The Struggle for Agency of Older Refugees of the Syrian Conflict in Vienna

Sabine Bauer-Amin

Introduction

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I visit an Arabic speaking church in the 19th district Vienna; after the service, the priest invites me to have a small get together with the community members to introduce our research project on first experiences and expectations of refugees in Vienna. While I am chatting with different community members, a very elegantly dressed man in his late 50s comes to sit next to me. For a while, he stays silent. Then Abou Younis, as he introduces himself to me, apologizes and says that he did not want to interrupt my conversation, but he wanted to talk to me. He explains that he felt lost in Austria because he felt "as if I had left my dignity behind in Syria." Before he had left for Austria, he had worked as an accountant and had enjoyed a good social status. One of his children had studied dentistry and another was a general doctor. Now, all of them are in Vienna, but there is no possibility for them to regain their previous status. Abou Younis underlines his wish to return to his profession but there was no possibility. The labour market service had also told him that there are no job prospects for him on the Austrian market and that his children should do a vocational training (Ausbildung) *instead of trying to re-enter into their previous professions. Abou Younis expresses that he was suffering mostly from this loss of status, identity and perspectives and that he did not see any future for him. For a moment, there is silence between us. The man begins to cry and cannot speak any more. Knowing about the lack of state sponsored programs for his age group, I also run out of words. After he regains his posture, he explains that he feels he is wasting his life in Austria now and that there was no possibility for him to use his time in a good way. He repeatedly addresses that he had no possibility of changing his current situation since he has no chances on the labour market, yet, he is continuously told by the Austrian authorities how important it is to find gainful work in order to become a useful member of society. Without being seen as such, and without being able to*

create connections with other German speakers, he asks me how he would ever be able to master the German language. Trying to shift the attention to a less exhausting topic for Abou Younis, I ask him about his daily routine. He explains he has only been sitting at his house alone. I then ask if the church helped. He answers that without the church, life would be much harder. He underlines how important it was to have these meetings to talk to people in the same situation. He then refers to several other elderly men in the room. "Look, this is Abou Youssef, an architect. Next to him is Dr Girgis, a cardiologist and in the corner are Mr. Revan and Mr. Imad, two engineers. All of us are useless now. We are nobody here."

The conversation with Abou Younis made me think about the situation of older[1] forced migrants in the Austrian refugee regime's current equation of "integration" with employment that overshadows their legal obligation to provide protection ("Responsibility to Protect", or short R2P, see United Nations n.d.) to people threatened by war and human rights violations. Why is the labour market focus so strong in Austria's dealing with refugees? What does that do to those who cannot enter the labour market (anymore)? What roles in society are left for those excluded from the Austrian "integration path" (Federal Ministry of Austria, European and International Affairs, 2015)?

The current understanding of "integration" in Austria is based on lessons learned throughout the Austrian *Gastarbeiter*[2] migration. While the current Austrian integration debate centres on the rapid acquisition of the German language and inclusion in the Austrian labour market, elderly refugees are often unable to fulfil these integration criteria, which may in turn leave them with only limited options for improving their current situation in Austria.

In this chapter, I want to shed light on the issues and challenges that elderly refugees from Syria face in Vienna. Their situation and their prospects are often overlooked, as they are seemingly considered unemployable due to the age restrictions and hence are not appealing for the Austrian government programs. Moreover, the private initiatives are not particularly interested in the elderly refugees either. This contribution discusses the challenging situation that many elderly Syrian refugees face in Austria as well as the scope for agency for the group in question, based on interviews and fieldnotes with elderly people from Syria conducted within a broader research project on

1 A discussion of what "older" means in this context will follow in the following chapter.

2 Transl. as guest workers; concept will be explained in detail later in the text.

refugees in Austria.[3] It aims to show the situation and perspectives, as well as the scope for agency for the group in question.

I first want to take a closer look at the pathway that the Austrian government envisions for refugees to integrate them into Austrian society. I then want to change the perspective and shed a light on a group, who cannot fulfil these requirements that the government foresees. Finally, this contribution wants to shift the focus on labour market integration as the main path towards being seen as a valuable member of society to the roles and agency of older refugees for communities. In doing so, I aim to highlight the consequences of the current refugee regime's reduced understanding of "integration".[4]

Older refugees and refugee regimes

Elderly refugees had not been in the focus of humanitarian agencies or national refugee regimes for too long. Only from the 2000s onwards, has the UN recognised older refugees as a vulnerable group with specific needs (UNHCR Standing Committee 2020). The UN introduced a special category for people aged 60 plus for their statistical data (UNHCR 2000, 21).[5] This was partly due to the rising percentage of elderly people among refugees. According to the UNHCR statistical data, in 2011 elderly refugees (aged 60 plus) accounted for 5% (UNHCR 2011, 8), however, in 2018 the percentage of refugees aged 60 plus increased to 8.5% (UNHCR 2011, 8). On the one hand, refugees who fled their homes as younger adults are now aging in exile while on the other

3 The study Leaving – Persevering – Arriving (LODA): A transdisciplinary survey of the recent situation of refugees in Austria was conducted from 2017 to 2019 by the Austrian Academy of Science Institutes for Social Anthropology and Urban and Regional Studies.

4 Rather than using "integration" as a concept for analysis, I examine it as an element within the current discourse of Austrian politics on facilitating refugees' lives in Austria; It is important to note that the term is highly contested in social sciences; Therefore, instead of using it to analyse a situation, I rather want to analyse the usage of the term itself and the effect it has on refugees' lives and agency

5 Paragraph 9 states: "The recent introduction of the age category of 60 and over in UNHCR statistics is not only a reflection of increased global attention to ageing populations, but also of UNHCR activities. … The age limit of 60 applied in UNHCR's global statistics is consistent with the definition of elderly persons by the World Health Organization".

hand, many refugees were already elderly at the time of displacement. Yet, their needs are still often overlooked in the design and implementation of relief programs on an international level, but even more so at national levels (Burton and Breen 2002, 47). While international programs are usually centred on the responsibility to protect (R2P), national ones, are more concerned with "refugee integration" (UNHCR 2012, 11) and usually have to develop their own strategies for building refugees' future lives and roles in their new host society.

However, the percentage of the elderly amongst refugee populations is not reflected in the actual age distributions per their countries of origin. This is partly because the elderly are often not as mobile as younger ones (Bryceson and Vuorela 2007) and, as a result, they stay back or find refuge as internally displaced persons (IDP). In migration research the phenomenon of misrepresentation of actual refugee statistics is referred to as the "healthy migrant effect" (Wolff 2016, 45). This can be understood as the ramifications arising from the preselection of those who manage to leave and survive a conflict situation (see Kohls 2008). Elderly who are not healthy enough to leave simply stay back or else do not survive the malnutrition, atrocities and destruction of infrastructure due to war.

Contrary to this effect of preselection at the point of *leaving* a country, the "exhausted migrant effect" as coined by Paola Bollini and Harald Siem (1995) shows that migrants often suffer poorer health *after having arrived* in the countries of exile when compared to similar aged people who did not migrate (Guidi and Petretto 2019, 157). Like older migrants, older refugees are often exposed to a lower quality of life, as well as having poorer mental and physical health (Bolzman 2014, 414).

Hence, rather than being a fixed statistical entity, social age is based on the respective functions of and experiences in life-passages. Who would be defined as an elderly refugee depends as much on the life circumstances and abilities of the individual, as on the definitions of age in the respective cultural and regional context. In fact, the UNHCR acknowledges that human age is shaped though general life expectancy and aging processes, such as physical and psychological health, family and social support, cultural background, life circumstances and economic situations (UNCHR 1997, 194). This definition reflects the claim of many scholars and practitioners – in particular those of forced migration – to view age as a flexible social category (Bolzman 2014, 409; ECRE Asylkoordination Österreich 2002).

The definition of age and aging is also based on cultural interpretations. While in Austria, and in most Western European societies, age is often related to the capacity to join or leave the workforce, in other regions family status and the presence of grandchildren can play a much bigger role in defining who is "old". If one follows a definition of age according to the Austrian focus on the labour market availability, which is up till the age of 64, then only 890 Syrian "elderly" refugees applied for asylum in Austrian first instance between 2014 and 2019 (EUROSTAT 2020). This does not include those individuals who came into Austria with family reunion or resettlement programs, who are counted in different categories within the statistics,[6] nor those who have reached retirement age after having successfully completed their asylum application process.

Within the Austrian refugee regime, elderly refugees are often made to be invisible. In 2002 the NGO *Asylkoordination Österreich* had previously criticised the insufficient attention towards older refugees. Furthermore, most refugee relief organisations often lack the knowledge required for fulfilling the needs of elderly refugees and, in turn, are unable to adequately accommodate them compared to other vulnerable groups (ECRE Asylkoordination Österreich 2002, 2).

Even less is known about those who have not yet reached legal retirement age but are already highly unlikely to ever join the workforce due to their age. In Austria, all individuals between 18 and 64 are considered "*erwerbsfähig*" (fit for work) and are treated equally in the statistics. According to official reports regarding the labour market service, however, even Austrian nationals encounter difficulties finding new employment opportunities once they reached the age of 50 (see Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich 2015/2). Given the early aging of many refugees, often coupled with poorer outlook on educational and professional integration, other studies use an age limit of 30+ (ECRE Asylkoordination Österreich 2002, 9) to indicate when refugees are "older". Hence, even when only following an Austrian societal convention of seeing people who are not able to (find) work (anymore) as old, a much larger number of refugees would also fall into this critical group.

Neither the Asylum statistics of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, nor the Austrian statistical agency however, provide any data on the

6 Resettlement cases are decided prior to arrival in Austria. Here the number of Syrian citizens over 65 years of age at the time of resettlement decision is 1730 people according to EUROSTAT.

number of refugees within this critical age group for employment (which is of 50 plus, even for Austrian nationals). While this group is officially invisiblised, the Austrian Labour Market Service (AMS) is not encouraged, in practice, to help people like Abou Youssef in finding employment. This is however in complete contradiction with the government's idea on integration, which is based on the labour market, as will be discussed later in this chapter. This approach effectively denies vulnerable groups, such as elderly refugees, societal worth, as a consequence of the equation of integration with employment.

The Austrian Gastarbeitermodel

The Austrian refugee regime from the 1960s onwards is strongly influenced by the so-called *Gastarbeitermodel* (guestworker model). Rather than a focus on the humanitarian care-obligation, the possibilities of receiving asylum or protection in Austria are strongly bound to criteria deriving from their usability for the workforce. Hence, forced migrants, who receive some sort of asylum status, are required to "integrate" into society and sustain themselves as soon as possible. Integration here follows the primacy of gainful employment. One of the reasons why employment is seen as fundamental to integration into society, and not for example developing a sense of belonging, developing neighbourhood ties or engagement in societal clubs and associations, comes to light by a look into the historical roots of Austria's handling of foreigners.

Austria's, model is based on the previously mentioned *Gastarbeitermodel* stemming from the early 1960s (Castles and Miller 2009, 97). Its aim was to cover the need for a labour force which was understood to be cyclical rather than structural. According to Gudrun Biffl, after WWII Austria was considered to be the "alms-house of Europe" and was unable to attract highly qualified workers (Biffl 2011, 19). Salaries in Austria were considerably lower compared to other countries in Western Europe and, consequently, Austria lost many of its own highly qualified workers to neighbouring countries such as Germany and Switzerland, as well as to Canada, the US and Australia. Subsequently, Austria suffered a dire shortage in the workforce. As the country was unable to attract highly skilled migrants, the organisation of labour within companies and the technologies of production had to be restructured and adapted (Biffl 2011, 19).

During the economic upswing in the 1960s and 70s, Austria reached full employment while demand for further labour force was still not exhausted.

Therefore, foreign labourers were needed to respond to the economic developments. Austria agreed to various recruitment agreements with Spain (1962), Turkey (1964) and Yugoslavia (1966), following a similar strategy adopted by Germany, and the Benelux and Scandinavian countries. The chamber of commerce in particular focused on the regulation of *Gastarbeiter*-migration, in which workers were allowed to reside in Austria on a rotational basis and only for work reasons. Therefore, state politics followed an idea of a rotational principle as Monika Mokre explains:

> the beginning of the system of guest workers was, rather naively, based on the idea that such an import of labour was possible without any further reverberations or changes: The labour force would be imported as long as needed and would be sent back when no longer necessary. The first guest workers had consistent plans for their lives: They would stay just long enough to earn money for a good life at home (2018, 34).

Required contingents of guest workers were specified yearly, based on the needs of the market, but without any legal basis for the first 10 years. At that point, neither side had thought about a permanent settlement in Austria. With the economic crises in 1973, the demand for workers from abroad dropped. While other countries, like Germany or the Netherlands, stopped inwards migration through much more drastic measures, in 1974 Austria decided instead that the income of labour migrants would not be increased in the coming year. The main focus of the Austrian migration regimes having been on labour market rationales, it was only after the drop of labour force demands that political and public debates broadened to include questions of "family reunification, integration, asylum and the control of territory access" (Jandl 2008, 28). These debates coincided with the end of full employment and economic recession and culminated with the issuing of a new foreign employment law in 1975. With the introduction of new restrictions into migration regimes, 45,000 guest-workers lost their jobs and hence their rights to remain in Austria (Berkirchner 2013, 76). The right to remain in the country was now legally and tightly connected to strictly regulated forms of employment. Yet, those, who had already been working in Austria for more than eight years at that point, received the right to freely access the Austrian labour market.

The new law, therefore, resulted in a much higher competition in the labour market. The first years saw a 40% decrease in labour migration; however, those who were already employed, were pushed to remain in Austria longer than intended, due to the high competition in the labour

market alongside the lack of return prospects (Bauer 2008, 6). As a result, many people who had migrated for temporary, rotary work then became permanent residents, followed with chain migration and family reunions in Austria (Demokratiezentrum Wien n.d.). This changed labour migration from demand-driven into supply-driven. At the same time, a much higher percentage of migrant children were now obliged to attend Austrian schools, resulting in questions of integration and German language acquisition.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, rhetoric regarding a feared inflow of migrants started. However, the economic boom of the 1990s caused a liberalisation of access to the labour market (Jandl 2008, 28). In 1990, Austria started a campaign permitting foreign workers to legalise their status after only a very short period of time, which quickly allowed a legal residency status for 30,000 individuals (Jandl 2008, 28). Moreover, a constantly rising number of refugees and asylum seekers[7] and de-facto refugees were added to the potential labour force towards the end of the 1980s (König 1990, 24); 95,000 alone came from the then war-driven Bosnia-Herzegovina, between 1992 and 1995.

The Austrian government responded to these demographic developments with the introduction of several laws that subsequently tightened opportunities for migration, residence and employment, but also for asylum (Jandl 2008, 28). In 1990, an amendment to the asylum law was already enforced that accelerated procedures for those without valid entry permits. For others seeking employment, employment quota for foreign workers were introduced. The 1992 Alien's Act then further tightened the possibilities for entry and residence, while possibilities for asylum were limited by the introduction of the concept of "safe third countries/ countries of Origin" as a reflection of the Dublin Agreement. Many migrants were rendered hyper-exploitable, through their exclusion from most of the political and social rights that Austrian nationals have, yet being demanded to join work force, and with the possibility of staying in Austria being based on their employability in the Austrian job market (Mokre 2018, 34f). This resulted in racial capitalism, which usually describes a situation in which social and economic value is extracted from a

7 In 1985 there were 6,725 asylum applications, rising to 11,406 in 1987, 15,790 in 1988, 21,882 in 1989 and 27,306 in 1991. Bauböck and Perching even call these an "asylum crises". The numbers between 2004 and 2013 were once again below 20,000 (Austrian Asylum Statistics, Bauböck and Perchinig 2003, 13)

person who differs racially or ethnically from the majority population.[8] In the Austrian case, (forced) migrants were integrated into the Austrian labour market mainly to cover otherwise unpopular jobs and working conditions, such as harvest work, cleaning, building, newspaper distribution or factory work. Hence the situation in which labour market integration of (forced) migrants is based on racial capitalism, as Elizabeth Dunn ascertains for the US-American context, can also be identified within the Austrian context, where (forced) migrants "are both indispensable and stigmatized". Dunn further argues that this resulting paradox "is used to racialize and devalue their labour, creating ethnic enclaves in the labour market that simultaneously permit them to work and trap them in dangerous, underpaid jobs" (Dunn 2020).[9] These dynamics are hence also guiding the economic development of Austria after WWII.

Through the introduction of the free movement agreement within the EU, Austria limited immigration from third countries, especially for pecuniary reward. Only family members within family reunions and highly qualified key individuals were allowed to immigrate. The 1997 Alien Law connected the previous 1992 Alien's Act with the Residence Act of 1993 to create further provisions for foreign residents following a principle of "Integration before Immigration" (Jandl 2008, 29). In addition, the asylum law was further modified in response to the new Dublin Agreement. Following these changes, net migration dropped rapidly and then only rose slightly after Austria became a member of the EU. Since 2004 Austria saw a new wave of immigration, following the inclusion of Eastern countries into the EU.

In 2008, the government decided to make additional legal changes, similarly to those in the UK in 2005. Within these, they planned to consider the need for highly skilled labourers from third countries (Biffl 2011, 19). Hence, Austria's immigration history was fundamentally shaped by labour-market demands, and the supply of the resulting required workers. On economic

8 The term "Racial Capitalism" stems from Black Marxist engagement with slavery in the US: It generally refers to the accumulation of capital in tandem with the production of difference mainly through practices of coercion and exploutation (c.f. Ralph and Singhal 2019) In recent years, the concept of racialised labour expolitation to uphold capitalism has been used in many different contexts that create hierarchies highlighting the relation between coercion and productivity (Bhattacharyya 2018).

9 In reference to the worker's chamber's annual report of 1974, Christof Berkirchner explains that foreign workers were not seen as competitors for Austrian job seekers, since they were mainly hired for jobs which were unable to attract Austrian workers (2013, 85).

grounds, Austria is currently still in need of additional workforce, but not of non-employable or retired people (Biffl 2011, 22). This seems to be very much the intention of the current legal definition of "integration", and the legally prescribed path for all newcomers into Austria.

Integrationsgesetz as instrument for the current refugee regime

While Austria has been a host to a huge number of refugees from former Habsburg countries like Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (1980s), it was the significant numbers of guest workers from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia that influenced public opinion, coupled with rising racism and xenophobia (Merhaut and Stern 2018, 29). From the 1990s onwards, the Austrian right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) launched anti-immigration campaigns, such as their "Austria first" campaign signed by more than 400,000 Austrians (Gottweis 2000, 8). Following this trend, asylum and migration laws in Austria have become considerably stricter. With growing moral panic over so-called "parallel societies" and disintegrated sectors amongst migrants in Austria, demands for state-supervised adaption into Austrian society became louder. Following the arrival of a relatively high number of refugees in 2015 compared to the previous years, then chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, introduced a number of laws regulating the lives of refugees in the public sphere in Austria, such as the face veil ban and, finally, the integration law, which became effective 2017.

The new integration law from 31 December 2017 defines in § 2 (1) integration as the process in which all immigrants actively participate in the measures of integration offered to them by the state. In § 2 (2) it further defines the goal of these measures as such: "Of key importance in this regard is participation through gainful work, access to and acceptance of education offers, equal treatment of the sexes, and the rapid achievement of the ability to earn one's living." (IntG § 2(1) – (2)). Integration therefore seems only to be possible through one's quick entrance into labour force and, in turn, through the acquisition of the German language. Again, through the concept of integration, the Austrian refugee regime prioritizes economic usability in the labour force above its legal duty to protect or humanitarian reasons for supporting vulnerable groups, since by definition, those who cannot join labour force are not regarded at all and are thus excluded from Austria's "integration path".

What about those people, then, who cannot work anymore due to age restrictions or due to the difficulty of joining labour force arising from their

age, such as Abou Younis? Are they unable to integrate? What prospects are available to them?

The short-comings of equating integration with gainful work

Institutional Ageism

In order to address the shortcomings of the current legal definition of "integration", I need to come back to the previously described equation of integration with employment in Austrian law. The corollary of this is that those who do not or cannot find employment in gainful labour are not on the path of integration and are hence not in the focus of state measures, as many of my respondents have painfully remarked.

In the week following our conversation in the church, I met Abou Younis on the bus. I asked him about how life was going. He told me that he just had an appointment at the labour market service some days ago and had hoped he would finally be able to get a state-funded German class. Yet, the employee had told him that at 56 years of age, he would not be able to find work anymore and hence would not need a German class either. I asked him what he intended to do now. "I will not give up and keep on applying for jobs. Who would have thought that we would leave the war in Syria to join the war for work in Austria?"

While Abou Younis had been waiting for state-funded classes for some years at that point, he had organized some possibilities for study within the church community. And while he and others (in particular males) of his age group were out of the focus for state programs, those who seemed more valuable for the job market, received a different treatment by officials. In order to support those who are on the labour path, Austria offers several programs, like language classes, training and internships to facilitate entrance into workforce. These are predominantly (co-)funded by the labour market service. For those who are not part of the target group, significantly less support programs are offered. Hence, integration through the state is selective (Wolff 2016, 46). This selective choice was, in some cases, highly computerized until recently, and predicted one's future and the effort the state would put into support measures based on various variables.[10] The Austrian labour Market Service,

10 This measurement was cancelled by the court in August 2020.

for example, introduced such a system for a short time in 2020. It calculated automatically the chances of a job seeker on the labour market according to variables such as education, citizenship and gender. Those in category A were usually people who would find employment fast. Category B were individuals who had a mediocre chance of finding employment, and were those in which the service would invest. Category C, however, was comprising those with the lowest chances. The system also listed several criteria for this group, one of which was having a migration background, another being age (Alhutter 2020, 7). While for people aged 50+, special programs for (re)entering the labour market were available, the additional criteria of not having Austrian citizenship also served as a further barrier for many older refugees. As a category C applicant, Abou Younis did not feel that he was given much support in his efforts to fulfil the integration requirements and feel like a valuable member of society. Such a selective effort in integration, however, contradicts the previously mentioned humanitarian principles.

Excluding elderly refugees based on their national background and/or migration history and age in the state's integration efforts by denying their value for the economy and society of Austria serves as a basis for discrimination. Hence, efforts to support refugees are built on neoliberal calculations that are, again, based on deficient concepts of age and aging and with negative cultural ascriptions (Wolff 2016, 47). Such discrimination practices by institutions are influenced by what Robert Butler coined "ageism". Ageism is a process in which society ignores the potential contributions of the elderly and diminishes their collective worth (Bazzi und Chemali 2016, 55). Such discriminatory practices perpetuate stereotypes and indirectly justify institutional negligence of care through an unequal distribution of resources.

Haunting of the past in the present

While many of the forced migrants that I spoke to expressed a strong desire to start working – better now than tomorrow – their actual chances on the labour market looked very different. Despite their desires to work and the inherent labour migration-logic in Austria's integration plan (BMEiA 2015), not all refugees were healthy young men fit and able to start work immediately.

As she was under the age of 50, 48-year-old Oumayma had to go through a German class for women. While the class would not necessarily translate into any future employment, she was nevertheless required to participate. Oumayma, though, unlike Abou Younis, was not very happy about this obliga-

tion as she had been suffering from hearing difficulties since her flight from East-Ghouta, and would have preferred to receive a working permit immediately without having to go through lengthy language classes.[11] Asking her about her difficulties in the class, she answered,

> Of course it is hard for those who are older. The young ones learn fast. They learn in the schools and in the courses. It is hard for those who are older than 40. Those above 40, they cannot learn. They can try to talk maybe. But beyond that, no, not for those who are 40 and older. I don't want to say that it is not possible at all. There are some who manage and some who do not. These are different capacities.

When I asked her what she meant exactly by capacities, she went more into detail, describing her own hardship of having lost her oldest son in Syria's war machinery, as well as most of her siblings and her elderly parents, along with all their belongings, the results of many years of hard work, in the rubbles of Ghouta. Oumayma explained,

> We Syrians, three quarters have psychological pressures [or stress]. They have psychological conditions. For sure, everyone who has left Syria has something. They have many psychological problems, problems, problems. I am also psychologically stressed myself. *Wallahi*,[12] I have psychological pressures. It is true, I am here with my children, but the rest of my family are still under bombing. They were bombed yesterday and they were picked up from under the rubble. I can show you the picture when they were picked up from under the rubble [*shows the pictures*] This is one thing. And also my son, my son, I don't know if he passed away or if he is good. Therefore, I have psychological stress. Do you know how? I am not able to focus. There is something distracting me. Something is occupying my mind here. I have things working in my brain at the same time. I cannot focus. I forget very fast. No, not like this. I cannot forget my family! No! I cannot forget my firstborn. […] I swear, we are suffering from this a lot. We came here, it is safe,

11 Austria has redesigned its previous refugee integration program. This new integration program provides and offers structured support for the first phase after having received asylum. This phase includes obligatory language acquisition as well as participation in value and orientation courses before further measures for labour market integration are taken. The program is free but also obligatory for the participant, as stated in the integration agreement (Expertenrat für Integration 2018, 78).

12 Transl. "By God", expression of emphasising a statement.

> there is no bombing, but we are still under psychological pressure. There is a war in our country.

Similar to Oumayma, mental health and trauma were also critical issues for many older refugees. While there are studies connecting professional dequalification or long-term unemployment with low self-esteem and depression (Bolzman 2012), these are often also side effects of forced migration in general. Bolzman argues that "[f]or the majority, the reality is that forced migration remains dominant in their memories, and continues to be as complex in its political content as it is in terms of that person's response to it" (Bolzman 2014, 414). In particular, many of these memories of forced migration can return in older age and create mental conditions like anxiety, depression or paranoia (Bolzman 2014, 414). For many, the reasons for flight were already traumatic, yet the flight itself and the difficulties encountered after arriving in Austria are also traumatic. With the emphasis by which integration and meaningful contribution to society are framed as being merely a result of employment, long-term unemployment and dequalification become painful reminders of one's position in the new society and one's attributed value there. Hence, the current emphasis creates a mood among many elderly refugees that Abou Younis had best expressed, when he said, "All of us are useless now. We are nobody here." (see fieldnotes above).

Elderly refugees often feel difficulties in re-establishing their lives in exile and adapting to their new surroundings. In many cases, after having lived most of their lives in their homes, their sense of loss through displacement can be very strong. This is also explained through an often-greater attachment to home, land and social ties. In particular, 67-year-old Elise made this point very clear. Having lived for almost 70 years in an aristocratic family in Damascus, the move to Austria had disrupted not only her former social relations but also inverted her societal position. She narrated,

> If you had been well known in all neighbourhoods and entertained social relations and you come here and no one wants to get to meet with you. Why? What is the matter with us? There is terrorism in our area […] our level in Syria was not quite good, it was *really* good. I don't want to live on the same level as a dog. If I have to live on the level of a dog, I will return to my country. Despite the circumstances, despite the war, I will go back to my country. […] In Syria I live in a house, our house is right behind the house of the president. The president of the republic. If here is the presidential palace, then here is our house *[indicates a small difference with her hands*]. […]

> So, in our area there is nothing. But my children, what can I do without my children? [*still in tears*] hard, hard. When we were in Syria, we were happy. We were at ease. The war and these things, but despite we were content. Happy, we lived happily. All was good. Had we just known this.

What became apparent was that mainly elderly people – who had built their life elsewhere and had left their lifetime achievements behind to move to a new country – suffered from the transformation in public status that they had gone through. Dequalification, the rupture of social relations and public recognition seemed unbearable for many, such as Elise or Abou Younis. Through the erosion and the destruction of older support networks, established rituals and habits as well as community values, elderly refugees often experience a greater feeling of emptiness from which they often cannot recover as fast as younger refugees since their prospects to build up a new life are less promising, as Burton and Breen describe (2002, 47). Oumayma also addresses this emptiness resulting from a lack of meaningful occupation.

> Yes, there is a lot of time for memories. There is empty time, empty time. When we were in Syria, there was never empty time. We, as housemakers, we work in the house. We do not have free time. No, there is so much free time. Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness. And this emptiness makes the head bigger. The hardest thing in the world is emptiness. When one is alone one thinks about the memories, the past. When one has work, one is busy. If you work, you get distracted. If you are working, you are not free to cause problems. But if you have time you start causing problems. They do not have time to argue over this or cry over that, no. May God make it easy on us, ya rab.

In particular, when it becomes clear that a fast return is no longer possible, elderly refugees often express feelings of emptiness and despair (Bolzman 2014, 415). Similar studies on elderly refugees in Lebanon have shown that elderly refugees report anxiety, depression, guilt and the feeling of being a burden to their family (Bazzi and Chemali 2016, 55). This is a feeling that 65-year-old Nadhim, who was still in his asylum procedure during the time of our first meeting, also knows well. Nadhim had fled Iraq in 2002 for political reasons and sought shelter in Syria. Nadhim, whose son had already come to Austria in 2012 and whom he only joined five years later, describes his living situation as,

> I am alone. Also my son lives alone. For a while, I have lived with him […]. But then I returned to the camp because he needs his own private live… I appeared out of a sudden in his life, because I am his father and he is my son. I don't like that. This is why I thought I had to go back to the Camp.

Others, like 59-year old Maha, still hope for a return to Syria and see their asylum in Austria as being only a transitory phase in their lives. Despite her having actually had the chance to embark on the Austrian path of integration by finding work through her sewing skills, she never really saw her future in Austria. When I asked her about her expectations for the coming years, she answered,

> To be honest with you, I have a little bit [mixed feelings]. Anyone of us tries to settle. But there is always a challenge inside every one of us. See, this is not my country. I do not know what the future holds, if I will survive or not. But I do not feel at home here. I know that this is not my country but maybe in the future I can go back. Maybe once the war is over, I can return. Or maybe I will not see the war ending. But, all what I wish for is more stability. But we know deep inside, that this is not our country. We are just here temporarily. […] Still, there is always this little feeling inside that this is not our country. I am trying. I am trying really, but I cannot. And believe me, Austria is a very enjoyable country.

Following Elise, Oumayma, Maha and Nadhim in their descriptions of homesickness, the loss of status and social ties, and their bemoaning of their fate, it becomes clear that their current situation in Austria holds few prospects for helping them to cope. Many forced migrants of the Syrian conflict suffer from health or psychological problems and need time to adapt to the new living circumstances. Others have care responsibilities not just towards children, grandchildren or the elderly but also towards others who they have grown close with due to their shared fates of life in exile. They have grown into a community, connected by destiny rather than by kinship, religion or ethnic boundaries. Again, others do not plan to settle in Austria and only sought temporary safety while waiting to return or move on. Hence, next to age, the legal definition of integration also excludes many other people of different age who cannot enter the labour market and completely ignores the real-life attachments, identifications and sensitivities of people. What about Abou Younis, Nadhim and Elise? The governmental programs were not able to assist them in actively shaping their situation in Austria. They were simply not

employable anymore and, therefore, were not able to "integrate" into society according to the state's definition.

Civil Society's age blindness

Austria does have certain offers and service structures available for the elderly, to which refugees also have access. Yet, most of these services comprise part of the care structures for the elderly. In fact, intercultural restructuring processes and the inclusion and training of diversity sensitive staff have opened care concepts. For pensioner's clubs, however, German is often, but not always, the only language offered.[13] This language homogeneity makes it difficult for those without sufficient language skills, in particular since the elderly who are excluded from the job market, do not have access to paid language classes. In addition, most of these clubs are rather attractive to people beyond retirement age, while for the group of refugees in particular, who are still in their 50s or early 60s, these clubs are not accessible.

While there is a plethora of private initiatives by volunteers for refugees, most of these programs focus either on children, young adults or women. Not only do these groups receive more attention from volunteers, but also from the media; this relationship may be mutually dependent. Cynthia Enloe has coined the term "womanandchildren" to depict the "passive masse of 'womenandchildren' in need for protection" in armed conflicts (1990, 13). This need for protection of these "masses" is often translated into volunteer activities in refugee relief work, in Austria as elsewhere. Middle aged men, as well as the elderly, however, are not in the centre of empathy and need for protection. Yet, in particular, the elderly might very much need assistance, yet for exactly this group, several difficulties appear in volunteer actions.

Volunteerism is often based on power asymmetries in which no reciprocal relationship can arise. For refugees, who often need assistance in acquiring knowledge and/or language skills, relationships with volunteers are often difficult to establish. In fact, volunteers themselves are often not searching for reciprocal relations with forced migrants but rather are driven by an urge to

13 I thank Maria Six-Hohenbalken for pointing out pensioners clubs to me who also offer services in other languages, such as Turkish, Polish or Kurdish. While many clubs do have multilingual staff who can also offer multilingual services, this is not usually officially announced, and moreover, the website that summarizes all the possible offers is only available in German (https://kwp.at/pensionistenklubs/clubs).

help "the refugees" as a collective. 51-year-old Kurdish-Syrian Radwa, former school principal in a Northern Syrian city, described her difficulties in building sustainable friendships with Austrians the following: "I really developed a complex in this subject. I don't have any contacts with Austrians. When I first arrived to Austria, I met an Austrian woman, then we became friends, and she helped me with the language, but she doesn't have time. I saw her two months ago. She is busy helping other refugees now. So, she left me." For Radwa, it became clear that her assumed Austrian friend was not interested in building up a sustainable friendship because of mutual sympathy but had spent time with Radwa simply for humanitarian reasons. As such, Radwa was not considered as an equal potential friend but rather as a suffering object, one that could be easily replaced by other people who fell into the same category. This reduction of any personal traits, stories of affects to her refugee identity was a painful insight for Radwa and many others. In particular, for older people, who often look back on a certain social status based on their lifetime achievements (and family heirlooms), the reduction to their role as a "refugee" detached from their life stories often poses a major difficulty.

This reduction on a social level is also perpetuated on a professional level, where forced migrants are also ripped of their professional education and expertise due to diplomas, job experience and certificates not being acknowledged by authorities or potential employers. Oumayma's 53-year-old husband Radi, who started working as a carpenter at the age of ten, struggled to have his expertise acknowledged on the Austrian labour market.

> I started working at age 10. […] And also now, I want to work here. But wherever I apply here, they tell me that I need to learn German. […] I know there is work in Vienna. I have seen a lot of workshops here. And I have seen people who work in there without knowing the language. So it is possible. The Eastern Europeans all work without language [competencies]. And there are others, like Turks, who have been here for 15 or 20 years. They have been working and they cannot form a single sentence right in German. And they work. And they build a house. And they socialize. All of this without knowing the [German] language. The Austrian government tells us we have to learn the language. Well, I am 53 years old and we have been through very hard conditions. A war! And I have lost a young son! I do not know where he is. I do not know if he is dead or alive. Very hard social conditions! My kids! My family comes from Ghouta. Have you heard about Ghouta? It is all under bombing, attacks, killings. You have heard about the problems

> there? When somebody has a background like this and a family under such conditions, do you think I would have the peace of mind to study when I have to keep up with the news about my family? That is a huge problem. It is problematic for someone like me, in my age specifically. […] But here you need *Ausbildung*.[14] All of us want to work, but the government does not accommodate that. There are carpenters; there are blacksmiths, electricians, plumbers, lawyers, doctors, engineers. They would already be working without these minimum language requirements. Instead of spending money on these as refugees, you should allow them to work. […] But you do not allow them to work because of the *Ausbildung* thing. They would be adding to the Austrian economy and not costing it.

For many of the elderly, who are disillusioned by the actual prospects of dequalification and the loss of societal status and reputation, the envisioned future might not always be in Austria. Very often, certificates are not accredited in Austria and job experience is not acknowledged, neither by authorities nor by potential employers. In particular, older refugees with middle or higher qualifications describe this devaluation of their education and experience as very frustrating (Brücker et al. 2016, 14).

With it being impossibile to regain former societal status, probable difficulties in acquiring language fluency, little job perspectives and difficulties in establishing social relations, for the elderly the wish to return is often strong. Elise's 72-year-old husband Ilyas, a former news reporter, made his wishes very clear, when he explained,

> I came here to Austria and you cannot deny it, there I have difficulties personally. These difficulties concern my social status. The social conditions: The social conditions here: No one has time, everybody has a job to do. There is no one who has time to sit down with you and talk to you. […] I am old, you know I do not have the capacity to learn a new language. I don't have the capacity to learn something new, especially the German language. […] There are difficulties to integrate into the society here. There is a problem with that. […] Trust me, if I had planned to stay in Austria, I would have learned the language. I would study, study well. It would have taken me a year, two or three, but I would have studied. But I have known since coming here that I will go back to Syria. Because I do not want to die anywhere else except for Syria.

14 He used the Austrian term for vocational training.

Paths towards the future

For many older forced migrants, letting go of the past is difficult. Often, they have a feeling of loss and grief not only over what they had owned and built but also over who they used to be. Remembering the past, therefore, becomes a painful exercise on account of its stark distinction from the actual reality. With reference to Casado-Diasz, Kaiser and Warnes (2004), Bolzman explains that older refugees are often less flexible than younger ones in adapting to their changing social situations. He observes that they often try to "reproduce their former way of life in the new environment" (Bolzman 2014, 410). Hence, the move into either a previously unknown urban or rural setting, in particular, with different social rules, languages and demographic compositions causes particular difficulties for older refugees. The move itself is often synonymous with a radical loss of social and economic resources and hence everyday life and its routines (Bolzman 1994; Bolzman 2014, 410).

In terms of future orientation, many older refugees are disillusioned and frustrated about their loss and their limited chances in Austria. Many older refugees do not consider the value of investing in their own future in Austria, since they do not see any realistic chance of this improving their situation. This includes education, German classes or other professional training. Brücker et al. (2016), who came to a similar result in their study on older refugees, explain this mainly with regard to older refugees' estimation of how much time they have left, as previously mentioned by Ilyas. Also, in the previously mentioned LODA study (see note 2), participants above a certain age were often no longer optimistic about their own futures, but were more so about their children's. Radi illustrated this point in the following way,

> I am more optimistic for my children here. I hope that they work here and succeed with their life. I am hopeful for them, not for myself. I am already old. In a bit, I will die. Everyone dies at a point. We all go under the earth at a point. I just want that my children succeed. I am positive, because my children can find work here and they are in safety.

In contrast to the lack of investment in one's own future, many older refugees invest mainly in their children and demand good education and job prospects for the following generation. Often, they place all hopes for an improvement of their own situation in their children, which often puts them under enormous pressure. Radi continued by pointing at his daughter's future,

> I want my daughter to succeed and continue studying. She is a good nurse. She can take care of people. I want her to have her own practice to help others. For example, she could also help elderly people. If she had a practice, I would want it to develop and become great. I want her to have a car.

His wife Oumayma, in another conversation, added even higher expectations for their youngest son,

> We really did not think that we, the grownups, would have to study a new language. For our future, we thought only the children should learn it. We really thought this would be enough. You know? [17 year old son] studied anyway at the school and with the school he would study the language. And our daughter was working as a nurse. So we thought she needs the language, too. But she could not find something here, until now. And our son wants to study business administration after his school. He wants to study in an Austrian university. He will go to a university and then he will earn a lot of money. We [she and her husband] can never earn much money here. Maybe he will earn 4 or 5.000 Euros. Of course, we cannot. But at the moment he has only B2 German. He first also has to do the *Matura*. He is already studying a lot. And then we need to see how to pay the student fees. It is also around 400 Euros. This will be very hard. That is also why we think maybe he should make the Matura and then *Ausbildung*, so he can earn some money first.

For both, then, it was clear that their future depended detrimentally on the success of their children. Yet, in particular, imagining the future often causes dilemmas for older refugees, especially when the period of refuge takes longer. While for many older refugees, there is still hope of returning to Syria and to their old lives one day, they often understand the efforts that their children and grandchildren have invested in their own future in the country of residence. This is the case with Oumayma, who declared,

> *Wallahi*, my girl Sabine, we are here now. I stopped thinking about my future. My future is that my children study well. I think about the future a lot. The future is for our children to learn and to become educated and succeed at the jobs that they are in. This is my future: only my children.

Yet, in the next sentence, she added her dilemma,

> [*in low voice]* and that I go back to my country. Yes, that I go back to the country. I hope I will be able to, one day. I wish, I wish, by God, to go to my

> country. As much as you like the country that you are in, your country of origin remains very special. I am longing for my country. Do you know this feeling? I am homesick. This is very hard. It is like the longing of a child for his mother. You miss, you miss your country. I really wish.

A return to Syria would in many cases mean having to give up the cumbersome achievements of children and grandchildren in Austria. With the passage of time, however, returning to Syria becomes less and less realistic and feasible, which in turn causes feelings of resignation and emptiness for many older refugees who had hoped that their current hopelessness would only have been temporary. "These feelings of loss are particularly intense when refugees perceive their situation in the country of exile to be permanent—knowing that they may never see their country or region of origin again" (Bolzman 2014, 410).

The present situation is, therefore shaped both by feelings of nostalgia, loss and grief over the past and by hopelessness towards the future; this evokes feelings of stagnation, emptiness and being forgotten. For the generation who had lost their own previous life achievements and the heirloom of their families and past generations, starting from scratch in Austria is often difficult, in particular with the lack of state or NGO support. This generation often expressed that it is not worth investing in their own future of their own volition. Also, they do not seem to be an interesting group for the state to invest in, and for many volunteers they are not vulnerable and hence attractive enough to spend time and resources on. For Abou Younis, this was a very difficult situation, which he expresses, as "We are a lost generation. May the next one have more luck."

This situation has clear effects on their social networks. In particular, family members and the following generations are affected, but so also are ethnic networks. Yet, it is important that older refugees are not only seen as a burden, but also to underline their scope for agency and their importance in safeguarding heritage.

Effects on families

Flight and exile have transgenerational effects on families in many ways. Forced migration affects the composition of households and causes the fragmentation of family networks (see also Bauer-Amin and Six-Hohenbalken 2020). While some members are not mobile enough to leave – or do not

want to – others might find exile elsewhere in the country or neighbouring countries. Other family members might stay back in other locations along the flight route. Often, older refugees do not wish to leave or only do so to stay with their (adult) children (Bolzman 2014, 412). Yet, they often suffer greatly from their physical separation from other (adult) children and further family members, in particular when they are left back in danger. Oumayma, for example, was pained greatly by the fragmentation and physical disconnection to her family:

> So, I am here and my family is there and my sister is there and my brother is there. We are not used to the distance. We Arabs always immediately get together. We want to stay in the same neighbourhood, the same street, you know? […] All the relatives are staying together. My family is here, my in-laws next to me, my uncles and aunts and their children, we all live in the same neighbourhood. Not that everyone lives in a different neighbourhood. I wish that now it would be at least like this. But now, we are in different countries. A part in Germany, a part in Britain, *wallahi al-'azim* in all countries. A part in Libya, and we are here and they are in Syria. It had us dispersed in all different countries. This is what makes it very very hard for us.

Through physical separation, family life needs to be reframed in transnational ties. This leads to the development of what Coenen-Hutter, Kellerhals, and Von Allmen (1994) call "long-distance closeness." Yet, this closeness is translated into differing roles and responsibilities, since older family hierarchies and care relations are often affected by war and fragmentation. Older refugees, who had been affluent business owners or other higher social status, are often no longer able to support other family members after going through the transformation of flight (also Bauer-Amin and Six-Hohenbalken 2020, 87 ff).

Older refugees suffer particularly from such separation. The fragmentation of the family network also means a transformation and possible disruption in the passing on of family heirlooms, traditions and legacies to the following generation. For many, this feels like a failure in preserving the achievements and values of past generations and causes a sense of guilt for not being able to provide the coming generation with the material, social, capital and symbolic foundations they would have were they not lost to the war.

The lack of external support for older refugees, in particular, for acquiring language skills, often results practically in older refugees having little leverage

in navigating through their Austrian everyday life and its complications without the assistance of younger ones. Often, they depend fully on their children for communication with authorities, doctors or even neighbours. When not knowing how to access the Austrian care system, in specific, this can cause an even greater burden to be placed on the shoulders of the younger ones. In addition to these missing system and language skills, the absence of prospects on the labour market and of any other financial means, often causes many older refugees to be trapped in a cycle of poverty.[15] For Elise and Ilyas, it was impossible to improve their income level and move to a better flat since they were fully dependant on the state for support, having lost all their resources in the Syrian war, which made them dependant, not only financially, but also practically, on their sons.

These dependencies of older refugees change their roles within families. Similar to the Chilean forced migrants in Switzerland in Bolzman's study, Elise and Illyas, Nadhim and many others, experience these changing roles as a decrease in self-esteem. As Bolzman notes, "Loneliness was a reality for these older people, and even when the family was trying to be supportive, life in exile is often associated with social and economic difficulties, which burdens the younger members of the family" (Bolzman 2014, 413).

Importance of solidarity and ethnic networks for elderlies

Returning to the initial conversation with Abou Younis at the beginning of this chapter, he had pointed out how important the church community was for him. In this community, he found people with similar destinies, like Dr. Girgis, Emad and Rewan. Meeting with people who understood his situation and shared his experience of loss, emptiness and devaluation in Austria was

15 Up until the age of 64, refugees in Vienna who cannot find employment, receive financial assistance of 917.35 Euro for a single person household or 1,376.02 Euro for couples. Once they reach retirement age, they are entitled to a minimum pension of 966.65 Euro for single headed households and 1,524.99 Euro for couples. In 2019, the poverty line for a single person households in Austria was 1,286 Euro (EU-Silk 2019, 10). The numbers and support systems differ from one federal state to another. Asylum seekers and persons with subsidiary protection have access to different forms of support, such as allocations in organised shelters, health insurance and a smaller amount of pocket money of 40 Euros per month if living in shelters to a maximum of 200 Euros per month if accommodation is organized by the recipients themselves.

an empowering feeling for Abou Younis. This shared burden made the current situation bearable for him. In fact, many other studies have noted the importance of ethnic minority communities in providing essential support to forced migrants, particularly during the early stages of their flight (Bolzman 2014, 416). In these moments of mobility, new solidarity relations emerge as a result of the redefinition of social roles. Such networks can therefore be an unexpected but useful resource for grouping under a common destiny beyond ethnical or religious lines.

While previous studies have underlined the role of kin or ethnic networks in providing material support and practical help after arriving in the new country (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Olwig 2003), often communities of a shared destiny evolve that can be much different from solidarity lines that existed before the war, or are even independent from ethnic or kin networks (Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter 2005). Abou Younis' church group consisted of Arabic speakers, mostly Christians, but drawn from far beyond the usual denominational lines and, rather, being united by the shared experience of being forced migrants within exile in Austria.

Such networks can serve as bridges between the past lives and the present situation. They serve as self-help groups that allow space to exchange experiences and information about the home countries, places along the route, and Austria. In addition, these networks can become important providers of resources during exile. When financial state or (N)GO support is not sufficient or available, the establishments of *jam'iyāt* (saving communities)[16] serve as material support. However, they are also a support for social and cultural needs. For example, celebrations that used to be family celebrations, turned out to become important community celebrations in the absence of extended families with whom to celebrate. Before the Corona pandemics, Oumayma and Radi celebrated *'Īd al-fiṭr* in Vienna in the Islamic Centre alongside thousands of visitors. Abou Younis and others celebrate Christmas together in a huge Turkish restaurant, instead of their family homes. The community became a substitute extended family.

The elderly here play a particularly important role in such social and cultural resources/events. Often, they are consulted on such occasions to make

16 A group of people who join into a collective rotational saving and loaning effort. All members of the *jam'iyāt* pay into the fund, which on a monthly bases then goes to a different community member.

sure that these are celebrated according to "how things used to be done back home," as Oumayma's daughter explained.

Resourcefulness of elderlies in preserving heritage

Almost a year after our initial meeting, I was invited to a baby party on the 40th day after birth. Unfamiliar with this kind of celebration, I was curious to go. The celebration was a female-only celebration. In the midst of the younger women, I found Oumayma with the baby on her arms. I soon approached her and sat down next to her. It turned out, she and her daughter had planned the whole event, which was based on an old tradition, which she had still celebrated in her village. Oumayma, who kept on holding the child for the whole evening, without letting it out of her arms, continuously gave advices to the mother of the child on upbringing and to two younger women who had just gotten married how to improve fertility. She became an active part in consultancy for young Syrian women in her network and a valuable resource for many on topics, in which the NGOs and Austrian state initiatives could not help much.

Older refugees, like Oumayma, can play important roles in passing on cultural knowledge and immaterial heritage. This is important, in particular, for younger ones who would otherwise grow up without any or only poor knowledge on how Syria used to be before the war. Hence, older refugees are important for passing on knowledge and skills and keeping them in the community. On the other hand, they are living testimonies of the cultural and historic richness of the now war-driven county. As such, they create stability and trust and become invaluable repertoires of resources.

Moreover, in Abou Younis' church community, the role of elderlies only became clear after a certain time of settlement and, in particular, during specific occasions, such as weddings or funerals, where they made sure that the celebration was done in the "right" way. Yet, the community also had another occasion, where the role of older refugees, in particular women, became obvious. Every three months, the youth group of the church had to prepare food for the community. It was important that it was Levantine food, especially dishes that are difficult or time-consuming to prepare. The older ladies, who soon took on leading parts in the design of the church celebrations, by choosing the songs, teaching them to others and organising the props, then gave advice on how to improve the recipes and make them taste "authentic". The

interesting part here was that elderly women explained to the younger ones how they could replace certain ingredients or where in Vienna they would find the specific ingredients for the recipe. The more experienced the younger ones became in creating dishes according to the older one's tastes – within the parameters of living in Vienna – the more positively the older ones evaluated the younger one's arrival and stability in Austria. Only someone, who knew their way around the city in order to find everything needed to produce "authentic" food, had really managed to make the new city home.

Hence, older refugees, by providing the necessary knowledge on cultural and social practices can serve as important bridges for finding the space for pre-flight practices in a post-flight everyday life. This helps to see "integration" not as a rupture but as a process of becoming home. Therefore, older refugees can deliver substantial contributions "in maintaining cultural traditions and in passing on folklore, customs, and traditional practices to younger members of the community" (Burton and Breen 2002, 47). As such, they can help others to overcome the cultural loss and create links across their biographical gaps.

Conclusion

In Austria, many organizations, governmental and non-governmental, try to lay out a path to facilitate the transition into Austrian society for refugees. However, the focus often lies on the acquisition of language and integration into the labour-market. These, therefore, are tailored for people who are instantly ready to work and to adapt to a new environment and language. These measures are built on a model of work-migration and do not take into consideration the specific circumstances of refugees, such as psychological pressures or simply the demographic difference. It is even less up to date with regards to the new demographic forms of refuge that Austria has witnessed over the last few years, when the people arriving were not only healthy and young men, but people who need time to cope with their past and present, whole families, children and the elderly. Within this neoliberal refugee regime, forced migrants who are not able to integrate fast into the labour market, are excluded and marginalized.

Alongside the neoliberal outlook, a humanitarian discourse on "womenandchildren" is also present, motivating volunteers and civil society to engage in initiatives for children and women. Yet, older refugees, who are not yet as advanced in age but still not easily employed into the labour market

anymore, are not attractive to civil society initiatives either. However, their agency should not be reduced to measures of how much they can follow the guest worker model or be attractive to civil society organizations. They play major roles in supporting their adult children and preserving cultural and symbolic resources. The overt focus on effective labour market integration often causes enormous pressure, so that these important functions are often forgotten not only by governmental agents but also by forced migrants themselves. What Abou Younis' testimony brings to the forefront is the discrepancy between the ideas of "integration" focused on mainly the job market and the devaluation of elderly refugees who did not only loose their homes and previous life achievements but also their social status and possibilities to upward social mobility. On the contrary, their exclusion from most support options turns them into dependants of their children and grandchildren, which, in turn, enlarges the social loss experienced already. These enormous pressures and the devaluation of elderly refugees by society are often unbearable. Bolzman observes, "for some older refugees the best solution is to return to their home country. Generally this solution is preferred by those who have kept strong symbolic and cultural ties with their home society [...] they will try to go back and rebuild their life as it was before their forced migration" (2014, 416).

Bolzman's observation is also true for some of my interlocutors. For Ilyas, these feelings were so pressing and the loss of status so terrifying that he went back to Syria, alone, while his wife Elise remained in Vienna. When I asked him about the plans for his future, he had already alluded to the plan, that he would complete shortly after our interview:

> What is my future at my age? What I want is to live with a peaceful mind and a little bit of good health. I just need some friends with whom to get along and whom to talk to. What is my future? I need to go to my home. I really wish to go back to my country to see my friends, my people. This is my future.

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