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Refugees tell a different Berlin story

On a chilly winter's day in Berlin, it's hard to imagine how Oranienplatz looked 18 months ago. From October 2012 to April 2014, the tree-lined square in Kreuzberg was the heartland of the German refugee movement, occupied by refugees and activists in protest at the state's asylum policy. Now it's gone back to being a largely unassuming urban space, but for those who lived there in that time, the square still holds significant meaning.

"It's beautiful," says Mohamed, a Sudanese refugee who arrived in Europe four years ago. "And it was the place where we had people we could meet and communicate with."

His story forms part of the Refugee Voices tour, a new initiative giving visitors and Berlin residents the chance to hear first-hand the experiences of refugees. The tour, launched last month, is a collaboration between local guide and refugee activist Lorna Cannon, Mohamed and fellow refugee Moha. They hope that by next spring they will have more refugees involved. A Syrian-led tour about coming to Germany is also being planned.

"We were already telling stories, giving tours to newly arrived refugees," Moha tells me. "But tourists kept asking us about what had happened. We felt the best way was if we told it."

We hear about the pair's journey to Germany. Moha's passage from Somalia cost him \$18,000: a family member sold two properties to raise the money. Mohamed travelled by boat from Libya to Italy in 2011. He sits on the floor, legs apart, to demonstrate the way refugees were crammed

together on boats for days at a time. Their legs would stop working, which is why so many drowned if they fell in the water.

While the tours are an opportunity to hear incredible stories that most people only read about in the news, the tours also have a political aim: to preserve and acknowledge the birth of the refugee community in Berlin.

Our guides tell the story of the Oranienplatz occupation, including how the tents were eventually cleared by police. Sudanese refugee Napuli Langa climbed a tree in the square and spent a week on hunger strike as the police closed in.

We move on to a former school on Ohlauer Strasse, which was occupied after the clearing of Oranienplatz. The authorities evicted most residents from there, too, in dramatic scenes involving riot police and refugees threatening to jump from the roof. Now it is an official refugee centre. Mohamed is the only one of the 25 original residents still living there. Nearby Gorkitz Park is best-known as a place to score drugs, but it is another important social spot for refugees in the city. When the tour ends, we're invited for lunch with a weekly cooking group for refugees, run by Give Something Back to Berlin, which was founded in 2013 to bring together all visitors to the city – be they short- or long-term, privileged tourist or refugee.

As I warm up with a generous portion of the group's Sudanese curry, Mohamed tells me what the tours mean to him: "Living in the school, you're in isolation. The conditions aren't good and no one can visit. So when I get a chance to tell people what I feel inside, I have a good feeling." He points to his chest. "I relax somehow."

- Refugee Voices tours run at 2pm on Saturdays, starting at Oranienplatz, payment by donation, facebook.com/refugeevoicestours