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Asylum with Human Face: Angela Merkel, Reem Sahwil and Another Video-Gone-Viral

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JOYCE MARIE MUSHABEN, JUL 28 2015

On July 16, 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel visited the Paul Friedrich School in Rostock, as part of a discussion series with youth as to what it means “to live well in Germany” (watch the video here). Among the 29 students in attendance was sixth-grader Reem Sahwil, who had arrived four years earlier from a refugee camp in Lebanon. She told Merkel how hard it was to watch her peers who “are able to enjoy life,” knowing that she could not; already fluent in German (the best in her class), she wants to attend university. Her family nonetheless faces potential deportation. Her father, a trained welder, is not allowed to work, given their uncertain legal status. As Reem began to cry, Merkel left her “official position” to offer a little comfort, telling her she had “done a great job” — explaining her own situation in a way that highlighted many things that are still very, very wrong with German migration and asylum policies.

Merkel’s personal gesture, as a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* headline declared, “landed her in a shitstorm”. She has been mocked from top to bottom in the twitter-sphere for having shown too much or too little “emotion” during this exchange: would pundits expect the same of a male Chancellor? The Chancellor has moreover been criticized for not taking immediate action to grant permanent residency to thousands of migrants, who are legally “tolerated” but denied a chance to naturalize. Although their asylum applications have been rejected, international conventions prohibit their deportation to homelands that are little more than combat zones. Forced to renew their “tolerated” status every six months, they cannot engage in paid labor, fueling taxpayer resentment over their “shameless exploitation” of the national welfare system.

The number of asylum applications filed in Germany rose from 18,278 in 2008, to 169,166 in 2014: by May 2015, it grew by another 129% (see full statistics and report here). The 2015 total is expected to reach 500,000; at least 20,000 have entered as unaccompanied minors under 18. Despite its size and wealth, Germany is not the biggest per capita recipient, falling midway between Sweden and the UK. It has the dubious distinction of hosting the greatest number of undecided cases, however.

Merkel’s Christian Democrat Union predecessor, Helmut Kohl, deserves the blame for Germany’s hard-line approach to asylum – long biased in favor of persons fleeing “communism”. Prior to 1980, breadwinners with pending applications received temporary work permits. By 1987, only East Europeans were exempted from a new five-year work ban, although two-thirds were between 18 and 50 (working age). Applicants had to live at designated sites in hostels, tents, or containers, even if relatives offered to sponsor them elsewhere, and were denied language instruction. Conditions worsened over time: buildings already inadequate for families had their kitchens removed to prevent them from cooking. Reduced cash allocations were replaced with benefits in kind, health care access declined. Applicants allowed to work under very exceptional circumstances could not earn more than the equivalent of €1.05 per hour. Unification was followed by the arrival of 450,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia, as well as by an unprecedented wave of xenophobic violence (1991-1993). Two Turkish homes were set ablaze by neo-Nazis in the western towns of Mölln and Solingen, killing two grandmothers and six children. Kohl refused to attend the victims’ funerals and disparaged *anti*-neo-Nazi demonstrations as “shameful for Germany” (Mushaben, 2008).

As head of a parliamentary democracy, Merkel cannot change the rules on her own. The real problem lies with

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Germany's powerful "state princes" and a motley assortment of coalitions controlling the second federal chamber, the Bundesrat. Although Bavaria has profited immensely from 91,000 skilled laborers from abroad over the last two years, its Christian Social Union leaders are the strongest opponents of citizenship, migration, and asylum reforms. Minister President Horst Seehofer plans to house "poverty migrants" from the Balkan states in facilities close to the border to expedite their deportation. State officials in Thüringen blamed one police and nine migrant murders on organized crime elements, then blocked investigations when evidence showed that its own "constitutional protection" agents had ties to the real perpetrators, the right-extremist National Socialist Underground, between 2000 and 2007. In contrast to Kohl, Merkel met for three and a half hours with the victims' families in July 2013 "to listen to their needs and concerns."

Joking that she is also a person of migration background, Angela Merkel has consistently stressed Germany's need to become a "welcoming culture," in order to survive a looming demographic deficit. Its aging population may decline by 17 million over the next 35 years, causing a major skilled labor shortage. One of her first acts as Chancellor was to personally distribute new passports to twelve naturalized citizens. Merkel pursues the "politics of small steps" but recognizes the need for holistic solutions, e.g., expanding educational and vocational opportunities for youth of migrant descent. She is the only chancellor to have convened National Integration Summits (seven to date) and a Youth Integration Summit. In 2007 she introduced the National Integration Plan (400 initiatives, 129 stakeholder organizations) and a National Integration Action Plan in 2012, replete with concrete indicators, time-tables and implementation monitoring.

Other legislative reforms enacted during her watch add up to a bona fide paradigm shift. Asylum applicants can now seek jobs after three months; those rejected but tolerated (100,000) who have lived in Germany for eight years (six for children) have a "right to remain." Migrant dependents (15-20) who attended German schools or who have been in the country for 15 months can receive educational stipends (BaFög) and work permits after training. Refugees and asylum seekers now enjoy some freedom of movement after four months, allowing children to accompany their peers on class trips. Some states now allow families to move into apartments after two years. A 2012 law established procedures for recognizing occupational qualifications attained abroad; of the 13,344 cases decided in 2013, 9,969 (74.7%) were fully accredited. The Federal Agency for Migrants and Refugees (BAMF) established a Round Table on the "Accepting Society," with task forces establishing "best welcoming practices" and "intercultural opening and training" – to re-socialize civil servants into friendlier, inclusionary behaviors vis-à-vis newcomers. The BAMF is helping to professionalize ethnic associations as communication channels as well. Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière is adding 2,000 staff members to help process asylum applications. Meanwhile, Germany is facing a renewed wave of attacks and demonstrations against refugee hostels trying to keep pace with the influx, especially given the refusal of other EU states to take them in.

We now know that Reem Sahwil was born two months early in a Palestinian refugee camp, where a lack of oxygen rendered her 30% disabled and wheel-chair dependent; she was then seriously injured in a traffic accident at age six, requiring multiple surgeries. Germany granted her family a medical visum to allow for six further operations. The mayor of Rostock has declared that the family will not be expelled, on humanitarian grounds. But what about the other 499,000 seeking refuge in Germany this year? Merkel did what she could, and has proven to be more humane, if not more "emotional" than all previous Chancellors. She accepts the fact that Germany must become a land of immigration *and* integration. The rest is up to the democratically elected lawmakers, who at least are being forced to reconsider the millions of human faces trapped behind their self-serving, partisan-populist declarations that "the boat is full."

References

Joyce Marie Mushaben (2008) *The Changing Face(s) of Citizenship: Integration and Mobilization among Minorities in Germany* (Providence/Oxford: Berghahn Books).

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Joyce Marie Mushaben is a Curators' Professor of Comparative Politics and Gender Studies at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She has spent over 17 years researching in Germany, focusing on East/West/multi-cultural "German" identities, European immigration and integration policies, EU gender policies, comparative welfare states, as well as on peace, ecology and Neo-Nazi youth movements. Her work has been generously funded over the years by the DAAD, the Fulbright Commission, the Ford Foundation and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, inter alia. Her books include *From Post-War to Post-Wall Generations: Changing Attitudes towards the National Question and NATO in the Federal Republic of Germany* (1998); *The Changing Faces of Citizenship: Integration and Mobilization among Ethnic Minorities in Germany* (2008); and *Gendering the European Union: New Approaches to Old Democratic Deficits*, co-edited with Gabriele Abels (2012). Her current book-in-progress is titled *Becoming Madam Chancellor: Angela Merkel and the Berlin Republic* (forthcoming, 2016). In 1999 she received the Trailblazer's Award for her contributions to gender equality at the UM-St. Louis; in 2007 she was honored with the Chancellor's Award for Research Creativity, and in 2012 she became the recipient of the Governor's Award for Teaching Excellence. One of only six women to be named Curators' Research Professor during the 50-year history of the UM-St. Louis, she is commonly known as Dr. J.