

SEEKING ASYLUM

A refugee finds a new home in Germany.

BY DENISE HRUBY

Scientists and people with academic backgrounds from all over the world have risked their lives on arduous, dangerous journeys over land and sea to find a new home in Germany. The country has taken a proactive approach to helping them get back on their feet through a number of programmes and initiatives.

One of the beneficiaries says their arrival wasn't quite what they had expected. "Everything was chaotic. I didn't know where to begin" they say. "I didn't know what was expected in public situations, how the rules worked. I had no contacts here — no family, friends or network that could show me how to fit in."

After registering as a refugee, they were given accommodation in Lower Saxony. They had been told that because they already spoke some English, they'd be able to pick up German easily. "I thought they'd have a few words that are different [from English]," they say. "But then I realized it's an entirely different language. It's very hard. The words, grammar, everything is different."

Roland Koch, a spokesperson for Germany's largest scientific organization, the Helmholtz Association, says that "we saw how strong the movement of refugees was, and we said, as scientists, we have a responsibility toward other scientists and qualified people". All of the major research organizations in Germany

— the Helmholtz Association, the Fraunhofer Society, the Leibniz Association and the Max Planck Society — as well as the grant-giving German Research Foundation (DFG) have established funds specifically to help refugees with a scientific background in response to the migrant crisis that began in 2015.

REFUGEE CRISIS

More than one million people made their way to EU countries in 2015, leaving behind war, conflict, persecution and economic hardship. While many nations were trying to keep them out, Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, extended a de-facto invitation to refugees. "We can manage this," she said. The 890,000 migrants who arrived in Germany that year were, for the most part, welcomed with open arms. "Clearly, among so many people, there has to be a lot of potential, and a lot of people with a scientific background. We didn't want that to lie idle," Koch says.

The scientist had arrived on their own, without any family or friends and with no support

network. They quickly found German friends who helped them to better understand the culture and customs, and practise the language. Their goal was to find a job in their research field, but this was difficult because they were still waiting for their work permit and diplomas to be translated and approved by the German authorities.

Shreya Balhara at Scholars at Risk, a US charity that protects academic freedom across the world, says that Germany has shown great openness in integrating those with a scientific background. Short-term placements are often a good start. "The scholars we speak with want to be recognized first and foremost as scholars, that is their identity. Doing so helps a lot," she says.

She does say that disappointment can be found in Germany, too. Many scholars will not be able to find the positions they were hoping for, and often their degrees are not recognized in Germany.

About two years after their arrival, the scientist was able to impress at interview using the German they'd acquired. With the financial support of the Helmholtz refugee initiative, they secured a one-month internship, followed by a one-year contract, which was then renewed. "I got so much support and help, and this is 100% what I want to do," they say. ■



**86% OF REFUGEES
LEAVING SYRIA REPORT
HAVING A HIGH SCHOOL OR
UNIVERSITY DEGREE.**

Denise Hruby is a writer and editor in Austria.

CORRECTION

This article was amended on 19 November 2019 to anonymize the interviewee.