RACISM IN GERMANY.

Internacional | 06-04-2008 | 08:55

nsulted, spat at and attacked -- by ordinary Germans. Unable to bear the daily racism, a pastor's family fled from a small town in eastern Germany back to the their former home in the west.

Sometime last year, Miriam Neuschäfer, who has dark skin because her mother is Indian, decided it was time to record the daily instances of racism she and her family were suffering. The 32-year-old mother of five and wife of a German clergyman wrote down her encounters with the citizens of Rudolstadt, a small town in the eastern German state of Thuringia.

"It helped me work through it," she says, "and some day I want the children to understand everything that happened to us."

A slight woman, Neuschäfer sits at her kitchen table, flipping through the yellow file. She constantly shakes her head. Ten pages filled with black writing. She has more just like it in a drawer -- perhaps 50, she estimates.

When she first started she would write in full sentences but ended up just jotting down bullet points. The files are a disturbing account of the events that drove the family out of Rudolstadt after spending almost eight years trying and failing to get on with the locals. They have moved back to western Germany, to the town of Erkelenz in the Rhineland where they are not subject to daily abuse.

She could no longer stand the racism, the hostile comments from everyday citizens, the feeling that she was hated in her own country. "It was an escape," she says. "It was a matter of survival."

Neuschäfer grew up in the Lower Rhine region of Germany, studied theology and speaks perfect German. Her husband, Reiner Andreas Neuschäfer, 40, is a pastor. In 2000, he was offered the position as schools administrator for the southern Thuringia region.

It was an attractive job, and the family had no qualms about moving east. The Neuschäfers and their two young children moved to Rudolstadt, a former royal retreat in a pretty valley near Erfurt. It's small town with 25,000 residents. A family would find its footing and make new friends in a place like this, they thought.

But the Neuschäfers remained strangers in Thuringia.

From the beginning, says Reiner, the family sensed major "cultural differences". They found it hard to get to know people and the few friends they did make had also come from western Germany. They felt isolated. But they didn't lose heart. Perhaps, they thought, they had just misread the local character. After all, even native Thuringians admit they have a tendency to be grumpy and aren't the easiest people to please.

It will work out in the end, thought the Neuschäfers. But it didn't. In fact, things started to get worse.

The Neuschäfers began to sense something more profound than just cool distance. "We could sit here for hours, and I could just keep coming up with examples," says Miriam, as she browses through her accounts of hate and animosity.

"Your Skin Isn't Right"

The alarm bells first went off in 2002 during a conversation with the kindergarten teacher of Jannik, the oldest son, who is now 10 years old. The conversation suddenly turned to the issue of integration. "Your skin isn't right," the other children said to him. It got so bad that Jannik tried to scrub his skin white with a coarse brush.

According to the parents, when Jannik went to grade school later, the teasing continued. "Mom, what's a nigger?" the young boy asked at home. His classmates had taunted him, saying: "You are this brown because you rubbed shit all over yourself." One day, nine school mates reportedly beat Jannik up on the playground so badly that Reiner called the police. The school administration scolded the small boys who had roughed him up.

The second-oldest daughter, Fenja, who is now eight, also came home with stories of being bullied. And the mother, Miriam, had her own harassment experiences, too. She recalls how an elderly gentleman in a supermarket said: "Amazing the kind of people they let shop here" as she and her children walked past. "Go back to the jungle!" she remembers another man yelling at her once. She was in a parking lot and hadn't closed her car door fast enough for his liking as he tried to pull his car into the adjacent spot.

Less Than Helpful Authorities

It wasn't long before just being stared at by people started to get to Miriam. "I just kept my eyes on the ground and counted the paving stones, she says. It wasn't long before she stopped venturing out of her house on her own.

Even when she was accompanied with her large and powerfully built husband or with the few friends they had, Miriam and the children sensed people's animosity. Whenever the family showed up at a busy playground, it would empty out abruptly. "In glorious sunshine," according to the mother. One day a teenager spat at her as she walked through a park with an acquaintance, she says.

"Spat at? I can't imagine that," says Georg Eger, the deputy mayor, vigorously shaking his head in his office on the second floor of the Rudolstadt town hall. He raises his finger and continues: "I

even rule that out." City spokesman Michael Wagner tries to soften that categoric statement a little. Of course, one can't vouch for every single citizen, he says.

There's a whole lot of head shaking in Rudolstadt's town hall these days. "We've been steamrolled," Eger says. Steamrolled by reports about the Neuschäfers' flight from the xenophobia of some of Rudolstadt's inhabitants.

Crisis management is what is called for now, says the spokesman. He adds that he is drafting a public statement by the city in response to the matter. Every sentence counts. The example of Mügeln (more...) made that clear. In that small town in Saxony, in August 2007, a drunken mob attacked a group of Indian men after a confrontation at a street festival. The group shouted racist taunts, but Mügeln's mayor played down the problem and blamed the violence on visitors from out of town.

Fear of the Mügeln Effect

Like Mügeln, Rudolstadt is worried about its reputation. In recent years the city has fought an uphill battle to improve its image. In 1992, after 2,000 neo-Nazis marched here in memory of Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess, the town was labelled a bastion of the far right. Today, Rudolstadt's inhabitants proudly point out that the town is home to Germany's largest world music festival, which draws 10,000 people from all over the world each year.

Now the town's administration fears its reputation is slipping again. The mayor's office has received hundreds of hate e-mails. Their message: "We won't be returning to Rudolstadt."

The town has to walk a fine line. It has to fight against the blanket judgment that it is a nest of xenophobia, but it must also avoid publicly dismissing the Neuschäfers' claims as being made-up stories. At times, the latter is particularly hard. The deputy mayor speaks of "schoolyard scuffles." The mayor intends to meet Reiner Neuschäfer soon to clear up the matter as soon as possible. Until then, he'll ask around about something that he never cared to hear about before. He'll talk to the police, who confirm Neuschäfers filed two legal complaints. And he'll talk with the school, which is currently defending itself against the accusation that it didn't do enough to help.

The Neuschäfers say they aren't bitter, that this is not about stigmatizing eastern Germany or Rudolstadt. They did not seek out the publicity. The story of their flight from Thuringia leaked out gradually, reaching the press by coincidence.

Miriam and her children finally moved to Erkelenz last October. At first it was just intended as a vacation, as rest and recuperation. But it became an "act of liberation". They found they couldn't bring themselves to return to Rudolstadt.

Miriam and her children Jannik, Fenja, Ronja, Jarrit and Jannis Neuschäfer are enjoying life in their former home. Their father is still looking for a job back in the Rhineland. For now, every weekend he drives the 430 kilometers (267 miles) between Erkelenz, where he spends time with his family, and Rudolstadt, where he sleeps during the week on a mattress in their empty flat.

At the moment, he is on vacation. Next Tuesday, he will drive back to Thuringia for the first time since the accusations of racism were made public. He has "mixed feelings" about the looming trip, he says. He knows "it could be a gauntlet."

font:DER SPIEGEL

Fuente: Redacció
Autor: Redacció