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Bridge or barrier: how Bavarian town is coping with its refugee crisis a year on

A Europe without borders is just a memory as the influx of migrants polarises locals

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Janek Schmidt Freilassing

The reinstated border between Germany and Austria on the Freilassing bridge, above. Clockwise from right, Rainer Borchers; Syrian refugee Khaled Misho; a German boy and his friend from Pakistan; and migrants outside their temporary home Photograph: Jens Schwarz for the Guardian

Two centuries ago, after the Napoleonic wars had laid waste to much of central Europe, the continent's rulers decided to redraw the border between Austria and Germany along the river Saalach, between Salzburg and one of its suburbs, now a Bavarian town called Freilassing. When Austria joined the Schengen area in 1995, the border in effect became obsolete: only a short white line in the middle of the motorway bridge still marks the division between the two countries.

But a year ago, the Freilassing bridge once again become a symbol of barriers between nations and cultures. On 5 September 2015 - a day after Germany's Angela Merkel and the Austrian chancellor, Werner Faymann, had decided to accept thousands of refugees stranded at Budapest station - it was here that about 400 refugees on board a train got their first glimpse of Germany.

And it was on Freilassing bridge that a week later thousands of refugees found themselves stranded once again after Germany's interior minister, Thomas de Maizière, reintroduced border checks that continue sporadically to this day, unleashing scenes that have divided the border town in more ways than one.

Rainer Borchers, 38, returned from his night shift as a hospital nurse in the early hours to find hundreds of people camped outside his home on the Bavarian bank of the Saalach.

"These people were in a lot of need: they were exhausted, thirsty and hungry. As a nurse, I want to help people, so I let them use my car park, my toilet and gave pregnant women a chance to rest in my camper van."

Borchers helped for a week, after which he grew critical of the situation on his doorstep. He claimed he was spat at and threatened with a knife when handing out bottles of water, and one night heard shots on the bridge - police insist the banging sound was created by a van running over a traffic cone.

"Generators were running 24 hours and made my bedroom vibrate. I bought this house with my own money, and as a carer it's not like I earn €5,000 a month."

Borchers said he remembered "positive moments" from his week of volunteering, but in the coming weeks he became more and more disillusioned.

"I've never had anything to do with politics but I called the Social Democrats to complain, I called the mayor of Freilassing, and I called the district office, but none of them would listen to me." Then, he said, he called Germany's new rightwing, anti-immigration party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), "and they took the time to listen." He has since joined the party.

On 24 October, more than 1,000 AfD protesters and hundreds of counter-protesters demonstrated against Merkel's "illegal" crisis management

A year on, Borchers said, his town feels "scarred". "My neighbourhood is divided between left and right - there's nothing in between. You are either pro-refugee or against."

But the mayor, Josef Flatscher, said describing Freilassing as a town divided was "completely over the top". Last September the politician, part of the conservative Bavarian Christian Social Union party, was driving back from a family holiday in Italy when he heard of the resumption of border checks between Austria and Germany on the radio. But when he drove across the bridge into his hometown an hour later, there were no border guards to be seen.

Only the next morning, local police set up makeshift patrols on the bridge. By the afternoon, they were replaced with the national police force, who still carry out sporadic border checks.

A year on, Flatscher feels reassured about Freilassing but points to 6,500 migrants being rescued off Libya on one day this week. "This isn't going to stop completely. But next time we'll know how to deal with the situation."

The traffic jams on the bridge, the mayor said, "made us realise how great it is to live in a Europe without borders. We should talk about that more often."

1,500

The number of migrants arriving on the bridge from Salzburg every day at the height of the refugee crisis last year

While he would not put his name to Merkel's credo during the crisis - *Wir schaffen das*, ("we will manage") - he did not disagree either. "We are a strong country, and we can manage a lot."

Khaled Misho might agree. Having arrived in Germany in 2014, the 21-year-old Syrian shares a room with three other young men, in a spacious three-storey house with a little garden that is home to 60 refugees who have been located here while their asylum applications are being processed. The ground floor is just for men; one side is for Arabic speakers, mainly from Syria, the other for those speaking other languages, most of them Africans.

Last September and October, when about 1,500 refugees arrived on the bridge from Salzburg every day, Misho had been there for almost a year and spoke basic German. "So I went to the bridge to support volunteers who distributed food and clothes and to help with translations. Both German officials and refugees seemed grateful when I helped, but a few times it turned out that the presumed Syrians didn't speak any Arabic at all. I have no idea where they were from, but certainly not from Syria as they had claimed."

Since then, the number of arrivals has fallen considerably. Germany's federal refugee agency says no more than 40 refugees and migrants a day arrive at Freilassing's reception centre. The shelter, in a former furniture factory, was at an "operative minimum".

Misho said: "We are lucky here in our house with the refugees, as there is some green space in front and we all get along well with each other. I am still really grateful to Germany that I can be here and there are a lot of people in town who are happy to help us."

Some people in Freilassing, Misho said - "maybe one in five" - seemed less happy. "A few times people have even told me that I shouldn't be here. But then I just answer them in German and then they are intimidated and confused by the fact that I speak German. That is my best way to defend myself."

Now Misho is starting a new job in a restaurant at Chiemsee, a nearby lake and tourist destination. He would mainly be preparing salads, he said, but hoped he could work his way up.

Yet not every refugee who made it across the bridge has reason to be hopeful. Though police on the bridge only carry out sporadic spot checks, border control has in effect been moved inland to the migrant reception centres.

Those who cannot show a passport or an intention to apply for asylum are sent back to Austria - in August, German police returned 300 migrants from Freilassing to Salzburg. With the Balkan route now closed, many are forced to stay in Austria or have to make their way back across the Saalach river elsewhere.

"In Freilassing it may feel like the refugee crisis has stopped - in Salzburg it is now starting", said Karl-Heinz Müller, a pensioner in nearby Fridolfing, who played a key role last September.

As the weather turned, Müller, 77, recalled seeing mothers with babies waiting on the bridge for days on end, unwilling to move for fear of losing their place in the queue. "I was so immensely sad about our collective inertia."

Then Müller, who ran an analytical chemical company, decided that "since you couldn't rely on the police, you had to use your brain". With a marker pen, he drew a fat A on the wrists of the first 10 people in the queue. The next 10 got a B, the next 10 a C, and so on. Soon, Müller was on to decimal places.

After a few days, a local paper likened Müller's system to the Nazis tattooing Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp, which angered him. "All we were trying to do was to create a just, fair system." Salzburg's deputy mayor eventually donated coloured wristbands, which he used instead.

After months of volunteering, often sleeping for a few hours a night in a makeshift bed, Müller is ambivalent about the future, pulled between sympathy for anyone trying to make their way to Germany and understanding for those worried about immigration. "You have to respect everyone who doesn't want more refugees. We can manage this but only if the population at large is involved."

He plans to set up a museum with his archive of documents and children's drawings. "Someone has keep the story of what happened here alive."

'People have told me that I should not be here but I always answer in German'
Khaled Misho