

Welcoming Culture in Germany

Europe On Air project in Berlin-Frankfurt a.d. Oder

by Mila Schmolke, YCBS

It is estimated that one million refugees will arrive in Germany until the end of this year.

In the past, numerous Germans were affected by the refugee fate (after 1945 around 12 million Germans were forced to leave their home due to the changed borders). Therefore the German society is more tolerant when it comes to refugees. The German advocate a fundamental principle of solidarity and social market economy, which requires supporting the economically weaker by the stronger ones. The refugees can find here appropriate social structures that can allow them living a worthy existence.

A study conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung revealed that a positive attitude towards the refugees generally increases, although there are some regional differences. In the states previously belonging to former East Germany the distrust and fear of immigrants is very common, the attacks on the aliens as well as setting fire to the refugee camps occur more often.*

In the states that used to be a part of West Germany, the citizens had more contact with other cultures therefore their attitude towards the immigrants is more positive nowadays.

Aydan Özoğuz, the Minister of State with responsibility for migration, refugees and integration, appeals for more support for the organizations that endorse solidarity and open communication ((Die Bundesregierung | 2015).

Many people in Germany have joined their forces privately in order to help newly arrived refugees. "Welcome initiatives" are being started and considerable support is offered. According to a study "Volunteers and refugee work" conducted by the Humboldt University Berlin, thousands of Germans have been getting involved in helping refugees on a purely voluntary basis. They have been assisting the refugees with the paperwork, teaching them German or helping the children out with homework.

Also churches and other charities are involved in refugee work (yet it is important to note that organizations such as churches, charities, NGOs receive funds for their work, which is typical for the German civic society)

For example in Berlin, one can find almost in each neighborhood an initiative that supports or consults the refugees (Flüchtlingsrat Berlin 2015). However, it is said that the public offices could support the work done by the volunteers even more and that the churches and other organizations could offer even more help.

The initiatives are of considerable significance for the refugees. Khalid, a Syrian refugee, visits every day the office of the "Neue Nachbarschaft" project (in English New Neighborhoods). He can learn there German and meet new friends. He described it as his family in which he feels well and welcomed.

Since the number of asylum seekers increased in Germany, the prejudices and negative

attitude towards the refugees have been developing within the society as well.

It is said that Germany does not have the capacity to receive any more refugees, on the other that many refugees arrived due to economic reasons only and do not have an asylum right.

In the past months more and more groups were formed that protested against refugee camps. According to the media reports, the number of racist attacks on the refugees and immigrants increased considerably (Zeit online | 2015).

The raids on the refugee camps occur more often and almost every day new attacks are being reported. Even the aid workers of the Red Crescent and similar organizations have been assaulted. Since 2012 the number of the attacks increased from 24 to 150 raids in 2014.

Summing up, one can state that the “Welcome Culture” exists in Germany. Although attacks and negative attitudes persist in the society, the majority of the Germans is open-minded in reference to refugees. The willingness to help is to be observed in numerous projects and organizations that are involved in refugee work. A study conducted by the Berlin Institute confirms it – in the past three years the number of volunteers increased by 70 % (BPB 2015).

Nevertheless, the politicians should attempt to support and protect the volunteers even more. Many of them wish that the paperwork was easier. In fact, many volunteers take over functions of certain public offices since the extreme workload causes personnel shortages. Especially the threat from the right-wing extremist groups must be addressed that hinders the development of the “Welcome Culture”.

** The movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) was founded in Dresden in October 2014 and is against the Islamization of the West world.*

Berlin and migration history

In the course of his 750 years long history Berlin was constantly influenced by migration which has transformed the city into a diverse cultural metropolis.

Already in the 12th century Flemish farmers settled down in the swamp areas of Berlin that had been uninhabited until then. In 1560 the French protestants (the Huguenots) fled to Berlin to seek a shelter from the persecution in their home country. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the people from Silesia and Bohemia arrived in Berlin searching for employment possibilities. At the beginning of the 20th century, the artists representing the Russian Avant-garde: Malewitsch, Kandinsky, Chagall settled down in Berlin and the art group “The Blue Rider” (German Der Blaue Reiter”) was formed.

After 1945 Berlin received thousands of exiled inhabitants of East Prussia.

In the 1960s because of the economic boom, many guest workers (German: Gastarbeiter)

from Italy, Spain, Portugal and especially Turkey arrived in Germany. The Turkish guest workers inhabited mostly the areas of West Berlin that were closely located to the Berlin Wall and the dangerous East-West border. The neighborhoods were: Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Wedding und Moabit. In the 1970s the immigrants arriving in Germany were mostly either of Russian-Jewish descent or came from Palestine. The following immigration waves after the fall of the Berlin Wall came from the previous Soviet countries and Ex-Yugoslavia.

Currently, most of the immigrants arriving in Berlin decide to leave their countries due to the economic and political reasons. They come from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldavia, Syria, North Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Eritrea.

Frankfurt an der Oder/Europe University

After the Second World War, the German city Frankfurt was divided into two parts – Frankfurt an der Oder and Slubice, the first one belonging to Germany, the latter one to Poland. The river Oder was to be the demarcation line between the countries.

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Europe University Viadrina was founded closely to the Oder border. Political and cultural functions of the German-Polish university are: reconciliation, cultural dialog, communication beyond borders.