

# ***A Mile in My Shoes***

## **Heiko – Size 11**

***“When my parents asked why we couldn’t move in, they were told that it was because they were Turkish and would be having parties till late in the night, that they’d stink of garlic and that a Turkish family would not fit in.”***

Well, my first memory that has influenced my whole life up to this very day, happened in 1978.

At that time, my parents sent both me and my sister to my grandmother’s in Turkey, so they could work here and save money. In 1978, my parents were able to buy their own flat in North Cologne. Shortly before we moved in, the owner association told my parents that they weren’t allowed to move in, even though they had signed the contract, the money had been transferred and the estate agent and lawyer had been paid. When my parents asked why this was not possible, they were told it was because they were Turkish and would be holding parties at night, and stink of garlic and that a Turkish family would not suit the house.

Now, I should also add, that my parents are Armenian, they were born in Turkey as an Armenian minority. One of the reasons my parents came to Germany from Turkey was due to the danger to my parents who didn’t have an easy life there. They imagined building a better future with their children in Germany.

And my first memory was of all the photographers from the press who took photos of my parents and my sister and me.

I was four years old. We were standing in the meadow in front of the house. It was a block of flats in the Wilhelmstr, in Lommerich.

And I still remember exactly... there were several people with massive lenses and cameras, and...

I didn’t understand what was happening at the time. I only know it from the stories I heard when I was older.

The press had come to help me and my parents to publicise our story in the media, in order to persuade the owner association to retract the injunction that they had obtained from the court.

[Father's voice] "I have been living in Germany for 15 years with my family. 15 years we saved up for a flat. We have bought a flat in this house, but we are not allowed to move in.

[Reporter] The sales contract for the flat in North Cologne had been signed.

However, the owner association demanded a preliminary injunction from the court against the family moving in.

The justification: Turkish people have different habits.

They hold parties into the early hours and smell of garlic."

[Hayko] My parents had to go through the courts. They won of course.

The day that the press were there, I think I saw my mother crying a lot and later, after we moved in, there were no parties until the early hours – and of course we cooked with garlic.

The other children in the block of flats were not allowed to play with my sister and me.

And we were treated as pariahs in the block of flats.

Many questions remain after something like this happens.

The neighbours avoided being in the lift with us. For example, when we entered the house and were waiting for the lift, and another neighbour came in and wanted to go up too, then he would do anything to avoid coming to the lift, for example, looking into the letterbox for a long time, only to avoid getting in the lift with us.

On the other hand, I don't remember my parents doing anything like that.

They didn't try to keep any distance.

At some point, after one or two years, they built a climbing frame in the meadow.

One of the sentences that a child said to me that I will never forget, (he was around 8 at the time, I was 6): "You are not allowed to play here, your parents didn't pay for this climbing frame."

Even though it was complete nonsense. It was paid for out of the community fund, but at that moment, I just accepted it, until my parents told me, "No, you can play there."

I still remember them removing the dirt from our letterbox, my mother was prohibited from putting her laundry in the same washing machine as the German families, it was quite heavy.

It lasted for around four to five years, for sure.

And then it began to settle a little, probably they just accepted it that the foreigners were going to stay in their house.

Funnily enough, then there were rumours about my father running illegal businesses, that he was dealing drugs, how else would a foreign family be able to afford to buy a flat...?

My parents took on a lot of debt to buy that flat, they paid for that flat their whole life.

I only felt I really arrived [in Germany] when I started in the army.

That's when I thought, OK, you're in the German military. I was also in a quite interesting unit, the guard battalion.

At that time, my superiors were Volker Ruehre and Helmut Kohl, and we would welcome all the state guests. We were the boys who would welcome state visitors with carbine rifles and that was the first time I felt as if I had arrived, as a part of the big whole, not a puzzle piece lying somewhere on the edge of a table.

And since then, the feeling never left.

Maybe it was my fault in some ways, I must say that I strongly lived 'being Armenian' in my youth in Germany, but over the years, I realised that being Armenian wasn't an attribute, or something you need to be proud of, I mean, you can't be proud of where you come from because you can't influence that.

You can only be proud of things you create or develop yourself.

After all, my parents came here as refugees, as economic refugees and also fled due to persecution and repression.

Today, I'm seeing all of this again, from the viewpoint of a person who knows both sides, on the one hand, that of the one who has fled, who was looking for an opportunity to start a new life, and on the other hand as someone who lives in and is established in this society, who may live their life in that way.

And also I see people who are trying to seek their fortune here, just like my parents back then.

I am definitely in favour of opening the door to other humans, it is an early Christian thought, which should be deeply anchored in every human. With regards to those who exploit these opportunities through criminal activities, I place my trust completely in our justice system. That it will deal with these people... but...

But when we speak of criminal displaced people, it is a tiny percentage.

Unfortunately, this tiny percentage dominates the entire discussion.

All the others are not taken into account. All the people who bring so much more, people who you could have great discussions with, who have completely different cultural backgrounds, who could show you new horizons, open new doors.

I just try to build a bridge to these people, like many others do.

I would also like it if people have the opportunity to feel good here, to feel as if they have arrived.

It isn't easy, but at least at my shop at Ebersplatz, everyone should have that opportunity.

I generally believe in good.

I also convey to my children, to be positive at all times, and to take the positives out of all negative situations, in order to change things for themselves so things doesn't get too hard.

I think, for our future, it will get harder but it will stay stable.

I wish two things for Germany's future: On the one hand, bigger acceptance for other people, and secondly levelling out the difference between people with regards to what they earn, their salary, etc.

If we could improve that a little, I believe we would have a great society in Germany.