

Muhammad's Story, Austria



“Before leaving for Europe, I went back to Syria to see my family once more. I slept in my uncle’s barn the entire time I was there, because every day the police were knocking on my father’s door. Eventually my father told me: ‘If you stay any longer, they will find you and they will kill you.’ So I contacted a smuggler and made my way to Istanbul. I was just about to leave for Europe when I received a call from my sister. She told me that my father had been very badly beaten by police, and unless I sent 5,000 Euro for an operation, he would die. That was my money to get to Europe. But what could I do? I had no choice. Then two weeks later she called with even worse news. My brother had been killed by ISIS while he was working in an oil field. They found our address on his ID card, and they sent his head to our house, with a message: ‘Kurdish people aren’t Muslims.’ My youngest sister found my brother’s head. This was one year ago. She has not spoken a single word since.”

For two weeks my tears didn’t stop. Nothing made sense. Why did these things happen to my family? We did everything right. Everything. We were very honest with everyone. We treated our neighbors well. We made no big mistakes. I was under so much pressure at this time. My father was in intensive care, and every day my sisters called and told me that ISIS was getting closer to our village. I went completely crazy. I fainted in the street one day and woke up in the hospital. I gave the rest of my money to a smuggler to help my sisters escape to Iraq. Now I only had 1000 Euro left and I was stranded in Turkey.

My father recovered from his operation at this time. He called me and asked how I'd paid for his surgery. I told him that the money came from a friend. He asked if I had made it to Europe. For the first time ever, I lied to my father. I didn't want him to feel guilty about his surgery. I told him that I was in Europe, and I was safe, and there was nothing to worry about."



"After I told my father that I'd made it to Europe, I wanted nothing more than to turn that lie into the truth. I found a smuggler and told him my story. He acted like he cared very much and wanted to help me. He told me that for 1000 Euros, he could get me to a Greek Island. He said: 'I'm not like the other smugglers. I fear God. I have children of my own. Nothing bad will happen to you.' I trusted this man. One night he called me and told me to meet him at a garage. He put me in the back of a van with twenty other people. There were tanks of gasoline back there, and we couldn't breathe. People started to scream and vomit. The smuggler pulled out a gun, pointed it at us, and said: 'If you don't shut up, I will kill you.' He took us to a beach, and while he prepared the boat, his partner kept the gun pointed at us. The boat was made of plastic and was only three meters long. When we got on it, everyone panicked and the boat started to sink. Thirteen of the people were too scared to go. But the smuggler said that if we changed our minds, he would keep the money, so seven of us decided to go ahead. The smuggler told us that he would guide us to the island, but after a few hundred meters, he jumped off the boat and swam to shore. He told us to keep going straight. The waves got higher and higher and water began to come in the boat. It was completely black. We could see no land, no lights, only

ocean. Then after thirty minutes the motor stopped. I knew we all would die. I was so scared that my thoughts completely stopped. The women started crying because none of them could swim. I lied and told them that I could swim with three people on my back. It started to rain. The boat began to turn in circles. Everyone was so frightened that nobody could speak. But one man kept trying to work on the motor, and after a few minutes it started again. I don't remember how we reached shore. But I remember I kissed all the earth I could find. I hate the sea now. I hate it so much. I don't like to swim it. I don't like to look at it. I hate everything about it."



"The island we landed on was called Samothrace. We were so thankful to be there. We thought we'd reached safety. We began to walk toward the police station to register as refugees. We even asked a man on the side of the road to call the police for us. I told the other refugees to let me speak for them, since I spoke English. Suddenly two police jeeps came speeding toward us and slammed on the brakes. They acted like we were murderers and they'd been searching for us. They pointed guns at us and screamed: 'Hands up!' I told them: 'Please, we just escaped the war, we are not criminals!' They said: 'Shut up, Malaka!' I will never forget this word: 'Malaka, Malaka, Malaka.' It was all they called us. They threw us into prison. Our clothes were wet and we could not stop shivering. We could not sleep. I can still feel this cold in my bones. For three days we had no food or water. I told the police: 'We don't need food, but please give us water.' I begged the commander to let us drink. Again, he said: 'Shut up, Malaka!' I will remember this man's face for the rest of my life. He had a gap in his teeth so he spit on us when he spoke. He chose to watch seven people suffer from thirst for three days while they begged him for water. We were saved when they finally they put us on a boat and sent us to a camp on

the mainland. For twelve days we stayed there before walking north. We walked for three weeks. I ate nothing but leaves. Like an animal. We drank from dirty rivers. My legs grew so swollen that I had to take off my shoes. When we reached the border, an Albanian policeman found us and asked if we were refugees. When we told him ‘yes,’ he said that he would help us. He told us to hide in the woods until nightfall. I did not trust this man, but I was too tired to run. When night came, he loaded us all into his car. Then he drove us to his house and let us stay there for one week. He bought us new clothes. He fed us every night. He told me: ‘Do not be ashamed. I have also lived through a war. You are now my family and this is your house too.’”



After one month, I arrived in Austria. The first day I was there, I walked into a bakery and met a man named Fritz Hummel. He told me that forty years ago he had visited Syria and he’d been treated well. So he gave me clothes, food, everything. He became like a father to me. He took me to the Rotary Club and introduced me to the entire group. He told them my story and asked: ‘How can we help him?’ I found a church, and they gave me a place to live. Right away I committed myself to learning the language. I practiced German for 17 hours a day. I read children’s stories all day long. I watched television. I tried to meet as many Austrians as possible. After seven months, it was time to meet with a judge to determine my status. I could speak so well at this point, that I asked the judge if we could conduct the interview in German. He couldn’t believe it. He was so impressed that I’d already learned German, that he interviewed me for only ten minutes. Then he pointed at my Syrian ID card and said: ‘Muhammad, you will never need this again. You are now an Austrian!’”

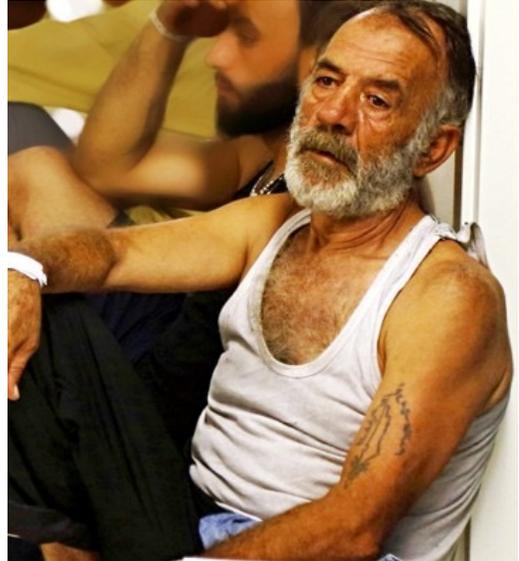
Ahmed's Story, Malta

Ahmed survived the disaster, but he can't find a reason for his life any more. He lost eight members of his family at sea, when on October 11, 2013 their boat sank shortly after it has left Libya and just over hundred kilometers away from the Maltese coast with hundreds of Syrian refugees on board. Three dozen people died in the tragedy.

Ahmed together with most of the survivors was taken to one of the refugee camps in Malta. It was there that I met him. The 67 years old man recalled the horrible day with a broken heart. He had organized the itinerary of his family's flight well in advance from Syria. "Agents" helped them to reach Libya, and from there, according to the deal, Tunisian smugglers should have transported them to Malta. But they got into the hands of a gang of Somalis, Libyans and Tunisians instead. They were kept locked up in a stable on a farm until the departure, that is until the smugglers managed to collect the number of refugees they wanted. Nobody was allowed to leave the building even for a minute. Days were passing and the price of the journey settled in advance rose all the time. Those women who were unable to cover the ever increasing amount got raped by their keepers, while the men got tied up and tortured.

In the end, Ahmed and the members of his family paid USD 3,000 per person in order to get on board. As they entered the boat, however, suddenly some Libyan militiamen showed up and held guns to their heads. They demanded more money. As it turned out the militiamen had noticed, that there were more than 200 passengers on board which was more than double than the number the smugglers had agreed upon with them. The refugees emptied their pockets and put together further several thousands of dollars. But it did not help.

All of a sudden a ship emerged behind them with the militiamen on board and followed their boat for hours. They wanted to force it back to Libya. As these efforts failed, the gunmen started to shoot at the defenceless refugees and severely injured many of them. Soon the bullets punctured the boat, and it sank within minutes.



Hosein's Story, Greece

Hosein is an Afghan Civil Engineer student. He was born in Iran and along with his mother and sister, they sailed off from the Turkish coast heading for Samos Island in Greece. Their boat sunk at high seas on 11 July 2014 and his mother and sister are missing. Hosein and his three other sisters, two in France and one in Germany, have left no stone unturned in trying desperately to find a clue that would lead them to their beloved ones:



The past ten days were the most agonizing days of my life. On 10 July, along with with my mother Fatme and my sister Shokoufeh, we sailed off in a 12 meter boat after having paid 9,000 Euro for the three of us. It was overcrowded as the smugglers had crammed around 40 men, women and children on that little boat.

After several hours at sea, the captain informed us that he was no longer in command of the boat which suddenly started taking in water.

Among terrified screams, I tried to elbow myself to reach the small cabin where my mother and sister were, but I was hurled overboard by panicking passengers. I was very desperate. In the sea, the currents were so strong that I could hardly swim. It was only until several hours later, namely on Friday 11 July at noon, that I along with another, almost unconscious passenger, were spotted by an Italian sailing boat and were transferred to Chios Island. Other survivors were brought to Samos. Fifteen Syrians and Afghans have been rescued. The shipwreck so far claims the lives of six persons who were found by the Greek and Turkish Coast Guards while the rest are still missing.

Other family members of missing people with whom we were in the same boat, are in Germany and in Denmark while I am currently in France with my two sisters and their families. I traveled legally on a travel document issued by the French Embassy in Athens. All the families of missing people are appealing that the search and rescue operations of the authorities continue unabated. We urge the Greek authorities to bring up the boat as there were women and small children in the cabin who may have been trapped.

As for my missing mother and sister, another passenger who left the boat after me told me that they were not trapped in the cabin. Since they had very good life jackets, they must have survived. I am sure they are alive. I will not abandon the search. I expect and hope for good news. But even if the news were bad I still want to know!

Aziz's Story, Greece

Aziz* was 10 when he witnessed his father getting killed in Afghanistan. Together with his older brother, sister and mother, they had to run for their lives. Aziz and his brother went to Iran.

“The day we left, we cried and cried but we couldn't stay in Afghanistan any more. At the time, I thought we would return back one day. I didn't expect my life would take that turn. We lived in Iran for three years, paperless, penniless and experiencing intense racism. My brother then decided to send



me to a European country, where things would be 'better'. I crossed the sea to Lesbos Island, Greece and then reached Athens. During that journey, I lost my most valuable possession: my father's ring which was the only thing I had to remind me of him.

I am now 23 and have been living in Greece for seven years already. I see my life getting worse day by day. How many years can a person live without a future? I applied for asylum in 2008 and never received any notification. I have no papers, no home, no job. I have tried to leave but without success. I don't expect anything anymore. The problems have made me lose my mind.

As if all these weren't enough, in late May this year, I got beaten at the street. I had just arrived in Athens from Igoumenitsa port after another failed attempt to reach Italy. It was 3.30 a.m. and was heading to a friend's house. Five men suddenly surrounded me and started hitting me on the face. I got dizzy and fell down but they kept kicking me. Then they saw I was not moving and took off. My nose was broken and my eye got all swollen up. At the hospital they said I was lucky they didn't draw a knife. I can't stay here anymore. I want to go somewhere where there are laws. If they killed me that night, nobody would do a thing.

What despairs me the most is that I cannot help my mother. I hear she is sick and very worried for me while my brother is still in Iran unable to help. If my life weren't in danger in Afghanistan, I would go back in a minute.”

Mohad's Story, Poland

I first met Mohad in January 2013. He had just arrived to Poland from Malta where he was granted status as a refugee. Warsaw was covered in deep snow then, and the temperature was 15 degrees Celsius below zero. Back there, in La Valetta it must have been at least 30 degrees more. "Why would a young Somalian man trade Malta for Poland?" you may ask.

Mohad had only one reason to do that, but it was a very important one. In Malta he might have had a steady job, but what's the use of having one when you can't live with your family?



In 2008, Mohad, a fisherman from Kismayo, Somalia, had to leave his fatherland due to threats he had been receiving from local militiamen. He had no other choice but leave his family behind. His children were too young to endure the perilous journey towards the unknown, and his wife was pregnant. "I will find a safe shelter and bring you and the kids there. Sooner or later," Mohad promised his wife during a hasty farewell.

It was much more "later" than Mohad expected. In search for safety, he had to cross the Sahara desert on foot and the Mediterranean Sea in a tiny old boat with tens of other refugees. "We were given a GPS and told to navigate to Malta ourselves," he remembers. "We saw the land four days later. A day more and I would die of thirst."

In Malta, Mohad was finally safe, but he missed his family who in the meantime found refuge in Kenya. When it turned out that the Maltese authorities did not allow for family reunification, he started exploring other options. He had to wait 5 years before he found one. One day he was given the opportunity to be relocated to Poland. "I only asked them if I would be able to bring my loved ones," Mohad said.

Mohad's determination paid off. Half a year later he welcomed his wife and children at the Chopin airport in Warsaw. The relief on his face was almost tangible when he realized he fulfilled his promise. I know, because I was there myself.

Agid and Sherin's Story, Greece

"We have no other choice ..."

Agid and Sherin, a Kurdish couple from Afrin, are among the about 200 Syrian refugees demonstrating in Athens' Syntagma square since 19 September 2014. They left Syria eight months ago aiming to reach northern Europe. Yet, after seven attempts to leave Greece and having lost their lifetime savings, they are in total despair. *"Syntagma is our last hope. If this doesn't work either, we have no other choice than to go back to die in our country," says Agid.*



Their journey started in early 2004, when, at the age of 21, Agid was arrested for participating in the Kurdish movement:

I was sentenced to five years and transferred to Adra prison. The first month I was subjected to unspeakable torture. I spent the second month in complete isolation. 'We will make you wish you were dead, but that time will never come,' they told me. And so it was. I was tortured until I didn't believe I was human anymore...

In July 2006 I was released after receiving amnesty. After the abrogation of my political rights and while I was still in great shock, I chose to pass to Turkey for a quieter life. But when the war in Syria intensified, I felt that I could no longer remain uninvolved in what was happening to my people. Thus, I returned to Ras al-Ayn.

In the beginning of 2013, during clashes between Kurdish forces and jihadist militants, I was severely injured by a suicide attack. I spent one month in the hospital. The entire left side of my body is full of shrapnel. If I don't receive any treatment soon, I risk of partly losing my eyesight. Due to the injury, I also suffer from memory problems.

My life was threatened again after this attack. I realized I had become a target, after discovering a bomb in my car three times. Together with Sherin, we left for Turkey before it was too late. But even there, the situation was grim for the Kurds. In order to build a normal life we had to reach northern Europe at all costs.

So, on 6 September we crossed from Bodrum to Rhodes. A one-hour journey turned to 14 hours of hell. As we were certain that we would drown, we were constantly pumping water out of the boat,

while trying to find our way. There were eight children on board. We were very fortunate to come ashore alive.

After Rhodes, we made repeated attempts to cross to the rest of Europe, as Greece cannot provide refugees with the basics to make a new beginning. We tried three times to leave from Crete's airport but failed. Then we went to Igoumenitsa and made three more attempts to reach Italy by boat. The third time, we stepped on Italian soil, expressed our will to apply for asylum but they just sent us back...

With our remaining money we tried to cross to Skopje on foot. Right before reaching the border though, the smuggler disappeared together with the 5,000€ we had given him. A large family who was with us, and today also protests in Syntagma, had given him 28,000 €... Personally, I no longer consider smugglers as humans.

Now we are left with nothing. We spent more than 26,000€ to buy what? An empty hope...

Hamid's Story, Greece

25-year-old Hamid from Afghanistan was just four years in Greece when he sat University exams. He succeeded and now he is studying Business Administration at the University of Macedonia, in Thessaloniki, Greece.

"I was determined to study and get educated. I first went to a Greek school in 2007, without knowing any Greek. In the beginning, I didn't understand a thing but gradually, thanks also to my teachers, I managed to become one of the best students in class.

My school years were not easy. Every morning I got up at 5:30 to go to work, came back at 16.00 and rushed to the night school from 19.00 until 23.00. Fortunately, I had friends to help me with the lessons and Ms Angeliki, the new 'Mom' I found in Greece, to help with all the rest. She cooked, cleaned and contributed to my rent so that I would concentrate on my studies.

When I found out I got into the University, I immediately called my 'real' mom in Afghanistan, whom I haven't seen since I was 14. My family, which belongs to the Hazaras, lived under the constant threat of the Taliban, until, one day the latter tried to run me over with a car. My parents feared for my life, and sent me to Iran. At first I was crying all the time. It hurt too much being on my own. When things got tougher there too, I headed to Europe.

I was just 17 when I came once more close to dying, this time in my attempt to cross to Samos on a boat from Turkey, along with four more Afghans. I had never seen the sea before and although I knew how to swim, the waves terrified me. When the sea got really rough and the oars of the boat broke one after another, there was panic. I was rowing with all the strength I had in me. What kept me going was a 13-year-old boy who was constantly asking me *'If I fall in the sea, will you save me?' 'As long as I am alive, you have nothing to fear'*, I kept telling him. We are still good friends with this boy.



I love Thessaloniki, the town where I live now, but if I could, I would return to Afghanistan without second thoughts. My country is beautiful, there are amazing landscapes, natural resources and high mountains. The only thing missing is peace...”

Sahara's story, Slovakia

Sahara had to flee Somalia and later was offered resettlement. We met her on her way, in the Emergency Transit Centre in Humenne, Slovakia. She told us her story with incredible easiness.

“I told it many times, do not worry, I am settled with my past and trying to look only into the future. I am not afraid, maybe I do not realize how difficult it will be to start my new life in different place but I know that it will definitely be the best what I could have ever done for my beloved daughters.



I was born in 1972 in Somalia. I lived in a city together with my parents and brother until my

parents died a violent death that I witnessed at the age of 16. I remained alone with my grandmother who decided to leave Somalia in order to protect me. Our journey took two months, me and my grandmother walked all the way to the shores of Djibouti where we took a boat through the Arabian Sea to Yemen. I almost lost hope after the engine of the boat had broken down. Fortunately, our over-crowded boat was found by a ship and its crew helped us to reach the coast of Yemen safely.

Our lives depended on the help of others, who provided us food and temporary shelter. We slept and begged in the streets until we were sheltered in one of the refugee camps in Yemen. My life went normal, I found a job as a servant and was happy to be able to take care of myself and the only relative, who was close to me, my grandmother. But the journey exhausted my grandmother, whose health condition deteriorated rapidly. After her death, I remained alone and met a man who wanted to marry me was a recovery. Being a single woman and a refugee in a foreign country is not that easy, trust me. I liked him too. After our wedding, we found a decent house in the capital of Yemen, which offered much more job opportunities. Our three daughters visited school and I was pregnant with our fourth child when my husband filed a divorce and I remained alone again.

I knew that without any support, I would not be able to survive and decided to ask UNHCR for help. I applied for resettlement and found myself to be chosen out of hundreds of refugees waiting with me in harsh living conditions.

People say it must have been a really hard decision to leave everything behind and move to another country with different culture. I made the decision very easily, grabbed the hands of my children, like my grandmother grabbed mine 27 years ago and now, we are on a way towards a new, better life.”

Mouhamad's Journey, Greece

Mouhamad, a 40-year-old dentist and poet, lived in Aleppo, Syria, for many years. In his dental clinic, he offered free treatment to those in need, especially ex-political prisoners. He witnessed a mortar attack that killed 27 persons in September 2012.



Photo by Jowan Akkash/ 2014

“That day, I survived just by chance, because I had closed my clinic half an hour earlier. Like in a traditional Kurdish legend, I received three golden eggs which grant me three wishes. The first one saved me from the bombing, and the second helped me to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan. In January 2013, after passing 20 different checkpoints, I managed to enter Iraq, along with my wife and two children.

My house and the big library still exist. But my brother Nouri did not survive. One and a half years ago, he was killed during his military service. For many months, I imagined the shots rattling into Nouri's head. I had already left Syria, so I wasn't able to take a last glance at his body.

At the beginning of April 2014, I left from Iraq to Istanbul, Turkey, where I made a deal with a smuggler for 2,200 Euro. My wife and children stayed there, to be spared the dangerous journey.

On 3 July, along with other 11 Syrians, I took a bus to Bodrum. There, in a hostel, we hastily wrapped our documents with tape and hid them inside our underwear. We received a call from friends, who told us how the smuggler had forced them at knife point to board a rickety boat. I only had one golden egg left, and it broke it without hesitation:

Once on board, the first time our fiber glass vessel was hit by the waves, it started to wreck. At 2:30 in the morning, the engine suddenly stopped. The deadly silence around us was creating a funeral atmosphere... The sea was terrifying. Terrifying and blue – more blue than it should be. At 5 a.m., we managed to call the Greek coastguard, which took us to Kalimnos. Three days later, we were released with a six months permit.”

Despite the risk, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again. I can't look back. Orpheus did that mistake, and lost everything.

And Mouhamad really meant it: in September, he reached Italy by boat along with 25 others. One week later, he entered another EU country further north, where he applied for asylum and has been living ever since in a camp for asylum seekers.



“My fear, is to wake up one day transformed – as in Kafka's book – into a huge insect, willing to accept anything to survive... War creates slaves of anger. During my short stay in Athens, I found it a fascinating place, even though I don't know how to love another city, apart from Aleppo. The Greek capital is already part of my first novel, which I hope to finish now that I have found somewhere to settle down”.

