Integration into What? The Intercultural Week, Mental Borders and Multiple Identities in the German Town of Bayreuth

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However, I wonder whether this is not asking too much, to somehow jump over walls on such an evening. Well, walls is maybe too strong a word, but to suddenly jump over borders that are so present in everyday life, whether this is not way too ambitioned.¹

This was the disillusioned résumé of Reverend H. after the ‘Festival Evening of Cultures’ (Festabend der Kulturen) which was planned to be the highlight of the Intercultural Week 2008 in Bayreuth, Germany. Reverend H. uses both terms ‘walls’ and ‘borders’ to define what he considers a strong separation between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’.² For a number of years he was the main person responsible for the Intercultural Week, but had resigned from this position at the time of the interview. The Intercultural Week (Interkulturelle Woche, or IKW) is the largest single event celebrating Bayreuth’s cultural diversity. I participated in the meetings preparing the Week for 2008, during which the organisers also evaluated the IKW of 2007. The atmosphere of these meetings was friendly. But emotions were stirred when participants discussed an incident during the IKW of 2007: a dance troupe of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union had overstayed their allotted time on stage. Once they had finally finished, the audience – mainly other Germans from the former Soviet Union – left the venue, leaving the remaining artists behind, who had to perform in a nearly empty hall. After heated discussions about this issue, from which the organisers of the dance troupe remained absent, it was decided that this troupe should not participate in the Intercultural Week of 2008. The following year, the Week’s programme was reduced.
This chapter will be about absences: the absent audiences at events of the IKW, the Russian-Germans’ (Spätaussiedler) lack of interest in other migrants’ activities, and the absence of the ‘native’ German population in Bayreuth, which reduced the event to a meeting of what could be called the ‘integration scene’. I will ask why other groups were absent from the IKW in 2008, and why encounters between those groups who did participate did not take place. I will try to explain these findings by focusing on performances, and on how these reveal existing mental borders not only between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’ but also between different groups of ‘natives’.3

6.1 The research setting in the town of Bayreuth

Bayreuth is the regional capital of Upper Franconia, the most north-eastern region in the German federal state of Bavaria. It borders on Thuringia and Saxony, both of which were part of the German Democratic

Map 6.1 Bayreuth in the German region of Franconia