

# « LIKE A FISH IN A TANK »

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EVERYDAY RACISM  
IN COTTBUS





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Dear Readers,

Like a fish in a tank, like something to be stared at – that's how one of the people interviewed for this brochure felt, when a Cottbus bus driver threw her out of the bus for no reason and even her white<sup>1</sup> German friend did not intervene. Occurrences like these are still commonplace for people in Cottbus, who are seen as not white and therefore as not being part of part of society.

The interviews in this brochure, which began in late 2020, capture a small part of the experiences made by Cottbus residents of various ages, genders, social statuses and origins. Some respondents have lived in Cottbus for decades, others arrived just a few years ago. What they share are the experiences of racist hostility, exclusion and sometimes violence in their own town. Their reactions range from wanting to leave Cottbus to years of intense activity against racism in order to build a local society based on respect.

This brochure aims not just to uncover racist discrimination and violence in Cottbus, but also to support the resistance of those affected.

Finally, we want to encourage all Cottbus residents and all readers to question their own racist bias, images and stereotypes and get active against racism and discrimination.

In the end, racism affects us all, and each and every one of us is needed for building a society worth living in.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed to this brochure, and especially our respondents, for their willingness to share their personal stories.

Opferperspektive e.V.

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1 *White* describes the social category of people who benefit from racism, not a skin color.

# LOOKING INTO THE FISH TANK

## RACIST VIOLENCE IN COTTBUS SINCE 2015

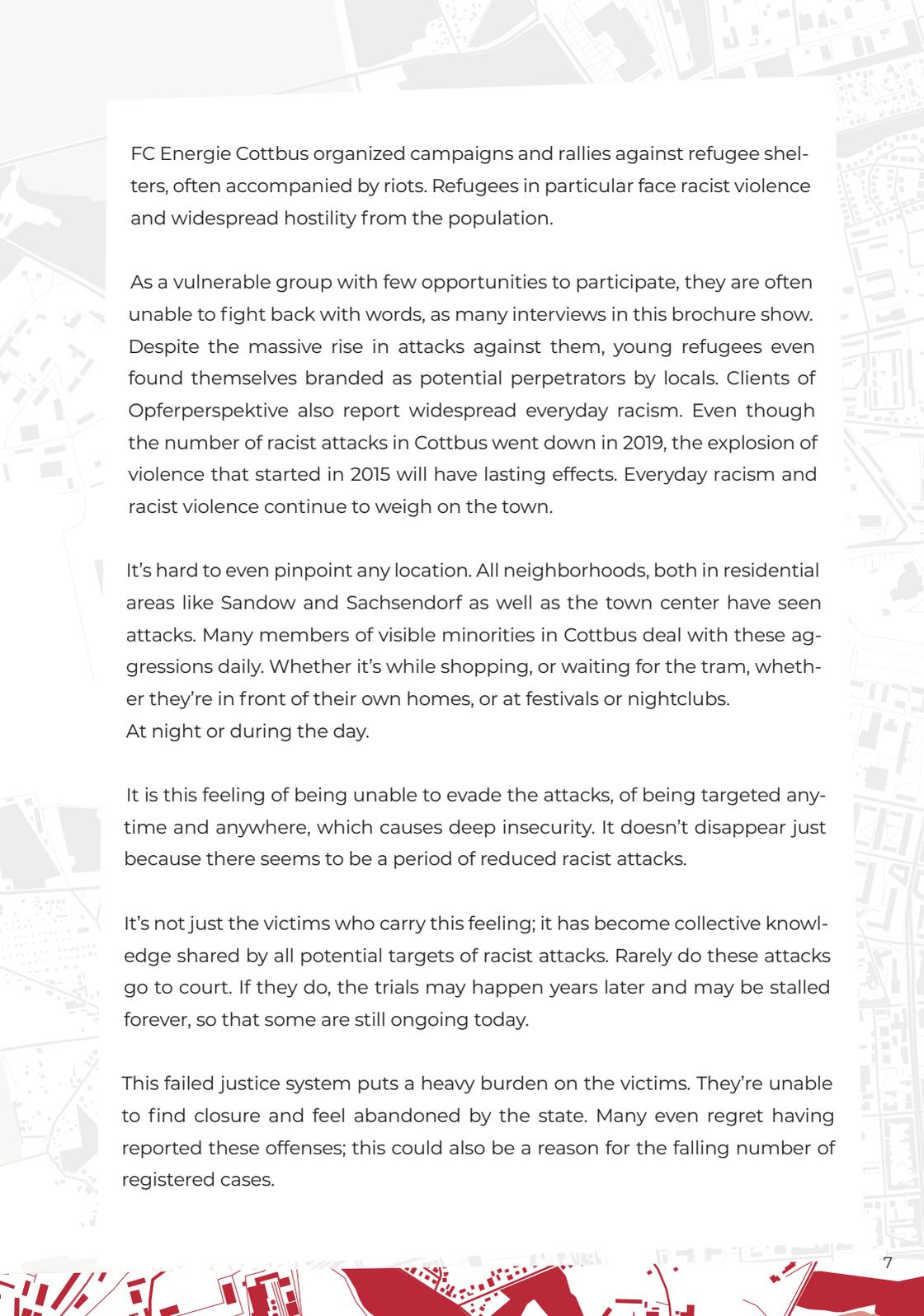
I was a teenager when the Wall came down. At first I was happy about the new era, but then I saw photos of the neo-Nazis. Young guys in combat boots, who hunted anyone they didn't consider "German." As humans we tend to remember bad experiences better than good ones, so my brain stored the image of the "dangerous East." When I think again, I know that's a generalization.

Still, as the respondents told their stories, it was these old images that came up again. Wow, 30 years later nothing has changed! Still, a lot has happened. There's more awareness, there are institutions and volunteers working to turn strangers into friends. And there's the association Opferperspektive (victims' perspective), which supports people harmed or threatened by racist violence and discrimination.

They've been working since 2002 to systematically document right-wing and racist violence in Cottbus. In 2015, their monitoring highlighted a worrying development: The number of registered right-wing attacks had tripled to 28 since 2014. Then, in 2016, Opferperspektive registered a peak of 41 right-wing attacks, more than in any Brandenburg town since they started monitoring. In 2017 and 2018, with 32 and 36 incidents, respectively, Cottbus again topped the list. Yet, these figures show but an incomplete picture of the most brutal effects of the racist climate that has seized the town.

This climate was fueled by more than 20 rallies by local right-wing activists in the autumn of 2015, which greatly alarmed members of visible minorities. Especially disturbing is how organized right-wing groups in Cottbus are.

Various right-wing and racist groups, such as the association "Zukunft Heimat" (loosely: "Our homeland, our future") or violent fans of the local football club

A faint, light gray map of Cottbus, Germany, serves as the background for the page. The map shows a grid of streets and various building footprints. At the bottom of the page, there is a decorative border consisting of stylized red and white geometric shapes, including rectangles and lines, that resemble a city street layout or architectural elements.

FC Energie Cottbus organized campaigns and rallies against refugee shelters, often accompanied by riots. Refugees in particular face racist violence and widespread hostility from the population.

As a vulnerable group with few opportunities to participate, they are often unable to fight back with words, as many interviews in this brochure show. Despite the massive rise in attacks against them, young refugees even found themselves branded as potential perpetrators by locals. Clients of Opferperspektive also report widespread everyday racism. Even though the number of racist attacks in Cottbus went down in 2019, the explosion of violence that started in 2015 will have lasting effects. Everyday racism and racist violence continue to weigh on the town.

It's hard to even pinpoint any location. All neighborhoods, both in residential areas like Sandow and Sachsendorf as well as the town center have seen attacks. Many members of visible minorities in Cottbus deal with these aggressions daily. Whether it's while shopping, or waiting for the tram, whether they're in front of their own homes, or at festivals or nightclubs. At night or during the day.

It is this feeling of being unable to evade the attacks, of being targeted anytime and anywhere, which causes deep insecurity. It doesn't disappear just because there seems to be a period of reduced racist attacks.

It's not just the victims who carry this feeling; it has become collective knowledge shared by all potential targets of racist attacks. Rarely do these attacks go to court. If they do, the trials may happen years later and may be stalled forever, so that some are still ongoing today.

This failed justice system puts a heavy burden on the victims. They're unable to find closure and feel abandoned by the state. Many even regret having reported these offenses; this could also be a reason for the falling number of registered cases.

Having the court confirm that they were wronged is important to the victims, because it signals that these attacks are recognized and don't just disappear.

The court is one of the few places where people can speak about the racist violence they've experienced. Hence, the trial is crucial in helping those attacked to find closure. The failing justice system in Cottbus means that many victims never reach this moment.

Local debates frame migration and integration as the main problems, not racism and right-wing violence.

One example is the reaction to conflicts between white German and refugee youths in 2018, which left people on both sides injured. Local right-wing activists seized the chance; "Zukunft Heimat" held racist rallies and marches attended by thousands.

The town administration reacted with "civic dialogues" to show the populace that they were willing to listen. Yet, racism and right-wing violence were hardly mentioned. Discussions were dominated by security and integration concerns and immigration was framed as the central problem in Cottbus. Citizens with migrant backgrounds were hardly involved in the discussions.<sup>11</sup>

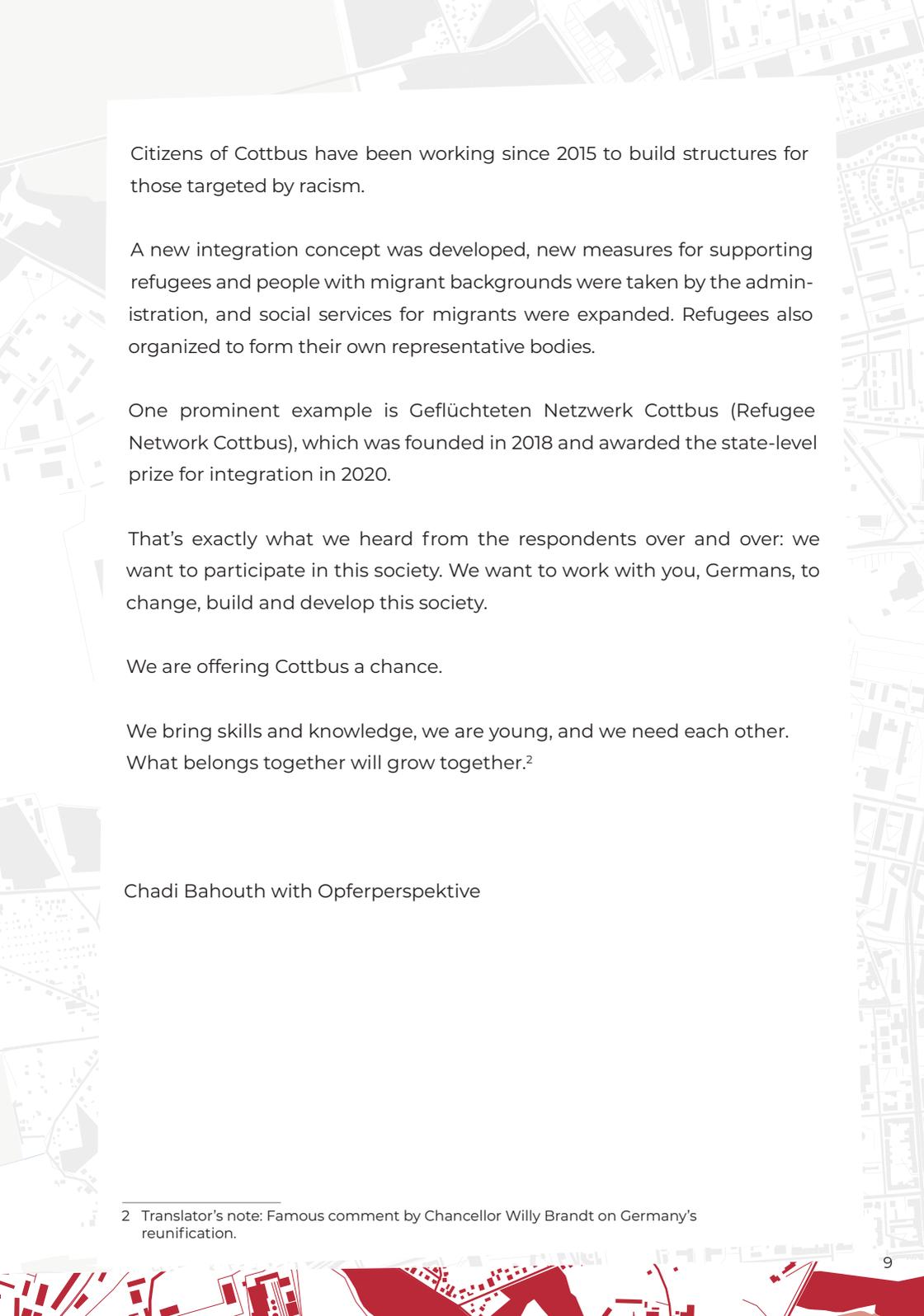
This reaction from politicians and civil society has given reassurance to racist and far-right actors.

Cottbus must take responsibility, address racism and properly deal with the events that occurred to prevent a new wave of violence.

The first step is to listen to the victims.

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<sup>11</sup> s. Raab, M & Radvan, H (2020). Dialog-Veranstaltungen als Demokratisierung? Eine Analyse der Bürgerdialoge in Cottbus in Zeiten völkisch-autoritärer Mobilisierung: Ergebnisse eines Forschungsprojektes, MIKOWA Arbeitspapiere, MIKOWA –Forschungsplattform Migration, Konflikt und sozialer Wandel; Nr.1, 2020.

A faint, light gray map of Cottbus, Germany, serves as the background for the page. The map shows a network of streets and building footprints, with a central area highlighted in a slightly darker shade. The map is oriented vertically, with the top of the page showing the northern part of the city and the bottom showing the southern part.

Citizens of Cottbus have been working since 2015 to build structures for those targeted by racism.

A new integration concept was developed, new measures for supporting refugees and people with migrant backgrounds were taken by the administration, and social services for migrants were expanded. Refugees also organized to form their own representative bodies.

One prominent example is Geflüchteten Netzwerk Cottbus (Refugee Network Cottbus), which was founded in 2018 and awarded the state-level prize for integration in 2020.

That's exactly what we heard from the respondents over and over: we want to participate in this society. We want to work with you, Germans, to change, build and develop this society.

We are offering Cottbus a chance.

We bring skills and knowledge, we are young, and we need each other. What belongs together will grow together.<sup>2</sup>

Chadi Bahouth with Opferperspektive

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: Famous comment by Chancellor Willy Brandt on Germany's reunification.



## WITH REUNIFICATION CAME THE RACISM

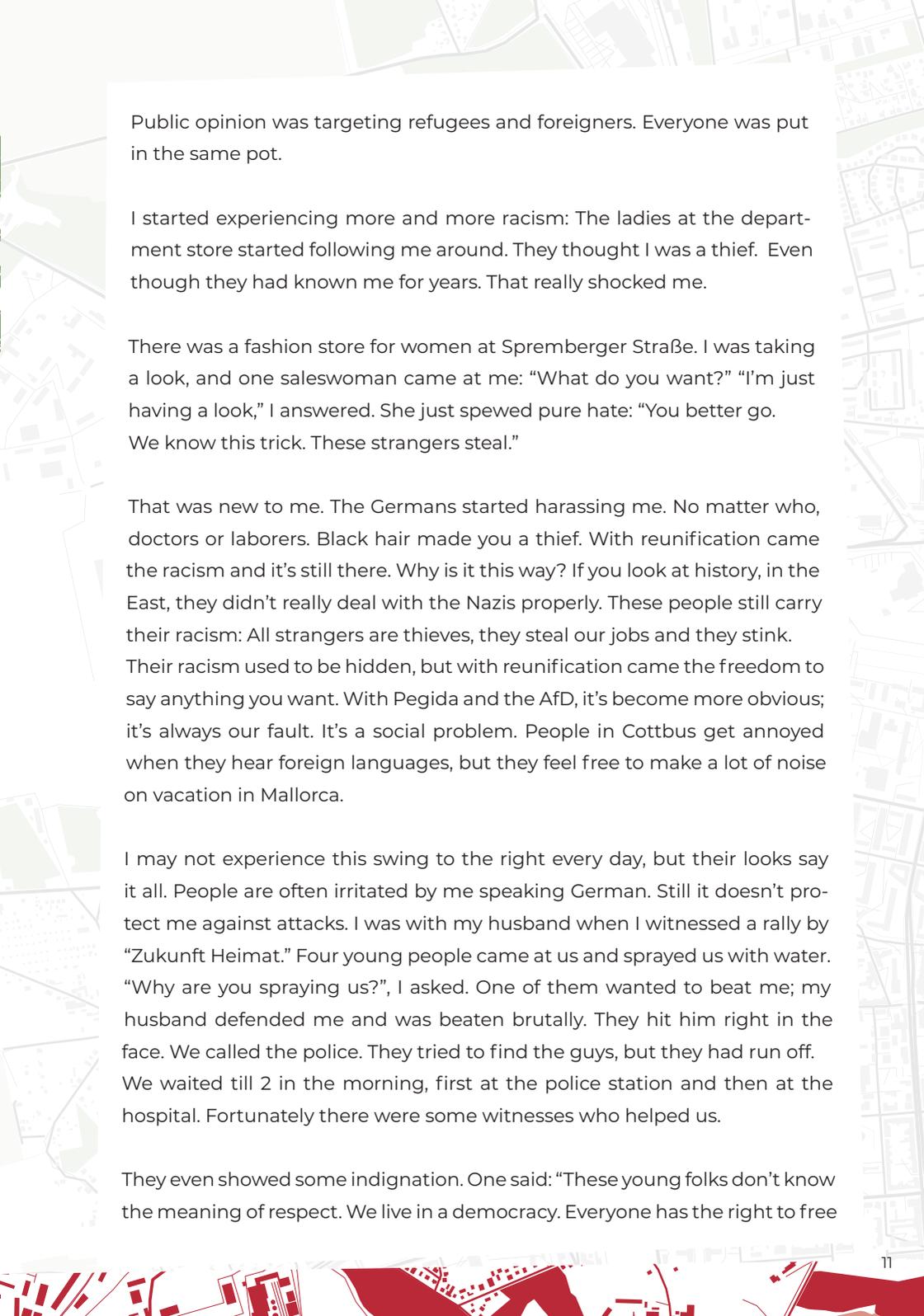
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**I don't know if I'd come to Cottbus again. With reunification came the racism. It's only gotten worse with Pegida and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Insulting others openly used to be frowned upon. Now people just yell at you; they feel no shame.**

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When I came to Cottbus at age 13, it was still in the GDR. I lived with the German kids, and it was no big deal. People had a different mentality then. We were made to feel very welcome. Everything was organized. The kids learned German, the parents could pursue their jobs. All was well until Germany reunified. I was around 30 at the time. I had a job, got married. We were a happy family. But then I felt how things began to change. Since the Wall came down, there seemed to be a strong movement growing in Cottbus. Anything foreign was no longer welcome. More and more strangers were coming to Cottbus, which the locals apparently found more than irritating.

My whole world collapsed. It wasn't just a shock for me, but also for my close acquaintances.



Public opinion was targeting refugees and foreigners. Everyone was put in the same pot.

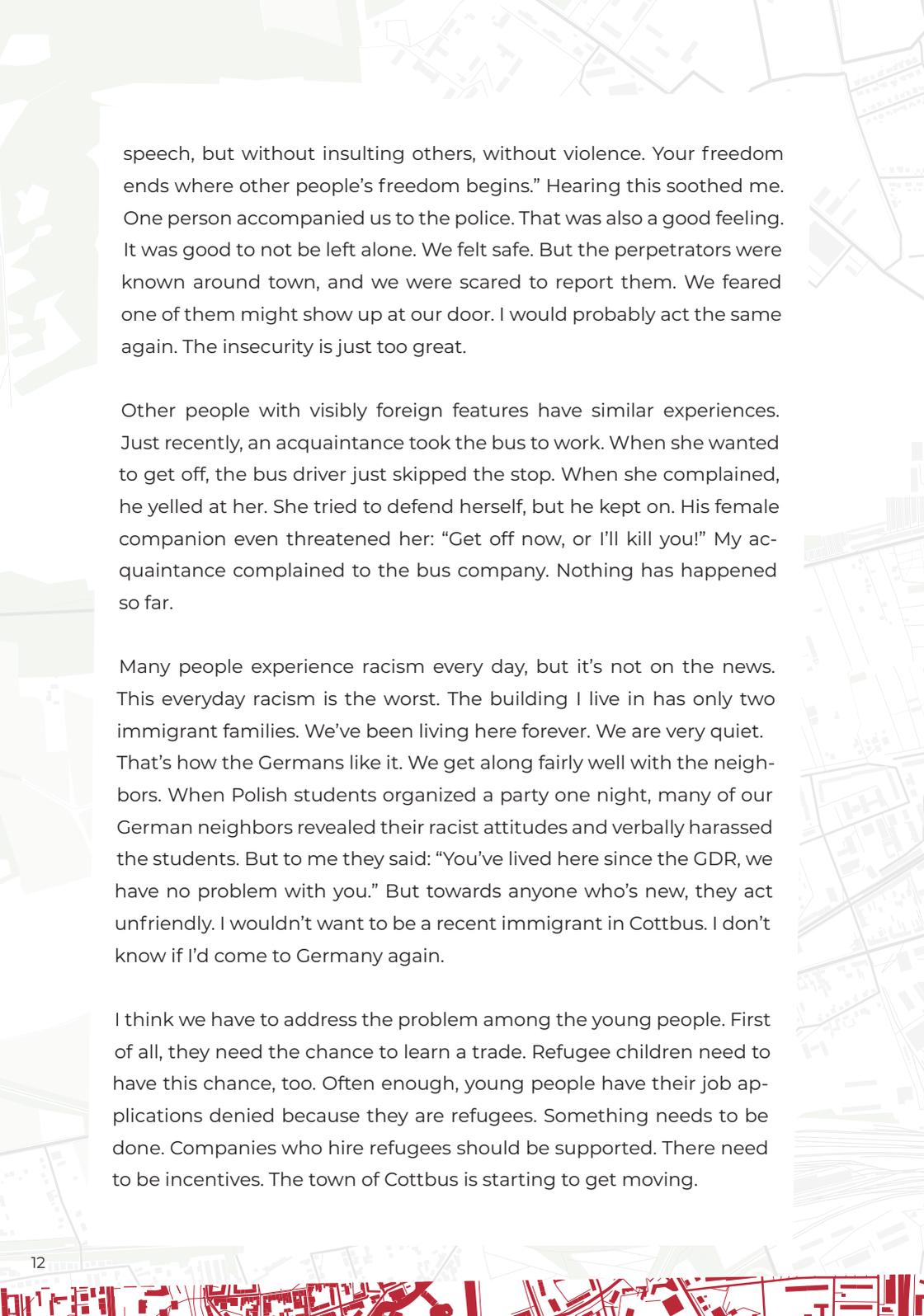
I started experiencing more and more racism: The ladies at the department store started following me around. They thought I was a thief. Even though they had known me for years. That really shocked me.

There was a fashion store for women at Spremberger Straße. I was taking a look, and one saleswoman came at me: “What do you want?” “I’m just having a look,” I answered. She just spewed pure hate: “You better go. We know this trick. These strangers steal.”

That was new to me. The Germans started harassing me. No matter who, doctors or laborers. Black hair made you a thief. With reunification came the racism and it’s still there. Why is it this way? If you look at history, in the East, they didn’t really deal with the Nazis properly. These people still carry their racism: All strangers are thieves, they steal our jobs and they stink. Their racism used to be hidden, but with reunification came the freedom to say anything you want. With Pegida and the AfD, it’s become more obvious; it’s always our fault. It’s a social problem. People in Cottbus get annoyed when they hear foreign languages, but they feel free to make a lot of noise on vacation in Mallorca.

I may not experience this swing to the right every day, but their looks say it all. People are often irritated by me speaking German. Still it doesn’t protect me against attacks. I was with my husband when I witnessed a rally by “Zukunft Heimat.” Four young people came at us and sprayed us with water. “Why are you spraying us?,” I asked. One of them wanted to beat me; my husband defended me and was beaten brutally. They hit him right in the face. We called the police. They tried to find the guys, but they had run off. We waited till 2 in the morning, first at the police station and then at the hospital. Fortunately there were some witnesses who helped us.

They even showed some indignation. One said: “These young folks don’t know the meaning of respect. We live in a democracy. Everyone has the right to free

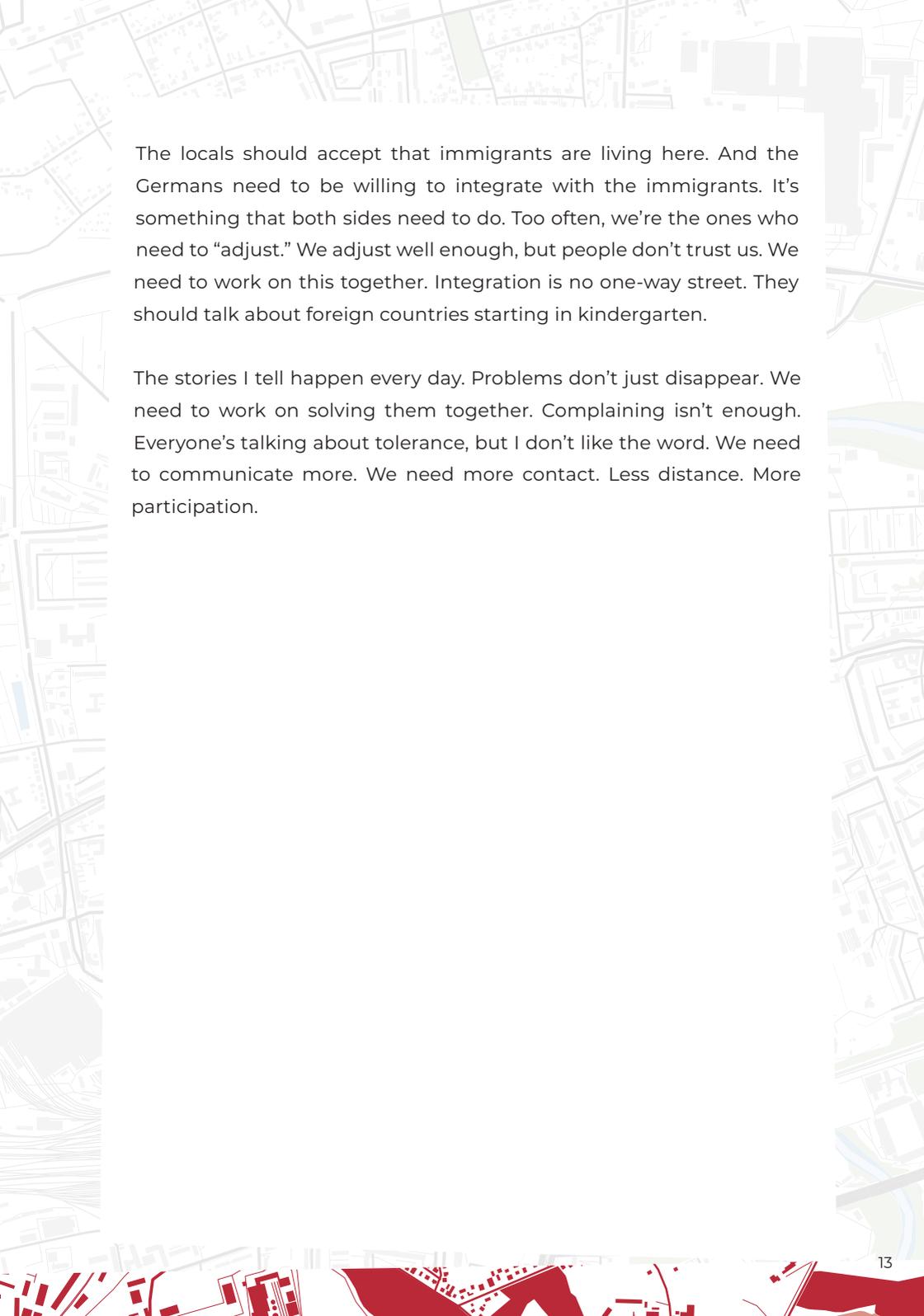


speech, but without insulting others, without violence. Your freedom ends where other people's freedom begins." Hearing this soothed me. One person accompanied us to the police. That was also a good feeling. It was good to not be left alone. We felt safe. But the perpetrators were known around town, and we were scared to report them. We feared one of them might show up at our door. I would probably act the same again. The insecurity is just too great.

Other people with visibly foreign features have similar experiences. Just recently, an acquaintance took the bus to work. When she wanted to get off, the bus driver just skipped the stop. When she complained, he yelled at her. She tried to defend herself, but he kept on. His female companion even threatened her: "Get off now, or I'll kill you!" My acquaintance complained to the bus company. Nothing has happened so far.

Many people experience racism every day, but it's not on the news. This everyday racism is the worst. The building I live in has only two immigrant families. We've been living here forever. We are very quiet. That's how the Germans like it. We get along fairly well with the neighbors. When Polish students organized a party one night, many of our German neighbors revealed their racist attitudes and verbally harassed the students. But to me they said: "You've lived here since the GDR, we have no problem with you." But towards anyone who's new, they act unfriendly. I wouldn't want to be a recent immigrant in Cottbus. I don't know if I'd come to Germany again.

I think we have to address the problem among the young people. First of all, they need the chance to learn a trade. Refugee children need to have this chance, too. Often enough, young people have their job applications denied because they are refugees. Something needs to be done. Companies who hire refugees should be supported. There need to be incentives. The town of Cottbus is starting to get moving.

The background of the page is a light gray map of a city, showing streets, buildings, and green spaces. A large white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing two paragraphs of text. The text is in a simple, black, sans-serif font. The map is more detailed on the left and right sides, with some buildings and streets highlighted in a darker gray. At the bottom of the page, there is a decorative border consisting of red and white geometric shapes, including rectangles and lines, arranged in a pattern that suggests a city skyline or architectural elements.

The locals should accept that immigrants are living here. And the Germans need to be willing to integrate with the immigrants. It's something that both sides need to do. Too often, we're the ones who need to "adjust." We adjust well enough, but people don't trust us. We need to work on this together. Integration is no one-way street. They should talk about foreign countries starting in kindergarten.

The stories I tell happen every day. Problems don't just disappear. We need to work on solving them together. Complaining isn't enough. Everyone's talking about tolerance, but I don't like the word. We need to communicate more. We need more contact. Less distance. More participation.



## BLOND PEOPLE GET IT ALL

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**If I leave Cottbus, the Nazis win. That's why I'm staying, although it's often hard. But I won't let any Nazis tell me what to do.**

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When I came to Cottbus, I knew nothing about this town. I was living in a village in Brandenburg before. Someone I knew helped me move to Cottbus. I originally planned to go to Berlin. But that didn't work out, since I couldn't find an apartment. That's easier in Cottbus. Yet, even here downtown apartments are often overpriced, or they tell us refugees that the place is already taken. Or the property managers say only refugees with a permanent visa can get an apartment, though that's not true. That's how racists think!

When I was looking for a place some years ago, landlords in the town center came up with various reasons for not renting out to immigrants. I only managed to find a place there thanks to a German acquaintance. He came along with me. If a blond-haired man comes along, he'll get what he wants. That's frustrating.

The racism continued after I moved in. In the first week, someone scratched my name and other foreign-sounding ones from our mail-

boxes. This happened three or four times in the first months. My building houses more than 80 people. Many didn't even greet me back on the elevator. I wonder: What did I do wrong? All this stress just because my hair's not blond? Whoever did this doesn't even know me. Even if I have an Arabic name, I could still be holding the German citizenship. Once a friend came to visit me and wanted to smoke a cigarette on the communal balcony. A woman came up to us and asked him who he was. She then said: "Refugees are taking our money." Just like that. For no reason.

These reactions make me feel uneasy. How to deal with such people? What can I do if they don't greet me back? If they refuse any contact right from the beginning, what do you do? I have also experienced racism elsewhere.

Before Corona, I worked as a waiter. There was a guest who wanted to pay, so I got the bill ready. We had no mobile card reader, so I asked him to go to the cash register. He said: "Why don't you have one? We're not in Africa!" In fact, you can pay by phone in many African countries... Anyway, I asked a colleague to do his bill. Once my colleague came, the customer was nice again. My colleague just said the guy's an idiot. I have nice colleagues.

More than half of all Germans have a fixed image of refugees: We only want the money, but not the work and make babies to collect benefits. I'm often asked: Do you want to go back home? I laugh because I don't know what to answer. They want us to leave. But they don't say it directly. That's hidden racism. In my experience, the majority thinks that way.

Personally, I haven't experienced any extreme insults or attacks, but others often tell me about it.

For example, one property management company wrote to a family that they were going to come by for a look. For no reason. When they arrived,

they said the neighbors had complained about their kids. We started a non-profit to help refugees in these situations. We're also in regular contact with Opferperspektive.

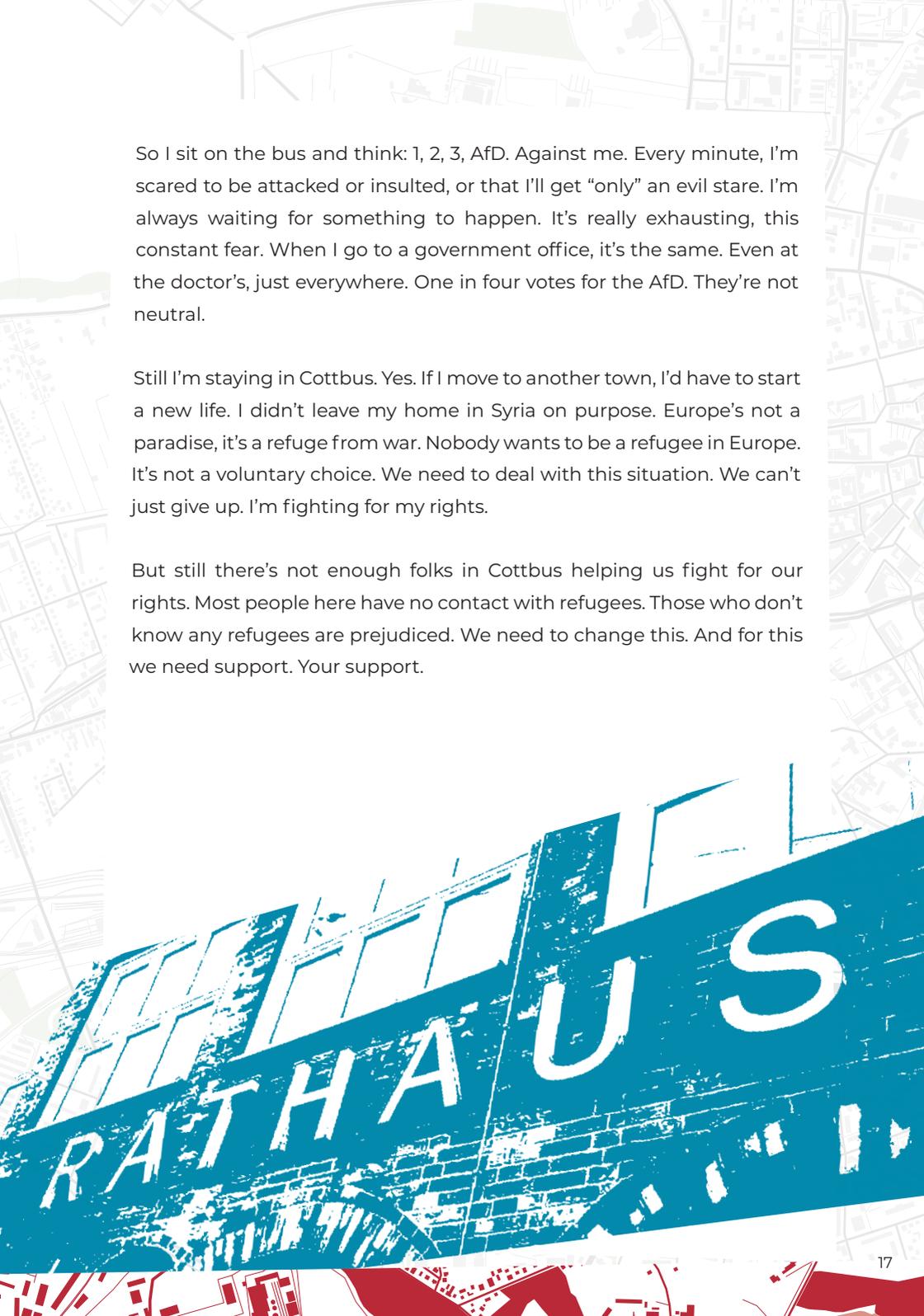
Refugees also suffer physical attacks, they are pushed, insulted or beaten. It happens every day. Sometimes even when kids are watching. I remember one occasion where a child was attacked by adults, pushed on a stairway and hit on the head. The police didn't believe the child. Instead, the parents got mail from the property management. Their contract was terminated, the reason given was that "liars were not welcome as tenants." So the family moved out, because they didn't see any hope in going to court.

Hearing such stories makes me feel unsafe. I wonder what I should do to be accepted as an equal human being. Such situations often make me think I need to leave Cottbus. But since I haven't personally experienced anything like this and I have a job, I want to stay for now. Also, if we move away, the Nazis win.

I mean, we need to keep fighting. But not everyone has the energy. The Germans need to understand us. We are humans. We have a right to life and justice.

Politicians need to do something, they need to see the humans behind the story. This also means we have to publicize these stories. We really need to be heard and seen. Like this publication right here. It makes a difference!

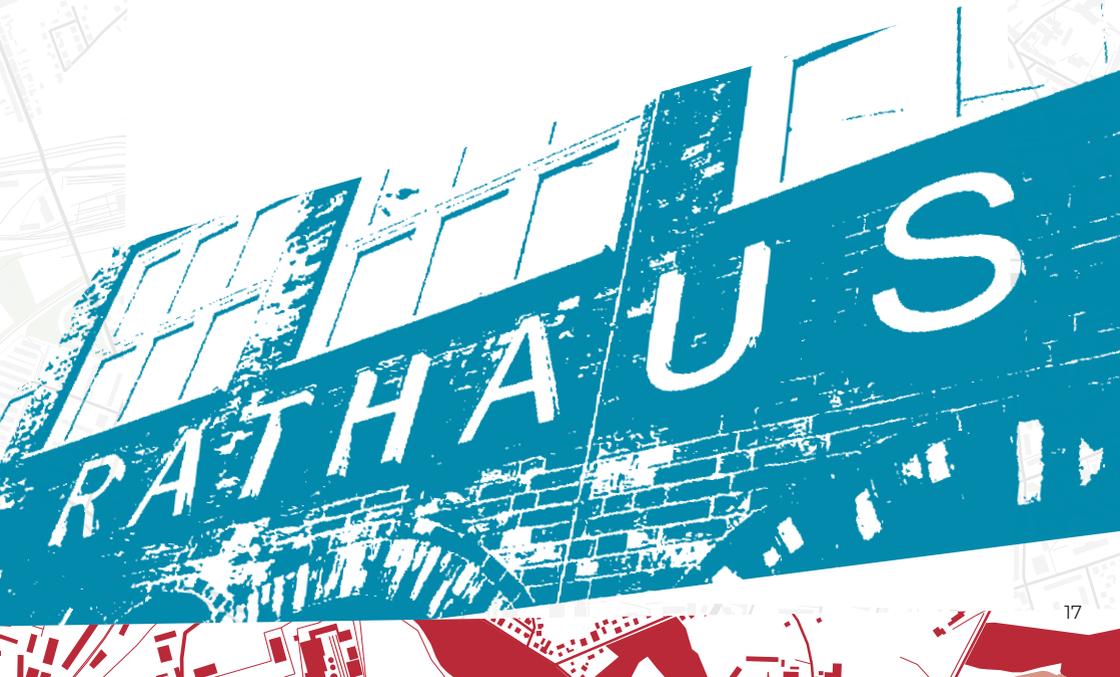
Politicians are still doing too little. The AfD won in Cottbus. 25% of the citizens voted for them. That's one in four.

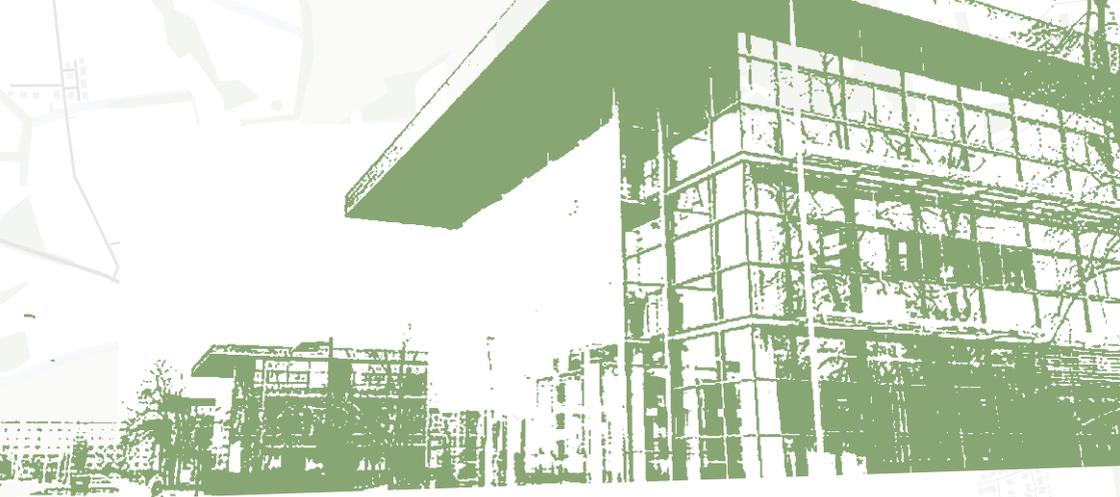
A faint, light-colored map of Cottbus, Germany, serves as the background for the top two-thirds of the page. The map shows the city's street grid and various landmarks.

So I sit on the bus and think: 1, 2, 3, AfD. Against me. Every minute, I'm scared to be attacked or insulted, or that I'll get "only" an evil stare. I'm always waiting for something to happen. It's really exhausting, this constant fear. When I go to a government office, it's the same. Even at the doctor's, just everywhere. One in four votes for the AfD. They're not neutral.

Still I'm staying in Cottbus. Yes. If I move to another town, I'd have to start a new life. I didn't leave my home in Syria on purpose. Europe's not a paradise, it's a refuge from war. Nobody wants to be a refugee in Europe. It's not a voluntary choice. We need to deal with this situation. We can't just give up. I'm fighting for my rights.

But still there's not enough folks in Cottbus helping us fight for our rights. Most people here have no contact with refugees. Those who don't know any refugees are prejudiced. We need to change this. And for this we need support. Your support.





## DREAMING OF COTTBUS

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**Five years ago, Cottbus was nearly as bad as it was in the 90s. Still I believe we can swing the mood. But we need urgent support from the administration.**

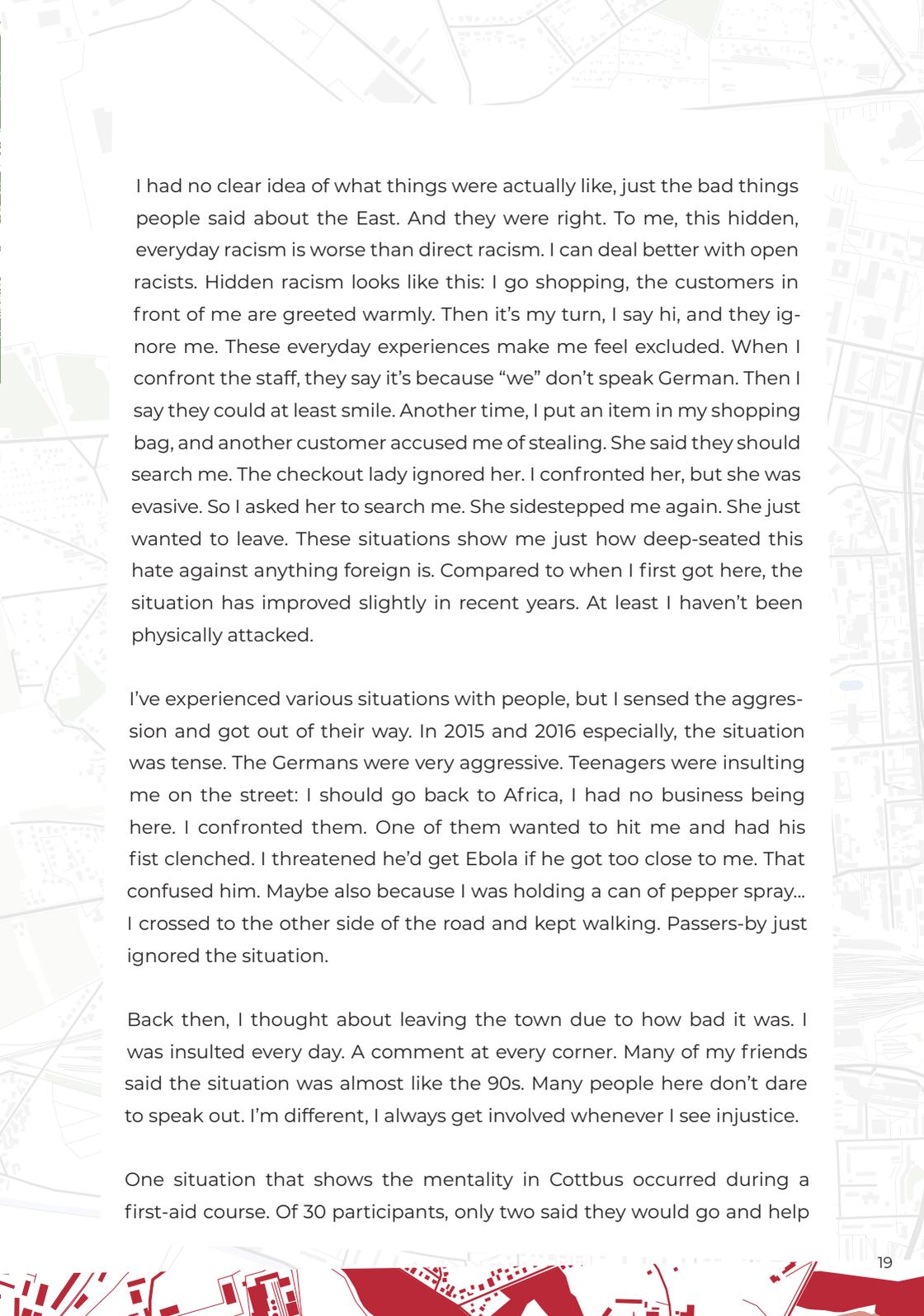
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I always dreamt of studying English at university abroad. While waiting, I studied German at the Goethe Institute in Nairobi. Originally, I planned to study in the USA, but I didn't get a visa.

When I got the chance to be an au pair in Germany, I took it. That was 2007, I was 24 years old. First I lived in Düren [in West Germany], but the au pair gig didn't work out. Originally, I wanted to go back to Kenya, but it wasn't safe and I had no money for a ticket.

The situation in Kenya was getting more unstable. Cottbus is where I was sent after applying for asylum. I had heard a lot of bad things about East Germany while living in the West.

So when it was clear I would be sent there, I had mixed feelings. Cottbus was foreign to me.



I had no clear idea of what things were actually like, just the bad things people said about the East. And they were right. To me, this hidden, everyday racism is worse than direct racism. I can deal better with open racists. Hidden racism looks like this: I go shopping, the customers in front of me are greeted warmly. Then it's my turn, I say hi, and they ignore me. These everyday experiences make me feel excluded. When I confront the staff, they say it's because "we" don't speak German. Then I say they could at least smile. Another time, I put an item in my shopping bag, and another customer accused me of stealing. She said they should search me. The checkout lady ignored her. I confronted her, but she was evasive. So I asked her to search me. She sidestepped me again. She just wanted to leave. These situations show me just how deep-seated this hate against anything foreign is. Compared to when I first got here, the situation has improved slightly in recent years. At least I haven't been physically attacked.

I've experienced various situations with people, but I sensed the aggression and got out of their way. In 2015 and 2016 especially, the situation was tense. The Germans were very aggressive. Teenagers were insulting me on the street: I should go back to Africa, I had no business being here. I confronted them. One of them wanted to hit me and had his fist clenched. I threatened he'd get Ebola if he got too close to me. That confused him. Maybe also because I was holding a can of pepper spray... I crossed to the other side of the road and kept walking. Passers-by just ignored the situation.

Back then, I thought about leaving the town due to how bad it was. I was insulted every day. A comment at every corner. Many of my friends said the situation was almost like the 90s. Many people here don't dare to speak out. I'm different, I always get involved whenever I see injustice.

One situation that shows the mentality in Cottbus occurred during a first-aid course. Of 30 participants, only two said they would go and help

if someone fell over on the street in front of them. The others would just call an ambulance. Their explanation was what shocked me: The other person could be sick they said: "I don't want to catch anything." This showed me that the people here have no courage. Things like that really frustrate me.

Another incident the likes of which I've experienced several times: A group of Eritreans was attacked by Nazis. Since they spoke no German, I called the police. They came and accompanied the Eritreans home; it's called "Schutzbegleitung" (protective convoy). I also reported the case to Opferperspektive. The hooligans were later arrested. I don't know what happened after that. Apparently, the whole town was full of hooligans that day.

Such situations often made me feel like leaving Cottbus. Things have calmed down a bit since 2016. I myself have also become more resilient. One reason I'm still here is surely because I know many very, very good people in Cottbus, who are always there for me.

Many others don't have this support. I remember a Kenyan who had come to Cottbus in the 90s. He died in 2015. After suffering a racist attack, he was prescribed antidepressants. Apparently, the meds gave him hallucinations. Thinking Nazis had entered his place, he jumped out the window and broke a leg. He died shortly thereafter.

I don't understand why. The circumstances are very strange. I try to protect myself by not letting such experiences get too close to me. But they are real.

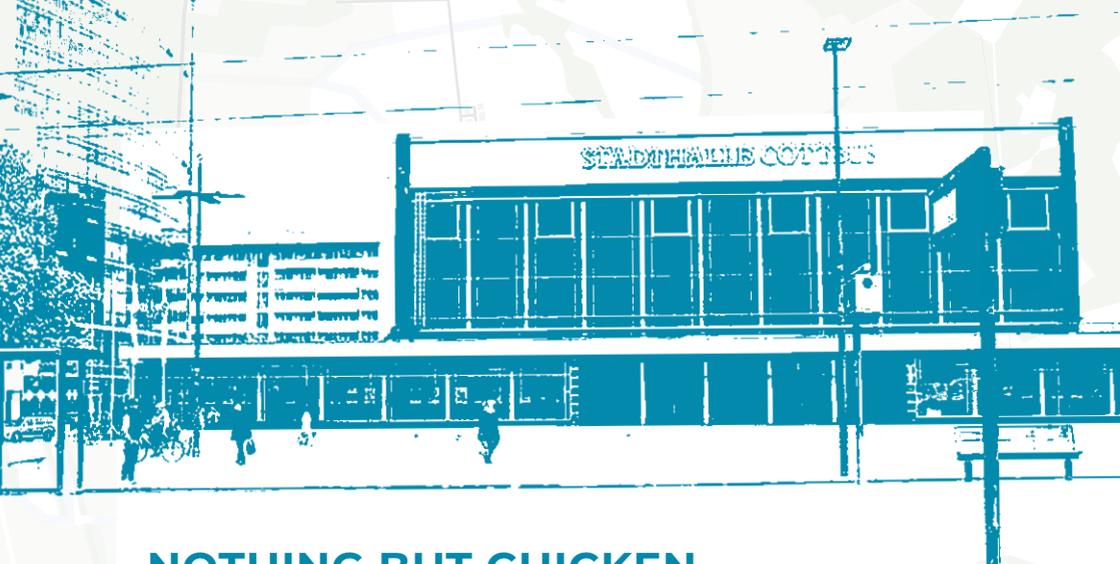
New immigrants need more chances to integrate. The intercultural festival Cottbus Open could happen more often, for example.

We need more of these multi-ethnic festivals, where white people can come into contact with foreign cultures.

And we need to dismantle prejudice, which I believe dates back to the GDR. For example, some of my colleagues thought I wouldn't know how to use a camera. One colleague took it out of my hand because I'm black. This would be funny if it weren't so sad.

I believe we shouldn't judge people before we get to know them and we should have the courage to meet new people. Nobody needs to fear those who look different. We immigrants can raise awareness. For example, I visited schools on behalf of the local integration commissioner. I also wish the town's mayor would find the means to support this important work.





## NOTHING BUT CHICKEN

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My first name is the nickname of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson. It means "the chosen one." That's not how I usually feel in Cottbus though. People keep asking: "Why did you come?" It annoys me. Nobody asks me: "What do you do in Cottbus?" I'd prefer talking about that.

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When I came to Cottbus in 2010, I had to pay for my own language classes, because I wasn't eligible for government funding. I had already been through a two-year asylum process by then. What I knew right away was that I wouldn't get anywhere without the language. So I sold my food stamps. They were worth €160. Often I only got €120. That made me angry, because it only made things more unequal. Other people my age, I often thought, can take language classes, finish secondary school or even study. I had to choose between food and language classes. Literally.

For a long time, I ate unhealthy, nothing but chicken, because it's cheaper than vegetables. If my uncle who lives here hadn't supported me occasionally, I wouldn't have made it.



When I finally got a residence permit, my situation got even worse. Since I couldn't apply for a student scholarship, they wanted me to register as unemployed. But I preferred to do something and worked at a nursing home for five euros an hour. For one year, I had no insurance, couldn't pay the rent, my Internet connection was cut off. I sacrificed a lot to get my secondary school diploma and learn the language. Then I started to fight back. I found out that many others were dealing with the same issues. I supported a group who were in court against racist attacks and publicized the conditions we lived under online. Of course, my Iranian secondary school diploma still wasn't recognized. So I had to take adult education classes and get the German diploma. The Hans Böckler Foundation gave me a scholarship, and I was able to do a bachelor's in social work. Now I'm doing a master's. Looking back those were tough times. I wanted to quit many times. Germany isn't always a friendly country. But now I'm happy because I've built a strong foundation.

In Cottbus, I work as a translator with refugees and also for the local initiative Flumico. They've been around since the 1990s. We also started a food stamp initiative. If you engage in these types of activities, you're bound to get attacked by Nazis. I've experienced two physical attacks. Once during a Nazi rally. But this rally no longer takes place. Our group "Cottbus nazifrei" (No Nazis in Cottbus) helped stop it. Democracy isn't for free, you need to get involved.

Another time I was attacked at the door of the town hall. I got hit in the face several times. Many people watched, but nobody helped. I wasn't injured seriously though. I took down the attacker, but didn't beat him. Then he ran off.

I've also been attacked by "normal" citizens. Once I was followed around by three teenagers. I charged at them, and they fled. I was lucky.

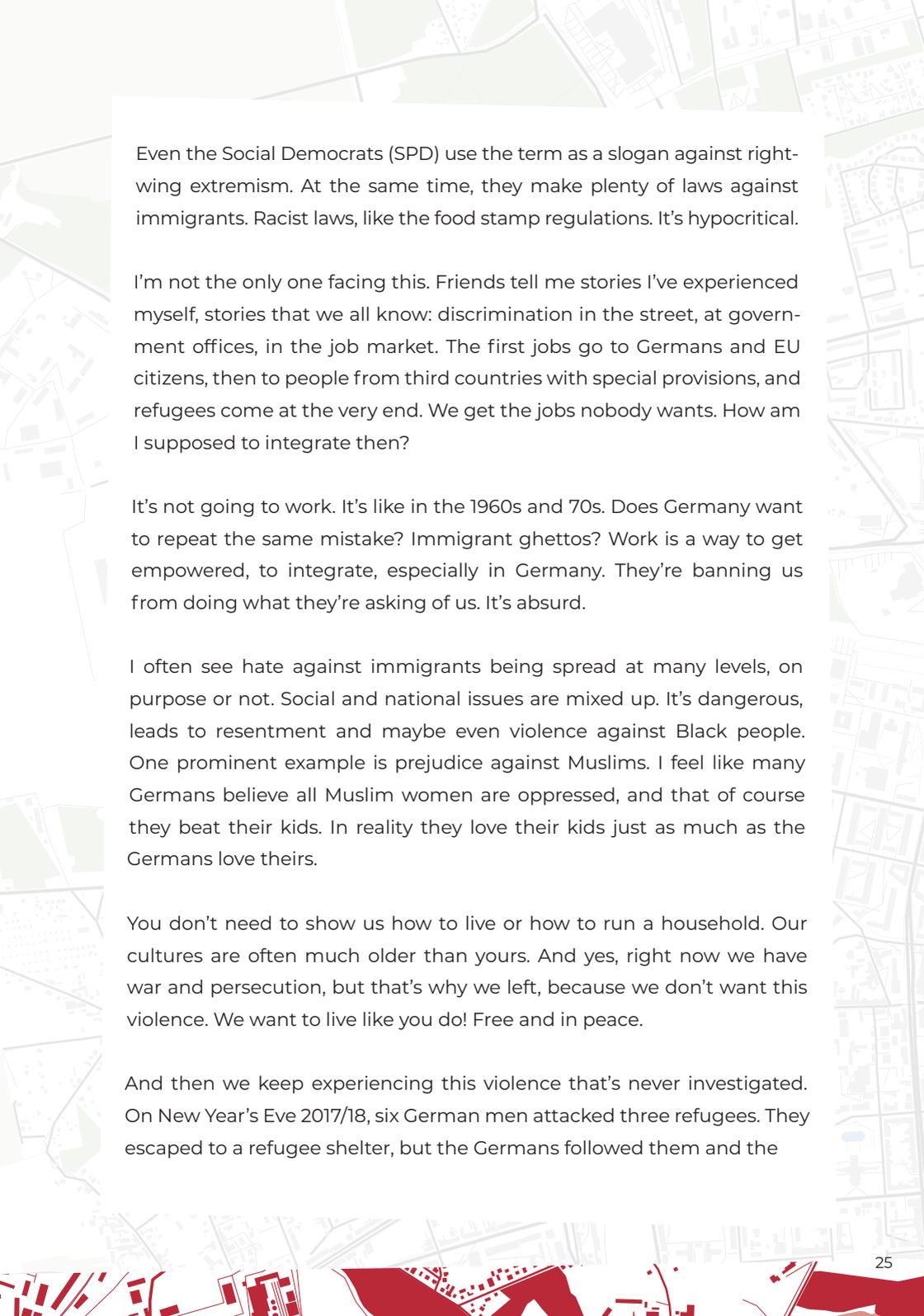
Today I know, thanks to my work with Opferperspektive. Next time, I'll try changing sidewalks. It doesn't happen every day, but often enough that I ask myself where all this anger comes from. I've been pushed, insulted and stared at on the tram. This really hurts. What's even worse is just how widely accepted far-right extremists are. Most normal people, I think, are too scared to get involved. No one ever came to help me in any of these situations. Nobody, nothing. That's hard to swallow. If a German gets aggressive, attacks people or shouts Nazi slogans, they always say: "He's mentally ill." They never say: "Do you need anything? Should I call the police? Do you need a witness in court?" I find that shocking. Once I got some real satisfaction.

I was at a party with six friends. Two men racially abused me. We asked the barman to kick them out. After all, he had the right to. But he didn't want to. So we went up to the two guys and did it ourselves. Peacefully of course. Violence is always harmful. In my home country and here, too. For yourself and for the others. Throwing out the two guys felt good; it felt like achieving some justice and equality.

Today I know it's important to file a police report if I'm physically attacked. Even if you think the police won't catch anyone or that some officers are also racists. It makes a difference, even if it's just for the statistics.

What I find annoying is when Germans ask me about racism. Germans need to understand what's going on by themselves. They need to really care about the issue, not just in the moment they are asking me. This needs to be more sustainable. We immigrants need Germans to support us. I don't constantly want to explain myself.

German society still sees anti-racism as a fight against extremism or as Christian charity. Not as an issue of inequality. The debate is going in the wrong direction. Racism makes people unequal.



Even the Social Democrats (SPD) use the term as a slogan against right-wing extremism. At the same time, they make plenty of laws against immigrants. Racist laws, like the food stamp regulations. It's hypocritical.

I'm not the only one facing this. Friends tell me stories I've experienced myself, stories that we all know: discrimination in the street, at government offices, in the job market. The first jobs go to Germans and EU citizens, then to people from third countries with special provisions, and refugees come at the very end. We get the jobs nobody wants. How am I supposed to integrate then?

It's not going to work. It's like in the 1960s and 70s. Does Germany want to repeat the same mistake? Immigrant ghettos? Work is a way to get empowered, to integrate, especially in Germany. They're banning us from doing what they're asking of us. It's absurd.

I often see hate against immigrants being spread at many levels, on purpose or not. Social and national issues are mixed up. It's dangerous, leads to resentment and maybe even violence against Black people. One prominent example is prejudice against Muslims. I feel like many Germans believe all Muslim women are oppressed, and that of course they beat their kids. In reality they love their kids just as much as the Germans love theirs.

You don't need to show us how to live or how to run a household. Our cultures are often much older than yours. And yes, right now we have war and persecution, but that's why we left, because we don't want this violence. We want to live like you do! Free and in peace.

And then we keep experiencing this violence that's never investigated. On New Year's Eve 2017/18, six German men attacked three refugees. They escaped to a refugee shelter, but the Germans followed them and the

security guards didn't react. So the Germans continued beating up the refugees. And even though there are videos of the attacks, the public prosecutor claims nothing happened. Why?!!

We are from countries broken up by gang warfare where might is right. We know this kind of justice. But we didn't expect it in Germany. Maintaining the rule of law should be in your own interest. Because the next victims will be average Germans.

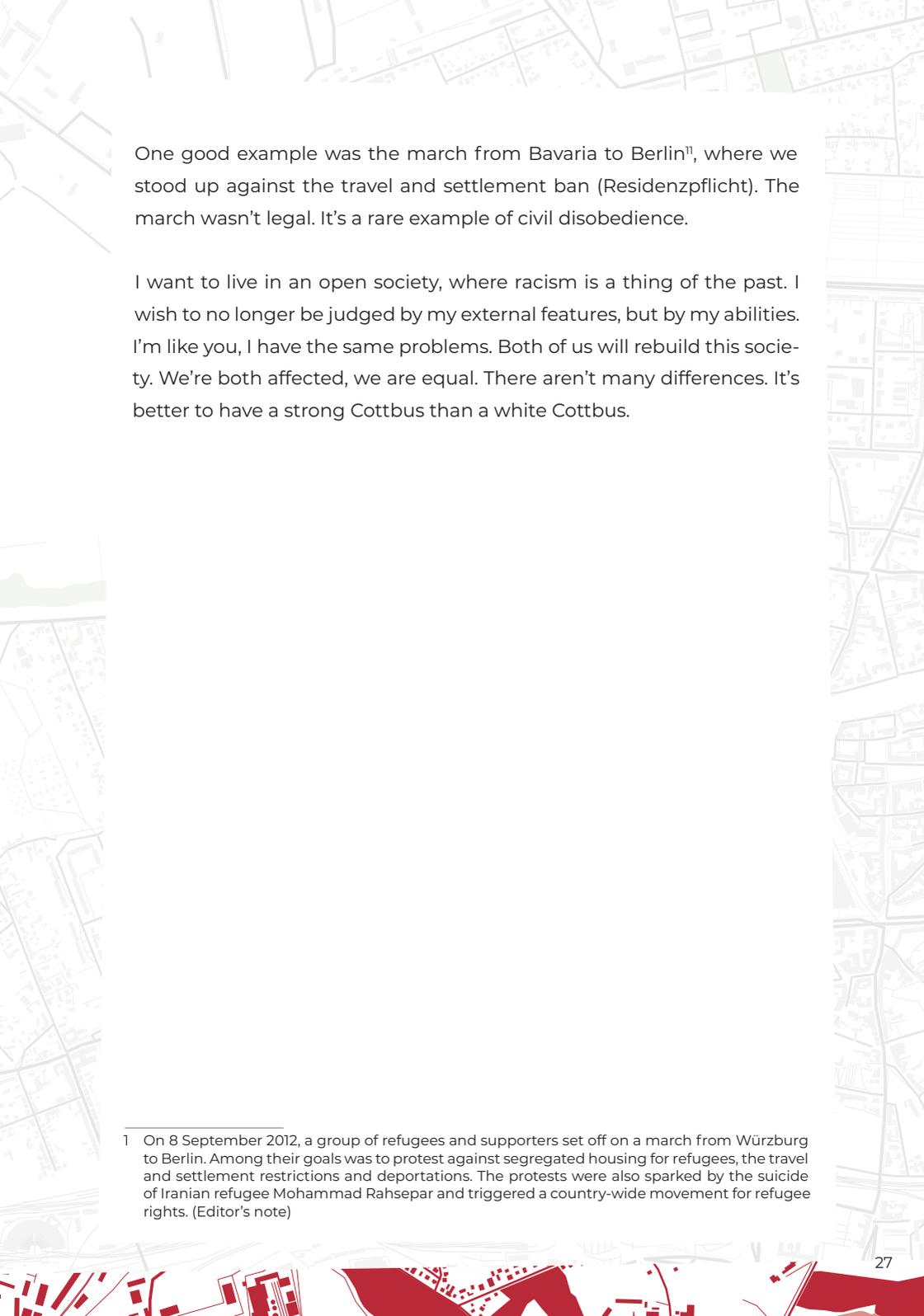
Friends sometimes ask me if I don't want to leave Cottbus and live in a big city like Berlin or Hamburg. Anonymous and protected. Because these conflicts here are giving me mental breakdowns. Some things are especially hard to deal with.

As a representative for Opferperspektive, I hear lots of stories about racist attacks. I hear many more as a social worker. Back then, I would get calls every day about the New Year's Eve attack. From fellow left-wing activists or media representatives. I got pressure from many sides. I openly took the side of the victims.

The pressure became so great, I decided to start therapy. This has allowed me to reflect on my own position. I've learned where my boundaries are and how I can protect them.

Despite all the negatives, I try to find something positive. One thing I've learned: We need a clear political stance. It's lacking in politics and in society. It's always the same people who support us.

I wish that more average citizens would give us support. But they just stick to statements against right-wing extremism. What I would like to see is more action against racism.



One good example was the march from Bavaria to Berlin<sup>1</sup>, where we stood up against the travel and settlement ban (Residenzpflicht). The march wasn't legal. It's a rare example of civil disobedience.

I want to live in an open society, where racism is a thing of the past. I wish to no longer be judged by my external features, but by my abilities. I'm like you, I have the same problems. Both of us will rebuild this society. We're both affected, we are equal. There aren't many differences. It's better to have a strong Cottbus than a white Cottbus.

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<sup>1</sup> On 8 September 2012, a group of refugees and supporters set off on a march from Würzburg to Berlin. Among their goals was to protest against segregated housing for refugees, the travel and settlement restrictions and deportations. The protests were also sparked by the suicide of Iranian refugee Mohammad Rahsepar and triggered a country-wide movement for refugee rights. (Editor's note)



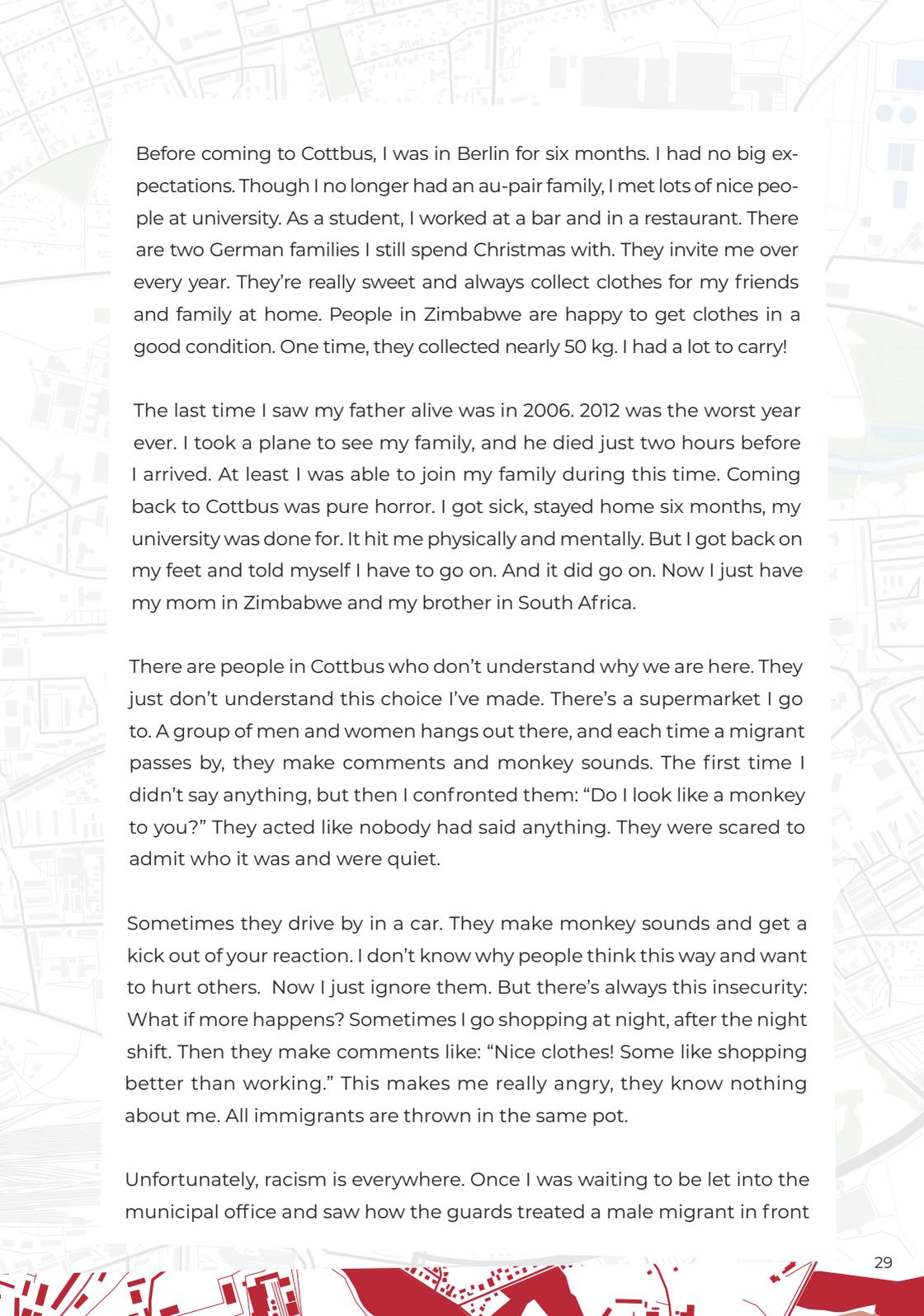
## I FIGHT BACK BECAUSE I CAN

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**Living in a foreign country means a lot of sacrifice. Nobody comes here for fun. I wasn't able to say goodbye to my father when he died. I was two hours late. Two hours. After being separated for six years.**

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I came to Germany in 2006 as an au-pair. First I lived in Cologne, then in Bergisch-Gladbach. In 2008, the situation in Zimbabwe started getting very difficult. So I enrolled in university so that I could stay here. My mother wanted me to stay in Germany, since it's safe. I came to Cottbus in 2010 to start my studies. I chose Cottbus since my German wasn't good enough and courses were offered in English here. It's not because I was lazy! I learned German in Clausthal-Zellerfeld, Lower Saxony, in 2009 and 2010. The people there were different, some were more friendly, and since it's a small university town, there are many people with a migrant background. They have Italians, Turks. A more friendly atmosphere.

A faint, light-colored map of Cottbus, Germany, serves as the background for the page. The map shows a grid of streets, various building footprints, and green spaces. The map is oriented horizontally and covers the entire page area.

Before coming to Cottbus, I was in Berlin for six months. I had no big expectations. Though I no longer had an au-pair family, I met lots of nice people at university. As a student, I worked at a bar and in a restaurant. There are two German families I still spend Christmas with. They invite me over every year. They're really sweet and always collect clothes for my friends and family at home. People in Zimbabwe are happy to get clothes in a good condition. One time, they collected nearly 50 kg. I had a lot to carry!

The last time I saw my father alive was in 2006. 2012 was the worst year ever. I took a plane to see my family, and he died just two hours before I arrived. At least I was able to join my family during this time. Coming back to Cottbus was pure horror. I got sick, stayed home six months, my university was done for. It hit me physically and mentally. But I got back on my feet and told myself I have to go on. And it did go on. Now I just have my mom in Zimbabwe and my brother in South Africa.

There are people in Cottbus who don't understand why we are here. They just don't understand this choice I've made. There's a supermarket I go to. A group of men and women hangs out there, and each time a migrant passes by, they make comments and monkey sounds. The first time I didn't say anything, but then I confronted them: "Do I look like a monkey to you?" They acted like nobody had said anything. They were scared to admit who it was and were quiet.

Sometimes they drive by in a car. They make monkey sounds and get a kick out of your reaction. I don't know why people think this way and want to hurt others. Now I just ignore them. But there's always this insecurity: What if more happens? Sometimes I go shopping at night, after the night shift. Then they make comments like: "Nice clothes! Some like shopping better than working." This makes me really angry, they know nothing about me. All immigrants are thrown in the same pot.

Unfortunately, racism is everywhere. Once I was waiting to be let into the municipal office and saw how the guards treated a male migrant in front

of me very rudely. Then it was a white man's turn, and they treated him very nicely. When it was my turn, they acted rude again. I told them: "Don't you say hello to people?" That left them speechless.

At the drug store, there's a checkout lady who greets all customers very nicely, but never says anything when it's my turn. That's extremely hurtful. And it wears you down. When it gets too much, I speak up. Because I can. But when I think of all those who don't speak German, they're helpless. They boil inside. As an immigrant, you always need to prove yourself to be accepted.

Most Germans don't speak up against racist discrimination. Nobody's ever stepped in to defend me on the street. At work, someone once told me in private that they were sorry about how I was being treated. And then added: "Please don't tell anyone, I don't want people to know. If the others find out that we're friends, I'll be excluded too." I think reporting people to the police does nothing. Once I thought about it, but then didn't. Though I trust the police.

But I also get racism from other immigrants insulting me for my skin color. Some of my best friends are Syrians, and they taught me some Arabic. One day on the tram, a group of Arabic boys talked about me as a "slave bitch." I replied in Arabic: "Are you talking about your mom?!" That shut them up.

Racism exists everywhere. And these experiences are shared by all my immigrant friends. Especially the situation in the supermarket. In Cottbus, they love monkey sounds. If you're black, you'll hear them. All the time. It really wears you down.

I often want to say something, like this time I was waiting for the elevator: I stand waiting for it, three women come out and just go "Pew!" And you know that's for you. But I can't address it every time, it'll make

me bitter. I'd rather go through life happy instead of responding to everyone. I think my laughter attracts people.

I have many German friends. But many Germans still have internalized hierarchies. When they see me with important people at an event, they suddenly have more respect. Most people acting this way are those who've never traveled anywhere; they're not very open-minded.

Despite everything, I take my freedom, I go out and confront people if necessary. I try to have a normal life. To deal with all this madness, I meditate every day. To change something, officials need to involve the migrant community in Cottbus much more.

We need more visibility, and politicians need to send a clear signal to racists that they're on our side. The message needs to be: They are here and we accept them. Cottbus keeps calling itself diverse, but you rarely see it. We need more diversity. For example, they could do an interview with a migrant at the weekly outdoor market.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This respondent is referring to the custom of politicians making public appearances at weekly markets in Cottbus (Editors' note)





## THE BUS DRIVER WHO GAVE ME COURAGE

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**I'm not afraid of physical confrontations, but I'd rather live in peace. Germany has a good reputation around the world; I'd like to see more of these German virtues: impartiality, honesty, justice.**

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I had to leave my homeland Chechnya for political reasons. My goal was Germany, because I feel safer here and because I already had friends and family here. The easiest way to escape was to enter the Schengen Area via Poland. I stayed in Poland for a month and a half before making it across the border.

When I arrived, I applied for asylum. At first, I was in a refugee shelter in Schleswig-Holstein full of Syrians, mostly. No one spoke Russian. That was in December 2015. Then I was sent to Eisenhüttenstadt; the staff told me that it's where applicants from Russian-speaking countries are processed. I stayed there for about three weeks.

I've been in Cottbus since the beginning of 2016. I'm 36 years old today. It was a long journey.

I have new friends and acquaintances at this point. I also have a budgie that I bought for my kids. He's sitting on the windowsill and doesn't want to go back in the cage. He loves freedom.

I hoped to find work quickly in Cottbus, but it takes longer around here. It's especially difficult if you don't have a German education; there's hardly any chance. I was an Arabic teacher in Chechnya.

At first I worked as a community interpreter for Syrian refugees in Germany. I used to translate from Arabic into Russian, and the Diakonie employee translate that from Russian into German.

For a long time, I wasn't allowed to take a German course. This went on for several months. So I learned German at the BTU (Brandenburg University of Technology). Right now I'm doing vocational training at a large company.

I've experienced racism, even if I'm not a victim. I mean if someone wants to hurt me, I know how to fight back if talking doesn't help.

Before I knew any German, I was constantly in situations where people were obviously insulting me; I understood that much.

Once I was standing at the bus stop with my children and two people came up to us and said something like "No Asyl!" and "Fuck Asyl." I spoke back in my broken German. To prevent things from escalating, I took my children and we walked home, so we wouldn't have to ride the same train.

Later I saw them again. They lived near the bus stop and cursed at me and my wife; they even threw things out the window. If you don't speak German, it's difficult because you can't answer. In both cases there was no one else around.



Later I saw them again. They lived near the bus stop and cursed at me and my wife; they even threw things out the window. If you don't speak German, it's difficult because you can't answer. In both cases there was no one else around.

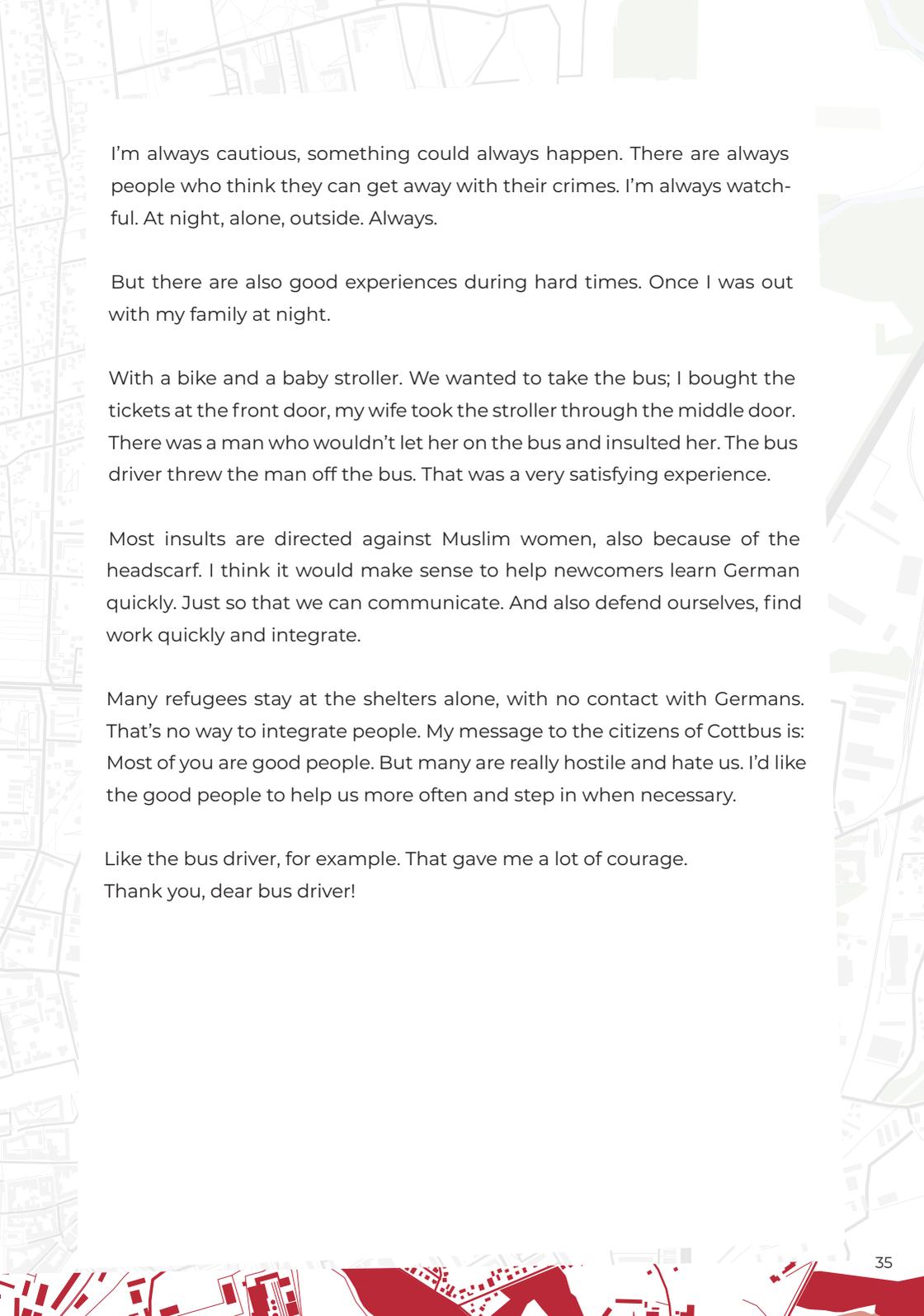
Another time I was downtown around Christmas. I was out with a friend in the evening to visit the Christmas market. Here we saw the same two people and their friends. My friend was walking ahead of me, so he didn't notice what was happening at first. They walked up and started heckling me. Again I didn't understand what they wanted. Then they started attacking me. They beat me, I fought back. So it was me alone against four men and their girlfriends. Nobody helped me; pedestrians even started insulting me. Some other people came up to us, including my friend. He helped me. The attackers pulled back, and so did we.

The next day, while out grocery shopping, I saw three of the men near my building. I talked to the guards, but they wanted to help the attackers and asked me to write down my name, because these guys wanted to report me to the police. I just wanted to clear up the situation and put an end to it. I told my social workers, who called the police, and we filed a report; I also showed them my injuries.

It's also a good feeling to have someone there supporting me. These things haven't happened to me a lot, but I'm not the only one; I have friends who tell me similar stories.

Due to the attacks, I was afraid to let my family go for a walk or to the playground alone. Because there are always people who react aggressively to us. They yell: "Find a job!" Many think that immigrants don't work.

At least now I can answer in German. Once they hear that, they often leave me alone. If someone doesn't speak German, these people get more aggressive.



I'm always cautious, something could always happen. There are always people who think they can get away with their crimes. I'm always watchful. At night, alone, outside. Always.

But there are also good experiences during hard times. Once I was out with my family at night.

With a bike and a baby stroller. We wanted to take the bus; I bought the tickets at the front door, my wife took the stroller through the middle door. There was a man who wouldn't let her on the bus and insulted her. The bus driver threw the man off the bus. That was a very satisfying experience.

Most insults are directed against Muslim women, also because of the headscarf. I think it would make sense to help newcomers learn German quickly. Just so that we can communicate. And also defend ourselves, find work quickly and integrate.

Many refugees stay at the shelters alone, with no contact with Germans. That's no way to integrate people. My message to the citizens of Cottbus is: Most of you are good people. But many are really hostile and hate us. I'd like the good people to help us more often and step in when necessary.

Like the bus driver, for example. That gave me a lot of courage. Thank you, dear bus driver!



## COTTBUS TAUGHT ME TO IGNORE

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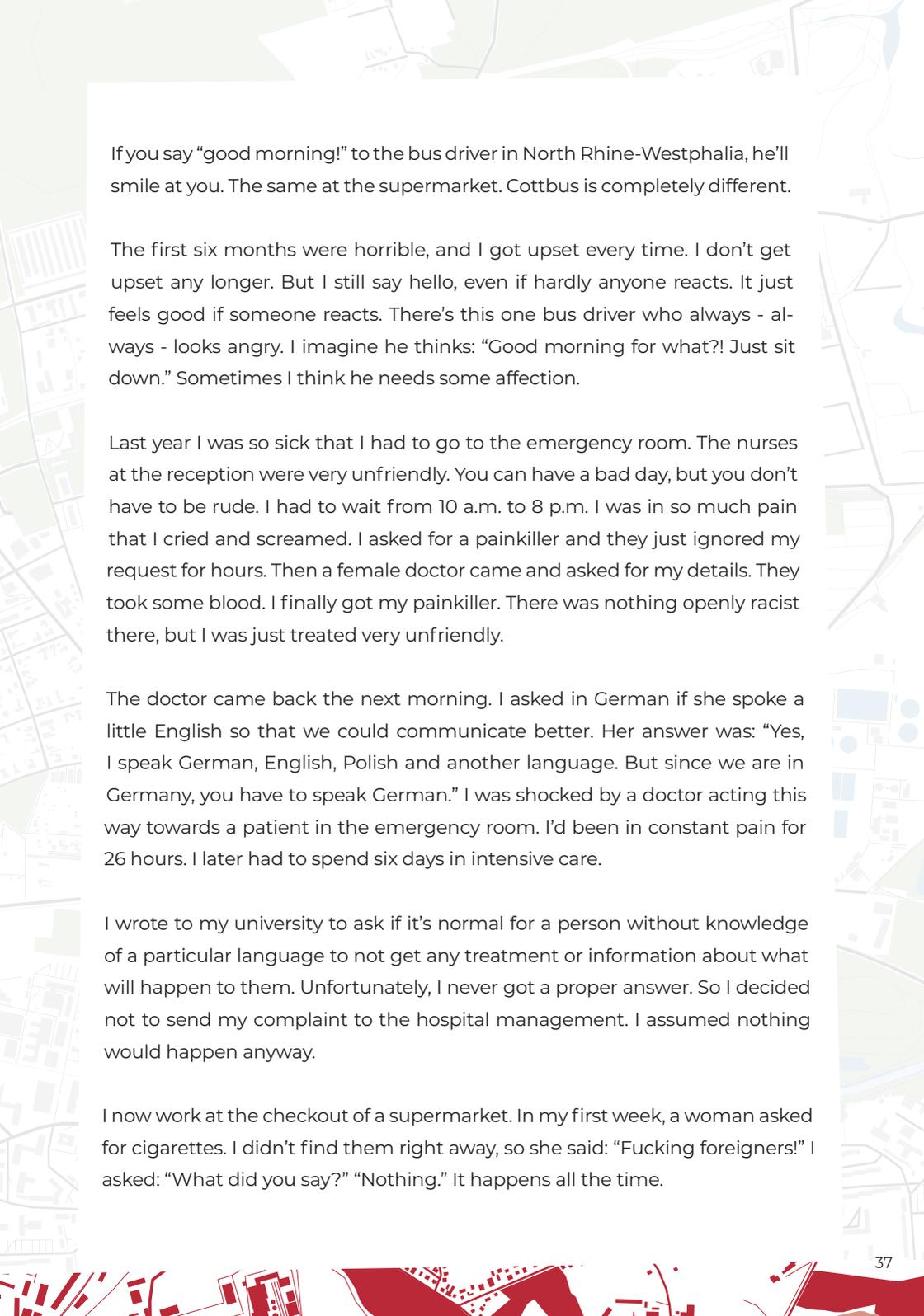
**People in North Rhine-Westphalia are a lot more approachable than in Cottbus. Probably because they actually speak to foreigners instead of just insulting them. Still I'd like to do a test and see if they'd hug me.**

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I lived in Kleve, North Rhine-Westphalia, for five years. I did my bachelor's degree in sustainable agriculture, which means that I learned sustainable fish farming and vertical farming, that is how to grow vegetables on building walls. My dream is to work in one of these areas. I left Kleve because I wanted to do a master's course taught in English. Since the only offering in my field was in Cottbus, I came here. I remember my friends asking me why I was going to East Germany. It's a very different place, they said.

That's all I knew when coming here.

My first impression was sort of okay, but I soon started feeling bad, because the locals never said "hello" back or even smiled. They often don't bother responding when you talk to them. It doesn't make me angry, but I just don't understand how you can ignore someone saying "hello!" or "good morning."



If you say "good morning!" to the bus driver in North Rhine-Westphalia, he'll smile at you. The same at the supermarket. Cottbus is completely different.

The first six months were horrible, and I got upset every time. I don't get upset any longer. But I still say hello, even if hardly anyone reacts. It just feels good if someone reacts. There's this one bus driver who always - always - looks angry. I imagine he thinks: "Good morning for what?! Just sit down." Sometimes I think he needs some affection.

Last year I was so sick that I had to go to the emergency room. The nurses at the reception were very unfriendly. You can have a bad day, but you don't have to be rude. I had to wait from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. I was in so much pain that I cried and screamed. I asked for a painkiller and they just ignored my request for hours. Then a female doctor came and asked for my details. They took some blood. I finally got my painkiller. There was nothing openly racist there, but I was just treated very unfriendly.

The doctor came back the next morning. I asked in German if she spoke a little English so that we could communicate better. Her answer was: "Yes, I speak German, English, Polish and another language. But since we are in Germany, you have to speak German." I was shocked by a doctor acting this way towards a patient in the emergency room. I'd been in constant pain for 26 hours. I later had to spend six days in intensive care.

I wrote to my university to ask if it's normal for a person without knowledge of a particular language to not get any treatment or information about what will happen to them. Unfortunately, I never got a proper answer. So I decided not to send my complaint to the hospital management. I assumed nothing would happen anyway.

I now work at the checkout of a supermarket. In my first week, a woman asked for cigarettes. I didn't find them right away, so she said: "Fucking foreigners!" I asked: "What did you say?" "Nothing." It happens all the time.

I then spoke to my shift supervisor. He just didn't answer. I felt alone and abandoned. Later I confronted him. I told him: "A customer said 'fucking foreigners' to me." A colleague stood by and laughed; again my shift supervisor said nothing. When I come and go at work I say "hello!" and "bye!". Nobody responds.

When I once didn't greet people, my boss gave me a formal warning. I explained the situation. She wanted names. After that my colleagues started to greet me. At least something happened. Something is better than nothing.

But the feeling of not belonging, of being excluded, remains. So the way I go about my job is to go in, work and then go back home. Otherwise there's zero contact, no jokes, no coffee breaks, no contact outside of work. That's surely not normal. Once I'm finished studying and can choose, I'll go back to North Rhine-Westphalia. I'm definitely leaving Cottbus and East Germany.

Cottbus taught me to ignore. I used to fight for everything. Today I just ignore. It doesn't feel good. I believe the people of Cottbus have rarely come into contact with foreigners. Unlike the people in North Rhine-Westphalia. We need more contact with each other in this town. My friends say the people in Cottbus are old and backward.

When Corona is over, I'll do a "Hug me!" campaign with a German friend. Hug strangers and then see who gets the more hugs. The German or the immigrant. I'm afraid I know how it'll turn out, but why not try?



## SECURITY IS WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE

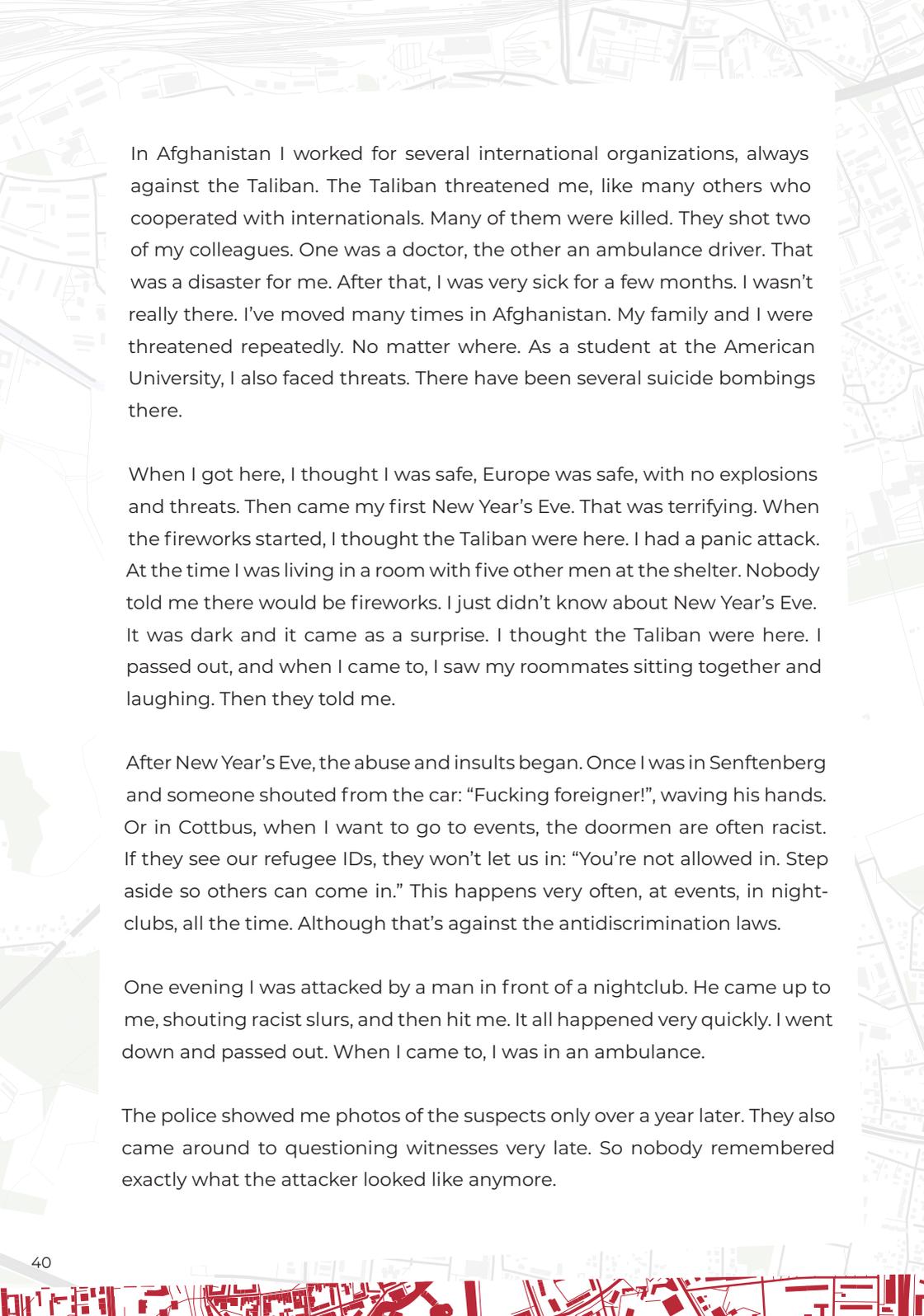
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Right when I came to Germany, one thing was clear to me: I have to learn the language as fast as possible and then find a job. That gives you security. And security is what really matters in life. But due to the racism in Cottbus, it's hard to find sometimes.

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Before I came to Germany, I didn't have a normal life. Starting a normal life was my dream. A normal, safe life. Security is the most important thing in life.

You can't live or work in peace without security, you're always afraid. I lived in Afghanistan, with weekly suicide bombings, war between the Taliban and the government, even in the capital. My family and I were very scared, we never got a break, couldn't think, couldn't work, couldn't even go shopping. I was always scared. That's no life. You just have to get away. Otherwise you're not alive.



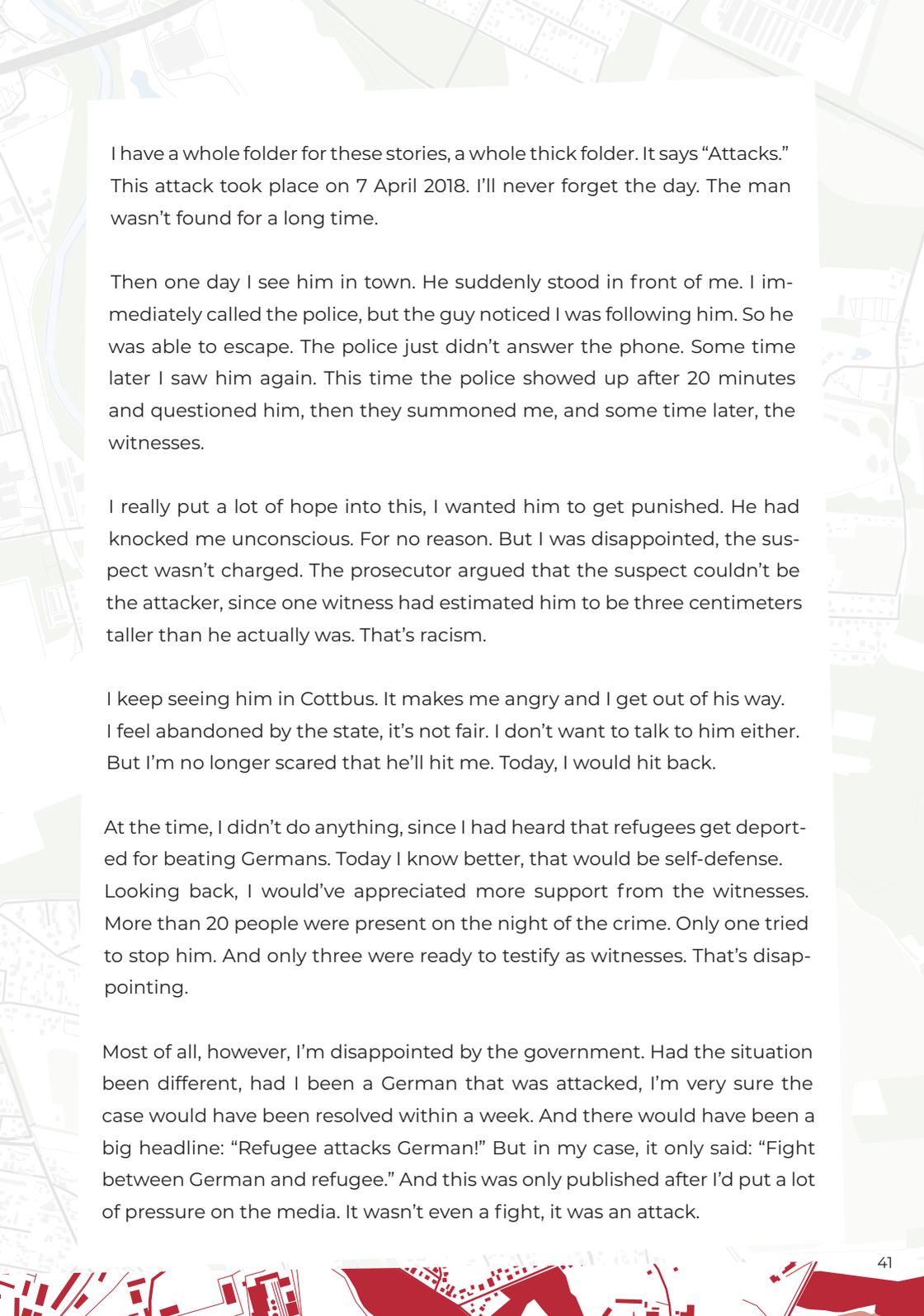
In Afghanistan I worked for several international organizations, always against the Taliban. The Taliban threatened me, like many others who cooperated with internationals. Many of them were killed. They shot two of my colleagues. One was a doctor, the other an ambulance driver. That was a disaster for me. After that, I was very sick for a few months. I wasn't really there. I've moved many times in Afghanistan. My family and I were threatened repeatedly. No matter where. As a student at the American University, I also faced threats. There have been several suicide bombings there.

When I got here, I thought I was safe, Europe was safe, with no explosions and threats. Then came my first New Year's Eve. That was terrifying. When the fireworks started, I thought the Taliban were here. I had a panic attack. At the time I was living in a room with five other men at the shelter. Nobody told me there would be fireworks. I just didn't know about New Year's Eve. It was dark and it came as a surprise. I thought the Taliban were here. I passed out, and when I came to, I saw my roommates sitting together and laughing. Then they told me.

After New Year's Eve, the abuse and insults began. Once I was in Senftenberg and someone shouted from the car: "Fucking foreigner!", waving his hands. Or in Cottbus, when I want to go to events, the doormen are often racist. If they see our refugee IDs, they won't let us in: "You're not allowed in. Step aside so others can come in." This happens very often, at events, in nightclubs, all the time. Although that's against the antidiscrimination laws.

One evening I was attacked by a man in front of a nightclub. He came up to me, shouting racist slurs, and then hit me. It all happened very quickly. I went down and passed out. When I came to, I was in an ambulance.

The police showed me photos of the suspects only over a year later. They also came around to questioning witnesses very late. So nobody remembered exactly what the attacker looked like anymore.



I have a whole folder for these stories, a whole thick folder. It says “Attacks.” This attack took place on 7 April 2018. I’ll never forget the day. The man wasn’t found for a long time.

Then one day I see him in town. He suddenly stood in front of me. I immediately called the police, but the guy noticed I was following him. So he was able to escape. The police just didn’t answer the phone. Some time later I saw him again. This time the police showed up after 20 minutes and questioned him, then they summoned me, and some time later, the witnesses.

I really put a lot of hope into this, I wanted him to get punished. He had knocked me unconscious. For no reason. But I was disappointed, the suspect wasn’t charged. The prosecutor argued that the suspect couldn’t be the attacker, since one witness had estimated him to be three centimeters taller than he actually was. That’s racism.

I keep seeing him in Cottbus. It makes me angry and I get out of his way. I feel abandoned by the state, it’s not fair. I don’t want to talk to him either. But I’m no longer scared that he’ll hit me. Today, I would hit back.

At the time, I didn’t do anything, since I had heard that refugees get deported for beating Germans. Today I know better, that would be self-defense. Looking back, I would’ve appreciated more support from the witnesses. More than 20 people were present on the night of the crime. Only one tried to stop him. And only three were ready to testify as witnesses. That’s disappointing.

Most of all, however, I’m disappointed by the government. Had the situation been different, had I been a German that was attacked, I’m very sure the case would have been resolved within a week. And there would have been a big headline: “Refugee attacks German!” But in my case, it only said: “Fight between German and refugee.” And this was only published after I’d put a lot of pressure on the media. It wasn’t even a fight, it was an attack.

I'm not the only one in this situation. Other refugees keep telling me similar stories. Often exactly the same as mine. I know others who've been beaten. Insults on the street are part of everyday life in Cottbus. Everyone has a story.

Since the attack, I haven't been going out that much. I'm somehow not as happy as I used to be. At the time, I was looking for social contacts. Today I don't speak to strangers anymore. It's also the culture here for most people not to talk to strangers.

When I lived in Dortmund, it was normal to say "hello" to people on the street. Or on the bus or the tram. Many Cottbus residents act differently towards me than towards each other. They notice very quickly that we are immigrants. Different hair, beard, skin color, different reaction.

But there are also people in Cottbus who are open and help. Who speak to me or smile at me. They want to help and are friendly. But they're not many. They can't give me much hope, there's just too few of them.

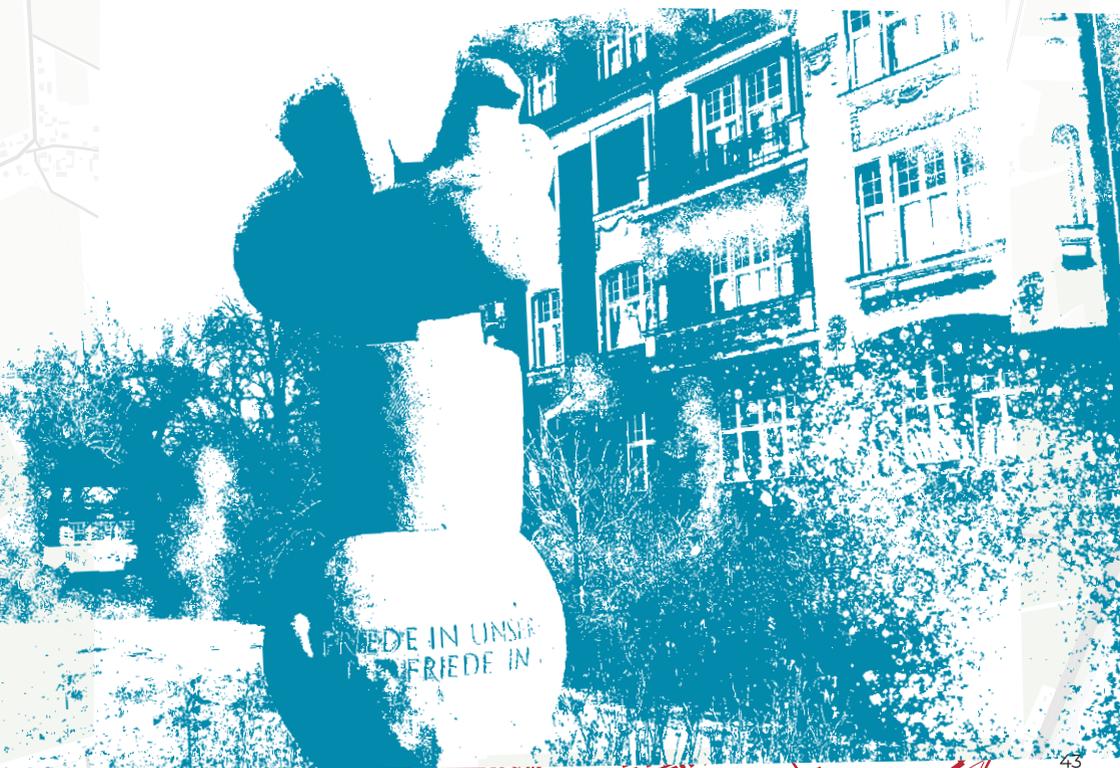
I want to move away from Cottbus because I won't be happy here. I don't fit in here. I've been trying to adapt since 2015, but it just doesn't work. Even though I have friends. Good friends. But at the supermarket, on the street, that's where the problems are.

Too many people are just racist. I would say that one in three people acts racist towards me.

When I'm somewhere else, in Berlin or Hamburg, or when I went to an eco-village two weeks ago, I notice again and again that Germany has some friendly people too. People in Cottbus are more unfriendly than in other German cities.

The government in Cottbus should speak to refugees directly, listen to what their needs are, so that they can get first-hand information. Instead, we are portrayed badly in the media. We're described as criminals, as lazy or as thieves, and they say we don't want to integrate. But all my friends are working or in vocational training. Some can't get a job because they're not allowed to. It's a dilemma: If we don't work, they call us lazy. If we work, we're stealing German jobs.

But all my friends are working or in vocational training. Some can't get a job because they're not allowed to. It's a dilemma: If we don't work, they call us lazy. If we work, we're stealing German jobs. I wish it would stop. I want an open society that's friendly and accepting. Peaceful and equal coexistence.





## “HUMAN DIGNITY IS INVIOLEABLE.”

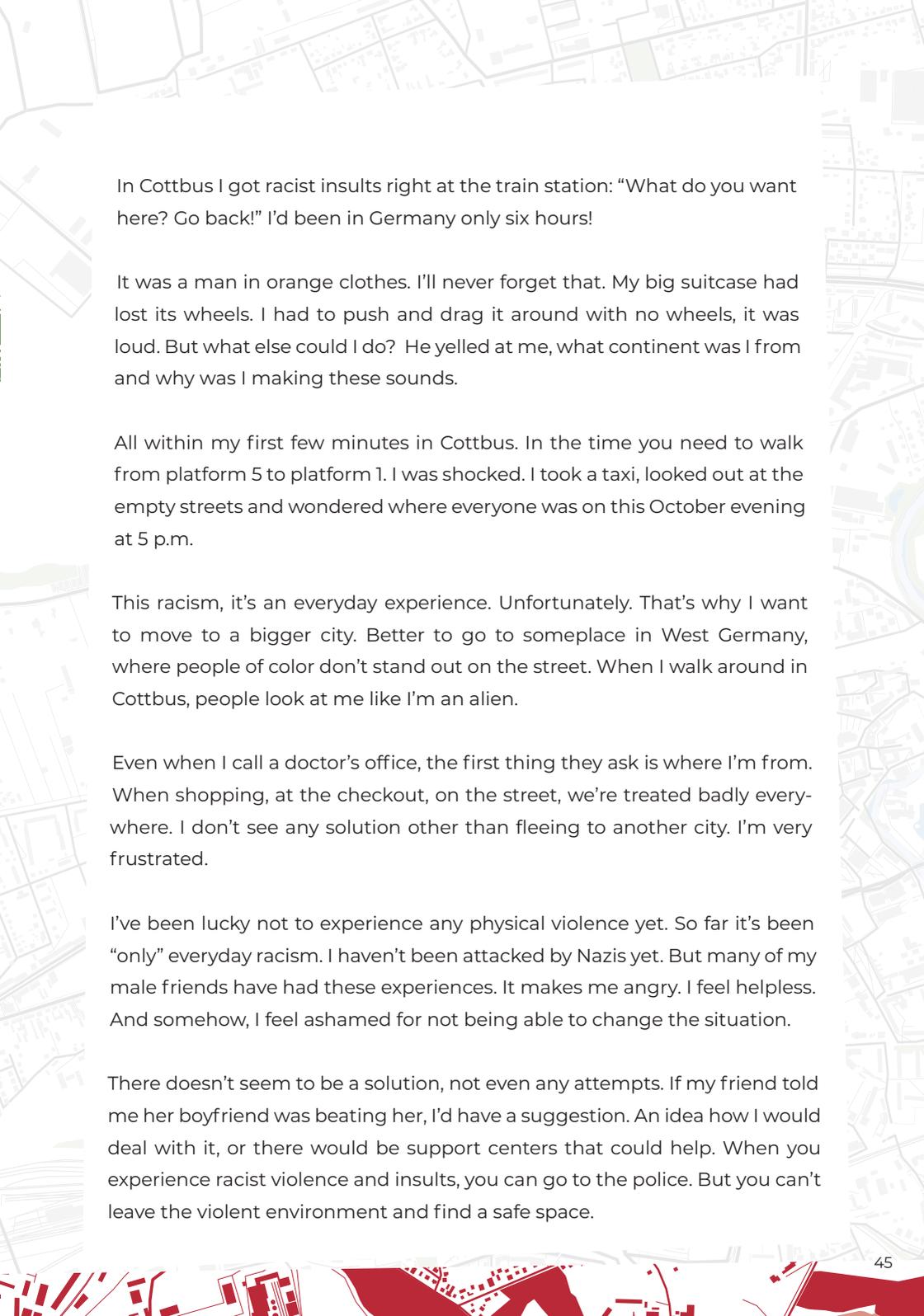
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When it turned out I was going to Cottbus, everything happened very quickly. At the time I was living in another country, in a major city. I got the visa after two weeks, which is very quick. Then I researched Cottbus online to see what it looked like, since in one week's time I would be living there. As soon as I arrived, Cottbus showed its ugliest side. The racism I faced was brutal. Online, Cottbus still looked like a cute little place with its town hall and pyramids.

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I've been in Germany, in Cottbus, since October 2015. I came to Germany as a student to do my master's in architecture. But then I switched to another subject. In 2020 I graduated successfully. My reason for changing subjects were the racist experiences I had. Racism has been a constant part of my life since I moved to Cottbus. I want to leave Cottbus.

My trip to Germany began with my landing in Berlin, from where I took the train to Cottbus. Berlin was cool, people immediately helped me find my way around.



In Cottbus I got racist insults right at the train station: "What do you want here? Go back!" I'd been in Germany only six hours!

It was a man in orange clothes. I'll never forget that. My big suitcase had lost its wheels. I had to push and drag it around with no wheels, it was loud. But what else could I do? He yelled at me, what continent was I from and why was I making these sounds.

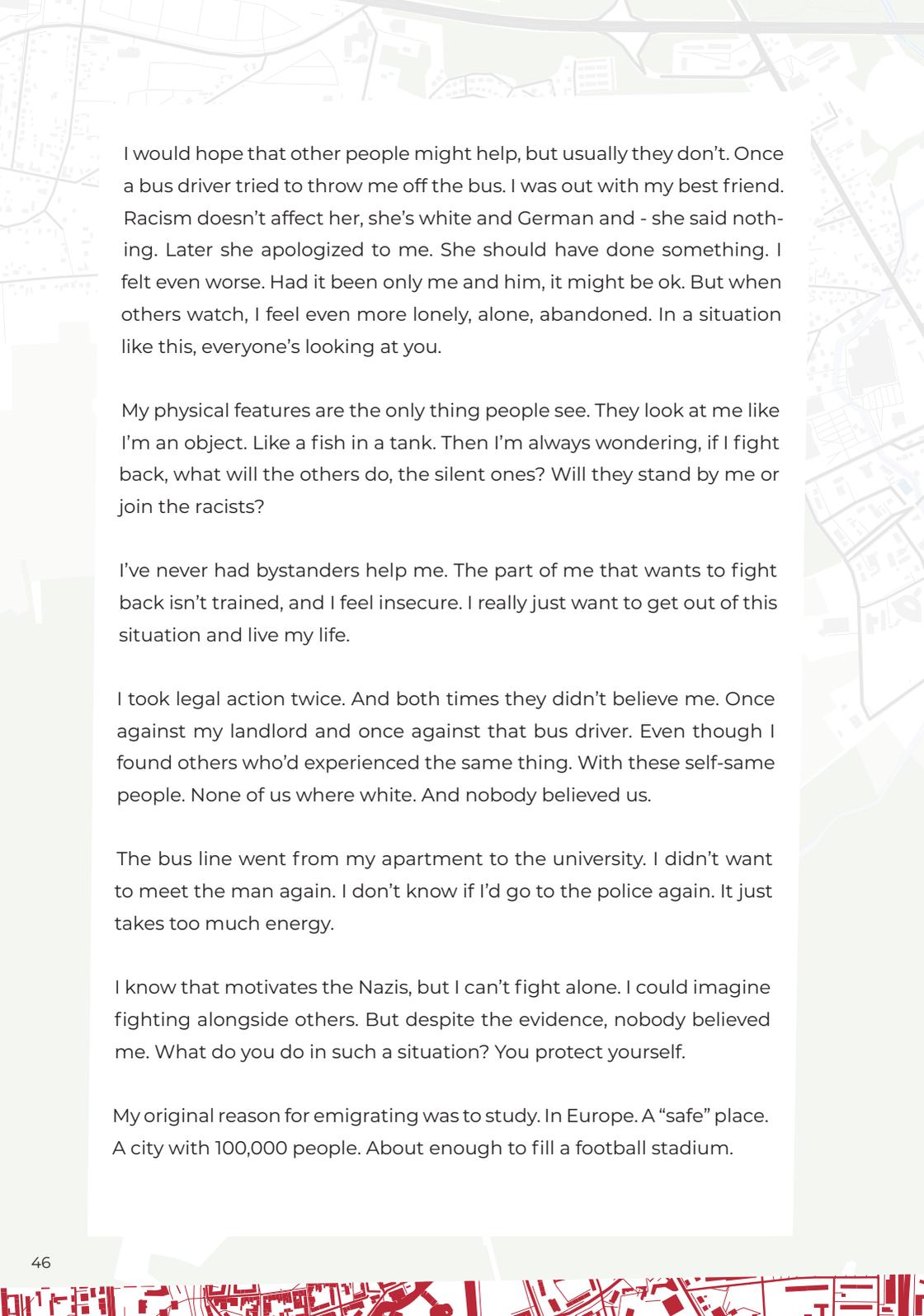
All within my first few minutes in Cottbus. In the time you need to walk from platform 5 to platform 1. I was shocked. I took a taxi, looked out at the empty streets and wondered where everyone was on this October evening at 5 p.m.

This racism, it's an everyday experience. Unfortunately. That's why I want to move to a bigger city. Better to go to someplace in West Germany, where people of color don't stand out on the street. When I walk around in Cottbus, people look at me like I'm an alien.

Even when I call a doctor's office, the first thing they ask is where I'm from. When shopping, at the checkout, on the street, we're treated badly everywhere. I don't see any solution other than fleeing to another city. I'm very frustrated.

I've been lucky not to experience any physical violence yet. So far it's been "only" everyday racism. I haven't been attacked by Nazis yet. But many of my male friends have had these experiences. It makes me angry. I feel helpless. And somehow, I feel ashamed for not being able to change the situation.

There doesn't seem to be a solution, not even any attempts. If my friend told me her boyfriend was beating her, I'd have a suggestion. An idea how I would deal with it, or there would be support centers that could help. When you experience racist violence and insults, you can go to the police. But you can't leave the violent environment and find a safe space.



I would hope that other people might help, but usually they don't. Once a bus driver tried to throw me off the bus. I was out with my best friend. Racism doesn't affect her, she's white and German and - she said nothing. Later she apologized to me. She should have done something. I felt even worse. Had it been only me and him, it might be ok. But when others watch, I feel even more lonely, alone, abandoned. In a situation like this, everyone's looking at you.

My physical features are the only thing people see. They look at me like I'm an object. Like a fish in a tank. Then I'm always wondering, if I fight back, what will the others do, the silent ones? Will they stand by me or join the racists?

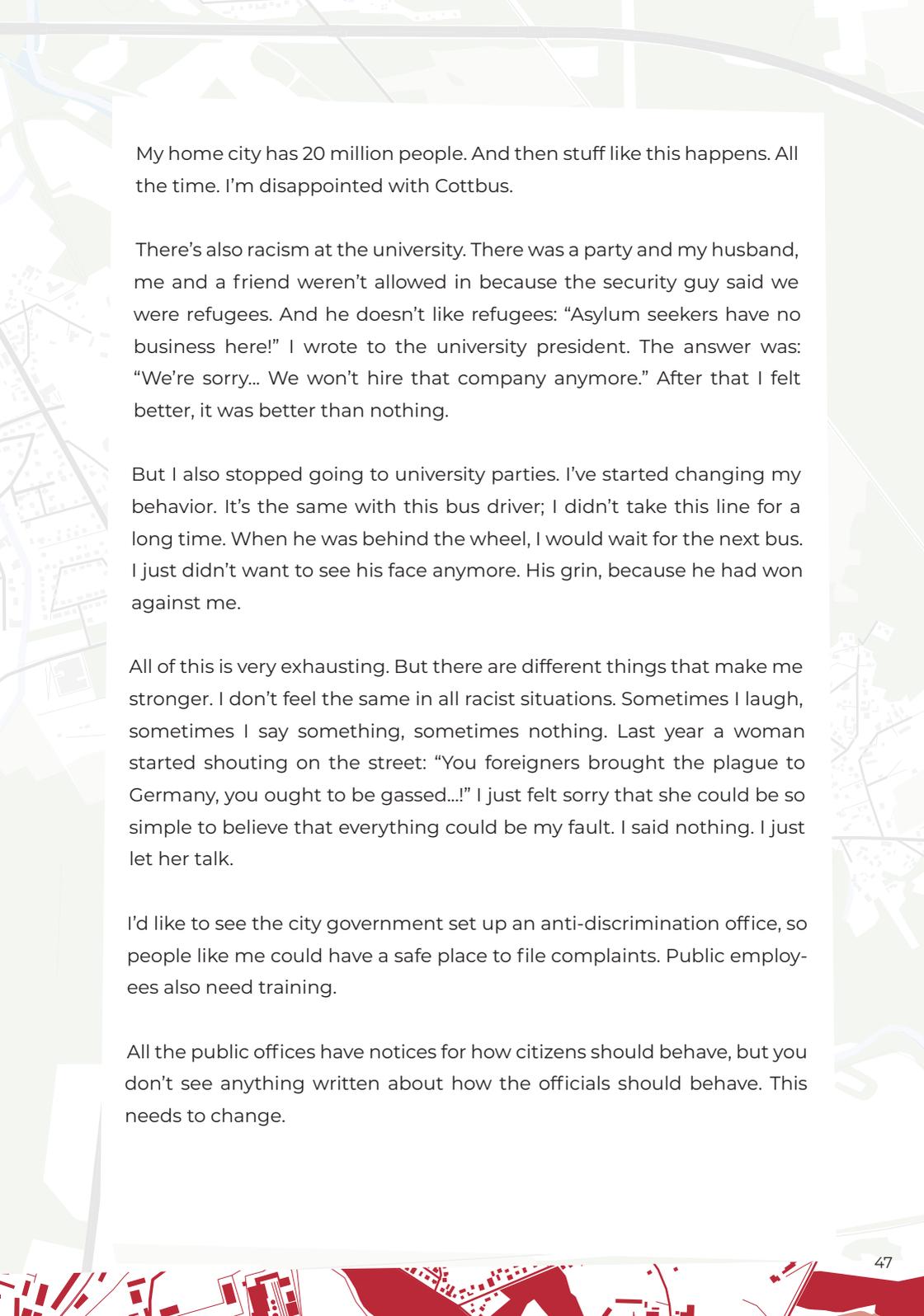
I've never had bystanders help me. The part of me that wants to fight back isn't trained, and I feel insecure. I really just want to get out of this situation and live my life.

I took legal action twice. And both times they didn't believe me. Once against my landlord and once against that bus driver. Even though I found others who'd experienced the same thing. With these self-same people. None of us were white. And nobody believed us.

The bus line went from my apartment to the university. I didn't want to meet the man again. I don't know if I'd go to the police again. It just takes too much energy.

I know that motivates the Nazis, but I can't fight alone. I could imagine fighting alongside others. But despite the evidence, nobody believed me. What do you do in such a situation? You protect yourself.

My original reason for emigrating was to study. In Europe. A "safe" place. A city with 100,000 people. About enough to fill a football stadium.



My home city has 20 million people. And then stuff like this happens. All the time. I'm disappointed with Cottbus.

There's also racism at the university. There was a party and my husband, me and a friend weren't allowed in because the security guy said we were refugees. And he doesn't like refugees: "Asylum seekers have no business here!" I wrote to the university president. The answer was: "We're sorry... We won't hire that company anymore." After that I felt better, it was better than nothing.

But I also stopped going to university parties. I've started changing my behavior. It's the same with this bus driver; I didn't take this line for a long time. When he was behind the wheel, I would wait for the next bus. I just didn't want to see his face anymore. His grin, because he had won against me.

All of this is very exhausting. But there are different things that make me stronger. I don't feel the same in all racist situations. Sometimes I laugh, sometimes I say something, sometimes nothing. Last year a woman started shouting on the street: "You foreigners brought the plague to Germany, you ought to be gassed...!" I just felt sorry that she could be so simple to believe that everything could be my fault. I said nothing. I just let her talk.

I'd like to see the city government set up an anti-discrimination office, so people like me could have a safe place to file complaints. Public employees also need training.

All the public offices have notices for how citizens should behave, but you don't see anything written about how the officials should behave. This needs to change.

I would like the majority society, the white part of society, to get off their high horse. And for once really see us for who we are, approach us. And try to imagine what it feels like to experience this racism every day. That they get to know us and see that we are people too. And what it's like to not be as privileged as they are. Due to skin color and language. Then they might really start applying the first article of the Basic Law: "Human dignity is inviolable."

**DIE  
DIE WÜRDE  
DES MENSCHEN  
IST UNANTASTBAR**



## WE WANT TO LIVE IN PEACE

---

**We are two young people from Arab countries who fled the war. We live in Cottbus and have already had too many experiences that shocked us. Racism in Cottbus is everywhere. Still, we won't let them put us down. We fight back and stand up for democracy and human rights.**

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**A:** I'm 17 years old and have been living in Germany for three and a half years.

First my father, my brother and my sister came on a rubber dinghy. Two years later, I followed with my mother and brother under the family reunification policy. I'm currently in 10th grade. In Cottbus there are many people who give us mean looks. Even at school there are racist students who insult and harass us. If I tell a teacher, they'll have a talk, there will be a fake apology, and then the racism starts over.

**B:** I came with my parents and sister on a rubber dinghy from Turkey to Greece in late 2015. Then we took the route from Serbia to Germany. Before Cottbus, we lived in Berlin for a short time. At the moment I'm in 10th grade. I speak really great German, and yet I don't feel comfortable here.

My sister wears a headscarf and therefore can't find a job. They say she should take it off. All her applications are rejected. When we walk through the city and speak Arabic, we get hostile looks.

**A:** Once we were walking together on the main street during the town festival. My friend wanted to visit someone at the hospital. I wanted to go home. We spoke in Arabic at the tram stop. Two men came along, both in their mid-twenties, heads shaved. They watched us for a while. One said: "Fucking foreigner, fucking Kanacke. This is Germany, you have to speak German here." We asked: "What did we do to you? Why are you insulting us?"

**B:** Then one of them hit us several times.

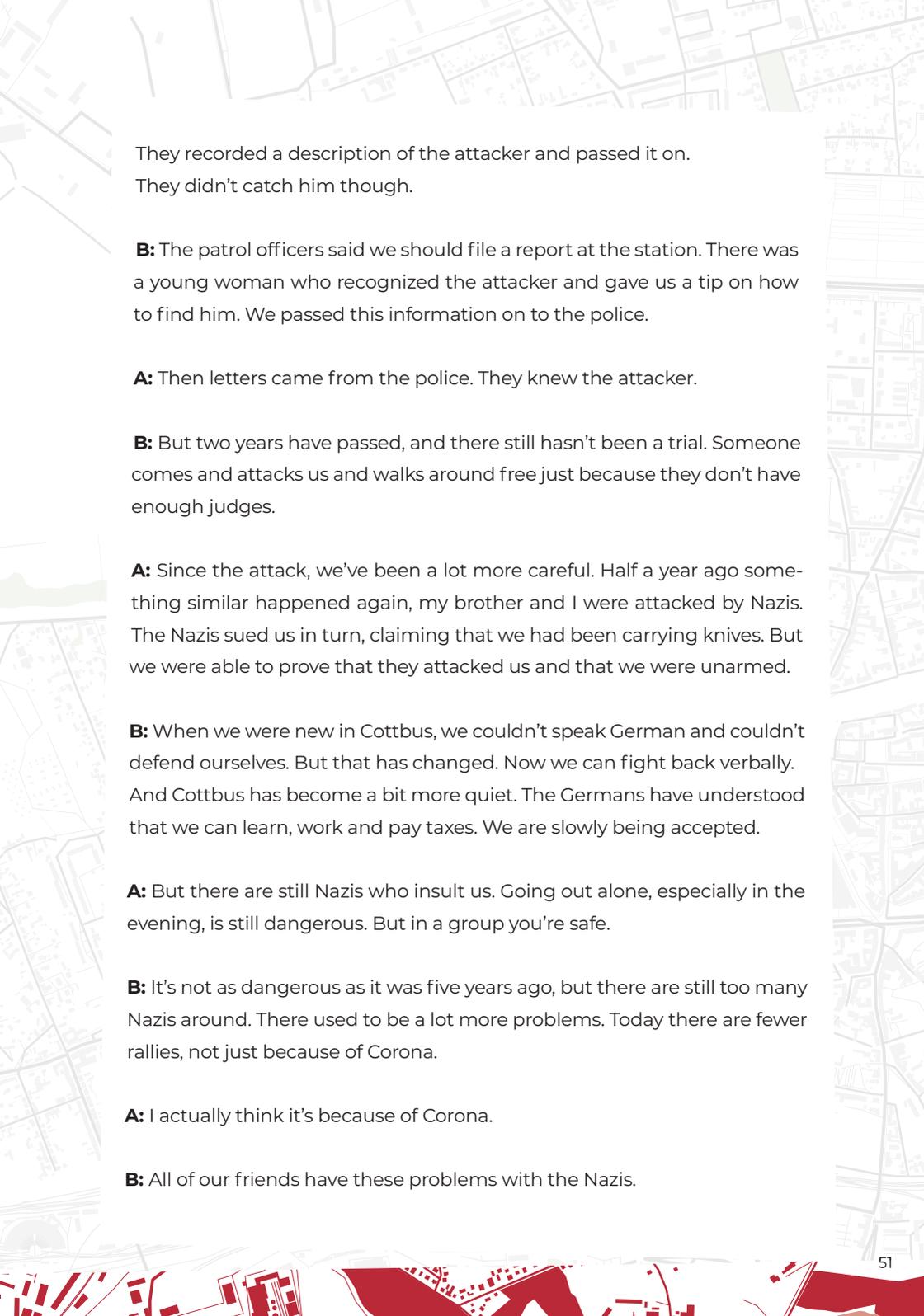
**A:** When I tried to speak to them, one hissed at me, a 14-year-old, what I want. He was athletic and apparently did martial arts. He pushed me onto the tracks, and I fell and injured myself. Then he hit my friend in the eye with his fist. We fought back and some bystanders helped us. Others just stared. The attacker then fled.

**B:** It was really too much for us. He was just totally aggressive. That was a shock to me. Not even my father ever hit me. After the punch, I was out of it and felt dizzy.

**A:** When I saw that my friend's eye was injured, I fought back. I wanted to defend myself and my friend.

**B:** Some men broke us up and most of the women there supported us. They recommended that we call the police. But nobody wanted to testify as a witness. That was disappointing.

**A:** I called the police anyway. I told my friend to watch the attacker, who was fleeing. The police were there quick because I stopped a patrol car that was driving by.



They recorded a description of the attacker and passed it on. They didn't catch him though.

**B:** The patrol officers said we should file a report at the station. There was a young woman who recognized the attacker and gave us a tip on how to find him. We passed this information on to the police.

**A:** Then letters came from the police. They knew the attacker.

**B:** But two years have passed, and there still hasn't been a trial. Someone comes and attacks us and walks around free just because they don't have enough judges.

**A:** Since the attack, we've been a lot more careful. Half a year ago something similar happened again, my brother and I were attacked by Nazis. The Nazis sued us in turn, claiming that we had been carrying knives. But we were able to prove that they attacked us and that we were unarmed.

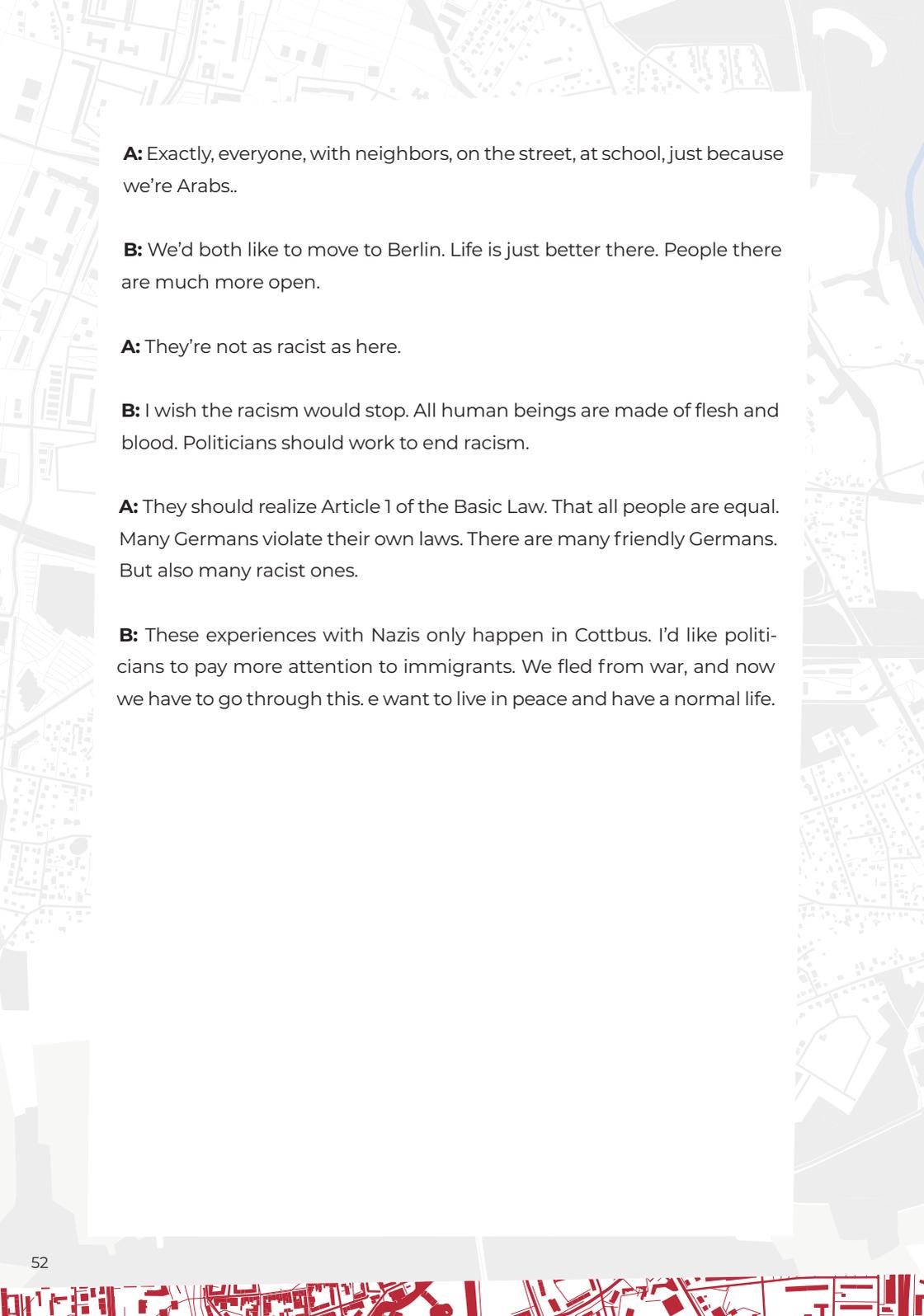
**B:** When we were new in Cottbus, we couldn't speak German and couldn't defend ourselves. But that has changed. Now we can fight back verbally. And Cottbus has become a bit more quiet. The Germans have understood that we can learn, work and pay taxes. We are slowly being accepted.

**A:** But there are still Nazis who insult us. Going out alone, especially in the evening, is still dangerous. But in a group you're safe.

**B:** It's not as dangerous as it was five years ago, but there are still too many Nazis around. There used to be a lot more problems. Today there are fewer rallies, not just because of Corona.

**A:** I actually think it's because of Corona.

**B:** All of our friends have these problems with the Nazis.



**A:** Exactly, everyone, with neighbors, on the street, at school, just because we're Arabs..

**B:** We'd both like to move to Berlin. Life is just better there. People there are much more open.

**A:** They're not as racist as here.

**B:** I wish the racism would stop. All human beings are made of flesh and blood. Politicians should work to end racism.

**A:** They should realize Article 1 of the Basic Law. That all people are equal. Many Germans violate their own laws. There are many friendly Germans. But also many racist ones.

**B:** These experiences with Nazis only happen in Cottbus. I'd like politicians to pay more attention to immigrants. We fled from war, and now we have to go through this. e want to live in peace and have a normal life.

**AT OUR OFFICES, WE AT OPFERPERSPEKTIVE OFFER  
COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY  
RIGHT-WING VIOLENCE AND RACIST DISCRIMINATION.**

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**CONTACT US:**

**Anti-discrimination counselling Brandenburg**

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▶ [www.antidiskriminierungsberatung-brandenburg.de](http://www.antidiskriminierungsberatung-brandenburg.de)

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**COUNSELLING CENTERS:**

Branch office in Cottbus

Altmarkt 21

03046 Cottbus

☎ +49 176 878 440 76

Head office in Potsdam

Rudolf-Breitscheid-Str. 164

14482 Potsdam

## LEGAL NOTICE

### About the author

Chadi Bahouth holds a doctorate in political science and works as lecturer for political issues, coach and therapist, editor and presenter for the radio and printed media.

### Publisher



Opferperspektive - Solidarisch  
gegen Rassismus, Diskriminierung  
und rechte Gewalt e.V.

Rudolf-Breitscheid-Straße 164  
14482 Potsdam

☎ +49 331 817 0000

✉ info@opferperspektive.de

▶ www.opferperspektive.de

**Editing:** Simon Grünwald

**German Proofreading:** Haidy Damm

**Translation:** Emal Ghamsharick

**English proofreading:** Simran Sodhi

**Layout:** TEKTEK - Gestaltung & Produktion

**Printing:** Printstar GmbH, Berlin

This publication was produced under the model project "changelog - Gleichbehandlung kommunal." Changelog is active in the cities of Cottbus and Potsdam, offers counselling and support to people affected by racist discrimination, and promotes civic awareness for discrimination in both cities.

This brochure was funded by:

Gefördert vom

im Rahmen des Bundesprogramms

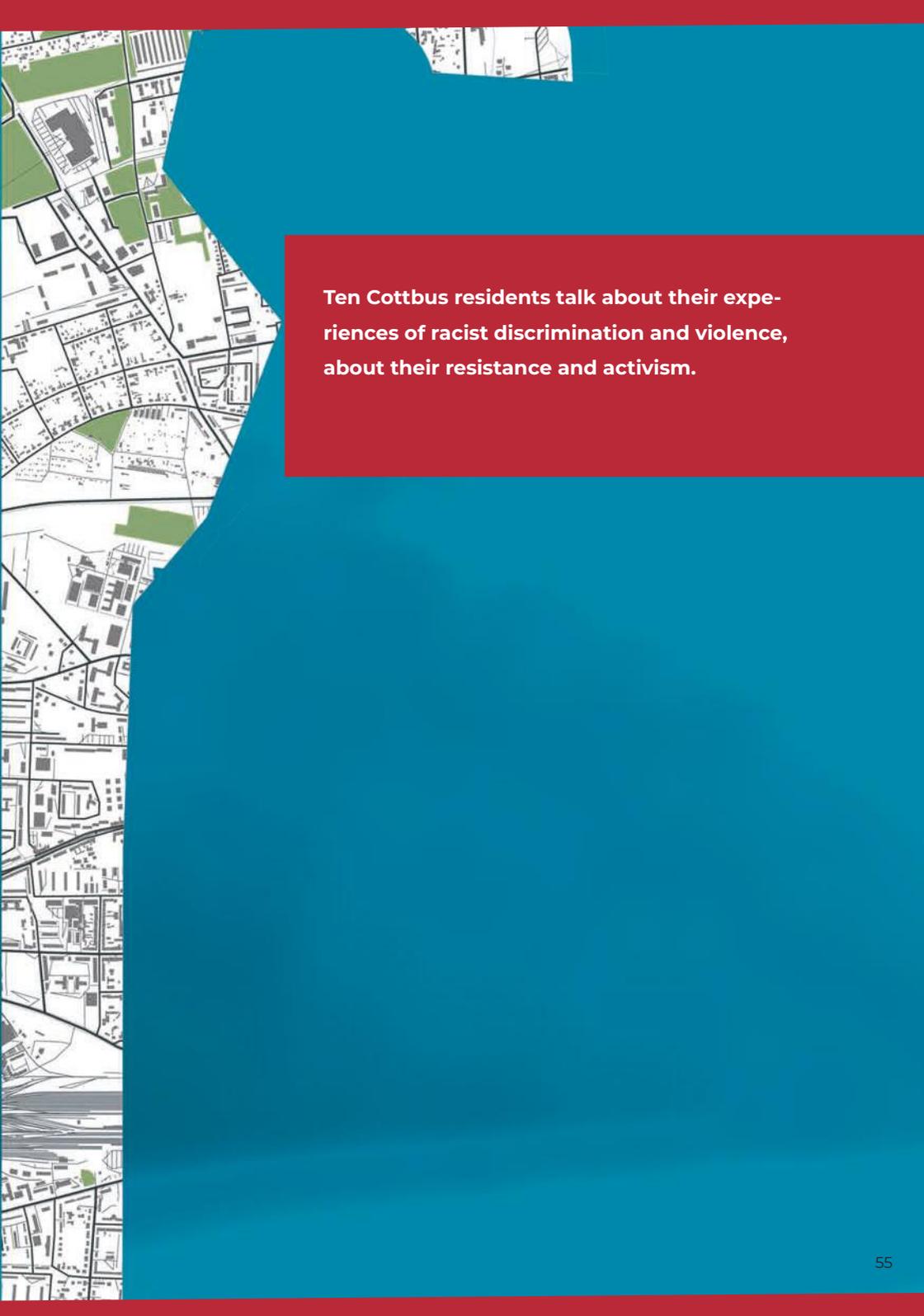


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und Jugend

Demokratie **leben!**

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**Ten Cottbus residents talk about their experiences of racist discrimination and violence, about their resistance and activism.**