

## **Volunteering with asylum seekers - a life-changing experience**

With the increasing amount of asylum applicants in Germany, there is also a growing need for housing. The newly established Wilmersdorf refugee shelter in Berlin, opened in mid-August in a former city hall, currently accommodates about one thousand people. The shelter is operated by a network of volunteers of “Wilmersdorf Hilft” as a temporary home for the refugees and asylum seekers, who will later be transferred to other locations. One of the hundreds of volunteers working at the shelter is Christine<sup>1</sup>, who heard from a radio that a new refugee shelter will be opened, and asked her mother if she would be interested in going to see the place together.

### ***Working throughout the night until the morning***

On her first visit to the shelter Christine saw minimum of 200 people who had just arrived to Germany. She witnessed the first groups coming throughout the night, but she had never imagined that she will ever experience something like that: *“For me it was like in a movie. I felt that this is not real. I had no experience with refugees.”* Yet, she did her best to make them feel safe, relaxed, having water to drink and something to eat: *“There were only a few helpers during the night, but when I looked into the refugees’ thankful eyes, I felt I could not leave, I had to help them.”* Christine went to the shelter one day after her work and has been actively helping at the shelter since that day.

### ***Treating refugees as people***

*„I always look into their eyes and feel that I am on the same level“*, says Christine. She believes that it is important to remember that people at the shelter have had a normal life – most of them had a work position or they were students, sometimes they even had a better position in the society than she does. She feels that people often forget to ask asylum seekers and refugees questions which they ask from other people they meet in their everyday life, such as what you like to do on your free time, or what do you do as a profession. Also, she has tried to stop saying ‘refugees’, because she feels that it is stigmatizing the people at the shelter, and is now searching for new words to express herself.

She sees the refugees and asylum seekers as her brothers and sisters, and sometimes as close friends. Yet, although Christine knows many of the refugees very well, only recently people have started telling her stories of their fleeing to Europe. She was walking along a river with one of the people from the refugee shelter, and he started telling his story of coming to Germany, and what he is feeling now when he is watching the water. Christine feels that to make the people at the shelter feel comfortable, it is important that there would be trust between the workers and the people living there.

***“We had only our mind and heart, nothing more.”***

At the shelter Christine met a famous Syrian painter who she had seen a couple of weeks before in German TV. For her it was an eye-opening moment. The painter explained that he needs to paint and for that he is dreaming of a room. She reached out for him and promised that *„with heart, with hope, with luck, with your talent and with my talent, we will find what we need“*. In the end, she managed to reserve a room for him in Berlin.

Among many others she met another Syrian artist from Aleppo, who escaped away from Bashar al-Assad’s men because of his anti-regime caricatures. *„I asked them of their occupation, of their talents, and step by step the ideas would create connections, and, through that, help them - to find a way for continuing their life here, outside the refugee camps, so they could lead a normal and good life with much luck“*, Christine explains. She said that when she first met the artist he looked so sad, as did many others, but she saw no tears. Christine had cried for him, but when she saw his pictures and heard his wish to tell the story of Syria to people in Europe through art, she knew what she had to do.

Christine had a met a woman and told her about her dreams for the refugees. The woman said that she has a brother who has an apartment, and that he was willing to rent the apartment for the painter who Christine had met at the shelter. Yet, her problem for the next days was how to manage the situation monetarily. She happened to tell her story to a work colleague who was immediately willing to assist the artist financially during the first months. *„I do what my heart tells me to do. I have had much luck, and I am very open, so gradually things started coming together,“* Christine describes. *„When I came here, I met her (Christine) as she was standing next to me. She brought me colours, brush, everything. She found a flat for me. Everything“*, the painter and caricature artist stresses. He is very grateful and sees Christine as his big sister.

***Working hard for everything they have***

Yet, everything has not gone so smoothly. All the things they have at the Wilmersdorf refugee shelter have been received in the form of donations from organisations and private persons. Christine explains that she does what she can while staying positive, but she knows that possibilities are not endless. It takes time to get the necessary supplies. They have to fight for every room, for every bed, for all the showers. Only now in November they will get ten showers, but until that time they have had to get by with only two. Although she knows that many refugees came to the shelter with *“bags full of hope”*, she trusts that the volunteers have at least made the building into a home for many of those people, and not merely a transfer point.

***Cannot just sit back anymore***

Christine says that she has had so many special moments at the shelter, and that she has cried so many tears, that speaking about it is difficult for her. She herself experienced a glimpse of the life of a refugee by, for example, waiting food in the same line with the asylum applicants. She purposively wanted to know the feeling how is to live in such a place. Volunteering at the shelter

had been very difficult for her at the beginning because, even when home or at her work place, she kept thinking about the people living at the shelter. Yet, by now she has learned to take her mind off those thoughts. Sometimes she feels that she wants her old life back as it was very comfortable. Christine does not have the same friends anymore, mostly because she realized how different political opinions about life they had: *“I will never get my old life back like many other people who volunteer here.”* Yet, she still enjoys working at the Wilmersdorf shelter: *“We can’t help everybody. We can’t save the world. But we have never lost hope. And this continues to give us strength.”*

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<sup>i</sup> The name of the interviewee has been changed due to the interviewee’s own request.