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*Making Friends: Refugees and Volunteers in Germany*

*For H. and Michael Geyer, who both taught me, in very different ways, about friendships.*

In September 2015, Germany – and Austria, let’s not forget – opened its borders for tens of thousands of refugees, mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who were stranded on the Serbian-Hungarian border, or in Hungary itself, a country that did not want those refugees to stay. A conservative chancellor, Angela Merkel, decided to allow refugees to enter Germany, fully aware that many of them would stay in the long run. Full of euphoria, thousands of Germans went to train stations to welcome refugees, they went to refugee camps to donate water, food, cloths or teddy bears for children, they volunteered to support refugees in dealing with the authorities, teaching them German, or organizing trips to zoos and theaters for children. Germany had another *Sommermärchen*.

Of course, the images of friendly Germans welcoming refugees tell only half the story. Many Germans resent the arrival of foreigners, especially from Muslim countries. The number of arson attacks on refugee shelters sky-rocked to more than a thousand in 2015. The public mood quickly changed as well, especially after the events on New Year’s Eve in Cologne, when, according to police reports and witnesses, hundreds of women were sexually molested and mugged by men who were commonly described as North African or Arabian. Bavaria’s minister president Horst Seehofer (CSU), who has been calling for harsh measures to stop the entry of refugees from early on, enjoys an unprecedented popularity, and the German government has implemented stricter asylum regulations. It has announced that refugees from Afghanistan would face deportation and has made it more difficult for accepted refugees to bring family members to Germany. Predictably, the result of the decision was that an increasing number of women and children crossed the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> And in the regional elections of March 13, 2016, in Sachsen-Anhalt, Baden-Württemberg and

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<sup>1</sup> See for example ‘Immer mehr Frauen und Kinder auf der Balkanroute’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 February 2016. By the time of writing in early April 2016, the Balkan route has been closed, and the number of refugees arriving in Germany has dramatically dropped.

Rheinland-Pfalz, the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* accomplished significant victories.<sup>2</sup> But these developments notwithstanding, something quite surprising has happened in Germany. It is perhaps telling that a radical left-wing newspaper like *jungle world* felt the need to applaud Angela Merkel, that Green minister president of Baden-Württemberg Winfried Kretschmann prays for her well-being, and that an author for the Berlin *Tagespiegel* considers it reasonable for supporters of the left to vote for Merkel.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, these developments deserve the attention of scholars interested in Germany. Indeed, there has been a brief debate in the German Studies Association's newsletter about how to assess the current situation in Germany from afar. An initial optimistic contribution by Irene Kacandes who expressed hope that Germany would become a more open country faced criticism by a number of scholars who urged us to keep a critical eye on the ongoing racism in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Providing critiques is certainly what we as publicly engaged scholars typically do. There is the expectation that what we write is critical. This essay will defy such expectations. It is written in a spirit of deep hope. Of course, this does not mean that there is nothing to criticize – there is, indeed, a lot to criticize, ranging from security staff members who harass Muslim women who are not following Ramadan, to the German social welfare state increasingly unloading its duties on private charities and volunteers, to the European Union's deal with Turkey. In this essay, however, I want to look into an aspect of Germany's *Willkommenskultur* that is, I would argue, inspiring hope: the friendships that form between Germans and refugees. In particular, I will focus on the situation in Berlin and its *Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales* (LaGeSo, meaning 'state office for health and social issues'), and what volunteers did at LaGeSo. Mostly, volunteer activism has been praised as humanitarian and social work. Rarely is their work considered in political terms. Indeed, commentators tend to look down on activists' politics as naïve.<sup>5</sup> My goal here is to challenge this

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<sup>2</sup> In Rheinland-Pfalz, the AfD achieve 12,6%, in Baden-Württemberg 15,1%, and in Sachsen-Anhalt 24,3%.

<sup>3</sup> Svenna Triebler, 'Klarkommen', in *jungle world*, 15 October 2015; Stephan Haselberger and Hans Monath, 'Winfried Kretschmann im Interview: "Ich bete jeden Tag für Angela Merkel"', *Tagespiegel*, 1 February 2016; Andrea Dembach, 'Flüchtlingspolitik: Angela Merkel bekommt Beifall von den Linken', *Tagespiegel*, 3 February 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.thegsa.org/news/index.html#Letter>.

<sup>5</sup> When volunteer organizations speak up politically, they usually do so to criticize official immigration and asylum politics, or the failure of local administrations. But as far as I can see there is not much of a debate about the *political* meaning of what volunteer organizations are

perspective. By building friendships with refugees, activists are engaged in something that is deeply political. As strangers become friends, both long-time Berlin residents and newly arrived Berliners learn to trust each other and to live with differences, indeed, to be friends despite sometimes quite serious differences.

A personal note is in order at this stage. What I have to offer is based on my own activism in Berlin since the fall of 2015. Rather than talking about ‘volunteers’, I will thus refer to a collective ‘us’ in the following discussion. It is impossible for me to offer a sober and neutral analysis (not that this is what I would like to do). Instead I will offer some reflections on what I, together with many other people in Germany, have been doing. This also means that the essay is not based on any research in the traditional sense, but on a form of participant observation, though observation was never the goal of what I was doing, but participation. There are countless stories to be told about what was and is happening in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. It surely would be worth a PhD dissertation in anthropology or sociology. At least as far as I can see (‘on the ground’, that is), nobody is doing this research right now, at least not in Berlin. Probably, it would be somewhat inappropriate to go to LaGeSo, where I was mostly active, for research. If anything, I believe that the stories I am going to tell are worth being told and remembered, and not to be forgotten in the abyss of Facebook groups.<sup>6</sup> The evidence on which I draw might seem anecdotal: personal observations and stories other volunteers told me or shared on Facebook. Yet, while this essay is not based on any systematic research, the daily, or rather nightly activism of several weeks and the multitude of stories gathered in this context provide more than just anecdotal evidence. Of course, one might object that it is impossible to verify my sources. Yet, the

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doing. See for example reports about the demonstration *Moabit Hilft* organized in October 2015 to protest against the situation at LaGeSo, ‘Den Flüchtlingshelfern reicht es’, *rbb online*, <https://www.rbb-online.de/politik/thema/fluechtlinge/berlin/2015/10/moabit-hilft-demonstriert-in-berlin-gegen-zustaende-vor-dem-lage.html>. For volunteers’ worries about a de-politicization of their work, see Armin Lehmann, ‘Flüchtlingsbeauftragte der Kirche im Interview: “Die Ehrenamtlichen fühlen sich um ihre Arbeit betrogen”’, *Tagespiegel*, 5 February 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Much of the support is organized via Facebook groups, notably *Moabit Hilft*, *Place for Refugees*, *Mit Herz für Flüchtlinge*; the group *Apfelkuss* collects stories and experiences of volunteers and refugees. All of these groups are closed groups. I will not provide URLs to protect refugees’ and volunteers’ identity.

same would be true with regards to verifying any story a newspaper or an Internet blog reports.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I will first briefly discuss the situation at Berlin's LaGeSo, arguing that, paradoxically, the administrative chaos that reigned in the fall of 2015 provided an important context for building friendships. The second and largest part of this essay will explore how friendships are formed between German volunteers and refugees. While building friendships might seem to be a personal rather than political issue, I will argue in the third part that those friendships are deeply political. To conclude, I will offer some reflections on the sense of fear that seems to dominate German public discourse, and contrast it with the sense of hope and optimism that friendships with refugees can generate.

*'There Is No Refugees Crisis in Berlin, Only an Administrative Crisis'*

If there is one place in Germany that has come to symbolize the incompetency of local administrations and the plight refugees have to go through once they are in Germany, it is Berlin's *Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales*, a place that has received national and international media attention.<sup>8</sup> Refugees have to register at LaGeSo to file their application for asylum, to be provided with a place to sleep, and to receive monetary support and health care. Registering as a refugee at LaGeSo is a vital first step in a complicated bureaucratic process. And refugees have to return to LaGeSo time and again. They received vouchers for their camp (*Kostenübernahmen*), which were valid only for a limited time and hence needed to be renewed at LaGeSo. The same was true for their health card, though this has changed by now. They also need to come to LaGeSo to receive money, which is paid once a month. While emergency camps provide refugees with food (at least theoretically, in practice, this does not always work either), this is not the case in the regular refugee shelters to which refugees are transferred after a certain period of time (in theory, again). Then, refugees need

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<sup>7</sup> For a good blog from Munich, see [www.blicktausch.com](http://www.blicktausch.com), by Karim Hamed. Some of the blog entries are translated into English.

<sup>8</sup> See only Laurie Penny, 'The refugee crisis is a battle for the soul of Europe', *New Statesman*, 23 September 2015; Melissa Eddy and Katarina Johannsen, 'Migrants Arriving in Germany Face a Chaotic Reception in Berlin', *New York Times*, 26 November 2015. Listing all media reports in Germany about LaGeSo would go too far here.

the little money they receive to buy food. But since LaGeSo could not cope with the task, refugees often had to wait for weeks until they received their money. In early 2016, there were reports of refugees going hungry because they could not support themselves. In short, there are multiple reasons why refugees have to go to LaGes0, or 'Sozial', as they call it.

In July and August 2015, LaGeSo basically collapsed. Every day, hundreds if not thousands of refugees were waiting in the summer heat in front of the building hoping for their registration, and hence a place to sleep, to eat and drink. At first, the state of Berlin did nothing to support these refugees at all. So the neighborhood initiative *Moabit Hilft* stepped up. Local residents brought food and water, vital during the hot days of July and August. Doctors and nurses volunteered to provide refugees with free medical support. At night, the office closed. But this did not mean that problems ended. Sometimes, there were not enough places in official camps, so refugees ended up sleeping in a nearby park. Of course, refugees continued arriving in the evening or at night, with no idea where to go. Sometimes they came from other German states, usually Bavaria, with papers sending them to a shelter that was full since months, or directly to LaGeSo. For others, LaGeSo was the first point of contact with German officials. Some refugees decided to simply spend the night in front of LaGeSo. They had to come back the next morning anyways, and had no money to pay for public transportation. For those refugees, Berliners brought blankets, water and food. In other cases, especially when families and small children were concerned, we (I spent many nights in front of LaGeSo) tried to arrange private sleeping places for them. Hundreds of Berliners had declared their willingness to house refugees for a night or over the weekend, until they found a place in the camp. So we called them, sometimes in the middle of the night, and often they came and picked up entire families. There were nights when we found private places for nearly 200 people. In one case, a family with three little children arrived, just after the last bus that brought refugees to a camp had left, and with it all officials. A student who happened to live close by approached me, asking me how she could help in general. I asked her to wait for a bit, because I first needed to take care of the family. When we had given them food, water and some clothes for the kids, I turned to her and said half-jokingly that now, I'd need to find a place to sleep for them. She just called her roommates, and ten minutes later the family was on their way to the student's place.

By the fall, the situation changed. While most people in the summer had waited for their registration, refugees now started to come back to collect their monetary welfare support or because they needed to renew their vouchers so that they could stay in the camp. (Camps are not run by the state, but by private companies or charities that are paid by the state of Berlin: To receive payments, charities needed to collect vouchers from refugees – German bureaucracy at work.) Every night, people started queuing around 10pm, so that they might enter the waiting area first, though being first in line did not mean that you were the first to get into the office building. By 4am, when security forces opened the gates to the actual waiting area, where refugees would have to wait another 4-5 hours, some 400-500 people started running. They climbed over fences, or just pushed security forces and the police aside, all hoping to actually get into the building and see a case worker (though seeing a case working did not mean that a case was solved; all too often, files were simply lost somewhere). We frequently called an ambulance because refugees got hurt in the melee each morning. Once a police officer asked me how we could deal with this every night (there was a core team of volunteers there every single night), since she couldn't cope after one night. Those nights, we mostly talked to refugees, looked at their papers, which we as Germans barely understood, and tried to explain to them whether they actually had to wait in line; we distributed tea and sometimes food, and we simply talked, either with those who knew some English, or with the help of translators.

Translators, in fact, deserve a moment of attention. It goes without saying that the state paid for none of them. During the summer and early fall, a number of local residents who speak Arabic or Farsi came and translated. But mostly, we relied on refugees as translators (some of our Farsi translators had, in fact, worked as translators for American, Canadian, British or even German forces in Afghanistan). Sometimes, refugees returned the very next day after we had welcomed them at night and arranged a private sleeping place for them. Sometimes, they joined one of the Facebook groups and asked if they could 'return' something, so we invited them to join us and help translate. This is common all over Germany. Without the help of refugees, little support would be possible.

The situation at Berlin's LaGeSo was dramatic and even catastrophic. I recall chatting with a couple of men from Afghanistan who were utterly stunned by the masses sprinting at 4am to be first in line. This couldn't be Germany, they said. Then we laughed, explained that it was

sort of an exceptional zone, drank some hot tea, and looked at pictures from Kunduz. Berlin was not facing a refugee crisis, but an administrative crisis, as one volunteer put it. Helping in this situation was intense, in both positive and negative ways.

### *Making Friends at LaGeSo*

Depending on their political standing, media designate those who are arriving in Germany as (im)migrants (*Migranten*) or refugees (*Flüchtlinge* or *Geflüchtete*), a term volunteers tend to prefer. Activists, however, also often choose a different word, especially when referring to individual refugees they are supporting: *friends*. Unlike the terms ‘migrant’, which carries a socio-economic undertone (‘they migrate to Germany for a better life’), or ‘refugee’, which has a distinct political connotation (‘they are fleeing from war and terror to seek refuge in Germany’), the term ‘friend’ comes from a private, even intimate register. It implies a personal and emotional bond beyond and above politics. It also implies a degree of equality and mutual respect. By choosing to depict relationships with refugees as friendships, many volunteers quite consciously refuse to regard themselves as ‘helpers’ and others as refugees in need of help. There is even an organization, called *Starting with a Friend*, that seeks to provide refugees with a German friend to start their new life.<sup>9</sup> One might, of course, object that these aren’t real friendships. Friendships need time to develop, they imply a certain level of intimacy and equality that does not exist given the structurally unequal situation Germans and refugees face. Yet, attempts to assess whether those relations are real friendships would miss the point. For one, stable and deeply intimate personal relations do form. People interact with their new friends on a daily basis, visit each other and have dinner. But even if friendships are transitory, they are meaningful in the moment when they are enacted, when we joked with refugees at night in front of LaGeSo who by could not imagine they were in Germany facing the chaos, or who showed us pictures of their houses in Kunduz in the middle of the night. But more importantly, even if relations between German ‘volunteers’ and refugees are not exactly typical friendships, calling refugees ‘friends’ is a powerful statement. It is a call for a social practice that is anything but politically innocuous. Indeed, forming friendships is one of the most crucial and politically relevant aspects of what

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.start-with-a-friend.de](http://www.start-with-a-friend.de).



volunteers do. In what follows, I will first explore how friendships are formed and what practices this involves and will then make an argument why these friendships matter politically.

Berlin's LaGeSo might seem like a strange place for making friends. It is a place of long hours of waiting, often for nothing, at night and day, in the hot summer as well as cold winter, outside or in cramped and sticky tents.<sup>10</sup> It is a nerve-wrecking place where refugees are confronted with often aggressive security staff, where files are lost and case-workers (*Sachbearbeiter*), though doing their best, are simply overburdened. It is a place of chaos. Not least, the chaos destroys any trust refugees might have in the state, as the state represents itself as unreliable and unpredictable. A state that tells you to come to an appointment at 9:00 am, and then leaves you waiting the entire day without you even getting into the building, a state that loses your documents and files is hardly a state to be trusted – an aspect rarely noted in discussions about LaGeSo.

But perhaps paradoxically, this chaos also facilitates the conditions for building friendships. Because of the administrative chaos, because of the office's failure to secure enough sleeping places in emergency camps, volunteers can (and have to) come and talk to refugees. They can and have to explain papers, help refugees dealing with the bureaucracy, or provide them with shelter for a night, the weekend or a longer period of time. Not least, the bureaucratic collapse in the midst of the city – LaGeSo is located at Turmstraße in Moabit, not in the outskirts of the city, where some commentators would like to move it to make the misery invisible – makes it very easy to come and talk to strangers. If the bureaucracy worked more smoothly, the necessity to step in and support refugees in a most basic way, with food, blankets or shelter, would disappear, but so would be the opportunity to make friends. Indeed, when the administration managed to have enough sleeping places in official camps and reorganized the situation in a way that made it unnecessary for refugees to wait all night, opportunities for talking to strangers disappeared.

On the surface, it might seem as if volunteers primarily provided practical support at LaGeSo. We distributed blankets, tea and sometimes food; we looked at people's papers and tried to explain them; and, most importantly, we organized sleeping places for those with no

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<sup>10</sup> By the time of writing in early April 2016, the situation has, however, massively improved.

official place to stay. But this kind of practical help was only half the story. While the situation changed dramatically over the course of the fall and winter, one basic element of what we did remained the same: we talked to strangers. When we offered groups or families of refugees a place to sleep, when we looked at their papers to explain in which line they had to wait, when we offered tea and a blanket, or when we gave a teddy bear to children and played with them, we tried to build trust. Most basically, we had to gain their trust in our good intentions, that we would not lie to them, that we would provide them with correct information in a situation where everyone was saying something else, often including German authorities, and that it would not be any problem to sleep in a stranger's house with their entire family. We shook hands, smiled, and listened to stories, stories of war in their home country, but more often about the miserable situation in Berlin. Often, we met refugees again at night, sometimes, because they had to come back to wait in line, sometimes because they themselves wanted to help. There was, for example, a group of refugees who refused to go to an official camp to protest against the way they were treated by the bureaucracy. We listened to them, shared their frustration, and eventually even provided them with a tent. Another group came because the camp they were sent to failed to provide them with food. They knew they would find support amongst helpers, not only in the form of food, but also with pressuring the staff at the camp to change the situation.

It is worth telling some stories to show how trust was built at LaGeSo. One night, a young woman arrived together with a young man and a young boy. First, we thought they were a couple with their child, but as it turned out, the woman, twenty years of age, was the others' older sister, her brothers being 17 and 5 years old. She had taken responsibility to get them from Syria to Germany. Her parents, it seemed, were already in Germany, but in Chemnitz, where the woman with her two siblings wanted to go. Understandably, the young woman was shy and scared, but when we found a place where she could stay for the weekend (after which their hosts brought them to the train station), she started feeling safe. Over the next couple of days, we received numerous text messages from her thanking us and ensuring us that they had arrived safely in Chemnitz. A second story concerns an under-aged boy who showed up one night in December 2015. Unaccompanied minors are special cases, because we cannot house them privately and need to bring them to the responsible agency – without our presence, minors arriving alone in front of LaGeSo at night would simply have been lost.

That night, we had to wait a bit for our driver, so we sat down and talked to the boy. He was just eager to talk in English which he had learned watching TV. Admittedly, we were not sure we understood him entirely, but it seemed that his mother was dead, his sister kidnapped by the Taliban, and he hadn't talked to his father in two months. Somehow we managed to provide him with a smartphone, so that he could contact a friend at home, letting his father know he was safe. But most importantly, he told us, he wanted to go to school and learn English and German. For sure, these were brief encounters, and we soon lost touch with these refugees. But for one night, we provided more than a place to sleep; we provided a sense of security, and lent an ear to talk to. We were strangers in a strange place the woman and the teenage boy could talk to. Far from being trivial, I believe, and hope, that such first encounters will matter for the future.

Perhaps these encounters were too brief to be called a friendship. But in many instances, lasting friendships formed. We befriended refugees on Facebook and continued talking to them. As friends, we do what friends usually do: we celebrate birthdays and religious holidays, Christian as well as Muslim, together with friends from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Eritrea; we go out to movies and dinners; we introduce our German friends to our new friends; and most importantly, we talk – about personal issues ranging from love and dating advice, to the political situation in Germany and the countries refugees come from, to surviving suicide bombings and the death of close friends and relatives still in Syria or Afghanistan. For the most part, our new friends are men, perhaps due to the fact that we were mostly active at night (other volunteers befriended families more often), but once in a while, we also met female refugees. For example, I became friends with a young woman, 25 years old, from Afghanistan, let me call her Reza, with whom I had many conversations, mostly via text messaging, ever since: about practical problems like finding a German course or doctors, but also about life in Berlin and Afghanistan, about gender relations and the public display of sexuality, about corruption in Afghanistan, about religion and evolution, about hatred against men, about intimate matters like love relations, and for a brief moment even about Adolf Hitler.

Not only did we build friendships ourselves, we also facilitated friendships. As I've noted, one of our primary tasks was to find a place to sleep for refugees arriving late who would otherwise have had to spend the nights in the streets. In these situations, Berliners did not

only talk to strangers, but they opened their doors to strangers – and on an impressively massive scale: there are more than a thousand names on one of the lists, and given that there are numerous networks, this is probably only a fraction of those who have offered places to sleep. At night, our main concern was of course that refugees, especially families with children, would have a roof over their heads, and hopefully something warm to eat in the morning. But by arranging private sleeping places, we also helped others to become friends with refugees, at least occasionally and especially when people stayed for the weekend.

In November – it was the weekend of the terrorist attacks in Paris –, for example, we sent a group of four male refugees to a host (finding people willing to host groups of men was notoriously difficult, since most people either offered places for women or families with children), where they could stay the entire weekend. Afterwards, the host reported extensively about the weekend in a Facebook group. Overcoming communication difficulties proved to be somewhat funny. One of his guests for example asked for ‘swim’, which, not surprisingly, caused some confusion until he took his host to the bathroom and pointed to the shower; of course, they could take a shower. The host gave them all towels, but they simply shared one, until the host told them that they could each have one. He also gave them the password for his wireless internet, and was introduced to countless friends and family members over the weekend. One mother talked to him for several minutes and cried. The host, of course, could not understand a word, but feelings mattered more, he wrote. They played X-Box and cooked together. When his guests wanted to do the dishes, he showed them his dishwasher, which he had to explain. ‘Magic’, his guests exclaimed. Sharing such stories on Facebook encouraged others both to share their stories as well, and to open their doors to refugees, as comments under his post show. A woman and her sister who were hosting a male refugee (and often his friends) for a couple of weeks remarked how grateful she was to have made new ‘brothers’: ‘There is nobody I like to hang out with more.’ Most guests we arranged at night stayed only for a night or the weekend until they found an official place in a camp, not least because this is a legal requirement and necessary for the registration process. But that does not mean that contacts don’t last. One volunteer reported, for example, that she and her family had hosted a mother and her two children until they had found a place in a camp. But the family still visited at least once a week, and one of the

children even more often. He and the host's child became friends. In these cases, we did not simply arrange sleeping places, but friendships.

Many other friendships have their origin in one of several Facebook groups where Germans offer places to stay. A particularly moving story concerns a single woman who had just given premature birth and was still in hospital. Apparently someone working in the hospital was a member of a Facebook group and posted that the young mother and her child needed a place to stay, since they could not be sent to a camp. It did not take ten minutes, and a family had declared their willingness not only to take them in, but to take care of them, support them in their dealings with the bureaucracy and provide the equipment needed for the infant. They stayed for several weeks, until a place in a mother-child-home was free. To be sure, hosting strangers is not always easy. A gay couple, for example, offered a room, but their male guest was, it seems, so appalled by their homosexuality that he left after a day without saying a word; that is, at least, the story the couple shared. But the couple did not give up. It went much better with their next guest. In fact, they decided to clear their home office and turned it into a third room for their now permanent roommate. Another friendship began on Facebook as well. A volunteer reported about an eighteen years old man who could not sleep in a camp because he was missing his family back home, being deeply worried. Hence he looked for a family to 'adopt' him and to find a home, as he explicitly said. It took a bit, but then a family with a five years old daughter took him in for several weeks (as I'm writing these lines, he is still living with his new 'parents').<sup>11</sup>

Friendships not only imply a sense of personal intimacy, but also a sense of equality. While there is a structural inequality – it is at least easier for us as Germans to understand both the bureaucratic system and cultural expectations – and friendships have an element of mentorship, especially if there is an age difference between Germans and refugees, being friends means more than being the provider and recipient of support. Not least, this is why seemingly trivial everyday activities like celebrating, cooking together, going to the zoo with children, or organizing biking trips matter. They provide the context for building a relation that is not marked by the structural inequality between volunteers and refugees. Friendships are not one-way roads. Indeed, many volunteers who hosted refugees reported about their

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<sup>11</sup> The man's story has made the news, see <http://www.dw.com/en/how-a-selfie-with-merkel-changed-a-refugees-life/g-19101366>.

guests cleaning the apartment, cooking for them, even repairing broken items. One host who had allowed a couple to stay in her apartment while she was on holiday reported that when she got home, there were cookies in her apartment that was cleaner than it had ever been. Another host wrote how her new friends called her and told her to meet them very urgently. Worried that there might be a problem, she went, only to be invited to a Middle Eastern restaurant popular amongst refugees. A family of volunteers, to give a final example, who wanted to take their friends to the museum ended up receiving a private lecture about Islamic culture based on the museum's exhibition.

There would be many more stories to tell about friendships. Perhaps this seems to be too rosy a picture. It goes without saying that there are problems. Dealing with Berlin's administration can be highly frustrating. Even more frustrating are the often aggressive private security forces. Of course, there are conflicts between friends. Reza's mother, for example, tries to prevent her from interacting with male strangers, and prohibits her from going out on her own. Sometimes, refugees can be highly unreliable. Sometimes, they expect help and support beyond what we can do, and sometimes, they rely very much on our help without showing much initiative on their own. Indeed, there have been debates amongst volunteers about going too 'soft' on refugees, and some volunteers have expressed great disappointments when they felt betrayed by their new friends after finding out that they had lied to them. There are also cases of refugees who refuse to share an apartment with a refugee from another country for racist reasons (in one case, volunteers tried to talk to the refugee in question, but for the time being withdrew their support), and homophobia amongst refugees has been an ongoing concern. There are topics that sometimes seem to be taboo amongst new friends. Some gay volunteers for example keep their homosexuality a secret, while refugees avoid talking about homosexuality or Hitler – one refugee told me that he felt sympathies for Hitler, but started reconsidering his views after his host got very angry about this and explained to him that with Hitler, Germany would never have accepted Muslim refugees – because they are afraid that Germans might hate them for those views. Interestingly, however, refugees were eager to talk about these issues and explained to me that learning about sexual freedoms in Germany was difficult and would take time for them. And of course, there are the normal conflicts of friendships: people fall in love, sometimes happily, sometimes not, an issue that is perhaps made more complicated by cultural

differences – writing long and cheesy love poems might simply not be very attractive to Western women. New friendships are not always easy. But then, this is arguably true for most friendships. But by and large, very positive experiences far outweigh negative experiences, and many volunteers report about a sense of optimism and hope that friendships with refugees have inspired in them.

### *Political Friendships*

Facing the arrival of close to a million refugees in 2015, German politicians, intellectuals and journalists have debated what this means for the country. Two discourses are particularly noteworthy for the argument I want to make here: first, debates about Germany as an endangered state of laws (*Rechtsstaat*), and second debates about the opportunities and difficulties of integration. In neither of these debates do friendships play a significant role. While these debates usually remain unrelated, they tell us something both about how Germans think about their polity and the meaning of citizenship. It is thus worth having a look at those debates before making an argument as to why friendships between strangers matter politically.

Germans like to praise themselves for finally having established a state of law (*Rechtsstaat*), a term that serves to separate the Federal Republic from both the Third Reich and the GDR, two regimes commonly depicted as states of unlawfulness, or *Unrechtsstaaten*. But by opening its borders in September 2015, Germany is at least in danger of being no longer a *Rechtsstaat*, conservative commentators claim. Most drastically, Bavarian Minister President Horst Seehofer implied that Germany has become an *Unrechtsstaat*.<sup>12</sup> But also several leading legal scholars urged the government to return to state of lawfulness, which would imply that the Dublin III regulations are enforced, according to which Germany might reject all refugees arriving at its borders because they crossed a safe European Union state on their way to Germany.<sup>13</sup> “The state of law is about to dissipate in the context of the wave of refugees, as

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Seehofer unterstellt Merkel “Herrschaft des Unrechts”’, *Passauer Neue Presse*, 9 February 2016.

<sup>13</sup> See only Alexander Peukert et al., ‘Die Flüchtlingskrise kann rechtsstaatlich bewältigt werden’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 February 2016. The article by leading legal scholars of Germany includes numerous references to German and European laws and regulations.

applicable law is effectively not enforced. Government and executives make their decisions disregarding the democratically legitimated legislature, media financed by the state uncritically report [*üben sich in Hofberichterstattung*], and the people [*Volk*] has to silently witness the erosion of its collective identity', write legal scholars Otto Depenheuer and Christoph Grabenwarter.<sup>14</sup> My point here is not whether these legal arguments are correct or not – they have, in fact, been contested,<sup>15</sup> – but that the focus on questions of legality indicates how Germans think about their polity: as a *Rechtsstaat* that is endangered by the refugee crisis.<sup>16</sup> What matters for the well-being of the state is that the rule of law is upheld.

The rule of law also matters with regards to integrating refugees into German society. How to integrate refugees is a second and perhaps even more important worry for many Germans. Both in economic and in social terms, there are, critics of Angela Merkel's policy argue, limits to what Germany can accomplish. What do Germans mean when they talk about 'integration'?<sup>17</sup> Put most abstractly, it means 'integrating' a group that is in whatever way marginalized, in the case refugees from predominantly Muslim countries, into mainstream German society. Commonly, learning the German language, receiving education and training (*Bildung* and *Ausbildung*), and finding a job are considered essential steps for a successful integration. Of course, training and educating people is costly and difficult,<sup>18</sup> and hence Germans worry about the financial costs of integration, not to speak of concerns that

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<sup>14</sup> Otto Depenheuer and Christoph Grabenwarter, 'Vorwort', in idem (ed.), *Der Staat in der Flüchtlingskrise: Zwischen gutem Willen und geltendem Recht*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016, 7.

<sup>15</sup> For a critical perspective, see Jürgen Bast and Christoph Möllers, 'Dem Freistaat zum Gefallen: über Udo Di Fabio's Gutachten zur staatsrechtlichen Beurteilung der Flüchtlingskrise', 16 Januar 2016, <http://verfassungsblog.de/dem-freistaat-zum-gefallen-ueber-udo-di-fabios-gutachten-zur-staatsrechtlichen-beurteilung-der-fluechtlingskrise/>.

<sup>16</sup> Tellingly, Rainer Hank suggested in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* turning to Wilhelm von Humboldt to understand the purpose of the state: a strong legal state (*Rechtsstaat*) should protect its citizens, but not, as a welfare state does, search for their happiness, see Rainer Hank, 'Flüchtlingskrise: Versagt der Staat?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 February 2016.

<sup>17</sup> I am, to be clear, concerned with how integration is debated in public and political discourse. Discussing academic integration scholarship would go beyond this article; for examples, see only the work produced by the Berliner Institut für Empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung, or by sociologist Ruud Koopmans (Humboldt University Berlin).

<sup>18</sup> See for example Julian Staib, 'Nicht mal am Horizont ein Ausbildungsplatz', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 February 2016. Despite being highly motivated and many efforts by local authorities, companies and teachers, unaccompanied minor refugees in Rosenheim, Staib reports, face great difficulties finding an apprenticeship due to a lack of schooling since childhood.



refugees might be a burden for the welfare state for many years to come before they are actually integrated into the labor market.<sup>19</sup> But integration also has a less tangible, less economic side. For many Germans, it means that refugees, and foreigners more generally, should accept German norms and values. Not surprisingly, this is a fuzzy issue. What, after all, are German values and norms? Most simply, it means respecting German laws – a somewhat trivial point, given that everyone in Germany is expected to respect the law. For many Germans, integration also means that refugees from Muslim countries learn to respect women, especially in positions of power and authority, that they accept the open display of (homo)sexuality, and live with an understanding of freedom of speech that entails the right to mock and criticize religion. Integration, in other words, means that refugees will adapt to German society in terms of language, work, customs and values. They are considered, as Mark Terkessidis has pointed out, as somewhat ‘deficient’ – not knowing the language, not working, not respecting German values – and need to compensate for these deficiencies.<sup>20</sup> If debates about Germany as an endangered *Rechtsstaat* reveal how Germans think about their polity, then debates about integration are telling with regards to how Germans think about citizenship. A good citizen, if we follow the logic of German debates about integration, is able to speak German, to provide for herself through means of labor, adheres to certain loosely defined cultural norms, and obeys the law. Citizenship is, German discussions about integration suggest, defined by fulfilling certain duties vis-à-vis the state and society.

Friendships between Germans and refugees are hardly ever mentioned in these debates. After all, friendships hardly matter for Germany as a *Rechtsstaat*. If friendships matter for integration, then it is only because of the practical help German friends can provide with finding an apartment or a job.<sup>21</sup> As long as people obey the rules, be they written laws or the instructions on how to behave in a public swimming pool, the German polity functions. How people, *citizens*, interact *with* each other in their daily lives does not seem to matter. But there are other ways of thinking about citizenship and the democratic polity that deserve our attention. Historian Nina Verheyen has reminded Germans in an article in the *Frankfurter*

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<sup>19</sup> See only Andrea Nahles, ‘Ohne Integration werden die Leistungen gekürzt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 January 2016.

<sup>20</sup> For a critical discussion of the ‘integration’ project, see Mark Terkessidis, *Interkultur*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2010, 39-78.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Alexander Kluge, ‘Aleppo. Berlin. Paris: Was passierte, als wir Flüchtlinge zum Essen einluden’, in *Huffington Post*, 1 April 2016.

*Allgemeine Zeitung* how Americans tried to transform West Germans after World War Two into democratic citizens by teaching them how to discuss: learning how to respectfully exchange arguments, how to listen to each other, how to accept different opinions was considered essential for building a democratic polity. From this perspective, communication is not simply a private matter, but essential for creating a democratic polity; it is a *civic* practice. Both newly arriving refugees and Germans agitating in social media would benefit from (re-)learning this lesson, Verheyen has suggested.<sup>22</sup>

Given this essay's focus on personal reflections, this is not the place to engage with the role of friendships in political theory or migration studies in any substantial manner. However, a book by an American scholar deserves being mentioned because its discussion of political friendships encourages us to reflect on the political meaning of friendships between refugees and German volunteers: Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers*. Her book is, among other things, a powerful plea against the maxim we teach children: 'Don't talk to strangers.' Talking to strangers, she writes, can 'cultivate modes of citizenship that provide citizens with the security and self-confidence of full-fledged political agency.' Engaging in a conversation with strangers, especially with 'those strangers who come from worlds and places one fears', is not only a way of providing knowledge about the world, but of 'curing one's fears of strangers.' By talking to strangers, friendships, in Allen's reading 'political friendships', develop based on mutual trust. 'Political friendship (which finds its tools in the art of rhetoric) cultivates habits of imagination that generate politically transformative experiences out of ordinary interactions among strangers. Herein lies its power. To be a good rhetorician, one must see oneself as strangers do. The effort to do so entails understanding how one is implicated in strangers' lives, and how calculi of goods and ills look different from other experiential positions.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nina Verheyen, 'Drum seid höflich und bescheiden', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 February 2016. See also her dissertation *Diskussionslust: eine Kulturgeschichte des 'besseren Arguments' in Westdeutschland*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. Some commentators applaud the political discussions many Germans are engaged in, calling for 'rational' [*sachlich*] arguments instead of an emotionalization of the debate. Yet, refugees are rarely considered participants in these conversations.

<sup>23</sup> Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, quotes 165, 167-8, 171.

It is worth following Allen's lead in inquiring about the politically transformative power of friendships between refugees and volunteers in Germany. Talking to a stranger, especially at night in front of LaGeSo, and especially to a person from – and, from a refugee perspective, in – a strange country, takes a moment of courage. Normally, one does not greet a stranger, shakes hands, or inquire about the other's personal situation (and certainly not in Germany). Inviting a stranger, or even a group of strangers, into one's house probably requires even a bit more courage, just as it requires a bit of courage to enter that stranger's house. Indeed, refugees often reacted with disbelief when they realized that we arranged private sleeping places and were often reluctant to accept, worrying about intruding into a stranger's private space. Their disbelief only grew when some hosts simply gave them a key to their place, inviting them to return. Housing strangers and entering a stranger's house requires a leap of faith that the other will not do them any harm. In most cases, this leap of faith was well justified. It is a moment of overcoming fear of strangers that teaches both hosts and guests a lesson that trust and solidarity between strangers is possible. Berliners' willingness to privately host refugees is a powerful testimony that the presence of foreigners does not diminish social solidarity. This is not a phenomenon limited to Berlin: when all sixty male refugees of a camp in a small village in Saxony were to be moved by the officials, residents found a private home for each and everyone of them.<sup>24</sup> These are signs of trust that have taken me and many others by surprise.

Friendships between Germans and refugees can also be transformative in other ways. They require learning how to deal with difference. An Afghani friend who helped us by translating for many nights stayed with a gay host without realizing it. Once he found out, he was at first utterly scared. He did not like gay people, he explained to us, though this did not mean that he moved out from his host's place. Apparently, they had even gone to gay parties without the Afghani friend realizing it. For the time being, we simply continued being friends with him, and he continued living with his gay host. But a few weeks later, and after making new gay friends, he posted on Facebook that he had learned to accept gay people: 'Now I really like them.' My friend Reza was appalled by German boys and girls kissing in the street and said she would pray that her sister's children would never do this. But she

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Schade, 'Ein Dorf kämpft um seine Flüchtlinge', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 26 February 2016.

agreed that it was good that people have the freedom to kiss if they want to. Germans, too, have to learn how to deal with difference. Reza, for example, is constantly struggling against her restrictive mother who does not allow her to go out alone or to meet German friends. She would like to play basketball, but is not allowed to. For a German like myself, it is inconceivable that an adult woman is obeying her mother in such a way, but while I explain to her my perspective and that she is free to make her own choices, I, too, had to learn to accept that Reza had a different priority: her mother is ill, and she does not want to upset her. Talking to strangers who have become friends not only conveys knowledge about the other, but also gives a different perspective German society. A male friend from Afghanistan for example wondered why German women and men hug, but men never hug their male friends. Perhaps he had a point. Those friendships teach how to live with difference. As the adopted 'mother' of an eighteen years old young man who had found a new home in a family remarked: While she likes to drink a gin tonic in the evening, her adopted son doesn't eat pork – 'and that's just fine'.

Perhaps even more important than learning about differences are shared moments, moments when friends realize that they share desires and dreams. These can be trivial things, like watching a soccer game together, talking about shopping shoes with Reza, or chatting about how much fun a waterpark can be and making plans to go to one near Berlin in the summer. In those moments, friends have ceased to be strangers. It is a powerful experience for both of us if my 25 years old Muslim female friend from Afghanistan and I, a 36 years old male atheist Westerner, can talk about such intimate matters as love relations, both hers and mine. It shows to us that we can be friends, that we can laugh together and care for each other despite our differences, for example whether it is acceptable to kiss in public. In her analysis of political friendship, Danielle Allen separates the emotional elements of friendship from its social practices. I'm skeptical whether this separation works. Laughing together, talking about water parks, about love and girls and boys, cooking and eating together: these are all practices that form the bonds of a friendship, that create the mutual trust and understanding of a friendship – and that make a friendship enjoyable. We should not ignore this aspect.

Being friends with refugees might seem like a trivial matter. Why would it matter politically? Do friendships promote integration more effectively than any integration course that is mandatory for refugees could? Perhaps one might argue that living with a family integrates

refugees like an eighteen years old man from Syria, not only into the family, but also into German society more broadly, not least because it will certainly improve his German language skills. But thinking about friendships with strangers in such terms fundamentally misconstrues what is happening. In those friendships, mutual trust, respect and solidarity are formed that constitute the basis of a democratic polity, while fear, distrust and perhaps even hatred are overcome. Perhaps there is a bit of a naïve optimism in this hope. Even other volunteers remarked that they did not share my optimism because of frustrating and disappointing experiences with refugees who lied to their German friends and betrayed their trust. Friendships do not always work. But there are stories that indicate how friendships can be transformative. One female friend who had, in fact, been disappointed by refugees who had, she thought, become friends also noted that she learned to respect male refugee friends even though they refused to shake her hand, something she had considered insulting before. Another gay friend said that he had previously been afraid of Islam, but since he formed friendships with refugees, though he keeps his homosexuality a secret, he has lost this fear. A refugee from Iraq described to me how utterly stunned he was by how Germans trusted refugees and opened their doors for them. Germans, he said, ‘look at the soul’. As a result, he himself became more trusting. Even political attitudes changed. There is, for example, the story of a volunteer who brought food and water to LaGeSo in the summer. A young Neonazi from the neighborhood offered to help her carry the stuff, not knowing where she was going. After five minutes at LaGeSo, the tough Neonazi was shedding tears, the story goes, moved by the misery he saw. On a larger scale, this happened in Sumte in Niedersachsen, a village with some hundred inhabitants that had to host 576 refugees. After initial xenophobic fears, not least of single men who would threaten women and girls, the villagers soon learned to appreciate their new neighbors.<sup>25</sup>

*Conclusion: Fear, Hope and Stories that Matter*

Many Germans seem to be deeply scared by the current situation. The electoral successes by the AfD are a worrying testimony to this. Talk about ‘legitimate concerns’, as opposed to

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<sup>25</sup> Philip Kuhn and Christiane Wittenbecher, ‘Wie Sumtes Wutbürger lernten, Flüchtlinge zu lieben’, *Die Welt*, 8 December 2015.

blatant racism, is ubiquitous in Germany. Not least, a number of German historians, none of them migration experts, have expressed grave concerns about what will happen to Germany as a result of the arrival of nearly a million refugees (notably, those who are actually experts of migration history are much more optimistic than those who are not).<sup>26</sup> Historian of ancient Rome Alexander Demandt, for example, provided a historical overview of the demise of the Roman Empire, concluding that a ‘manageable number of [Germanic immigrants] could be integrated [into the Roman Empire].’ But once immigrants came in such numbers that they formed an ‘independently acting group’, the old order dissolved. Explicitly placing the article in the context of the refugee crisis, the implication is clear: if too many immigrants arrive, the political order of the Federal Republic will dissolve.<sup>27</sup> Heinrich August Winkler, something of a state historian of the Federal Republic, worries about the political culture of the Federal Republic formulated in the *Grundgesetz*. Basic rights, like the freedom of speech and religion or the legal equality [*Gleichberechtigung*] of men and women have to be ‘practiced [*eingeübt*] and internalized from childhood on’, he demands; as if rights are to be internalized and not exercised, as Patrick Bahners remarked in a critical comment.<sup>28</sup> Jörg Baberowski, professor of Russian History at Humboldt University and an expert on violence, drank a bottle of wine, as he freely admitted, talked to his wife from Iran, and wrote down what came to his mind: Germany has turned in a ‘republic of virtue’ [*Tugend-Republik* – the term is meant as an insult], he argued, and criticizing the government had become impossible. In a country that lacks ‘reason and prudence’, ‘illegal’ mass immigration endangers the ‘social peace’, he worries. Why should Germans pay for those who had never worked in Germany? At least according to the professor from Berlin, Victor Orbán is,

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<sup>26</sup> Jannis Panagiotidis, Patrice Poutrus and Frank Wolff, ‘Integration ist machbar, Nachbar’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 October 2015; “Wir können gelassen sein.” Interview mit Klaus Bade’, *Zeit Campus*, 4 February 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Demandt, ‘Untergang des römischen Reiches: Ende der alten Ordnung’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 January 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Heinrich August Winkler, ‘Deutschlands moralische Selbstüberschätzung’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 September 2015. For critical remarks, see Patrick Bahners, ‘Zu Heinrich August Winkler’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 October 2015. See also Thomas Fischer, ‘Fischer im Recht – Flüchtlinge III: Schaffen wir das?’, *Zeit Online*, 6 October 2015.

smarter, since he did not give up Hungary's sovereignty as Angela Merkel had done in Germany.<sup>29</sup>

Readers will not be surprised that I disagree with these historians. I do not share their sense of fear, nor do I share, for that matter, the concern about German racism some American professors have expressed in the GSA's newsletter (and while the AfD's popularity is troubling and should not be ignored, it is also noteworthy that two parties, the Greens and the SPD, supporting refugee-friendly politics have won the elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz). The numerous friendships between refugees and Germans give reason to hope, not least because these ordinary friendships seem to be a novelty, compared with, say, the situation in the early 1990s, when a large number of refugees from Bosnia arrived in Germany. Let me turn to a final example that provides a hopeful perspective on the future.

In January 2016, a refugee from Syria made news in Germany: Firas Alshater, youtuber and filmmaker.<sup>30</sup> After two and half years in Germany, he not only wanted to learn German, but also learn about the German people – are they more like the Pegida-movement, protesting against 'those who destroy our country', or more like those welcoming refugees? Hence he did a little experiment. He stood at Alexanderplatz, Berlin, blindfolded with a sign next to him saying 'I'm a refugee from Syrian. I trust you – do you trust me? Give me a hug.' At first, he stood there – and nothing happened. And so he waited, and waited. After a while, someone came, only to take a selfie with Alshater, but without hugging him. But then, things changed. An ever increasing number of people hugged Alshater. 'Once Germans start with something, they never ever stop', he quipped. Germans take a bit longer, but then, nothing can stop them, he had learned. Thus he is optimistic that integration will work – '*irgendwann*'.

Alshater's video brings us back to the central issues of this essay: trust and friendship. The video he made of his experiment tells a story of trusting a stranger, though it is a hug, a

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<sup>29</sup> Jörg Baberowski, 'Ungesteuerte Einwanderung: Europa ist gar keine Wertegemeinschaft', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 September 2015; idem, 'Deutschland verwandelt sich in eine Tugend-Republik', *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 27 September 2015. For a critique, see Patrick Bahners, 'Der Affekt gegen den Affekt', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 September 2015. See also his interview 'In Dresden herrscht Pogromstimmung', *Baseler Zeitung*, 24 October 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Firas Alshater, 'Zukar 01: Wer sind diese Deutschen?', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZozLHZFEbly>.

bodily gesture rather than a conversation that creates trust. Whereas many commentators share a sense of fear that is all too common in Germany nowadays, Alshater's video expresses and generates hope for the future. Stories like his matter, just as the stories I told in this essay. Scholars and politicians know that stories matter as much as pictures do. They know this when they complain that the selfies refugees took with Angela Merkel functioned like an invitation to come to Germany. They know this when they hope that news of the hard conditions refugees face in Germany, and especially news of the prospect of deportation will spread in refugees' home countries and thus deter refugees from crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the first place.<sup>31</sup> Strangely enough, historians and other scholars who comment on the current refugee situation rarely consider the power of stories of friendship. Building friendships fosters trust and solidarity. Telling stories of friendships encourages more friendships, more trust, more solidarity. It will matter for the future whether Germans tell each other stories of friendships with refugees that have enriched their lives, if refugees will tell their children stories of Germans welcoming them into their homes or at night at LaGeSo, or if they tell stories of an unreliable and unwelcoming administration. These stories generate hope rather than fear, trust rather than distrust. As publicly engaged scholars, we should start telling these stories. Hopefully, they will matter for the German polity.

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<sup>31</sup> See for example Thomas Gutschker, 'Wie Europa seine Grenzen schützen kann', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28 February 2016.