

Guest Workers' Stories (Retrospective Account, 2013)

Abstract

This article recounts a community conversation featuring a group of “guest workers” who chose to remain in West Germany. Looking back (in some cases, over fifty years), the participants described challenges ranging from communication difficulties to outright xenophobia. Many felt that they had achieved only partial integration in their “second homeland.”

Source

A Second Homeland: “Guest Workers” Recount How They Got Settled in Germany

They planned to live in Germany only temporarily to earn a little money—but ended up staying their whole lives. On Thursday evening “guest workers” in Wannweil shared their experiences with 80 listeners.

Wannweil. “We asked for workers, and we got people instead.” With this quote from Max Frisch, Hauke Petersen from the Nurses’ Association opened the event. Held in cooperation with the local library, it was already the fifth in a series of conversations with witnesses to history. “Our fellow citizens with foreign roots are also among the Wannweilers who have life experiences to share,” emphasized Petersen.

“I am happy to stay, since my children are here.” Most migrants feel the same as Giuseppina Giani. She came to Germany in 1964 at the age of twenty—against her parents’ wishes. “They said the Germans were bad people.” Her father had fought against the Germans in the Second World War. In the beginning, the young, twenty-year-old woman did not like it at all. “I cried a lot.” She lived with fellow Italians, didn’t understand a thing, and the natives were anything but friendly. With her Italian husband, whom she had met in Germany, she returned to Italy for a time—but new beginnings were also difficult there, and so the family went back to Germany.

Like her cousin, Giani found work and housing in the Old Spinning Mill. Right after the war, a lot of displaced Germans [*Heimatvertriebene*] were employed by the textile firm; later the workforce was up to eighty percent foreign. “We communicated with hands and feet,” recounts Eugen Schweizer, who was plant foreman there beginning in 1975. To be sure, the wages were lower than in the metal industry, to which many native workers switched over at the time. But: “Here, with us, the migrants could live and work in shifts.”

With one exception, the apartments had no showers—there were company showers that could be used only on Fridays and Saturdays. There were communication problems and conflicts among six nations of workers, Schweizer recalls. He stayed out of it: “I had to make sure that the machines were manned and that everything was running. What went on between people wasn’t my problem.”

Many migrants actually planned to stay in Germany for a limited time. “I only wanted to work a year, earn a little money, and then go back,” recounts Ali Alpaslan. His real name is Alparslan. The immigrant office dropped the “r” in his last name when it issued his passport. He came from Turkey in 1973 and worked on construction sites. On the drive to his job interview, he had used biscuits to show his colleagues how to build walls. After a series of stations, he came in 1988 to what was then Flender-Himmelwerk in Kilchberg, where he worked as a floater until retirement. He’s had a house in Wannweil for a long time, his children and grandchildren live here. “In Germany, people say “Hello!,” in Turkey I don’t know anyone anymore.” Still, if given the choice again, he would not go to Germany today.

Mehmed Türkoglu returns, again and again, to the small Turkish village where he grew up. Even after more than forty years, he speaks little German; his daughter Ayse Bonhafa interprets. The mother had come to Germany first—to Nuremberg, later to Wannweil to the Old Spinning Mill. She got married in Turkey, her husband followed her. The mother has little nostalgia for the old homeland. And Ayse knows the country only from vacations. “We’re foreigners there, too,” she says.

Many migrants lived in Fallenbachstraße in Wannweil. “There, we foreigners created our own country,” recounts Ayse Bonhafa. “We were like a family. Everybody knew everyone else. A small homeland.” All those on stage speak unanimously of German neighbors, work colleagues, and retailers who helped them get settled.

Abdullah Sezgin came to Germany in 1970 at the age of fifteen. His father worked at Daimler in Sindelfingen, Abdullah initially as a varnisher at AEG. He recalled his job interview, which he managed without knowing a word of German. Later, Sezgin became a painter in Pfullingen. He returned to Turkey, did his military service there and even had his German visa in his passport cancelled.

But then he was seized by worries about the future; he called his former boss, who sent another invitation to Germany. Sezgin returned in 1976; a year later he brought his wife and son. His wife found work in the spinning works. Sezgin went to work on the assembly line at Daimler; later he was a shop steward for five years. Today he is retired. He built a house in Wannweil with his sons, who work at Bosch and Daimler. “I don’t feel like a foreigner here—maybe because I came here at such a young age,” he says.

“The 1970s were the golden age for guest workers,” says Abdullah Sezgin. Today, however, the migrants advise their compatriots to come to Germany only if they already know the language and have learned a profession. The audience and speakers alike were impressed by the dialogue at the Wannweil community library—the migrants had never before spoken openly about their lives. “This sort of event should have happened sooner,” noted Ali Alpaslan.

Source: Matthias Reichert, “Die zweite Heimat: ‘Gastarbeiter’ erzählen, wie sie in Deutschland Fuß gefasst haben,” *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*, November 9, 2013. © *Schwäbisches Tagblatt*. Republished with permission. Available online at: <https://www.tagblatt.de/Nachrichten/Gastarbeiter-erzaehlen-wie-sie-in-Deutschland-Fuss-gefasst-haben-103210.html>

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Recommended Citation: Guest Workers’ Stories (Retrospective Account, 2013), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5038>> [February 08, 2025].