself under any circumstances: "People helping out here all day long shouldn't also spend money." She wasn't speaking in dialect anymore. She really meant it.

Just before eight p.m., Ida and I finally really did go. I had already cancelled my dinner a long time ago; Wassef had accompanied a refugee to the hospital as interpreter. We dropped off our badges. And then it happened. Maren said: "It was nice of you to come by. See you tomorrow then." And, automatically, without thinking, we answered: "See you tomorrow." Jochen grinned.

Damn. It had been a trap. Now we couldn't not come back again.

An hour later we were sitting in Kreuzberg, drinking coffee and talking. We had seen, heard and overheard so much over the past few hours that talking about anything else was impossible. I tried to make sense of the experience. What had we witnessed there today? And how much more was there? We'd seen all of half a floor out of a total of five – a mere fraction. We agreed that we'd go back again the next day; we could afford to give one more day. I couldn't stop thinking about the coffee machine.

At 8:31 p.m., I wrote my first Facebook post on the topic of the Wilmersdorf town hall:

Dear network,

Does anyone have a regular coffee machine and/or electric kettle to give away? Ida and I spent today at the refugee shelter in Wilmersdorf and will be there again tomorrow. It's incredibly moving to see how many people are helping out. All the help is organized on a 100 percent voluntary basis. At the same time, it's shocking that these volunteers help out for up to ten hours a day without even managing to have a coffee. It would be great if we could give them a coffee machine tomorrow.

Thanks!

The next morning, I was in front of the town hall right on time for the nine o'clock shift. My former colleague Ruben and my friend Stefan brought by their coffee machines, and in my bag I had the electric kettle from my kitchen, candy and instant coffee from the corner store. As if it were the most natural thing in the world and without asking, I stepped into the Info Point, said "Mornin' everyone" loudly in Berlin dialect, set down the machines, turned to the front, grabbed the list, smiled broadly and, ten minutes later, handed Ida her badge for sorting donations. Now we were ready to start.

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51. Two hours, one year

August 14, 2016. A year ago today, the emergency shelter had opened; a year ago today, for many of us life had changed. We had to celebrate this year, this one year of volunteering that had changed us and our world so much. We debated: Could we really celebrate voluntary work that exists because people ó our residents ó had been forced to flee? No. But we wanted to celebrate life ó the life we had achieved together. The We. Together with the full-time staff, together with everyone who had fought with us.

The Info Point was brought back. Our old sausage stand. Today, volunteer badges would be given out here again. Just like a year ago. Except that today they were given out by Yussuf, Yaver and Khaled, our residents, who had long since become part of the We.

Michael had arranged for benches and a sound system; there were short speeches ó by Stephan, the district mayor, Philipp, Inga and me. Kerstin emceed the festivities. Katja had organized a big photography exhibition, showing the best shots from the past year. Inga and Gloria had put together an exhibit of the craziest donations of the year, though the frozen chicken was still missing. Inga created a quiz, and the prizes were precisely those donations we had been holding on to since day one and really had to start getting rid of already.

Nostalgia was in the air, people dug up òremember-whenö stories. It was just like a year ago; the old energy was back. We hugged; here and there a tear was shed when we looked at the pictures, but more than anything else we laughed. This laughter, which had been with us from the very first day, giving a sense of life and confidence to the building for a year ó it was still here.

Smiling, I looked across the courtyard, observing the volunteers, residents, employees, building and the playground that had finally been set up. What had we accomplished here? Almost exactly a year ago, I had walked into the Wilmersdorf town hall for the first time and for the first time had come into contact with the òrefugee crisis,ö a crisis that wasn't a crisis of refugees but of wars, the arms trade and the failure of the United Nations. A crisis that had made our country tremble, that had flung the ugly and aggressive faces of hatred onto front pages, that had ensured that a right-wing populist party like the AfD moved into parliaments, verbally courted by politicians from democratic parties who believe they can stop the rise of right-wing parties by adopting their rhetoric.

But, above all, the crisis has given new momentum to this so often sluggish country and ó with a hitherto unimaginable wave of helpfulness and humanity ó a new face to Germany, has changed our country's reputation around the world. And it has changed me. I had been allowed to become part of this wave. I came for two hours and stayed for a year. And will continue to stay. The last twelve months were the most exciting, most emotional, most active and exhausting of my life so far. The best.

We saw suffering and grief. But much more than that we experienced joy, the will to live

and a willingness to help. We met impressive individuals, among both our residents and volunteers. We made mistakes in the process, were forced to recognize that visions can turn out to be illusions. But more than that we regained faith in our ability to make the impossible possible and in the notion that giving up, envy and whining are not an option for Germany.

We're still far from our goal, still have a significant way to go. What will the future bring? We don't know. But we didn't know that a year ago either. Why should we fail? Didn't so many people during the past year tell us that we wouldn't be able to do it, and didn't we prove them wrong again and again? Didn't hundreds of thousands of fleeing and arriving people show that democracy, humanity and open-mindedness also mean something to them, something they no longer want to lose?

What the future brings depends on them. But it also depends on us, on our willingness to let them become part of us.

Most of them will go back to their homelands at some point. If even just a few of them take back something of the equality and human dignity they experienced here, they will be able to contribute to the development of their former and future homelands. Presumably they will not initiate Gay Pride, establish a center for anti-Semitism or open a workshop for people with disabilities. But if they've internalized the principle of equality between different people and continue to advance it, they can help promote respect and humanity. In that case we've done everything right.

öWe.ö A big building, a big experiment. And people. Katja, Lana, Djamal, Kristina, Frank, Inga, Andrea, Susanne, Dilek, Alice, Zohra, Ute, Beate, Sima, Kerstin, Orly, Ismael, Alexander, Philipp, Gloria, Rotraud, Esther, Nour, Yasmine, Gabriele, Jaime, Sozan, Yasmine, Michael, Basima, Jakob, Liz, Hawwa, Hamit, Lidia, Shadwan, Christoph, Dawud, Sita, Ali, Peter, Gazwa, Katrin, Christine, Aida, Jochen, Milad, Patricia, Maria, Mohammed, Omar, Alice, Sharif, Maren, Mola, Klaus, Rivkah, Katrin, Khaled, Martina, Doro, Javad, Besim, Carola, Rüdiger, Ewald, Mithu, Yaver, Christiane, Mehmet, Daniele, Jens, Michaela, Uwe, Faizah, Melanie, Shebby, Ulla and many, many others.

They're there, just like a year ago. They came as volunteers, refugees, displaced persons. Today they are volunteer workers, residents, intimates, allies, friends.

Someone once said: öWe can do this.ö We still don't know exactly what ödoing thisö means. But we do know now who öweö is. We have found each other, banded together, learned from, motivated and pulled each other along. We just did it. And keep on doing it.

Quiz

1. How many residents have lived in the Wilmersdorf town hall emergency shelter so far?

- a) 1,350 b) 1,800 c) 2,300

2. How many babies have residents given birth to so far?

- a) 21 b) 32 c) 43

3. How many children started school?

- a) 155 b) 214 c) 335

4. A total of how many hours of volunteer work have there been (not including shift and division work, since these aren't recorded in the Volunteer Planner)?

- a) approx. 10,000 b) approx. 50,000 c) approx. 80,000

5. How many boxes of clothing and other textiles (bedding, sheets, towels, etc.) have been donated, sorted, stored, handed out and redistributed?

- a) approx. 5,000 b) approx. 8,000 c) over 10,000

6. Which Hollywood stars visited the shelter?

- a) Ben Stiller & Susan Sarandon b) George Clooney & Angelina Jolie

7. How many divisions are managed entirely by volunteers?

- a) 5 b) 16 c) 21

(2,300 residents; 43 babies; 214 children and secondary school students; approx. 80,000 volunteer hours [approx. 100,000 including shift and division work]; over 10,000 boxes; Susan Sarandon & Ben Stiller; 16 divisions)