

which means that I draw on second-hand interpretations and fragmentary reconstructions in order to make sense of the events.

The following chapter consists of four parts. To start with, I briefly sketch out the history of the protests in Schwäbisch Gmünd, arguing that the so-called “camera conflict” presented an important turning point that substantially altered the relationships of solidarity between the refugee activists and various local actors. In section three, I then examine the reasoning that led both the refugee activists and members of the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees to end all relationships of solidarity with the other side. In section four, I investigate the contrasting imaginaries of ‘local community’ that came to light in the course of these conflicts. Finally, I conclude by looking at the intimate relationship between solidarity and community.

## 6.2. A Short History of Refugee Activism in Schwäbisch Gmünd

The story of the Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd began in summer 2012 when the refugees returned from the “Break Isolation camp” in Jena (see The Voice Refugee Forum: 29/3/2012)<sup>5</sup>. This workshop gathered refugees, their supporters and left-wing activist groups from across the country. Together, they discussed the discrimination and exclusion refugees faced on the ground and elaborated ways of taking a stand against them. Back at their accommodation centre, the asylum seekers in Schwäbisch Gmünd translated words into action. Supported by the local left-wing youth centre Esperanza, they squatted the central market square of town and erected a protest camp for several days in order to raise awareness of the unacceptable conditions at their accommodation centre. Over the following three years, they repeatedly took a public stand in the town in order to voice their discontent over various issues. In these protests, they directed complaints against local authorities, the police department, the employees at their accommodation centre, the local population, the local media and members of the local citizens’ initiative supporting refugees. Their accusations included “*police brutality*” (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 15/4/2014), “*criminalization and persecution of refugees*” (ibid. 8/5/2015), “*repression from the Ostalb district authorities*” (ibid. 11/6/2014), “*violation of refugees right*” (ibid. 10/3/2014) and “*colonial injustice*” (ibid. 17/4/2013), to name just a few. Local actors in Schwäbisch

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5 See: <http://www.thevoiceforum.org/node/2488> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

Gmünd, in turn, repeatedly criticized the group for its violent and “radical” behaviour, the inappropriateness of their protest actions and their unreceptiveness to de-escalating dialogue and compromise. Eventually, the situation became increasingly tense resulting in the court trial sketched out above, while the issues remained unresolved, and all relationships of solidarity with local actors broke down.

When the refugee activists of Schwäbisch Gmünd first took a public stand in late summer 2012, their actions elicited support from the local citizens’ initiative and the left-wing youth centre *Esperanza* as well as understanding and empathy in local press coverage. With their protest camp on the market square, the activists called attention to the tough conditions at their accommodation centre, their “camp” as they called it, and demanded that “the asylum centre has to be closed immediately” (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 21/11/2012). Located at a former barracks complex built by the Nazi regime during the Second World War, the facility hosted around 200 asylum seekers, with five refugees having to share one room. Even before the protests, the accommodation centre’s run-down state was well known. More than a year earlier, the citizens’ initiative supporting refugees had called on the local authority to refurbish the facility (see *Remszeitung*: 7/6/2011)<sup>6</sup>. Yet, it was only in response to the refugee activists’ protest camp that the council agreed to take action.

While their protest at the market square was still ongoing, the local mayor invited the protesters and representatives of the local citizens’ initiative to a joint meeting that would discuss possible solutions to the situation at the facility. The outcome was a “Memorandum of Understanding” that was signed by the mayor, the council’s chief administrative officer and the refugee activists. It consisted of a twelve-point action plan that defined various steps to be implemented by the local authorities in order to improve the conditions of reception in Schwäbisch Gmünd. For instance, they agreed to work towards the long-term goal of closing the accommodation centre and replacing it with a decentralized housing scheme that would host asylum seekers in smaller units dispersed across the town. Another immediate step agreed to was the abolition of the discriminating voucher system in favour of monthly cash allowances paid directly to the asylum seekers. These agreements clearly illustrate how the refugee activists’ protests initially met with understanding

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6 See: <https://remszeitung.de/2011/7/6/mittelfristig-ist-eine-neue-loesung-fuer-das-asylbewerber-wohnheim-noetig/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

and dialogue from various parties involved in the reception of asylum seekers in Schwäbisch Gmünd. As I write this chapter six years later, the accommodation centre under dispute is still in place. Nevertheless, this action plan illustrates that the local authority was willing to make concessions and enter into dialogue in response to the activists' protest camp. I would suggest that it also laid the ground for what became known as the "*Gmünder Weg*" ("the Gmünd way"), the town's seemingly successful approach to the local integration of refugees. From 2014 on, this narrative put Schwäbisch Gmünd in the national spotlight and made it a role model for the implementation of a local 'welcome culture', something I will illustrate in more detail later in this chapter.

In the months following the protest camp, the Refugees Initiative refrained from further protest actions in Schwäbisch Gmünd. However, from its Facebook group, it was evident that the initiative had not disbanded but was continuing its activities in other parts of the region. In March 2013, the refugee activists joined forces with asylum seekers in the nearby town of Nördlingen in order to raise awareness of the tough conditions at the local accommodation centre. From April to June 2013, the refugee activists organized what they called a "Refugee Liberation Bus Tour", making stops in several towns and villages across the state of Baden-Württemberg. In each place, they visited the local refugee accommodation centre, raised awareness of the problematic conditions on the ground, and mobilized the centre's residents to participate in local protest actions. Their Facebook group featured extensive coverage of the tour, including numerous posts and photos.

In March 2014, around one and a half years after their first protest action, the refugee activists made a reappearance in their town of residence, Schwäbisch Gmünd. This time, their protests were of unprecedented intensity and lasted several weeks. They staged several protest actions at different locations including their accommodation centre, the town centre, the premises of the district council, and the state parliament in Stuttgart. What came to be known as the "camera conflict" assumed particular significance in all of the interviews I conducted and critically altered relationships in the town. I would thus argue that this conflict marked an important turning point in the relationships between the refugee activists and local actors in Schwäbisch Gmünd; relationships that were up until then embedded in mutual understanding and solidarity.

The camera conflict broke out when the district council installed a surveillance camera at the entrance to the central accommodation centre in early

March 2014. Immediately after its installation, the refugee activists complained about the camera and denounced it as another means of surveillance and control. To them, it constituted a symbol for the intolerable “Guantanamo methods” of the district council in the handling of asylum seekers (Refugees Initiative Schwäbisch Gmünd: 8/3/2014). They thus demanded the immediate removal of the camera. The council, however, refused to comply and offered a different explanation of the need for a camera: it was not their intention to keep track of the accommodation centre’s inhabitants but, in fact, to monitor the nearby bins, where unknown outsiders had repeatedly dumped their rubbish illegally (Interview with Karl Kurz: 9/3/2016). The refugee activists, in turn, denounced this interpretation as a lie and insisted on the removal of the camera, a demand that resulted in numerous protest actions over the course of several weeks.

In the first days after the installation of the camera, the refugee activists’ anger was directed towards employees at the reception facility, such as the head of its management staff, the social workers and the caretaker. The activists blocked the entrance gate so that staff members were unable to leave the building and go home from work for hours. They insulted and threatened social workers to such an extent that some of them quit their jobs and subsequently needed psychological support, as a dedicated volunteer with the local citizens’ initiative told me (Interview with Jens Küffner: 12/3/2015). Roughly one week later, the refugee activists redirected their anger to the responsible deputy at the district council. They entered the building and staged a sit-in at his office. Back at their accommodation centre, the activists covered the surveillance camera with a banner on which they had written in large letters: “Camera must be removed. We do not want Guantanamo and no surveillance”.

When the district council had still not taken down the camera a month after its installation, the refugee activists staged further protests at the facility and held a protest march through the town, in the course of which they blocked the traffic at a central intersection. This time, their protests were met by a large-scale police operation involving special units from surrounding areas, what the refugee activists later denounced as “police brutality”. In the local press, the events also received increasingly negative publicity and were depicted as “refugee riots” (Remszeitung: 13/4/2014)<sup>7</sup> or “disturbances

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7 See: <https://remszeitung.de/2014/4/13/landrat-und-ob-sehr-besorgt-wegen-fluechtling-krawallen/> (last accessed 1/8/2020).

at the accommodation centre” (*Schwäbische Zeitung*: 11/4/2014)<sup>8</sup>. According to a newspaper article, the local mayor and the council’s chief administrative officer were “extremely upset” by the incidents and concerned about the “good cooperation and togetherness” in the town (*Remszeitung*: 13/4/2014). In response to these articles in the local press, the refugee activists set up an “info tent” on the town’s market square and handed out leaflets to passing pedestrians explaining their version of the story, which, they claimed, differed significantly from the press’ false accusations.

Eventually, the object of dispute – the camera – was stolen by unknown offenders. Neither the refugee activists nor the district council ever mentioned this incident in public nor claimed responsibility for it. According to a volunteer I spoke to, this apparent solution also went unnoticed by the local media, which had previously reported extensively on the camera conflict. Nevertheless, the sides remained unreconciled and conflicts only reached a symbolic ending in the court trial in May 2015.

### 6.3. The Breaking of Relationships of Solidarity

The camera conflict substantially altered the relationships between refugee activists and local actors, including the citizens’ initiative supporting refugees, the local media and the district council. Over the course of the dispute, these relationships became steadily more conflictive and, ultimately, remained irreconcilable. On the one hand, the refugee activists deliberately refused all support offered to them by local actors, whom they accused of “deceptive solidarity”. On the other hand, citizens acting in support of refugees withdrew help and support and broke off all ties to the protesters. In the following section, I investigate in more detail how, as a result of the conflict, relationships of solidarity were broken by both refugee activists (first subsection) and volunteers supporting refugees in town (second subsection). In the third subsection, I then illustrate how the refugee activists, from the very beginning of their struggle, reached out in order to forge alternative relationships of solidarity that went beyond the boundaries of Schwäbisch Gmünd.

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8 See: [https://www.schwaebische.de/landkreis/ostalbkreis/schwaebisch-gmuend\\_artikel,-tumult-in-der-asylbewerberunterkunft-\\_arid,5625635.html](https://www.schwaebische.de/landkreis/ostalbkreis/schwaebisch-gmuend_artikel,-tumult-in-der-asylbewerberunterkunft-_arid,5625635.html) (last accessed 1/8/2020).