

The day begins with birds chirping. The ringing of my friend's cell phone wakes me up. The voice of X, our friend who is in Germany, resounds through the receiver: You can start now! It is the 4th day that we spend near the outer borders of the fortress of Europe. We hold ourselves ready to give it small pinpricks. We want to make our fundamental criticism of the regime of inhumane borders, of the forcible closure of people practical. Fundraising, demos, campaigns are no longer enough for us.

We want to become refugee helpers and thus take a step towards radical humanity. For months we have been discussing it, for weeks we have been meticulously preparing.

We start our mission on, let's say, Thursday. We put many kilometers behind us and wait in a safe place for everything to start as planned. We set off. The first setback quickly follows. The people we want to help enter the European Union have been picked up by border police shortly before reaching the first meeting point and taken back miles away. Possibly an illegal pushback. Now they have nothing. No means of communication, no food, no water, no money. The police have taken almost everything from them. That night it is cold, raining. We can return to our dry safe space, the fugitives are left with almost nothing. At least we know that one has found a shelter and can warm himself by the fire. Many kilometers separate us. The following day we learn that they have arrived back where they have a roof over their heads and can organize communication with us. In general, cell phones are the linchpin on the escape routes. Without them, nothing works, no orientation, no contact. Even those who protect borders with all their might know that.

The next night, too, there is no chance of a meeting. The people can't get away, a lot of things have to be rearranged.

The following day we get the news that it will not work out today either. Our group has to deal with these setbacks. The urge to get going is great. Some are running out of time. One thing is clear to everyone: we want to implement our plan. There is a growing fear that it will not become reality. But that is our reality. At too few points in our meticulous preparations have we given sufficient thought to the reality of those fleeing, to the danger that they will be hindered, that they will be prevented. An important lesson on which we reflect much. What follows is the morning of the starting signal. The plans, as they are written on paper, are overturned within minutes. We start in the direction of the border. We put the first stage of numerous kilometers behind us.

We drive to the place agreed with the people. It is in the border area, but already on the territory of the European Union. Most of the fugitives take this barrier themselves and are picked up and brought back only in the supposed safety. Illegal pushbacks by the border police of the respective countries and with the involvement of the EU border protection agency Frontex are much and fiercely discussed. After a ruling by the European Court of Justice on the illegal Hungarian practice of forcibly pushing back refugees to Serbia, Frontex had withdrawn from Hungary in January 2021.

<https://www.amnesty.de/allgemein/pressemitteilung/push-backs-schutzsuchende-frontex-ungarn> However, there is evidence that Frontex was indirectly and directly involved in pushbacks in the Aegean Sea itself, among other places.

We are getting closer to the point of meeting. I am tense. Everything has to work well. I am afraid to fail in navigating. The Internet does not work in that area. So our group can't be in contact with each other. We are each on our own. The car I'm in is heading to the agreed location, the other team is nearby, but to a wrong point. A military car drives by, sees us.

This is not how it should be. We wait at our point, 10 minutes, 20 minutes. Nothing happens, no one comes, no sounds around.

Our friend in Germany, who is our communication bridge to the fleeing people, has impressed upon us that we should not get out of the car. After almost 30 minutes, I get out. I want to walk to the other team, which is out of sight, a river separates us. In case the fugitives come, my passenger drives off, I will be picked up later, we agree. I reach the last known location of the other team. They are not there. I run back to my car. It is still there. Far and wide no trace of the fugitives. We drive off to where we can be reached again. The other teams have sent us a location where we want to regroup. The navigation system leads us back to the place we just came from, the agreed pickup point. We are confused. We drive deeper into the border area. As we should not do. Suddenly, someone jumps out of the bushes and directs two people into our car. We are excited. It worked. We drive off. Sending the signal to the others that it worked. The cars are coming towards us. They pick up the waiting others at the point. Later it will be clear that our navigation system failed. We didn't go to the new rally point, but to the one originally agreed upon. Luck of the draw.

We drive. We stop briefly so that all teams are together again. The first communication with the two new passengers. Relief. A joint cigarette. Eating. They have been on the road for many hours. We briefly meet the others. All are on board, all are well. Now comes the next leg. Hundreds of kilometers. At night. We are stable while they sleep. A police check is taken creatively. We are a good team. Everyone works as agreed and planned. Small challenges are well overcome during these hours.

At our next destination, the fugitives are to get out and cross the next border. We reach the point two hours late.

I have honest respect for them, who are now setting out again on a foot march. Through the cold darkness. To a point where we pick them up again. That takes strength and requires great trust.

Allies who help to overcome borders without taking money for it, that is probably no longer part of the reality for most refugees. In 2015/ 16, there had been refugee assistance movements. In the meantime, the border regime has been further perfected. Drones, thermal imaging cameras, armed patrols. People mainly help on the ground or exert political pressure. Practical support through refugee assistance takes place selectively, in secret. We also experienced this on our trip. We want refugee assistance to become a more widespread practice. And we have allies for this. We are not alone. That gives us strength.

People have disappeared into the darkness of the landscape. We are taking off. Together we head for the next country, which we can enter legally. Corona makes border crossings between EU countries a little more difficult, but we are prepared for that. We think. Our delay over the day causes us problems, because for the transit the stay time may not exceed 12 hours.

The border crossing of our friends went faster than planned. They are already waiting for us. In the meantime we had feared not to be able to support this next stage, there are isolated doubts. But we find each other. Consensus is quickly reached: We are close. We do it. Short sorting, orientation, the plan is played out.

Already we are on the short way to the next meeting point. This time we want to make a change of persons. In the other car there had been many conflicts on the first leg. This is also part of the reality.

It has become light again, the environment we are driving in now is different than yesterday evening. The landscape is almost defenceless. We become aware that we are in a restricted military area and head directly for a police base. Then it goes blow by blow. The fugitives jump onto the road and head for the cars. Contrary to the plan, we pick up in our car the two who had already joined us on the first part of the way. Our communication is interrupted again. Missing radio networks are apparently common in the border area. We drive. Too late I read that we are to take the lead. We are out of the maze of streets on the main road that is supposed to take us to our intermediate destination. A safe space that was made possible for us in the final stages of our preparations in Germany. A place that impresses us all. Where we could be the last days and much more than that.

Everything is good. I am slowly starting to lose a little tension. I can't remember when I noticed the police siren. The next few seconds pass like a movie. At first I think: Drive on. Run away. The person driving later tells me that she thought the same thing. We can't really communicate in this situation, we can't talk to each other. In front of us I see the car of the other team. We stop. A police check. A military car. The others later tell us that the jeep had come towards us shortly before.

I'm sure: it's over now. The emergency plan unwinds before my eyes. I send a short message and switch off the phone. The two passengers are hidden under a blanket in the back seat. Before my eyes, I see them being dragged out of the car, try to imagine what will happen to them as paperless people. I know that we two EU citizens will be taken to the police station. I am afraid that our team will come back to support us.

The police officer asks us for our IDs, for our driver's licenses. She asks us what we are doing here. We answer what we had always answered before at the border crossings. She goes to the car. We inform the two on the back seat what is happening here. I am sure that our mission will end in the next few minutes. Surely the policewoman will call for reinforcements. She goes to the military car with our papers. There is only one person there as well, a soldier with a military mouth guard. Absurdly, I remembered that exactly. The police officer looks at our car from the outside. She asks us about one or two other cars with German license plates. We shrug our shoulders. She looks at the blanket on the back belt. She seems nervous. She asks for the first aid kit. My passenger gets out, opens the trunk. There is only a warning triangle, no first aid kit. "I see it's full as it is," she says meaningfully to the passenger. We get our ID cards back. We are allowed to drive. We drive. I am, we are stunned. We are both sure that the policewoman saw the people in the back seat. The two of them have remained incredibly calm.

We all kept our nerve. What just took place there will remain unclear. That it was an act of consent to what we were doing is the least likely. Later, those who know the local border police practice also tell us. That the staffing of the two state officials was too minimal is another variant. That they didn't want to expend any effort is another.

We are driving. I am afraid that we will be stopped at a later point. It is likely that we will be followed in order to identify ourselves as a group. The two fellow passengers make quiet noises under the blanket. All-clear. For the time being. I try to make contact by phone. None

of the others answer the phone. I type the message. We try to come up with scenarios of what must follow now. It must not be possible to make any connections. None of the supporters must be endangered. Everything falls into place. We arrive. We get out of the car. The two in the back have been huddled together the whole time, they only make it with great difficulty. We are received. Everyone is crying at this moment. Tears of relief. Later I will say that it was good that, unlike what we had planned, we had the people in the car who are such calm personalities. It could have gone wrong with the others right at that point. A person from the other team will say at that point that it was good that we did not take the lead as they had communicated and not they were stopped by the police.

There is disposition. And finally we're all in the same room. We hug each other. Every*one has tears in their eyes. We have made it. We have outwitted the border regime. We have overcome two borders, or rather, we have been able to support the fugitives in securing their border crossings and relieve them of routes that would have almost certainly resulted in a push-back, or official registration in a place where they do not want to be. The path is far from complete. Safe Space can only be a way station. The road is still long, but it is easier. Because they are now in the Schengen area. Corona alone complicates border crossings between EU states. Our fear of being checked on the return trip, which the larger part of the group takes on a little later, and of getting into trouble because of Corona-related rules, will not be fulfilled.

I feel powerful despite the physical lack of strength. I see the various images of the last 20 hours in front of me. I see the two lovely and strong passengers in front of me. I hear them talking on the phone with our friend in Germany and the words bursting out of them. We are receiving strong emotions from all who have been part of this mission. And it was by far not "only" us who were on the road. I will still have tears in my eyes a few times on the way back.

Nevertheless, now, on this Sunday, May 2, it is clear that the mission is not finished. The people at the way station will not have time to wait for us. I am a little afraid that they will try and fail themselves. But I know that they are strong and have strong experiences. That their lives are shaped by fleeing. I also know that they have people around them who are looking for solutions and are ready to find fast ones. Today I think about whether I was right to leave the situation, even though it is not yet closed. Here I have to have confidence that the solution is being worked on. And keep me ready to support.

So I can only draw an interim conclusion. It is right what we have done. It is a strong practical symbol of solidarity. It is a piece of the mosaic in the fight against the regime of borders. Refugee aid is special because people can see, feel and directly relate to what they are doing. It is about concrete people. It is about taking a piece of the burden from them, from those who regularly try to cross the border and too often fail. In my view, escape assistance should become a mass practice of civil disobedience. That was the starting point of our thinking. We began to think of what we were doing as a large-scale action that would enable many, hundreds, even thousands, to find their way to a dignified life and that would confront the foreclosure regime with open sights. This was naïve, and we have had many discussions about it and have been taught. Our action to help refugees should not be the only one, that is clear. Whether that is redeemable by us is an open question at this point.

What is clear, however, is that this form of struggle for the human right to freedom of movement is taking place and must take place on a larger scale. Perhaps we could and can contribute to this.