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Obermayer Award

**“There is a
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Stefan Schirmer and FC Ente Bagdad build understanding and acceptance, preserve Jewish history, and play a lot of soccer



by Toby Axelrod

Shady Sharif was 19 when he fled war-torn Syria. After spending 15 days at sea in a boat with 250 others, he arrived in Italy. He eventually settled in Germany.

Sharif was living in a home for refugees in Mainz when he first encountered Stefan Schirmer, a longtime volunteer with *FC Ente Bagdad* (the Ducks of Baghdad Football Club), an amateur

soccer club that is about much, much more than sport.

“He always took young people along to play soccer,” recalls Sharif, who was alone in his adopted home. “It helped with the language a lot. They had a lot of patience. Stefan Schirmer was always there.”

Today, thanks to that encounter, Sharif, now a full time IT specialist, is also an ambassador for pluralism in Germany. “I have experienced a lot,” he says, “and I know what is important. One should not fight because of religion.”

Schirmer’s role in conveying this message is huge. He is, in many ways, the guiding force behind an organization that for decades has been a beacon for diversity, acceptance, and equality, as well as in recognizing and understanding Jewish history and culture. What makes these achievements more remarkable is that they have occurred among a community — sports enthusiasts — where those values are not always at the forefront and who may be missed by traditional outreach.

It all started in 1973, when a group of high school graduates in Mainz founded this amateur soccer club. They chose the name because it sounded worldly and exotic: They associated the city of Baghdad with Scheherazade’s fabulous tales of “One Thousand and One Nights”; they wanted to play fabulous soccer, and a duck always swims on top.

The club's unforgettable motto is "You'll never waddle alone." It's a play on the Rodgers and Hammerstein song "You'll Never Walk Alone," which has become the anthem of Liverpool FC, a popular team in the English Premier League.

"We said, 'This is a very good motto for us,'" says Schirmer, who got involved with the club in 1974. "First of all, it's funny. And it says so much about what we do as a club: None of our members will ever waddle alone. Someone will always be there to help out. These few words say everything."

Ente Bagdad's philosophy is that soccer is universal; it can provide a space for diverse people to meet and learn about each other. Today, the club has members from dozens of countries. It has played at the local, regional, national, and international levels. At the same time, the club has engaged in many social justice activities, including working with refugees; organizing trips to the home countries of its members (including Syria before the war, Morocco, Bolivia, and Israel, with a trip to Rwanda planned for 2023); teaching about the Holocaust through soccer history; and focusing on diversity.

"There was no discussion"

For many years Schirmer and club president Ronald Uhlich ran the club together. It now has a six-member governing group. Schirmer takes the lead in its history and remembrance activities, its

website (he jokingly calls himself *Maître de la Toile* — Master of the Web), and all its international work.

There are two reasons why it is important to look at the past, says Schirmer, who works full time for a Swiss company that manufactures software for digital printing machines. “First, if you don’t learn from experience, you just are making the same mistakes again and again.” Second, “there is often just not enough time in high school history classes to talk about the background of what happened and what it meant. If you are lucky, you scratch the surface. And I think young people need — and want — to understand.”

His commitment reflects his own attempts to make sense of the past. Born in 1958 in Mainz, Schirmer grew up in a religious Christian environment. Looking at the long history of antisemitism in Germany, culminating in the Holocaust, he wondered how people could be so hypocritical, he says: “On one hand everyone was religious, but when they turned around it was just the opposite.

“There was no discussion at home about this,” says Schirmer, who eventually realized one of his grandfathers was a Nazi. “I just learned to open my eyes and ears by myself and tried to understand things I saw and heard. And that was how it started.

“The next Nazis I met were the teachers in my school because there were so many left at the

time,” he says. “There were many things they said or expressed that as a young boy first made me laugh. Later, when I got older, about 13 or 14, I started to think that there is something strange and wrong about what they are saying. One of those teachers used to say, ‘With two tanks more we would have won Stalingrad.’ And that was the early 1970s, quite a long time after the war.”

“I just learned to open my eyes and ears by myself and tried to understand things I saw and heard. And that was how it started.”

— Stefan Schirmer

Schirmer studied marketing communications in Germany and economics in France. He has held many positions of global responsibility in numerous countries during the course of his professional career and speaks three and a half languages, as he puts it.

In 2004, soccer fans in Germany — inspired by an Italian initiative — founded the Never Again! (*!Nie Wieder*) project, aimed at ensuring that the Holocaust not be forgotten and combating discrimination in soccer. They adopted

International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27, as a remembrance day in German soccer.

Ente Bagdad became a pillar of that initiative and expanded it locally into Mainz Remembrance Weeks, organizing programs, speakers, and exhibitions on related topics. Most recently, in 2022, they dedicated an event to the topic of the Nazi forced sterilization and so-called euthanasia programs.

The club brings in speakers to kick off the Remembrance Weeks. The first was Serge Salomon, whose grandfather, Eugen Salomon, founded the FSV Mainz 05 soccer club in 1905 and was its first president. Eugen Salomon was murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz.

“We got in touch with Serge Salomon because we thought it would be a good opportunity to show the people of Mainz and soccer fans that the club is remembering the first president of Mainz 05, who was a Jew,” says Schirmer. (FSV Mainz plays in Germany’s major professional league, the Bundesliga.)

“I have just one word for what Stefan Schirmer does: incredible,” says Salomon. Schirmer and Ente Bagdad don’t just tackle one thing at a time; they constantly have many projects going on at once, he says.

Salomon says he worries about rising antisemitism

and xenophobia in Germany and in Europe overall. “Whether it is refugee homes being set afire or shots fired at a synagogue in Essen, you hear things in the news and it adds up.” More recognition for such projects as Ente Bagdad can only help, he says: “It’s all about communication and youth work. Nothing else works.”

“New Germans”

Schirmer is “a companion, friend, and reliable partner in the fight against antisemitism and discrimination of all kinds, especially in the context of club soccer,” says Janik Trummer, an education specialist with Zusammen1, a prevention project of Makkabi Deutschland, the Jewish gymnastics and sports association in Germany.

“In particular, the educational work with refugees within the club represents one of the great strengths,” Trummer said in his letter recommending Schirmer and FC Ente Bagdad for the Obermayer Award.

In 2015, as hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Syria, Afghanistan, and other war-torn regions and landed in Europe, FC Ente Bagdad co-launched the first nationwide “Welcome to soccer” alliance together with Mainz 05 and the Juvente Mainz Foundation for youth welfare, supported by the Bundesliga’s DFL Foundation.

“They don’t want to be called refugees,” says

Schirmer. “They are new Germans.”

It was at this point that Schirmer met Shady Sharif.

“They were housed in a place where no one in Mainz wants to live anymore,” recalls Schirmer. With help from multilingual volunteers, “we went there and introduced ourselves. We said we knew they were here because they had to flee their country, so in order to help them establish themselves a bit here, and perhaps to have two hours per week of not thinking about their situation, we invited them to come and play soccer with us.”

Today, many of the youth who participated in the program have become volunteers themselves. And the program now includes participants who have fled Ukraine.

One challenge has been confronting antisemitism among refugees from the Middle East. “They are educated like that – Israel is the enemy and Jews are the enemy, and so on,” says Schirmer. “We didn’t touch directly on that subject in the early days, but they saw that within Ente Bagdad there is a very open-minded spirit, and everyone is respected. That already told them something about the club, and it influenced them – it was part of what I would call their Germanization – to be open-minded.”

“Nevertheless, we had discussions about that because they said, ‘We have been told at school

that Jews are bad, Jews are everything negative.’ So we asked them: ‘Ok, what do you think about this guy here?’ They answered: ‘He is a great guy.’ We said: Well, he is a Jew.’

“‘Oh!’

“We discussed it, and they started to understand that being against Israel does not mean that all Jews are bad,” says Schirmer.

Words became action. In April 2018, a person in Berlin was attacked for wearing a kippah. “We quickly organized a friendly soccer match against the fans of Mainz 05, and all the players went on the pitch with a kippah as a sign of support,” says Schirmer.

Sharif took part in that match. “I have Christians and Jews in my circle of friends,” he says. “I knew what a kippah was, and I wore it without thinking twice about it.”

“Some of my friends were wondering about it, but I did not care. There are always those types,” he says, adding that he is proud of Syria’s Jewish history. “My father said, ‘That’s soccer, and it’s good that you are taking part and learning the history.’”

One of Schirmer’s goals is to build greater visibility for Jewish life in Mainz. To that end he has been brainstorming with Alon Meyer, president of Makkabi Deutschland, about building a “sporting bridge” to the Mainz Jewish community.

“I am firmly convinced that Mr. Schirmer's visionary spirit can and will build this bridge in the distant (or even near) future,” Meyer wrote in his nomination for Schirmer. “Sport, as a link between societies and cultures, will always play a leading role in this process.”

— *Obermayer Award recipient 2023*



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