

The Guests in My House: An Autoethnographic Narrative of the Relationships between Austrian Hosts and Syrian Refugees

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Cultural entanglements....

1 (Yasin, a Syrian family father):

Dear Leon,

I need your advice about how to deal with a mouse in the house. We have seen a mouse in the kitchen. I have brought poison from the hardware store and a mouse catcher. But it seems to be an intelligent one that has not touched any piece of the poison. As you know the girls are afraid, and do not sleep in their room as it is near the kitchen.

Do you have an advice or tips on how to deal with the situation? They may come from some holes and I am trying to figure it out.

Best Regards,

Yasin

2 (Leon, son of the author and manager of the apartment, emails his mother, the author):

Hi mom (see attached mail from Yasin), I do not have any experience with mice but I remember we had one many years ago. Do you have any recommendations as to how to deal with them?

Leon

3 (Me mother of Leon emails):

Oh Yasin, I have quite a lot of experience with mice too.....They are intelligent and only some of them go into the trap. But the trap with a bit of cheese in it is still the best catcher. Tell your girls, that the mice are much more afraid of them than they could be of the mice. May be this helps a bit.

Introduction

Born and educated in Tenerife/Canary Islands/Spain, I went on to study psychology in Vienna, and I have been a systemic family therapist and trainer for almost 40 years. For many years I worked at a family therapy center and at the largest systemic therapy institute (ÖAS)¹ of Vienna. My husband has worked as a university professor in social and cultural history at the University of Vienna. Both of us have a 'special vein' for experiential qualitative approaches in the social and cultural sciences. Having grasped the unique opportunity to house Syrian refugees² from autumn 2015 until now, both of us transformed

¹ Österreichische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Systemische Therapie und Systemische Studien (ÖAS) founded 1983 and deeply attached to constructivistic and constructionistic ideas. Some of us went to visit Harry Goolishian, Tom Andersen, Karl Tom and they came to Austria to hold seminars in the late eighties.

² I want to refer to them as 'guests' throughout this project, being aware of the stigmatizing connotation of the word 'refugee'. I am also giving significance to the fact, that every person coming from Syria has their

this experience into a personal research question: My husband developed a social research project focusing on life under war conditions and the process of legal emigration and the illegal escape from war of Syrian physicians and pharmacists. I focus first on the experience of living together with Syrian refugees in Vienna. I will proceed to describe our guests. In the first month we hosted two men (Tarek, age 45 and Can, age 33). The second wife of Tarek, a widow with a little girl (Samira, age 25 and Leyla, age 6), arrived one month later. Tarek's first wife arrived with 5 children (aged 18, 17, 14, 10, 9) six months later, after Tarek had gotten asylum in April 2016 and asked for family reunification. He organized the legal immigration of his first wife and his children with a visa. Until this, his first family had lived in one of the big Jordanian refugee camps. From that moment onwards he switched between our house, where his second wife and her daughter lived and the new home of his first family in another district of Vienna. Can (a single man) stayed with us until May 2016. In May 2017 we announced that we would like Samira and Leyla to move out at the end of the year. In the meantime she found a one-room apartment on the other side of the city, very near to Tarek's first family's flat. This is the 'short version', of our hosting process.

Methods of reflecting and writing

In this book, I write about an ongoing research project. I use autoethnographic evocative methods developed by several scholars³ to recall my experiences and reflections on everyday life with these refugees, our guests. I recall those who were present and the 'important others' who were not, such as Tarek's first family (cf. Tomm et al., 2014). Even until now Tarek does not know more than five German words, and we don't speak more than five Arabic words. Therefore we can only communicate about basic subjects. Inner visions and fantasies about my understanding of episodes and scenes, combined with my ideas of the 'significant others' outside the present context represent my very own experience. I rely on my 'self-experience', which has always been an important issue in my training as a systemic therapist, through which I try to combine triadic and dyadic trails of interaction (Ahlers, 1996; 1998). Another focus in this very special daily communication with limited languages is the gender perspective, which again is one of the topics I deal with

own, unique life-story according to the geographical, cultural and individual experience giving meaning to life. All guests have been given pseudonyms. Their hometowns and some live-events have been changed to protect their identities, as long as it does not interfere with the reflexive research process.

³ Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2006; Ellis et al., 2010; 2011; Ploder & Stadlbauer 2017; Stadlbauer, 2017

as a systemic therapist (Ahlers, 1999). My bicultural background helps me to empathize with some of the behavior of our guests, which I feel many times to be alien.

When I let my inner voices speak I operate with a technique Peter Rober calls ‘inner conversation’. He uses his inner dialogue evolving throughout a therapeutic conversation reflecting on the process after a therapeutic session has taken place. He likes to do this shortly after the session and again after two weeks (Rober, 2002; 2010; 2011; 2014). I try to sit down every second day to write down my impressions, which had been made the previous day. In the ongoing project and in the forthcoming report on I talk about ‘inner conversations’ with myself, trying to understand the ‘scene’, the ‘episode’ and my ‘feelings’ towards a special moment in the context of living with our Syrian guests. My inner disputes are about understanding their way of life, their concerns and their quarrels within themselves, their hopes, troubles and expectations towards their live in Austria. I reflect on my ideas about what I think would be a way for them to integrate themselves in Austrian society, and my insight, that the ideas do not always resonate in them. I talk about my inner struggles to ‘touch’ their life-style, without grasping all of it.⁴ Some of my reported reflections were made later, when I went through the first versions of this text. As they are not immediate responses to the experience I call them ‘reflections looking back’. They are connected to the concept of ‘inner conversation’ after more time has elapsed.

Other ‘inner conversations’ refer to dialogues, even disputes between my husband and me, and sometimes within our family (husband, youngest son and myself). I describe some discussions about our differing experiences in everyday life, trying to find a mutual negotiation of meaning.⁵ I refer to our disputes according to Sheila McNamee’s concept of ‘radical presence’ and the necessity to perform. We try to escape the Babylonian feeling of emotional messiness when communicating without a common language. Our guests are not simply visiting us. They were under heavy pressure to save their lives, and they are now stressed by a host society, which is alien to them. All of us try to fully encounter each other in everyday life, but we produce a mixture of misunderstandings or uncertainties, astonishment, reluctance, willing to overcome shameful or hostile situations and a curiosity for Arabic culture. The confrontation with daily news about terrorism, fundamentalism, and

⁴ Austria is my second homeland, as it was the country where I came to study psychology and later settled. I was born and educated in Tenerife/Canary Islands/Spain.

⁵ Those were very pragmatic questions for example where we should put the shoes in front of the main entrance of our house or how to express the invitation for a shared dinner, but it could also touch complicated interpretations about the role my husband could/would have had in front of Samira, Tarek’s second wife, when Tarek was not there, or about who could enter their apartment under which circumstances, etc.

all prejudices against the Muslim world coming from outside makes our encounter a very special project with manifold impressions.

Aside from the focus on our Syrian guests, I introduce discursive reflections on another level, referring the ideas to what Bateson (1981) coins as ‘metalogues’ with his daughter Mary Catherine in his famous book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Following from him, I try to reflect on a more abstract idea concerning the issue of ‘cultural and social integration’ from a relational and constructionist point of view.

The beginning: Finding our guests

In late summer 2015, coming back from our usual summer holidays on Tenerife, we were deeply moved by the many thousands of refugees from the Syrian civil war arriving on Austrian borders. The eastern reception camp near Vienna, Traiskirchen, was totally overcrowded and refugees slept in tents or without any shelter outside the camps and in railway stations. Many of our friends tried to help by preparing meals, collecting and distributing clothes, hygiene articles and other things for daily needs; some offered German language training or went to the train stations to welcome refugees with water and food. They behaved as citizens in the very republican sense – as my husband likes to express it – with a strong feeling for the right to have human rights. Some of the wealthier ones even rented apartments for the refugees arriving in Vienna and others opened their private houses and flats. A private alternative school hosted hundreds of refugees over some weeks. Many of the refugees were on their way to Germany or Sweden. They stayed in Vienna just for a few days, taking a shower, washing their clothes, or relaxing for a while until they got the signal from Austrian authorities to continue their journey to western and northern parts of Europe.

In those late summer days assistance was organized by civil society with barely any help from governmental institutions. Many good ideas came from civilians and were immediately put into action. These volunteers were successful in preventing total chaos. On the other hand, however, a growing part of the population developed growing hostile feelings culminating in panic against what they interpreted and named as “wave” or a “flood” of refugees, fearing sexual abuse of Austrian girls, or an outburst of criminality. For example: friends of my friends bought guns to withstand what they believed to be a growing everyday danger.

If we were to share our home with refugees, how could we find ‘suitable’ ones? At first we tried to communicate with NGOs, but it turned out not to be that easy. The Austrian system of civil and confessional help organizations was totally overwhelmed and unable to react to thousands of requests like ours. This left us helpless and sometimes even angered me. More than two months went by from the day we took the decision to house refugees until their arrival. Being a rather impatient and quick person I could not understand why it was so difficult to get in touch with refugees. We used the waiting time to prepare ourselves. I wrote to several e-mail addresses and talked with the Caritas (associated with the Catholic Church) and the Deaconship (of the Protestant Church). Both organizations were eager to ask me questions concerning the quality of the flat we offered, the distance between our house and the next supermarket or the next bus station and many other conditions, which I felt to be of little relevance at this crucial, historic moment. I thought the NGOs were more inclined to evaluate us than to collaborate. They took note of all our dates, but never called back. After some weeks the Deaconship called and asked us to shelter a Syrian family, but at that time we already had two Syrian refugees living with us. When we informed the organizations about this, they wanted to know from which institution we had got ‘our’ refugees. There evidently was a sort of competition between helping organizations.

At that time we already knew a Syrian named Yasin Haddad⁶. He had arrived in Vienna from another Arab state. Because of troubles with one of the secret services in Syria he asked for asylum in Austria and was soon acknowledged as a political refugee. He rented an apartment that I owned, located in another district of Vienna. Therefore, he knew my older son, Leon, who lives in the same rental flat. I met him personally for the first time when the dishwasher in Yasin’s flat stopped working properly. I told him about our idea to house Syrian refugees. Some years ago, Yasin had finished an MBA and had worked in the U.S.A for a while. As my husband would say, he was an ‘organic intellectual’ in the Antonio Gramsci⁷, sense who knows well about specific education, cultural and professional

⁶ He is the author of the ‘mouse’question. In the meantime we know his family well, we attended his awards ceremony for a prize he got from the Austrian institution for computer notions certification, we (my husband, my son Leon and I) in order to acquire Austrian citizenship quicker than usual. We invited him to our house and he lent himself as a translator many times.

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist philosopher and founder of the communist party in Italy, believed that every social class generates some intellectuals with their own capacity to express in words what other members of their social class feel and experience but cannot express. In this sense, some of the Syrian refugees are organic intellectuals, who become helpful in many ways, even for us in order to understand better what the refugees’ experience is like. (See Reinhard Sieder/Badran Farwati, Rebellion, Flucht/migration und Asyl: Ärzt*innen und Apotheker*innen nehmen an der Syrischen Revolution teil, fliehen aus dem Syrischen Krieg und erhalten Asyl in Österreich, in: Ursula Mindler-Steiner/Reinhard Sieder, Flucht & Asyl/Escape and Asylum. Austrian Journal of Historical Studies (OeZG) 28 (2017) vol. 2, 127-17

background of many of his fellow Syrians and how to improve their status in the hosting society.

Room and light

Our house was built over 2012 and 2013 in classic modern style as a villa containing private living space as well as work areas for each of us. The house is between green fields and a forest on the outskirts of Vienna. It is open to the surrounding landscape with big frameless glass windows. Just a few doors inside make the whole building very transparent. There is less intimacy and more connectedness among inhabitants than in most Austrian houses. There is a table big enough for 12 people in the living room and the dining area which opens towards the kitchen. The whole floor has a free view of the garden and a swimming pool, embedded in the garden. From the terrace we can slide into deep green water; the other side is full of plants, frogs and water salamanders. I am writing about this in some detail because it will be relevant, when a young Syrian refugee woman with a little daughter will become our guests. All our social life takes place on the main floor with its inner and outer parts, whereas we retire to our studios and bedroom on the third floor. Downstairs there is a big separate apartment. It was obvious for us that this apartment would be the best place for the Syrian guests. It has a separate entrance, a bathroom, a kitchen and its own terrace. They would also use our main entrance hall to access what we call the technical room full of machines regulating the heating, the water and the electricity. There they would use our cleaning materials and two washing machines.

When we planned the house, the idea was to use this apartment as my office with a separate entrance for my clients. Two sides are long glass walls with thick curtains to shutter the light or to escape observation. As I am writing this text in the summer of 2017, a Syrian family is still living in this apartment. The curtains are closed nearly all the time. Obviously, the Syrian family creates a home behind curtain ‘walls’, preventing too much sunlight entering the room and suggesting privacy and shelter. If they were to open the curtains they would see either into an atrium with a big tree on one side, or into the northern part of the garden. But the curtains are closed all the time.

Tarek and Can – an odd couple of Syrian men

It was in October 2015 when the Syrian intellectual Yasin met his fellow Syrian Tarek at the Viennese main train station. Yasin discovered that he knew his brother from Abu Dhabi. Before bombs fell onto Tarek's home city in late 2011 he owned a house with a green garden and swimming pool. (We saw a photograph of it on his mobile phone; it was the first picture he showed us, obviously a symbol of a good family time, lost in the chaos of the Syrian civil war.) Showing us this photo at the very beginning of our relationship allowed Tarek to present himself as a wealthy person with a high quality of life. After his house was completely destroyed the whole family fled to one of the big refugee camps in Jordan.

Tarek did not speak English when he arrived in Vienna; he could not read the Latin alphabet, though he managed to establish limited communication by body language. He arrived together with Can, a 33-year-old man, who had been working in Syrian government administration. Can knew some basic English and this made them a competent team. Tarek arrived in Vienna in March 2015, leaving his first wife and children in the camp waiting for his granting of refugee status in Austria. He would then bring them to Austria. Tarek did not tell us about his second plan in the first weeks of his stay. Before he brought his first wife and his children, his next wife arrived. She was a young widow of 25 years. She arrived with one of her two children, a six-year-old girl. Her son lives with his late father's family in Lebanon. We learned about that some months later.

Can is the son of a rather well-off family in Aleppo. He studied Syrian law and was employed in the Syrian government. His mother, a widow, sent him away to avoid his conscription in the Syrian Army. Can arrived in Vienna after a fearful and dangerous ordeal over the Mediterranean Sea and over the Balkan route in the summer of 2015. First he stayed in a tent outside the reception camp in Traiskirchen, Lower Austria. There he was robbed of all of his documents. One brother fled to Turkey, a married sister fled to Luxembourg. His mother stayed with Can's twin-brother until the last fights from the city of Aleppo. Now she lives with another sister of his in Latakia, a Syrian port city on the Mediterranean coast. After half a year, Can told me that his mother wanted him to marry a cousin. Maybe this was another reason for him to leave Syria. Can's father died when he was five years old. As a lawyer and businessman, his father had owned big pieces of land in Raqqa, later occupied by the Islamic State group.

Both of us were happy; they were happy to enter a new home and we were happy to have finally succeeded in our search. We were impatient to begin a communal life with them. We focused on getting them acquainted with our dog, with the house management and amenities such as the heating system, washing machine, shower, separating the rubbish, etc.,

etc. We went for a walk in the forest together with them, proud to show them the countryside. There is a stolen Turkish grave with an Arabic inscription from the time Vienna was almost conquered by the Othman empire in the seventeenth century. We took them there to show the Arabic signs, and they seemed happy to be able to share this experience with us. Can and Tarek seemed to understand each other well. Neither of them wanted to have their new address in Vienna, considering the institutions of lower Austria, where they had come from, to be quicker in the asylum process. Every two weeks they went to the old place outside Vienna to collect their official 'pocket money', 40 Euros. It took us two months to convince them to declare our address at the city registry of Vienna. They were very suspicious about the 'city of Vienna asylum principles', the information being mostly transmitted orally from other Syrian colleagues.

Reflection looking back: *It was the beginning of my journey into accepting the mixture of uncertainty about so many things combined with having seemingly no wish for clearing up my uncertainty on the other. Sometimes in desperation, I felt that they were choosing the wrong paths in my country; on the other hand also not knowing, whether my country was as good to them, as the media narrated on a daily basis at the time. Very often my husband and I thought that governmental procedures were not carried out correctly, that even for us no information was available, that people who we had expected to be pro-refugee, even friends of ours, were not, etc. Therefore reluctantly I accepted more and more to live without a clear plan for the near future of our guests. My concern was their language course, the money they received from government and when and what specific timetables and official encounters they had to fulfill to keep track of government assistance.*

When we invited them to eat with us, they always brought some food they had prepared. Tarek had a gift for Syrian cuisine. Can used to help us in the kitchen, by washing the dishes after the meal or by preparing the 'Taboule' (typical Levantine salad). I spoke German with him then. Each day we read one page in a very famous Austrian children's book. I read it first and he repeated it. I learned from him that his mother had rehearsed a lot with him during childhood as he had reading problems at school. They overcame that together. They had a strong affiliation and Can once said to me, that I was a bit like his mother. Can was constantly listening to German using a smartphone application. He could do that for every waking hour of the day. He slept a lot however, sometimes for 48 hours without interruption.

Reflection looking back: *Today I am aware of how difficult those times were for Can. At that time he may have felt 'really secure' after fleeing from Syria and the many hours he slept were a way of coping with the situation and confronting the new challenges in Austria. We used to make jokes about him wearing the woolen bonnet we gave him for wintertime all the time, even for sleeping. He very often wore his coat inside the house. It seemed as if he needed warmth from anywhere he went.*

In the meantime Tarek amused us with his two English words “problem” and “no problem”, a lot of social skills, showed us his good humor and made a good social feeling for our hosting. He was behaving as the ‘best’ guest you can think off, trying to help whenever he felt it needed. He was quick to understand social situations in their special context, without verbalizing. One afternoon we invited our friends to play music all together. We knew a Jewish pianist and a Mexican singer and guitar player and we had heard from Tarek that he played the Syrian lute, called the ‘Ud’. We brought him one, but it was the wrong one. That afternoon we realized that Can was a fan of ‘Shakira’, so the Mexican woman sang a Shakira song and he made the beat with his fingers on the table. Tarek sang a Syrian song and we admired his tenor voice. It was a pleasant afternoon, getting to know each others’ music tastes.

Inner conversation: *My husband and I were becoming euphoric. Everything seemed so easy going. Without understanding the language we understood the essential in each other: Art, music, creative action together. There is a mutual admiration, a ‘being with each other’, may be it is what Sheila McNamee calls ‘radical presence’ (McNamee 2017). We feel good with most of our friends congratulating us for our decision to take in Syrian refugees and becoming curious about it. I can see them learning from our culture and us showing them our world of meanings and maybe learning something from them too. I say it this way, because I am aware that I take the position of being the one from whom they have to learn more!*

Samira’s and Leyla’s virtual introduction to our household

Two weeks after they had established in our house Tarek first time mentioned his “girlfriend”. ‘Girlfriend’ was the third English word in his repertoire. We talked about the

'girlfriend', not knowing how to handle the situation. Now we were informed that she was his second wife. We heard, that she was already on the Balkan route towards Austria. He knew that for official reasons, in Austria she would be a 'girlfriend'. Yasin told us for the first time that he had married the woman in Jordan because she was a widow, her first husband was killed by a bomb in the Syrian civil war. She had a little, six-year-old daughter travelling with her. To marry her meant protection for the widowed woman and to assume the responsibility for her and her daughter. Her tribe would not admit any other approach to a woman, Yasin explained. We accepted her arrival without hesitation. We learned that he had met her in a Jordanian refugee camp, that they had fallen in love there and that Tarek's first wife presumably had accepted (or had to accept) this marriage. With his few words and using the translation application on the smartphone Tarek explained, that his second wife Samira had visited and nursed his first wife in hospital and that both had become best friends. He told us that everything was perfectly arranged and that he was very much in love with this woman. He told us that his first wife had been a dialysis patient since they arrived in the Jordan camp. Once international funding had been cut down, the Jordanian camp could not supply free dialysis anymore. The health problem had motivated him to choose Austria as a country with a good national health system as a target country for their migration. His second wife Samira was 20 years younger than Tarek, he tells us. She is 25 years old, the same age as one of my sons.

Inner conversation: *I am confused by the story. The mixture of 'allowances' and 'duties' for the man towards the woman, her adherence to the 'clan' to dictate the principles for marriage make clear that the woman does not have much freedom to decide about her life. On the other hand I listen to Tarek's infatuation talking about her and I take the perspective of the little daughter who has the kind of a new father, knowing that this girl did not get to know her real father. My personal and professional experience with blended families tells me, that this could be a good constellation for forming two families. In the Arabic culture I assume, the woman would make any sacrifice to work for a better future for all the kids in the host country. Such a life might resemble a rebuilt family in Austria.*

Whenever the men brought a dish when eating together with us, Tarek would now say: Samira is a much better cook than me. He was and still is a perfect networker. He managed to make us curious about Samira. He sent photos of our dog to the little daughter by Whatsapp. In fact he let them participate in our daily routine, regularly sending photos

over Whatsapp. We became part of the their story. We felt so close to them, knowing them to be on the route we were hearing about on the media every day. Once we heard that they had been stopped at the border in Macedonia we all felt helpless and frightened, that Samira and her little daughter would be forbidden to cross into Serbia. That moment was the first and only time I saw both men going to the Islamic center to pray. Never ever again was this an issue, though I tried to forward them to other Islamic centers in different districts in Vienna.

Inner conversation: *After the experience I observe myself asking, what kind of religious practices were they involved in. I have not the slightest idea about their Islamic spirituality, religious convictions or habits. Praying does not seem to be of big importance to them. Both of them wear western clothes, have western mobile phones, their hair is cut in the fashionable western manner. What could their actual 'convictions' be? For the first time I ask myself, what it is that they may think about us, our daily habits, at least about that, what they see. They see us always doing things, leaving the house, coming back, very busy. What effect do these habits have on their inner ideas about life style and wellbeing?*

My husband and I were concerned about Can, becoming aware of the fact, that our offer of two or three young men or a family with one child had been taken advantage of without us noticing. Can offered to go without any sign of reluctance, but we had bonded already, and we did not want to release him. He still was our English translator for daily communication. We decided to offer him the music room downstairs, thinking that he would share a bathroom and kitchen with the family of Tarek. We also offered him our son's bathroom downstairs. This did not turn out to be a good idea.

Reflection looking back: *Thinking about this event now I feel a bit taken advantage of and I ask myself (I will never know) how much Can knew of Tarek's plan. Did Tarek inform him when entering our house that his second wife would arrive one month later? In their perspective that they may have played with the idea, that in the end it would be possible for Can to stay. The group dynamics between the new family and Can in the next half year lets me hypothesize that Can was left out of the plan, and they had to cope with the fact that he was staying with us. Can was dependent on Tarek, who at the same time could be jealous of Can, a much younger and attractive man, and Samira may have felt disturbed in her family*

building project, having to bond to Tarek as much as possible before his first wife and family would arrive in Vienna.

On the day when we expected Samira to arrive with her daughter Leyla we were all in a special mood. Even our son was a bit intrigued about the event. We were waiting for the big appearance; in the evening Tarek announced that he was going to fetch them. Samira and Leyla had arrived on a bus, and she was trying to describe to him where she was on the phone. She was somewhere outside Vienna at the station. Suddenly they were in the doorway: Mother and daughter, tired and dirty, but in good humor. That evening we just threw away their dirty socks and shoes. We sat down to drink a short cup of tea. Everything appeared to be so normal, a kind of coming back to sometime somewhere. They said goodbye to us to take a bath and went to sleep. Can went to what we called the 'music room', his new home from then on.

I will proceed now to describe our everyday life with Can, Samira, Leyla and Tarek, always from my own perspective with my inner conversations and dialogues, my positions, voices, my astonishment and sometimes anger, my feeling of helplessness and the many discussions we had in our family about our way of behaving towards our special guests. As a reference I am introducing an actual genogram for Tarek in his bond with his second wife, Samira, and both first families in the same picture. I also introduce a genogram from Can, focusing on his family of origin, as he has no actual family. I will begin with Samira, the second Muslim wife of Tarek.

Samira, second Muslim wife of Tarek

Samira is a 25-year-old woman from a village near the Syrian-Jordanian border. A bomb killed her first husband. She is a Syrian woman with a headscarf who married Tarek in Jordan. From him we know he married her because his first wife was so ill and that she accepted the marriage and was even nursed by Samira in the refugee camp. Samira is a strong young woman, from whom we know that she helped her mother to build a house, her father being ill at the time. She and her daughter are a good team, Leyla is a charming little girl, and her mother has a friendly smile. They are likable guests. Leyla is a curious and active girl. She wants to learn to ride on the bicycle and to move the sleigh on the first snow. She is not at all afraid. Tarek had been praising Samira's cooking abilities, and she treats us

to some of her dishes now and then. When we eat together they always prepare way too much food and the table “bends”. Asking her what her work projects for the future in Austria are, she answers with “cooking”.

Inner conversation: *I do not assume that Samira is planning to work here, as we heard from our Syrian colleagues living in Austria that this is not the usual life project for a traditional Syrian woman, who is in charge of the house, the children and the man. I assume that Tarek married her to overcome the fate with his first wife. I know from many friends who are hosting Syrians, that when asked what work they want to do, 95 % of Syrian women answer the same thing. Whether they know what it means to cook as a professional, is hard to say. But I listen to my inner voices towards Samira’s role as an Arabic woman and whether I can accept it. It is a stubborn difficult dialogue I maintain with myself, involving her husband Tarek with his patriarchal stance, his most probable needs and her capacity to cope with it, considering that she is a second wife, and a widow with a little girl, for whom Tarek has taken responsibility by marrying.*

Three months after her arrival, while driving with me in my car, Samira suddenly shows me a photo of her son on her smartphone. He is 10-years-old by now and living with his late father’s family in Lebanon. She saw him once for a week in Amman before leaving to Vienna on the Balkan route.

Inner conversation: *From the outset I understood that she was a young mother, but now I realized, that she must have been 14 years of age when she was first married, and most likely an arranged marriage. I had heard that her father was also much older than her mother. I assume, that her mother had not been the first wife of her father. I feel very awkward about her now scattered and disrupted family and her early marriage before. I imagine my older son, same age as her, being in her situation. Both of them are judicious young adults. But my son was free to develop in his way until now whereas she did not have the option. Even so I have to admit she emanates an optimistic charisma. I wonder how I would have evolved if I had grown up like her?*

Seen from our perspective, Samira’s relationship to Tarek, 20 years her senior but looking even older, looks somewhat awkward. She looks at him with a little irony, towards his habits of eating, his body measures and his minimal German. On the other hand she

completely subordinates and expects help from Tarek when she or her daughter needs help (doctors, medicine or just consolation and coping with Austrian authorities). Tarek organizes her arrival and the steps she has to take. For the state she is just a single mother with a child. He takes her to hospital for care for a shrapnel wound in her head.

Inner conversation and family discussions: *Talking with my husband about the sudden visit to the hospital for an almost 2 year old cranial shrapnel wound we discuss the necessity to take her to hospital. We assume that he does it to make it easier for her to get acknowledged as a refugee here. I am ambivalent about the way he organizes her life. He wants to show her that he knows the correct steps to take in this country. But he also holds her away from making autonomous decisions. My husband is of the opinion that he is supporting of and attending to her. However I feel a patriarchal motivation in his provision of help as a way of diminishing her autonomy.*

He makes all the papers with the Austrian administration for her, always accompanied by his friend Ilias, who speaks much better German than he does. As soon as this is settled, Tarek relaxes. From now on, Samira's position in this newly built temporary family is cooking for 'all of them' downstairs. Whether she does it for Can because she thinks we expect that or whether he is paying something for it, we will never know. We see Leyla bringing him "Jezz Muzz" every night. In the meantime he eats fruit, eggs and onions in his room, which we do not approve of because there is no kitchen in that room. Apart from that, he has nothing to do with them. My husband and I get an increasing sense that there is little engagement between them. When I ask Can to take Samira to his German course just to acquire the information for next possible courses in her level, he refuses.

Inner conversation: *I do not understand what is going on between the three adults. After he left, Can seems to have renounced his friendship to Tarek. Tarek says that Samira does not like to have Can in our Whatsapp group. Leyla is the one who visits Can and he spends a little time with her. But Can tells me that Leyla is not behaving like a woman. What does it mean in the context of the three of them? We are highly irritated by the disagreeable relations downstairs, and are getting important information much too late. I.e.. Not using their bathroom or not eating with them. We do not know how to handle it, because we cannot really talk with them. Can is the only one to speak English, but he is the wrong one to translate.*

I have several telephone conversations with Yasin, and he reassures me, that the bathroom is open to be used by friends of the family. Is it important to know though, that the friend cannot enter the house while the patriarch is out of the house. But this would be possible, because Tarek is at home most of the time. One pragmatic explanation I give myself is that they are all jealous of the other for different reasons: Tarek on Can, being the younger, attractive man, Can on Samira, who took Tarek away from him and Samira on Can, who is disturbing her relation with Tarek. While at the same time they are like kids in a competition for the attention of their parents. Symbolically the parents for them are us: their hosts!

Apart from cooking for ‘all of them’, Samira is Leyla’s mother, and she is a very good mother. Leyla has a good physical contact with her mother and both are usually in good humour. Samira wants her daughter to participate in everything that may turn up. She gets a very tiny tricycle from Tarek, a bit too small for her, but Leyla uses it in front of the house as Samira watches her. Samira’s own adventure with a freshly bought bicycle ends with her falling down into the ditch: No more bicycle for Samira. But the mother likes to see her child moving and experimenting with new things. At the beginning she also wants her to learn from us. Mother and daughter are very close. They lived the Balkan route together and most probably Leyla was very important for Samira after having lost her husband. Leyla never got to know her biological father, who died before she was born.

Inner conversation: *I am expecting Leyla to be ready to learn our culture. She seems to be curious about so many things. She rehearses the German word, because she wants to have contact with us.*

Samira is not motivated to follow a German course. At first I tried hard to book a course, even paying for it for her. She answers that she will wait until she gets the course from the government. I look for cheap possibilities on the Internet or free courses for women. She never visits them. When asked whether they want to go back to Syria when the war is over both, Tarek and Samira, always say they don’t. It is a difficult question because the war is not over, but they seem to assume that they are going to be here for long. Tarek likes to talk about the many jobs here in Austria, but we know that they are not all open to him and apart from that: How will he manage to get one without speaking the language?

Inner conversation: *I begin to assume that Samira thinks it is the responsibility of the Austrian government to teach her the German language. From the point of view of being a refugee this might be a perspective. This can be an option taking it as a temporary stay, waiting for the moment to go back to your country, but it is not, if you are planning to stay for long. If it were me, I would get impatient and search for possibilities to develop coping strategies for handling the cultural challenges. I interpret Samira's passivity as a mixture of fear, of ambivalence towards Austria, and too little sense of agency. As a woman she is waiting for Tarek to sort out her life.*

After several tries on my side I give up the project to bringing both of them to German courses as soon as possible. We are happy to get a place at the nursery school for Leyla. This gives life a structure of bringing and fetching the girl from school. Apart from that the couple has enough challenges getting the E-card for health and social security, managing the money and buying Syrian products to cook their meals.

A young Syrian man: Can

Can lived with his mother and his shortly married twin-brother in a rather big and beautiful house in Aleppo. His father died when he was 5 years of age. His father wanted him to have his birth certificate expedited in Raqqa, as they owned huge amounts of land there. His father had been a lawyer, and owned a supermarket chain. Can was a bit frightened about telling the Austrians that he was from Raqqa, now the core of the 'Islamic state'. He had lived in Aleppo most of the time only going to Raqqa for short visits. The twin brothers both studied law and worked in the state ministry until Can fled in 2015. At the beginning of his stay with us his brother was still getting his wage from the Syrian administration though he did not go to work as everything was shut down. Can told me that the money was delivered personally by a person from the government who visited the family once a month. All siblings of his family had attained some level of education, either academic or other. That meant the family had wealth and a liberal orientation. The sisters were married and scattered around Syria. His younger brother was an accountant and had fled to Turkey, where he was working in a supermarket as an accountant. Can describes his mother as being a strong person, who was able to manage the family after the early death of her husband. She helped Can through school, as he has some form of dyslexia. Can passed challenging exams after

finishing his law studies, alongside his twin brother, to be able to secure their positions in governmental institutions.

Tarek decided to bring Can with him, because he knew a bit of English. Can is such a silent man, so that Tarek may have expected him to remain passive and not be a nuisance for anybody. Can was not handy, whereas Tarek was. Tarek built a bed for him, Can tried to help him, but did not put much effort into it. Can was the English translator, and Tarek was the socializing and practical man. They were a good team. After Samira's and Leyla's arrival the whole communication dynamic between them changed, but we did not keep track of the daily occurrences downstairs. We met them upstairs at our mutual dinners or helped with administrative matters or health problems because they all had various pains and were eager to take medication, especially antibiotics.

One month later we realized that Can was not allowed to enter the big apartment, where Tarek now lived with Samira and her daughter. He did not use our son's bathroom either. He was not washing himself and was using a toilet in the garage for which he had to go out of the house. We tried to persuade him to use the bathroom of our son, and we were astonished that nobody had communicated with us about this new situation.

Reflection looking back: *I can say now that we did not want to interfere in the family life of the other three at that moment, trying to understand it as a different culture. I called Yasin and asked him about rules in Arabic families and how guests would be integrated in using bathroom and toilet in a shared apartment. I never was able to put the mosaic of meanings together and mired in uncertainty, but I was sure, that I could not solve the problem by any means of intervention.*

I heard in passing from Can that his twin brother was kidnapped in December 2015, at the same time that we were leaving for our holiday to Spain, and he felt preoccupied when we left. Coming back in January we were happy to hear that Can's mother had been able to release the young man from Al Nusra captivity, by negotiating with them. The brother came back with Hepatitis however. Coincidentally, Can was having symptoms those days which would have been similar to his brother's. His kidneys and his waist were aching, so we visited a doctor who told him he had to drink much more.

Inner conversation: *Reflecting on Can's body language, understanding his proximity to his brother and his helplessness, he may have even felt a sense of guilt for him being here now,*

in a safe country, not protecting his mother and the house in Aleppo. I do not exactly know how to handle my inner reflection, what to tell him, what to tell others, for example when visiting the doctor from whom Can is expecting a lot of medication or at least a blood analysis to have certainness about his illness. I suppose it would not be a relief for him to know this to be a supernatural answer to his brother's disappearance.

We also knew that Can had been staying in the room for days and nights even before knowing the fate of his twin brother. Either he slept or he put his earphones on to learn German. Or he connected to his family through the smartphone. He was so quiet that you could forget that he was there. He would not come out of his room for an entire day, lying in bed. When asked why he never came out, he answered in a friendly tone: I am very shy! Sometimes I had managed to bring him upstairs to learn German with me. We did it while we were preparing the meal. I had to push him, but I became aware that he liked it. He was eager to learn the language. We read a children book I liked very much, and I could transmit my fascination to him.

Inner conversation: *I feel a mixture of wanting to help him, to shelter him, to teach him the language, to make him feel comfortable. But I am also irritated seeing him sleeping all day long. My 17 year-old son, living next door to him sometimes sleeps until 1 o'clock on weekends. This may drive me crazy. But Can sleeps throughout the day and the night. He just does not get up. Once he slept 48 hours without interruption. I think for myself that this cannot help him. I try to understand that he had and is having hard times. I would like him to talk about his problems. I ask myself which psychotherapy student of mine I could ask to help him with regular 'talking cures'. I know that the organization of that is easy for me, being a teacher of psychotherapy. But I also expect that he would not entertain such an approach and I can somewhat understand. How could conversation help, in a language of which I know little, in a country I did not really chose to come, feeling like a stalk of grass hanging in the wind without purpose or a reasonable future goal in sight.*

We discuss Can in our family, when we are alone: How to get him out of his bed and his room? He is waiting for his Asylum status in Austria and for the money he will get. He is waiting for the German course he will then be able to pay for. We help him with the official dates at the authorities (police, passport, e-card, social affairs, etc.). This part is done. Now he has to wait! We try to put him on a German course, lending him the money for it. He is

reluctant, but in the end he accepts because I bring him there and I make the first registration for him. Now at least we know that he will go for three hours of German lessons 5 days a week.

Inner conversation: *I would like to have him move out. Even if he is traumatized, and especially now not knowing what is going to happen to his brother, I am sure that he would be better off, getting out of bed. It cannot be good for the body to be lying all time. He may be waiting for better times, but they will not fall from the sky. I suppose, that he is going through his trauma now that he finally has refuge in our house, but this knowledge does not help my patience. Although sometimes I think: He may just sleep out his trauma. But: don't you get ill, when you stay in bed? Usually, that is what I think: You are in bed all day when you are ill. And you won't get cured just by staying in bed. Or maybe you will? I am ambivalent about that. What I have to work out with myself is the anger I feel, having him down there in his bed all day. I offer to learn some German with him and he accepts. I send him to do little jobs and he does them. The dog is of big help, because he has to be taken for a walk and in the end all of them love the dog. In most cases, usually I knock at his door and he comes out dizzy from being in the middle of a deep sleep making me feel a mixture of anger and awkwardness.*

Tense dialogue⁸: *My husband and I discuss what is best for Can, and we are not of the same opinion. When I am angry about Can, my husband defends him. When he is angry because of usually something very similar, I defend him. Can is occasionally represented by 'invisible parents' struggling for his integration. My husband and I have different opinions about the duration of the stay of Syrian refugees in Austria. He refers to the convention of Geneva for refugees allowing the shelter in a country, until they can get back. In his opinion they are only waiting to return to their country, and thus, they do not need to integrate. Feeling sheltered should be enough for them under these conditions. I have the opinion that they could use the time to learn from the situation, even if they do go back. I expect them to be curious about us, otherwise I cannot really be curious about them. It is about relationship as a mutual process. I need a sense of partnership to stay in contact, and I retreat from that*

⁸ Sheila McNamee (2015) senses 'radical presence' in a dialogue, when the persons involved maintain their posture and same time try to understand the others in their respective posture. The dialogue may become tense, rather than easily resolved. Irritation, even anger are better hosts for a transforming dialogue than a quick harmonization of perspectives.

position if I do not feel that we are in such a relationship. We argue a lot about our positions, trying to understand the other without much success.

I take the position of ‘my own self-experience as a point of reference’. My husband organizes his own ‘research project, inviting Syrian medical doctors to talk about their motivation to flee’.

Bits and pieces of everyday life

Departing from my everyday experiences I am going to describe encounters from my perspective in contact to ‘them’, all of us trying to understand each other.

Can buying trousers with me in a shopping mall

Can is asking me to help him to buy a pair of trousers. He now receives money from the Austrian government, and he can buy things for himself. I have been buying what I thought necessary, giving it to him as a present at Christmas, and not always matching his taste, I suppose. But now he seems to need me to take him to the shopping center because he is simply too shy to enter a shop. We go by car. I show him the different places in a big shopping center nearby and try to explain the differences, so that he can select the place he likes. After a while explaining to him and him not taking a decision, I agree with myself, that I have to make a try. The British chain C & A seems suitable; he may even know it from Syria. We enter, and he seems to be nervous. He does not look, nor does he take clothes in his hands, he just stands besides me. That is why I make the first move: I show him 5 or 6 trousers I think would be suitable, and he selects one from those. I give him one more (my mother instinct makes me go for two now that we are here already). I have to convince him to try them on. They are pretty tight, but he says that he should work on losing weight, Ramadan is near, and that he was slimmer when he was in Syria. He wants to get back to that weight and therefore these two pair of trousers will fit!

“What about some shirts?” I say (We are on a good track, I feel). I give it a try, take another three or four from the rack, and he decides on two of them. Two trousers and two shirts: such is the yield of that afternoon. At the cashpoint he remembers that he needs a belt. I show him the table with the belts. I look for the right size as there are not many of them around. Looking at the prices, he becomes perplexed and says: “They are very expensive!”

I tell him, that C & A is a shop known for affordable prices and quality. He answers immediately: “They cost one third of this price in Aleppo.” I ask “Where?”. “At the Bazaar” he answers.

Arriving at the cashpoint again with the belt in his hands he sees a charity box on the counter. I observe his face, and I see that he is hesitating. Then he puts some coins inside with a sort of ‘arrogant’ facial expression.

Inner conversation: *I am wondering what the meaning of this action is. I know Islamic principles dictate that people should give money to beggars, but what I see in Can’s face seems different from that. His expression may mean “I can afford to give to others. It may be a sign of pride, and humanitarianism aimed at Austria, like saying “I am not only a refugee, but becoming part of civil society here”. I know that we will not be able to talk about this little scene. Whatever he thinks will remain unsaid. I am astonished and a bit irritated about this short moment in our situation of minimal communication.*

Yesterday evening, coming back from our meeting with Ken and Mary Gergen at the Sigmund Freud Private University- SFU

Getting to know Ken and Mary Gergen in Heidelberg 1984 and having read the saturated self (Gergen, 1991) I invited them to Vienna a very long time ago. After so many years I met them again tonight at the university. I told them about my autoethnographic text. I considered, that their ideas of social constructionism had something to do with my project (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Mary encouraged me to continue with the narrative of my experiences and both of them introduced relational performance as a method to me (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). The idea of combining different disciplines to do research inspired me to begin a new project I call ‘cultural dialogue’. It takes place within Austrian psychotherapy students and an Arabic community. Being a mixture of action research and relational performative transformation, this project is being an exciting adventure for both communities⁹.

Can is waiting for me to come back from our dinner. His room is at the entrance of the house, so he sees when I arrive, and I know when he is in the room because I see his shoes outside the door. Can now knows that he will leave us in May (next Sunday in fact),

⁹ A publication about transformative integrational reflections is planned for 2018 (Göttingen: Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht)

because we told him we need the room again. He is obtaining financial support from the government, and we also think that a room in a place nearer to the center with young people around him would be better for him.

Inner conversation: *It is my position after having had a lot of conversations with myself and with my husband about what would be better for Can: staying with us or leaving. Can wants to get his Syrian Legal study acknowledged in Austria. I am not sure that he will achieve this goal. Law is very difficult and language is very important. There are almost no common topics between Austria and Syria concerning the study, very different from medical studies for example, which are easily recognized. I do not put my pessimistic view forward to him because I do not want to disturb his dreams, which give him the hope and the motivation to learn the German language.*

I tried to help him looking up rooms in the Internet, especially on the student platforms. But I had to realize that Austrian students are not open to receive Syrian refugees in their student apartments. In the advertisements you do not read anybody offering that kind of open curiosity, rather they are asking for persons ready to socialize, make parties and be clean. Can is too shy and he does not drink! He even visited two of them, but then he found a room through a Syrian classmate. He calls it a 'studio' he will share with a refugee already living there, a Syrian Doctor from Aleppo, five years younger than him.

Can comes out of the house and greets me before I can enter the house. I know he smokes. I want to smoke my daily cigarette too. We understand each other; without saying one word, he invites me to a cigarette. We do not find an ashtray, and then he says he has none. What is he using as an ashtray all the time? Where is he ashing in my atrium if he has no astray? I keep all this to myself. He ashes into the empty cigarette box, and I find myself a piece of paper, which I roll into a cone to ash into.

Inner conversation: *Not a very good idea, in fact, but I do not want to lose the moment, because if I do, I will have to explain myself....*

We begin to smoke our cigarettes...I ask him about his course, his German, his Syrian friend of a friend, with whom he is going to live after leaving us. His answers are all the same: "Very, very good".

We talk about the German course. He says that he is helping others in the course. The teacher tells him, he should be in a better course (he names B1 to C1 German courses, he cannot tell me the right number for the level of German he is in).

Inner conversation: *I am wondering why he does not know the numbers defining the German course levels. If he wants to learn the language and study law, he should understand that part by now. Or does he want to be seen as an independent young man and another part in him is telling me, that I am giving him up. May be that is expressed in not remembering the right number of the course. I know from our relationship over time that he often compares me with his mother. She sometimes used to kick him into the world. He said to me that he needed it. That announcement gives me a certain security that I am driving on the right path, when I give him a kick out of the room now and again. But I feel strange with Can, a 33 years old man in my house behaving like a boy, my 17 years old son living here too, and me being a European woman, that he had never met before coming here. I do not find the right position for myself in this play. I am pondering over a fog of feelings, some notions of the Islamic world, maybe a lot of prejudices and a lot of questions in my mind...*

Right now, smoking the cigarette with him 4 days before he leaves us, I do not want to be his mother.

We finish our cigarettes. He also packs his cigarette in my paper cone. He wants to throw it in the dustbin. But I feel the paper is still hot and say “no” to his idea, so that he offers to put some water on the role of paper before he throws it in the dustbin. I accept, and we say goodnight to each other.

Leyla coming back from the Nursery School

Leyla has just had her 6th birthday in March. She is a charming girl who just repeats everyword of German by habit without understanding the meaning. We are surprised how easy it is for her to intonate and pronounce words in German now, which had been difficult for her. Over time it seems to have become more difficult for her. Now we do not understand each other, and she does not just repeat what she hears. She has been going to the nursery school since January. It is as if she has just stopped repeating words like she did at the beginning.

Today I picked her from the nursery because her mother was ill. Leyla seems to be proud, that the Austrian woman is coming to pick her up. “Auf Wiedersehen” she says to everybody on our way back to the wardrobes and downstairs to get outside. On our way back we pass an Austrian primary school. I try to explain her that this is the school where she will go next year. We see boys and girls coming out the door with their big schoolbags on their shoulders. I want her to have a ‘picture’ in her mind. Leyla answers with the words “yes” and “madrassa”. She just repeats the word many times. After a while I understand that she wants to tell me that ‘madrassa’ means school in Arabic.

Inner conversation: *Leyla wants me to learn the Arabic word for school. I was just showing her something here and now to have a shared experience with her. In a way she is imitating a position of her parents: “If I have to learn German, you have to learn Arabic”. Tarek used to do it with us during our common meals, trying to teach us Arabic, until one night my husband turned back: “No, I do not have to learn Arabic, you have to learn German, you are here and I am not there”. At the time, we thought this had to be said, because we did not see Tarek trying to learn one word of German.*

Our position towards their language skill is routed in our eagerness to get into verbal contact with all of them. I am so curious to learn more about them, but it is almost impossible. Now. I want to share the moment with Leyla, looking at these children coming out of school, but I get the impression that she is not sharing with me but rather translating into Arabic. I associate her little response to my offer to a subtle family constellation, which does not allow her to be quicker in language skills than her mother and her new father. I see Leyla fighting with translation, and it makes me think that she may not be allowed to speak better German than her parents. Can she overtake them? When I ask her something I always see her looking at her mother as seeking permission to let her answer. And Samira answers for her. Coming from the Nursery School today is a rare occasion of being together without any adult around. I feel like there is a veil between her and me, and I do not know what it is for: “Let us not come too near to each other”.

Tarek has big difficulties in learning the language. We cannot communicate with him apart from the names of household aids like ‘Hoover’, ‘machine’ and his ‘problem’, ‘no-problem’, ‘smart, smart, smart’. I know Tarek feels ashamed, as he is the only one with no English skills at all. He is still unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet. I want to book a course for him, and I realize that he has to go into a course for ‘alphabetization’ first. I know he comes

from a well off family and that he had studied the Arabic language at a University in Damascus for two years. After that he did several jobs and ended up running a business selling cars.

Inner conversation: *I continue to wonder about Tarek's frustration. Might he be reluctant to learn German as well as being frustrated by it? When I go as a tourist to another country I try to learn some words of the language there. Does the status of being refugees avail them of learning German? I feel awkward with Leyla instructing me in Arabic. Am I being impolite, or discourteous? Am I being colonial? I am bilingual myself, so I do not know how I learned Spanish and German simultaneously growing up in Spain. Maybe my bilingualism lets me take a special position: In fact I always hated translating. The words never mean the same thing in two languages. You have to feel, to smell and to sense a language within the culture just by using it. Translation does not help that; it is an obstacle more than anything else.*

Leyla and Angelo, the dog, – could be every day

Leyla loves to instruct the dog! In English, in German, not in Arabic: “Sit! Go! Platz! Sitz! Come!”

The dog reacts in a disturbed manner. Or he ignores her. He looks at me as if searching for help. Is he suffering? Her instructions are too quick to be followed. I know that dogs do not respect kids, they rather look after them, but he seems to be strongly irritated by her.

Inner conversation: *I remember our performance with the dog and our first Syrian guests. I feel I have to protect the dog. At the same time I am sure, he is a challenge for them and he is helping them a lot to understand our cultural thinking. I know that Turkish migrants, even after years, still have difficulties accepting dogs. If Leyla learns to hug him and to establish a relationship towards him, this will be a milestone for her integration.*

I know Leyla likes the dog. She has a little puppet she calls Angelo, same name as our dog. The dog is a bit like a little brother for her; at same time he is just an object. She is not eager to understand his signs.

Inner conversation: *I remember buying the dog when our elder son left the house. We wanted a companion for our smaller son to help him overcome his fear of dogs. Now Angelo is used for the same sort of task again. But something is different: Leyla is not my daughter, and I am not successful in showing her how she should treat a dog, as I did with my son, when he was little.*

I appreciate our dog. He is our hero without knowing it. I call him my 'intercultural integration dog' and I promise him, that on his grave I will put this sentence as a memorial for his services. Humans weigh more than animals, that is my final analysis.

A tense meal with Samira and Leyla

Leyla has had a terrible fight with her mother that we heard from upstairs. We ask Samira and Leyla to come up to eat with us, and we tell them, that we have prepared enough dishes, also some to their taste. Tarek is not coming today to be part of our meal. Leyla likes potatoes and Samira brings up her Taboule.

Leyla is in a very bad mood, not speaking and not eating. Samira tries to convince her to try some of our dishes. In answer to that Leyla plucks two little hairs hanging down from her mother's ear. Making an ugly face she seems to urge her mother to return these two hairs under the scarf again. Samira reacts immediately, a mixture of irritation and desperateness on her face.

Inner conversation: I am shocked about this moment. My concern is directed towards my feeling of body autonomy. Does the little girl not see what harm she is doing to her mother? She is behaving like an adult, maybe she is speaking for Tarek. Or maybe she tells him stories about her mother's behavior? Leyla cannot foresee that this is going to be her fate too, once she has grown up, but living in Austria, where most people do not wear a headscarf. She just wants to punish her mother like children sometimes do. They also do it in our culture. But those two small hairs of a woman are enough to produce such stark irritation and produce so much shame. It drives me crazy.

A hot day with a big family: Leyla in our pond

We are having a family gathering at our house: Children and grandchildren, my two sons, their girlfriends, Tarek, Samira and Leyla. Can does not appear and stays in his room all day. Tarek and Samira let Leyla play upstairs with the other kids, same age, in the garden.

Leyla is not shy when she meets my step-grandchildren because she is of a similar age. After a while the kids come to the pond to swim. The smaller ones use floating buoys or similar security paddles to dive into the water. Leyla is dressed and takes a seat on the terrace besides the pond, letting her feet into the water. The parents of the other children are beginning to ask who is looking after her. Everybody knows that she does not swim. They feel frightened, knowing that the girl sees everybody else in water, does not swim, has no buoy and has never been in the water before. Somebody puts water wings on her arms trying to make her understand, that it is meant as a security anchor, in case she falls into the water. But Leyla understands the message the other way round as a signal for her to slip into the pond. She is completely dressed. My husband understands her misunderstanding as a signal from her, that she is ready for an adventure in the water.

I am in the kitchen. I hear a splash: My husband is holding her in the water so she cannot drown. She looks a bit helpless but euphoric too, though she realizes that she could drown immediately. This side effect is instructive for us adults. At least she has sensed what being in the water means. We help her out of the water after 20 seconds. There is Leyla in her wet clothes: A big adventure, for whom? What is the next step? Everybody seems rather helpless and in this situation: I offer myself to bring her down to her parents.

Inner Conversation: *I am consternated. Why did this happen? I am sure Samira and Tarek will not be fond of the whole action. I can understand though, that the others were frightened that she would fall into the water. How to explain this rather complicated story to the parents without a language? How can I make it clear to them, that there is a risk having Leyla with us upstairs near the pond knowing that she does not swim? We all know that every year there are thousands of kids drowning in pools and therefore it is so important for them to learn to swim. How can I forward the important information to them? Without adequate language it will be difficult.*

I bring Leyla downstairs and knock at the door. Samira and Tarek are astonished. They take her in and I try to explain the story, but as I foresaw, they understand nothing.

Inner conversation: *I feel vulnerable and angry at the others upstairs and helpless leaving those downstairs without the information they needed. I did not want this to happen, but it did.*

After a while Tarek comes upstairs with Leyla dry and in new clothes. Tarek tries to tell us something. Tarek's opinion seems to be that Leyla will not enter the water as she knows it is forbidden to her. All of us Austrian adults are not happy with this educational stance.

Tense dialogue: *After Tarek leaves, all of us discuss the matter. We think it is a high risk plan, telling kids they are not allowed to enter the water. Some of us criticize Tarek for his laziness and lack of responsibility. I take the position, that we should not have let Leyla go into the water. Moving on the small border of intercultural challenge I would have preferred not to take the step, assuming responsibility for the child. In this moment, the culture clash becomes evident: Different estimation of risk, maybe of skills, and other educational concepts. Tarek is not Leyla's real father. He is her stepfather. His own children had a swimming pool at his Syrian home. He may underestimate Leyla's abilities and her eagerness to imitate the others. He knows though, that she cannot swim. In front of us he appears as the patriarchal household of a family dyad (mother and daughter) he got to know in Jordan. At the moment he lives together with them, but his first family just arrived in Vienna. From now onwards he will move between the two families; that is what he explained to us. Samira does not give us her opinion. She stayed downstairs. But she is the mother. Concerning this part of the story all of us present at the time are of the same opinion: We dislike Tarek for putting himself in the father role for Leyla, because we do not give him the credits for being truly and effectively in charge of the girl.*

Taking a walk with our dog: Tarek's charm

I want to explain to Tarek how he can manage the dog when he takes him out for a pee. It is important to know when he can leave him free, when not. We walk together on the field in front of our house. Suddenly I stumble over a piece of wood and it may look for a second that I could fall into the ditch. Tarek immediately tends his arms to hold me. He does not touch me but he tends the arms under me like making a towel to be able to catch me in the air. I show him that I am not falling down. I am a self-reliant woman, no need to help. He retreats and smiles warmly.

Inner conversation: *His caring and protective behavior towards me as a vulnerable woman has a special charm for me. I do not expect any Austrian man would be that caring towards a healthy woman. I feel flattered and overprotected at the same time.*

Learning German with Tarek, Samira and Can

Passing their apartment from outside trying to find the dog prompts Tarek to ask me for help with his German homework. I am glad that he asks me. It had never happened until now. The homework is to learn the parts of the human body by writing them down in German on a sheet where figures of body parts are labeled. I invite them to do the work all together knowing that the homework only concerns Tarek: “Let us all work together: Tarek, Samira, come on. Let us meet upstairs at the big table.” Samira attends another course, but at same level. I take the sheets with the figures with me to copy them upstairs for everybody. I think that I can stimulate teamwork, and they can help each other learn even though they have different levels of German. Tarek does not seem to understand that I am proposing a German lesson for all of them. The way he reacts I understand that he does not want Samira be part of the lesson because she is not attending the same German course as him. He seems to be telling me: “These homework sheets are for me and not for her. They belong to me”.

Inner conversation: *First I ask myself whether Tarek feels jealous or frightened, that everybody will see how little German he knows. His German is rather precarious. At the moment he is spending more time with his first wife, and he comes to visit his second wife only when the time allows. His first family has just arrived and everybody (first wife, five kids and second wife one kid) has special needs that he has to settle. That makes him strong, but at the same time weak, as he is in the middle of both families. I know he is doing what he can for everybody through his very good networking. But his lack of language makes him dependent on others. He knows many Syrian people who are always in the mood for helping him. At the same time there is a part of Tarek I do observe with ambivalence: He wants to be a big patriarch, helping everybody, being a leader, a father and mother figure same time, somebody to love and rely on. He puts me in contact through his mobile phone with young women in Jordan, saying that he was father or mother for them being orphans.*

I listen to those stories with an ambivalent voice in me: what is his gender role in all of those stories? His explanation for having a second wife is that his first wife is very ill. He

told us that story, which brings out resentment in me: Does a wife not want protection and care from a husband when she is chronically ill? Or does it mean that you should move yourself out of the way when you are ill and let your husband have somebody else?

Tarek shows me the homework, pictures of the whole body and one of the head of a human figure, he has to fill in the names. I tell him I will help him, but I would make the lesson for both, for him and Samira. Samira is following another German course. He shows me her exercises, trying to make a difference to his, like saying: “My homework is of a better quality”. I say firmly: “I do the homework with both of you”. We sit around the big table upstairs. Tarek unpacks the paper with the figure of the body and head. He has many of them. Only after I ask him many times does he hand one over to his wife. We begin to work.

Inner conversation: *My hypothesis is that Tarek suffers when he feels that Samira is quicker than him at learning the language. She is 20 years younger. But maybe I am misunderstanding him because I am prejudiced towards him already. I also know that he keeps saying that Samira is very smart. It seems he can admit it, but that he does not want it to be proven in front of all of us.*

Leyla comes up and sits next to her mother. She also tries to take part in the conversation. She is now adding to the general fight for my attention. None of them intervenes to tell her to let us work. Samira tries to involve her in her work, which is impossible. I go and fetch a little game for Leyla, trying to involve her in something else, but it is a game about numbers, too difficult for her age. She tries it out and does not know what to do with it. I would have to explain it to her and I decide not to, as I am committed to a lesson for the adults, which I want to follow through to the end. There seems to be no separation of children’s play from adults work. Children are part of the scene: whatever they do, it is okay.

We begin with the sheets; we name the details of body and head, writing them down and pronouncing them loudly. I pronounce them first and then let them repeat. It is extremely difficult for them to listen to the difference between the German vocals ‘Ö’ and ‘O’ and ‘U’ and ‘Ü’. It seems to be possible to have a joint work project with good concentration at the moment. Leyla has disappeared acknowledging nobody will play with her.

Inner conversation: *For me this process of arranging a learning situation is interesting and irritating at the same time. In my cultural understanding much time is being wasted. Everybody seems to be in a 'free associative' mode, not capable of maintaining concentration or a focus. Is it in the culture to do homework like that? Is my motivation subconsciously boycotting me making a lesson for all of them? I am really frustrated, and my own concentration and motivation for teaching them German is waning.*

Can comes up from downstairs. I do not grasp the sense for his sudden appearance; he is the one who is always missing. He smokes a cigarette outside, he eats an apple and he hangs around making himself useful. He never did that before. He makes comments in Arabic while explaining something to them, but they do not listen. The whole communication between them is odd. I try to ask him something about the paper with the figure. Of course he likes to be involved, but then he begins to ask me difficult questions in German, which pushes the others out of the scene. In fact he is disturbing us, but not in the same way as Leyla had done earlier.

Inner conversation: *Suddenly we have a competition here. Is Can jealous because he sees me working with them on their German? Can is leaving tomorrow for his new apartment. He is most probably disappointed that Samira stays and he does not. My task of helping them cannot be finished. I am getting disturbed and a bit angry towards all of them.*

Samira and Tarek continue the task by writing the translation into Arabic on the left side of the German word they write on the sheets. That does not make sense for me, as these sheets were made to be able to omit translating.

Inner conversation: *It seems to me as if they will only feel secure having the translation into words of their language. The word only really exists in their language of origin. The German word is a fake. That is what I feel when working with them. Words are more than a vehicle for understanding. They are objects, which convey their culture and a sense of homeliness in hostile Europe. They stick emotionally to that world and do not want to change it into another language. Learning the language means switching into the new culture. Maybe they are not ready for that.*

I still try to catch their attention towards parts of my body, showing them my eyes, my nose, belly, hands, arms and fingers, but they do not understand and continue writing words down in Arabic. Can is repeating my remark: “No translation, he says. That is very bad!” The others just ignore him, as if he was not there. Our working situation becomes socially void.

Inner conversation: *I assume that Can wants to show the others that he is much better. I understand it is related to him leaving tomorrow. I begin to feel ambivalent, whether it was the right decision to dismiss him and stay with Samira, Leyla and Tarek. With him at least I can talk a bit. I assure myself that Samira and Leyla are more in need of help. He is a young man, and he could easily find a new place. I ponder Can’s personal story: He had a higher education in Syria, and he is trying hard to learn German. He is bringing out Tarek and Samira’s passivity to learning the language. He himself did not learn anything practical: at 33 years of age, after five months of living with us, he finally does his first load of laundry. He does not know how to hang up the washed clothes even after I explained to him several times.*

My voices change perspectives: Tarek and Samira are down to earth, they are competent in everyday life but they are not interested in the language of the country they are living in and from which they are sustained. Can is on a different trip: He wants to integrate and has the goal to continue studying law here. But he does not know much about everyday life. He was sheltered by his mother, until he fled. Then he did the boat crossing and the traumatizing Balkan route, after which he retreated back into his cocoon.

Having our last meal with Can

We come together at 8.30 in our living room. Samira brings chicken in a pie with onions. It is a meal we have not tried yet. Our family upstairs makes salad and potatoes in the oven. Can and I make “Jezz Muzz”, his favorite meal. It is like scrambled eggs with garlic and tomato sauce on it. In this sauce we boil a lemon, which we pick out after boiling. Once its ready, Can brings the Jezz Muzz and places it in front of him on the table. He seems to think, it is just for him. I comment, that we may have misunderstood each other because I thought we were making the dish for everybody. He apologizes and puts the dish in the middle of the table. In the end nobody touches his Jezz Muzz and it returns to his place.

Inner conversation: *Did he really think the Jezz Muzz was only for him? Is it his selfish way of behaving? Or do the others think this dish is for him? It triggers many situations here, where I considered him not showing solidarity with the others. I discussed the issue several times with my husband, and we both had the position, that he did not care for the others. Of course we never knew exactly the type of relationship they had. Sometimes we saw Tarek in his room talking with him. We never saw him in the big room with the others. Leyla would bring Jezz Muzz or another dish to his room. We never found out what the reason was for Can being excluded, because nobody would tell us. Did Can exclude himself? I find myself again pondering this, wondering whether it was the right decision to let Can leave and the others stay.*

First of May: Bringing Can to his new apartment

We offer to drive Can with the car to his new apartment in the city. My younger son is driving the car. Can is a bit nervous; he giggles continuously. I try to relax the situation by talking about simple things. He refused the suitcase we offered him, and put all of his things into plastic bags. Once in the car I ask him for the address. He names the metro station near by. I repeat that I need the address. Then he opens it in Google maps. He does not seem to know the written address with the number of the house and the door.

Inner conversation: *I ask myself how we shall find the place without an address? Is he aware that driving a car directs us to the place on a different way than coming on foot from the metro station? He does not seem to have thought about this before. It sounds strange for me, that he has no address on a piece of paper or in his head. I suppose that he has just been there once coming from the metro station. But how is it he never writes down street names and numbers? I would feel disoriented and lost if I had no clear address. I wonder how they find locations in their own country. May be asking people on the streets, which would be similar to people in my Canary Islands culture. This is usual and nobody bothers about wrong answers. I lived in an oral culture, whereas my homeland now, Austria, is a written organized culture.*

I explain him that there is a different branch of the fitness club he had been using in our district just around the corner from his new condominium, because I see it on Google maps. I am not sure that he is listening to me. I am talking and talking. My son is moving his

eyes up in a sign of distress; he always finds me awkward. I do not know how we arrive, but we do because Can knows how to direct us at the end. There is a square in front of the house with a little Turkish market on it. I am pleased with that. Knowing about his minimal cooking experience I see him taking a snack in a sort of similar culture.

Inner conversation: *The market relieves my guilty conscience for leaving him here alone in the middle of nowhere.*

My son and I help him bring all of the plastic bags up to his new apartment. I want to have a look at the so -called ‘studio’ and at his new flat mate to get a feeling of how he will be living from now onwards.

We enter the house with all the bags and take three staircases on the right side, but he does not find the door. Osama is not there. He phones, the friend of the friend answers. He is a guy leaving the flat for Can or he may be he was leaving anyway. Can lets us know, that he is a Syrian Kurd. The guy tells him through the cell phone to go downstairs again. We are on the wrong staircase. We turn the left and go up the other side of the house. The guy comes towards us and helps to carry Can’s bags. On the staircases we see a lot of ugly things: a rotten kitchen, some plugs and old cables lie about. Nobody seems to clean the staircases here.

The young man shows us into the room and then he leaves. Can remarks that he is leaving to visit relatives in Germany.

Inner conversation: *I wonder about the fact that nobody cares for the staircase. I’ve never seen that in Vienna. Does it mean that refugees live here? It is a world I do not know. I feel strange and with a mixture of anxiety, sadness, awkwardness and a need to leave the situation as soon as possible. I ask myself whether the other man is leaving for Can and whether it has to do with his Kurdish origin?*

I realize that the toilets are outside the flat in the style of old Viennese houses: One toilet for the whole floor. It is a ‘not yet revitalized house’, usually kept for selling or – apparently – for renting to refugees until you can sell it. There is a kitchen one square meter in size with two cups. Behind there is a little room filled up with metal pieces and three mattresses lying on the floor. It seems more like a construction site than a living room. There are bags everywhere, one small closet. No chairs, no table, just nothing. Not knowing what to do

there anymore, we say goodbye. We both hug Can, and then we quickly leave. Having arrived at our car we talk about the house, the surroundings, and the Turkish market on the other side of the street. Everything here seems to be Turkish. Driving the car we still see the other Syrian Kurdish guy with a rucksack and a notebook going down the street. He just left.

We both actually realize: Can is going to stay there alone after we leave.

Inner conversation: *I have a very strange feeling. The host is not there to welcome him, but the guy leaving is waiting for him. Can does not have a key. I am wondering how Can will manage. He does not know how to use any tools to build a bed. I saw those pieces of metal and I ask myself whether they are parts of a bed? I could not distinguish anything useful inside that house. All odd things lying around seemed to be broken, sort of given away from somebody else. It looked like a dump, I look back on Can's refusal to take anything from us with him, no blankets, no cover, not even a suitcase....Maybe he felt ashamed and therefore called it 'studio' for us, so that we would not see that he is moving into very low level accommodation. I know that Can's social milieu in Syria is 'upper-class'. He does not cope with his social class well here. His shyness and inhibition are of no help to discover alternative ways to finding new friends.*

Can visits me in the office for the first time after he has left our home

Can forwards several emails to me. He writes them all in the German language, which is remarkable because it is difficult for him:

Can 01.05: „the days with you were the most beautiful ones in my life, I thank you for that!“

Me 01.05 back: “How is the studio? How do you get on with Osama? Do you need something?”

Inner conversation: *I realize that I am writing in the style of a mother looking after her just grown up son being away from home first time.*

He answers 04.05.: “I am thankful for your question but you do not need to worry. I have everything I need”.

I offer him to visit me in my office, as it is nearer to his place, that we can always meet there.

06.05: “I miss you, I would like to visit you, tell me a good time”.

He comes to my office on the 10th of May. I have a slot of one hour time between two therapy sessions. He comes late so that we have 20 minutes time to hug and to exchange some sentences. He is eager to see me, and me too to see him. He is dressed in juvenile fashion and therefore looks more handsome than before: The hair over his forehead waxed upwards. That was his look arriving at our place 6 months ago before he decided to wear a woolen cap during the day and night. We sit down and drink the fruit tea I have prepared. I ask him about Osama and about whether they do things together. He is eager to answer: “Yes Osama is nice, he has a lot of friends, he visits them most of the time. Yes he stays at home. Sometimes he cooks. In this mini kitchen, yes he does. I have a bed and a cushion and everything, yes”.

He admits that he still is in the room for long times. He does not say that he sleeps a lot, but we understand each other. We both laugh knowing that this is his personal challenge and that it is not good for him to stay in bed but that he does it.

Inner conversation: *For me it feels a bit like Can coming home to get some caring coaching to overcome shyness and other life difficulties. I cannot avoid comparing him with my son who sometimes has similar difficulties, but he is much younger.*

At the moment his twin brother is still living alone in Aleppo guarding the house, the mother having moved to Latakia to the family of the sister. Latakia is being kind of protected from war, being a city on the coast with an emerging domestic tourism industry before the Syrian war. I ask Can about his brother: “Is he as shy too as you?” He immediately answers with a “Yes. We are both shy. My younger brother, the one who fled to Turkey, he is not shy. He is extroverted, and therefore he found work as a clerk in a supermarket”.

Break time is over, and my next therapy session begins. In any case, he seems to be happy and not wanting to talk longer. It was the same when he lived with us. The communication was usually brief and intermittent. We hug each other and that is good enough for both of us.

Inner conversation: *I feel relaxed, because I can see that he is not doing badly. Even if he is behaving this way for me I become aware that the ‘roughness of everyday life’ with another young man in a tiny apartment have wakened him up making him more enduring and ready for change.*

Driving the car with Samira and Leyla

We are driving in the car to have a little walk in the countryside. During our drive I try to start a conversation with Samira, with the little words we have in common, a lot of gesticulating and expressing myself in different ways, just trying it out. But we see that we do not understand each other by our facial expression. When this happens Samira sometimes uses the translation app of her mobile phone, which may help or not. I listen to her story: She stayed in a huge refugee camp in Jordan for three months, afterwards moving into the house of a family member in Amman. She has been married to Tarek for three years, and the marriage took place in Jordan. He lived half time with her in Amman, and the other time of the time with his first family in the camp. Suddenly she shows me a photo on her mobile cell and says: that is my son.

I am driving the car, looking over the wheel on to the photo of her son.

Inner conversation: *It is difficult to look and drive same time. They do not have the feeling for the danger of such a situation and I do not want to be impolite. I do not understand and think she is showing me the photo of her husband, but as I look at the photo on the display I recognize a small boy. She tells me that he is 10 years old. He is living with the family of her late husband in Lebanon.*

I ask myself whether Leyla knows that her brother exists? Now I know that Samira was just 15 years old when she first gave birth. I do not know the age of her first husband and I do not want to ask. The fact is, that some time after this man died she was married to Tarek. I suddenly become aware how little I know about Samira's life, and this will not change while we have such little language to communicate. I do not want to cross borders of intimacy by asking questions which may be interesting for me but not for her. All the while, not having the facts evokes fantasies in my own imagination. For example: the marriage between Tarek and Samira was most probably a love marriage. But maybe it was also because she had a house in the capital. Reviewing my observations of both of them I continued pondering about whether this was a love marriage or a marriage for protection of the woman. The family of Samira is from a village near to the border to Jordan, where the Syrian revolution began in February 2011. Obviously her husband must have been killed at the very outset, the rest of Samira's family is scattered around Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

When Tarek arrived at our home and talked about Samira he seemed to be very much in love with her. And when Samira arrived she was also looking lucky to be with him. They had not seen each other for half a year. From my western perspective, trying to discover self-agency in Samira's life plan is difficult. To handle the daily confrontation with a family where the woman is a second wife of a man is a challenge for me as a woman, a host and a therapist. I assume that Samira had to follow Tarek to Austria. She needed to take the Balkan route to be able to obtain the status of a refugee, because officially she is not married; in Austria she is a widow. But there was no particular need for Samira leaving Jordan apart from being Tarek's second wife. She was living in the capital in a house with some relatives and Leyla had another child to play with her. Of course, as a refugee in Jordan she receives less money than she gets in Austria. But there is no existential need for her to flee, apart from being in love and/or being a second wife.

I am becoming a 'gender' and a 'political' problem: She is here because of love. If that is so, she is receiving money for being a widowed refugee with a child. But at the same time she submits to be Tarek's second wife, waiting on him and cooking for him and listening to his sorrows: A contradiction? In my western perspective Samira accommodates her life to Tarek. If he is there, Samira is at home. If he is not, she may invite her girlfriend Mina or she may visit the mother of another Syrian child at nursery school. The worst case for her is that she stays alone with Leyla without any companionship. Then she may just cook and bring us a tray of new dishes.

I try hard to understand the stories behind the flight and asylum of our guests. I say to myself that it would be wrong to understand fleeing as fleeing only from bombs, terror and that sort. People flee for many reasons, not to be judged by outsiders. I can see better why Samira is not motivated to learn German. She is here for Tarek. Her understanding of the situation is that she is his second wife and he should look after her the same way as she did for him. Another aim might be that her daughter gets a better life in the future and that she has a 'father' figure. I phone Yasin, the organic intellectual to let him explain, why Tarek had to marry her. My intellectual friend Yasin does not seem to be a fan of second wives but he explains that this is an option for widows. Otherwise they will stay alone with their children. Once Tarek approaches Samira, he is obliged to marry her and her family (clan) will press him to do so. In other words: He cannot look after her, if he is not ready to marry her.

From my European gender perspective I want to see the amelioration of the position of women in society. Am I taking the adequate ethical position maintaining the second wife of

Tarek in Syria, his girlfriend here in Austria in my house? As I already said, I feel a little resentment towards Tarek, because I observe that he keeps Samira as a dependent. Maybe that is what she wants from him. What sort of woman is she representing in Austria and what does it all mean for Leyla, who is growing up under familial circumstances, which do not resemble the life style of most people here? What can she tell her schoolmates about the family she lives in at an Austrian school once she knows enough German? And will she be allowed to be more autonomous as a young woman?

I admit that I would like her to understand our gender position or at least my own. I am a rather independent person. It has been, in a way my life story. I left men when I thought it would be better for me, and they left me too. I live in an extended patchwork family. But Samira does not have my options. She is 20 years younger than Tarek. She looks smart and she likes cooking. I recognize that she can work hard. She has to share Tarek with another woman. This is the main point, which strikes me? Why?

From the moment Tarek's first wife arrives with his children in Vienna his first wife denies Samira's presence. Her argument is that he brought the second wife first. The first wife decides that she does not want to have anything to do with the second woman and that her children should never meet Leyla either. Tarek respects her decision and Ilias, his Syrian friend in Vienna, now engaged to his eldest daughter, has broken the contact to Samira because this is the wish of Tarek's first wife.

Inner conversation: *I ask myself, whether Tarek's first wife was really as free in her decision to accept his second marriage as they have told me. She certainly changed her opinion once here in Austria. Was the different cultural context a solution to her inner conflict? These are hypotheses, of course.*

I tell myself that this is a situation as bad as in some of the worse Austrian separations or difficult blended familial arrangements, where the adults cannot talk or listen to each other anymore and therefore bring all the others into the conflict by asking for loyalty to them.

We know from Tarek, that his elder daughter and Samira became friends in Jordan. Samira even cooked for the engagement party of his daughter, but she was not allowed to be part of it. I observe, that whenever he comes to visit her, she puts on her earrings and tries to be as pretty as possible. She tries to keep the bond, Tarek does it too, but in a manly way: He

behaves as if he owns her. I see Tarek and Samira walking around the garden looking at the plants and flowers smiling. They really look like they are in love.

Inner conversation: *I have the idea that my home may be a place of pleasant rehabilitation for him from the somewhat difficult family life he has had with a very ill wife (receiving dialysis) and five children, having lost everything: business, villa, garden. It seems to be my problem, that I cannot accept their story. From the very beginning I had a moral problem with Tarek, knowing that he came and left his family with 5 children in the camp. There is still a symbolic meaning of him first bringing his 'girlfriend', 'second wife' or his 'love' on the Balkan route. Officially he did the right thing, his first family arrived after his asylum claim was accepted.*

I can understand that his first wife does not want to meet Samira. I can also understand that Samira preferred to be a man's second wife than staying alone with some relatives and a little daughter in a country shaken by an insufferable war.

Metalogue I: Dyadic versus triadic relationships

I am becoming aware that it is more difficult for me to describe my relations to the family and their friends than my relation to Can. He evoked feelings in me, a bit like a 'lost son'; I always compared my relationship with him to my relationship to both my own sons. It was a dual relationship between him and me and a dual communication. I did not have to think about to whom he would tell what I'd say to him. Sometimes my husband had an opinion on it, but overall, Can was sort of 'my business'. I learnt German with him; he sought contact with me when he needed it, and I represented a substitute for his mother here in Austria. I could play with 'relational identities' (Gergen & Gergen, 1986) asking him questions about his relationships with several siblings and with his mother. That type of conversation was much more difficult with the other three guests in our house, first, because I was almost never alone with any of them, and second, because we had such a language barrier.

The connections between Samira and Tarek, Samira and her daughter Leyla and Tarek, Samira and her friend Mina¹⁰, and Mina and Tarek were much more difficult to penetrate with my ideas, reflections, my empathy and forms of understanding the effects of their changing constellations in daily life. I was concerned with my focus on the question of "whether they are curious about us, are they integrating in this country and will they be integrated with the people of this country and what is my own position about it?" I was aware that my stance towards them was from 'western perspective', but even trying very hard I could not find alternative

¹⁰ I will shortly introduce Mina in detail

ways of looking at them because I simply did not understand what was going on within them and with us. I could observe more of their lifestyle than with Can, who had his German courses or sat in his room not relating to anybody. I was much more irritated because I was more exposed to their daily living, their occupations and the little communicative performance we had through our language performance. At least with Can I could try to verbalize myself and he answered. With Tarek and Samira it often ended up as a consultation with the mobile phone translation application. I was never sure whether we had understood each other, and I easily got suspicious of them, thinking they were hiding information from me or that they were telling me a false story to keep me at ease. I explained my feeling with the language deficit but there was a point in Tarek's impression management which fed into my personal uneasiness, which I reacted to by offering German courses or similar 'to does' for them, which I considered essential for their integration: Visiting playgrounds with Leyla, going to museums or to the city center to walk around. I wanted them to be occupied, mainly with Austrian culture, in order to avoid leaving them in the house all day behind the big curtains.

At that time they did not care for my efforts! In the meantime, around two months ago Tarek sent us a photo on Whatsapp showing him explaining the displays in the Holocaust museum in Vienna to other Syrians.

Today I have to admit that I was impatient with them. It had taken them almost two years to 'land' in this country, probably needing time to comfort themselves after years of war, fleeing Syria and accepting new fates in their lives. There had been no room for the future or for learning about new cultures until now.

Mina's personal story

It was during a drive in the country that I listened to Mina's story in detail. I had seen her once at our house on Samira's birthday. Mina is Samira's old friend from school days, who landed here in Vienna as the second wife of a Palestinian man. Her story resembles Samira's, but she has worse luck: The husband, who brought one son with him and whose first wife stayed back in Syria, is violent with Mina. He throws her out of the house he considers *his* home. As she is not officially married to him in Austria, she has no legal status here. Austrian institutions are helping the young woman. Their advice is to leave this man. Mina's family is scattered around the world (Dubai, Lebanon, Canada) and is pressing her to go back to him, which she has done several times already. He used a screwdriver to hurt her near her vagina. Official Austrian institutions are involved. We immediately offered Can's room to Mina.

Inner conversation: *I am very concerned listening to the fact that people (her family) from different parts of world (without knowing the concrete situation) are giving advice to the*

young woman over the phone. This is the perfect example of the distorting, confusing effects of social media interaction.

A Meal with Samira, Leyla and Mina

They come up with the usual collection of tabouleh, rice with chicken and almonds, a vegetable soup, some spicy vegetables, kebbeh. We love the Syrian rice, which tastes completely different from what we know.

It is on this evening taking the meal together I get the information that Mina is related to Samira. Samira's grandmother was the second wife of Mina's father. Mina's father had four wives, her being one of ten children of his third wife.

Inner conversation: *I do not dare to ask Samira, but I am finding myself pondering about possible genealogies of both families. Knowing that she is the second wife of Tarek and that he is 20 years older than her, I ask myself what the age difference could possibly have been between her biological mother and her father.*

Mina and Samira laugh explaining the complicated story of their kinship to us. We need our time to understand how many children Minas father had with how many woman when, and how many children were born each time. At the time being, most of them are scattered around the world living inside or outside the refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Canada, Austria, etc. We decide to offer Mina the room downstairs on condition that whenever we have guests, she sleeps with Samira in the other room. Both like the idea, especially because the two young women have a very good relationship with each other and help each other a lot.

Mina entered our house the following week, and she stayed with us for half a year. The 'new team' living downstairs changes everybody's mood. The women are always in good humor together. Tarek is neglected a bit. They sometimes treat him ironically and he has to fight a bit more for his position. Leyla is very amused with Mina and Samira cooks with more happiness.

The relationship between the two young women goes through several stages: they attend different German courses, and Mina practices at a Moroccan hairdresser on the side. Mina is thrown out of the hairdresser shop, but before that she falls in love with an Egyptian who works at the flower shop next door to the hairdresser's. The man called Ali has been

living in Austria for 10 years. Mina has been declared divorced from the Palestinian man by Austrian authorities. He went to the Iman to get Mina back, but the Iman respects the Austrian divorce after listening to all of them: Mina, Samira, Tarek, the Palestinian, Ali.

Samira and Mina organize Mina's wedding with Ali, which takes place at our house. Mina leaves our house in January 2017 to live with Ali. Shortly after that, she becomes pregnant.

A meal together with some loved friends of mine

We are having a little gathering for friends. The following persons take part: Tarek, Samira and Leyla, my husband, myself and my son, Miriam (a friend visiting from Tenerife), Elias (musician from Israel), Caro (his spouse, Austrian physiotherapist), Matthias (Austrian psychotherapist), Ingrid (Austrian systemic therapist), Klaus (Austrian psychologist and her spouse).

It has been a long time, since we did not see Tarek (he is now mainly living with his first wife and his children because he has to organize many things for them, as they just arrived) and we only see Samira and Leyla occasionally downstairs. We ask them spontaneously to eat all together. The weather is hot. Our guests are just streaming in. It is a spontaneous event apart from the fact that we want to play music and sing together. They play table tennis, take a swim, we chat. Our Syrian guests will meet us for the meal at 8.30 pm. I prepare cold dishes, always anticipating that Samira is bringing so many dishes herself, that it will be too much in any case.

We are twelve people today. Setting the table I organize the groups according to the language they speak: German, Spanish, Arabic. I put my husband on one front side of the table together with Caro and Tarek, Samira and Leyla on the other side. I discuss all of this with my son, who wants to leave everybody the option to sit wherever he or she wants. He has an argument with me about my dominant position towards them.

Inner conversation and tensions dialogue: *I am in a permanent struggle between my family and our Syrian guests. My family does not want me to intervene and wants to let it go spontaneously, and I want to organize our relationships by setting their seat at the table. I foresee the chaos everybody not knowing where to sit and what to do about it. I arrange in my head a position of two patriarchs (my husband and Tarek) sitting at opposite ends of the*

table, meaning it as sign of hospitality. That is my intuitive prediction for good dialogues, considering the language limitations.

It takes time to organize the dishes on the table, the cutlery and everything else. When everybody is seated nobody seems to be ready to help him/herself, and all of them are staring into the air. My husband and I begin to fill up plates for everybody. Tarek, who usually does exactly this when we eat together, today stays at his place. But once my husband finished he goes round the table offering the Syrian dishes.

Inner conversation and tense dialogues:

Some of my friends observe that they only eat their food. We defend Tarek: He also eats our fish, but he is the only one. Elias is from Israel, and he cannot refrain from saying that it would be very bad manners if we did not eat their food in Syria being their guests. My husband and I defend them. They may not be educated that way. It must be hard for them, participating in so many foreign customs..

By this time I already know, that Samira eats olives and tomatoes, Leyla eats potatoes, Tarek eats fish and that they do not like the oil in the salad. We live that version whenever we meet to eat: They prefer eating their own food, which makes them feel at ease. A familiar taste can make a home.

Inner conversation: *I assume that it is doubly difficult for them to try out the foreign dishes under the observation of so many people. On the other hand I do understand our European guests, when they feel uneasy, observing that they do not try out anything from 'our side'. Differences are becoming quite evident. So I ask myself whether I should defend them against the people from here? Am I responsible for that? I would like to get this intercultural community to engage in relational conversations, and it seems to be more difficult than I thought.*

The conversation with our guests at the table gets into a rhythm depending on who is sitting next to each other: Little open dialogues, changing partners to your right or to your left. But Tarek and Samira are out of it, because after a few words, our guests do not know how to behave.

I go sit next to Tarek and exchange our usual words. I ask him about the family, if his children are going to school yet, if he is getting the money from the government, his German course. There are no more issues easy enough to be exchanged without language. The lack of it does not permit to get details about his inner state of mind, or about his wellbeing or anguish. I may have been talking for three minutes with them.

Inner conversation: *I often scrutinize myself on whether I could have made more of an effort to engage in conversations. But with them it turns back to organizational issues, and I realize that this part of the dialogue may serve as a control for them. In me there is a mixture of shame for not knowing their language, sense of responsibility as a host and anger for their lack of language, for which I attribute to them a certain responsibility.*

Finishing the meal Leyla wants to dance. We know she always likes to dance, and she seems to be accustomed to doing this in a crowd of adults. We ask our son to look up a Syrian pop singer they named to us on his app, but again, for language reasons, he does not find him. In the end he decides on traditional rock, thinking that this might be good music for Leyla to dance. Leyla tries hard to catch this rhythm. She is talented, but still it is impossible for her to find movements for that sort of music. She dances with my husband, moving around him. None of the Syrian adults moves with her on stage. All our guests stop their conversations and look towards her. Comments like: “Oh she is talented”, “Oh how cute she is”. With this type of music Leyla does not get enthusiastic. After two songs she goes back to sit down at the table.

Inner conversation: *I am contemplating the scene with ambivalent voices. One is saying that this is an intercultural event. The other voice is focusing on the event as an eye-catcher, which is misusing the little girl, exhibiting herself.*

In our world we would not expose a single child in front of a crowd of adults because we would feel it slightly as a cross of frontiers of intimacy, especially in a setting such like this one. My cultural proximity to Spain lets me understand better. In my second country Spain children are often treated like ‘little adults’. But then I think of her mother Samira, getting nervous each time she does not find her headscarf at the right moment, disguising her prettiness the best she can when men are around, and because of that I cannot prevent a feeling of pain each time Leyla wants to dance for us. I do it, and my husband is doing it today. Dancing with us hosts has become a certain ritual at our meals. Leyla loves it. Today

I feel awkward, intuitively foreseeing the moment, when from one day to the other all these things will be forbidden to her. I am highly irritated by the observation of the little child being sexually exhibited, and at the same time adult women being hidden away and wearing ugly clothes to repel male attention. It sounds to me as if being a woman is only to be a sexual object for men, and they can offer nothing more.

The atmosphere at the table relaxes after Leyla's dancing. Some of the guests try to pass a few words to Tarek and Samira. Leyla is getting bored, and she goes downstairs to her room. Tarek and Samira stay for a little longer, while sitting in silence at the end of the big table, just looking around, watching us. I know from other situations that Tarek likes to be the center of the conversation or at least take some part in it. Today there are too many people in conversation for him to get this position without using the German language. Communication with them today would only become possible if our guests synchronized their conduct to include them, which would stop all other dialogues. We are also drinking wine and beer. They never drink, not even water. All these facts mark a difference.

Throughout the meal I observe that Samira and Tarek are silent, but observing all of us without talking themselves. They look relaxed and curious, as if they were experiencing a bit of our culture.

Inner conversation: *In this moment I think to myself, that I should talk to them, but another voice in me says that may be experiencing being outsider motivates them to learn the language...I am in a dialogue with my sense of responsibility. I study their faces and my sense is, that they are involved in our world by observing and maybe becoming aware of how different we are: They see us having fun. People are laughing and having good conversations. You can see that from outside. I think that Tarek and Samira are having their inner conversation about the mutual experience. I am confident that they both of them are enjoying themselves.*

Samira and Tarek get up and begin to take the dishes away. My husband first tells them not to, just leave everything at the sink. But they continue and in the end, of course, this is comfortable for us. We can just continue to talk and enjoy. Nobody hinders them doing the kitchen work. Having finished, as usual, they take their pans with them, say good night and disappear into their accommodation downstairs.

Inner conversation: *I am wondering whether this situation of them cleaning the kitchen is putting them in the role of servants, without us helping them. But I have an example of myself when I help my friend Ingrid at her house, because I am giving back her hosting me. I like to do that when I feel that I do not know her friends, or I am getting bored, for example at her last garden party. With that thought I feel relaxed, and I suppose that our guests want to give back our generosity in such a way. This time, for the first time I do not feel in a moral dilemma. The housework gets them out of 'feeling indebted'. Both of them, man and women are doing the housework together, what makes them similar to a western vision of sharing that type of work. Even so, on the face of it, it looks like they are our servants. That is one voice in me, while the other voice is pleased. I feel that today everything was very relaxed: there were no expectations from either cultural side and that makes the atmosphere 'easy going'.*

Tarek's efforts at learning German language

I knock at Samira's door wanting to set up our common meal for Saturday with her. Entering her apartment I see Tarek. I greet to both of them and they invite me to eat some cherries. It is the first cherry I eat this year. They bought them at the discount supermarket, and they taste very good.

Inner conversation: *I catch myself liking this part of their lifestyle: eating fruit besides all the chocolate they buy for Leyla and all the sweets they like to cook. That I like less, understanding that it is not good for their health in general and knowing that Leyla has rotten teeth. Cherries, I assume, might stand for having a certain luxury, like their life in Syria before the war.*

Tarek then begins with his favorite words: "There is a problem, Problem in the course." I ask: "What is the problem?" He says: "Coffee", then makes a body language like sleeping, "course, problem, today, yesterday, tomorrow, no, today!"

I know he always messes up the days and the hours, but I do not get a hint of what he is trying to express now. Samira as usual tries to help him, but she is not successful. They both stare into the air, me too, we understand, that we are not understanding. We still try to. They repeat the words: 'coffee, course, problem, German!'

In the end they look it up in the translation app on the mobile phone and hand it over to me. I can read: “Problems with the building of sentences”. Tarek still explains: “Tarek no problem with ABC, no problem with reading, no problem with speaking, Tarek problem course today....”. I am beginning to understand that his problem has something to do with not understanding the grammar to build sentences in German.

I tell them, that I am not the right person, because I cannot explain, as I do not know their language to explain it to them. I bring in Can, who is not living with us anymore, but I know, that Tarek has the phone number. I ask Tarek why he does not meet Can and ask him to explain the differences in building sentences in German much better. He knows enough German to teach Tarek. Tarek looks at me very skeptically: “Can?”, he asks. I repeat it: “Yes, Can would be the right person!” Tarek’s laugh expresses his skepticism about his former roommate. I observe him explain something about Can to Samira, and dialogue end with both of them seeming unconvinced about my proposal.

Inner conversation: *I am wondering why they do not accept my proposal all the while being aware of the difficulties during our only German lesson upstairs with the three of them. Can was there and disturbed the lesson. But I feel so irritated about the fact that the two men had been so connected at the beginning of their stay in our house and that they do not help each other now. In a way it irritates my positive memory of their arrival and the beginning of our experience together here. I reflect that I am being normative because I want them to ‘behave well’ so as to guard my good memories. I hypothesize that Samira does not like Can, and that Tarek has to justify meeting him for a German grammar lesson. But he also may have dismissed Can because he could disturb the couple. He is not convinced that it would be a good idea to meet Can for learning. Perhaps you can only learn from people you trust. Can is not trusted anymore, that is what I feel. And he is not living in the ‘family like community’ of this house anymore. Therefore he is non-existent for them. Maybe they see him as a threat. They may think that I could also change my opinion, throw them out and bring him in....*

With some reluctance I go to print some German papers from the Internet for Tarek. It is my answer to his grammar questions, which I could not grasp. There are sentences to be constructed and I can correct them if he gives them to me after filling them in. I had done so with Can. Up until now, Tarek and Samira have never returned papers to me.

Inner conversation: *Now that he is not here anymore I have become more aware of the benefits of Can's presence with us, forgetting the hindrances he presented. I try to abate the vengefulness in me and try to be tolerant of their poor management of learning the language, telling myself that they may need more attention from us.*

Metologue II: Solidarity

I reflect on Syrian concepts of Solidarity. Deciding to flee and to stay in Austria makes them a group with a certain similarity in their life stories and in their expectations towards the hosting country. In my opinion they should help each other in every aspect of daily life, learning the language, conflicts with official institutions and hospital visits in the new country. It does not seem to be part of their understanding. For example Samira wanted to skip an official German course, because she had to fetch her daughter from nursery school half an hour before her course finished. I had the idea to tell her why she did not ask the other Syrian mother who lived two houses from nursery school to take Leyla to her house for one hour and Samira could fetch her from there after the course. This mother accepted and in the future mothers and daughters became good friends. The idea of helping each other (Samira usually invited the other family on Sundays) would not come into their minds.

Syrian people seem to struggle only for themselves and mostly for family members and respectively members of the clan. Extended family or suitable kinships are allowed to do something for you. Otherwise sharing communities like friendships, neighborhood and even contingent relationships are not enough to build a durable bond between people. I heard from other Syrians that, in our western mindset, this rather selfish behavior assuming responsibilities inside but not outside their family, is due to the war: their trauma, their looking backwards into what they have lost instead of forward into their future life and the understandable unwillingness to care for others.

Apart from that, the most acceptable interpretation I see is a mindset completely different from western culture in, how a relationship is built and how it functions. Relations are very important, because Syrians organize daily life around meeting people in the afternoon, and not all of them are 'family' or 'kinship'. They meet in open spaces or they visit people to drink a cup of tea or coffee, eat some cookies or enjoy time together. They do not usually meet to work or to prepare for something. Can explained to us, that people do not argue or discuss common issues, nor do they refer to the wellbeing of the other. When people meet they talk about the family: "What about your daughter, how is your wife doing, how many kids does your brother have", and the like. They do not ask questions like "how is your project going on, what are your interests, your hobbies, etc.". Relationship is spending time together, sensing others by drinking coffee or smoking Shisha. It is not getting to know the other, comparing positions and values towards life and its challenges, discovering common interests or arguing about disagreement. This kind of exchange does not exist. I wonder, what it would

mean for them to get acquainted with our postmodern concept of relational identity (Gergen, 2009). Their 'self' seems to be part of the community they live in, but do they feel 'autonomous' same way as we usually do in individualized western countries? I sense something in their relationships towards each other being slightly different from our conceptualization of identity.

Family, clan, kinship, marriage, those are the important bonding rules which connect and condition people's lives. Being unmarried seems to be not at all attractive.

Teaching them the waste separation

Our house waste containers, green for bio waste, black for everything else, are always full. We have been observing for a while that they are throwing everything in both containers. My husband and I are getting annoyed about it, fearing that the neighbors may notice it too. Tarek knows about separating garbage living in Austria since March 2015. It was he who showed me the symbols (paper, bottles, metal) on the public containers and laughed. I do not understand, why he did not explain it to his wife. I want to take the occasion to explain it to Samira. She is the one who cooks and produces the most waste here. Tarek laughs when I try to explain to him that he could explain it too. I know he knows, but he does not seem involved in the housework here anymore, as he usually comes as a guest to visit Samira and Leyla.

Inner conversation: *It is an important principle for me to teach them about Austrian standards for garbage because this country is ecologically aware. At the moment they are throwing the garbage somewhere else, assuming that we are not happy with what they did before. I am concerned that they may be throwing it in our neighbors' house containers to please us.*

Not wanting to postpone any longer I fetch Samira and Leyla to take them with the car to the public containers 300 meters down the street. On each of them there are pictures describing the sort of garbage you should throw in them. I want to make the introduction in front of the containers. I take all sorts of garbage with me to demonstrate.

In the car Samira suddenly receives a phone call. She begins and continues talking with strong emotional involvement. I park the car and now I wait for her to finish the call, but she does not. The call goes on for a long time; she is absorbed in her call, and not making any sign to me or acknowledging that I am waiting for her to finish talking.

Inner conversation: *I am getting really irritated, having planned their introduction into waste separation for a few days already and never being able to have the two of them together. It makes me feel like a servant to them; instead, I am of the opinion that they really should pay attention to learning how to treat the rubbish in this country if they want to live here. Besides it is my house and I want it to be done. Basta! I am eager to get their attention to show them something, which is important for me.*

Noticing my irritated face, Samira moves out of the car, the phone still stuck to her ear. She then decides to hand over the mobile phone to her daughter, giving her a sign to keep talking. Samira helps me put the garbage into the different containers, but she does not pay attention to what I want to explain to her. She wants to be committed but is not present, her ears searching for the stories coming out of the mobile phone. I cannot explain, because I do not have her attention. Leyla is answering in a seemingly polite manner with "yes" or "no".

Inner conversation: *It is in this moment I realize that this person must be important, Leyla answering to the call in this tiny unusual voice for her. I try to guess who the person could be and what relation this person may have to both, mother and daughter. I assume that Samira knows as much about waste separation as she did before. It makes me feel frustrated, even a bit angry.*

Suddenly the phone call is finished. After returning into our car on the 300 meter drive home Samira points on the mobile phone and says to me with a suggestive gesture trying to show me the importance of the call: "Mother Tarek. Dubai. Old. No Internet. Just phone".

Inner conversation: *I understand she meant that this was Tarek's mother, that she is old and therefore only capable of using the phone, so that when she calls, you cannot postpone the call. Tarek's mother lives in Dubai with his older brother. Samira is a second wife and probably very eager to be in good terms with her mother-in-law. She probably has to present herself as best she can. It makes it impossible for her to explain the social context she is with me in front of the containers at that very moment. Most probably she is following social principles not to intercede in the communication of mothers-in-law, but it may be part of*

Samira's personal story: At least she wants to feel loved by Tarek's mother, knowing that his first wife has cut off contact with her. At that moment those family members on social media become more present than our daily garbage problem. Giving all these voices a space in my head makes it easier for me to empathize. Still I am happy with my cultural norms, which allow me to behave with more autonomy towards my own mother-in-law.

A cosmetic enactment: Mina doing face massage

After a divorce according to the Austrian legal system, the counsellors for domestic violence in Vienna organized an internship for Mina at a Moroccan hairdresser. Mina leaves for a German course at 6 o'clock in the morning, then she continues at the hairdressing salon from 12:00 to 6:00pm. When she comes home she goes straight to bed. Her only free day is Sunday.

Inner conversation: *I suppose that it is meant as an intervention from the counselling office to keep Mina away from ruminating about her separated marriage. They want to keep her busy and away from possible calls by haunting family members wanting her to return to the man. The scattered family is not bothered about her being treated badly. Mina has been crying a lot. I guess that the little management of time left for her was meant to be a diversion from bad thoughts and possible flash-backs.*

Mina likes the hairdresser work more than the German course. Everything concerning hair, nails and faces fascinates her. She brings the Moroccan cosmetics for facial massage and nail treatment in a little plastic bag and wants to practice a treatment with me. I decide on a manicure and facial massage. Mina is in very good humour, singing throughout the whole 'session', doing the manicure first, after which she asks me to relax and to close my eyes. She will do the facial massage now. Lacking the language possibilities I do not tell her that I wear contact lenses. Shortly after closing my eyes I begin to feel my eyes hurting, but again, I do not want to disappoint her.

Inner conversation: *I am becoming aware that Mina is still learning to do massage. I admit that the creams and liquids looked odd to me from the beginning and I know those materials*

from my stay in Morocco. I never bought them there. It itches. I am conversing with myself whether I should say something or let it go.

The massage goes on and on and does not seem to come to an end. In the meantime my eyes are hurting, so that I tell her to make a break. After opening my eyes, I displace my contact lenses. Mina looks astonished, but she continues with her massage as if nothing happened.

Inner conversation: *I assume that she has never seen contact lenses before. What does she think about the little concave pieces of glass I just put on the table and tell her not to touch? The way she continues lets me reflect on possible reactions to my expression, i.e. a feeling of fear, or being extremely cautious, etc. But Mina does not behave that way. She goes on as before. I put myself in the perspective of a possible client, and I must admit, that I would not be delighted by the treatment. Her singing sounds lovely though and transmits her inner feelings.*

I say to myself, that now the important thing is to give her the hope that something useful is happening in her life and then she may get a new stronger identity as a human being to take on a new life. However I must admit that I was happy after the cosmetic treatment was over.

Can visiting us - half a year living alone

Can has been seeing me at the office, making small talk and having his post delivered through me. Now he comes to see us at home for the first time. He is so shy. He brings flowers and some Turkish cookies. He puts them on the table in the plastic bag. My husband thanks him while I am still upstairs finishing an email on my computer. I come down and Can gives me a hug. He seems to be very happy to see us both. He happily remarks that our dog Angelo recognizes him. My husband reminds him that he should give me the flowers. It is my husband who unwraps them and puts them in my hands trying to educate Can, probably thinking of possible acquaintances with other women in his life. But Can is somewhere else, a bit like beamed away.

His German has improved a lot. He likes to use difficult German words and very colloquial sentences. Sometimes he does not find the right one even when trying very hard.

We all try to help him, and we participate at his improving German expressions. I recognize his way of learning: listening, repeating, listening, repeating, rehearsing a lot. It seems to work for him.

Inner conversation: *I have to revise my positions about how you learn a foreign language. I was so sure that simply rehearsing word would not bring real success. Can is demonstrating the other side; his German has improved.*

My husband and I are both so glad that we can get into a dialogue with him. We look at each other happy to be in what we consider to be a mutual process of understanding and encountering. He tells us that he is not happy in the room with his Syrian colleague because he invites a lot of friends over, and the room is always full of people. He can never be alone. He says that he cannot concentrate.

Inner conversation: *I am thinking to myself that even him lamenting about his situation is good for him. This was why I wanted him to be out of the room downstairs. He was isolating himself and pushing himself more into depression. Even if his companion Osama is irritating him by inviting so many people, he is indirectly inviting Can out of a stance of regression and defeat.*

Can admits, that he has been taking some steps: His German has improved, his fitness too, he got to know a Colombian girl at the German course, same age and same profession as him. They do the homework together and they have either an intimate relationship or are just close companions, which seems to help both of them.

Inner conversation: *I am fascinated about his evolution. He seems to be able to establish contact, interestingly enough with a Latin American woman. I know he likes the pop singer Shakira and he got a bit in touch with Spanish culture at our house.*

His goal for the future in Austria is doing a course to be a 'legal assistant', whatever that means. He tells me that he has breakfast at the Turkish market in front of his house. He makes Jezz Muzz for himself once a day. He has tried some Colombian food, but he does not like it. He is eager to learn to swim in the summer because the Colombian woman was a professional swimmer before coming here and she wants to teach him.

Inner conversation: *I know that our pond always fascinated him and that he came in a boat over the Mediterranean Sea. I am full of admiration for his future plans and I also think that he seems to have found another person to care for him.*

He emphasizes that before putting on a bathing suit he has to do more fitness training to trim down his belly. Only then, most probably next summer, will he dare to show his body to others. What I observe is that he is much slimmer than when he left and he assures us, that this is his normal weight. He looks very handsome. We prepare our part of the meal and Can helps me. In a very natural way, he does the same chores he always did while living here. He makes the salad whereas I prepare the chicken. We sit with a cup of coffee after the meal as always. We smoked a cigarette together, just like we did while he was living here. My husband drove him to the metro station. Saying goodbye, Can comments that it is colder than last year. Even though we both do not think that is right, my husband gives him a scarf and a pair of gloves. He reluctantly accepts. He looks much healthier than last year. He is slimmer, has a young, cool dressing style, he does not use a cap to cover his head anymore. We all laugh when we remember the time when he wore the cap day and night.

Inner conversation: *I reassure myself that he has become a functional person in his new world.*

Planning Mina's leave after a 'beauty day' with the neighbouring 'ladies'

During our Christmas holidays in Tenerife we heard from our two sons, who are in Vienna, at the time that Mina is going to get married. We did not know that. We knew that she had a Egyptian friend, Ali, who worked at a flower shop near her Moroccan hairdresser. They were talking about getting engaged, but this announcement seemed premature to us, knowing that Mina was still recovering from a difficult marriage, which had in fact brought her to Austria.

One week after coming back I had fixed a Sunday afternoon with my neighbours to try to help Mina with her cosmetic interests. She had lost the internship at the hairdresser and I thought that I could help her by networking with my friends in the neighbourhood so that she could earn some money doing manicures and facial massage.

Inner conversation: *I hope that the two women did not forget our appointment at the beginning of January with my neighbors. I had reserved that date two months in advance. I would feel responsible, just like the bed my friend had held for Tarek. I hope that the women are more committed than he was.*

We had arranged to have a ‘women’s day’, where Samira could present some of her dishes and Mina could do her beauty treatments. I had thought that this could be of help for them in the sense that Mina could visit neighbors to do manicure and Samira could present her Syrian specialities.

Inner conversation: I am becoming aware that I am transmitting my western motivation to earn one’s own money. I want to give these women a sense of financial independence., though in a way, both of them are independent, as they are receiving money from the Austrian state as if they were single women. It is a paradox, but I still stick to the idea that they should have an experience earning money in exchange for their labour.

When I come back from my holidays it was the first thing I asked them. Though I noticed that they were not very motivated, now thinking mostly about preparing for Mina’s wedding. they assured me that Mina would be there that day and leave with her husband the day afterwards.

In the end it turned out to be a good exchange: Ali asked us, whether the ‘wedding reception’ for 15 people could take place at our house and Mina and Samira planned the ‘women’s day’.

Inner conversation: *My idea, that the neighbour network could help them to be more independent, vanished quickly, observing their changes. I listened to them giggling downstairs with Leyla always part of it too. All other things were less important. It bothered me and I even felt a bit angry with them: How could they be so naïve to stick to the romantic vision of love being in the situation they were here?*

Knowing how little Ali earned in the flower shop I thought that Mina should be eager to help him financially. But she had ‘changed the chip’ in her head, wanting to be sustained by Ali, both most probably wanting to have children as soon as possible. That was the

information we got from Mina and Samira, whenever we had the chance to talk to them. Ali would teach her German, no more courses needed. The prospect of becoming a hairdresser was no longer interesting.

Inner conversation: *In a way I understood Mina's position having found her 'prince charming for a new life' but as a western woman I still would have preferred that she could keep up the motivation for practicing the beauty treatment she had shown me two months before, singing while doing her face massage and declaring that this is going to be a professional goal for her. It seems to be that it is always better to find a man than to take up a profession.*

An afternoon ladies' beauty session

My neighbors arrived at 2 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. I told them that they could do something with their nails or their face. Walking with them through the forest we created a vision of intercultural relations between women, caring for each other by doing beauty treatment.

Inner conversation: *Maybe we evoked a harem out of 1001 Arabian knights. Or we wanted to have a mutual feeling by caring for each other. Or the other ladies just wanted to help me with the Syrian guests.*

Mina does not seem to feel at ease coming up alone while Samira is downstairs cooking for the event. Mina is helping her postpone her arrival upstairs. We again have a western problem of 'organizing', as the ladies have different times, coming and going, having other dates, and so on. Finally, after my third attempt to invite her to come up, she arrives and then she is with us about three hours all in all, mostly doing nails. We chat and drink coffee or tea. Some of us go swimming or into the sauna and one of us is doing nails with Mina. Most of us are impatient, as we are hard working women, not accustomed to going for manicures. But still, everybody is trying to adapt to the situation; it turns out to be a cosy afternoon.

They ask me what they should pay and we do not know how to calculate it. In the end spontaneously we let go around a cap and give the money to her as a present for her wedding, which is taking place tomorrow. She accepts it rather timidly.

Samira brings up her taboule and her kebbeh at 5 o'clock. Eating together we have a nice relational time. Cultural differences get smaller. My friend Wanda provokes them by asking why they wear a headscarf now that we are only women here. Samira answers that she likes to wear it. Later we make some jokes of a sexual nature about men and we all laugh a lot together. We finish at 6 o'clock, all of us in a good mood.

Inner conversation: *I am happy about how the event turned out. There was a small space of mutual acceptance when laughing and giggling together. For a little moment, it was a women's space. I gather that the 'shortness of the event' helped us to be successful, as it was a time slot where everybody put energy into understanding each other.*

Metologue III: Colonialism

My personal experience of being German born on a Canary Island sometimes lets me feel a 'colonial voice' in me. For example, I know, that I discredit my Spanish friends and colleagues when I see them standing around, chatting endlessly without any goal. I want them to finish with 'the plan', and it usually does not happen. In these moments my German roots speak through me, although I did not grow up there and although I reject that voice within me. I do not want to be a 'quadratic German', as Spaniards like to call them. In other occasions I can tell Austrian friends how likable my Spanish colleagues are when they sit together chatting without any project. In relationship with my Syrian guests I realize both roots and apply the bipolar vision to them. I see many 'colonial' stances in myself and even in those who try to be most helpful and caring towards 'foreigners'. It is almost impossible to not 'fall into a colonial trap', because we always want something back from our guests/refugees/migrants, etc. This can be gratefulness, seeing them learning from us, or being able to relate to them in other ways. What is difficult for us is to keep our cultural stance with them because we do not understand it and furthermore, we are full of prejudice about it. And we cannot develop alternatives because the lack of language does not permit a dialogue. There comes a point, where the clash does not allow for any bridge. Moments where we come into emotional distress without a solution. We usually forget the other party: What do they think about us? It becomes clear that there is no mutual participation possible in the sense that there is no exchange of ideas taking place.

I want Samira to learn to sort the garbage. I want her to let Can take a shower in the shared apartment. I have difficulties accepting that Can does not join the fitness club because there are no separated individual shower compartments. I mostly discredit Tarek in his overwhelming protection of his second wife

Samira, whom I would like to see become a free, autonomous woman. I am not ready to assume that he and she may have a lot of reasons for behaving the way they do that I do not see or cannot grasp.

When communicating with them I often get the impression that they are trying to treat us like authorities or as social inspectors, which my husband and I do not want to be. I am aware of their relation to governmental institutions here, on which they are depending, and at the same time I forget that they are depending on me too, because of my lending them the apartment downstairs. I want them to be curious about me/us, not considering, that they are in the same situation with me as they are with the administrative institutions. What is different is that we encounter each other daily on the staircase, or in the car driving somewhere together, or eating together, which means: sharing life-and family time together. Do these relationships we have within a familial unit of nurturing, sharing, just having time together for fun, change something about the hierarchy in our relationship? The idea of a one-way road is attached to the concept of colonialism.

Whenever I bring home my friends, my female neighbours or my colleagues I realize that they do not know how to behave with my Syrian guests. They ask me questions about them and only few of them encounter them directly. In such a context I feel like defending my guests against colonialism from outside. I can guide the encounter taking place between my Syrian and non-Syrian guests, for example, by inviting people to play music with them, by sitting them next to each other at the table, by organizing little events where they can show their abilities, their cooking, their competence. But I experience that our Syrian and my non-Syrian guests are not always eager to respond my wish to create these contacts and networks. The non-Syrian guests prefer talking with me about my experience with them. The Syrian guests would rather invite us to drink tea downstairs with them, when they have invited their Arabic-speaking friends. In this case, we enter their condominium, sit at their table and understand nearly nothing, except when their friends are businessmen from Dubai or from Beirut, who make more or less of an effort to speak in English to us. Tarek and Samira always look proud to have us downstairs. Our communication style is now the other way round: we are their guests on those rare occasions. Is this an encounter between two cultures wanting to get to know each other or is it showing 'important others within the dominant culture' that integration is taking place, that the host country is wonderful or that our family's teaching of integration is wonderful?

At the end of our common journey I have to admit that I am not sure whether we were successful in building a relationship outside colonial patterns. Even so, I am happy with the changes happening to me by reflecting upon our common progress.

The wedding between Mina and Ali

Ali and Mina asked us whether they can have their wedding event at our house. They tell us that the wedding formalities are nothing more than making an entry into a book with the imam. There seem to be no more ceremonies at the mosque. To celebrate the event they want to invite a few of their friends, bring their Syrian dishes upstairs and stay for one hour, after which Mina would leave with Ali. They ask for permission very politely, at the same time offering to go to a restaurant instead. My ladies' beauty day was fixed for Saturday, while the wedding would be on Sunday.

Inner conversation and tense dialogue: *In my head their question is turning out to be an exchange of beauty day for wedding. I have a strange feeling because I am not sure anymore for whom I am doing this. I thought I planned my ladies' day for Minas and Samira's future in Austria, but now I am thinking that they are doing it for me and for my people. My husband and I felt a bit overwhelmed, not very sure about what to say about the wedding at home. But we feel a bit like a substitute family for Mina. She has made big steps in the last year, separating from the Palestinian guy and now marrying a man, whom we know a bit and believe to be a good match for her. Therefore we decide to let the wedding be with us.*

An Arabic wedding at home

The days before the wedding are full of preparations by the two women, Leyla being the third in the team. You hear them shouting and giggling, like little girls at school. Mina proudly shows us her wedding dress during our beauty afternoon. They are euphoric and full of energy.

On Sunday evening, around 6pm, my husband and I are getting nervous upstairs, as people start arriving. They are fathers with two or three children of different ages. We are informed that most of them are in the flower business run by Egyptians in Vienna. They are friends of Ali, and because they do not want to bother us with too many people the mothers had stayed at home with the rest of siblings. Leyla and children of Samira's other girlfriend are nicely dressed and joyfully playing in the garden. Mina and Samira's Syrian relatives are presented to us. The man, looking so serious, shows us his immobilized arm after a bombing raid, his wife helps explain, as she speaks better German than he does. Luckily for us as hosts the business of bringing up the dishes and waiting for the couple to be wed to come up makes everybody busy preparing their phones for recording the event. Children are intrigued too, and everybody is looking for a place for a good view. Suddenly we can hear the couple

moving upstairs, very slowly, stiffly, seriously. Mina is looking down to her feet, Ali up to the crowd upstairs. A fusillade of flashes from video- and photo taking accompanies the freshly married couple through our living room until reaching the couch, where they thankfully sit down.

The next – most important – part of the ceremony is his putting the ring on Mina's finger. I do not see Mina doing it the other way round, but this part, him putting the ring on her finger, is the act which is done several times, so that it can be recorded by everybody.

After the photo session Tarek gives a seemingly endless speech, from which we understand that he is thanking us as hosts for making the ceremony possible. He is constantly naming us: Dr. Corina and Dr. Rain. I observe that the crowd is becoming bored with Tarek's endless words.

Inner conversation and tense dialogue: *I feel stressed with Tarek's thanking words towards us, not wanting the whole crowd to be part of it. I have a notion that this kind of speech is an Arabic necessity in open community spaces, having had similar situations with Yasin in other occasions. But I am almost sure that the Egyptian flower businessmen are not eager to listen to it. They have been living in our culture for a longer time and may sense that this is a painful cultural challenge for everybody here excepting Tarek. I also get an idea that this speech is of indirect profit for Tarek, who in this way is conducting his personal impression management. My husband who stands beside me is not of the same opinion, backing Tarek's position as the patriarch in this event and asking me to smile.*

The speech comes to an end, everybody storms the Syrian buffet and most of us eat standing up, as there are not enough places to sit. They brought plastic crockery, so that the event looks a bit like a picnic in a modern house. The guests are all bothered not to make nuisance or destroy anything in our house. The atmosphere is stiff, and for us even a bit boring. My husband and I want to change it by asking: "Where is the music, where is the dance?"

Ali had been setting up the sound system together with my son a few hours before. It is easy to find Arabic pop tunes on the Internet. Ali is the first to dance, alone in the inner circle, the surrounding crowd clapping along. He brings in one man after the other to dance a little show with him, his friends from the flower business, none of them Syrian. It looks a bit like a 'Sirtaki' we know from Greece, where men dance alone. Each one has his very individual way of moving his body. The children take part in the dance in whatever way,

Leyla being the most exhaustive in movement and rhythm. Tarek does not dance, neither do the women. They do not move at all. Only we, as hosts, are trying to make ‘western’ moves to the foreign, but interesting rhythms, highly acclaimed by the crowd.

Inner conversation: *I am really irritated now by the fact that the women are not accompanying me. I have no clue as to what role I am playing here for the men standing around. I am glad, that my husband is here. I am wondering why the bride is not dancing. Do the other women not dance because they are shy or ashamed in front of us or are they not allowed to in their culture? The latter would add to my prejudice of women being limited to household affairs. I am also bothered about the sexual signs attributed to women, limiting their body autonomy.*

I try several times to invite the few women standing around to move with me but I am dismissed, always with a little smile. I observe that all women love to see me dancing. Mina is asked by the crowd to dance with the groom. She looks so shy, just completely different from how I have been experiencing her these last few days. With stiff and cautious movements she moves over the floor, guided by Ali, who is showing his best and charming side.

Inner conversation: *I cannot help feeling very disturbed by what I see as a gender performance here. It makes me feel sad. I remember a scene once experienced in Turkey seeing an old woman starrng through a little hole in a fence at the tourists inside the restaurant. I had just gone to the toilet and saw her standing behind the fence, with a concupiscent glance on her face. Today it is different, because we are all inside. But what feels similar for me is that there is a big invisible fence between them and me. There are a lot of question marks in my head that I cannot resolve.*

The dance continues for a while, but the atmosphere abates like a falling tide and one hour later everybody is taking their leave quite abruptly. They explain that this is because the next day is a workday. The remaining women clean the table and our kitchen, a lot of plastic rubbish collected. We say goodbye to everybody, most guests thanking us effusively for the pleasant evening. That was the big event, marking a new life for Mina, but also for Samira and Leyla, who have lost her as a companion, a friend, a babysitter, and a neighbor.

The next day Samira is in bed, ridden with a sore throat, and, as a result, misses one of her first German courses, and is reprimanded by the Austrian institution for not attending.

Metatext IV: Gender perspectives

The exposure of 'gendered emotions' is the most difficult topic in this entire project for me because of all the perspectives I have within me: host, wife, mother of my son, female systemic therapist/trainer and female observer. My husband has a completely different perspective towards many issues here, and we discuss this a lot. I have a different relationship with them; I can enter the apartment even when Tarek is not there. I had motherly feelings towards Can. Tarek once called me 'older sister'. My husband is the 'patriarch'; he is the important person in the house, the authority. When they needed help or instructions they asked me and not him. Probably in their cultural pattern I am in charge of the household, meaning everything at home concerning them. Nevertheless my husband did a lot of things to help them with the Austrian authorities; he arranged Leyla's attendance at school and talked to the headmistress; he went to the official institution for labor administration with Can and with Samira. He made a lot of phone calls, as did I. We usually share the 'tasks' that popped up, talking about them and deciding, depending on availabilities and on what we consider to be the better option.

As for my daily contact with the men and the women, I have different positions and reactions to them; with Can I felt motherly feelings mostly, wanting him to become more mature and a bit more down to earth. He related to me in a natural way though. I became more and more aware that I was not his mother. With Tarek my relationship was complicated; I am flattered by his charm and good humor, smiling and laughing at his jokes, but at the same time I am suspicious about his way of networking. I see him using relationships he has with Syrian friends and with Samira's girlfriends as tools to make himself seem mightier. He becomes a comfort for all of them. He may have ideas of working here in Austria, but he does not make an effort to learn German. His job is to network with people who can help him. I am ambivalent about this competence, knowing that it is an important part of Arabic culture. Samira can be ironic towards him, making jokes about his weight and his poor German, but she does not do more than that. It is a reciprocal bond of necessity and dependency, which I cannot accept. It sounds to me as if they rather restrain themselves from improving their autonomy here. I get a feeling like he does not want her to speak better German than he, even if he openly tells us, that she is bright and her German is 'super'. I anticipate a hidden jealousy on his part, which comes into action when he feels emasculated. Samira does not want to confront him too much and remains dependent on somebody who is not willing to learn the rules of life here. That is one of my interpretations, which is not entirely true, because Tarek attends the courses for integration and even makes excursions with Syrians in Vienna, to show them historical monuments. He does that in Arabic though. He is just born to be a networker.

Knowing Mina's story it is very difficult for me to find the right stance towards her. She managed to separate from the violent man. Before her marriage, she stayed with us, rather shyly helping Samira in the house and with Leyla, but is much lazier than she. Not working at the hairdresser's anymore, she slept a lot and she did not do the washing up, the cooking and the shopping for them. Samira did it. I should say that Mina has had a traumatizing life until now and that she is not in the position to take charge of her life. Her abrupt marriage to another man brings out a mixed feeling of admiration and sorrow for her. I had the inner construct, that she would be the first one to integrate quickly, assuming her single position as a woman in this country. That was a false assumption. As in so many other occasions I am being much too quick in assuming a possible change of inner constructs, life principles and life style. Because of my own gender constructs I am not able to accept Mina's new love story just as it is: falling in love so suddenly. Another voice in me evokes the blind woman selling flowers falling in love with Charlie Chaplin in his famous movie 'City Lights'¹¹

Can visiting us with Natalia

Can always talks a lot about his friend Natalia, whom he met in the language course. She is Colombian, the same age as he is and recently divorced from an Austrian guy. She wants to learn German quickly, to be able to stay. She was also a lawyer in Colombia. They have a lot of similarities. They learn together at the German course, and he reiterates that he is quicker than she in learning the language, and he is very proud of that.

Inner conversation: *I cannot decide whether Can and Natalia are a couple or just friends or colleagues. I would feel uneasy asking him, assuming that it must be a 'special' relationship in any case. Because I can speak Spanish with Natalia, I am getting very curious about her.*

This time Can tells us not to invite Tarek and Samira when he brings Natalia. As his German has improved so much we are also hoping to have a 'deeper conversation' without Tarek and Samira.

Inner conversation: *I ask myself why he does not want them to be part of the meeting, whether he dislikes them or whether there are some cultural reasons, such as his not wanting them to know that he has befriended a non-Muslim woman. Could this be forbidden in their*

¹¹ City lights, 1931 by Charly Chaplin, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Lights (acc. 10.08.2017)

Syrian community? I wonder about this possibility, knowing that I will never find out what is happening here because none of them would ever describe all the particularities to us.

When Can arrived with Natalia he seemed to be in a very good mood and very self-confident. He gives both of us a hug and Natalia, being a Latino American woman, makes it easy to engage in informal conversations. I immediately take her aside to speak some Spanish, which she loves, as her German is not at the same level. I ask her about her plans and about her dramatic divorce. She now wants to learn something in Austria and then decide whether to go back to Colombia. She gave up her newly-founded independent legal practice in Bogotá. She knows that if she went back she would have to start from scratch. Can is having a conversation with my husband. They also practice their ancient rite of smoking a cigarette together on the terrace.

Afterwards both of them help me in the kitchen. Can wants to do the things he always did when he was living here: washing and dressing the salad. Cutting a lemon into it and setting the table. Natalia asks me to help with a few things; it is a nice way of being together more than just preparing a meal. During the meal we have discussions on different topics. This was a really interesting and fruitful evening, full of nice conversations about sport, nutrition habits, plans for the future, salsa dancing, learning swimming, etc. We just need to speak slowly in order to understand each other. Natalia drinks a glass of wine with us, Can drinks water. Everything is easy going. We have a sort of trans-cultural meeting.

Inner conversation: *I have to admit that it feel so different from the exhausting attempts of understanding each other when sitting with Tarek and Samira. It may also be true that the fact of having three cultures sitting together helps us to feel relaxed and engaged every time a new topic comes up. We are all so curious about each other, and this makes it a special moment.*

Natalia is very interested in our gymnastic program. Just like us she also prefers less intense fitness activities, whereas Can prefers the fitness club. We talk about the differences in doing sports, but nobody judges the other. Tonight our encounter is a gentle form of exchanging, irritating, and reassuring bond, a curious common movement, a bit like dancing to a new rhythm. At 11 o'clock at night, much later than other Syrian evenings, my husband brings them to the metro station. We promise each other that we will meet again.

Metatalogue V: Languages

I want to talk about what 'language' can mean in the intercultural dialogue. Relying on Maturana's anthropological version of 'languaging' as a combination of moving the tongue, the emotions involved and coordinating the meaning of interactions in human evolution (Maturana 1990)¹² I come back to our communication with Syrian guests. The coordination of our meanings is contingent. We always try to understand each other, with more or less success. The translation app on their cell phone often makes mistakes and sows confusion. In few cases it helps. Our family is not able to use it on our phones, so it is one-way. Often we have to accept, that there is no way of understanding each other at that moment. We leave the conversation open with a bit of resignation in interrelating with them. When I am not understood, emotionally I feel helpless and irritated. I continue thinking about how I can make myself understood. I assume, that they have similar problems but they do not show it in the same way. I suppose that the Arabic culture in any case leaves more space for coordinating meaning; it does not so much want to make things clear or bring things to an end, as western culture dictates. I think of Tom Andersen, when he talked about 'Vorverstehen' in language and relationship, inviting us to overcome our 'prejudices' as much as possible. In our case it is almost impossible to avoid falling into misunderstandings with only a glimpse of understanding each other (Andersen, 1991).

Gesticulating and pointing towards the objects one means, are useful for understanding simple acts. We often use that type of communication to coordinate daily life together. Even here we both learn different meanings of gestures. We have fun when we finally understand or don't understand each other! Body language is simple and by facial expression you can easily determine whether your message has reached the receiver. My conversations with Yasin, usually on the phone, help us understand the constellations of their acts in daily life and to calibrate my attitude towards them, but after a while I find myself questioning other new acts. It is rare that I feel the relief that we have both mutually understood each other. The dialogues we have are experiments of coordinating a meaningful conversation without a voice from outside telling us whether we are "right" or "wrong". This is not just a matter of translation. Cultural principles of how to maintain the conversation, who should be first to talk and to listen, of what is allowed to be said but also what is thought to be interesting for the other, what not, etc. . . . All these facts run besides the words uttered and listened to.

In this long running experience with my Syrian guests I gradually become humble: I have to accept what I get, never knowing the exact meaning. Interpretation is my hobby, but it does not seem to be the vehicle to get into contact with them. Much better is a good sense for humor and making common everyday jokes. All

¹² Maturana (1990) exposes in this chapter, how in the evolution of human language evolved through a coordination of uttering sounds, designing objects and reaching a consensus of which sounds would belong to which meanings.

of us have had a lot of fun with jokes concerning eating, putting on or losing weight, learning German or not, praying to Allah or not, etc. These jokes were the best vehicle for feeling closer to each other without the necessity of understanding complicated issues. In those moments we felt a connection on the human level.

Finding an end to our story: Spring 2017

Mina has left to live with Ali, and Samira is often alone. She goes to visit Mina. At the moment Tarek is not coming as often as he was before. All of them are receiving money from the Austrian government as official refugees. My husband and I are having conversations about the time when we want to have our apartment back. There are many reasons for it, but I will not expand on that issue here. In any case, whenever we talk about it, we feel a bit guilty. We want to do it smoothly and help Samira to find an apartment in the district, so that Leyla can stay at the same school. We are looking forward to finding an apartment with two rooms, so that Leyla can have a single room for herself. That would be an improvement for all of them. We want to give them time until next Christmas to find the right flat.

Everything turns out differently. First of all we do not find an apartment affordable enough for them. Second we are refused whenever we mention that we are looking for a flat for Syrian refugees. Politics have changed in Austria; instead of euphoric civilian motivation, a racist tendency is taking hold. We realize that there is no initiative from the government to help us find accommodation.

Suddenly Samira tells us, that she has found an apartment. It is affordable; it has only one room, and is very near to where Tarek lives now. It is on the ground floor, having an entrance to a little garden for the house. There are supermarkets close by. Leyla is supposed to go to another school than Tarek's children from his first marriage because the first wife wants it that way. But there are two schools in that district. Tarek seems to be the winner, as he has to move less between the two houses. He tells us that Samira found the flat all by herself.

Inner conversation and tense dialogue: *We are in the well-known 'bazaar of feelings' with them, wanting to advise them better but don't have anything better to offer to them. This is our frequent mixture of emotional distress, when we try to help without success. Governmental institutions are of no help in obtaining information. We have to admit that Tarek and Samira, will design their future life here in Austria without much advice from us.*

On the 10th of November Samira leaves our house with her little daughter and all of her belongings. She very eagerly cleans the rooms, the kitchen and even the walls, packs her things and puts all of her stuff in a van, with Tarek and his son's help. In half a day the signs

of the everyday life of a Syrian woman and her daughter are removed from our sight. The scent of their cooking, maybe cardamom, or maybe the scent of her shisha, still lingers in the air of their apartment, where we almost immediately move in with our books, our computers and our western work habits.

Personal highlights reflecting on cultural entanglement from a relational perspective.

When I first began to take my autoethnographic notes of my everyday encounters with my Syrian guests, they were self-experiential considerations. I eagerly wrote them down on scraps of paper to get rid of my inner irritations, and the words written down made me ask new questions about myself and my world. The second time around, after sharing my first spontaneous interpretations with my family and friends, and even – meant as an inner dialogue- with my dog, these reflections turned into more general assumptions. Other sources for rubbing and accommodating my inner lenses could perhaps be my professional therapeutic or systemic training experiences, perhaps a session, which contained elements of what I had imagined about my guests' overt behavior. Or it could be positions evoked by social media or newspaper headlines concerning the refugees. My first subjectivity was filtered, disrupted and organized in new manners, provoking kaleidoscopic pictures of the society which I am part of, moved by hidden hands. Rather than feeling autonomous, I would see myself as an interdependent wayfarer, driven by uncontrollable mass media and other forms of communications (Gergen, 2017), but relying on my bicultural biographical coherence in arranging the Syrian stories into a personal narrative of my life. These very subjective interdependent reflections may resemble ideas of 'others', who do not give voice to their ambivalent feelings towards the migratory process in European countries just now.

Asylum seekers are driven away from their country, their family, their broader clan, they leave their kids with other relatives; mothers are evacuated to the one sibling living in the host country considered to be the best one, uncles, sisters and brothers being scattered around the world.

The feeling of foreignness, showing us the effects of polygamy, huge numbers of family members and kids, many of them unattended on their exodus from their country or from refugee camps nearby trying to find a better world, a better standard of living or a better future for their kids. And all of them without realistic notions of what the host country

they will seek asylum in will be like.

Watching their state of shock relating to a dichotomized society composed of people who just do not want them there and others who are curious about them, but scared at the same time, and others still who are interested in their life story and wanting to merge with their culture to a certain extent.

The relational stance towards the arrival of Arabs in Austria is ambivalent. Most people here want them to adapt quickly to our cultural system, not to disturb our values and our lifestyle, to learn the language and to work. In our western society they are expected to earn money soon and stop claiming refugee welfare payments anymore, to accept our values and our lifestyle, and function in our society.

These reflections evolve through my personal stories as a host, but relate to the overall feeling of many people. I tried to get into an autoethnographic stance, decrypting my everyday experiences with them and transforming myself. I am going to generalize about some of the areas in which I learned and hope that they will come into resonance with the views of others. That what we often call 'political correctness', often slips out of control, and I am pretty sure that there will be a 'western distortion' in my descriptions. I often asked myself how I could honestly evade a western centric colonial position towards my Syrian guests in our encounters. There was little verbal communication to explain our culture to each other and there certainly was a 'hidden agenda' behind our ways of behaving towards each other. For example: I would like them to engage in our idea of cultural activities, such as visiting museums, going to an open space playground, adapting to our lifestyle, whereas they would like us to taste their food, learn basic Arabic words and let them be as they were. Our communication always had a second and third meaning behind our explicit interactions. The motivation to learn Arabic in our family was low. We expected them to change, and we did not make many steps towards their culture. My first learning point was as follows:

The more you become sure, that the 'migrated stranger' has to change to adapt to your world, the more you should put yourself in his/her position and ask yourself, how you would hypothetically perform in the same situation. An open mind is a good way to foster – hopefully mutual – empathy.

Social situations where we could laugh together were especially helpful. Communication via body language of laughing, observing our convulsive body movements, studying our distorted faces and 'being with' the other in such moments probably made us

think, that we had passed the border of cultural misunderstandings: “Tarek weighs 105 Kilos, Ramadan will help him to lose them” (Samira); “Samira on the bicycle, boom!” (Tarek makes a sign with his hand, towards the ground). Tarek makes a scene of himself being drunk, because he cleaned some stain on the floor in front of the dishwasher, supposedly alcohol, etc., etc. In these moments we felt relaxed and close to each other. They count as perfect instruments for integration:

Bringing humour into conversation and laughing together are the best vehicles for surmounting cultural difference. It is the 'glimpse of easiness', which brings us together, having eye contact, feeling relieved and unburdened from misunderstanding. The search for understanding turns into double and triple meaning, which become palpable for all of us, and everybody takes whatever he/she wants out of the situation.

As their hosts I assume that we must have made a somewhat 'bossy' impression on them: We wanted them to throw the garbage into different bins, we wanted them to put their shoes in an order at the main entrance. We repaired Leyla's bicycle twice for her, and we helped them deal with the authorities by phoning for them or accompanying them to appointments. We helped them understand the Austrian lifestyle, Austrian products and Austrian behaviors asking them to keep an open mind. If I try to put myself into their position I assume, that they were trying to be the best guests they could, not understanding many of our requests and comparing them with what Arabic acquaintances in Vienna would explain to them or what family members in other countries would tell them about their own experiences during their frequent cell phone conversations. Not so many refugees lived in their conditions, because most of them would rather live independently in a flat or in a refugee shelter.

Tarek showed us photos of his bombed-out villa, his garden and from his social activities in the refugee camp in Jordan, where he always showed himself helping others. It was his way of making us equals in the relationship. He was eager to show us, that he had been 'somebody important' in Syria before the war disrupted it. We were impacted by the photos and by his palpable emotions showing them to us. We felt his frustrations and at the same time, we were not capable of attuning because we (the post war generation) had never lived such horrors first-hand. We often remained silent, waiting for his own ideas for solving the painful situation with his next utterance. We felt helpless. My inner response to Tarek was a mixed feeling of pity, quickly released by the search for possibilities of how he could overcome the loss. I was shocked though by the fact that his cell phone suddenly broke and he could never restore the photos on it. I felt that loss of all his digital memories with him.

This was happening now, in my house, so I could feel it with him in my body. But often I was not patient towards his reluctance to settle down in Austria, a country he seemed to have chosen for a better life. Looking at his life now, I assume that he probably decided to seek asylum in Austria because he had heard of the open health system and knew that his wife would need dialysis for the rest of her life. Assuming that his language improvement was poor and that he did not get the driving licence from Syria accredited in Austria, at that moment his revising of his idea of making a life may have turned into meaning something like ‘a better future for the next generation and a place for me and my first (and perhaps my second) wife to retire’.

When I train systemic therapists I often tell my students to be patient with their difficult clients, but in the immediate living situation with Tarek I feel the inner confrontation with my own expectations towards change because I was not able to share his attitude towards life. Turning this inner experience into a learning point I would stress the following issue:

It is better if the hosts are able to slow down their expectations towards ‘the migrating strangers’ and let them be who they are. No push for change makes it easier for them to open up. Nevertheless, it is important for hosts to have a notion of the sort of commitment they are engaging in and what is their personal motivation behind it. In my case the effort of writing down my experiences was keeping me curious. I could slow down my expectations towards their transformation accommodating to an emotional frame both of us could share. I was so eager to understand more. The balance between slow and quick motion in the cultural dialogues offers constant opportunities of transformation.

Our Syrian guests usually addressed us as a family: My husband being the ‘Head of the house’ and me being the ‘guardian of the household’. They gathered that I was the organizing force behind our cultural project with them. They paid me a financial contribution to their living with us, they coordinated the dishes for eating together with me and they asked me questions about the cleaning or using the washing machine. When they saw my husband doing garden work, they always offered their help in weeding and sweeping the pathways. When we sat together there was a ‘flavour of family life’ for them and for us, meaning a whole big family of everybody living at this address, trying to maintain a living space. They liked to drink a coffee with us or invite us for a ‘Syrian coffee’ or a cup of tea in their room. Sitting together and chatting, pronouncing our names ‘Dr. Corina, big sister’ or ‘Dr. Rain’, (they never added a kinship to his name but always looked at him with admiration), celebrating birthdays together or having them with us when all the

children and grandchildren of our extended family came for a visit. All these things made them feel a part of our family. On these occasions the atmosphere was relaxed and spontaneous, very different from that of the German lessons, and the closeness made it easier for us to feel happy together. The discourse of a happy family, the 'Family Myth' as my husband likes to call it (Sieder, 2008) took a hold of us and there came the learning hotspot:

The discourse of family as a myth of the untouchable forces of bloodline and kinship follows trans-culturally accepted interpretations of feelings and behaviors. Therefore this is a suitable setting to convey cultural accommodation for newcomers. Questions such as "How is your son doing? Did he get his exam back? Does Leyla bring friends from school, we will celebrate your birthday, etc.", bring in 'homely feelings'. Our guests feel tenderly welcomed and embraced by membership in a family group, and they are open to following instruction from the household leader. The emotional frame enables them to bond with the situation better than through words. It is by a 'feeling of membership' and 'doing things together', that the stranger is integrated: The traditional patriarchal family model is helpful for trans-cultural integration.

A trans-cultural ritual for all families is eating meals together. It is the pleasant time to chat and feel close. By sitting around the big table passing around dishes offering and helping 'the other' to get food on his/her plate, we all experience the diversity in the preparation, color, smell, and taste of the meal: "Oh, you slice the inner lemon into the salad and you cut the parsley so little and you use that amount of cardamom, etc". Our guests were not as curious about our food as we were about theirs because as I learned now talking to diverse second generation immigrants, food is one of the important 'homemakers' you can reproduce in other countries if you find the right ingredients. Food is like a mascot, responsible for emotional integration: Your memories of home are in your stomach. Our Syrian guests would travel across half of Vienna to find their butcher and their market for their vegetables, spices and Syrian coffee beans. We felt disturbed by their never trying our dishes, even after we told them that we bought 'halal meat'. We did not understand the enormous cultural challenge for them and the relevant Islamic rules¹³. We tried to avoid vinegar using only a little oil and offered different dishes, but mostly their face would turn ugly when trying it.

At last we stopped putting much of our food on the table, knowing that they would always bring too much of their own food, may be trying to give back something to us for

¹³ ,Halal' refers to the Islamic way of slaughtering animals, and it is a rule for Muslims to only eat halal meat.

hosting them. It changed towards the end of our common meals, when they felt more relaxed and autonomous in their life in general. Our meals would not be so opulent anymore. We insisted again that they should try some of our dishes. And now, two years after their arrival, we finally see them trying some of them. We admit, that we never stopped drinking beer or wine at dinner, which was commented on with jokes or funny stories and then just ignored.

Eating 'strange or foreign dishes' is a special challenge for cultural adaptation and has many components for the meaning perceived: Taste is very cultural but politeness as a guest is a trans-cultural behavior, however performed. We have to keep a balance between strange and homely dishes. Like little children who mostly eat spaghetti but are instructed by parents to try out something new, it is a challenge for newcomers into a country. Having passed the challenge of perceiving 'ugly tastes' when trying foreign meals, turning them into an 'acceptable menu' stands for integration! Taste is big cultural heritage.

I often found myself trying to explain our lifestyle or the pieces of our world to them. I looked into their eyes to grasp whether they understood what I had said. The more I saw bewilderment or astonishment in their faces, the more I got into body language, trying to gesture, make pictures in the air, making 'evocative performances' of what I wanted to emotionally transmit towards them. I was never sure of what was getting across to them: That is well - known constructivist wisdom, but it makes a difference when we are playing with such cultural ambiguity. I learned throughout our experiences that misunderstandings in body language are never as hurtful as verbal misunderstandings can be, because I always felt an increasing trust towards each other after using body language.

It can be fascinating to perform with your body whenever you cannot transmit meaning by verbal language. One is performing and understanding the other in that moment. He or she is expressing him/herself through body and facial expressions, miming and gesturing. We are exposing ourselves to others, and they are doing the same. Probably we are bringing out parts of ourselves that we do not even know. This endeavor brings us nearer and touches feelings without us interpreting them. Body language is quicker than spoken words, looking up for translations, etc. and therefore it encompasses mutuality in dialogue. It is feeling the other rather than understanding him or her.

A somewhat odd but important issue living together with our Syrian guests was their relationship to animals: Dogs were disgusting animals for them and in our house they had to live with a dog always watching them. We saw some instances of reluctance and others of them relating nicely towards him. When I felt that my dog was maltreated I created a vision in my head of a country where pigs were treated like dogs in our country to help myself.

They would be kept at home, would sleep on the sofa, eat with us. How would I feel in such a context? This fantasy helped me to step down from my expectations towards them about the dog.

It became obvious to me, that besides this being our prejudice about Arabic culture, their relationship to different animals is ‘written down in their bones’. Observing their contact with animals it becomes visible for us, how difficult it is to overcome culturally embedded notions. Arabic women are often very frightened of dogs, mice, cats and all sorts of running creatures. It may be a gender role asking men to shelter them.

We should not assume a general reluctance towards all animals, and we can try to change the ‘relational stance’ towards them by going with them to the zoo or by telling them stories about animals or by offering them contact with them and even by letting them make all the photos they want to send their family members around the world. It makes ‘running material’ for integration: Leyla with the dog standing beside her bed; Mina looking proud sitting on a horse after all what she had endured from her ex-husband; Can coming to visit us after half a year and telling us, that our dog recognized him. These pictures are tell stories about their coming along with our culture and making them into little heroes on the front page of a virtual family newspaper.

Living with animals fosters integration. The contact with them does not have to involve challenging experiences like hugging a dog or a horse, nor do they have to open their hearts to them. But our ‘doing relationship’ stories about animals tell them a lot of our social constructions, f.e. that we give them a lot of space in our western world. Our guests are invited, may be even confronted with a cultural challenge, where they have to take a position.

I will embrace a discourse I find of strong relevance concerning the rules of behavior for migrating strangers and their host country. Implicit and explicit voices of ‘political in/ or correctness’ often come along with polarizing arguments for or against the ‘strangers’ - refugees, migrants, dark people, outcasts, etc.- and the conduct expected of us towards them. The perspective mainly depends on the point of observation, which may be general or private, society in general, the government, the virtual employees, helping institutions, our friends, my husband, my sons or myself. None of these perspectives can be removed from discourses on globalization, nationality, religion, education, local communities, etc.

After running through many of my inner conversations concerning experiences with my Syrian guests I reluctantly admit, that I gave up the political credo of an unvarying

politically correct stance towards them and their behaviors. Reflecting on a transparent and open-minded dialogue within cultural challenges and setbacks, I became aware of my own fears and emotional irritations, even of some feelings of despair. After a while I accepted them as important instruments used to keep the connection with the migrating strangers. The call for 'political correctness' displaces our personal awkward feelings, which become taboo and we may subconsciously project on the strangers again. People do not speak openly about fear, but tension is ready for discharge. My inner voice would like to give an uncensored explanation even to the biggest fear in experiencing migrating strangers, without my emotional distress being immediately evaluated as 'racism, nationalism and intolerance'. Accepting your inner emotional mess in contacting with unknown habits, life stories and performances does not mean that you are accepting the overall fears of others regarding the refugee migration, which is mainly exaggerated, hardly rational and manipulated by media headlines and political speech. Instead of accepting or fighting against the dominant voice of social media you can try to understand those, who are furious about refugee politics, sharing your experience with them and hoping to find common ground.

Muzzles for speaking up usually polarize the leading opinion and narrow the possible dialogue. Through personal expressions of astonishment, shock, even of disgust you may get into contact with 'the strangeness in your body'. Besides you get an idea of how the migrating strangers are having the same feelings towards you. Encountering becomes possible by admitting annoyance and trying to overcome it. Both of us have a notion of the distress, the difference in upbringing, cultural heritage, political discourse and communal living, breaking us apart, but this enhances mutual curiosity. By addressing your bewilderment you are asking for help to understand.

If we accept that questions can be asked, how do we expose them in such a way that we find common ground? Trying to understand daily living with my Syrian guests I was never sure, whether I could stay with my feelings towards a situation or whether it needed reconstruction and adjustment of my inner stance towards them. I realized that my questions related to my goal-oriented intentions: What am I doing here, for what am I doing it, what do I want to happen, what will be the end of the story? There may be more or less goal oriented relationships when engaging in a project of common utility, but I became aware, especially through the Syrian project, that you are operating with an aim, whether you are aware of it or not. I reflected on my 'politically incorrect' aims for hosting them, For example by asking myself, whether others would be more motivated to learn the language, or whether I should have taken people with a stronger educational background, or whether I

should have set up conditions for their living here at the beginning of their stay or whether I should do it now. My overall response for still having them with us was the enormous amount of curiosity I felt towards their world to contrast with my personal experiences to overwhelming media reports of ISIS, Islam, women suppression, violence, etc. My daily face-to-face encounter with them helped me to withstand the threatening fantasies expressed on the outside.

As a woman I look upon their world with my gendered perspective: Would I like to be soothed, spoiled and teased by men like they are from their men? Would I like to stay indoors most of the day? Would I be happy doing mostly housework and child rearing work? Would I like to live in my body like they do, unmoved, no body exercise, gaining weight so as to fulfil the Arabic ideal of feminine beauty? In terms of energy, I am working on a higher level than them, being responsible for many things that they are not: Work outside the house, household activities, raising the children, community work, even leisure activities. But is my way a better lifestyle? They like to sit together and chat, to play games, to smoke the shisha, to cook and to eat, not aware of the time spent just sitting around. Both cultures – the West and the East - could help transform each other by living the differences instead of fostering well-known prejudices.

The daily routine with Samira, Leyla and Tarek lets curiosity fade away. Then we saw ‘their mistakes’ such as not taking their freshly washed clothes out of the machine, letting the plants on their part of the garden dry up, leaving Leyla’s bike obstructing the entrance and so on. Prejudices were getting a grip on us whenever we lost contact and curiosity. Contrasting with daily routine, when Mina’s Egyptian spouse appeared at our house, he brought new and fresh information into our conversations and when Can came to visit us with his Latin-American girlfriend we spend a very nice evening with them getting to know new things about her, but also about Can’s life. We got curious again. Our look at our daily life with each other was transformed again. We needed a ‘feeding of curiosity’ through new challenges or new information or other performances. I am sure that the migrating strangers visiting us or even us visiting them not necessarily evolved in a transformative self-experience because we stayed in an observational focus. Therefore I come back to the reflection that ‘living life together’ is a perfect frame in which to learn about each other and that it should be the quest for us as honourable hosts to elaborate these many settings in which they can take place.

People of western hosting countries may open up their houses to the ‘migrating strangers’ just to

test the mutually transformative deeply embedded systems of belief by performing everyday life together: It is worth giving it a free trial for a self-experiential adventure!

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