

Interview with Lotfi

Basel, April 29th 2020

The conversation took place in front of a running camera in French, was then translated into German for the documentation and now into English, among other languages, to make the documentation accessible to a maximum of people.

Content notion:

Physical violence, every day life at camp, denial of rights

Since when are you at the federal asylum camp Bässlergut?

"I've been at the asylum for two months now."

What kind of experiences have you had here?

"I haven't had good experiences here. What happens at the asylum is very difficult for me. There are always problems with the securitas¹. They do really bad things. They search you, your things, your bag. If you're just one minute late you have to spend the night outside and you don't get any allowance. It is 20 Francs a week. They beat people at the asylum. We come here, searching for asylum, because it's difficult for us in our countries. We seek safety but can't find it here. They always say, Switzerland is the country of security, but that's not true. All we find here is racism. Besides, the food is really bad."

What do you mean by racism? Which form did you experience?

*"Racism against Arabs. You aren't seen as a human being, but as an animal. Once I came back, it was raining and very cold. I rang the doorbell. They didn't open. After 20 minutes I rang again. The securitas said: *why are you ringing?* I said: *because I would like to get inside.* He said: *Go home back to your country.* I answered: *Why do you talk to me like this?* Then he hit me. Just by the door. There are no cameras inside. They beat people there. The room is right on the left when you come in. It has shut windows. Nobody hears you scream. People who live there can't do anything because they're scared."*

¹ Employees of the Securitas AG will be referred to as "the securitas" in this text.

Did you experience violence?

"Yes. My leg is still swollen. This is because of the securitas. They kicked me with their boots. This is how I have to go back to my country. I can't walk for long. I can barely sleep because I have to hold my leg in an upright position. I was on the phone. Somebody threw a glass at my head. I saw a "Kurd" and asked him, why he had done that. He said he didn't mean to hit me. I went up to him. Immediately, the securitas ran towards me. They didn't ask what was going on. They immediately tackled me and punched me in the face. I tried to defend myself. All of a sudden, there were six of them."

What language do they speak?

"I speak to them in French, but they only speak German. Some of them are good and speak to us. But there is one group of securitas, they're from Turkey and one of them is from Russia. Every time the "Russian" works at night there are problems. When he isn't here, everything is calm. Then there aren't any problems."

How many of those securitas are there?

"Six or seven."

Can you describe them?

"We don't know the names or the numbers. But we know the faces. One of the "Turks" has a beard and a moustache. Another one too. The one who told me to go home is strongly built. He also has a moustache. He wears a ring."

Can you describe the "Russian"?

"He is bald and has a beard. His eyes are blue and he's a bit cross-eyed. He always makes problems. He does weird things. Yesterday at midnight he came into our room and shone at us with his flashlight. Then he opened the window. I asked him what was going on. He said: *It smells like tobacco, who smoked?* No one! A second securitas came. He said: *Sorry, you know him, he's always like that. Just don't speak to him.* Today, five or six securitas came to search our room. It's Ramadan so we were all sleeping. Why do they do these inspections? They search everything, under the mattresses, the closets ..."

What do the securitas speak among themselves?

"German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese... Some of them understand French but they refuse to speak with us."

How do you know that the "Russian" is from Russia?

"Everyone says he's Russian."

Did you go to the health service after being injured by the securitas?

"Yes, they gave me painkillers. Nothing else."

Did you witness violence against others?

"Yes, often. They beat a lot. Sometimes, people have to sleep outside or in the "contemplation room". When people come, they just don't let them in. We often have to sleep on chairs outside in front of the *camp*. Three to four times a week people are beaten, especially at night. They mainly punch with their fists. Sometimes they're three or four against one. When someone is weak, they come in pairs, for the strong ones they come in groups of four or five. They also use pepper spray."

Do you have proof, photos or videos?

"I made a video as they were beating my friend. They pushed him down the stairs. But it's difficult, because it's forbidden to film or take pictures."

Why can the securitas be so violent?

"They are racists. They always find a reason for us not to get our allowance. When you arrive one minute late, for instance, you don't get the money."

Do the people from ORS know what's happening?

"They are always here, they see everything. But they don't speak."

What do the other people at camp do, who witness the violence?

"They're afraid, they don't speak."

Did you speak to the management of ORS?

"Yes, we spoke to the people of ORS. They always say they're going to change something. But nothing happens."

What happens when you call the police?

"You can't call the police. A friend from Morocco was beaten by a securitas and his hand was hurt [see *Testimonial Moustafa*]. He spent the night outside. Since then they won't let him back in, since then he's in the streets. When the securitas call the police they claim that the residents of the *camp* are aggressive. An "Algerian" was beaten by a securitas on his first day here, while two others were standing by. He called the police. They came and arrested him. He spent a week in jail."

Do you know of similar cases from other camps?

"I've only heard stories like this from this *asylum*."

Did you also experience racist inspections on the streets?

"Once I came out of tram number 8 by the Migros at Claraplatz. Two others from the *asylum* were coming out of the Migros, we greeted each other and then I went along. Two police cars came and cut my path. They said: *Inspection! Show your papers!* They searched me. I had to stand against the wall. They cuffed me. They claimed I had stolen something from Migros. I replied that I hadn't been in the store. They said: *Yes you have.* I said: *look at the surveillance footage.* They searched me and didn't find anything, except a Coke and some chocolate. I had a receipt for both. They took me to the station anyway. They photographed me. I had to strip down naked and do weird movements. Then they put me in a *cell*. After two hours they came and told me I could leave. I wanted to know why they treated me like this, even though I hadn't done anything. They said that's just the way it is, because a lot gets stolen. I hadn't even been inside the Migros... People on the street were staring, it was very disagreeable. It felt as if they were arresting a terrorist."

What is your opinion on the asylum system in Switzerland?

"It's not good. You come here, because it's hard in your country, because you're afraid to go back. They always say Switzerland is the country of justice. But there is no justice here. Why, why is it like this? I came here looking for safety. I should've stayed in my country. Dogs live better lives than we do here. Dogs can take a shower, they can eat, they can go to the doctor when they're ill. We can't."

Do you recognize a system behind this?

"The system of this *asylum*. I think it's better in other camps."

Are there other bad things in the camp?

"I have to take digestion medication because the food is so bad. All we get is pasta or rice. Three minutes after eating we all fall asleep. As if they put sedatives into the food. After eating, everyone gets tired and wants to go to sleep. Besides, the *asylum* is very dirty. There are rats here²."

How is the situation now, during Ramadan?

"It's the sixth day of Ramadan. During those days we've only eaten twice. The first day we didn't eat anything. In the beginning they made a list, to see who was practicing Ramadan. It was almost 30 people. The first day they gave us a little bit of bread and some chicken. When we complained, someone from ORS came and he asked: *Why are you making problems?* I said the food wasn't good. On the next day: the same problem. But my friend bought me some vegetables and some lettuce. Yesterday, after five days of Ramadan, everyone practicing it gave five Francs so we could buy food together. But we all barely have money. Today we don't have anything. What can we do. Bread and milk, that's it."

² Our collective has a video documenting this.

The ORS doesn't pay for special food during Ramadan?

"No. We can shower from 5 PM to 10 PM. I wanted to take a shower at 6 PM. They didn't let me. So I took a bottle, filled it with water and washed myself. The securitas were standing there and mocked me. Yesterday we were praying. The "Russian" came and turned the lights out. When Christians pray, we turn off the TV and respect them. *Why don't you respect our religion?* We asked. *Why do you turn off the light?* A friend from Pakistan was very angry. The "Russian" had provoked him. It's impossible to practice our religion."

Would you like to add something?

"I'm going home. But there are many people who will come and who will apply for asylum. They must be respected. They seek safety. Please, there has got to be a solution for the people from Africa, Arabs, all the others. Not racism. Something has to change with the securitas. They make problems all the time and they beat people. Everyone is stressed because of this. I had to take the digestion medicine because of the stress, too."