

“It wasn’t just a normal train” - the journey that inspired a volunteer

Theresa and some acquaintances were about to board their usual train between Budapest and Vienna when they were met with a shock. “The door opened, it was so full of people that you couldn’t see in,” she said. “Apart from me, nobody else got on.” She didn’t think twice: “What problem should I have with these people?” So she boarded the train.

Of course, the people packed into the train were refugees, trying desperately to get through Hungary to countries further west. This was the start of Theresa’s experience with the so-called refugee crisis in 2015.

The train ride was slow, uncertain, dangerous, and humiliating. They didn’t even know if they would make it: “When we reached the border we were told that the train wouldn’t go... because Austria wouldn’t let us in.” Theresa knew a different, local train to take, and managed to convince some of the refugees to transfer to that train. In the end, she arrived at Westbahnhof at the same time as the original train.

People clapped and cheered when they arrived. “I felt so angry... What are you clapping for? Nothing is over for these people... it won’t be easy, and not all of them will be allowed to stay. They are still in danger.” It was this feeling that spurred Theresa to begin helping wherever she could. Using her Hungarian and German, she acted as an online liaison between local groups helping with the increasingly difficult journey between Hungary and Austria. She hasn’t stopped helping refugees in Vienna since.

Westbahnhof and Hauptbahnhof: train stations & hubs of activism

When thousands of refugees started journeying through Vienna, it took many by surprise. Meghan, a volunteer and student in Vienna, was one of those people. In retrospect, she said, “political forces must have known that there was a wave of people.” Even so, no one was organized or prepared for the vast number of Middle Eastern refugees and migrants traveling through the train stations.

People eventually just started noticing that something was going on. “I remember being in Westbahnhof for some reason and the area up by the train platforms was just... full of people who were from the Middle East.” Meghan went on to say how confusing it was -- no one seemed to really know what was going on.

But then: “I saw a Facebook post from Caritas that they were looking for people to help out at Westbahnhof.” So, she turned up to help -- along with hundreds of other volunteers, doing whatever they could. Many turned up to work with Caritas, but many just showed up spontaneously to see what they could do to help. Eventually, organizations and initiatives started forming, many of which still exist today -- but they were all born at the train stations.

Even today, activism centered around refugees and human rights in Vienna’s train stations still exists. For example, next week (June 20th, 2018), there is a planned demonstration in the Hauptbahnhof demonstrating against anti-asylum politics.

