



What Ali Wore

VANESSA ELLINGHAM ON ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST
UNLIKELY – AND VISUALLY APPEALING – FRIENDSHIPS

Photography by Zoe Spawton

In the online world he's known as that diminutive Turkish man with the outrageous wardrobe. But to Berliners, the photography project *What Ali Wore* symbolises something much greater: the coming together of two neighbouring Berlin migrant communities who live parallel but very separate lives.

Each day, 85-year-old Ali makes an exhausting journey for a person of his age. He takes a bus, then the S-Bahn and then a tram from Neukölln all the way to Lichtenberg, where he works as a tailor six days each week. But to get to the bus, he first walks down a side street traversing two Neukölln migrant communities. It is as if he is crossing an invisible line running down Sonnenallee, separating his more established, predominantly Turkish community from the newest wave of migrants who have set themselves up around Weserstraße.

It was here on one of those early mornings that Ali was first spotted by Australian photographer Zoe Spawton, who was working in a café along the street. Like many in her part of the neighbourhood, Spawton came to Berlin (in mid-2012) in search of adventure and creative inspiration. Needless to say, no one could have quite predicted the special gift that Berlin had in store for her.

"You know when you see somebody every day, and you smile and wave?" Spawton explains. "After a few months of waving I introduced myself, and then asked if I could take his photo. I wasn't trying to befriend him to take his photo, but after I saw him again and again, I knew I had to shoot him." And this is what makes the story so much better: Ali has never dressed up to have his photo taken. He simply dresses up for everyday life.

Two years later, Spawton has photographed Ali wearing an almost bewildering range of three-piece suits in all manner of hues, most of which he has made himself – including the special grey checked suit that comes with a matching tie and hat, all in the same fabric. He has been photographed wearing the tracksuit of his Turkish hometown's football team

and a camouflage outfit with a US Army patch on the forearm. Sometimes he poses with his measuring tape wrapped ostentatiously around his neck. Other times he holds out a string of worry beads that deliberately match the colour of his tie or hat.

All these outfits constitute Ali's regular work attire; he's been dressing to impress for a very long time. "One day he brought me some old family photos," says Spawton. "There's one of him with an electric blue suit that I've got a photo of him wearing, too. But this photo must be from the early 80s. He's still rocking it."

The first photo Spawton took of Ali shows a reserved man that is hard to find in her more recent photographs. Over time Ali has begun to strike more dynamic poses – "but even though the photos are posed, I don't direct Ali. It's all him." Spawton says his posing has developed along with their relationship, but that he gets particularly expressive when there are other people watching. "When he's got an audience, he loves it."

Over time the reach of Spawton's *What Ali Wore* blog has grown to more than 100,000 followers, with international media coverage in Turkey, the USA and Australia, as well as in Germany. At the same time, her friendship with Ali has also grown. He has taken her on Sunday road trips to a summerhouse with his boss and friend, Karim, providing a window into the Turkish Berliner's way of life – when Spawton is out and about with Ali, he carries her handbag, insists on walking on her left-hand side, and won't allow her to pay for anything. She has also found him to be a generous gift giver.

These days Spawton works in another part of the city, but Ali still comes to visit as he has just recently retired. Fewer of their meetings take place in the gap between those two migrant worlds of Neukölln, but the very idea of their relationship has left a big impression on the young, creative inhabitants of those in-between streets – and the rest of the city too.



