

25. "I've seen them grow up. They're almost like my children."

Salah Yousif, a poet from Sudan, came to Berlin in the 1970s by accident. For over thirty years, he has run his store for antiques, vinyl, and African design on Urbanstraße. From his store, he observes Berlin and processes his impressions in poems. He has watched generation after generation of Arab migrants pass by in Berlin. Julia Gerlach visited him.

Julia Gerlach: How did you come to Berlin?

Salah Yousif: I wound up in Berlin by chance. Actually, I was just passing through. I came here and then lost my passport in the first few days. It took me a year to get a new one, but by then, I had developed a taste for life here, so I stayed. It was a beautiful time, the seventies in Berlin. Music, politics, and people came together, with lots and lots of discussions. That was great.

J.G.: How old were you?

S.Y.: Oh, age doesn't play such a role with us. I was twenty, twenty-two. Very young.

J.G.: And you've been writing ever since, right?

S.Y.: I've been writing poetry since I was a child, and when I came to Berlin, I took a little break. In the '80s, I started again. When you arrive someplace new, you first have to find your bearings before you can write. Once you begin to participate in local life, you begin to understand.

When I came here, of course, I had no means and needed to find work. That was exhausting. I began working in construction. I remember arriving in a suit. An academic going into construction. That was something! I had studied pharmacy and social sciences.

J.G.: And now you have this store.

S.Y.: Yes, I'd initially opened a grocery store, but that was very tiring. And then my neighbor here recommended that – like him – I could sell antiques instead. That's what I've been doing ever since. I used to restore things myself, but now I sell what others restore. I also sell records. I love music. In the beginning, I just sold off parts of my record collection. Now that business is doing well again. Many young people buy records from me. Lately I also offer these African things in the store. I sell them for a niece of mine. That's nice because it makes the store a little warmer.

J.G.: How has Berlin changed over the years?

S.Y.: So much! Berlin has changed, and so have the people who live here. It's become colder. The atmosphere was more humane back then. In the beginning, people helped me out an incredible amount. If you didn't have a place to sleep, they would take you home. If you went out, you would split the bill. The concept of "this is mine and that is yours" wasn't as strong back then as it is now. It was more humane then. People showed more solidarity and were friendlier. Maybe that had something to do with the Wall. People were packed more closely together back then.

You can still feel some of that in Berlin today: if you go to a café, it's easy to meet new people.

J.G.: Over the years, Berlin has also become much more Arab.

S.Y.: Yes, that's true. First the Palestinians and then the Lebanese. Always after a war, many people would come here. The arrival of the Syrians has changed a lot because overall, the level of culture is very high in Syria. They have changed the art scene here in Berlin. But I myself don't notice much of that. I've been here for so long and settled into my life. I live with influences from many different directions. I am not your typical Arab.

J.G.: What do you write about?

S.Y.: These days I do readings of my poetry more often. I read in German and in Arabic. I have five books out. I have an inner urge to write. There's something inside that wants out. I also write so that people understand that there are many voices in the culture. I write a lot about Berlin. I feel good here and write about people and places. For example, I've got a poem about *Urbanstraße* and about *Tempelhofer Feld*.

J.G.: Sitting here like this in your store and looking out of the shop window onto the street is a little like being in the cinema. You see people passing by, and cyclists. Berlin is passing by out there.

S.Y.: Yes, it's a beautiful view.

J.G.: When people Google you, the first thing they find is an article about how your store was completely destroyed by rioters in March 2022.

S.Y.: Really, is that the first thing you find about me? It was horrible. A gang. A clan. From around here. They wanted my store for themselves. They said they wanted to buy the store from me, but I wouldn't give in. So, they smashed everything to pieces.

J.G.: Do you know them?

S.Y.: Not that well, but I know who they are. They're gone now. That's good.

J.G.: The gangs are also part of Arab Berlin, right?

S.Y.: Yes, among the Arabs, there is also a share of criminals, of course. That's normal. There are artists, and there are criminals.

Just put yourself in the position of those people: They came here as refugees from countries at war and found themselves in a situation where everything was walled off. They could not work; they had no chance to build something for themselves. Today things are different. Today, newcomers receive language and integration courses. I've seen this, and I know the different generations of refugees. I have seen them grow up. They're almost like my children.

J.G.: But it's not nice when the children come in and destroy your place.

S.Y.: They were so angry. They broke everything, and I had to clean up afterward for three weeks straight. Now they're gone. That's a good thing.

J.G.: You said: People living in Berlin have changed. What do you mean?

S.Y.: Life is getting harder and harder. People all have a lot of problems and are getting more anxious. That liberal flair that Berlin had is getting lost. You have to be a little more reserved in voicing your opinions. That development is not good. And the new militarism is not good, either.

There were so many terrible wars in Europe, and finally, peace. Now the war is coming back¹. And there is not even the necessary space to question militarism.

¹ Editors note: The war refers to the Ukraine war.

What people forget is that there used to be a lot of older people here. Now only young people remain. There are also hardly any children – only Arab children. And then there are the hipsters.

J.G.: You'd think that if more Arabs lived here now, it would be warmer and more communal.

S.Y.: What is an Arab? We have certain ideas about that. But what is an Arab, actually? What does he or she do? Does he or she have to fulfill specific criteria? What unites the Arabs? I think a lot is changing right now. I have the feeling that something has been destroyed inside many of them.

J.G.: Is that perhaps because after 2011, many people feel that they first have to find out which side the other person is on – for example, whether someone is for the regime or the revolution? Have people come to distrust each other because of that?

S.Y.: Yes, solidarity and self-confidence within the Arab world have taken a big hit. There are so many problems... and that is reflected in people's attitudes. They are becoming distrustful and losing solidarity. In addition, it's not easy for newcomers to come here and find a place. We are looked at with suspicion. That's not nice. The rug has been pulled out from under people's feet. It's easier for the children.

J.G.: But when the children integrate, it's easy to feel like you're losing them.

S.Y.: That's a complicated thing. On the one hand, you wish them lots of success, but on the other hand, you don't want to lose them. Because then they're no longer really part of the family. It's not at all easy to be an Arab in Berlin.