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In Vienna, bearing witness

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Abstract: For the last couple of months, I had been devouring every word written about the waves of refugees washing onto Europe's shores from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. I had been particularly fascinated by the role Austria was playing - as a transit point for those heading north to Angela Merkel's Germany and beyond. I am no stranger to Austria and its history with refugees. I have Austria - more specifically, Vienna - in my blood.

In 1938, five months after the Anschluss (Germany's annexation of Austria), my father Franz Engel (later Francis Elliott), age 29 and a partner with his father in a margarine factory, learned from an Austrian friend that the Engels of the Sixth District (Vienna is divided into residential districts) were on the SS's deportation list. As he told the story, my father went into his room and didn't come out until he had devised an escape plan, some three weeks later. The next day he, his parents, and his sister fled Vienna in the dark of night, slipping over the border to Italy and on to Switzerland and France. After two years interned in an alien camp in central France, he once again collected his family, eventually shepherding them to Lisbon, where they embarked for the United States.

Most coincidentally and precisely timed to my arrival in Vienna, the right-wing powers in Budapest succeeded in closing the Hungarian border with Croatia. The results were to halt almost entirely the flow of refugees into Vienna. But, just as water always seeks its own level, the refugees, too, shifted course and started traipsing through Slovenia toward Austria's southernmost border. By all reports, tens of thousands amassed there - stranded, their destinies out of their control. By the end of the week, the dam finally broke and once again waves of humanity started pouring into Vienna.

Links: [Base URL to 360 Link:](#)

Full text: Headnote

A volunteer on the frontlines of Europe's refugee crisis

The U.S. Passport Control agent greeted me with uncustomary warmth last month as I returned to Newark Liberty Airport. "Was your trip business or vacation?" he asked. For a split second I hesitated, but answered firmly: "Vacation." How could I tell him that the time I had just voluntarily spent in Vienna, Austria, on the frontlines of Europe's overwhelming refugee crisis was business, deeply personal business?

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o after so much reading about today's refugees, it felt like a no-brainer to me to simply jump on a plane to

Vienna and lend a hand in any way I could. First I called a Viennese- Jewish friend and asked her if she had any suggestions about what I could do. In typical wry, caustic Viennese form, she answered: "Send the money you would spend on coming, and stay home." That wasn't going to work for me.

Two years ago, I retired as a longtime employee of HIAS, the Jewish refugee organization - and the organization that my father worked for in Lisbon that also helped him and his family settle in the United States. From my network of buddies in the refugee community I learned that there were no formal programs and that I should, really, just hop on a plane and show up at one of two train stations that were serving as transit points. There, groups like Train of Hope, a refugee aid organization, and Caritas, a Catholic aid agency, were offering food, clothing, and beds to the arriving refugees. This made sense to me. Reservations were made, and three weeks later I unlocked the door to my rented studio less than a kilometer from my father's last apartment, and 10 minutes from the Westbahnhof, the West Train Station through which thousands of refugees travel daily. Most coincidentally and precisely timed to my arrival in Vienna, the right-wing powers in Budapest succeeded in closing the Hungarian border with Croatia. The results were to halt almost entirely the flow of refugees into Vienna. But, just as water always seeks its own level, the refugees, too, shifted course and started traipsing through Slovenia toward Austria's southernmost border. By all reports, tens of thousands amassed there - stranded, their destinies out of their control. By the end of the week, the dam finally broke and once again waves of humanity started pouring into Vienna.

Sobering and painful

On that day, the refugees began arriving by bus to the train station around 2:30 p.m. Initially visible a quarter mile down the tracks, they appeared spectral, wearily marching forward in single formation. As they got closer, individuals and family units gradually took shape. Within minutes, hundreds of hungry, worn-down refugees were upon us, and it was our job to feed them. The menu varied by the moment, but there were always bananas and apples, bread, pretzels, cookies, and water. At times there were dates, nuts, and hot vegetable stew with rice, courtesy of two Austrian women who had cooked up a storm at home and brought a feast. It smelled divine and for a good half hour, the refugees were drunk on the aroma and full bellies.

But passing out the food was a sobering and painful experience, especially when we realized we didn't have enough to go around. I made it my business to make sure that all the children had cookies (I actually had to wrest packages from the hands of some big guys equally intent on getting them), and that all the babies who needed it had formula. I'm not sure I've ever been around people who have known such privation. I spoke with one woman who had left Iran 21 days earlier. She told me that they were forced to walk 60 kilometers (37 miles) across Croatia to the Austrian border. Freezing on the train platform after only a couple of hours outdoors, I felt their pain even more acutely.

One of the hardest aspects of being a refugee is to live a life totally free of autonomy. Every movement, every meal, every smoke, every pit stop is ordained by others. The last independent, self-determining move that any of them may have taken was the decision to leave everything behind and pack their lives into several large plastic bags for the fickle promise of a future.

I am hard-pressed to begin to understand what they have endured thus far on their journey - and that journey has only just begun. The people I met last week had abandoned their former homes and livelihoods only threefour weeks ago. This is unimaginable to me - one month ago, I was sailing on Lake Ontario, not taking an irrevocable step into the unknown!

There has been much talk in the media about ISIS sending sleeper cells among the waves of refugees. Yes, the majority of refugees I saw were young men - starving, weary, beaten-down young men, who have had their youth stolen from them by war and conflict. Surely, there are better, easier ways to infiltrate the West than posing as refugees. No human being willingly chooses to give up all that is precious to him or her, unless there is simply no other option. It is impossible to know this until you look into the eyes of those who have lost everything. There are no assurances, but bearing witness to this vast wave of migration convinced me that I am

much more comfortable erring on the side of humanity.

I went to Vienna as an individual act, to do everything I could to make sure that today's refugees are treated much better than my family was. I also went there because I needed to see and believe that Vienna and the Viennese have changed. While there, I spent my days surrounded by people who care about people, working side by side with Austrians of all ages who gave up their days off to hand out food and sort clothes. And I was gratified to see the never-ending line of people donating yet another baby onesie or boy's winter coat to the nearly unmanageable mounds of clothing already collected.

I went there to witness, to be present, to help the refugees, and help I did.

Hineini. Like I said, this trip was about business, deeply personal business.

Sidebar

Recently arrived from camps on the Austrian- Slovenian border, refugees at the Westbahnhof (West Train Station) in Vienna wait for transit to Salzburg and points further north. Photos by Roberta Elliott

Austrian volunteers serve meals to refugees as they arrive at a train station in Vienna.

A young refugee gets a new doll; the NGO "Refugees Welcome" places arriving refugees in the private homes of volunteers.

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