

Speer's daughter and the Syrian refugees

By Abby d'Arcy BBC World Service, Berlin

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MARKUS WACHTER

Hilde Schramm - the 79-year-old daughter of Hitler's architect, Albert Speer - has spent a life campaigning for peace, fighting racism, and supporting Germany's green movement. This year she decided to help two Syrian refugees, but they have ended up helping her in return.

Admiring the apple, peach and pear trees flanking her beautiful Berlin villa, Hilde Schramm suddenly stops me. She's spotted a stranger inside her home. She guesses he's Syrian, and chuckles. "That's really nice," she says, genuinely pleased.

"My Syrian lodgers bring friends. They always know people coming from Syria. They stay here while they decide what to do next."

Schramm has been sharing her home, her kitchen and bathroom for eight months now with two Syrian refugees, Nizar and Ahmad.

For Schramm it seemed the logical thing to do, as the country's reception centres struggle to cope with the influx of refugees and migrants.

"Whoever has space for a refugee, should take one home," she says, batting away my suggestion that this takes a certain amount of courage.

"The decision was very simple," she tells me. "We had space here and everyone agreed to it."

As she guides me through her elegant yet simply furnished home, our conversation competes with the creaky wooden floors. The house is a labyrinth of rooms and wooden double doors, stretching over four floors.

I ask her how many people live here and there's a curious pause before she breaks into a smile. She just doesn't know.

"It's a really large house," she says. "We have to live as a different kind of community to try and fill it."

Schramm bought this house in 1968 with her husband and another couple. The idea was to live as a community, supporting one another, and bringing up children together. They even started a kindergarten in the garden house. At its peak, there were about 16 adults and six children living here. They've come and gone over the decades, but Schramm remains.

Schramm shares her floor of the house with the two young Syrians - and even she has been surprised quite how well the first few months have worked out.

"I was afraid there would be too much to organise, that I would freak out and think it was a burden," she says.

"Quite frankly, it's astonishing. There are no problems, really."

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Hilde Schramm

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This is fortunate because Schramm is a woman with little time on her hands. Devoted to her work, one of her long-term foundations is called Zurueckgeben, or 'giving back', supporting Jewish women working in the arts and academia in Germany.

Schramm was only nine when the war ended and barely knew her father, who after working as Hitler's chief architect became Minister for Armaments. But after he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment she started a lengthy correspondence with him, trying to understand the man and his motives.

When she inherited some paintings from him, she sold them and put the proceeds into her foundation.

When he starts cooking, I've usually already had my supper - but it smells so wonderful, so I do take a little bit

Hilde Schramm

"Most Germans really profited from the persecution of the Jews, taking away their jobs, taking away their goods and houses," she says. Giving something back to the Jewish people is a collective duty, in her eyes.

Schramm had a prominent role in the peace movement in the 1980s, and was later elected twice as an MP for the fledgling Green Party. Then, after Germany's reunification, she gave that up to found an organisation fighting racism in parts of former East Germany.

In their shared kitchen, she watches admiringly as Ahmad deftly pours tea from a very dribbly pot. I cautiously enquire about the chores and house rules, who takes the rubbish out, who does the cleaning?

"There is a wonderful answer," she tells me. "They do it all. I always say, 'Let me do it,' but they are faster than me. There are no rules. They just do it."

On warm summer nights during Ramadan, they would all sit outside eating together, Ahmad tells me in his almost flawless German. For him, coming to Schramm's home meant finally being able to lead a normal life.

"In the reception centre, there is nothing to do," he says. "You just sit and wait. You can't do anything. You can't learn German, there's no internet. It's bad. Coming here, it was so fantastic. I could call my family and cook again."

The new flavours in this Berlin kitchen from Ahmad's meat and rice dishes, tabbouleh salads and lentil soups, are something Schramm relishes.

"When he starts cooking, I've usually already had my supper," she says. "But it smells so wonderful, so I do take a little bit. And that happens quite often."

Albert Speer 1905-1981

Joined the Nazi Party in 1931, became Hitler's personal architect in 1933 and drew up plans to rebuild the whole of Berlin

Designed parade grounds and banners for the Nuremberg party congress of 1934

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As minister of armaments and munitions from 1942, he expanded conscript and slave labour - the workers were held mainly in concentration camps

At the Nuremberg trials he expressed remorse for Nazi crimes but denied firsthand knowledge of plans to exterminate Jews

Convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity, he served a 20-year prison sentence in Berlin

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

In Ahmad's spacious yet sparsely furnished room, my eye is caught by a life-size pink plaster model of some teeth. His own, it turns out. One of the few mementoes he brought with him from Syria.

When studying to become a dentist in Damascus, his ambitions were cut short by the civil war. He had no option but to leave, he says.

But coming to Germany and learning a new language has cost him three years, and there are still many hurdles to cross before he can even hope to get a good job here.

Ahmad can't disguise his sadness. He's had to leave behind a lot of family in Syria - a sick father, and a mother who has always believed the family should stick together.

"I've had this song in my head non-stop," he tells me, opening up his laptop and playing an old episode of the TV show, Arab Idol. "The lyrics really remind me of my mother."

"Come back from your travels. Enough of your absence," the contestant sings, accompanied by a sitar and a whooping audience.

"I haven't seen my family for two years now," Ahmad says, his voice faltering. "And I don't know how or when I will be able to see them."

Across the hall, Nizar has Eminem pumping through his headphones. "I'm always listening to him," he says, laughing. "He says I should take every opportunity, never let it go."

ABBY D'ARCY

Just back from his latest German language test, Nizar beams as describes how the examiners asked him to talk about German child custody laws, something he knows nothing about.

Schramm shrieks with laughter at the absurdity of expecting this of newly-arrived refugees.

But Nizar's irrepressible good humour can't hide his frustrations. Back in Syria, Germany had never been on his radar. When qualifying as a physician, he'd always dreamed of working in the Gulf.

I'm trying to be kind like they are, but I'm just not catching up

Nizar

When the civil war made it too dangerous to stay in Syria, he heard Germany was in need of doctors and got here only to find he couldn't even work as a hospital cleaner. He needed to go back to school, learn German and get his degree recognised.

Two of his sisters are in reception centres in different parts of Germany waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. One made the journey across the Mediterranean with three children, aged seven, five and one. Nizar was against it.

"It was so dangerous. She told me people died in front of their eyes," he says.

Now they're here, he's naturally delighted and hopes he will get to see them again soon.

Nizar is overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of the people he has met here. Not just Hilde, but also the people living on the other floors of the house, who gave him a bike or simply told him to ask if he ever needed anything.

"I cannot keep up with their kindness," he says. "I'm trying to be kind like they are, but I'm just not catching up."

Schramm sees the situation very differently. The past few months she's started getting back pain and Nizar and Ahmad have been invaluable, helping with the housework and doing her shopping.

"They are willing to do a lot for me," she says. "I almost have to be careful it is not too much."

"We are laughing and saying, 'I thought I would help you, but you help me.' It's all turned around."

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MUHAMMAD Y

Ramzi, my dearest Syrian friend - Ramzi the philosopher as I sometimes called him - had died of a brain tumour two weeks earlier in the port city of Lattakia, and after an emotional phone call offering his mother and sisters my deep condolences, I had feared my links to his family were over. So it felt unreal to be sitting with Ramzi's youngest brother on the sunny towpath of the Saar river, disturbed only by the occasional dog-walker - light years away from the chaos of war that had caused this newly qualified lawyer to abandon his career and risk everything, even his life, to get away.

"I know I have been lucky," Muhammad told me. "I will do my best to repay Germany. I will work hard and study, to make Ramzi proud of me." His young brown eyes filled with tears and together we sat by the river, weeping for the waste and the suffering of a lost generation.

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