



KOHLBACHER, SCHIOCCHET (eds.) ISR-FORSCHUNGSBERICHT FROM DESTINATION TO INTEGRATION

Josef Kohlbacher and Leonardo Schiocchet (eds.)

FROM DESTINATION TO INTEGRATION – AFGHAN, SYRIAN AND IRAQI REFUGEES IN VIENNA

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(Foto: Anja Petrovic 2015)

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“STEPS ON THE WAY TO SOCIAL INTEGRATION”: INITIAL SOCIAL INTERACTIONS OF REFUGEES FROM SYRIA, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN WITH THE HOST SOCIETY, THEIR RELEVANCE, ASSESSMENT AND IMPLICATIONS

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PREFACE

Josef KOHLBACHER, Leonardo SCHIOCCHET, Vienna

In 2015 Austria took on about 90,000 asylum applications - one of the highest figures per population in Europe. Although the ‘refugees welcome’ movement flourished, there were also many who did not feel as comfortable with the new arrivals. When the so-called “refugee crisis” of summer became a persistent issue in the media it quickly transpired that most of the popular discourse about refugees was based more or less on speculation. There was a lack of empirically gathered and systematically analyzed data about the people who were arriving.

Thus, to offer a more objective and realistic image of the spectrum of the reality of refuge, the Institute for Urban and Regional Research (ISR) partnered with the Institute for Social Anthropology (ISA) decided to finance and conduct an empirical pilot study among refugees, which is the basis of this ISR-Forschungsbericht. Thus, from December 2015 to March 2016, 60 biographical interviews with refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan living in Vienna were compiled mainly through networking. The average interview duration was one and a half hours but in some cases also considerably longer conversations could be recorded by native speakers of Farsi-Dari, Pashto, Arabic and Kurdish.

The collected information provided a wide range of insights into biographical topics in the context of refuge, for example, flight motivations and the often traumatic experiences which were made in the countries of origin but of course also during the long way to and in Europe. Most of the respondents had lost relatives, some almost their whole families and many had suffered severe personal or religious persecution.

The contributions in this volume provide invaluable insights in the refugees’ perspective of their situation, their hopes and expectations, specific problem constellations, and the challenges they meet in Austria. These aspects of seeking refuge and refugee life contribute to a deeper and more realistic picture of the living environment of forced migrants.

The refugees’ educational and qualification background ranged from university graduates to those unable to read or write, as they had never attended a school. The expectations for a better life in Austria were as varied as the respondents themselves. In particular those, who already had stayed longer in Austria realized that many of their

initial expectations remained unrealistic, that gaining a foothold in the Austrian labor market was extremely hard, even for the better educated and in many cases they had to accept some kind of de-qualification. The challenges of integration into the Austrian society proved to be diverse and even such “simple” things as accommodation proved to be a very challenging project.

The research explicitly focused on the particularity of individual experiences during the flight. These unique dynamic experiences of fleeing and integration formed the basis for an interpretation of the content of the pilot study interviews. It was possible to reveal structures of action and individual coping strategies to meet the challenges of flight, arrival and early residence in Austria and also the processes of long-term integration as some of the interviewed refugees had already lived for up to one or two years in Austria.

A broad range of different experiences of social contacts between the refugees and the Austrians was evident, obviously depending on specific variables such as gender, level of education, language proficiency and country of origin. Women usually reported different experiences than men, younger persons experienced other interactions and paths to integration than elderly refugees. Only a minority of respondents reported experiences in which rejectionist attitudes of local people were demonstrated against them. This may be a visible outcome of the general mood of politically and medially fostered “welcome culture” which dominated the refugee discussion in Austria until the turn of the year 2015/16.

Many interviews illustrated that it is generally through initial social contacts in Austria that refugees gain a first insight into the modes of interaction with Austrians as well as into the reality and characteristics of the receiving society. One initial setting for such interactions can be found in refugee homes where the respondents had to live immediately upon their arrival in Austria. Thus, invaluable insights into the refugees’ relationships with their immediate social environment in these homes were also collected in the interviews.

Some of the casual relationships with Austrians even proved to be long-lasting and helped the refugees a considerably in gaining a foothold in the receiving society and in establishing a social network in Austria both with compatriots and Austrians, too. Many long-term implications of positive inter-ethnic relations were reported. A qualitative and interpretative research approach was used to understand how the refugees make sense of their experiences and networks on their path to social inclusion into the Austrian society.

The eight chapters of this volume provide an insight into many aspects of the sending context of refuge on the one side and the challenges of refugees in the receiving context on the other side. The editors feel very obliged to all authors for their excellent cooperation, to Jenny-Carvill Schellenbacher for her quick and profound English language editing as well as to Florian Partl, who skillfully elaborated the layout.