SPRING 2016

Cycling towards Syria

London to Vienna by bike in 2016, following the routes of migration



David Charles

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About this book

In spring 2016, as more than a million people crossed into Europe seeking safety, David Charles set out from London on his bicycle. His plan was to follow the routes of migration in reverse, towards Syria, listening to the people he met: refugees, volunteers, officials and neighbours.

These are the dispatches he wrote along the way, first published on his blog and newsletter, from the camps of Calais to a refugee centre in Vienna. They are presented as they were written at the time, with a little tidying.

Contents

1. Cycling to(wards) Syria
2. The Tech Setup
3. Cycling Towards Syria: Days 1-3
4. Conversations in Calais
5. Grande-Synthe & Calais: Compare and Contrast
6. Cooking Sudanese Halla with The School Bus Project
7. Story of the Day #23: An Unexpected Hill
8. Story of the Day #24: Industrial Germany
9. They Want Me to Fly Like a Bird: Travels in the Belgian Asylum System
10. Refugee Hospitality
11. #25 Heidelberg Helps
12. Grandhotel Cosmopolis
13. Refugees Like It's 1699!
14. From containers to computers: the challenges of refugee integration in Germany
15. On the walls of Zollamtsstrasse refugee camp

Cycling to(wards) Syria

16 March 2016



This May, I shall set off on a 3,000 mile bicycle tour, following the routes of migration from the safe refuge of London to the bombed-out streets of Syria. Don't worry: safety is my first priority. I am fully expecting never to reach Syria, but that is my destination of the mind.

Along the way, I shall be collecting stories direct from the mouths of migrants, aid workers, government officials and local residents, using each interview to inform the course of the journey, and sharing these stories with as wide an audience as I can, in written word, photography, audio, and video.

(Link to Google Map of the route.)

This expedition has gradually solidified over the last few months from vague pipe dream to something that is really going to happen. Now I am ready to share my ideas, hear yours, and ask for help.

The route marked out above has a few flaws, not the least of which is that Google thinks I'll be walking, but the three thousand miles should cover the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey and Syria. Transportation will entirely by bicycle, save for two ferry crossings, of the English Channel and the Aegean Sea. I'll return by train at the end of July.

About Me



As you may know, I am a freelance writer with extensive cycle touring experience in Europe and North Africa. Although it feels long distant, I also have an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies (Arabic, modern history and music).

I've been writing and taking action on migration issues in Calais and beyond since summer 2014 and was one of the instigators of the 2015 Calais Critical Mass, which brought eighty-plus bicycle

donations (and their riders) to Calais. After the Critical Mass, I contributed to many media organisations, including the Victoria Derbyshire programme on BBC 2 and Newsweek.

I feel incredibly lucky to be able to take on a journey such as this by choice, and so feel a deep obligation to share the things I learn with as great an audience as possible, across as varied media as possible.

This will be my most ambitious story-telling expedition to date, and due to the need for hyper-mobility, words will be written on my beloved Alphasmart Neo 2 and publication-quality images, video and audio will be captured on a smartphone or iPod Touch (you can help with that!). All media from the expedition will be collected here and shared through Twitter (@dcisbusy).

Help!

If this ride is going to be a success, then I'm going to need a lot of help: encouragement, logistics and technology. If you can help at all, in any of these fields, please give me a shout.

Encouragement: Follow me on Twitter, say hi, share this page, and the stories when the ride begins. Drop me a line using my contact page, or leave a comment below this post. Let me know any ideas, what you do and how you might be able to help. Thanks!

Logistics: I will be taking camping equipment, but would also love to stay with friends, friends of friends, strangers and friends of strangers.

- If you or anyone you know lives on, or even remotely near the route, through the UK, France, Belgium, Germany,

Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey or Syria, then please, please get in touch.
- If you can offer suggestions on where to go or who to speak with, likewise.
- If you'd like to join me for some of the ride – awesome!

Technology: The success of the story-telling element of this trip depends heavily on me having the tools to do the job. I am in the process of gathering equipment now and if you can help with any second hand, discounted or downright cheap or freebie tech, then that'd be fantastic. These are the sorts of things I'm looking for:

- iPhone 5 or better (64gb minimum)
- iPod Touch 6 (64gb minimum)
- Front pannier rack for bicycle
- Waterproof, reasonably high capacity cycle panniers
- Bar bag for the bike
- A great quality penknife or Leatherman
- A lightweight small camping stove
- A thermarest camping mattress

Even if you're not sure how helpful you can be, please do get in touch. Thanks!



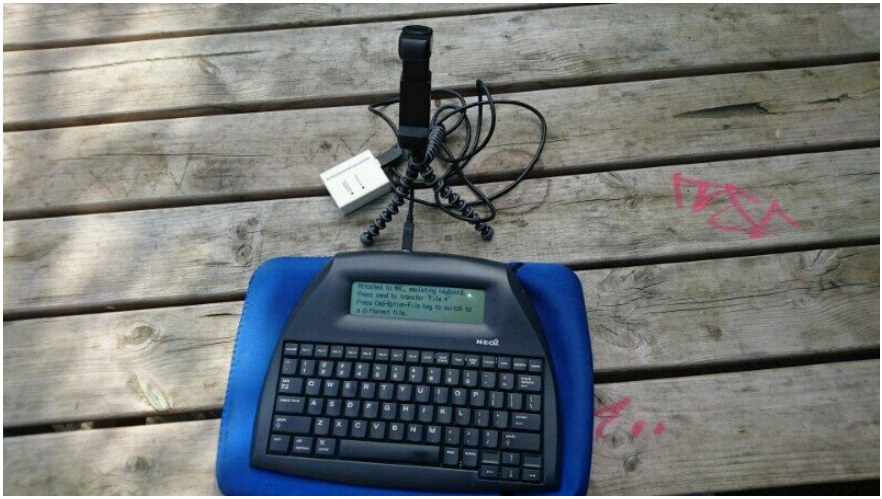
Migrant kitten, asleep in Calais, 2014.

The Tech Setup

13 April 2016

Ah – the bliss of writing outside! – sun on my face, the sound of trickling waterfalls around me and the scent of freshly budding flowers. Not bad at all, thank you. And it's all down to my now complete tech setup, ready for the ravages of the road towards Syria.

Unfortunately, I can't show you a photograph of the whole setup because I'm typing this blogpost on my phone, which doubles as my camera. But hopefully this gives you some idea (just imagine a phone where the tripod clamps are):



The other bits and pieces are my Neo Alphasmart 2, beloved typewriter extraordinaire, with an ordinary printer cable leading to a bluetooth keyboard adapter by Californian tech company Handheld Scientific. This magically communicates with my phone,

a Sony Xperia Z5 Compact, held at comfortable eye height by a Shoulderpod S1 smartphone grip attached to a Joby GorillaPod. Bingo!

So rather than a photo of the whole setup, here's a photo of me looking incredibly smug:



And may the Fates permit me to write you many more insightful and delightful updates using this mad crazy technology! Thanks for indulging my smugness, now back to my outdoor office…



Cycling Towards Syria: Days 1-3

4 May 2016



I'm writing this sitting on the beach front in Calais. A mother and two small children are scootched in the sand, and footprints mark where they've been playing. The wind and the waves come across the Channel from England. We've been pulling together a bench lunch, interrupted by an Englishman complaining about wogs and A-rabs, insistent on leaving the EU, while registering his van in Serbia for cheaper car insurance.

The first few days of this cycle have been about settling into a rhythm. We were sped on our way by a peloton of riders from London (so much thanks to Maryla, James and Grizzly) and pitched up the first night on the summit of Great Lines Heritage Park in Chatham. Up there, overlooking the twinkles of the Medway towns, the shouts and curses of boyracers drunk on the soakings of the May Day celebrations fade out into the wind.

Our camp snuck in the shrubbery between the fence of a college and the dog walking paths. Barking snuffles made an effective alarm clock. First and second breakfasts dragged us through the early miles, until we were flying through Faversham and whistling into Whitstable.

We were generously hosted by David Robert, editor of Cycling World magazine. David and his flirtatiously entwined cats served us heroic vegetable stew – potatoes, carrots, beetroot, topped with a dumpling crust – and we shared a Pepsi bottle filled with a dark pale ale from The Black Dog.

The next morning, David and his partner Fiona loaded us up with several breakfasts and half a dozen freebie cereal bars he's been pressed to review (the quinoa ones get five stars from me). I took the opportunity to courier over 3kgs of badly packed excess baggage back home. Nothing says "packed in a rush" more eloquently than leaving overweight.

On our way out of town we dropped in on Bruce Williams, an artist friend of David's who took his 1960s ambulance over to Calais last November, loaded with wood fire logs and bicycles. You can hear our conversation by playing the YouTube video below.

Whitstable briefly hosted an asylum detention centre, which provoked a response from the town's more sympathetic citizens. Since last year, the Whitstable Calais Solidarity group has grown to more than 500 members and some of the most active have taken alms and aid as far afield as Greece.

The closest English county to the continent, Kent seems to be home to partizans of both sides: the heartland of UKIP, but also

bastion of welcoming communities such as that which has grown around Whitstable.

The afternoon was spent in a bright cycle over the downs, through the cobbles of Canterbury, screaming past the castle and into Dover. A Dovorian bearing a fish and chip happy kid directed us up Military Hill to the Drop Redoubt, where we camped.

The redoubt is a Napoleonic era fort whose sharp sides and terrace steps are perfect for haring dogs and chastened rabbits. The grass we pitched on overlooked the port and the red and white lights of ferries slowly crossing for Calais. We lit a fire, smoked a couple of herbal teas, and settled for the night. The continent awaits.



Conversations in Calais

6 May 2016



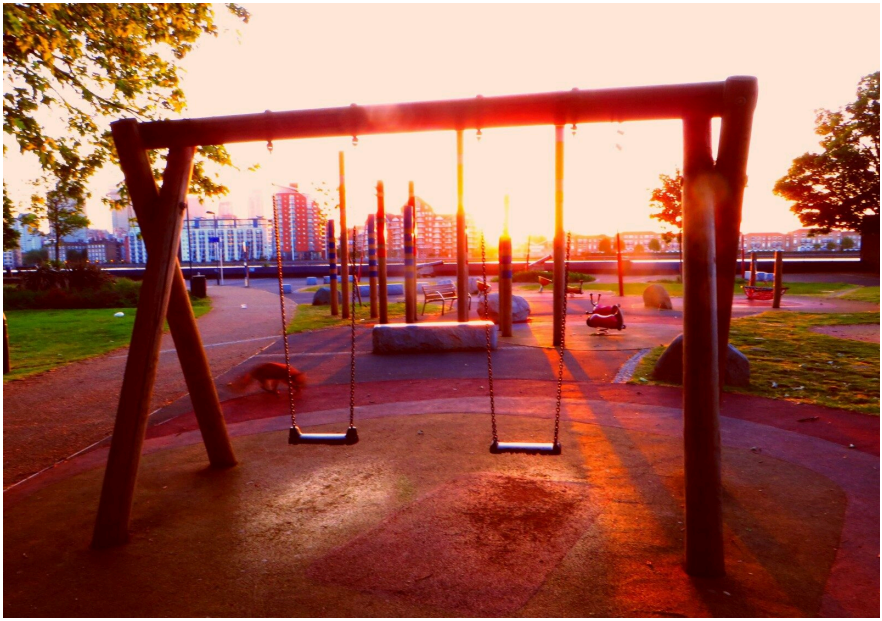
We are currently holed up in Petite Fort Philippe, equidistant from both Calais and Dunkirk, home to two of the largest migrant camps in Northern France. Yesterday we visited Calais, my first trip back there since the mass demolitions that have devastated the bustling shanty town.

When I visited the camp on New Year's Eve, I wrote about my optimism for the resilience of our communities, that they could embrace and include our brothers and sisters from across the world. Today, the entire south side of the camp is sand and dust, people's possessions churned into the ground. Only a few scattered buildings remain, isolated from the rest by a hundred yards of wasteground.

While we were in Calais, we spoke to many people, including Kate Atkinson of the School Bus Project, who we will meet again tomorrow (hopefully) to join one of her cookery classes. We also spoke to Inka (criminally not sure of the spelling – sorry!) who works in the Unofficial Women and Children's Centre, located in a sky blue double decker bus. Listen to the conversation by playing the YouTube video below.

Grande-Synthe & Calais: Compare and Contrast

8 May 2016



The Grande-Synthe migrant camp in Dunkirk is to the Calais jungle as Milton Keynes is to London. Where Calais is only now having order imposed on a meandering medieval street plan, Grande-Synthe has been ordered from conception to execution. The result is that the two migrant communities could not feel more different.



Calais 'jungle' camp containers.

Grande-Synthe, the first migrant camp in France built to UN standards, is around one fifth the size of Calais. It is home to approximately 1,100 people, mostly in wooden huts with power and electrical lighting, with others living in large white refugee tents. The living quarters are bisected by a single straight road that runs the length of the camp. Around the main entrance are kitchens, welcoming information huts, distribution points and a laundry. There is also a school and, at least on the day I'm there, an unreliable surface for playing tennis (I hesitate to aggrandise the pop up net with lines marked out by rocks as a 'tennis court').

After speaking with Ben, a volunteer who is running a migrant census, I learn that the population at Grande-Synthe is overwhelmingly Iraqi Kurd (over 90%), with a scattering of Iranians, four Vietnamese and a solitary Kuwaiti. This gives the camp an ethnic and cultural homogeneity that Calais, with its jumbled compounds of Eritrean, Ethiopian, Syrian, Afghan,

Pakistani, Sudanese and others will never have. (Milton Keynes compared to London again!)

The camp in Grande-Synthe opened with the blessing and encouragement of the local Green Party Mayor and it is managed by Utopia, a local charity. The day after we visited, their contract was up for renewal and one of Utopia's employees was worried for his job. Any charities or organisations who have attempted to manage the communities in Calais have basically failed, and both the recent destruction of half the vast shanty town and the construction of more comfortable container living accomodation have been met with serious opposition, including violent resistence.

Grande-Synthe does seem to be home to more children, who zip up and down the road on donated bicycles, cruising for something to do with their summer. But the contrast that really strikes me is in enterprise. Although it has a larger population, in Calais there is enterprise galore: restaurants, shops, a barbers, churches, mosques, bicycle mechanics, schools, a library, bakeries, a youth centre, a play bus, as well as the bustle of constant construction as architects and carpenters get to work building something new.



Church in the Calais 'jungle' camp.

Grande-Synthe is quiet by comparison, a sleepy suburb. My Friend's Cafe serves free tea and coffee, and when we passed a folk band were fiddling to a full tent. The school teaches all day every day, both English and French, and I'm sure that I missed much else besides. But the only migrant enterprise that I saw were a few roadside stalls, offering baguettes, biscuits and a few other essentials. That's why I got quite so excited when I bumped into an Iraqi Kurd making a beehive.

There is, unquestionably, the scope and opportunity for people to take the initiative and build in Grande-Synthe, but something about the place seemed to stifle natural creativity. Perhaps it was that the essentials were provided: huts, food, clothes, bedding and toiletries. Perhaps it is simply a matter of time – Grande Synthe has only been open for just over two months.

Of course, no one wants anyone to go without the basics needed for a decent life, but I can't help feeling that, instead of spending millions of euros on the top-down organisation of Grande-Synthe, and on the fortification and destruction of Calais, we should simply give the money directly to those who need it and allow free reign for their enterprise.

The ingenuity, enterprise and determination required to escape Iraq, Syria or Sudan and travel across land and sea to Northern France should be enough to convince the doubters. But if not then I implore them to visit Calais and see what miracles of architecture can rise from the wooden pallets that carry our plentiful food, clothes and toys. Or to visit Grande-Synthe and learn how bees can be cajoled into making life a little sweeter for everyone.

Cooking Sudanese Halla with The School Bus Project

9 May 2016

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Cooking Sudanese Halla with The School Bus Project



Just a quick message from north France, where we've been visiting migrants in Calais and Dunkirk.

Here's a short video I made for The School Bus Project, who are working with migrants in Calais to create community learning experiences through the medium of delicious food! **Sudanese Halla video**

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Story of the Day #23: An Unexpected Hill

24 May 2016



There wasn't meant to be a hill. We'd spent days slogging up through the steeple forests of Westphalia, precisely to reach this promised Rhineland.

And for good reason. The cycle path from Koblenz all the way to Switzerland runs along the Rhine, Europe's second grandest river. It's not that we're particularly enamoured with the river birds dipping for trout, or even devouring the same caught and smoked by more human devices. It's not the fairy tale cobbles and timber-

frame peach-painted churches. It's not even the sight of the world's largest hand-carved cuckoo clock, a dubiously self-appointed tourist attraction if ever I photographed one.

No: the Rhine is our route because water, like us, prefers the path of least resistance: our thousand metre climbing days flattened to perhaps a couple of hundred.

Bikes aren't the only traffic making good use of the easy riding: railways and roads run both sides of the waterway. Freight is hauled by trains, lorries and barges. Pleasure cruisers lifting binoculars, commuters looking up from their newspapers, motorbike tourers leathering north and south.

The point is that there are no hills. So I don't know what possesses us, after spending a night in a Rhineside orchard, to decide to go cross country, cutting around the easy river.

But here we are, standing on our pedals, cranking into the face of an isoceles hill. Sweat stinks the shirt on my back and my knee starts to wobble. C is somewhere behind me. 'I'm going to be sick.' She hasn't had lunch yet. I don't know what's holding her together.

I look back. We're holding up a grumble of traffic. Round another corner. More hill. One of the grumbles growls past us and pulls into a vineyard up ahead. A dog and two humans disgorge themselves and pause to envy our perseverance. The hill rises to the challenge and essays a passable impression of the Eiger.

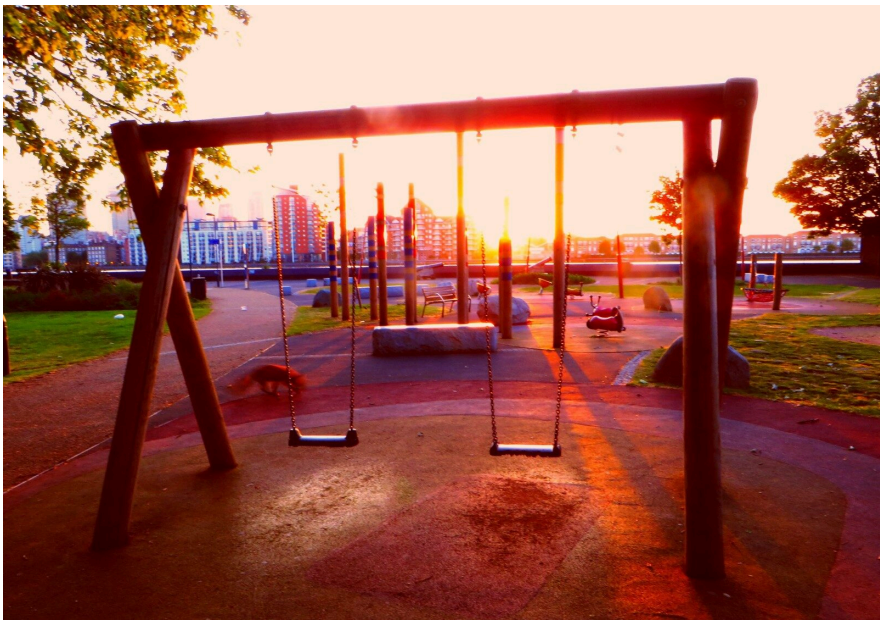
Imperceptibly, we haul ourselves level with the dog walkers. He shouts something in German at us, something about a tree. My German GCSE wasn't for nothing. I thank him beautiful and curse him under my spent breath.

We reach the tree and the shouting German's wisdom gloriously reveals itself in the summit. The wheels of my bike remember they're round and start to help me out a bit. I pull over to the vineyard and wait for C: 'This is the worst decision we've ever made.'

We wheel the bikes out to the view, over the autobahn cycling of the Rhine. The ride we could have taken. C settles her stomach with lunch. I unstuff my camping mat, pull my sweat-soaked shirt over my eyes, and fall asleep.

Story of the Day #24: Industrial Germany

25 May 2016



The stench should have been a clue. I couldn't work out whether it was a really foul cesspit, or a really good cheese. Whatever it was, it was strong and it was wafting into our tent.

In the photographs, our camping spot under trees on the banks of the Rhine, water lapping feet away from our... feet, will look romantic. The reality was suffocating, as the effluent sloshed the sulphuric assault past the feeble defences of two lines of canvas.

The signs were clear. After a week of deer frolicking, river burbling, bird tweeting Teuton we were about to enter Industrial

Deutschland.

And about time too. So far, I'd seen no evidence that Germans did anything to justify their reputation as Europe's most productive nation other than their consumption of a prodigious amount of baked goods and ice cream.

The change was immediate and well coordinated, like when the school bell goes to end playtime and everyone starts belching noxious fumes into the air.

The only thing that I knew about Worms was that a treaty had been signed there in the eighteenth century. I assumed, therefore, that modernity had yet to arrive, as if a mention in a history book was sufficient to hold back the exploitation of saltpeter and the discovery of cement.

Scores of chemical laden lorries, a horizon pricked with chimneys, complexes cased in steel piping and a constant drizzle put paid to those ideas. There was even a warning that cyclists should wear helmets. We had breakfast in a graffiti spewed motorway underpass.

I suppose it's all understandable: heavy industry demands a lot of water and the Rhine has been a faithful servant to the landlocked southwest.

But all is not lost for the passing tourist. On the other side of a four lane highway in the riverside town of Ludwigshafen sat an unmissable attraction, a must-see museum, a touristic temptress: the BASF Visitor Centre.

Ducking inside from the continuing drizzle, decked head to foot in Decathlon's finest waterproofing and several local varieties of mud,

we enjoy the appreciative attentions of a sixth form chemistry school trip. Ignoring the less politely stifled sniggers, we muster as much self-respect as the puddles under our feet will allow and present ourselves at the reception desk. 'We are visitors and we are at the visitor centre. What happens now?'

What happened then was a very expensively assembled version of that bit in chemistry when your teacher tried to convince you that science was FUN. We learnt how to cook the perfect steak by exploiting the Maillard reaction, investigated the properties of cobalt with anti-radioactive gloves and set off a rocket by cleaving water into gaseous hydrogen and oxygen.

In among the fun and games, we learnt how BASF stands for Badische Anilin and Soda Fabrik (I even had a glass of soda water) and how BASF Ludwigshafen is the world's largest integrated chemical complex, with over 2000 buildings covering 10sqkm. Their overground piping, arranged more creatively, could carry soda water from here to Seville.

We could watch archive footage of their history and swish interactive interfaces over their future as BASF heroically struggle with balancing the needs of the economy, the environment and society.

As we enviously watched a gaggle of US students (what were they doing there??) cooing over a console that showed you what you might look like with different hair styles, I started to wonder whether there was more to this outing than a three minute steak and a cut and blow dry.

A lot of money had been spent on this visitor centre. It had even won awards for its creativity. But there was something else in the air: not quite the gangrenous lung-stopper that accompanied our slumbers, but something not quite freshened by the fancy display panels and interactive modules. The faint but unmistakeable smell of greenwash.

They Want Me to Fly Like a Bird: Travels in the Belgian Asylum System

29 May 2016

A four year old sits on a double bunk bed, his legs tucked under, assiduously scrubbing his remote controlled car with a nail brush. His older brother is crosslegged in front of a small television, watching Japanese cartoons dubbed into Dutch. His father, ginger beard framing blue eyes, offers us tea.

We're squatting on small square stools around a small square table in the small square room that father and his two sons temporarily call home.

Fedasil Sint-Truiden, a Belgian government asylum centre, hosts around 550 refugees in concrete block buildings inside a secured compound. A dusty playing field has a set of swings and monkey bars, as well as a couple of football goals on an unfair incline. Anonymous doors with a Kafkaesque numbering system lead off the echo chamber hallways, punctuated by mouldering shower and toilet facilities.

Mother and two daughters live in another room of the complex, where they have access to cooking facilities, but father has a kettle. After pouring the tea, he pulls a folder from the metal locker that holds the family possessions, and takes out an identity card, issued by the International Red Cross, when he first left his home country in 2004. It bears his name, his date and place of birth: Chechnya.

In the twelve years since that card was issued, Andrei has been travelling, searching for a new home for the family that he has raised on the road. He shows us a passport for a Chechen Republic that does not exist and tells us that his lawyer made a mistake in his latest claim for asylum. Now he has two weeks to leave Belgium.

Andrei is phlegmatic. He has been through this process before and will appeal the judgement or reapply for asylum under a different part of law or in another country. He's worried that he'll have to move his children yet again and he and his wife want to get them back into school as quickly as possible.

Andrei and his family have been bumped around Belgium for the past two years, not always so lucky to have the basic food and shelter that this Fedasil centre offers. They once spent a month living on the streets.

When Andrei fled to Europe from what he calls a Russian 'concentration camp' in Chechnya, he was a strong, hopeful young man, about my age. He is now in his forties, lost in a system he can't escape. His children will likely inherit his limbo: born in Belgium, but without Belgian citizenship.

~ ~ ~

Sitting at the small square table with us is Nursultan, another refugee who has ended up in Belgium for no particularly good reason, other than being a man running out of options. Nursultan, also in his forties, is a bearish man with a smile that creases up the softness of his cheeks. His family isn't with him here, but in Turkey, the second country in which they claimed asylum. Nursultan is on his fifth.

Nursultan is an ethic Uzbek who was born and was once a successful businessman in Kyrgystan. But since the 1990s there have been ethnic tensions between Kyrgys and Uzbeks and Nursultan was caught up in the latest wave of violence in 2010.

When violence broke out in Nursultan's town, he moved into his business premises to protect them. After surviving three days, and several attacks by local Kyrgys with petrol bombs, Nursultan ran out of food. When he left the building, supposedly under the protection of the town elders, he was knocked unconscious, kidnapped and taken to a gymnasium, where he was tortured.

After refusing to pay $100,000 in exchange for his freedom, Nursultan was badly beaten and left for dead on the side of the road near his house. He tried to take the case to court, but the investigator took the side of his kidnappers. Nursultan returned home from court to find local police waiting for him. When they recognised him, they fired bullets.

Nursultan escaped in his car, and drove cross country to Kazakhstan, then flew on to Uzbekistan, where he claimed asylum. But after two months, he was told he and his family had to leave.

While the local Kyrgyz authorities tried to launch a bogus international police investigation against him, Nursultan applied for asylum in Turkey. But after four long years waiting he still had no country.

After protesting with other Central Asian refugees against the length of the asylum process in Turkey, the Turkish authorities ordered Nursultan out of the country, saying he should be thankful they weren't deporting him back to Kygystan.

By this time, Nursultan had written to all the embassies of Europe, begging for refuge. Only Sweden replied, with what he calls an 'invitation to claim asylum' – but he had to apply in the country. So Nursultan left his family to make the dangerous crossing into Europe alone, hoping that soon he would be able to give them a home.

After three months in a foetid Greek prison, Nursultan finally arrived in Sweden. Invitation in hand, he stomped triumphantly up to the home office building. But once there he was told that because he had been fingerprinted in Greece, he could not apply for asylum in Sweden.

It reminds me of Catch-22 and Nursultan laughs at the absurdity of his situation. How could he possibly arrive in Sweden without going through some other part of Europe? 'They want me to fly like a bird,' he says with a despairing shrug.



Fedasil Lubbeek

These are the forgotten refugees of Europe. In all the coverage of the refugees fleeing Syria, we overlook the others. In the emergency Fedasil centre in Lubbeek, opened by the army in December, there are ten different nationalities. Most are not Syrian; most do not receive favourable asylum verdicts.

The way the international asylum system has been created causes tensions between claimants of different nationalities. Syrians are often successful in their asylum claims for good reason, but even Baghdad is now considered 'safe' and, despite a decade of war, Iraqis are turned away.

There seems to be no refuge here for Chechens or Uzbek-Kyrgys. The Fedasil centres are more like vast transit stations, where people wait for their plane or bus ticket home, or back to where they started. It's like a great game of Snakes and Ladders, except there are snakes on almost every square.

One Fedasil employee (I'm keeping names to a minimum) looks pessimistic when I ask what chance these people have. Even those whose claims are successful have the odds stacked against them.

After a positive result, those granted asylum have two months to leave the centre and to find an apartment. After that, they have only another two months to find steady work before their financial support is cut off. Those without children stand a chance, Andrei reckons, but he has little hope of being able to support his family.

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The International Red Cross Centre at Sedoz sits on the banks of the Ambleve river near the pretty village of Nonceveux. The late evening sun breaks through the tall trees and the air is filled with

the shouts and screams of a group of boys playing a boistrous game of football. Thirty different nationalities live here, an accidental United Nations of the unwanted.

The two friendly Red Cross employees I meet are happy to talk. 'I love my job,' says one middle-aged woman. 'I meet people from all over the world.' When I ask what the difference is between the Fedasil and Red Cross centres, she reacts almost in horror: 'Fedasil is government!' she exclaims. 'We are independent, we are The Red Cross.'

Basically, she explains, this means that the police have a harder time gaining access to Red Cross centres. Legally, the Red Cross have different obligations and they can afford to be a little more free with their charges.

In a gorgeous rural setting, shaded by tall trees, with the sound of the river running past, this centre certainly feels very different to the institutional concrete block buildings of Fedasil in Sint-Truigen – and couldn't feel further from the emergency container-shelters of Lubbeek. But the problems are still the same.

Outside in the late evening sunshine, a young Somali tells us his story, confirmed by the Red Cross employees. He's been living in the centre for about a year since he had his asylum application interview. Every morning he's checked the post for the result of his claim. Every morning for a year. In the last few days, he got his response: negative.

Things are particularly difficult for people from Somalia because they often lack official documentation proving their nationality. Instead, during their asylum interviews, they're asked questions

about Somali politics, geography – even the weather. Like some absurd quiz show, where a single wrong answer will end your claim.

But here the anger is directed more towards the agonising process than towards the result, positive or negative.

A former security guard from Baghdad, who used to work with the British and Americans in the Green Zone, has already been here for eight months, without even getting an interview. 'I don't mind to wait even one year for a positive result,' he says. 'But to wait without knowing whether positive or negative…' His words trail off. 'My whole life is on pause.'

Like us, he has a bicycle. 'Sometimes I cycle in the mountains here,' he says. '20, 30 kilometers, all alone. I cycle and I sit and I smoke. It clears my mind.' It's certainly beautiful biking country, roads curling through steep sided valleys. But would I be happy cycling any road, no matter how beautiful, without knowing it had an end?

~ ~ ~

Sometimes it seems to us that the only concrete thing Belgium can really offer is language lessons. Our new Iraqi friend feels silly sitting in school learning his alphabet again, squeezing alongside his eight year old classmates. But every week he attends, hoping that one day he'll actually be allowed to put it to use.

In Brussels, we stayed overnight with Bert, an old travel buddy of mine and now working at the House of Dutch, part of the department of integration in Belgium. Among other services, House of Dutch offers free language courses to anyone who comes

to live in Belgium. And, of course, refugees have been making up a larger and larger part of his student cohort.

I met Bert while studying Arabic in Tunisia. He also spent a month studying in Syria, where House of Dutch had a centre before the war broke out. I'm heartened that there are people like Bert working for the government, motivated by their genuine desire to understand and learn from other cultures.

Further down the road, on our last night in Belgium, we're hosted by Anita, an English teacher who volunteers at the local Fedasil centre in Elsenborg, right on the border with Germany. Like Sedoz, this too commands a gloriously bucolic setting: cows lazily grazing, grass gradually growing. Imagine, then, 500 refugees popping into the quaint village shops. But the local community has overcome their understandable fears to make their temporary residents as welcome as we feel in Anita's big old farmhouse.

It is people like Anita who bring a little relief to the sad stories of Andrei and Nursultan. While politicians do all they can to close the doors to Europe, ordinary folks open their arms. Anita's walls are filled with photographs from a life spent travelling the world, and she only repays the hospitality that she has received. 'I try to keep an open house,' she says as she pours some more tea. 'It's better that way.' If only our politicians agreed.

It's not always easy to see the way ahead. Some of the people we have met will forge a new life in Belgium, helped by Fedasil, the Red Cross, and people like Anita and my friend Bert. Others will appeal their negative claims, or get bounced along to the next hopeful country: Uzbekistan, Turkey, Greece, Sweden, Belgium… Trying to

find a new campsite every night is one thing; I can't imagine what it must be like to have to find a new country.

Refugee Hospitality

29 May 2016

|IF:REWARDS| *|END:IF|*

Refugee Hospitality



Greetings from Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany!

We've just spent a delicious 24 hours with a group of refugees from Syria and Lebanon, after one of them took pity on us boiling eggs in the town square.

Their openness and hospitality was a delight to experience. It really felt like they were throwing everything they could at life, determined to make the best of whatever they had - even if that was only a 'plastic' room and good friends.

Hit the button to read a little more about refugee hospitality :D
Read Refugee Hospitality

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#25 Heidelberg Helps

31 May 2016

Heidelberg feels less a town and more a university campus. Arriving from the industry laden north, we're suddenly in the land of bicycles, scrubbed smiles and yoga mats. Heidelberg has a population of 150,000, a third of which are students. In the summer, they're replaced man-for-man by tourists, gaggling in the cobbled streets, selfying under the Schloss and monkeying around with the Heidelberg baboon.

Already in May, American tourists order show-off steiners of beer and eschew the old town Grundel bakery for a sympathetic Starbucks next door.



Heidelberg, a tourist's eye view.

Our host Manuel has been a student here for six years and is only now reluctantly finishing up his undergraduate thesis in Islamic Studies. In Germany, he tells us, university studies have traditionally been a personal pursuit whose goal was becoming a better person. A couple of years ago the EU-wide Bologna agreement moved this continental model of higher education towards the more industrial British system, which favours quantifiable results and unambiguous academic productivity.

We join Manuel in the evening for a lecture on the history of migrant and minority protests in Germany. The audience bang the tables with their fists to greet the lecturer, Simon Teune, who describes how Jews protested the desecration of their cemeteries after the second world war, how Turkish migrant workers went on strike for their rights, and how today the anti-muslim Pediga movement and the Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD) right wing populist political party are inspiring new generations of resistance.



Patrick Henry Village, an outsider's eye view.

The next day, we cycle seven kilometers out of town to Patrick Henry Village, a former American army base that is now the holding camp for refugees arriving in the southwest of Germany. We're not allowed inside, but refugees come and go, with free buses shuttling into Heidelberg.

A dual carriageway separates the refugees from the town, and only one bridge leads in and out. Leaning on the bridge parapet is Saif, a man from the Western Sahara in his late twenties.

Saif has a beaming smile and is thrilled to be in Germany, although he says it's been a culture shock. It's not just the cold weather, but everything is different: the way Germans do things, the things they say, the way they say them. He thought that when he was in Germany, everything would be easy, but it is quite the opposite.

Saif is optimistic that when he learns German, he'll start to understand and integrate into society. He studies twice a week in the camp and can't wait to test his declensions on meaningful business. For now, though, he has to wait. He has been living in Patrick Henry Village for two months and only has one more month left on his temporary permit. Uncertainty awaits.

***

In the afternoon, we cycle back to Heidelburg train station for a whistle-stop rendez-vous with Regine. Regine works for a Karlsruhe evangelist church in their refugee and integration programme. She began her career working with refugees in the 1980s, and reminds us that Germany has welcomed migrants on a similar scale to today several times in the past, most notably with the fall of the Soviet Union and the wars in the Balkans.

In 2014, 300,000 refugees arrived in Germany. In 2015, that rose to almost a million. This year, despite the border controls and the EU deal with Turkey, the numbers will still be in the hundreds of thousands.

The contrast with the UK couldn't be more stark. To compare the refugee situation in Germany with the refugee situation in the UK is to compare a dinosaur with a gecko. Yes, they are both reptiles, but that's missing the point.

The UK has pledged to take 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years. Last year in the city of Mannheim alone there were around 15,000 refugees.

Why is this so different? Regine can't really say. 'Germany is a migrant nation,' she says, and tells us about the invitations to immigrate extended to Russian Jewish communities and Kazakh Germans. After the sparse Eifel region, Mannheim is the first place in Germany where we've really seen the effects of migration, largely in the delicious felafel and kunefe of its Turkish restaurants.

Part of Regine's job is to support the thousands of volunteers who have taken a more active role in welcoming refugees, by becoming mentors and friends to the newcomers. It's not just German volunteers either: in Mannheim there are over a hundred clubs and associations for all nationalities – Iraqi, Turkish, Macedonian, Eritrean, Italian.

What's interesting is that so much of the support work for migrants is done by such volunteer and church groups. Regine's church is dedicating over 10 million Euros over the next three years to their refugee integration programme.

This popular support is, of course, a very good thing, but even in Germany, where so many more migrants have been accepted, not everything is perfect.

The church tries to treat everyone the same, but the law does not. Regine tells us that four nationalities in particular have favourable treatment: Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians and Eritreans. Refugees from these countries get fast-tracked applications, which includes immediate integration support in the form of language instruction. These are the 'good' refugees; everyone else must wait 3 or 4 years before they can start playing their part in society.

Other nationalities are fast-tracked in a different way: those from the Balkan countries have no grounds for asylum and are sent back within a couple of weeks.

Regine has also seen a polarisation in German society, between those in favour of migration and those against. Towns like Leipzig and Dresden in the east of Germany have seen constant protests and counter-protests by far right and left groups. Even in the west, far right parties like AfD have been making gains. Recent local council elections in Baden-Wurtenburg saw AfD candidates win seats.

Regine blames this trend on radical reducations in social services. This squeezes the poor and the lower middle and part of her work in the church is to try to make sure that Germans don't feel excluded in all the outpouring of concern for refugees. The church runs a choir of jobless and refugees in Mannheim, where all nationalities can sing and perform together.

As we prepare to leave, Regine looks up to the television that plays in the cafe. Angela Merkel is speaking from a lectern, about reforms to the integration law. The law sounds reasonable enough: a stop to unlimited financial support for people who fail to find a job or learn German. But Regine's worried things will get worse. She's sceptical that the state will support the programme of integration with enough money. And then how can they expect refugees to be independent of the state, if they don't have the resources to learn German and find a job?

Regine dodges my query about whether or not she's an optimist. 'The future of Europe,' she says instead, 'depends on a fair situation for all weak people.'

Grandhotel Cosmopolis

3 June 2016

Boutiques serve coffee and fine art, grafitti scratches the medieval walls and students sit cross-legged on the cobbled squares, drinking Radler and slurping ice creams. After another thunderstorm, we see a young man in a wet suit surfing the engorged canals.

Augsburg is exactly the sort of place you'd expect to find the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, where guests arrive with or without asylum.
The hostel we sleep in occupies one floor, three floors are reserved for refugees seeking asylum, and the top floor is a hotel. Everyone, guests of all status, mingle in the pay-what-you-feel cafe-bar or, between rainstorms, in the garden.



The idea, when you hear it, is obvious: both refugees and tourists need temporary convivial accommodation – why not share? But when we ask what inspired the Grandhotel, people just tap their heads: 'Crazy minds.' Well, those crazy minds have concocted an open space that not only delivers but delights.

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis could not be more different to the temporary 'plastic' accommodation we visited in Weissach. It's warm and welcoming, there's art on the walls and music in the air. Sitting in the cafe or sharing a meal at lunchtime, you can't at a glance tell who is a refugee and who is not. That is as it should be, of course. As one poster declares: 'Before I was a refugee, I was a human being.'

The hotel used to be a home for the elderly, and the rooms still have the emergency call buttons built into the light switches. 'You can press them, but no one will come,' we're told as we're shown around.



Our room is the Biotop: four bunk beds built from untreated wood, as if they grew from the stone-coated floor. Sensors dim the lights from sky blue in the day to pin-prick stars in the night-time. French doors open out to a beetle's paradise garden planted into the balcony. We eat our breakfast on a wooden bench with our feet on mossy turf.

The sixteen hostel and hotel rooms startle with their creativity, each designed by a different artist, along a unique theme: Peace, Women, Persia. The rooms for those with asylum status are less exciting, but more practical. As much as I love the forest ambience, I do keep banging my head on the 'tree branches' and tripping over the uneven floor.

The rest of the building houses artist studios, a seminar room for events and a large kitchen where a team of volunteers prepare a daily meal at lunchtime for everyone who works and lives at the Grandhotel.

On our two days here, we pitch in with the cooking. It's a good excuse to chat to the people who volunteer, and an even better excuse to eat ourselves silly with Bavarian spaetzle buttons ('Our Mac 'n' Cheese'), dumplings and lentil soup. The head chef is an Augsburger dame in her seventies; among the assistants are three boistrous young men doing community service for miscellaneous offences.



Over lunch we chat with Germans, Syrians, Ethipians, and a man who has travelled 10,000km from Namibia. I have no idea who is a refugee and who is not. As the spaetzle ‘sets like concrete’ (not my words, but those of a proud Swaebisher) and as the Namibian pours scorn on our slow progress, I can’t help but feel like the Grandhotel is a very good idea indeed.

So I’m particularly pleased to hear that the Grandhotel has spawned at least one child, in Munich. The name alone makes me

smile: Bellevue di Monaco.

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is a deep dream of peace: May their tribe increase!

Refugees Like It's 1699!

3 June 2016

|IF:REWARDS| *|END:IF|*

Refugees Like It's 1699!



Greetings from Augsburg!

It's always good to remember that refugees don't always come from Syria, and the crisis didn't start in 2011.

In this short piece from my blog we meet Karl Blanc whose ancestors fled catholic persecution in Piedmont, Italy, way back in 1699...

Hit the button to read more!
DC
(Now @dcisbusy on Instagram too) **Refugees Like It's 1699**

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From containers to computers: the challenges of refugee integration in Germany

9 June 2016

Since leaving London at the beginning of May, we've cycled about a thousand kilometres through England, France and Belgium, talking to residents and refugees about how their lives have been changed by migration.

It felt like France and Belgium (the less said about the UK the better) are socially and politically unable or unwilling to accept refugees wholeheartedly, but are trapped by international conventions into providing shelter and survival.

The result is an embarrassment for everyone: refugees packed away into buildings, containers or tents on the outskirts of towns and villages, with some eking out an uncertain existence in the asylum system for a decade or longer.

But now that we're in Germany, there's a different problem. Refugees have been welcomed, at least politically, and at least in theory. Comparing the refugee situation in Germany with the refugee situation in the UK is like comparing a dinosaur with a gecko: yes, they are both reptiles, but that's missing the point.

The UK has "pledged" to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years, in addition to the barely 5,000 already there. Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Germany has welcomed around 600,000. And that's just Syrians.

If the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in the UK, France and Belgium is best described as a collective failure of moral courage, then, no question, Germany has a very different refugee crisis. The crisis here is one of integration.



A container park in Garching an der Alz in southeast Germany.

Heidelberg

Heidelberg feels less a town and more a university campus. Arriving from the industrial north, we’re suddenly in the land of bicycles, scrubbed smiles and yoga mats. Heidelberg has a population of 150,000, a third of which are students. In the summer, they’re replaced person-for-person with tourists, gaggling in the cobbled streets, selfie-ing under the castle, and monkeying around with the Heidelberg baboon.

Outside the town, lodged in a former American army base, is a holding camp for refugees arriving in the south west of Germany.

We're not allowed inside, but refugees come and go, with free buses shuttling into Heidelberg. A dual carriageway separates the refugees from the town, and only one bridge leads in and out.

Leaning on the bridge parapet is Saif, a man from the Western Sahara in his late twenties. He's an optimist and talks easily about his plans for the future, how he will learn German and make German friends to help him through the shock he's felt in this alien culture. "I thought in Germany everything would be easy", he says with a gappy smile, shaking his head in bemusement. "In Germany they do everything different. They look different, they talk different, they do different". He smiles again: "even the weather different"!

But, as he talks, it becomes clear that Saif's future is nowhere near as secure as his optimistic demeanour suggests: he's been here for two months already, and only has one month remaining on his temporary documents. He's far from halfway across the bridge dividing refugees from residents.

Einwanderungsland

Inside the Heidelberg railway station café, we meet Regine, who works for an evangelist church in their refugee and integration programme. Regine began her career working with refugees in the 1980s, and reminds us that Germany has welcomed migrants on a similar scale several times in the past, most notably after the fall of the Soviet Union and during the conflicts in the Balkans.

Despite the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl's long insistence that Germany "is not an immigration country" (Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland), Regine says that in fact

“Germany is an immigrant nation” and that – remarkably – this is enshrined in law.

Germany is the second most popular migration destination in the world. I hadn’t realised that 12 million refugees displaced after the Second World War were forced to move into the new Germany, nor that invitations to immigrate were extended to Russian Jewish communities, to the million or so Kazakh Germans, and to millions more Gastarbeiter (guest workers) from Turkey and elsewhere.

Germany acknowledges the indelible debt she owes her immigrants, who rebuilt the country from the ground up and helped fuel the ‘economic miracle’ of the post-war and cold war years.

Part of Regine’s job is to support the thousands of volunteers who have taken an active role in welcoming the latest wave of refugees by becoming mentors and friends to the newcomers. It’s not just German volunteers either: in Mannheim there are over a hundred clubs and associations for all nationalities – Iraqi, Turkish, Macedonian, Eritrean, Italian.

What’s interesting is that so much of the support work for new immigrants is done by such volunteer groups: Regine’s church alone is dedicating over €10 million over the next three years to their refugee integration programme.

The integration lottery

In other towns we visit, such as the Bavarian spa town Bad Tölz, we see how a single volunteer refugee organisation can mean the difference between newcomers ending up among the state-

supported unemployed or as working taxpayers. This means that, for refugees, who are randomly sent to this or that town, their new life becomes a lottery.

In Bad Tölz, we enjoyed a pot of tea with Muafeq, a Syrian family man fortunate enough to find an 'ein Euro' (one euro) apprenticeship at AsylPlus, a small organisation set up to deliver online German language instruction to refugees. As the organisation expanded, Muafeq was able to transition from his ein Euro wage to being a fully paid member of staff.

The founder of AsylPlus, an indomitable Bavarian grandma called Frau Haase, is passionate about the need for refugee integration and evangelistic about the power of computers to do the work of a hundred thousand teachers. But mostly she is frustrated with her countrymen who don't see the benefits brought by the new arrivals. Yes, the state supports refugees financially, but where does that money end up? "Check your pockets", Frau Haase says. "Refugees spend their money, in shops, on accommodation – not like rich Germans who keep their money in the bank".

Frau Haase sees the state support for refugees as a form of financial redistribution, benefiting everyone in ways that are perhaps hard to see, but are there nonetheless. "Germany is old", she adds, "these young people want to work, and their work will pay for our pensions". She smiles mischievously: "not for me, of course, but for many people refugees are big business".

The big business of integration, however, has largely been left to private individuals and organisations like Regine's church and AsylPlus. Despite their fine words, the German state has taken a back seat role, reluctant to commit too far in one direction and risk

angering the growing numbers who believe refugee support has gone far enough.

Towns like Leipzig and Dresden in the east of Germany have seen constant protests and counter-protests by far right and left groups. Even in the wealthier west of the country, anti-immigration parties like Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have been winning seats in recent elections.

Back in Heidelberg, Regine blames this trend on radical reductions in social services since the 1990s. These reforms, she says, have made life very difficult for the poorest and have frustrated those on middle incomes who see their financial situation moving backwards.

Part of Regine's work in the church is to try to make sure that vulnerable Germans don't feel excluded amid the outpouring of support and concern for refugees. In Mannheim, for example, the church hosts a mixed choir of refugees and the unemployed, where all nationalities sing and perform together.

As we prepare to leave, Regine looks up to the television that plays in the café. Angela Merkel is speaking from a lectern, about reforms to the integration law. The law's aim sounds reasonable enough: to stop unlimited financial support for refugees who fail to find a job or learn German.

But Regine is worried that the law will only make things worse. She's sceptical that the state will support their programme of integration with enough money. How can they expect refugees to become independent of the state, if they don't have the resources

to learn German or find a job? They can't expect the church and volunteers to pick up the slack forever.

Now that refugees have been accepted, the state's reluctance to commit has only exacerbated the challenges of integration. Without full integration, refugees will find it impossible to contribute effectively in their new society and will become the drain that the far-right accuses them of being. The government's exaggerated effort to avoid angering those who criticise their open door policy to refugees is, tragically, only adding ammunition to arguments against immigration.

As she shakes her head, I ask Regine whether she's still an optimist. She dodges the question: "The future of Europe", she says instead, "depends on a fair situation for all weak people".



An AsylPlus computer room in a container park in Bad Tölz.

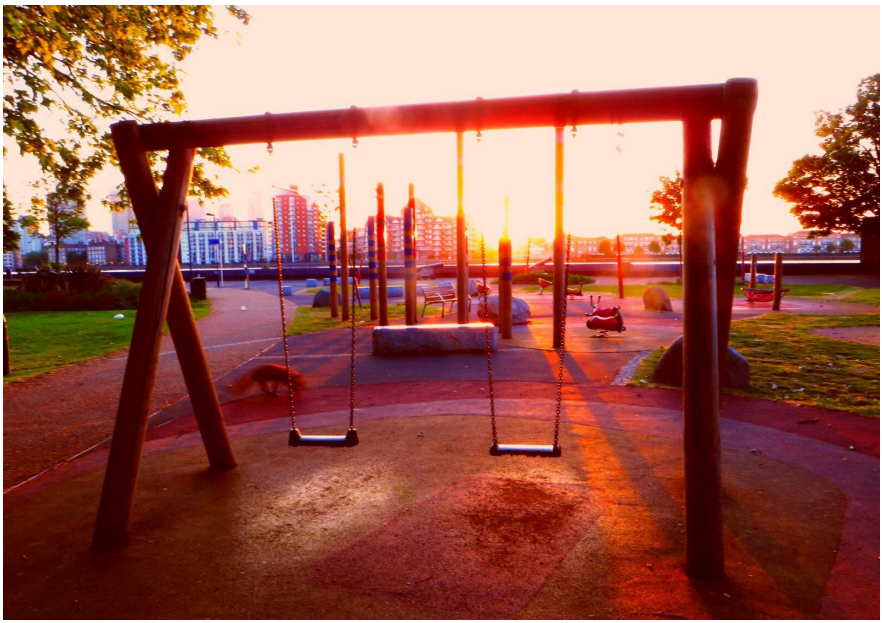
But the lesson from Bad Tölz is that, with application and appropriate support, Europe can make it.

Three years after arriving in Germany, Muafeq speaks fluent German and has a full-time job. His kids are settled in school and getting good grades. He and his family live in their own house in Bad Tölz and they no longer receive any social support from the state. He is the proud owner of a German-made family car. He pays taxes. He has integrated.

This post was originally published on openDemocracy.

On the walls of Zollamtsstrasse refugee camp

15 June 2016



Our journey along the storm-swollen Danube threads through castle-and-schnapps country into Austria. The further we cycle on this ride across the continent, the more we see how urgently Europe needs a plan, not only to cope with the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, but to deal with widening social divisions that have little to do with migration.

Two weeks before we arrived, Austria elected a new president. The two candidates were Norbert Hofer from the Freedom Party of Austria, whose first leader was an officer of the Nazi SS, and

Alexander Van der Bellen, a member of the Green Alternative party: far right and far left. The nation is split almost exactly down the middle: the far right lost the vote by 0.35% and have successfully won a legal challenge to force a second election, due to happen in October.

The two parties are irreconcilable. In Vienna, I speak to Daniel Aschwanden, an artist who has been working in a Red Cross camp for refugees set up in a former financial law court. He tells me that the first showing of the work he created with the refugees was attacked by far right groups, who themselves came under mortal threat. The result was that the Red Cross installed bouncers to protect both sides. Daniel shakes his head: “I watch people from the right and the left argue and I don’t want to get involved in that”.

Zollamtsstrasse

Inside the former financial court building on Zollamtsstrasse, the rooms now stand empty. The last remaining Red Cross workers clear away the children’s toys, the chairs and tables of the schoolrooms, and the books of the library. The refugees were recently moved after eight months here, and the building will become a university’s fine arts department – apt, I think to myself, as I wander around, admiring the colourful murals daubed on the corridor walls by refugees and volunteers.

Downstairs, a vast painting shows a woman’s head on the shoulders of a flowering tree, messages of love and motherhood in among its leaves, while a golden phoenix soars overhead. Another mural is coated with flags and symbols of all nations, with meaningful words memorialised: security, hallo, freedom. Upstairs, a Syrian

family's room is decorated with a beautiful woman in a blossom orchard dancing with a silk scarf, her skirts billowing in the gentle, petal-strewn wind. Similar flowers bloom around the electrical power outlets in the wall. An Afghani has drawn with coloured pencils two children, falling in love, playing music: Ich komme aus Afghanistan, ich liebe Afghanistan – I come from Afghanistan, I love Afghanistan. Another has drawn the crest of Arsenal Football Club.

Around 1,200 people were lodged here, mostly young men, but also plenty of elderly people, women and children, including unaccompanied minors. The doors to the bedrooms still bear the nameplates of the former tax inspectors, as well as the administrative chalk marks of the refugee centre. Room 421, formerly the office of Helmut Hummel and Magistra Regine Linder, was converted to accommodation for six persons. Office buildings aren't designed as living spaces, though: no showers, insufficient toilets, no clothes washing facilities, only the top-floor canteen for cooking – and no one was allowed to use the lift. At first, people were taken in small groups by mini-bus to municipal baths and might have one shower per week.

The building at Zollamtsstrasse was acquired by the university last summer and was lying empty before the builders moved in to start the art department refit. A student-run arts festival called Urbanize was due to take over the vast space last October, as the number of refugees arriving in Austria reached 5,000 per day. The university and the festival opened their doors to the refugees and from that moment this former tax court became a mixed space of students, volunteers and refugees from all over the world. It was only after civilians had turned the building into a welcoming space that the

Red Cross were charged with its formal management as a refugee centre.

Zollamtsstrasse wasn't meant to be permanent, but the refugees liked being here because, unlike at other more institutional refugee centres, there was always something to do. German classes in one of the four schoolrooms and a kindergarten for the youngest children, regular clay modelling workshops and dance empowerment classes, games of table tennis, table football and chess, as well as other projects like designing and painting the murals. Students from the university also designed and delivered two metal container shower blocks. As one of the volunteers, Stephan, told me, the philosophy of the place was that anyone could just come and do anything. "There are no rules, no bureaucracy, just openness", he says. "This is nice for students used to bureaucracy. They have the freedom to create".

But the heart of the building was the café, which 'sold' free cakes, cookies, tea and coffee, and hosted concerts, talks, films and art exhibitions. Every Saturday was women's day, when men were forbidden, the blinds were drawn and hijabs could be removed in privacy. Although not without its problems, particularly with regards to the protection of women, Zollamtsstrasse sounds like it was a brief interlude of freedom and real attempts at integration between refugees and residents in Vienna. My volunteer guide Patricia is obviously shaken that the hall where the café once lived is now dead. The serving bar torn out, the dishwasher ripped from the wall, the stage carted away. The only survivor is a chalkboard drawing of blooming flowers and a tree in blossom: the enduring emblem of Zollamtsstrasse.

The refugees have now been dispersed across Vienna to live in other camps – all converted, disused buildings, including the old offices of the Kurier newspaper. These makeshift camps are one sign, activists tell me, that refugees are not really welcome by the state. The resources are not being put into integration, but into moving refugees on, either further north to Germany, or back to the east. Patricia tells me about an Iranian who has been ordered back to Croatia, not because he had papers or a passport stamp from there, but because the bus he was on, commanded and escorted by the Greek police, happened to pass through Croatia. "And he was one of the supposed 'good' refugees", she says. "He was a doctor".

Stephan and Patricia and the other enthusiastic volunteers of Zollamtsstrasse have found a new empty building, a former phone shop near the station. In stark contrast to the old financial court, the walls are still bare, whitewashed. Over the coming months, those walls will be filled with the imaginings of refugees and the local community, creating a communal space where everyone belongs.

Back in one of the empty 'bedrooms' of Zollamtsstrasse, Patricia shows me a practice dialogue scrawled on the wall in pencil, first in German, then translated into Persian. It shows the linguistic preoccupations of the student, and illustrates the challenges that lie ahead for both refugee and resident in Austria. It's headed Meine Fehler – اشتباه من – My mistakes.

Bitte zahlen sie Bar.
[no translation]
Please pay cash.

Ich habe kein Bargeld, leider nein.
متاسفم، من پول نقد ندارم
I have no cash, unfortunately no.

Dieb.
دزد
Thief.

Ich bin kein Dieb.
[no translation]
I am not a thief.

Ich glaube Ihnen.
من شما را باور دارم
I believe you.

This post was originally published on openDemocracy.

UPDATE: Alexander Van der Bellen eventually won the Austrian Presedential election after a re-run that took place in December 2016. However, 2016 will be remembered as the year populist far right movements exploited widening political divisions, not just in Europe, but across the world.

On the walls of Zollamtsstrasse refugee camp was originally published on Cycling to Syria

Where next

All of David's stories, including the other long rides, are free to read at davidcharles.info/series.

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