

English summary

Interview with Johanna Exenberger – a socially extremely committed, education-oriented young woman with a large international radius of action

DZ=Dorfzeitung Inzing, JE=Johanna Exenberger

DZ: Dear Johanna, your CV is full of training programs and social commitment. Please tell us how your obviously close relationship with the French and later Spanish culture came about.

JE: My relationship with France came about rather spontaneously. At 16, I wanted to get out of Tyrol and Austria and experience a new country. Actually, I had imagined a Latin American country like Chile. But since I was only 16, it ended up being a European country. I lived with a French family in the Rhône-Alpes region, near Lyon. To this day, I have a very close relationship with my "French family". I have been very interested in Latin America since secondary school, especially the Andean region. In September 2013, I traveled to Santa Cruz de la Sierra in Bolivia and worked as a volunteer in the social project "FAMUNDI" for a year. After my stay in Bolivia, I returned to France, where I began my bachelor's degree in social and cultural anthropology and Spanish. I spent the last year of my anthropology degree at the Universidad de Guadalajara in Mexico. That year I also began to get actively involved with the NGO "FM4 Paso Libre", which supports migrants, mainly from Central America. I also returned to Mexico several times for several months to visit my friends and for field research for my master's thesis, which deals with Central American migration in Mexico. I then completed my master's degree in anthropology with a focus on migration research in Paris, and I have lived here ever since.

DZ: When I was working for refugees as part of the FK for Integration in Inzing, I noticed you as a young, interested listener. The complex topic of flight has obviously been with you very closely since then. What is the reason for that?

JE: At that time (2015), I was very affected by the so-called "migration crisis". I didn't know much about the topic yet, but I wanted to know more, not just get actively involved, but also engage with it on an intellectual level. I think the reason why I am so closely involved with flight and migration is that I am very interested in people's individual stories. I am not just interested in the big political debates, but in the personal experiences behind the numbers. That is also the reason why I chose anthropology: I want to understand how people live in different societal, social and cultural contexts, what drives them and how they deal with the challenges that life presents them. Flight and migration are topics in which the personal experiences of those affected and the big political decisions often overlap in a dramatic way. It is about human fates, but also about the systems that influence them - and that is what interests me particularly.

DZ: Can you describe your work and experiences within the NGO “FM4 Paso Libre”?

JE: It is a so-called “albergue”, i.e. a hostel, like the ones you find on the migration routes in Mexico. Migration movements in and through Mexico have changed a lot in recent years. Originally, these hostels were set up to offer migrants, especially from Central America,

shelter, food, clothing and a safe place to sleep for a few nights on their journey to the USA. Today, the “profile” and origins of those seeking protection have diversified significantly: more and more people are applying for asylum in Mexico because it has become almost impossible in the USA. Many migrants travel north, but do not necessarily have the goal of crossing the border. The number of migrants from African countries, Cuba and Haiti is also increasing. So on the one hand, the NGO offers protection for people in transit, but also supports asylum seekers and people with refugee status. I worked in the day care center. My tasks consisted of welcoming the migrants in the morning, conducting interviews for the database, passing on important information and organizing the distribution of food and clothing. Data collection is particularly important in order to document the daily challenges that the migrants have to face, to highlight human rights violations and to work together with the other hostels on a plea for the rights of migrants.

DZ: What tasks did you have to accomplish as part of the FAMUNDI social project?

JE: FAMUNDI is a social project in the outskirts of Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) that supports families in difficult life situations. My job was to coordinate the volunteer group, consisting of around four people, and to jointly design the various tasks and topics of the project. An integral part of our daily work was helping out in the kindergarten and the day-care center, where we organized weekly workshops and games.

DZ: As a basis for your commitment, your impressive academic education is certainly a great advantage. Why did you choose these areas of study?

JE: My bachelor's degree in Spanish came about rather spontaneously: after I came back from Bolivia, I wanted to improve my Spanish further. The course was extremely varied and exciting. This combination was very interesting and complemented my anthropology studies perfectly. My degree in social and cultural anthropology, on the other hand, had been planned for a long time (since I was 15 years old). I really wanted to study something that deals with people and their different ways of living, thinking and acting. The specialization in migration research in the master's degree arose from my previously described interest in the topic of migration and my involvement with the NGO FM4 Paso Libre.

DZ: Amongst other things, you have also scientifically dealt with the American refugee movement from the Latin American to the Anglo-American region. What do you think is the particular problem or challenge of this migration movement?

JE: That is a very complex question that can be answered on various levels. Migration policy decisions have a direct influence on the lives and migration movements of those affected. Unfortunately, these are usually very repressive and even human rights-violating decisions that make migration life-threatening. Unfortunately, migration is often only viewed from a political perspective and migration movements are portrayed as an "invasion" and a "danger". We are given simplified and distorted images. If you look at migration maps, e.g. from FRONTEX, they often show thick red arrows from Africa to Europe or from Latin America to the USA. South-South migration or internal migration is usually overlooked, which means that we lack perspective and the arrow pointing to Europe is perceived as very thick. But the reality is much more complex: migration routes are often unpredictable, zigzag or circular. There are numerous places where people are held up for months in a state of uncertainty.

Added to this are the dangers posed by criminal gangs, the exploitation of people without legal status, natural hazards and dangerous borders.

The USA - as well as Europe - are moving their external borders further and further south. Mexico plays a central role in US migration policy, similar to the Sahel region for Europe. The aim is to dissuade migrants from coming to the USA as early as possible. I would also like to address the right to asylum. It is a human right to arrive in a state and apply for asylum. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people manage to even arrive in the destination country. Under the Trump administration, Guatemala was categorized as a safe third country. This meant that people who flee El Salvador, for example, and pass through Guatemala are deported there and have to apply for asylum there. Since 2019, there has also been the so-called "Migrant Protection Protocols" (MPP), which forces asylum seekers to stay in Mexico during their process. This policy leads to extremely long waiting times, often in cities that are among the most dangerous in the world. The living conditions in these border towns are inhumane and people are exposed to the risks of violence and exploitation without protection. In short: One of the problems with these migration movements for me is that the political response in the USA and Mexico is increasingly repressive. Instead of offering real solutions, the routes are becoming riskier and more and more people are risking their lives to escape the precarious and dangerous conditions in their home countries.

[At the end of 2023, according to UNHCR, 117.3 million people were on the run. The vast majority are internally displaced persons (or refugees in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Colombia, etc.). 75 percent of the people on the run are taken in by low- or middle-income countries.]

DZ: You will begin a doctoral dissertation in Paris in autumn 2024 to complete this process. What specific question will you be working on?

JE: I am looking at the everyday experiences of people with international protection status (refugee status, subsidiary protection status, etc.) in three European cities: Paris, Vienna and Madrid. I want the people involved to take an active part in the research. That's why I work with photographs and artistic works that I have the participants create as part of the interviews.

DZ: You've become a real globetrotter now. How connected do you still feel to your hometown of Inzing?

JE: I feel very connected to the mountains and nature! I feel at home there! And of course, I love visiting my parents and siblings.

DZ: Thank you very much, Johanna, for the impressive description of your colorful life design. I hope that you can encourage other people to strengthen togetherness on various levels in these difficult political times and thus - a big word - make the world a little better!!