

With open arms – The library service run by the Bücherhallen Hamburg for refugees

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Abstract:

Refugees – an issue which has been posing an immense challenge for politics and society in Europe and Germany, at least since last year.

Refugees – also a major and important issue for libraries in Germany and Europe, as this article will show

The aim is to demonstrate how the Bücherhallen Hamburg, as a large municipal library system, are reacting to the situation, what has proven its worth, what hasn't, and ultimately how an unforeseeable challenge can hopefully end in lots of winners.

Keywords: Refugees; Intercultural library work; Bücherhallen Hamburg, Germany

Background

Countless refugees have been arriving in Europe since last year. A particularly large number of them have come to Germany. With a population of 81 million, the country received around 1.1 million asylum-seeker registrations and 476,649 asylum applications in 2015. The city-state of Hamburg alone, with a population of around 1.75 million, received 40,000 refugees.

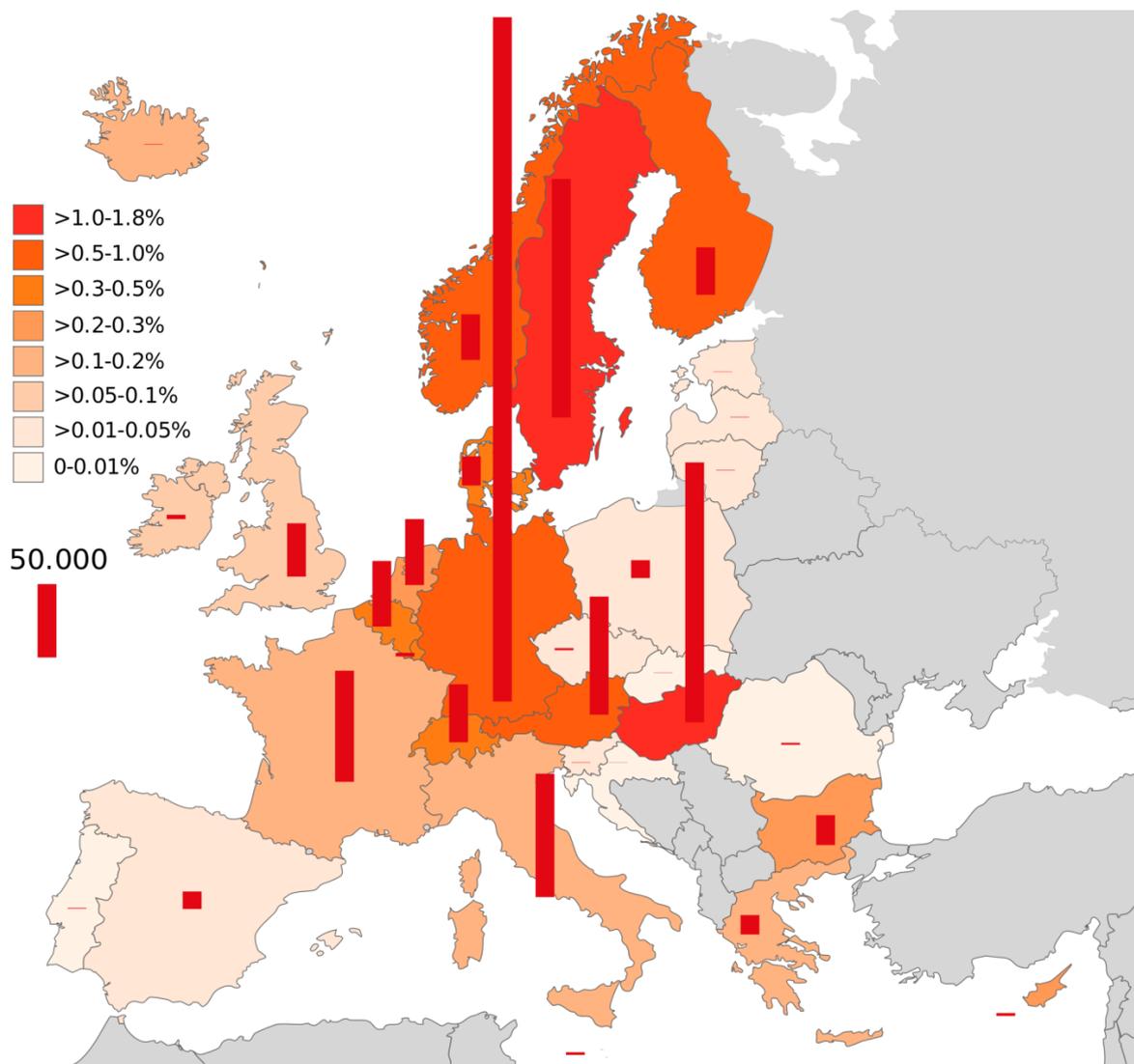


Image1: Refugees in European countriesⁱ

Refugees – an issue for libraries as well?

What's that to libraries? The Bücherhallen Hamburg are using the current situation – in full knowledge of the difficulty involved – as an opportunity to open the libraries, create an atmosphere of living and learning for immigrants, and provide access to information.

Libraries are very popular, especially among people of migrant backgroundsⁱⁱ. A refugee's most important needs after shelter, food and medical care include language acquisition – an area where libraries can make a significant contribution. Many refugees have no way of attending a language class. With their media services, wide range of language support options, or simply as a place of learning, libraries cater to the needs of refugees to improve their language skills.

Basic conditions

There are many challenges and problems. The refugee issue has a big presence in the media and public discussion. Almost everyone has an opinion on it. It is difficult to sift out what is relevant from the hordes of information. Half-truths are widespread. Terms, laws and regulations are often complex. The situation differs from state to state, and municipality to municipality, because Germany is a federation.

Networking at a municipal level

Initially, there were difficulties in pooling relevant information for organisations attending to refugees. In Hamburg, the Authority for Employment Social Affairs, Family Affairs and Integration (BASFI)ⁱⁱⁱ, as the operational body of the “Forum Flüchtlingshilfe”, established so-called dialogue forums on issues such as health, living, sport and language in late 2015.^{iv} The director of the Bücherhallen and the head of the Citizen Involvement division have joined forces with the Volkshochschule adult education centre to act as technical directors of the Language Forum for Hamburg.

‘Dialog in Deutsch’ (‘Dialogue in German’)

The Bücherhallen are specifically taking action to support refugee language acquisition, inter alia, through their ‘Dialog in Deutsch’ volunteer project^v. The 80 ‘Dialog in Deutsch’ conversation groups held at 33 libraries are currently being expanded by a further 25 groups to meet the dramatic increase in demand among refugees. ‘Dialog in Deutsch’ invites people whose native language is not German to apply and practise their German skills in groups. The groups are open and free of charge, and are currently run by around 200 volunteers; no enrolment or registration is required.

Volunteers also play a key role in integrating refugees in other areas. They often act as the link between salaried employees and refugees, e.g. by accompanying refugees to libraries, as well as administrative authorities, doctor’s surgeries etc. Around 460 volunteers work in the Bücherhallen. They are professionally trained and supervised.

Intercultural library work at the Bücherhallen Hamburg

The Bücherhallen have for years offered a range of intercultural facilities, based on which specific refugee services are now being implemented. The intercultural work today has a much broader foundation than it did previously. While the services were once essentially only the responsibility of a few individuals, the staff now understand intercultural library work to be a system-wide task. This was triggered by a brainstorming session, which demonstrated that almost anyone can contribute to intercultural openness.

Working group for refugee projects

The working group for refugee projects (Arbeitskreis Flüchtlingsprojekte) was established in late 2014. All areas of the Bücherhallen are covered here, and strategic decisions made for the entire system.

One of the first steps was to create various media packs: Arabic children’s and young adult books, boxes of games which are either known internationally or virtually self-explanatory, and chests full of (pictorial) dictionaries, board books, materials for learning German etc. These chests were intended as additional stock for the district libraries, and were not designed for borrowing.

Donation-funded online customer card for refugees

This service was further enhanced by the introduction of a donation-funded online customer card for refugees.

Unlike in many other countries, public libraries in Germany – with a few exceptions – do not issue free customer cards. A valid ID or passport must be provided in order for a card to be issued. Refugees recently arrived in Hamburg cannot generally provide the relevant documents, and the annual fee has, in the views of the working group, also posed a considerable hurdle.

The idea was to use a donation-funded online card to give refugees access to the wide range of e-media services and WiFi available in the Bücherhallen. With PressDisplay, foreign-language e-media through Overdrive, and e-learning courses such as German as a Second Language, the Bücherhallen offer a number of useful electronic services for refugees. Almost every refugee has a mobile end device. They are the most important means of keeping in contact with family and friends around the world. Most of their accommodation facilities, however, do not have WiFi access.

A simultaneous aim was to open up easily accessible spaces for refugees at their accommodation facilities and in their districts, thereby enabling exchanges and interaction. Other advantages of the online card included the fact that it could be issued even without the usually required ID, and that the customers incurred no fees for reminders or elapsed due dates.



Image 2: Donation-funded customer card for refugees

This costly project was based on a generous donation by the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S. foundation in late 2014. Participants from the ‘Dialog in Deutsch’ conversation groups recorded donation appeals for YouTube videos in their native languages^{vi}. As such, new intercultural services were advertised by people who had themselves benefited from the Bücherhallen’s established intercultural services. The first donation-funded online customer cards were issued in March 2015.

Co-operation with accommodation providers

Establishments like fördern & wohnen^{vii}, as the provider of most of Hamburg’s accommodation facilities, used flyers in German, English and Arabic to provide information on the cards. All Bücherhallen managers were asked to contact the social managers of the accommodation facilities in their catchment area and formulate further ideas for co-operation. The contact with the accommodation facilities proved to be very informative. The desire for visiting library work was often expressed, but most libraries do not have the staff for it. This desire gave rise to the idea of the Bücherhallen participating in summer festivals organised by the accommodation facilities. With teams of salaried employees and volunteers, the Bücherhallen contributed games, button machines and balloons, while simultaneously providing information about their services, and inviting people to visit. Many refugees

accepted this invitation, and it soon became apparent that most of them also wanted to borrow physical media. There is a particular demand for dictionaries and language courses.

Physical-media loans

Starting in October 2015, the working group for refugee projects then decided to enable all holders of donation-funded customer cards to also borrow up to three physical media items at a time, initially until the end of the year. If media were returned overdue, late fees were charged. Customers holding a donation-funded card were exempt from the reminder process. Refugees who had been living for a longer time in Germany, and who had a temporary or permanent residence permit, were able to receive a regular customer card, and thus borrow more media.

The demand for these customer cards consistently rose once permission was granted for physical media to be borrowed. Around 300 donation-funded online cards were issued from late March to September 2015, and a further 3,700 over the following eight months.

The donation-funded customer cards will be abolished on 1 July 2016. The donations have long been exhausted, and continuing to fund the initiative using donations is not realistic, given the large number of customer cards issued. In keeping with the principle of equal treatment, introducing a customer card specifically for refugees at a much lower cost or with funding from the social authorities is not an option either. In future, refugees will have to pay the same fee as all other customers, and will then be entitled to the regular borrowing amount of up to 70 media items at a time. The rules for issuing customer cards have been revised. Anyone who can present a valid passport can also be registered, based on the many different IDs refugees receive in Germany.

Due to the huge demand for customer cards among refugees without adequate German skills, card information is now available in German, English, Arabic and Farsi. Further translations are in progress. An audio app which uses images to explain the Bücherhallen concept to even illiterate people, initially in German, English, Russian, Farsi and Arabic, will be going live at the end of June.

Expanding German as a Second Language (GSL) stock

Some of the media boxes for on-site use have been discontinued and are now available as loan items. The district libraries have also received centrally selected and procured dictionaries and German-learning materials to boost their stock.



Image 3: Pictorial dictionaries are very popular

Responses to the Bücherhallen Hamburg's involvement

The involvement has attracted a lot of attention. Many individuals, institutions and organisations are supporting the Bücherhallen. At its 71 events in September 2015, the

Harbour Front Literaturfestival ran a donations appeal for “Mit offenen Armen”^{viii}, the fundraising campaign run by the Bücherhallen for refugees. Over 10,800 Euros were raised. The Freunde der Kunsthalle e.V. association sells pictorial dictionaries at the checkout of the Kunsthalle’s museum shop, which visitors can buy and donate directly to the Bücherhallen. One Hamburg coffee-shop also collected money for pictorial dictionaries during a staff party, donating around 100 copies, almost all of which are constantly on loan. Another idea came thanks to a student, who had an agency produce and sell sweatshirts and T-shirts printed with “Refugees welcome”. Net proceeds went to ‘Dialog in Deutsch’.

The large number of requests being received from authorities and initiatives for Bücherhallen co-operation also reflects how much their involvement is appreciated. These predominantly very positive responses serve as encouragement for further steps to be taken.

Integrating refugees in the professional world

Professional integration is an important area of action. On 1 July 2016, a young Sudanese woman and a young Syrian man will be commencing their federal volunteer service^{ix}, each working 20.5 hours a week at the Bücherhallen Hamburg. The Bücherhallen expect this to be a win-win situation: The refugees will have the opportunity to gain practical professional experience in Germany over a period of eighteen months, while the Bücherhallen and their customers will not only benefit from the new staff members’ native Arabic skills in media selection and processing, service and public relations, but also from their knowledge of the situation at the accommodation facilities and their experiences as new fellow citizens of Hamburg. As such, the Bücherhallen will be able to further develop its services, targeting specific needs.

Refugee services to benefit a broader audience

While some of the services described here are aimed specifically at refugees, the entire migrant target audience will benefit. Refugees are not the only ones interested in having a larger selection of foreign-language media or flyers and signs in languages other than German.

The number of people from migrant backgrounds is growing; according to the official microcensus statistics, they make up a good 20% of the population. Some definitions even estimate figures to be closer to 50%^x. As a library, focusing on the refugee target audience also brings with it the opportunity to slowly shift awareness – an issue which applies to everyone. If this enables intercultural openness to be addressed and accepted as a pan-institutional task, it will benefit refugees and migrants in general, as well as the libraries themselves and society as a whole.

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