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Extraordinary People

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Extraordinary People

Note: Names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals mentioned.

I SPENT A YEAR AND A HALF IN GERMANY ONCE.

I spent that year and a half as a foreigner. I couldn't really speak the language, and I didn't have any roots or connections. I tried to embrace the culture and understand their ways the best I could. But I quickly learned I was less of a foreigner than some of the people who had lived there for years. I was lucky, actually.

A few months after moving there, I met Najila, a shy girl who was about seventeen years old. Her family came from Iraq. She heard about us—the two Americans living nearby—through a friend, and wanted us to teach her English. She dreamed of being a doctor when she grew up and thought speaking English would be helpful in her future career. But that dream had kind of been put on hold. You can't become a doctor if you're failing all of your high school classes. And unfortunately for her, high schools in Germany don't offer any classes taught in her native tongue. So, she would have to learn German, and then algebra, psychology, biology, and history as they were taught in German at school before she could become a doctor. As bright as she was, that's a lot for anyone to take on, let alone a seventeen-year-old. As we taught a second foreign language to this ambitious young girl, she broke into tears of frustration and embarrassment. I thought about her as I fell asleep that night, and tears of sympathy wet my pillow.

The Hakim family lived in Zwickau, a sort of hole-in-the-wall city that people always talk about but never go to. Years-old graffiti littered the streets and there weren't enough smiles to go around. The Hakims lived in a high-rise apartment building that was overcrowded and under-cleaned, along with countless families in the same situation.

I remember the dad talking with us. He used to be a lawyer back in Syria. He helped people and made enough money for his three daughters and his wife to live comfortably and be happy. I'd bet they were wealthy back in Syria, lived in a nice neighborhood and had lots of friends, threw fun parties, and wore nice clothes.

When we met him, he had been attending night school every evening to learn German just so he could communicate well enough to keep his day job. He knew he'd probably have to go back to school to get a decent career in Germany, even though he already spent years in school for a law degree back in his homeland. The exhaustion was evident on his face, but so was his positive attitude towards the situation as he smiled and made jokes with us.

Janan was his second-oldest daughter. She was twenty years old and home from university for the summer. She spoke the best German of anyone in the family but wasn't happy there. She talked with us for a long time and said it was because we were so kind to her. It's hard to make friends at university when you don't share a language or culture with your peers and teachers. When they all see you as different, foreign, strange.

Wada was her mom. She didn't understand a single word of German. We tried to speak with her but she just got a pained look on her face and shook her head. She was unbelievably kind to us, complete strangers. She welcomed us into her home anyway and spoke to us through warm tea, a plate of cookies, and a smile. As we chatted with her daughters, she smiled and nodded occasionally, even though we all knew she didn't understand a word.

On our way home that day, I thanked the local bus driver in his native tongue for driving. He just glared at me through the rearview mirror and mumbled to himself.

These are just a few of the many I have met. Refugees. A single word, a label we put on them like stickers on produce at the grocery store. We bunch them all together and see them as "other," as "different," as "them." Strangers to us. Victims of their situation, of a war they want no part of. And still, they are here, far from their homes, trying to live in our midst and recreate the lives they used to live and love. Trying to embrace our culture and understand our ways while clinging tightly to their own, trying to preserve a sense of "home." Ordinary people. But extraordinary people.