

Episode 36: Willi

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to a Chinese-born German in Germany? In this episode, Willi shares his stories of growing up as one of the only children read as Chinese in a city in southern Germany. His episode is about his ongoing journey in coming to terms with his Chinese and German identities in a world that still reads people in certain ways.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Willi.

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F:

Willi was born in Germany to two Chinese parents. He spent most of his life in a city in southern Germany. Growing up, he says he had a relatively positive experience, especially at school.

W:

I was really privileged, growing as a... like, [my] parents are immigrants from China, I grew up here, and [so] just compared to other ethnicities, or people with another background, most of the time, I think I am very privileged. So I always had very supportive friends throughout my life, always very supportive teachers who didn't see color and didn't care where I was from. So most of the time in my closer surroundings, I was always treated as a normal human being. And I mean, in the district where I grew up, there were all kinds of other types of minorities, in that sort of area, so for my elementary school, I think the foreigners' rate, or people without... well, German parents or people coming from a migrant country, there were like 70, 80 ish percent. So I mean, I had lots of non... well, "biologically German" people around me growing up.

And just compared to them and how teachers treated them, I really cannot complain. So whenever I talked to friends or teachers, they were like, "Oh no, you're just a normal German guy." I mean, "Of course you don't... well you *look* different. But I mean..." Like, from a personality, from how I behaved, they didn't see much of a difference to them. And I have to add, I said, okay, there were like 70, 80% in my school who were not from a "biologically German" family, but I sort of always stuck with the German people. So perhaps that's another reason why people didn't really perceive me as someone *not* from their peer group, or, I don't know, not German.

F:

Willi reflects upon his friend circle at school.

W:

Well, I mean, Germany isn't as culturally diverse as other countries such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, or other parts of Europe. If we talk about foreigners or minorities in that sense, you would usually refer to mostly Turkish people, perhaps some people from an Arabic country, like those are the "typical"... well, not foreigners, but minorities or non-White Germans that you would think of. Of course, there are also Southern Europeans, or perhaps people from the former Soviet countries... I mean, if you had to think of, "Okay, what do most people associate with the term 'foreigner', or 'Auslander', in Germany?", that would be mostly people from Turkey or any other Arabic country. And for *my* school, we were in a district where there was a high percentage of those people, like people from Turkey, [people] whose parents came to Germany to help rebuild the country, or people from

other migrant countries who fled their country due to war or any other persecution, people with such a background.

And like, there aren't really many Asian... let's say *Chinese* communities, here in southern Germany. They are mostly concentrated in the bigger cities like Berlin, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, and so on. But not in conservative southern Germany. So when it came to, "Okay, who are you hanging out with?", and, "Who are you being friends with?", there wasn't really much of a choice. I mean, you could hang out with the German people, you could hang out with, like the Arabic-speaking people. At least that was the case for *my* school. And *they* [Turkish, Arabic children] were their own community, they were closer culturally because they had the same faith, they had the same cultural customs and so on. So they mostly hung out together. But like, for *me*, it was more... I don't know, it felt closer just to hang out with the White biological Germans because they spoke the same language, or at least, *culturally*, they were closer.

F:

Willi says he didn't have the best relationship with his German-Turkish and German-Arabic peers.

W:

Oh, it was horrible. That was the most paradoxical thing. I mean, like they were a minority in that regard [in the context of Germany at large], but in that school setting, they were the majority. So like, they sort of turned the game around, and then everyone who was German or non-Turkish or Arabic, those were the minorities suddenly, and they sort of picked on the minority. In that sense, the teachers were always more protective around me, like they... so that's why I was saying I was very privileged, because like, I mean, in that case, I was the minority who was on the teacher's side, who was being... well, "held safe" from the others.

F:

Whilst Willi says he didn't really experience racism at school, he experienced racism outside of school. He shares two incidences he vividly remembers to this day.

W:

The earliest one I can remember was when I was a child, I think I was around 10 or 11 years old, and there was a new shopping center which had its grand opening. And just to entertain the children, they handed out small footballs. Every child who went there could go to the counter and get one of the footballs. Like, everyone got their football. And when I was finally at the counter, they were like, "No, you're not getting one. You already had one." I was like, "No, I did not. I queued for 15 minutes here." I mean, probably some other Asian child got a football. But that one person sitting behind the counter was like, "No, no, you're the one who already got a football. I'm not giving you one and you can just go away." I mean, she was only that mean, or like that aggressive towards me. To everyone else there, she was very kind. So that was one of the earliest memories that I as a child experienced.

Another thing happened at a McDonald's when I was getting lunch with a cousin of mine. We were queuing just like a normal person. You usually, like I mean, at every counter, you have another queue, so you usually don't have a central queue where you queue for all the counters. So like, for every counter, you just wait in line. And when we were finally walking to the counter, this lady from behind us was yelling at us, "In *our* country, you're supposed to queue. I was here first, how dare you cut in line." And she was standing two meters apart from us. So like, I mean, there was no way that we could have assumed that she was queuing for the counter we were standing in line for, but she was really insisting that she came first, she was just standing a little bit to the right, but she was queuing, [and that] definitely, we were the ones in the wrong, and like, "In our country, in Germany, you're supposed to queue to order, you have to stand in line. Go back to your country, get out of my way." And we were like kids, we were probably 15 or 16. We were like, "Wow, what is happening?" I mean, how can you

like make such a big deal out of queuing, right? I mean, that was another story where I really felt, "Okay, yeah, I'm being treated differently here even though I just behaved normally," and didn't think about it much [after that].

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F:

Growing up as one of the only children read as Chinese in his environment, Willi developed a certain understanding of his identity. He shares how this identity evolved as he graduated high school.

W:

I think I really didn't identify as a certain ethnic group or with a certain culture. It was more of the opposite around. Like, I didn't want to be Chinese. I mean, I think throughout my school years at least, I just didn't want people to associate *me* with being Chinese, since there was a lot of stigma involved. Like, people in general have a very negative feeling or a very negative impression of China due to politics and what they show in the media. So it wasn't really like identifying as a certain person or with a certain culture, but more like avoiding being associated with certain traits, such as, I don't know, only eating Chinese food. I *never* brought food to school. I didn't want to be the weird guy who ate something with rice for lunch. I mean, I would rather eat a sandwich or just eat something different than something that would be associated with being from an Asian country, right?

And also, I mean, yeah, just growing up in school, I think my friends never heard me talking in Chinese or Cantonese or in any other Asian language. I just avoided having any, I don't know, intersections with that other part of me, the Chinese part of me. I was always like, tiptoeing around the issue. I mean, I look Chinese. Yeah, right. But as long as I don't mingle, are not seen only hanging out with the Chinese people, as long as I don't behave too Chinese, then it should be fine, it should be all right.

And this started to change after graduating high school. I think... I mean, people in high school in general, are a little bit more superficial. I mean, people care about your outer appearance, how you behave, whether you're cool or not, like, they find things to make fun of you. I mean, they're children, right. But in uni, that was kind of different because suddenly, I didn't have to be that careful anymore, so to speak. I mean, people didn't care about where I came from, or what college I was from. Like, as long as I was excelling academically, as long as I was socially not awkward, [being] friendly to everyone, no one cared where I came from.

So I started taking Chinese lessons. I didn't speak any Mandarin Chinese growing up, so I had to take university courses catching up with my Chinese skills. And I mean, suddenly, I started just, I don't know, organizing events where we would go out eating hotpot together, or just going out eating Asian food with friends from university. I sometimes also dropped a couple of typical Chinese or Asian jokes. I really embraced that... well, that Chinese side of me, just to add a little bit of layer and being funny about just that part of me. Yeah, so I think... I mean, this happened probably because... I mean, when you grow up, you enter university, suddenly you start being more mature. [And] one part of like, being more mature was probably for me to be more confident about where I come from, and just to integrate it into my personality or how I behaved around others.

F:

Willi reflects on his Chinese identity.

W:

I wouldn't say it's another identity of me or like... it's just like having more options suddenly. I mean, suddenly I can choose from, "Okay, do I want to consume more Asian media? Do I want to dress more Asian, or do I feel like being more European that day or that period?" It was also the time when I started dyeing my hair. I think I thought, "Okay, yeah, after school, many Asians nowadays dye their

hair, why not try it?" I mean, I would have never done that growing up in Germany, because I mean, guys just don't do that. I mean, if you're a boy, you usually do not dye your hair except for black if you're into emo or certain music genres. But usually, you wouldn't dye your hair. And just getting to know Asian culture more, watching more Asian dramas or movies, suddenly you just see much more possibilities on, like, "Okay, that's also how I can design my life. That's also how I can look or act." So it was just having more options, like starting out at a farmer's market and going to a large shopping center: you suddenly have much more to buy and to choose from. And that was at least my experience from embracing, or at least being more interested into, Asian culture.

F:

During his university years, Willi went to Australia to immerse himself in another context.

W:

On my first day when I arrived in Australia, I was on my way back to where I lived, and I was stopping at the traffic light. And in Germany, you tend to wait for the traffic light to turn green. And I waited. I waited very diligently. I think I waited for two minutes because those traffic lights were still new and not calibrated and there was something wrong with the traffic lights. I was the only person waiting in front of the traffic lights. Everyone was jaywalking. And then there was a car that was driving past me, and they turned down the windows and were yelling, "Oh, German! Where in Germany are you from?" And I was like, "Are you talking to *me*?" I mean, I was in Australia, the last place on earth where I would think people could guess that I was from Germany. But probably, just looking at me standing there, being the single idiot who waited for two minutes at the traffic lights, I mean, they just assumed, "Ah, the only people in Australia who do that are either from Japan or from Germany." And they just assumed that I was from Germany. That was hilarious.

F:

Willi contrasts his experience in Australia to something he recently experienced with his work colleagues.

W:

I was out with colleagues at the Christmas market. And during Christmas season, there are lots of Asian tourists around. And we went to the Christmas market with one of our visiting scholars who was from Australia. And he didn't really speak fluent German. I mean, he had a strong accent when he was speaking German. And I, on the other hand, grew up in Germany and speak fluent German. So we both went to the hot wine stall at the same time. We were ordering in German. And you could hear he, being a foreigner, trying to speak German, like you should have heard that he was a foreigner, and replied at least in English, or offered to answer in English. But he was fine, he could just order normally.

When it was *my* turn, I spoke to the people selling wine in German, and they were always answering in English. That was so funny, because I mean, everyone around us could tell he was the foreigner and he's just having a hard time articulating German sentences and talking to people in German, and he was treated like a normal German because he looked White. But like, I mean, *me* with my fluent German, I tried to order and no matter how much I talked to them in German, and they could speak German, they answered in English. And I was like, "What is going on?"

And the second funny thing was, I ordered three glasses of hot wine. But they insisted that me and my broken English, ordered *seven*. So they insisted that I pay for seven hot glasses of wine. And I was like, "Urgh, fine. Here, you have your money." I just wanted to go back to my group and drink wine. But that was just so... I don't know. I was lost for words at that moment. All around me were my colleagues, they were laughing at me because they only saw from afar how much trouble I had ordering. And it was just hilarious.

F:

Whilst he finds some of his experiences funny, Willi admits that they can be frustrating at times.

W:

This is the most frustrating thing growing up in another country, I think, because you never really fit in. Whenever I go to China, people immediately know just from how I dress, how I interact with them... I don't even have to talk to them, they just see that I'm from another country. When I go there just ordering coffee to go, for example, without even saying a word, they will be like, "Ah, where are you from? You're not from around here, right?" And they just see or feel that you are different than them. And the same thing even happens for my parents. I mean, they speak fluent Chinese and Cantonese. But when people look at them, they immediately know, "Okay, they are from another country. They're behaving differently and dressing differently." And so... you really don't fit in anywhere. I mean, for the ethnic and culturally Chinese people, you're not Chinese, you're like European, a "banana", so to say, like yellow from the outside, white from the inside. And back here in Europe, people say, "Okay, yeah, you must be Asian, so you don't really fit in. You're not... probably not European."

F:

Willi says he has never spoken to his parents about his identity as a German and Chinese due to certain barriers that prevents him from doing so.

W:

Culturally, I'm not very similar to them. I grew up in Germany and was mostly raised with a European mindset, unlike them, who were still from a very conservative background. And they of course are much more fluent in Cantonese than I am. My Cantonese level is probably kindergarten level. I know how to say the basics. I can tell when I'm hungry, when I'm thirsty. But that's it. I mean, it's not like I can have very in-depth conversations with them. So I didn't just share much about what's going on in my life back then. And still now, I mean, up until now, I think... I don't involve them as much in my life if it's not necessary. I think to this day, they don't know how any of my friends, what their names are. They don't know any of my friends, or who my colleagues are. They don't know their names. They probably don't know where I work or what I'm doing, but yeah...

So I mean, they were there, but it's not like they were there to give you emotional support or they weren't people who you could talk about these issues because since they were busy working all day, and since they never had to deal with any of these kinds of issues, it just wasn't... I didn't ever feel like sharing or talking with them about it. It's really a language barrier. I just don't know how to communicate with them. And I just feel so frustrated talking to them, since like, I mean, there's really a limit on what I can express in Cantonese, so I usually just lose my temper and my patience and go, "Urgh, forget it. Let's not talk about it. Let's just move on with our lives."

I mean, it's really frustrating because like, I mean, you of course see how families are portrayed in media. I mean, if you look at TV shows, European parents, American parents, they're friends with their children. You can share a lot with them, you can talk about your issues and how you're not feeling well and whether you have emotional... like, anything going on with your life. But that's not the case for Asian parents. I mean, you have a different role yourself. You're never on eye level. You cannot talk to them as if you were talking to a peer. I mean, they are always like... I think it's easier to talk to my supervisor than to talk to my parents. I mean, they are just more judgy and they're much more... I don't know, yeah, on a different hierarchy, I guess.

F:

Based on his own experiences, Willi reflects on what racism is for him.

W:

I think it's difficult for me to define racism. I think it's mostly about treating people differently due to their outer appearance. I think that's not a very clear definition for my understanding of racism, but that is pretty much it. Like, if people treat you less human, with less respect, just because you are from a different ethnic group. That's probably my understanding of racism, so...

I mean, I have to be honest, I'm not sure whether we really need to discuss racism as a society specifically. I mean, for me, it's just more about... I mean, just treat other human beings normally. Just treat them with respect, right? I mean, all these contemporary issues such as racism or sexism or homophobia, or how we deal with impaired people, people with a disability, no matter how you frame it, it's about people treating other people differently just because they have certain traits, or they just do not look like you. But I mean, that's how the world is: not everyone is like you, and... Just don't be a jerk, right? I mean, just don't be an asshole. Just don't treat other people in a worse way. Just don't make fun of them. And then that probably makes things much easier.

F:

Willi shares his take on what he thinks it takes to be antiracist.

W:

I think what it takes to be antiracist is being reflective about who you are and what you believe in. I think many people being racist probably have fundamental issues with themselves, with their personality, their identity, they're dissatisfied with something in their life. And one reason why they're being racist is they want to elevate themselves above other people, they want to find the flaw in others just to feel better about themselves, or to gain a certain advantage. So for someone to be antiracist, that probably means being in the clear who you yourself are in the first place, what you value, how do you define yourself, how you think about your worth or your worth in society. And then, to treat other people with respect, or tell other people that they're being jerks and how that's not okay.

And I think it takes a lot of strength to be just who you are and be secure about it, and to be so confident in yourself that you don't need to put others down and to treat people bad. I mean, that takes a lot of strength, to be secure, to be confident in yourself, to know who you are, being able to articulate it, or even being able to reflect it. I think that's what just many people are not able to do. They don't really have the... they never tried, or they just don't have that capacity or capability to be reflective and to be critical about themselves.

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You can find more information about racism in Germany, as well as other articles, books and videos Willi recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on April 5th!
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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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