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Editors' Note

Interviews may have been edited and condensed for clarity. Some interviews have been translated from Arabic, Farsi, French, Greek, Kurdish, Malaysian, Rohingya, Spanish, and Turkish into English.

001

Pascal Thirion, Tempelhof Management

Tempelhof Refugee Camp, Berlin, Germany, 2015-12-16 and 2016-02-09

AW What's the history of this building?

PT It has a difficult history, but it's a very special place for me and for many people. We're in the main hall of the former Tempelhof airport, an incredible old structure that ceased functioning as an airport in 2008—not a long time ago—but, since then, many things have happened.

The building was constructed in 1938, during Hitler's time. We're in a space full of history, good and bad. When the airport stopped being an airport, nobody really knew what function it would assume. The first thing that happened was that we started hosting events here. We had a big fashion show and some smaller events, which was a good way to open up these spaces to the public, otherwise the building would've been closed. You could feel that something special was happening here.

Not being German, I always felt Berlin was very different from other German cities. I came here because I knew this place from about thirty years ago. At that time Berlin was still occupied by American, French, and British military forces, and the wall was still there. This airport was run mainly by the US Air Force, so in one half of the building, it was like being in the US and the other half of the building was a normal public airport. My parents were working for the military, so I was able to walk in all these spaces. Of course, if you come to Berlin as a foreigner, you want to know a lot about the city.

You probably know how and why the airport was built, what happened with it when the war was over, and how it was used for people coming from East Germany or East Berlin. At that time, the wall wasn't built yet. It was the only way to get to West Germany, an orderly way to get out of the city.

I came here because I knew that Berlin was becoming more of a truly international city. I was privileged to work in many huge cities all over the world before coming to Berlin: in South America, the US, the Middle East. There's still a gap when you compare Berlin to other big cities outside of Europe. When talking about a city in Asia, you're talking about millions of people, but if you talk about a big city in Germany, it's still small compared to the megacities in the world.

What I saw in all these cities—Shanghai, Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, or even Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, and Moscow—was the challenge of accommodating all these people in adequate spaces. This was the specific reason why I thought Tempelhof could become a special place for Berlin and for Germany. When you have a large, open space like this, you have the possibility of creating new things because you don't have to work within a framework. People can come here and decide what they want to do. They can create the space they want to have. Inside these larger spaces, things can happen that could probably never happen somewhere else.

AW What's the current condition of the camp?

PT When I came here the objective was just to rent out spaces that could be used to earn a bit of money to contribute to its huge maintenance cost. We started by sponsoring commercial events. We had about eighty commercial events every year. The number and size increased exponentially. We had huge events that had never before happened in Germany. In the past five to ten years, we've seen more of a mix between commercial and cultural events. We have huge halls here—seven hangars where aircraft were maintained in the past.

Last year more refugees were coming to Germany. Last summer, people were already looking to Tempelhof: if we couldn't open spaces for refugees to live in, at least they could have a place to sleep. But you can't take refugees and put them in a hangar, because it's cold and windy; it's very nice for art shows or parties, but it isn't really a living space. We said, "Please, even if you can imagine living here in the summer, what's going to happen when it starts getting colder?" The hangars don't have heating or sanitary systems.

Normally there are twenty-five to fifty people working at Tempelhof, but now there are about 500 to 600 people living there. It wasn't easy to imagine how that transformation would unfold. Every night 500, 600, 700, even 800 people came to Berlin; every single night the city needed at least 700 new beds. It was only a matter of time before we had to open the hangars for refugees.

To be honest, in spite of having a few people who were specialists in organizing events, hosting refugees is a totally different situation than hosting a party where everything is ready at a certain time and then it's over and you tear everything down. The hangar has everything in place to host people at events—sanitary installations, lights, sound, a heating system, and so on—but holding temporary events is a completely different project than providing accommodation for refugees. Nobody knew exactly what was going to happen: Would people be there for a week, a month, a year? There simply wasn't enough time to prepare for this large influx of people.

Another issue we ran into is that there were many other organizations involved in this process. Could we work with them? Could they work with us? In the beginning everybody was full of energy. They came to Tempelhof and were fascinated with this space. Everybody thought, *Wow, look at this . . . this will become the best shelter ever*. You could feel the energy and history; you knew something very special was going to happen. But again, running a shelter or working with this very complicated issue of refugees is totally different. You know that every day you have to do so much more to offer better and more comfortable spaces, and at the end of the day, it's not happening at the speed that everybody wants it to happen. Every day it's like you're opening a new book. You're still in the same story but you don't really know what's going to happen, because you're a part of something that's happening worldwide.

Tempelhof is unique because of its enormous size. If you go to Jordan or Turkey, there are shelters for more than 100,000 people, but those in modern Western cities can't imagine 20,000 people in terms of size, smell, noise, and needs living

together in a small space. Berlin had to create space for 70,000 people last year. They all came, more or less, at the same time. Of course, nobody can be prepared to offer that many people housing, but you have to take care of their needs, including social work and health care. The other difficulty is that everyone came from regions where they don't really like one another for religious or political reasons. Now they're all put together into one small space. How do we deal with the fallout of this?

When the company Tamaja opened the first hangar, there were about 500 people living there. We had to put them in tents because it wasn't possible to set up other rooms for them. So we opened one hangar, then another, and now there are four open hangars with about 2,000 refugees living in them. The hangars could probably fit many more, but that's not working at this time. It's a huge logistics operation. At the end of the day, you need the infrastructure of three skyscrapers for each hangar. In the beginning we thought that people would come in for a week or so and then, after registering, go to other places where they could stay in much better conditions. Unfortunately, this isn't the way it works. People come here and stay for one to three months, and to be honest, nobody really knows how much longer they'll be here.

I still think it's absolutely necessary that we help these people, even though we now have to deal with problems we'd never anticipated before. How do you deal with men beating women? I'm not used to that. How do you deal with young people who have their whole lives ahead of them, who come into a rich society with cars and shops but who aren't able to be a part of it? Of course they're frustrated. I deeply believe that our society isn't ready to integrate people. It's a process that has to work both ways. Nobody really knows what's going to happen.

The most important thing is that we use the space, that refugees and other people have the possibility to meet, talk, and discuss what's happening in their lives. It's not only an issue for the refugees but also for the local people. I believe that the best way to integrate people is by using cultural events, because they are nonpolitical. People can simply meet as people. I would like to work very hard on this in the coming months to make these events possible. I know that there are a lot of people thinking similarly; they approach us and want to talk about their ideas. I hope that we can start very soon and make all these things happen. It's an ongoing part of the history of this fantastic building.

AW Yes, it's tremendous, there's architectural and also planning work. I once brought 1,000 Chinese people to Kassel, so I know how it works. Every day you need a truckload of food and another truck to carry away the garbage. And these people are from different locations; they don't know one another.

PT They come from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and African countries.

AW How many different countries do they come from?

PT's colleague Eight to nine. They're mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. A few are from the Balkan areas of the former Yugoslavia. There are only a few people from Africa.

AW Do they have conflicts?

PT's colleague Yes, indeed. The main conflict is between the Afghans and Syrians. Apparently, during their escape from their respective countries, their tracks crossed in Turkey and Greece, and Syrians were treated differently from Afghans. Afghans were stopped at many borders. Maybe it's jealousy, but there is no exact reason. It could be vengeance from a thousand years ago.

AW You must have a lot of volunteers or translators.

PT's colleague Yes.

AW Otherwise nobody knows what they're thinking.

PT Taking care of families is different than taking care of younger people between eighteen and thirty. People are full of energy. The funny thing is, they're all connected to their friends around the world because of Facebook. One of the biggest challenges is maintaining control and gathering information. I don't mean this in a bad way, but everything happening here immediately has an impact on other shelters, on people on the road, and so on. We're not prepared for it.

AW It's a very sensitive situation.

PT Yes.

PT's colleague Three months ago we opened another, smaller venue. Some refugees entered but many didn't. We asked, "Where are you going?" and everybody answered, "To Sweden." We asked, "Why Sweden?" No matter where they came from, the answer was always "Sweden." For some reason, initially people in these networks were saying that it was best to say you were going to Sweden. Four to six weeks later this changed, so it was interesting to see how they communicated. When there was a rumor that Hungary was closing its border—when, in fact, it wasn't closing the border but creating channels to control refugees—for the refugees it was very clear that it didn't make sense to enter Hungary through the fence, so they kept waiting until the way was clear again. Social media is something very special for refugees.

AW They create their language and their own code.

PT's colleague Probably.

AW How many languages do you have here now?

PT's colleague Six to eight.

AW How many people are there now?

PT's colleague Nearly 2,200.

AW And how many do you expect to come here in the future?

PT About 4,500 in the first phase. The city is still planning to set up tents, so this place should be able to handle up to 7,000. It doesn't necessarily mean that 7,000 are coming, but you have to see the bigger picture. So many people are coming to Germany, and specifically to Berlin. To control the situation, you need big places to sort everything out, to set up a clear structure to help the refugees.

AW It's a perfect location for them.

PT Don't tell me.

PT's colleague It depends on the point of view.

AW I mean, where can you find such a desirable place?

PT Yeah, for sure, and in the middle of the city. You also need to recognize that Berlin doesn't have a hinterland. In Munich they always say, "We have everything under control." They can say that because they send everybody out of the city and into the hinterland, out of sight. But cities like Hamburg, Berlin, and Bremen have to do everything, because they're responsible for the whole city. I think there are now 79,000 refugees in Berlin alone, which is double the number in all of Austria. It's incredible how the refugees disappear in the city. Everybody knows that they're there, and it's a lot of hard work to take care of them. Many schools offer their gyms for refugees to stay overnight.

This situation is also disturbing our plans to some extent because we've been dreaming about museums and all sorts of things at Tempelhof. But on the other hand, it's a positive challenge because we're helping people.

AW I think it's a heroic situation.

PT Let's go outside.

During the Second World War there were aircraft departing from these hangars for the West every ninety seconds and bringing back everything needed to keep the city alive: food, energy, everything, because there was no connection between West Berlin and the rest of the Western world.

AW So Germany was also used to this kind of humanitarian aid.

PT Exactly.

AW It's not new for them.

PT No, it isn't. At the end of the day they know that a huge world war started from German territory. I think what they're doing now is an incredible symbol of humanity, simply saying that you can't stop refugees from coming to this place, to Germany. My friends in France, Belgium, and Holland say, "Oh God, how can Germany do such a thing? What are they going to do with all these people?"

I always tell them, “Listen, at the end of the day Germany can be proud that all these people are coming to Germany.” The question should be, why don’t they want to go to France, Belgium, or Holland?

Money isn’t the only reason. I think it’s because this place has one of the most stable democracies in the world, and I think individuals are still extremely respected here. It’s a free country. It’s not corrupted. You can live your life here and make a living, especially young people. They come from all around the world because they simply want to start living here and do what they can’t do in their countries because the older generations are still preventing younger people from taking care of the country. I think it’s an incredible space where these things can happen. But it’s also a challenge. I think it will work; I think that in about five years, other countries will say, “Why didn’t we have similar ways of accepting people?”

AW This is a beautiful airport.

PT The whole airport stays like this as a monument. You can do everything in this airport as long as you leave it the way it was afterward.

AW It’s so open, so liberal here. They do everything from high fashion and art to refugees.

PT Exactly. But at the moment there are no fashion shows, only refugees. In the original architectural plans there wasn’t a restaurant but a glass wall. So you’d come into the airport and look upon the airfield. It’s a beautiful piece of architecture.

AW It will be remembered; you made a new history.

PT Exactly; it’s now part of the history of this building. When the wall was built, a lot of people from East Berlin wanted to leave. They came to this airport and flew out to West Germany. That was also an important part of history.

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