

2. The cell and the Securitas employee

The asylum seekers describe one specific room in which they experienced physical violence by employees of Securitas AG¹. The room is described as small and without windows. The walls are white. The door has a small sash window that can be opened only from the outside. The room is located on the ground floor near the entry of the camp dormitory. The asylum seekers refer to it as the *cell*, sometimes the *bunker* or *the room downstairs*.

Nabil says: “[...] *it’s there just to beat up people.*”

What kind of room is this? How can such a *cell* exist in a state facility for people seeking protection? In internal documents of the camp bureaucracy, terms such as *contemplation room* or even *cell* emerge in reference to this room. Apparently, upset asylum seekers are brought there to calm down. This may be. Nothing is to be found in camp or police reports regarding further usage of the *contemplation room* – they all end with the note that the affected person was merely brought there. However, as the interviews of the asylum seekers make obvious, it is a site of violence. Following are two examples:

As we arrived there [in the room], they started beating me without saying anything or warning me. In the room they treated me with brutal violence. They broke my ring finger and injured my knee. (Youssuf)

Next to the entrance there is a room. When we make a video of the room, the securitas call the police and we are put in jail for two to three days. (Nabil)

What is being described is a kind of torture chamber. A specific room, equipped for isolation in an attempt to conceal goings-on. It is feared among the inhabitants of the camp.

According to the reports of the asylum seekers, there is a pattern of violence:

Once, I was charging my phone. A securitas came and ordered me to go upstairs. I said: Ok, soon. I just wanted to finish speaking to my family. But he insisted, so I went upstairs. The securitas followed me and suddenly pushed me from behind. I protested and said, he doesn’t have the right to push me. The securitas got angry. He

¹ Those employees will be referred to as “the securitas” in this text.

shoved me harder and started calling [other securitas]. I defended myself and repeated that he doesn't have the right to treat me like this. But the securitas didn't stop, instead he pressed me against the wall and shouted for other securitas. Three of them dragged me downstairs. They shoved me into the cell with no windows and beat me. (Tayeb)

The securitas appear to be provoked by innocent acts, for instance, by an asylum seeker charging his phone in the hallway. This leads to protest, sometimes to disputes. The securitas escalate tension rather than to calm the situation. Tense situations are not surprising within constrained housing with such diverse people, many of whom are in precarious physical or mental states and have to follow restrictive daily routines. But what happens next as tensions escalate? The securitas call for backup and isolate individual asylum seekers in the cell. Three, four, or five securitas punch and kick the asylum seeker even if he is laying on the ground. In the end, victims are taken to the hospital in an ambulance. *Nabil* spent 15 days in the hospital. The documents of the University's Children's hospital of Basel regarding *Djamal's* case explicitly describe consequences of "assault"². The securitas blame the victims and claim to act in self-defense³.

Asylum seekers state that they could visually recognize the most violent Securitas employees. They can't give any names because the securitas are marked only with numbers rather than name tags. They speak German with each other. Victims refer to some securitas by giving them a nationality.⁴ The most frequently mentioned Securitas employee is referred to as *Russian*. The "Russian" is described as excessively violent and as the leading figure of the securitas. The asylum seekers describe him distinctively and consistently:

One of them is "Russian". He is bald, walks like a beefcake, is about 1.80 m tall, blue eyes, drives a black Mercedes with a German number and has a groomed full beard. No tattoos, no earrings. Apparently, he does Russian translations for asylum seekers at the camp. He might also be from Kazakhstan or Chechnya. (Nabil)

There is a Russian speaking securitas - every time he works during the evening, he creates problems. We never leave our room when he's working. (Lotfi)

He's bald and has a beard. His eyes are blue and he's a bit cross-eyed. (Lotfi)

² Our collective has the documents of the University Clinic of Basel from February 2020³ SRF Rundschau, May 13th 2020 and the police reports we have on hand. ⁴ We fundamentally reject ascriptions of nationality but will adopt the descriptions made by the affected persons. The ascriptions are set in quotes.

There's the most violent one. It's the "Russian", he describes himself as "Russian" and brags: I do UFC. He does combat sport and trains a lot. Once, I wanted to challenge him, but without his uniform. He said: OK, let's go fight. I said: but without your uniform. He didn't want to. That's what he gets his confidence from. (Ibrahim)

There are some good and some bad securitas. I recognize the bad ones. The "Russian" has no hair and a beard. He's tall and strong. His eyes are kind of weird, he's cross-eyed or something like that. We don't know their names. They only have numbers. (Djamal)

According to internal reports, the Russian speaking securitas prides himself in front his colleagues on his acts of violence.

The security force is the lowest authority in a strongly hierarchical system. It is clear to us that the Securitas firm offers dreadful working conditions and that many people work there under precarious circumstances. But none of these excuses or legitimizes assault by its employees. It is an abuse of a power position with terrible consequences for the victims. We explicitly advise against blaming only individuals for this violence. The Securitas employees cover for each other, always appear in groups and obviously do not report the acts of violence of colleagues. Without changing an institutionalized system, firing or transferring the violent securitas will not prevent future assaults. We wish to stress that making the SEM or the ORS accountable is just as important as identifying individual perpetrators of violence within the Securitas firm. Both institutions are aware of the incidents but choose to hide and deny them and thus remain complicit.