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Caitlin Meredith

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"Too Many Foreigners Does No One Any Good:" Austria Struggles To Keep The World At Bay

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: ______________________________
Tracy S. Dahlby

____
R.B. Brenner

"Too Many Foreigners Does No One Any Good:" Austria Struggles To Keep The World At Bay

by

Caitlin Meredith, B.A; M.P.H.

Report

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Abstract

"Too Many Foreigners Does No One Any Good:" Austria Struggles To Keep The World At Bay

Caitlin Meredith, MA

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Supervisor: Tracy S. Dahlby

This report explores the confluence of history, demographics, law, culture, national identity and human aspirations that frame immigration politics in Austria through the plight of a teenage girl named Arigona Zogaj who was forced to leave Austria after an eight-year fight to stay.

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An Adolescent Takes on Austria

On July 13, 2010, a teenage girl's sad but defiant brown eyes stared from front pages of every news rack in Austria, as if she wanted to climb out of page one and tell her story herself. Beneath her photo in the Kronen Zeitung, the most popular daily newspaper, the headline: "Abschied von Wahl-Heimat – Arigona verlasst Land" – "Farewell from your adopted homeland – Arigona leaves the country."

The face belonged to Arigona Zogaj, a Kosovar teenager whom immigration authorities deported after her very public fight to stay in Austria. The spectacle surrounding the case, one of some 25,000 jamming the national Asylum Court's docket, is exceptional in that it provides a rare glimpse of the forces at work in Austria's immigration policies.

To understand the furor, Americans might recall the case of Elian Gonzalez, a six-year-old Cuban boy who was the subject of a heated custody battle between his Miami relatives and his father back in Cuba in 2000. His mother had drowned while making the sea passage to the US with Elian in an aluminum boat. As in the Gonzalez affair, Arigona's plight saturated the media, provoked public protests, attracted international attention and finally ended with an unpopular political solution. It was a compelling tale – such a pretty girl, such a cruel, conflicted world. But Elian's saga was over in six months. The Arigona saga dominated headlines for three long years.

With its varied and sometimes hard to parse parts, the case of Arigona seemed more and more like an inkblot from a Rorschach test, representing not just this one immigrant girl's plight, but a whole country's struggle to work out a new approach to the demands of a changing world. Austria's insular identity, rooted largely in its post-World War II past, has not equipped the majority of its citizens to broaden their self-conception to accommodate a modern, mobile world. Though Arigona managed to capture the Austrian imagination, she was the exception. The other 1.5 million foreign-born in the

country elicit little sympathy from their Austrian neighbors, especially Muslims and Africans.

While Muslims evoke fears of bomb threats and hidden terrorist cells in some quarters, Austrians are mainly worried about preserving their distinctive way of life. They don't fear a suicide subway bombing as much as they fear the head-scarved Muslim mothers taking their children to the neighborhood playground. And there is a growing public conviction that not only do Muslims not want to assimilate, they *can't* assimilate, raising the specter of a parallel society that would tear asunder Austria's tight-knit social fabric.

Africans, on the other hand, do evoke fear of criminality. Relatively new to Austria – the first blacks most Austrians saw were American soldiers after World War II – African immigrants are largely seen as criminals. This uneasiness is amplified by anti-foreigner attitudes that are running at an all-time high and immigration policies that are becoming increasingly restrictive. Demographers and immigration experts alike say that immigration is necessary to continue the country's economic vitality. But so far, ordinary Austrians have resisted finding a place in their hearts or their neighborhoods for immigrants.

Austria might be one of the smallest countries in Europe, but it is a very rich one too – the International Monetary Fund ranks it as one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Yet no matter how successful the country is today, the Arigona story raised many questions about it's tomorrow. Arigona is just one of the 214 million migrants across the globe, an increase of about 37 percent in two decades, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mobile by choice or by force, these people are looking for new homes all over the world, including Austria. Without an ability to adjust to and catch up with this new reality, Austria will find itself at a disadvantage. If it wants to continue its economic prosperity and play a role in global politics, Austria will have to make some serious decisions about how to shape their approach to global immigration.

Austria's Adolescence

There's no better way to annoy Austrians than to assume that they are German. Austria, like Canada to America's North, lives in the shadow of a dominating, and at times domineering, neighboring country that consumes almost all of the geopolitical oxygen in the region. An Austrian social work professor at the Upper Austrian University of Applied Sciences, Christian Stark, told me, "the best thing now is when Austria beats 'big brother' Germany in soccer."

So, if they're not Germans, who are they? The problem with trying to describe Austria, said Heinz Fassman, a demographer at the University of Vienna, is that first you must define which Austria, at which period in history, is in question. "Some European countries can celebrate their birthdays, like France, but what is the birthday of Austria?" asked Fassman. "It is very, very complicated."

Whichever date you pick, Austrian identity has been in flux. The citizens of 300-400 years ago might have felt like the kings of the world as the Hapsberg dynasty expanded their reign through much of Europe, culminating in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But the 20th century has been particularly injurious to the Austrian ego. In 1918, Austria was on the losing side of World War I. The resulting Treaty of St. Germain was signed and dissolved the Empire, significantly cinching the political boundaries of the new "Republic of German Austria."

"This [new] republic had many problems with self-identification," said Fassman. Unaccustomed to being such a small fry in Europe, Austria tried to glom onto its bigger, and now more powerful, neighbor. "They wanted to reunify with Germany in the 20's and 30's but then came Hitler." In 1938 the Austrians' wish was granted, but not exactly in the way they had planned: Hitler's Third Reich simply marched in and annexed the country in what history refers to as the Anschluss. "Austria" as an independent entity was kaput.

Between 1939, when Germany provoked World War II, and 1945, when the Allied Forces triumphed, almost 250,000 of the 6.5 million total Austrian population lost

their lives fighting for the Third Reich and an estimated 65,000 Jews were killed in Austrian concentration camps, according the Austrian Embassy's American website. Much of the country's industry had been destroyed. And just like in World War I, Austria was yet again on the losing side of a global conflict, losing even more territory. Going from a kingdom to a corner in such a relatively short amount of time would be a jolt to any polity, but World War II and the atrocities on Austrian soil fueled an even more determined effort to redefine the Austrian character. Not only did Austrians have to reassemble their government and infrastructure, they had to construct a new identity.

"Nineteen forty-five was a new start," said Fassman, "the first time people would say 'We are Austrians, not Germans.'" A new figure of the typical Austrian man was created, complete with lederhosen, Alpine know-how and mountain charm, capitalizing on quaint, regional folk traditions that stood in stark contrast with their more modern neighbors. "This new identity was a wonderful mixture, a new type of man and, most importantly, had nothing to do with Germany," said Fassman.

Another important aspect of the post-War identity was Austria's new role as the buffer between East and West, politically as well as geographically. After the end of World War II, Austria remained occupied by the U.S., the former Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and France. A condition for the USSR's withdrawal in 1955 was an assurance of Austria's future impartiality between World War II's opposing regional forces. Thus was born the Declaration of Neutrality, which was integrated into the Austrian constitution, as well as its mindset. Too long had they been affected by the turmoil of geopolitics – now they were merely observers.

Taken together, these factors create an insular, white Christian European with a regal legacy who overcame dramatic hardship to not only survive but to thrive, playing an important role as the uninvolved bystander in global politics. Through this construction, the legacy of multi-culturalism that had thrived as far back as the Hapsburg Empire was discarded.

The effort to promote an exclusively Austrian identity continues today, often at the expense of immigrants, and ignores the diverse provenance of the actual citizens.

"The majority of Austrians have an immigration background," said Fassman, "but the politicians have invented the 'immigration background' label to apply to new immigrants, which is completely counter-productive to integration goals." Citizenship has become something you are born with, something immigrants will never have. The paradox: the notion of an authentic race was, as many point out, championed by Hitler, the very figure most were trying to distance themselves from in the war's wake.

Another component of this identity development is a fear and suspicion of outsiders. "They make people believe that newcomers can destroy the new Austria," said Fassman.

Or, as social work professor Stark put it, "the best way to make a country is to go against foreigners." Political parties, like the far-right Freedom Party which, in the 1990s, called for "zero migration," have successfully convinced the population that the very essence of Austria is to be a self-contained entity, invulnerable to the uses and abuses of the outside world.

Meanwhile, immigrants like Arigona's family keep streaming into the country. Historically a Catholic country, Austria is now home to almost half a million Muslims out of a total population of 8.5 million. Unlike the white Czechoslovakians, Yugoslavians and Hungarians of yesteryear, today's immigrants are just as likely to be African, Middle Eastern and Asian. This influx has prompted heated and sometimes hateful rhetoric by politicians and conservative media outlets citing the need to protect "Austrian" values in the face of foreign (read: negative) influences.

Despite the resistance to broadening the definition of who is Austrian, the actual demography of the country belies a different reality. There is a higher percentage of foreign born residents in Austria than in the US, said Herbert Langthaler of Asylkoordination, an organization that provides training and resources for refugee support agencies. And he's right: 18 percent of the population was born in another country; in the US it's only 15 percent. Vienna alone has a 40 percent foreign-born population. "It doesn't matter what the politicians say," Langthaler said. "We are an immigration country." Each year more and more restrictive immigration policies are

signed into law. This year the government approved a provision that requires potential immigrants to pass German-language tests before entering the country on a work visa; it had high popular support.

Though the mainstream media presents immigration as something that is happening to the country (recent headline: "Interior Minister 'alarmed' by soaring asylum seeker numbers"), the government has actually had an active role in creating the influx.

In the early 1960's and 70's, Austria faced a serious labor gap. It set up recruitment offices in Turkey, the former Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia and soon workers from these countries started streaming, then rushing, in. By the mid-seventies there were over 200,000 guest workers in Austria. But though the workforce shortage was solved, the program didn't go exactly as the Labor Department planned.

"The thinking was that they would stay for a few years to work while Austria needed them, and then go back home when the younger generation of Austrians matured and could take their places," said Magdalena Danner, a supervisor at Migrare, an immigrant social-service center. "But this isn't what happened." Instead of four to five years of residency, many of the workers decided Austria was their home. Many had married and had children during this time, and brought their families where they had good job prospects. By 1991, 133,000 of these guest workers became naturalized Austrian citizens.

The additional population is, in fact, much needed in Austria. Like many of its European brethren, Austria's birthrate is very low. At 1.4 children per adult female, Austria is not replacing itself with new Austrians: It would barely hold on to current population figures without immigration. The current population is approximately 8.5 million inhabitants, according to Statistics Austria, the central statistical office for the government. Of that total, an estimated seven million are "pure" Austrians, meaning without a recent immigration background (though the office offer no definition of "recent"). Given the low birthrate, this could translate to only five million native Austrians by the year 2060 – the current population of Alabama. But, according to Statistics Austria, immigrants will offset the loss of economically active persons as the

indigenous population ages. The country will be dependent on immigrants to beef up the work force and to pay the taxes that make the social welfare system function.

That, however, is not how many Austrians see it. Each year more and more restrictive immigration policies are adopted with broad public support.

Xenophobia by the Numbers

Austrians, like their government, are not enthusiastic about immigrants, whether they be asylum-seekers, minorities or just non-Europeans. Austria rates as one of the most xenophobic countries in polls conducted in the European Union, and these attitudes frequently translate into poor treatment. For example, between 2006 and 2008, reported racist and anti-Semitic crimes rose from 419 to 831, according to the Minister for the Interior's website. Amnesty International accused the Austrian police of institutional racism in its 2010 "The State of the World's Human Rights" report – an issue that was highlighted this summer when a black American teacher living in Vienna was ambushed by an anti-drug SWAT team while riding the subway; the officers thought he was an African drug dealer.

Austrians don't deny that their country doesn't welcome diversity. According to a 2007 Gallup poll, Austria is the only "developed European democracy with less than a majority (44%) of people saying where they live is a good place for minorities."

Blacks, Muslims, Jews and the Roma are "especially vulnerable to racism and discrimination, leading to significant socio-economic and other problems, compared to the rest of the population, according to a March 2010 report issued by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance.

The report goes on to say that aside from popular opinions, "The issue of racism and xenophobia in political discourse and in certain sections of the media is all the more worrying as the authorities do not appear to have taken any meaningful steps to find solutions." There are very few government-funded initiatives to confront racist attitudes and stereotypes. "We need more social work for Austrians," said Langthaler at Asylkoordination, the refugee advocacy education agency, "but in Austria it's hard to get money for awareness-raising."

Not all of Austria's negative attitudes are xenophobic. For example, as in other Western countries, some of Austria's apprehensions about immigrants are connected to women's rights. "In Europe they feel that they finally tore down some of the social

constructions that kept women down," said Professor Fassman, "but now with Islam it makes them worry there will be a return."

The traditional Austrian woman's role was – and still is in some sectors of society – "Kinder, Küche, Kirche," or children, kitchen and church. Although women gained the right to vote in 1918 (two years before the US), Austrian women have had a hard-fought road to active professional lives. The gap between men and women's salary is one of the largest in Europe, next to Estonia, according to a 2008 European Commission report on gender pay gaps. To Austrians concerned about equality for women, the headscarf worn by many Turkish and Chechen immigrants can represent a flag of defeat, rather than a religious choice for public presentation.

The Politics Of Picking on Immigrants

Much of Austrian political immigration discourse is aimed at highlighting problems rather than finding solutions. Out of the 700-plus political parties that are registered in Austria, only four are represented in the current government. The Social Democrats and the People's Party form a center-left coalition that controls almost three quarters of the Austrian Parliament. The right-wing Freedom Party and the left-wing Green Party divide the rest of the representatives, with favor towards the Freedom Party. These have been the main parties since the mid-eighties, but some predict that the Social Democrats are losing their edge and the more conservative Freedom Party is increasing its shares in both Federal and regional elections.

Stoking of this anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment comes most often from the far right parties like the Freedom Party. This is the political party made internationally famous for its links to Jörg Haider, widely viewed as a pro-Nazi anti-Semite, who eventually left the Freedom Party to create the Alliance for the Future of Austria, known familiarly by its German initials, BZO. Haider's departure hasn't meant a significant change in tone, however. Most recently the FPO, as the Freedom Party is called, has been in the headlines for its controversial election campaigning. In the central region of Styria it sponsored a video game called "Bye Bye Mosque," in which players get points for shooting down Islamic minarets. In Vienna FPO's mayoral candidate chose the slogan: "Mehr Mut für Wiener Blut. Zu viel Fremdes tut niemandem gut," which translates to: "More courage for Viennese Blood. Too many foreigners does no one any good." (It rhymes in German.)

But it's not only the far right that rates poorly on this issue. The Minister of the Interior, Maria Fekter from the more centrist People's Party, who is in charge of immigration, continually espouses anti-immigration sentiments. In August, Fekter announced that she didn't want "unskilled, illiterate farmers from some mountain villages" to settle in Austria, causing an outcry from the political left.

There is also the Green Party, of course, whose leaders speak out against the right and advocate more tolerant attitudes and policies, but they have a very small following. "Maybe ten to twelve percent of Austrians identify as the Green Party before the elections," said Christian Cakl, the managing director for SOS Menschensechbe, a human rights and refugee support agency "but during the election they only get eight to nine percent of the vote."

As for the more moderate, left-leaning Austrians, they are harder to locate. Some attribute this to Austrian's phlegmatic nature. "The problem is that one person out of 30 might speak up to say hateful things but the other 29 won't stand up to speak out against this," said Irene Brickner, a journalist who covers immigration issues for Der Standard newspaper.

Ironically, the lack of backlash towards politicians and media who vilify immigrants and promote racial stereotyping can be partially explained by the Austrian tendency to shy away from such behavior. "In general Austrians are not extremists," said Cakl. "There are no riots here like in other European countries." Such passivity in the face of an increasingly amplified anti-foreigner rhetoric is unsettling to many. Sixty-five years ago similar political speech was translated into a terrifying, genocidal reality.

"I'm not afraid that fascism will return, but this language scares me – it pulls on the same tendencies," said Brickner. Her job as a journalist, she said, it to remind people of that vulnerability.

Arigona’s Fight for Asylum

So how do Arigona and her family fit into all of this?

The story began in 2001 when Arigona’s father left Kosovo for Austria to look for work. But, there are only three circumstances qualify a person for legal entry to Austria: people who are highly skilled trades people of the kind the country needs at the moment; people who marry an Austrian or have immediate family legally living there; and people who make an asylum claim. Since Arigona’s father was not a skilled laborer, just a poor one, and didn’t have close family already in Austria, he decided to try his luck as an asylum-seeker. There are no concrete numbers on how many other Mr. Zogajs there are out there trying to use the asylum system to gain entry to work in Austria but it’s safe to assume that they number in the thousands; out of the 15,000 people who applied for asylum last year, over 80 percent were rejected for not having legitimate asylum claims. While his story is compelling – no jobs in Kosovo for him to earn money to support his wife and four children – it isn’t exactly what the drafters of the Geneva Conventions had in mind.

In 1949, in the aftermath of World War II, Austria signed the latest rendition of the Geneva Conventions. This fourth convention did something the three previous versions did not. In this iteration, the Geneva Conventions – what the International Committee of the Red Cross calls the “core of international humanitarian law” – specifically articulated the rights of civilians, in addition to combatants, who were affected by war.

This meant – and still means - that civilians fleeing violent persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion in their home countries have rights. Those who flee to a country bound by the Geneva Conventions are entitled to asylum, or protection. Given the mass displacements of Jews and Russians, just to name two groups, European leaders wanted to guarantee the rights for victims of war. When Mr. Zogaj came to Austria in 2001 he had no such claim.

He, like the majority of those seeking asylum, fled economic hardship: Kosovo had no jobs and he had a wife and four children to support.

Some, like the conservative Freedom Party, blame individuals like Mr. Zogaj for abusing the asylum system. Meanwhile, human rights organizations and migration experts say the problem is Austria's restrictive immigration policies. If immigrants had another legal avenue to pursue, they say, they wouldn't have to submit bogus asylum claims.

Austrians have less sympathy towards other war-torn countries because of, not in spite of, their own rubble-strewn history. "The attitude towards people in troubled countries is that they should stay and build up their country there – just like we did after the war," said Fassman, the demographer. Many of the grandmothers and grandfathers who picked up bricks and telephone poles from the streets for days, months and years, slowly putting their country back together starting in 1945, are still alive. If they could do it, why can't others?

Some advocates are puzzled as to why asylum seekers get so much attention from politicians and the media to begin with. "Refugees are the smallest group of immigrants but play the biggest role in the media," said Langthaler. Out of an estimated 1.4 million immigrants in Austria, there are perhaps only 20,000 asylum seekers. Recent polls found that 49 percent of Austrians consider asylum seekers as "generally dishonest," and up to 53 percent agreed with the claim that asylum seekers "are more criminal than other society groups," according to Karmasin, an Austrian public opinion polling organization.

Margit Ammer of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights, blames the media and politicians for creating this perception. "When they talk about asylum-seekers, it's always in context with criminality," Amber said. One of Interior Minister Maria Fekter's election promises was to increase the foreign police, the branch that handles asylum seekers, to make Austria "the safest place in the world," implying that the main security risk comes from asylum seekers. Aside from being factually incorrect – the highest crime rate within foreign groups is actually among Germans living in Austria who are not asylum seekers – this creates problems in the daily lives of asylum seekers

who are considered de facto criminals. Moreover, Bricker, citing a report by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, said that immigrants and especially Roma are much more often crime victims than non-minority Europeans.

In 2002, Mr. Zogaj brought the rest of his family to Austria, including the then ten-year-old Arigona. They applied for asylum, which was denied, so they filed an appeal. In Austria, asylum seekers are permitted to stay in the country while their applications are being determined, including during the appeal process. The government covers asylum seekers' basic needs– housing, health insurance and a very modest food stipend (140 Euros a month) – but they are not allowed to work. Children have a few more opportunities: Arigona and her siblings were allowed to go to school in the village where they were placed to wait for the asylum status determination.

Then, in 2007, when the foreign police arrived at their doorstep in the sleepy Upper Austrian village of Frankeburg to announce the denial of this appeal and forcibly deport the family, Arigona escaped into the night. Her mother was allowed to stay in Austria until her daughter was found, while the rest of the family went back to Kosovo. Arigona appeared a few days later on YouTube. The screen shows the 15-year-old in a spare room, pleading to the Austrian government to let her stay in the only home she'd known for the past five years. She said if they forced her to leave she would commit suicide. The video was played, and re-played, on the nightly news.

Even though Arigona and her family represent exactly what the mainstream Austrian public fears and fights against – economic migration to plunder their plentiful social benefit resources and robust economy – her YouTube appearance caused viewers to identify with her. Her seamless Austrian dialect – a perfect accent! – cut closer to their vanities than their xenophobia. Even the right-wing newspaper Kronen Zeitung bowed to popular pressure and changed its stance to support her appeal. A teenage girl who met none of the legal (or traditional) criteria for the Geneva Conventions all of a sudden became a poster girl for asylum. Her winning argument wasn't that she would be subjected to police torture if she were forced to return to her native Kosovo. It was that she felt more "Austrian." And this argument, in the public at least, appeared to win over

Austrian hearts and minds. During Zogaj's seven-year saga several protests were held, sometimes with as many as 11,000 attendees. Many of Arigona's neighbors in Upper Austria lobbied to argue the case to let her stay.

The government wasn't as easily swayed. Finally, a full eight years after her father came looking for work to support his family, Austrian authorities denied Arigona's request to stay in the country. By this time an 18-year-old young woman, Arigona was decidedly more Austrian than Kosovar – she no longer even spoke her native language. The Austrian public was incensed.

One thing the Arigona story revealed was how long and protracted the Austrian asylum process was, and how many problems result from that. Part of the problem was an inefficient processing system. Though the government reorganized the Asylum Department and hired more staff, there are still approximately 25,000 open cases. And on the human side, that translates to 25,000 people who wait in limbo to know their fates, often for many years. "Asylum seekers can live with having no job, or little money, but never knowing what will happen tomorrow is the most difficult part," said Marion Huber, a supervisor at Caritas, a social support agency for refugees.

As a young man from Cameroon said while waiting for his monthly stipend check at a Caritas house, "They asked me to wait, so I am waiting. But I feel like my whole life is being wasted."

Refugee advocates like Huber and Danner at Migrare and others who work with asylum seekers are critical of the interview process. "The quality of the workers who make these big decisions is very low," said Danner. "They know very little about these countries [of origin] and do very superficial interviews." Often different reports are copied and pasted so many times that it's hard to tell which asylum seeker or which country they are referring to. "I had a client from Senegal and in his negative response the final paragraph said that he should be returned to the Gambia," said Herlinde Lanzerstorfer, a case worker for the City of Linz. They might look at a general country overview for Uganda, for instance, and decide that the country is stable enough that no

asylum claims should be entertained even though the North of the country has many security issues.

So what has Austria learned from the plight of Arigona?

Not much, some fear. “The discussion of Arigona was too big for this country,” said Der Standard journalist Irene Brickner. Though it brought many thorny issues out on the table – the too-long asylum process, the dearth of other viable immigration opportunities, and the need for serious thinking about opening rather than restricting immigration – there wasn’t enough progressive leadership to confront them head or find workable solutions. Instead, politicians returned to their worn but safe anti-immigration rhetoric.

NGOs like Caritas lament that to focus too much on this one girl’s story is to miss the point. The real point is that Austria is in dire need of clearer, and less restrictive immigration policies. Caritas pointed out that there are at least 300 other families in the Zogajs’ position whose cases have been foundering, unresolved, in the asylum court for over five years. “When other EU countries change immigration policy they do a sort of blanket amnesty for all the cases that came before,” said Langthaler at Asylkoordination,” but Austria didn’t do that.”

No mainstream politician has been brave enough to even suggest it, knowing how unpopular the idea would be to many Austrians. “They say it would be an open invitation for others to come,” Danner said.

Lost Without Translation

"In the US you are friendly to newcomers, but you don't give them anything," Fassman explained. "The attitude is if they do well, OK, but we are not obliged to help them." But, he said, that's not the case in a social welfare system like Austria. "In our system we have to regulate and control work because out of work comes money to pay into the social welfare system," Fassman said. "This is much more important than ideology." In America, a less-than-perfect knowledge of the English language doesn't automatically translate to poverty; Korean car washers in thrive in Los Angeles, Russian manicurists get good business in New York and Mexican fruit pickers are in demand in the Central Valley. But it's different here. "In Austria you can't get a job if you don't know German," he said. And because of this, Austrians fear that if immigrants don't learn German they won't be able to work, and if they can't work they'll receive the generous social benefits Austria is famous for, without paying into the system.

Fassman, the demographer, added that, though there were some very practical reasons that immigrants need to learn German, language is becoming more and more of a government tool to keep immigrants out. He pointed to a new proposal to adopt the recently implemented Dutch immigration policies. A prospective immigrant to the Netherlands must now learn Dutch before applying for immigration and pass a test before they ever touch Dutch soil. "This is just an instrument to differentiate between necessary and unnecessary immigrants," said Fassman. "They want to pick and choose migrants, and they don't want more Muslims and Turkish who they assume won't pass the test." It may be an indirect obstacle, but it's a very popular one. A recent poll showed that 74 percent of Austrians agreed with the introduction of the mandatory basic German law.

Asylum seekers often feel confused by the language issue. Many actually do learn German but other than the NGO workers, they say no Austrians want to talk to them. This seems especially true for the Africans who this reporter interviewed. Ali Pierre Kennedy, a well-dressed Congolese former politician who is fluent in German, said that

when he asks people on the street for directions, they turn away from him. He said Austria had a lot going for it – technology, organization and security – but the fear of outsiders is a real problem. “I speak their language, I know their culture, I want to integrate, but what more can I do but change my skin color?” Kennedy asked.

Freedom's Just Another Word For Having Everything To Lose

One group that didn't budge in its position towards Arigona is the Freedom Party. In an interview in a Linz coffee house, Birgitt Thurner, the Freedom Party public affairs officer for Upper Austria, and her father, a former Party official, were asked what they think of Austria's asylum system. The asylum system is good, they both said, but the problem is that it is being abused. Mr. Thurner asserted that the number of asylum seekers arriving in Austria was ballooning by the day but when asked for specific numbers, he said he didn't know. Neither of them were aware that there's actually been a precipitous downward trend in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Austria in the past few years. After a peak of just over 34,000 newly arrived asylum seekers in 2002, only 16,000 applied in 2009.

Both father and daughter expressed a deep fear of what will happen to their own identities with an increased immigrant population. "Why do we have to give up our culture for them?" said Ms. Thurner, referring to her perception that many immigrants don't want to learn the German language or participate in cultural traditions like Christmas. They equate immigrants – especially Muslim immigrants – with losing Austria. "I'm sure that the people in our culture don't want that we can't eat pork," said Ms. Thurner.

Along with their fear that Austrian school children won't be able to eat pork is their fear that Austrian sports will disappear. Austrian sports. "It is typical that kids will be taught how to ski in our schools," said Ms. Thurner, speaking of one of Austria's most prized Olympic sports. "But now the tradition will break down because the Turkish kids are not allowed," she said. "We have so few sports. Skiing is special to us." When asked if any of this had actually happened yet Ms. Thurner said no, but there were discussions. (Scholastic skiing programs have been increasingly cancelled because many families, not all of them Turkish, can't afford it anymore.)

Beyond identity questions, immigration represents a disruption in social harmony, according to the Thurners. "When minorities go to a place too fast it starts problems," he

said. He gave many examples of avoidable racial problems in the United States – black/white confrontations in LA, indigenous tribes claiming territory in Alaska – and then he turned to Austria. "Anti-Semitism didn't start in Austria until 1867," he said, "because a new constitution was written that allowed people to move, so many Jews came to Austria. That's when anti-Semitism and prejudice started."

When asked if he wasn't placing responsibility for social prejudice on the victims of that prejudice, "No," he said, shrugging, "it's not their fault, it's just the way it is."

It might be easy to dismiss the Thurners' earnest, but misinformed, ideas, but their party receives a significant percentage of votes in each election. Recent polls have shown that the FPO (the group with the anti-foreigner campaign slogan) has the potential to garner up to 22 percent of the overall vote in the Vienna ballot. In the last national elections in 2005, it came in third with almost 15 percent of the vote (with a candidate who proclaimed that denying the Holocaust – legally prohibited in Austria - should be protected by freedom of speech.) Election watchers predict that those numbers are on the rise. They may not be the majority yet, but their loud voices influence the public discussion. They set the agenda for many political debates, including immigration and security.

Living By The Rules, And In The Margins

Joseph Amoah is a 51 year-old man from a politically well-connected family in Ghana. He currently works in a flour factory near Linz and was recently interviewed in his tidy but spare apartment not too far from the Linz train station.

He said he escaped to Austria in 2001 after an election in his region provoked an angry mob to come to his rich uncle's house to kill him and his family. The mob finally dispersed, but not before burning his car in front of the house. Through the help of his wife's family, Amoah went into hiding, eventually deciding that it was too risky to ever come out of hiding, much less return to his village. His father-in-law brought him to the port city of Tema and found a ship he could secretly board. The man who was helping him told him the ship was going to Switzerland. When he was recounting his story, the reporter questioned him about Switzerland, a land-locked country to the west. "Yes," he replied, "the ship went to Switzerland."

Many asylum seekers describe improbable journeys. For some this is due to an honest ignorance of European geography. For others it might be a story they were instructed to tell by the schleppers, or traffickers, who brought them to Austria. In 2003 the EU adopted the Dublin Regulation, a policy that requires asylum seekers to petition for asylum in the first EU country in which they arrive. Because of this, people who arrive in countries with notoriously oppressive asylum procedures, such as Italy, are coached to claim that they arrived in countries with more humane asylum procedures.

Conservatives say this is evidence of their cunning, strategic manipulation of social benefits and asylum policies of the richest countries. Refugee advocates like Caritas say that most of the asylum seekers are actually woefully misinformed, operating on rumors and whatever the human traffickers have told them. The classic example is that a Nigerian man reportedly told government officials that he was Chechen – he had heard that if you said you were a Chechen you had a higher chance of being allowed to stay. A strategy, yes. Cunning, no.

In Amoah's case, a judge ultimately ruled that he had legitimate asylum claims. Amoah showed me the photocopied newspaper articles with headlines about political unrest in his region that the judge had handed over as part of his file. (Perhaps the puzzle of the non-existing seaport in Switzerland was deemed irrelevant.)

Wherever it was that he landed from Ghana, he was then driven through the night in a truck and dropped off in Linz. Amoah applied for asylum and had to wait five years to have his petition granted. Five years is a relatively short time for an asylum seeker in Austria. Some have been waiting for more than ten years. They're not allowed to work and there are very few classes they can afford on the 140 Euros a month they are given. When Amoah was asked what he did during those fine years he said: "I would just walk around the streets of this city Linz," he said, "I couldn't even afford the bus." The humiliation of being a grown man accustomed to working hard to support his family intensified when he talked to his wife, who was still living in Ghana. He was only able to call her infrequently because of the cost of phone cards. "She would say, 'You have been in Europe for three years. When are you going to send school money for your children?'" In the end she divorced him.

Though Amoah is no longer stuck in asylum limbo and receives full rights and entitlements as a legal resident, he is certainly not rolling in the social benefit dough, a charge that is often leveled at immigrants like him. His monthly salary is 1,250 Euros (about $1,700). After paying rent, utilities, car insurance, school fees for his children in Ghana, he has only 280 Euros ($380) remaining to pay for food and incidentals such as car repairs, broken water meters and his desire to offer juice to a visiting reporter. He apologized that he was unable to offer this sign of hospitality because his cupboard was bare. "If I put the card in the bank machine right now nothing will come out," Amoah said.

One of the Freedom Party claims is that immigrants are eager for asylum so they can bring their (all too many) children to Austria to exploit the high education and health insurance benefits. Amoah expressed no such eagerness. He acknowledged going to the Red Cross earlier this year to inquire about the process, but he's not sure if it would be a

good thing for his children to come to Austria. “I want them to develop their brains, not be a field laborer like myself,” he said. There are so few jobs open to foreigners here, and even fewer open to Africans, he said. He thinks that they might have better chances to succeed in Ghana.

“This is a new home,” Amoah said when asked if, after being in the country for almost ten years, he feels at home here, “But home is not ‘home’ anymore.” He said that he was very lonely here, but acknowledged that there are some very good things about Austria. “One thing I like about this country is that it is very peaceful,” he said. “No one tries to kill you when you walk down the street.”

The Paradox of Austrian Generosity

According to Marion Huber at Caritas, Austrians are internationally recognized for their commitment to humanitarian relief all over the world. The World Bank rates Austria as the 12th richest country in the world, and along with this wealth has come a strong tradition of humanitarian philanthropy. Many people have sponsored children in Uganda and after the flooding in Pakistan they demanded that their vacationing government ministers return to Vienna to pledge appropriate economic support to the people of Pakistan's recovery effort. This humanitarian philosophy runs deep in their ethos.

But sympathies seem to change when those same Ugandans and Pakistanis cross over to Austrian soil.

Professor Christian Stark at the School of Social Work in Linz acknowledges this apparent disconnect. "Austrians' attitudes towards immigrants are schizophrenic," he said, sitting at the conference table in his office a few days before classes recommenced after the summer. "They don't like Turks or Muslims, but they like kebab and taking their holidays in Turkey." Something happens at the border when the people they see on their vacations decide to turn up at their home. "In their own countries they are viewed as good ones, but when they come to Austria they are regarded as dangerous," he said.

Stark attributes this schism to Austria's Calvinistic-like philosophy. While Austrians are very sympathetic to vulnerable groups like the handicapped, they withhold sympathy from groups whose situation they view as their own fault, like drug addicts, Stark said. Correspondingly, because asylum seekers and immigrants choose to leave home, the problems they encounter in Austria are of their own making. According to SOS, the refugee advocacy agency, less than one percent of domestic charitable donations go to refugee organizations.

A(nother) Teenager In The Night

Arigona might have revealed Austria's immigration quagmire, but the country can't afford to stay stuck for very long. Global migration is no longer a side story about niche communities, it's the story of the 21st century, according to a recent article in The New York Times. Journalist Jason DeParle quoted a University of Texas political scientist, Gary P. Freeman, who said, "There's more mobility at this moment than at any time in world history." National identity crises and political strategizing aside, treating immigration as a pesky nuisance that will disappear if you ignore it is not an option.

It's not hard to understand why Austrians want to prevent foreigners from disrupting the status quo – times are good in Austria. It has the lowest unemployment rate in Europe: 4.3 percent (compared to 9.5 percent in the United States.) Vienna was recently rated the city with the best quality of living in the world. And all of this prosperity was hard fought. Many of the people who literally picked up the pieces of Austria to put it back together after World War II are still alive. "The attitude towards troubled countries is that they should stay and build up their country there," said Fassman, "just like we did after the war." In the view of ordinary Austrians, the success Austria enjoys now is no fluke; it's the result of hard work and perseverance. Why should families like the Zogajs benefit from their labor?

Austria is also very future-oriented in many of its enterprises. It is one of the leaders in green technology and now boasts that a record 22 percent of the country's overall primary energy consumption comes from renewable energy sources. Solar, wind and water are all burgeoning industries that the rest of the developed world is watching.

There are even signs that some cultures have infiltrated the Austrian aesthetic to no ill effect. Kebab stands are as ubiquitous as bratwurst vendors. The staff at McDonalds, located at many train stations, represents a rainbow of world cultures. Through community media productions, more and more immigrant voices can be heard. But the country is still a long way from applying the future-thinking that is such a boon to

the economic vitality to other segments of society, like immigration. And because Austria is increasingly dependent on immigrants for its work force, the country won't continue to thrive without them. "We have to be careful we don't become a castle," said Christian Cakl at the refugee support agency SOS Menschenrechte, "otherwise we will shrink and shrink."

Meanwhile, the struggles continue for immigrants who would become Austrian. In early September of this year, a few months after Arigona had disappeared from the front pages, there was another Arigona-like case. A teenage boy named Sarkis from Bosnia had escaped in the night when the foreign police came to deport his family. He has no money or anything with him; no one knows where he is. Unlike Arigona, however, Sarkis hasn't made it into the headlines. There's no YouTube video. And even if there was, maybe it wouldn't be as effective. A Caritas worker who knows him says his German wasn't so good.

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