



Refugees and others from far away

Text by: Tilman Spengler

It is not long before midnight and most of the beach bars have long since taken down their umbrellas and tied them up, the doors have been locked, but the two men on the next table show no sign of leaving. On their impressively honed torsos they wear T-shirts, the colour of which is unclear in the darkness, but in silvery lettering they bear the name of an island state in the South Pacific.

Is there a moon in the sky? Of course, but it is not yet full. The two men look up at the stars and sing a song with an unusual rhythm and a melody that hints at moving sadness, but also, at times, dogged determination. The musical origins of this melody can only be described as mixed.

Naturally, I ask if I can join them at their table, after all, we're all in the Olympic family. And naturally, a glass is soon put in front of me.

They were singing their national anthem, the man on my right says in reply to my question. For days, they have heard only foreign anthems here in Rio and it was high time to let their own be heard for once. As a symbol, so to speak.

The writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe referred to a "liberating power" when he wrote that a symbol is "an image that is endlessly effective, albeit usually unattainable". This is not entirely undisputed in Polynesia.

"No goal is unachievable," says the man on my left now. "Just think about the refugees, think about when they appeared at the Opening Ceremony."

That was undoubtedly the high point of the Opening Ceremony. The delegation of the "Refugee Olympic Team" marched into the arena as if this place now symbolised their destiny. Later Thomas Bach, President of the Olympic Committee, spoke very simply about how these refugees represented "hope for the many millions of refugees" who "had to flee because of violence or hunger or just because they were different."

Thomas Bach is a lawyer and the winner of a gold medal in fencing. In both disciplines, the rules often threaten to overshadow the actual contest. Spoken before a public who were hopefully still awake, and were expected to be virtually present in their high millions, these words must be praised for being extremely courageous.

Courageous because, as we know, a Republican candidate for the post of President of the USA is campaigning to drive people who are "different" out of the USA, the Austrian and Australian Ministers for Refugees are recommending that the victims of violence be deported to remote islands, and in public usage the term "economic migrant" has suddenly replaced the simple word "hunger".

"No goal is entirely unachievable," says the athlete on my right now. He seems to be shivering a little, even though the waxing moon is still gazing down on us warmly and benignly. "In sporting terms, the refugees weren't much better than us, so that's why I need to sing our own words once again."

After two or three bars of the anthem to their homeland, his friend joins in, and with a little imagination you could believe that the leaping surf of the Atlantic was providing a foaming, effervescent accompaniment.

