

Interview with a Syrian Refugee

I met Essa at the cafe, that was cozily situated in a Vienna city center. He moved to Austria from a small town near Damascus. Essa turned to be a Christian. I was quite excited because of it: barely 10% of all the Syrians are also Christians.

I was expecting, thanks to the image that media give up, to meet a frustrated, exhausted refugee with at least a three-day beard. To my surprise, the clean-shaved handsome guy came in, looking at me with a big smile. I couldn't help but told him he didn't look like a person who escapes from war. "Too happy," said I. "Are you always happy, when you smile?" he asked.

- Where are you from?

I am from Syria.

- What is happening in Syria now?

The war started on 15th March 2011. I left Syria on 10th July 2015. Now it is a military freezing there. A Syrian military cannot get weaker and the free army cannot get stronger. People cannot expect they will be safe there anyway. The good thing is that the exploding of the cars and all those things reduced very much.

- Why did you decide to come to Austria?

Actually, I wanted to go to the Netherlands, but when our refugee group reached Austria and we were arrested by the police (the normal migrants' procedure until the allocation in the camps), the officers took my finger prints and for that reason I had to stay in Austria.

- Did you expect a better future in Europe or just run away from a war?

In Syria they speak about Europe as if it was a wonderland, but I think there is no better future here. I had read about bad sides of Europe before, I was also ready for our awful trip to Austria, this all wasn't shocking for me, but other people didn't expect it.

- Were you afraid to leave your homeland?

People were talking about Europe as about such a nice place, they were just trying to avoid the idea of thinking about fear. I knew it wouldn't be that easy. My family is in Syria now and I don't advise them to come here. When you are a head at one place, you cannot be a tail at the other place. People from different organizations treat refugees so badly here. They do it because they give refugees their money and of course they don't like it. The second reason is language. I don't know when I will see my parents. I can't even skype with them now. First two months were okay, but then... It is hard when you see people on the screen and cannot go to them.

- What problems did you have while leaving Syria?

People who smuggle us from Syria don't care if we die or if we stay alive, they just want to earn money. They use the war very well trying to benefit from it.

From Syria you go to Lebanon and then to Turkey (300\$). There you have to look for a smuggler (1500\$ each), if you don't have one. To allow themselves all this trip people sold household,

chickens. I sold my car. Between 4 and 6 am we should already be on the boat in the sea to go to Greece, because at this time there are no police – they are changing the guard. We were standing on a hill (they call it ‘the point’) near the boat and the smugglers were pushing us to go down to the coast. The stairs were 10 meters away from us, but they just wanted to make it stressed, to create an action, so that we could see the trip as a death trip and could realize that it was very dangerous and our money was paid well, because they were working for us. There were 47 people (two kids – 5 months and 2 years old) from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, from Syria on a plastic boat with a small engine and a trip took 2 hours. The waves were so high that there were no other trips in the sea except ours. The father of those children held them tightly and if you had looked into his eyes, you would have seen a big sorrow, because they were in a horrible danger and he wasn’t able to help them. There is only one choice in the sea you can make – either you die or you stay alive. Fortunately, we arrived to the island.

We spent 10 days on this island, because we were waiting for the documents which should have helped us to go farther. It took so long because of the cafés and hotels owners. There was no camp, so we had to stay on the street or rent a hotel room, which was really expensive. There was no toilet on the street, so we had to go to the café and order something to go to the toilet. This is how they earn money from each group of migrants. The weather was good, so we stayed outside. Then we went to Athens, to Macedonia (there we slept in a shed for animals), to Serbia (where one of us fell from the mountains and the smuggler didn’t allow us to take him to hospital), to Hungary and finally to Austria. In Austria we stayed in a refugee camp, there were no places, so for three days we slept under the tree (there should be 1500 people, but there were 4500).

The trip took one month, we took a shower only twice during this period of time, we were going through the fields, forests and mountains, stood 7 hours under the sun on the border. But it is normal, earlier the road from Syria for refugees took half a year.

- Does Austria or volunteer organizations help you?

The refugee camps did a lot for us. Ordinary people helped us with food and clothes, volunteers, Caritas for example, doesn’t help anyone. It’s just a name. The government gives people 180€ a month, Caritas gives only 40€. And people who live in camps don’t receive any money from the government (because they have food in a camp, by the way the food was really bad), only 40€ for living from Caritas a month. Now I live alone, I already have my asylum positive decision. I can get money from the government and live in a camp, but I don’t do it, because if I do – it will be like a prison, where everyone controls you.

- Why do the men bound to military service go abroad and don’t fight for the peace in their country?

Because they are grey. Not white or black – grey. It means they don’t have any opinion about the conflict or they have lost their opinion because of a big number of different sides of the same situation. These people don’t want to fight for something unknown.

- Why did the Islamic State (IS) appear?

In the first days of the war the Syrian government let 80% prisoners free. People from government wanted to create IS. Most of those prisoners are in IS now. When the government started losing control over the country, it needed an excuse to strengthen the control. At the same time, there was an excuse to have a world support. Of course, the government didn’t expect IS to become bigger and bigger. They didn’t expect their creature would go out of control. IS participants interpreted

Koran in different own ways, which would be an excuse to kill people. On the other hand, I am Christian and all my friends are Muslims. I've never had fear of them and I never will.

- *Did you or your friends have conflicts with nationalists in Austria?*

No... Not yet, I think.

- *What should Syrian government do in future not to allow the war?*

After 6 years of the war the only solution is to divide Syria. They have to give place for all Muslims (Sunni, Alawi, Shia, Ismaili) for them to live separately and not to have a war with each other.

- *Can you understand people who treat refugees badly?*

Of course, I can – many refugees don't speak German, they don't want to learn and just want to get money from the country. It's all about money. Refugees receive money from citizens' taxes. That is why citizens don't like us. The other example is Yugoslavian people who fight against the refugees, because they think refugees will take their job places. Refugees can be paid less money for a bigger amount of work.

- *Does Syrian government help you?*

I think our government is the worst government in the whole world. They know they have millions of refugees all over the world and they change nothing.

- *If you had to, would you be ready to accept thousands of foreign people in your country?*

We already had refugees from Iraq in 2003 and from Lebanon in 2007 and we opened our houses for them. For me, for my family and also for most of the Syrians it was normal, we would accept everybody.

- *Why have there been many criminal problems because of refugees recently?*

Before the elections you can read a lot about it the newspapers. After that there are no problems with refugees. It is not about refugees, it is about politics and media. There are bad people among refugees, but media take this several exceptions and just highlight them.

- *Who arranges the majority of all refugees - people who are looking for a shelter or economic emigrants?*

People came here because of the war. If you tell anybody that you are an economic emigrant – they will kick you out. In fact, everybody has his/her own reason.

- *What is the difference between your present perception of EU and perception before it has become your shelter?*

We would come here to travel before. We didn't see any of negative sides, but when you live in the society you see a lot of them.

- *Are you ready to change yourself to integrate in European society?*

Yes, I am ready. Otherwise, we will be like Turkish people – they have their own society here. Some of them have been living in Austria for 30 years and they don't even speak German. It is not a normal situation. At least you should learn the language. When I speak German here – all the doors are open for me.

- *Do you have anything that reminds you of your homeland?*

Yes, this black woven bracelet with cross I am wearing now is from Syria.

- *Would you like to stay in Europe or go back in Syria when the war ends?*

80% of all the refugees would be in Syria the next day, if the war finished today, but I don't want to go there again. When I came in Europe, I had destroyed all my future at home. And if I return there, I won't have anything. I want to start a new future here.