

On the Politics of Expectations in the Aftermaths of the 'Refugee Crisis': Ethnographic prospects from a post-industrial German city

The refugee crisis is no longer front page news. Since the closure of the Balkan route in autumn 2015, public interest has drifted to other topics and places. People have, once again, become used to the fact that refugees are drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. This piece revisits the 'refugee crisis' using ethnographic material from its aftermaths in a German post-industrial city. These ethnographic vignettes concern local expectations of the future. They counter the doomsday predictions of the far right, whilst complementing anthropology's emerging critique of Europe's dramatically failing refugee policies (in this journal: Albahari 2015; Hann 2015; Papataxiarchis 2016; elsewhere: Fernando and Giordano 2016; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Kallius et al. 2016). I focus on one family's hopes and expectations, which are tentatively emerging in a broader context of conflicting predictions of the future. I argue that, particularly in times of crisis, anthropologists can intervene in contemporary political discourses by providing detailed, ethnographic accounts of the future. I refer to such interventions as "ethnographic prospects". Based on anthropological knowledge and ethnographic detail, they open up the future for further thought and re-imagination (cf. Dzenovska 2016). They allow anthropologists to literally look ahead, with the help of their own ethnographies of the future. This provides one way of complicating stories about the continuing tragedies which are allowed to happen in Europe and elsewhere. It also reconsiders the discipline's temporal agency (Ringel 2016) in the current political moment.

Contrasting Expectations

It is March 2017. I am back in my fieldsite, the German harbour city of Bremerhaven, visiting my Afghan friends in their new flat (Fig. 1). A couple of weeks ago, after a gruelling waiting period, they finally received a letter from the Federal Ministry for Migration and Refugees granting them provisional residency for three years. We are all happy about this crucial decision and, with new prospects ahead, the evening feels like a joyous family reunion.

In the living room, I talk with the family's three eldest children in German. The parents listen in, but are not yet comfortable enough to speak German themselves. As usual, I am seated on the sofa and served strong, slightly bitter black tea, which calls for a lot of sugar. Some sweets are on the table, and fruits and other delights are continuously offered. A little over a year ago I was teaching these children basic German (Fig. 2), and on returning to my fieldsite I am deeply impressed by their subsequent progress. Back then, our hopes for their future concerned immediate refuge and survival. Now, new and farther reaching futures are taking shape.

Putting her smartphone aside, ten-year-old Hawra shows me her recent school reports. With pride, she recounts her teacher's statement that Hawra is the best pupil of the class. Hawra hopes that next year she will join the city's most prestigious grammar school. Her two older siblings, 16 and 17 years old respectively, face more complicated educational futures. Too old for a normal school education on their arrival in Bremerhaven, they struggle to fit into the German system. For example, Hanye wants to study medicine, but wonders how to do that – whether she should start training as a nurse first and then do her A-levels in evening classes, or go for A-levels and a university degree straightaway. The youngest of the family, 1 year old Maryam, keeps on interrupting us with irresistible charm. It is unlikely she will face such problems growing up. Maryam will likely call Germany her home country, and German will be one of her native languages.

Their mother Reyhane is cooking in the kitchen. She pops in and out of the living room, commenting in English and hesitant German about the subjects under discussion; their father Kazim sits with us, smiling politely and attentively. The discussion turns to more complicated topics: communism (because they found out that I grew up in the formerly socialist part of Germany), world politics (as a UK resident, I must report on Brexit), the differences between Shiites and Sunnis, the situation in Syria and the atrocities of ISIS. Mohammed, 16 years old and the family's only son, tells me that ISIS would kill them if they could, because they are Shiites. Over nine years ago, the same threat to their lives made them flee Afghanistan, where Shiites are a minority. The girls, in turn, tell me that on their arrival in Germany their parents asked them whether they wanted to continue wearing headscarves. Both opted for it. After all these years of flight, even the older children do not remember much about Afghanistan, and they certainly cannot envision a future in it.

During dinner, Hawra takes the floor. She tells a story (again: in excellent German) about their time in a refugee camp on a Greek island. Wearing a big smile, she explains how awful it was: she reports crying every morning because they had to get up at 4am to queue in the cold to be seen by a Greek official. When she impersonates the official – apparently an imposing man who carefully chose who he wanted to take on – the whole family bursts out in laughter. Hawra is a good actress, but I am even more taken aback by the situation in general: here we are, sitting around a table full of delicious Afghan food, in the middle of Germany's poorest city, laughing about all too recent stories from their history of flight whilst simultaneously planning ahead. I am impressed at the speed at which this colonization of the "near future" (Guyer 2007) has become possible. The parents' futures are also expanding. They are now entitled to attend German integration courses, after which they expect to apply for jobs. I am becoming aware that, over the last two years, what is *possible* to expect is changing – not just for this family, but for local activists and many other people around the world. In times of crisis, these personal and collective expectations emerge tentatively and unexpectedly. However, they are too easily overshadowed by the many powerful fear-mongering representations of the future. This family's expectations are thus part of a wider politics of expectations – the many utopian and dystopian, failed and fulfilled predictions of the future that have been negotiated in the wake and aftermaths of the 'refugee crisis'. How are we, as anthropologists, to intervene in these discourses about the future, and what can we contribute to them?

The short- and mid-term hopes and plans of this one family provide an obvious contrast with the far right's dystopian visions of the future. When the influx of refugees from Afghanistan, Syria and several African countries began, right-wing commentators depicted the fall of Europe and the collapse of its nation states. They foresaw a continuation and worsening of what they referred to as a 'refugee crisis'. Others responded with more hopeful, if vague, representations of a future after the crisis. In the meantime, refugees and the many activists helping them were busy responding to the demands of the day. On the ground, the mid- and long-term futures of refugees and the communities which housed them very slowly became objects of thought and matters of debate. Had these futures been formulated more quickly, they might have challenged the dominant fear-mongering. For instance, as a typical post-industrial city, it was expected that Bremerhaven would be overwhelmed by the arrival of several thousand refugees. In

fact, the recent encounters between inhabitants of Bremerhaven and refugees have produced different stories, as I will explain below.

I argue that anthropologists are in a privileged position to tell such hopeful stories of the future, and thereby disprove predictions of downfall and doom. Their position is privileged for two reasons. First, they can draw in comparative examples that can help foster ideas about how the future might look after a crisis. Second, anthropologists are the social scientists most attentive to the details of everyday life, and detail is key to envisioning the future. To use anthropological knowledge to create ethnographic prospects is a powerful ethical and political act when the future is at stake. Anthropologists should not shy away from communicating these prospects. This doesn't mean they should start issuing actual predictions of the future, it means merely that they should bring their ethnographic experience to conversations about the future. In this spirit, I tell the story of my Afghan friends in the next section not just to counter right wing discourses, but to use this promising account as a detailed insight into how futures might look for other refugees. If such stories were prevalent, they might help us envision such futures more quickly.

Histories of Expectations

In February 2015, Reyhane arrived at the One World Centre in Bremerhaven, where I was observing a meeting of local activists. She was told by other refugees that she could ask the *Arbeitskreis* for help. The *Arbeitskreis Migration und Flüchtlinge*, the civic initiative for migration and refugees (Fig. 3-4), is one of the many activist groups which took an important role in welcoming the arriving refugees in Bremerhaven (Fig. 5). Back then, Reyhane was six months pregnant and visibly exhausted. On entering the room, she addressed nobody in particular, and Gisela (Fig. 6), the head of the *Arbeitskreis*, was unsure how to react. Several members later reported feeling embarrassed at not knowing what to say or do. In the end, a lawyer volunteered his business card, and offered to discuss Reyhane's problems in his office later this week. Kerstin, an activist loosely connected to the *Arbeitskreis* and now a close friend of mine, and I offered to talk to Reyhane in an adjacent room.

With tears running down her cheeks, Reyhane tried to describe her situation. She had been sent to Bremerhaven a few days earlier with her son Mohammed. Because of the upcoming birth, she was afraid she could not care for him and herself properly. She desperately sought assistance to be reunited with the rest of her family. Her husband

was still in Athens, together with their two daughters. Reyhane had left them behind in order to find Mohammed, who was the only one of the family to come to Germany on foot, via the infamous Balkan route. Reyhane and Mohammed currently occupied a room in a makeshift reception centre (Fig. 7). Before the baby was born, Reyhane wanted her family to be together, to have a safe place to stay and enough to eat. Even more immediately, she was concerned about the upcoming birth, and who would take care of Mohammed. Moved by her story, Kerstin and I volunteered as her family's guardians.

A couple of days later, I visited Reyhane and Mohammed in their new flat, which had been allocated from the overcrowded reception centre. Kerstin told me that the houses in Hansastrasse had been erected at the end of World War Two, to house other refugees: German nationals from the previously German areas in Eastern Europe. Like many other post-industrial cities, Bremerhaven has faced high unemployment and continuous outmigration for several decades. Prior to the 'refugee crisis', the remaining apartment blocks of Hansastrasse had been readied for destruction. In a lucky coincidence, they would now shelter over two hundred new inhabitants (Fig. 8). Unexpectedly, the refugees saved this post-industrial infrastructure from deconstruction (for a more elaborate account see Ringel 2018). Similar situations have occurred all over Germany: rather than overwhelming local infrastructures, refugees have put them back into use. For example, in rural areas, schools and kindergartens due to be closed because of low numbers remained open thanks to newly arrived children from refugee families. This was not a future anybody envisioned at the start of the crisis.

On our second meeting, Reyhane explained how they entered Europe. The family had been divided at Turkey's coast into two different boats, one for women and children, one for adult men. Reyhane's boat made it to Greece, but there was initially no word about her husband's boat, which had to return to Turkey because of a military patrol. Stranded in Turkey, her husband went back to an Afghan-owned shop in a nearby city, which they had frequented previously. There, after several weeks, he found out where his family was and how to contact them. Meanwhile, already in Athens, his son Mohammed would not wait any longer. He decided to leave his sisters and mother behind and with seven other minors attempted to reach Germany on foot overland, crossing almost half the continent in permanent fear of some state's border or police force. On the way, his group was separated. He never found out what happened to two of his companions. In Austria, the remaining five boarded a train, and in Nuremberg Mohammad was finally registered.

Although the family reunion was pressing, Kerstin's and I were concerned with the family's immediate material well-being. Despite the state's and the city's slow institutional response to the influx of refugees, Reyhane and Mohammad's flat was already outfitted with beds, mattresses, duvets, a fridge and a table (but no chairs). In addition, we organized bedclothes and kitchen utensils. Reyhane – to our surprise – put carpets and a TV at the top of her list. Kerstin was a genius in procuring such things. After several weeks, we realized that this particular goal was fulfilled. With nothing immediately urgent ahead, the constant waiting became frustrating to all of us: Mohammed was still not allocated a place at a school; Reyhane was still not allowed to enter an official German course. The present seemed to go nowhere and we found it extremely hard not being able to plan ahead.

Nonetheless, and for reasons I still do not fully understand, both of Reyhane's daughters suddenly arrived in Germany in the summer of 2015 by airplane: Hawra landed in Düsseldorf, where her brother picked her up. Several weeks later, Hanye landed in Hamburg, and again Mohammed ventured to the airport and brought her to Bremerhaven. With the three children reunited, and the fourth one born, Reyhane had new concerns and wishes – a bigger flat, for instance, since the two rooms in Hansastrasse hardly housed the five of them. Kerstin and I focused on these new, immediate tasks, too. Meanwhile, the representations of the future in German and European media discourses became increasingly dystopian. In contrast to our experiences, fear and panic captured these representations of Europe's future and affected people who are certainly not 'right-wing'.

At the height of the 'refugee crisis' in summer 2015, my sister and her family came to visit me in Bremerhaven. Like many Germans, they were not afraid of 'The Refugees' but they feared xenophobic upsurges since right-wing political parties such as the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and movements like Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident) were becoming more and more successful in Germany and elsewhere. However, my sister and her husband both stated afterwards how uplifting they found it to meet this Afghan family. Having talked to Reyhane and her children in person, they had been able to envision the future *after* the crisis for the first time. In fact, the details of the everyday realities, problems and prospects of this one family gave them ammunition for conversations with people more doubtful of current developments. My brother-in-law also started asking questions that neither Kerstin nor

I had previously considered, such as, What will this refugee family's prospects be in five or ten years time?

A week later, I took Reyhane and her family to the Wadden Sea north of Bremerhaven, and we enjoyed the mudflats (Fig. 9). The sun was shining and we had ice cream after wading bare foot through the mud – the sound of which Hawra found terribly amusing. It was almost like being on vacation, Reyhane said that evening, and she shared her dream with us of having a house near the sea, like the ones we passed on our drive back to the city. She, too, was expanding her temporal horizons.

Later in 2015, the ministry finally approved the family's reunion – a new step towards the future. This time, Reyhane went to Berlin to fetch her husband, and my brother-in-law took a day off work to show her the way to the airport. Back in Bremerhaven, Kerstin told me that the reunion of Kazim with his children was heart-breaking. Mohammad had not seen his father for a year and a half. With the father's arrival, they could formally apply for official refugee status, and consider moving into their own flat. Life, it seemed, was picking up again, but initially the wait continued, this time for the interview that should determine their legal status as refugees.

Almost a whole year later in 2016, we sat together in Kerstin's house in order to prepare for this interview, which would determine whether they could stay in Germany. We were having cakes and tea in Kerstin's overcrowded living room. Everyone was merry until we started recording their story of flight. Kerstin, her husband and I thought it was good to get all the details on paper in order to prepare a German version of their history for the ministry. However, when scrutinizing the reasons for their flight, we could hardly endure the conversation. One reason was that our conversation was still in English and Reyhane had to translate for her husband into Farsi. In front of the children, we enquired which family members had been killed and when, and how often Kazim had been tortured. We also discussed what would happen if they were sent back to Afghanistan. We continued this ordeal because their future depended on it.

As you already know, the outcome of this interview was positive, and determined that the family would be allowed to stay in Germany for at least three years. After that they will have to prove – linguistically and economically – how well they have 'integrated' themselves. Integration is the state's new official and legally binding mid-term expectation (Fig. 10). In its specific timeframe of three years, this is the task at hand for Reyhane and the institutional network she finds herself and her family

positioned in. How Reyhane's grandchildren will grow up, whether her children will become doctors, and start families of their own, is yet to be seen.

The Politics of Expectations

Although this example of refugees making a future in their new home country looks promising, there are obviously endless other stories with different endings. For example, one of the African refugees I met at a theatre project in Bremerhaven (Fig. 11) committed suicide just a day before the dinner with which I started this account. There are also many stories of deportations (including to Afghanistan, which in contrast to Syria was recurrently labelled a 'secure home country' by the German government to the dismay of Reyhane's family), of loneliness, poverty, and many other tragedies all over Europe, which often remain unrepresented as well as unacknowledged in official policies. In contrast to those tragedies, this story documents one family's slowly emerging prospects. I wish such stories to be voiced quickly and widely, to help expand the range of expectations with which people think and talk about the crisis, and to challenge the injustice for which this crisis will be known in the future. The emerging futures for Reyhane and her family should help to disprove discourses that contest refugees' rights to asylum by predicting a future in crisis. As this account has shown, anthropology can help us envision these futures. The discipline should use its eye for detail, and its insights into other contexts of change and crisis, and raise its voice. We should not just speak *against* the gloom and doom of right-wing media, we should also join those who are keenly interested in thinking ahead.

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