

Experiences of Xenophobia

An overview of interviews with Italian and Kosovo¹-Albanian immigrants

Preliminary comment: there is in Switzerland, besides xenophobia, much goodwill towards foreigners. Neither the authors nor the people quoted here would question this.

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The issue of xenophobia is much discussed in Switzerland today. However, it is by no means apparent in which specific fields foreigners face this, how they experience it personally, or how they deal with it. For this reason I delved further into this question in my Masters' thesis for the Ethnological Institute of the the University of Zürich, seeking out migrants who had come across xenophobia and were prepared to give some account of this.

At the centre of this work, then, are migrants' personal experiences of xenophobia. I conducted a series of interviews with twelve Italians who immigrated to Switzerland before 1970 and live in Zurich today, and twelve Kosovo-Albanians in the cantons of Zurich, Basel and Luzern. They provided me with information about how and in which spheres of life they have been, or are today, personally confronted with xenophobia, prejudice and rejection.

In the boom years of the 1950s a large number of Italians arrived in Switzerland as labour. Although their services were valued, they felt they were strangers here and not truly welcomed. Today, this largest of the immigrant communities is popular with most of the Swiss population: people enjoy spending holidays in their country, much of their cuisine forms a part of our daily diet, and their proverbial spontaneity and cheerfulness is appreciated.

This is not the case with the Alnians of Kosovo. Hardly a day passes without some negative mention of them in the media. They are held to be aggressive and criminal, and connected with the drugs trade: their image in the media and among the swiss public tends to the negative - in the same way, and to the same degree, as that of the Italians years ago.

The result of my interviews is a collection of thought-provoking reports of personal experiences. Serious difficulties in finding flats, poor working conditions and low wages, problems with children at school, as well as problems with Swiss neighbours and public officials, were and are part and parcel of everyday experience for the interviewees. In their

¹ *Kosovo* is the official, Serbocroat, orthographic form. This has been established within the German-speaking media as the correct form, which is justified on the basis of the current political situation. However, the Albanian population of this region use the term *Kosova*.

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leisure time too, in restaurants and discos, on the street, on public transport, in firms, when seeking health care and in personal relationships with the Swiss, the immigrants interviewed were, and are, met with across-the-board prejudice. One Italian summed it up like this:

"at every turn, we were given to know that we weren't wanted."

A Kosovo Albanian expresses the following of his sense of injury from this discrimination:

"It's really difficult, when you always feel like the ugly duckling . . . We're people too. You get the feeling that you're not wanted anywhere. Not wanted anywhere, even though you do nothing to make yourself unwelcome."

Another Kosovo Albanian sees herself as a "second-class person". Apparently it can suffice to speak broken German, have a foreign-sounding name, or simply to be foreign in appearance, to be negatively pigeonholed and judged.

The interviewees reveal, through their accounts as contemporary witnesses, access to a world with which Swiss people generally have no or little acquaintance.

"We weren't allowed to shut the door and sleep in the same bed. One here and the other one there . . . We weren't allowed in the kitchen. Just to the toilet, that was all. And not in the shower either. We had to go out to the shower that everyone else used . . . We thought, 'so much money, yet we can't even make a cup of coffee'. Nothing, we weren't allowed to do anything in this room."

The Italian woman who reported this recalls how astonished she was about the conditions of the subletting arrangement she encountered in Switzerland. The housing arrangements of seasonal workers were particularly parlous:

There were lots of farmhouses. These farmers had seen straight away how to make money. They had converted old barns somehow and packed in an incredible number of people. Everyone paid. In the end, they made more money than a field of maize would have"

reckoned an Italian trade unionist, who came to Switzerland as a seasonal worker. And:

There were pigsties that had been converted for seasonal workers to stay in. Here on the edge of Zurich. They had just been painted up a bit. Those were desperate places."

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Xenophobia against Italians was ubiquitous:

"People had such a hatred of us. It happened several times that I was spat on in the street. They'd seen that we were foreigners. They just said '*Tschinggeli, Tschinggeli!*'² and spat."

And conditions in flats were highlighted again and again:

The caretaker would always come into the flat to check up. I don't think that's right. No-one has the right . . . She would just ring and then enter, she had to check the flat . . . I was the only Italian in the building. She didn't do that with the others."

Some may recall that there were signs hung in front of many Zurich restaurants in the 1960s that said 'Forbidden to Italians' (*Verboten für Italiener*). Is that a long-forgotten time? Not so. Today, though, it is not the 'guest workers' from Italy, but mainly people - among them many asylum seekers and refugees - from Kosovo, who meet the same or similar discrimination. Several discos and bars in Luzern and Zurich do not allow Kosovo Albanians to enter.

"The Kosovo Albanians are not allowed into this disco. The young people make the same distinction: they go together to the school, into the restaurant, everywhere, but not into the disco."

This is the assertion of an Albanian mother. Another Albanian tells of a visit to a restaurant:

"As I come in, the landlady comes over and says: 'we're closed', even though it wasn't. I'd seen it already, and I left."

Discrimination in employment is particularly frequent. Foreigners, who are not always aware of their rights but are dependent on work, can hardly fend for themselves. The argument that immigrants would take the jobs of the Swiss population in times of recession have been vehemently denied by most of the interviewees:

"We've taken the dirtiest work: the work that the Swiss don't want to do",

one Italian kitchen assistant told.

"They (the Italians) have never taken anyone's job",

added an Italian trades unionist:

² Translator's note: "*Tschingg*", or "*Tschinggeli*", were Swiss-German terms of racist abuse for Italians, now obsolete.

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"They've only taken the jobs that the Swiss haven't wanted to do."

In fact, most immigrants were employed in construction and the hotel and restaurant industry, and in the textile industry, where hard physical work is most often called for and a job pays little. An Italian mechanic tells of his working conditions:

"We built big turbines, gigantic pipes and so forth. We worked with welding machines and carried the cables over our shoulders as we climbed the ladders. The cables used to get very hot. Showering afterwards, nearly all of us had black tracks over the shoulder. We had to work hard . . ."

The pay of Swiss people and foreigners was not, and is not, always the same. One Italian locksmith says:

"We foreigners were paid by the hour, and the others had a salary. That's discrimination in itself . . . the others had a fine salary every month and no problems. They could stay at home for a day if they weren't well, and get paid all the same. We didn't have that possibility.

Kosovo Albanians meet the same problem today:

I get lower wages than the Swiss. She (the employer at the nursing home) said that I get lower wages because of the language. Just because of the language!"

An Albanian care worker says pensively, and reflects on how much less money it might be.

"The foreigners must always be one level lower. The Swiss are born here, and they get higher wages. But I do the same work as the Swiss."

Being given notice at work can have serious consequences for a foreign person, not least because it is not easy to find another job. The same woman continues:

I got my illness at the restaurant: I had problems with my back. I've been unemployed since 1 October 1998. I was in the hospital for three weeks. On the third day I got my notice. That was a shock. The boss said that the customers weren't happy with me. And what did I have to do with the customers?"

This Kosovo Albanian woman gives this unexpected answer to her own question:

"I worked in a buffet!"

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The great majority of interviewees had had serious problems finding a flat. Either people told them over the phone that the flat was already taken, or, more directly, the faceless voice at the other end of the line told them that flats weren't for foreigners. German spoken with an accent functions as a distinguishing signal. An Italian woman:

"So then we looked for a flat. No flats for foreigners. There was a sign in front of the door: 'No Foreigners'. So you knew there was no point asking. If I phoned, they knew straight away that I was foreigner - and bang, they'd hang up. What can you do? We were looking for a flat for a year and a half!"

Even accommodation agencies sometimes proceed the same way:

"There was a man there, and he asked me where I came from. 'From Kosovo', I said. Then he said, 'rather not. Please don't apply here. If you see our advert in the paper, give us a call. Perhaps it's still available.' Which is a way of saying, if Swiss people don't want it, you might do",

said one Albanian. In business too, Swiss and foreign customers are not always treated equally:

"In the shops, when I've gone and the woman has asked if I need any help, and when she notices that I can't speak German well, that I speak broken High German, then they're really strange",

one Albanian woman reports. Another Kosovo Albanian has had similar experiences with her son:

Here's a kiosk where I go to shop. If I'm with my son, the assistant looks around so. She's so worried that he'll take something. She doesn't look at what I want to pay for. But we're not thieves . . . This also happens if I go to stores to shop. Then they, the ones that work there, follow us. That annoys me. I'm not going there to steal, I'm going there to buy . . . You pay with the same money, but you're treated differently. Then you feel as though you had stolen that money."

Even children can be met with prejudices, as one young Albanian mother describes:

"You see it best in little children. All children can play together, and there aren't any prejudices. Although they don't speak the same language, they can play together well. The children accept each other as they are. Until the parents plant these ideas here in their heads. Then the children grow up with these thoughts."

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The fact that not only Swiss children, but teachers too, are also sometimes biased, presents these parents with a large and ubiquitous problem.

"My boy had the marks to get into the 'Sek'³ Then he went to the exams, and he didn't make it - because of a half-mark, oral. Always the oral exams, which can't be checked . . . then my son did the *Realschule*, then he did a four-year apprenticeship, and now he's doing technical college at evening classes."

The former president of a foreign parents' association, an Italian woman, dealt with this issue on a daily basis and so recognised the connections:

"The teacher said, when the parents went to ask how their daughter or their son was doing in school: 'great!' And at the end of the year, they only scored 4 or 4.1.⁴ After that, the child had to go to a special class or repeat. The child wasn't stupid! I always told parents: you shouldn't ask, 'how is my son or daughter doing in school?', but, 'is what my son or daughter doing enough to keep them at the same level as the others?' . . . but the teacher would say: ' yes, yes, for the child of a foreign worker it's good!'. Then, at the end of the year, we saw that it wasn't good."

The members of the Italian diaspora in Switzerland are without doubt far better liked today than they were two or three decades ago. One Italian is of the opinion that xenophobia is always concentrated on the new immigrant communities:

"For the image of Italians to change, other people from other ethnic groups had to come here."

An Italian active in the trades unions confirms this, and concludes:

"the last to come is suppressed, crushed, and pushed into a corner."

He means that immigrants from Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and the latest from ex-Yugoslavia must all in their turn suffer more or less xenophobia. The last in line are, at the moment the Albanians from Kosovo. On the question of what they want to do against discrimination, one Albanian says:

"I'll fight it. But my fight is a rather indirect one: so that I learn the language well and somehow fit into this society."

³ *Translator's note:* 'Sek', i.e. *Sekundarschule*, is better than 'Real', i.e., *Realschule*, which is the lowest grade of school for teenagers.

⁴ *Translator's note:* 4 is the absolute minimum required in any course or class, with 1 signifying complete nonattendance and 6 unattainable perfection.

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She pauses for a moment, and then continues.

"But that would be a mask. That wouldn't be me, unless I was assimilated. Quite the contrary; I have to struggle so that they accept me as I am. As a foreigner. That'll be hard. I just have to be here, so that people see that I'm here."

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
Translation: Simon Milligan



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