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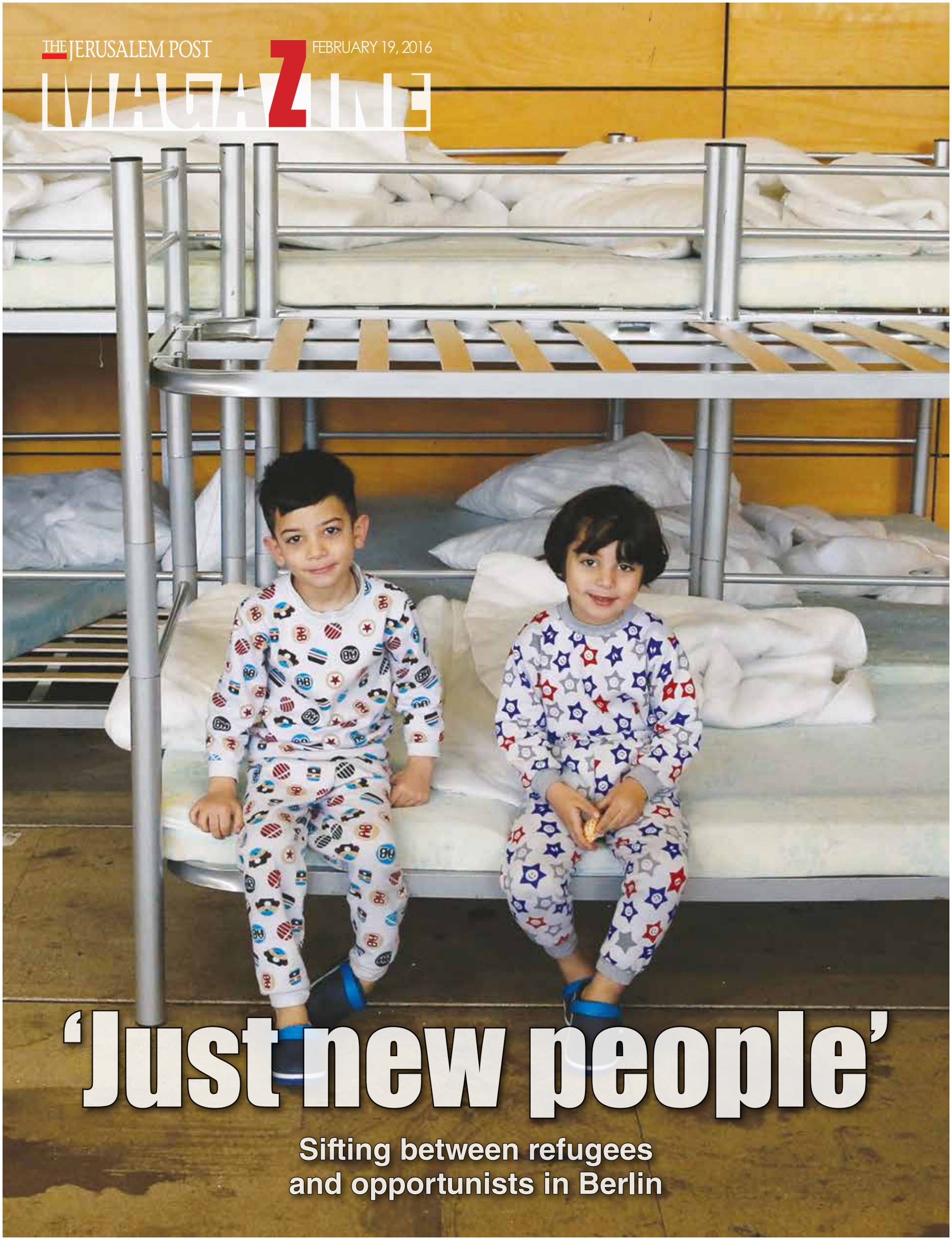

(Reuters)

‘Just new people’

Sifting between refugees and opportunists in Berlin

SYRIAN REFUGEE Hamza and 'Bild' reporter Til Biederman pose near Checkpoint Charlie. (Orit Arfa)

A tour through the new Berlin

The Magazine ventures to Berlin to learn firsthand how the influx of refugees – and non-refugees – are changing the landscape of the German capital

• ORIT ARFA

I told myself before traveling to Berlin to cover the refugee crisis that I would put my preconceived notions aside. This was my chance to learn about the crisis firsthand. It's easy to take a position in what has emerged as one of the greatest debates of 2016 – to accept or reject the tsunami of refugees from Islamic countries into Europe – based on prejudices, assumptions, and media reports.

For my orientation on my first day in Berlin, I met with Til Biermann, a local reporter for *Bild*, who was kind enough to introduce me to a Syrian refugee named Hamza (last name withheld), a graduate in journalism from Damascus University who interns for the paper. Hamza was to serve as my (informal) translator during my forays into the Berlin refugee camps.

At first I was concerned that Hamza wouldn't even want to talk to an Israeli reporter – let alone for an Israeli paper – but the 26-year-old was all eagerness, warmth and smiles. We met at the Starbucks near Checkpoint Charlie, the former checkpoint between East and West Berlin and a popular tourist destination.

SUSAN HERMENAU (Orit Arfa)

ANDREAS BOLDT (Orit Arfa)

Dr. RAFAEL KORENZECHER (Orit Arfa)

My pressing question, as a Jew and Israeli, was: Are refugees from Muslim countries importing Islamic anti-Semitism?

"I think the last thing a refugee is thinking about is the Jewish people and Israel," said Hamza, speaking of his Syrian brethren. He arrived in Berlin last summer, via a tumultuous journey from Damascus to Lebanon via Turkey to Budapest and finally to Berlin. His parents are still in Syria.

"Everyone understands if you will be here in Europe you have to forget everything about this. The government taught them to build this hate. It's fake. It's not something real. The government found this enemy for nothing."

To most Syrians who fled, the dictator Bashar Assad is the greatest enemy – not Israel.

Hamza lamented how Obama never kept his promise to intervene once Assad crossed the "red line" of using chemical weapons. He believes Assad's purported hatred of Israel is a sham – a populist tool to stay in the government – while Assad would never retaliate against Israel if attacked. Hamza said his support of the revolution against Assad was fueled by his desire for Western values to permeate Syria. He wants to be free, which he feels in Berlin – a city he loves. The Islamists are simply filling the void in opposition to Assad.

BIERMANN, A German with a Jewish grandparent who lived in Israel from 1999 to 2000 and is relatively fluent in Hebrew, wrote about his concern over Arab anti-Semitism, but, from a humanitarian perspective, he supports Merkel's policy of accepting refugees; over one million migrants arrived in 2015 alone. He was one of the first on the scene interviewing the refugees. Initially, the editorial stance of the media, including *Bild*, he said, was to be welcoming, even if overall public opinion wasn't.

"I think the editors felt that if they would write now that all the refugees want money, things would go crazy," Biermann said.

But that's changed since reports of mass sexual assaults in Cologne and other German cities on New Year's Eve allegedly by Muslim migrants from North Africa.

"I think it shifted a little bit," Biermann said. "We have to report the reality. We have to report the problems; otherwise, the readers will think we lied to them."

And that's what I planned to do – and Hamza, who was taught since he was young to consider someone like me an enemy, was eager to help.

After we wrapped up the interview, and Biermann and Hamza left, I began to organize my notes on my laptop – excited at the prospect of visiting the Legaso refugee processing center the next day. While I was working, a man – a beggar – came up to me. He didn't look German, and I wondered if he was a Middle Eastern refugee. He shoved a piece of paper – a solicitation notice – over the phone lying on the table, and looked at me threateningly. I expressed concern with my eyes to the coffee sippers around me. They just looked on. The beggar's eyes weren't asking for help.

Finally, he walked off, and I went back to work, relieved, but wondering if I should run after him to find out where he was from, if he was a refugee who was unable to make it, for Biermann had explained that the government regulates employment for refugees based on their entitlements and migration status, creating challenges for employment.

About to leave, I realized my phone was gone. I looked all over for it, frantic. "My phone was stolen," I cried. "I think it was that beggar!"

A man in his 30s named Erik came up to me and said he had been a victim of this "trick" in Sweden two years ago. A beggar makes himself as annoying as possible, shoves the paper in your face, and then slips the phone into his pocket. He assumed his thief must have been a "refugee." He suggested I go to the police a few doors down.

The police were not surprised. It happens all the time, the officer said, nonchalant about it. There is no point in launching an investigation. These are organized networks of thieves, and prison cells for these phone pilferers are revolving doors. "Are they migrants?" I asked.

"One hundred percent."

Well, there goes my objectivity. This has become personal. I felt violated. The thief messed with the wrong reporter.

I went back to talk to Erik, a Swede living in Berlin for three years, and I soon realized that even a personal violation will not necessarily sway people towards criticizing a pro-migration policy. His view mirrored the more conciliatory voices that emerged since New Year's Eve, such as that of the mayor of Cologne, who responded to the debacle by encouraging women to take precautionary measures in public places to ward off assaults.

"If you ask me, I don't want to put blame on a people who steal to make a living. I put responsibility on cafes to make sure it doesn't happen." Starbucks, apparently, was aware that it happens, but hasn't taken concerted effort to stop theses thieves before they strike.

"That's an easy way to escape especially at what's happening – to put it on people who are fleeing a horrible situation."

I would take up my phone theft with Hamza, whom I was sup- >>

Hamza believes Assad's purported hatred of Israel is a sham – a populist tool to stay in government

A CHILD walks in front of beds set up inside the Jane-Addams high school in Berlin's Hohenschoenhausen district. (Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters)

posed to meet at Starbucks the next morning, but when I got to Starbucks, he asked me to meet at Lageso in the Moabit neighborhood instead. A refugee had died from influenza, apparently from waiting in line in the cold.

THE PROCESSING center at Lageso, which is the German abbreviation for the State Office for Health and Social Affairs (with jurisdiction over Berlin as a city-state), consists of white tents. Mostly men were lingering outside, while Spanish volunteers handed out tea. Some men had to come as early as 2 or 3 a.m. to ensure their place in line. Lageso closes in the afternoon, and, apparently, it's first come first serve. It was about 8°, not as cold as the snowy week before.

First, I told Hamza about my stolen phone. "It's not the refugees for sure," Hamza said, feeling bad, as we walked the paths towards the tents. "I think it's the gypsy people." Truth is, the beggar didn't necessarily look Middle Eastern, but the rise in phone theft – confirmed by the service provider – has coincided with the influx of "refugees," a term – I soon learn, that doesn't apply to everyone. Biermann later weighed in and said that these fake "beggars" are mostly likely from Romania and Bulgaria as citizens of those countries have been entering Germany since they were admitted into the EU. According to police statistics, he said, only about 1% of Syrian refugees has committed crimes since arriving; crime rates are much higher among North African immigrants.

As Hamza and I looked for people to interview, it took us a few rounds to find Arabic speakers. Hamza could already tell by appearance where the men were from.

"They're from Afghanistan... they're from Pakistan..." And when we couldn't identify their nationality, we asked. Albanians. Moldavians. Russians. The only Syrians we found were a duo from Douma, a city Assad had attacked with chemical weapons. Compared to the other men loitering around, these young men, smartly dressed in snug jackets, seemed the most poised, put together. They share an apartment in the funky neighborhood of Neukölln and live off a subsidy of €400 each.

Through Hamza's translation I learned that 23-year-olds Mohammed Monaim and Ahmed Mahdi chose Germany for study opportunities. Monaim is studying civil engineering, and Mahdi is a medical student; Neither could finish their studies in Damascus because of the war. Most of their family is back in Syria; it's harder for their parents to leave. Both lost cousins in the fighting. Both are grateful for the chance to start a new life in Germany, which they reached through a common route via Greece and Hungary. Aside from Lageso officials, they find Germans extremely friendly. >>

REFUGEES OF all sorts collect clothing from piles in the street. (Orit Arfa)

'Today's "refugees" are largely opportunists'

Late last year Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, expressed concern that anti-Semitism will be imported into Germany with the wave of Muslim migrants inculcated with hatred of Israel in their countries of origin.

For Dr. Rafael Korenzecher, publisher of the Jewish German monthly *Jüdische Rundschau*, Schuster's public concern comes a little too late.

"These people were sitting quietly because they are always trying not to annoy the official Islam-appeasement policy of our government," Korenzecher said at in interview at Kaffeehaus Einstein near the Brandenburg Gate, wrapped in his Hermes scarf, speaking brashly with a bulldozer flair.

"They say, cowardly, 'we have to be aware not to say anything bad about Islam because the Islam itself is never to blame, it is only the Islamism.'"

Jüdische Rundschau ("Jewish Review") was the name of a German weekly published from 1902 to 1938, until Kristallnacht put an end to it. Korenzecher revived it as a monthly to provide an unabashed, independent pro-Israel editorial line after Operation Protective Edge saw pro-Palestinian protesters in Berlin shout "Jews to the gas," while German police simply looked on.

The son of Holocaust survivors, Korenzecher came to Germany at age 10. Trained as a physician, he became a real estate businessman. Unlike immigrants of the 1950s and 60s who came for productive work, today's "refugees," he said, are largely opportunists; authentic asylum seekers would suffice with safe shelter in places such as Turkey or Jordan.

Andreas Boldt, arguably Germany's most outspoken, non-Jewish pro-Israel activist, founded the Freundschaft Deutschland-Israel (German-Israel Friendship) Facebook page in 2011. Today, it has 13,000 members. Rarely does a personal Facebook post of his go by without effusive praise and love for Israel. Having grown up as a Christian but no longer identifying as one, he supports Israel, he said, from a humanitarian perspective; anyone who loves freedom, science, human rights and intellectual creativity must be pro-Israel.

A contributor to the *Jüdische Rundschau*, he also met with the Magazine at Kaffeehaus Einstein, sharing Korenzecher's worried forecast.

"I really was sure that in two or three generations to come, Germany would have normal relations with Israel and the Jewish people in general," Boldt said. "I was very optimistic we will overcome the issue of the Holocaust and German history in the sense of having a normal relationship in the way we have with the British, French, etc. We have anti-Semitism here and they're in the far Right, but they're a minority and they're more or less silent...With the rise of Islamism in Europe and Germany in general we hear more talk about BDS and against Israel."

Boldt said most of the hate mail he receives for his social media pro-Israel activity comes from Arab Muslims, not from the far Right or far Left (except for the occasional Left-wing Israeli). Boldt fears that said Arab-Muslim anti-Israel pressure may goad anti-Semitic attitudes dormant in some Germans.

"The average Germans just don't want any conflict," he said. "We want a peaceful life. We want to save money for our lives. They're quiet, usually. They don't demonstrate... the Muslim population is pushing the Germans, saying: 'Hey, we have to do something.' Starting with boycott calls in front of shops, so they avoid those shops because they don't want conflict."

On a personal note, Boldt has had to make minor adjustments in his family lifestyle. Living in a village near Bielefeld, he and his wife now won't allow his 12-year-old daughter to travel alone by bus to reach her dance class because it passes through an unfriendly refugee camp.

"I saw the way they look at her," he said. "They didn't even give us a way to pass."

Korenzecher believes crime and threats by Muslims generally go unreported because the German government and mainstream media are wary of criticizing Islam, hence the delay in reporting the New Year's Eve sexual harassment incidents.

"Can you imagine if there was a circle of Chabadniks doing that; it would be in the press the next second," Korenzecher said. "And if right-wing people did that – it would be in the press. They're trying to minimize the Islamic crime by causing everybody to shut up about Islamic contempt and violation of our laws. They are calling every and even justified criticism of Islam 'racism' but they let the Islamic racism, for example, against Jews happen without opposition."

So far, German liberal values have been widely, publicly affected with caution now being taken with the traditional regional festivals. The town of Rheinberg, for instance, recently canceled its annual carnival over fears of Cologne-style sex assaults on women.

The impact on German-Jewish relations has yet to play out. Boldt thinks it may take five to 10 years for the migrants to feel confident in turning public tide against Israel, and by extension, the Jews. Korenzecher has noticed increased insecurity at Jewish establishments. He believes Germany stands at a crossroads.

"We have a reactive right-wing shift, but I don't think the right-wing shift will overcome in the end," Korenzecher said. "But our policy may cause the termination of our liberal way of life. I don't want the Right – I hate the Right – but I don't want an Islamization of our society either. It's a loss of the way of life for you and me and the free people who don't want any extreme and don't want to be told how to behave or believe." – ***O.A.***

Both are non-practicing Muslims, and Mahdi even claimed to have some Jewish ancestry.

Towards the end of the interview, as my identity as an Israeli reporter was revealed, Hamza asked them about their view of Israel.

"I think most of the refugees had bad thinking about Israel but not to do something bad," Monaim said.

"Most of us escaped war," Mahdi added. "We don't want to start a new war. We just want to live our lives."

Monaim said he even noticed a change in attitudes towards Israel on Facebook posts; more Syrian voices are emerging that promote peace with Israel.

"The thinking is starting to see another way," Monaim said. "We see the problem isn't Israel. It's inside us."

Hamza said he has no jihadi friends with intentions to spread Islam in Europe. He said the Paris attacks by ISIS terrorists who apparently snuck into Europe as "refugees" ruined opportunities for well-intentioned Syrians. Like Monaim and Mahdi, he is tired of apologizing for the migrants who groped and allegedly raped German women on New Year's Eve. They're not Syrian, he insisted, whose population he says is more refined, educated.

"They're animals," Mahdi said of the perpetrators. All three resent the fake "refugees" who take advantage of their plight to receive Germany's benefits for asylum seekers. Mahdi even once met a beggar asking him for money, claiming he was from Syria, but the beggar couldn't speak Arabic.

Hamza and I finally found some more Arabic speakers, these from Egypt. They were scruffier than the Syrians and much more eager to speak with, or rather complain to, a reporter.

Mohammed from Egypt arrived six months ago, and he has no place to sleep. He waved his papers at me; he came for a new appointment to renew benefits only to leave with another appointment slip. Halab had not yet received authorization papers to reside in Germany legally, and he has been sleeping at the Lageso compound for four days, desperate for an appointment that will get him that authorization.

After several attempts to contact her via email, the Lageso publicist said they are too understaffed to give me a proper interview. The best she could do was provide some statistics. About 50,000 refugees live in Berlin's 144 shelters and camps; another 10,000 are already settled in apartments.

HIBA ALBASSIR, a refugee from Damascus, attends a workshop called Refugee Entrepreneurship Action Lab in Berlin. (Fabrizio Bensch/Reuters)

WE HEADED off to Tempelhof, an abandoned Berlin airport that has been converted into a refugee camp; it felt more like a ghetto. I had gotten a glimpse into Tempelhof through a video published in *Die Welt* that Biermann and Hamza had shared with me. A Jewish man by the name of Yonatan Shay had gone in with a camera, wearing a kippa, to test reactions on Jews and Israel. One wall showed a swastika and a map of Palestine (i.e. the entire land of Israel). Shay was met largely with curiosity, mild hostility, but no violent altercation.

We didn't have an appointment to enter Tempelhof, but Hamza said it was the site of some unrest. A fight had broken out over the treatment of the guards and the unsanitary conditions.

On the road leading to the housing facility I saw a man who looked familiar. He had appeared in the video, responding with curiosity to that mysterious Jew in the camp. At age 20, he had fled from Baghdad. Next to him stood a man named Saleem from Lebanon. Hamza gave me the Iraqi's basic story through translation.

He had wavy hair that appeared colored to add a bit of style; had been a soccer player and singer back home; these days, he could hardly smile. He came for a better future, to study – he very much wants to learn German – but the crowded, filthy conditions are not suited towards productive activity. People loiter around with nothing to do. He suffers from a stomach virus.

Would he have rather stayed in Iraq? "In my area in Iraq there is a war so of course it's better than that... everyone is dreaming to come to Germany, and thank God I'm here."

Salaam was rather quiet, but he admitted to having posed as a Syrian to get into Germany, much to Hamza's dismay. Hamza later told me there's a Facebook group of Syrians seeking to out these imposters. Hamza asked Saleem – rather pressed him – what he thought of Israel. "Israel is a problem," Saleem said without elaborating.

We were anxious to leave spooky Tempelhof. The next shelter, Spandau, provided relief. The entrance foyer was an active laundry room; the halls of the offices were bright and clean. A pretty, friendly Syrian social worker with perfect English graciously guided us to clean restrooms and a conference room where we were to meet Ahmed Muhammed, a Kurdish refugee from Qamishli, Syria, near the Turkish border. Immediately, upon hearing where I was from, he greeted us warmly with: "We are all humans. It doesn't matter if you're Muslim, Jewish or Christian. Everyone is the same."

The authentic Syrian refugees have the most promise of overcoming difficult conditions to build a new, productive life, and to integrate into a liberal democracy

Through Hamza, Ahmed said Muhammed had Jewish friends in Qamishli; a small synagogue is still protected by the Kurds. He said Israel is more humane than Arab countries that reject Syrian refugees, and he is aware of a strong Kurdish community in Israel. Once Ahmed started talking, he couldn't stop in what sounded like elegant Arabic – and not to complain about his living conditions, but to cry for help. With a leather jacket and an imposing frame, and broken, yellowed teeth from smoking and lack of dental care, it was clear that he was a man of importance in Syria – a proud, accomplished man. Indeed, he owned a supermarket and several homes, including in Damascus.

"Everything is gone."

ISIS had taken over his house. Confirming systematic Kurdish opposition to ISIS, he said he even taught his young daughters how to use a gun to defend themselves from ISIS.

He whipped out his smartphone, anxious to show me a video from his sick brother, holed up in his home, telling the world that his wife had been killed. Ahmed, once a charitable man of means, wishes an organization would step in and rescue him.

He came to Germany with his 23-year-old daughter and 19-year-old son, barely making ends meet off a subsidy of €360 each a month. He longs to be reunited with his wife and daughters in Syria, who are stuck in Istanbul, and he showed us a picture of them – one of the girls healthy and happy back in Syria, and one of them with calloused feet in Turkey. They're trying their best to go through diplomatic, bureaucratic channels to attain safe passage into Germany; the women and children won't try their luck with the smugglers who make a living taking migrants across land and sea via crowded boats and vans.

Muhammed would go back to Syria if he could, but for now Germany is his home, and he called Susan Hermenau his little sister, although they look nothing alike. The tall, thin blonde clearly feels affection for Muhammed, but when we got to her office for the first German official view of the crisis, she was no nonsense and frank.

Hermenau is a spokesperson for PRISOD, a private social services company outsourced by the German government responsible for 14 shelters in Berlin, around 4,500 refugees in total. Every district in Germany is required to take in a certain percentage of refugees, so that they are spread out throughout the country. Hermenau acknowledged major shortcomings in the administration of the refugees and supposed asylum seekers.

"The bureaucracy is not working," she said. "We're doing our job but we rely on the state. If this state collapses, which is happening right now, I have no one to talk to. No one is answering the phone... I know they cannot. They are completely overwhelmed. And that's why there are bunch of people staying in front of Lageso."

She believes Germany has the responsibility to accept people who might otherwise perish, "but you have to find a way to distribute them in Europe. You have to find the way not to let the whole area of Europe break down. That's what's happening. The whole European Union is falling apart."

New Year's Eve has triggered the tightening of filters against economic opportunists, but Germany's asylum laws dictate that people who arrive in Germany claiming political persecution are provided with shelter and limited benefits for three months. The process of checking the veracity of such claims could take up to a month.

Hermenau has noticed that integration into a liberal democracy is the greatest challenge for the refugees, and the assaults on New Year's Eve are just one symptom.

"These young men never drank alcohol before, never saw a sexy woman. They were never free." It was a sentiment shared by Hamza.

Hermenau, on the other hand, experienced no impropriety – only sweetness and gratitude – from the refugees in her care; in fact, she doesn't like the term "refugee" since it depersonalizes human beings.

However, it seemed clear from my trip that "refugee" is not the accurate term for so many of the migrants. The authentic Syrian refugees, like Hamza, have the most promise of overcoming difficult conditions to build a new, productive life, and to integrate into a liberal democracy. The imposters, opportunists, and who knows? Potential terrorists pose the greatest challenge to Germany, and unsuspecting tourists sitting at Starbucks. Whatever one's opinion – pro or against – one thing is certain, as Hermanau noted. Germany will never be the same.

"The challenge for the news and also the Germans is to learn that these are just new people, and not only are they the ones who have to change, everybody has to change. It will change everything. Germany will not stay the same with these millions of people coming. We have to find our peace. That's the only way." ■