

Cologne: In New Year's Melee, a Syrian Migrant Was One Woman's Savior

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BERLIN — Caught up in a melee of drunken revelers outside the Cologne train station on New Year's Eve, Caitlin Duncan, a neuroscience student from Seattle, was terrified. She had somehow gotten separated from her German boyfriend, who had both their cellphones and her wallet. Ms. Duncan, 27, said that she was quickly surrounded and groped by several young men: One snatched her hat from her head, another tried to kiss her face and neck.

Like many of the hundreds of women who later said they had been assaulted in the crowd, Ms. Duncan sought help from the police, but said the officers were too busy trying to clear the square. But unlike other victims, whose complaints of attacks by foreigners of North African and Arab descent have ignited new debate about Germany's ability to absorb migrants, Ms. Duncan said she was rescued by a group of Syrian asylum seekers.

Amid the swirl of criminal chaos, it seems, there were also acts of chivalry.

As the crowd swelled and grew more unruly, Ms. Duncan said, a stranger came up and asked if she needed help. Both of them spoke broken German, so the stranger summoned a friend who spoke English. He was Hesham Ahmad Mohammad, from Aleppo, Syria, who had met up in Cologne for the holiday with six or seven other Syrian refugees scattered around Germany.

The men offered Ms. Duncan money for a taxi to her boyfriend's parents' home: "the only address I knew," she said. They would happily have called her boyfriend, Sebastian Samer, but Ms. Duncan had relied on speed-dial and could not remember the number. "I know there's a lot of 7s," she thought, "but that's not helping me right now."

She persuaded the men to form a kind of cordon around her so they could move through the crowd. She described her boyfriend to them, and they eventually found him inside the station. She cried. "I was just so relieved," she recalled later.

Mr. Ahmad Mohammad, a former primary-school teacher, said he had left Aleppo, a scene of tremendous fighting in the Syrian civil war, in 2014 for Turkey, and had arrived in Germany via the Balkans and Austria in September. He said he had left his wife and two sons in a village near the Syrian-Turkish border and was living in a small town near Cologne with two other Syrians, studying German as he awaited asylum.

He said in a telephone interview on Friday that he and his friends had also felt unsafe on New Year's, and blamed "bad boys" who were "drinking, and I think taking marijuana or something. They lost their minds." Now, they worry that Germans and other Europeans are drawing conclusions that will make it harder for new arrivals.

"We keep hearing news about refugees all day: 'They are bad people, they must go back to their home,' " Mr. Ahmad Mohammad, 32, said. "When I hear that in the news, I am sad. Because we

know that there were bad boys and bad people. But the good people, nobody speak about them.”

Ms. Duncan’s story started like so many others. In a long telephone conversation from Tübingen, a south German university town where she and Mr. Samer study neuroscience, she recounted the horror.

“One man grabbed my hat, took it off my head,” she began. “Someone else came around the back of me and grabbed me,” she added, “I guess looking for something in my pockets. I turned around, you know, to push him off me because he’s touching me. I turned to get my hat back, put it on; someone else tried to kiss my face and to kiss my neck. I pushed him away and yelled, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ ”

“I thought, ‘This is a bit strange, but it’s New Year’s and people are drinking too much — I’ll just find my boyfriend and leave,’ ” Ms. Duncan said.

But the police brushed her off and alarmed her more, she said, by shoving the crowd from the square.

She asked an American who was filming the scene if it was a political protest, and he speculated that the officers might be trying to thwart some kind of terrorist attack.

“So then I thought, ‘This is really not good, I need to get out of here,’ ” Ms. Duncan said.

But with the police again shoving back the crowd, “all of a sudden, I was pushed back into this big group of people, eight or nine men, groping, pulling my hair,” she recalled. “I went into a kind of fighting mode, and kicked and hit and pushed until I got away.”

By now, she said, “I was getting really scared.” At 5-foot-2, she could hardly see in the crowd.

It was then that the stranger approached her, a glimmer of goodness in the grimmest of situations.

It took her some days, she said, to realize that hundreds of women had undergone similar ordeals — mostly without her happy ending.

“I was surprised that there were so many women that reported being groped,” she said. “I really didn’t see that happen to other people; I was really surprised to learn that it was something bigger.”

She and Mr. Samer are in touch with her Syrian rescuer at least every couple of days, she said.

Mr. Ahmad Mohammad said: “My friends and I are very happy because first of all, we help somebody. After that, we have new friends from Germany,” the kind of contacts needed, he said, to start life here.

“In the end,” Ms. Duncan said, “it turned out really well” — even if “that was not how I planned to ring in the new year, definitely.”

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P.S.

* "In New Year's Melee in Cologne, a Migrant Was One Woman's Savior". The New York Times. 15, 2016:

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/16/world/europe/in-new-years-melee-in-cologne-a-migrant-was-one-womans-savior.html?_r=1

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