Her Stories

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"I learned that courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

Nelson Mandela

Title: Her Stories

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Preface

Life is a stage displaying our story and we, the protagonists, get to perform different roles from birth to old age. As many people, as much stories. And not just a single story. People are a treasury of different stories written by life. Yet this same life often denies us possibilities or opportunities for our stories to be really heard and understood. Therefore, as the play of our life is unfolding, our decisions and acts often become subject to interpretation of individual observers, which leads to misinterpretation and subjects us to the mercy of stereotypes and prejudice for the society to easily sort us in different compartments.

'Her Stories' presents a collection of personal stories of women, who have left their home countries for different reasons and have created a new life among us. At first sight one could say migration and/or refugee experience is a common thread of the women in the stories, but taking a deeper look and really listening to the women 'speak' reveals they are so much more than migrants and/or refugees and have a lot in common. With each other and with us.

'Her Stories' collection is the result of the project bearing the same name. Its primary objective was to create possibilities for connecting women with migrant and/or refugee experience among themselves and with their local environment, which has become their new home. Using the method of storytelling the women got the opportunity to be heard and understood and as protagonists also the power to present their stories to you, dear readers, in their own manner and style. The stories present a bridge between different

groups of people and reading them we can find similarities with our own lives, making it evident there is a lot more connecting us than separating us.

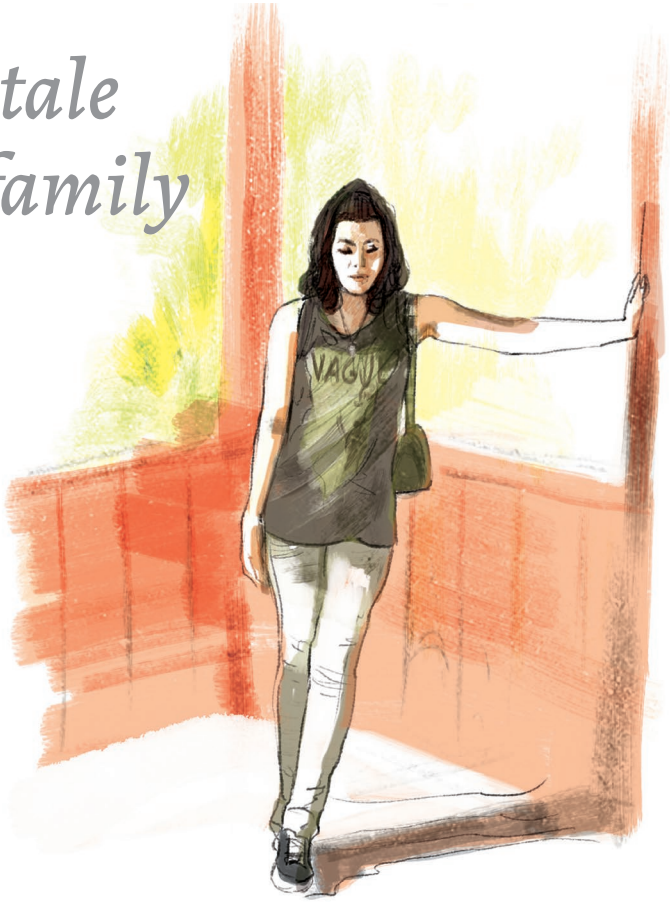
We would like to take this opportunity and thank everyone involved in making this publication become a reality. Firstly, we would like to thank all the women for their courage and time to share their stories for our publication. We would also like to thank the institutions, who recognised the added value of our project and enabled us to publish this collection – Erasmus + Youth in Action and the Slovene National Agency Movit, as well as our project partners – Officine Cittadine (IT), Asociatia Curba de Cultură (RO), Zavod Voluntariat (SI) and Südwind (AT).

Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to the people who devoted their time to the project, training, collecting the stories and writing them down and Assunta Resta for contributing the illustrations for the book.

The publication consists of seven personal stories of women. Along the stories you will find a fairy tale, a poem or some other literary work which the women were free to include in their presentation. Being aware the meaning of the literary work might get lost in translation, we have decided to include some of the literary works in their original language.

In the end, let us invite you on a journey of discovering seven outstanding women and their stories. We hope you enjoy reading the publication at least half as much as we enjoyed preparing it.

A fairytale about family ties



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Once upon a time there lived a family of seven sisters, one brother and a stepmother. One day the stepmother sent the children, equipped with a blanket full of holes, to the forest with the task of collecting walnuts. The children stayed in the forest for hours, losing time by trying to get their blanket filled up. As the sky turned dark and it was time to return home, the little ones had lost their track, but luckily found their way back home: following the path led by the lost walnuts.

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Resisting patriarchy – Self-made woman

My name is Zakie Hosseini, aged 32. I am a single mother of three children and have been living in Austria for six years. Currently I am based in Innsbruck. My parents are from Afghanistan, but I was born and raised in the city of Mashhad (the second largest city in Iran). My family had fled their home country because of the constant war in Afghanistan, which has been going on since the 20th century.

Identity

As an Afghan in Iran one is always afraid of being thrown out of the country, due to the lack of secured residency rights. You need to get your stay prolonged over and over again. As an Afghan at school I could not go to the swimming pool or take part in any kind of competitions. I hated my Afghan identity. I never liked being (considered as) an 'Afghan', as there was always the difference between us and them (Iranians). Our family just lived in Iran, a hard life as a poor family.

Sorting out nuts

I grew up in a big family: we are seven sisters and three brothers. My parents always wanted to have boys, as they were considered 'strong' in comparison to 'weak' girls. That is why there is ten of us, children. (...) My father was considered as the breadwinner of the family: he worked as an imam[1], but still his salary did not respond to the needs of our family. So we, the children, had to work from morning till evening, besides going to school, to secure the family's survival. Our work included producing handmade dolls and separating pistachios and walnuts to sell them at the market later on. These earnings helped us cover the expenses for our education.

1 Imam – a religious leader in a Muslim community;

Relationships

I married at the age of fifteen. At that time my father was very sick. He couldn't work anymore and stayed at home. My mother used to say: "Why should girls learn? They need to marry anyways. We are not rich and I will not be able to send any of them to university." I was actually quite good at school, I received only A's, but still I seemed to be a burden to my family. For me, marriage was not only an obligation, but also something to help my family have a better life. Personally, I just wanted to escape the hardships of my situation. My father chose a man who was ten years older than me, from a reasonable, but poor family. The father of my future husband was also an imam, like my father, which reassured me that they were a good family.

Motherhood

Just after my marriage and before turning sixteen, I gave birth to my first girl. We both cried out of different reasons at the same time. I did not know what to do with her. I had not known how to prevent pregnancy. My mother had never explained anything about contraception. She was always involved in taking care of my siblings, every two years she gave birth to a new child. Nowadays, I think that you should not get pregnant as a teenager, but instead enjoy life as a young person.

Non-communication

As my husband was much older than me, I felt that he was the grown up and l was the child next to him. We did not get along with each other and I think that his family had (like my family) arranged the marriage for him. I felt that he was not satisfied with our marriage. I wanted to love him, but I had no feelings for him. He never spoke to me, actually, we never spoke to each other. Maybe he felt that I

was not able to understand him, but for sure neither of us felt comfortable in our given situation. I just stayed with him at his family's house, because it would have been too shameful to get divorced. My mother also explained to me that a divorce was not possible for me, as she had so many children to take care of and she would not have been able to support me financially. So, in Iran I never thought about ending my marriage and stayed with my husband for eight years.

Unsteadiness

At some point my husband said that he would go to Europe. Although he had not had any money. My husband was poor and he didn't earn enough money for any 'extras', like a refrigerator or a vacuum cleaner or dresses for family weddings, which made me always stay away from these kinds of celebrations. He simply never bought us anything. He believed that as long as he could get us something to eat, he performed his family duties well enough. Despite the lack of money, he still managed to leave us with a small amount of monetary budget before fleeing to Europe. Left alone in Iran, I figured out how to survive on my own. I was lucky to find a job in a bakery, although I didn't have a formal working permission, due to my Afghan nationality. But these circumstances did not prevent me from working. After a while my husband contacted me from Greece and explained that his money had been stolen by a smuggler. He asked me for financial support. I was very upset and frustrated at that time, but I had no choice than to help him out. I sent him the requested amount. (…) After some time he got in touch with me again, explaining that he had received a positive answer for his asylum application in Austria and he wanted us to join him. I actually didn't want to move to Austria and was definitely not ready to live with him again. (…) I asked my mother for advice and she insisted that I should follow him to Europe. She said: "If you don't join him, imagine the gossip from the relatives and other people!"

Fighting and travelling

I repeatedly threatened my husband that if I came to Austria, I would apply for divorce, but he did not take me seriously, as manhood is often related to having the last word in discussions. (…) In the end, we decided to follow him to Europe. He borrowed 1000 Euros from a friend and bought us plane tickets to join him in Austria. (…) Finally there, and with the help of my German teacher, as I could not fill in the form for the court on my own, my German skills were not advanced yet, I managed to get divorced on consensual decision. It did not take long; within a year I was divorced. The only problem was that my husband did not want to pay enough alimony for our children. He even wanted to be reimbursed for the airplane tickets from Iran to Austria that he bought for us. Thus, I accepted his request. (…) It would not be possible to get divorced in Iran. Firstly, my mother never supported my longing for separation, scaring me with the idea that my children would be taken away in case of a divorce. Secondly, a divorce cannot happen without the man's approval.

At home, but missing trust

At present in Innsbruck, I am well-off. Except, sometimes information and opportunities for single mothers are not easy to figure out. I think that an organization for single mothers, especially foreign single mothers is missing in Austria. With such an organization everything would be much easier. For example, how to find kindergarten place for my boy in time. (…) My youngest child is from a relationship with an Iranian man, whom I met in Austria, but he has already been deported, as Norway had been his entrance place in Europe. He received a negative notice from this Scandinavian state. Before his deportation, I tried to help him out, so that he would be able to stay in Austria. He lived with us for nine months, but it was not easy, as he was always nervous because of his lacking

papers. In addition, we had a couple of fights over my pregnancy, as he wanted me to get an abortion. But I wanted (and gave birth to) this child. (…) Nowadays I cannot trust anyone (anymore), as something always went wrong in my life. I only have two friends from Iran, whom I know from my German course. I am always occupied with my children and we only get to spend time with my sister sometimes. She lives in Stuttgart and is waiting for decision on her asylum application. Her application had already been declined once. If I feel bad, we go and visit her. (…) In Austria, I have already finished an eight-month education as a domiciliary nurse. I worked in this field for a short time, I got a job at Volkshilfe, where I worked for a year. In the meantime I got pregnant and now I am on maternity leave, which does not cover the apartment costs, but are being paid by the social security office. I am really thankful for that. (…) I have not seen my family for three years now. The journey to Iran is simply too expensive. I would like to visit my mother, but I also would like to pass the driving license, to be able to take my children somewhere around in town or elsewhere. (…) The relationship with my mother is good. I mean, she had her problems and issues, but being a mother on my own, I understand her better nowadays.

Protection

At the beginning of my stay in Austria, I wore my headscarf for four months, but as soon as I started my German course, I did not want to have those looks from the others. That is why I decided to take it down. Just like that. Even in Iran, I had problems with my headscarf, I could never put it on correctly. Here, I was happy not to wear it any longer. If a woman knows how to defend herself, she does not need a headscarf any longer. Why should I cover my hair? Religion is still important to me and makes me feel comfortable. But in the Islamic Republic State of Iran women must wear a headscarf, although maybe the majority does not want to wear one. As I am not forced to put on

a headscarf, I do not put it on. Still, I am a religious person: I fast, pray and I am thankful for everything I have. Religion helps my soul. That is why I think religion is beautiful.

Belongings

I do not miss anything from Iran, except my mother. I have not seen anything there – no lake, no sea. The place where we lived, we just had an imam and a mosque next to us. If I felt bad, I went there. I miss that place and my mother a lot. Otherwise, I do not miss anything. I do not even want to imagine going back to Iran. (…) Here I have a passport and I can travel easily. I do not need anything for moving around. If someone would like to travel the same distance as from here to Salzburg in Iran, they would need permission, which would be valid for ten days. Here, with my passport, I have an identity. (…) I feel like being at home. (…). But some Afghan men are scared of me. They are afraid that I will tell their wives silly stories or lecture them about their rights in life (…) My future dream is for my children to study at the university and have a good job. Although I do not know if they actually would like to take that path …

My little dream

After two days and one night of travelling by bus from Ukraine, I arrived to Bari with great enthusiasm and pleasure, awaiting new surprises. When I saw my mother again and the smile on her face, I realized the meaning of true love and happiness – when a mother reconciles with her children after so many years. My mum drove us in a small car and

that evening, as we were entering the new city, I remember looking through the window, with my eyes wide open at the numerous lights, so many cars and big plazas. Oh my God! I felt like being in a fairy tale. My first contact with Italy was fabulous. You may wonder why? I am going to tell you all about this experience, so let's get back and start from the beginning.

I am Vita from Lutsk, Ukraine. I am 34 years old and have been living here in Italy for 13 years now. I belong to a family of four people. Me, my younger brother Andriy, my mother Nina and my grandmother Katia. I grew up in a medium town of Ukraine, with only my mum and my brother. My mother was divorced and had to take care of the family by herself. But her salary was not enough and we were always having trouble fulfilling the basic needs of our family. Because of the situation, my mother decided to take a step further and borrowed some money from our relatives to start a furniture business together with another person. As they were developing the business, my mum's business partner gave up on the idea and ran away, leaving my mum in debt and in a very troubled situation. It was a very difficult time, the worst period for my family. A single mother with young children and people wanting their money back. They were chasing us here and there. It was difficult for us to go outside the house or even to remain in the house, because every morning, afternoon or evening there would be someone ringing our bell or knocking on our door to curse us, humiliate us. My adolescent years were marked with continuous mental pressure, sometimes even physical torture from our lenders. At this point my mum decided she needed to do something. She left the country in search of fortune somewhere else in Europe. To earn money and return it to the lenders. But things were not that simple. She first went to Poland and from Poland illegally to Italy, where she started working as a domestic cleaner, a black market job, without a contract.

We haven't seen or heard from our mother for almost four years. Life for us back in Ukraine was a complete hell, particularly for me. Still underage, I was forced to take care of my younger brother in

my mum's absence, as well as suffer all the misbehaviour of lenders and other people. Because of this, I had to let go of the opportunity to become a nurse, which at that time was my dream job. As I was 20 years old, my mother finally got her legal stay permit and she finally was able to visit us. She wanted to take both of us back to Italy with her, but there was a problem because of my age and she proceeded with taking back only my younger brother, who was 15 years old at that time. She tried to find another way for me. She was able to arrange a false working contract as a domestic cleaner for me, through some people she knew and after a lot of difficulties, I finally arrived to Italy. But that's a start of a different story.

At that moment I thought arriving to a country much richer and more developed than my own will offer more opportunities and possibilities for me. After some time had passed, I realized I had to start from zero, from the very beginning. I felt like a new born child, having to learn my first words, basics of the language, having to learn how to move and learning my first steps in life. I started again with school, everything from the beginning. It was really difficult and complicated. I was not a child, I was an adult, a fully grown person, with already years of life experience from the past, which involved a bad childhood as well. I started to lose belief in myself and things only got worse with the hurdles of problems surrounding me – the competitive environment, language barrier, strange behaviour of people, social misconceptions, stereotypes and prejudice all around me. Fortunately, I met some good people as well, who understood my situation and helped me move on with confidence and face new challenges with courage and hard work. Now, after a struggle of 13 years in Italy, I have a job as an intercultural mediator and it is a job that I like very much. This profession helped me to accept and understand the obstacles of living in a new country. And now I get to do this for other people. This is also the reason I am sharing my experience, to make people aware and understand the dynamics of women who left their own countries for different reasons, but don't get the opportunity to tell their side of the story. And to represent their voice and words.

Besides my job I am also studying at the university here in Italy, which I thought was impossible to do in my country. I am also the president of an association of professionals and students from foreign and Italian background. The association works in the field of social, cultural and educational affairs. I am looking forward to a bright future for myself and people around me. I often thank the day I arrived to Italy. I also have a dream to pursue, the dream job from my childhood. So, many things to do and work is in progress.

Home is where the family is

"Thousands of years ago mankind developed monoteism, the belief in the one God. Where is the awareness of the one mankind, the awareness of the unity of humanity? I would call it 'mon-anthropism'."

Viktor E. Frankl

Miroslav Antić: **Plavi čuperak**

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Čuperak kose obično nose
neko na oku,
neko do nosa,
ali ima jedan čuperak plavi
zamislite gde?
U mojoj glavi.
Kako u glavi da bude kosa?
Lepo.
U glavi.
To nije moj čuperak plavi,
već jedne Sanje iz šestog "a".
Pa šta?
Videćeš šta – kad jednog dana
čuperak nečije kose tuđe
malo u tvoju glavu uđe,
pa se umudriš,
udrveniš,
pa malo – malo... pa pocrveniš,
pa grickaš nokte
i kriješ lice
pa šalješ tajne ceduljice,
pa nešto kunjaš,
pa se mučiš,
pa učiš – a sve koješta učiš.
Izmešaš rotkve i romboide.
Izmešaš note i piramide.
Izmešaš leptire i gradove.
I sportove i ručne radove.
I tropsko bilje.
I stare Grke.
I lepo ne znaš šta ćeš od muke.
Sad vidiš šta je čuperak plavi
kad ti se danima mota po glavi,
pa od dečaka – pravog junaka
napravi tunjavka i nespretnjaka.

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Her name is Emina. She was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in a village called Gračanica. Most of her childhood she lived in Slovenia, where she also grew up. Now, at the age of 31, she is currently living in Klagenfurt (Austria) with her husband. A year ago their family was blessed with their biggest joy, a daughter. She was once a refugee and a migrant. Today, she is a foreigner everywhere she goes and is home everywhere her family is.

Her story begins in her early childhood. When she barely set out on her 'life journey', she was forced to understand the meaning of journey in literal sense as well. The word journey became her life companion, a regularity in her life.

It all started with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the spring of 1992. In just a couple of months, millions of people were forced to leave the country. They sought shelter in other countries of Western Europe and a lot of them came to and stayed in Slovenia. The growing tensions in the war zone literally 'tore' them out of their homeland. At that time her father was working in Slovenia and once the war started, he came for her mother and her.

"That night we had to go ..."

"I was four and a half...I am not sure if this is really my own memory or these images arose as a reflection of other people's stories. Certain images are so much alive I believe them to be my memory of events that really happened. I remember we always used to have a blanket and a big can of water ready by the couch. I kept asking my mother why. She answered it was for emergency, if we had to go immediately. To be prepared. I didn't understand where we should go, how come and why. I remember one night. I was in my pyjamas – as usually – and my mother quickly put my clothes on. That night we had to go. I remember leaving on a truck, us sitting in the back, in the trailer of the truck. Saying goodbye to grandfather and grandmother was the most difficult part. They were crying as well. They didn't know if we will ever see each other again. At that time, I didn't understand why they were crying,

but I felt the pain in my heart. I remember other people sitting with us in the truck. There was a lady... I don't know if she was our neighbour, maybe a friend of my mother...she left with us too. During the drive I was lying in my parents' lap and fell asleep ...."

First station: Slovenia (Ljubljana)

They arrived to Slovenia, the capital Ljubljana and found shelter in a private house with several units, which the owner intended for housing refugees only. They lived there for three years. The conditions were very modest, with each family having only one room and people sharing the bathroom, kitchen and other facilities. The modest living conditions didn't discourage the people living there from sticking together and visiting each other.

"I remember an older couple. They were about sixty years old and I saw them as 'surrogate' grandfather and grandmother. I remember visiting them regularly with my mum and dad, drinking from plastic yogurt cups, because we had no glasses. We all came with only one bag, one suitcase... you took whatever was at hand at that time. Only the bare essentials."

Her father didn't earn a lot. He was the only one making a living, besides this they would often send packages and small amounts of money to relatives back home. *"I remember they didn't have milk and we would send them powder milk... and coffee, toothpaste and other essential things. We would enclose a letter into the parcel. Telephones were rare, not every family had one. In the village where I come from only a few families owned a telephone. We would write letters to each other, trying to arrange a time when we would talk on the telephone, just to hear each other's voice, but the calls were really expensive, the lines often bad. Therefore letters remained our main means of communication. By that time I already knew how to write, because I started attending school for refugee children from BiH. I wrote letters to my aunt, grandmother and grandfather."*

Despite life circumstances and living conditions, her memories of early childhood are filled with warmth, feeling of security and

wit. Childlike joyousness. *"I don't remember missing anything. There were other kids living in our building and we would often play together. Of course under different circumstances than today. Modest. There were no computers, telephones, not a lot of toys, but we managed. I remember a game I made up and often played it by myself. Every morning I would go to work and imagine I had a perfume I would put on before going to work. There was a quarry nearby, maybe it was a building site...I remember white, shiny little stones that would keep my mind occupied for hours and hours. That was my working station and it took me quite some time walking to get there."*

Her father worked on a construction site as well. His earnings were modest and the financial situation made her parents decide to move from Ljubljana to Germany.

Next station: Germany

Arriving into a new environment this time was not easy. *"The older I got, the more I became aware of our family's position, I experienced our circumstances differently and arriving into a new environment was marked with sadness and melancholy. Uncertainty. Nobody in our family spoke German. Not a word."*

Her memories are clear and go far back. After arriving to Germany, they lived in a hotel for the first few days. They had a lot of paper work to do and they needed to find a place to live. Sort out their lives. The hotel was a simple one. Full of people from the 'social bottom'. *"The three of us were all in one room. I felt really bad. We didn't know anyone. I remember crying for days...I missed the people I got to know and love in Slovenia. I got attached to them."* She was also bored. Her mother and father didn't pay her as much attention as they used to, they had other worries. She didn't have any toys. *"I remember often standing at the window of the hotel room and crying. I made up a game. There was a road in front of the hotel. I counted cars... counted their colours... something like that."* Her biggest joy was her father's transistor. At one of the radio stations they would receive calls from Bosnia and

Herzegovina of people sending their greetings to relatives around the world. *"I don't remember exactly... maybe the radio programme was also about commenting the war and political situation of that time... but I remember clearly the three of us lying together in bed and eagerly waiting for the show. We were thrilled at hearing something we could understand. Something connected to us. Something a part of us. The show aired late in the evening...I remember listening to it before going to sleep and for me that was the highlight of the day."*

It was hard at the beginning, because her parents didn't speak German. As a child, she quickly learned the language and became a great help in communication. Once again she started school in the first grade, but because her language skills advanced very quickly during three months, she started attending regular second grade. When she was in her fourth grade, her father lost his job. Both of her parents were now unemployed and the mother pregnant for the second time, Emina in school. That is why her parents decided to move back to Slovenia, where her father would seek his former job, which, despite the modest income was a stable one. In 1998, after three years, they again moved to Slovenia, this time to an industrial, mining town of Trbovlje, because of lower accommodation prices. In Trbovlje, Emina entered into fifth grade of primary school.

Returning to Slovenia: Memories of growing up in the 'black valley'

Just as she got used to life in Germany and things got nice, she had to move again. Just as she mastered the language. Just when she started making new friends and spending time with them. When they started going to the cinema together and first sympathies started entering into their lives. Again, she had to leave it all behind ....

She describes it as the hardest period of her life. Their moving would again bring them into the unknown – as usually. She found herself in a new and different environment again. She had to (re) learn a foreign language again. She had to change school and meet

new people. Make new friends. This was happening at a point of entering her teenage years, a period of sensitivity and vulnerability. Besides this, teenagers are not as open as young children. They hang out in groups. *"It is more difficult to get accepted and harder to meet new friends,"* tells Emina.

"I remember often being laughed at and called 'Bosanka[1]', 'čefurka[2]'. It is interesting to observe how one tends to forget or repress most of his/her early childhood, yet certain memories or images are literally cut into your memory. When I was in fifth grade, I remember writing an essay in which I wrote that our 'aunty' instead of aunt came to visit me. In my language we use 'aunty'. Everybody in the classroom laughed at me. From that moment on I was always afraid of saying something wrong and I am still afraid today. It was very difficult for me. I remember often crying in the morning before going to school. I would cry in school, in the toilet before going into the classroom as well."

Even the image of the town was painful to look at. While in Germany, they lived in a city surrounded with beautiful nature, vineyards, whereas Trbovlje is a former industrial town. The place they moved to was an old, former mining settlement. *"Our first apartment was a wreck and too small. I already had a small brother at that time. As a family of four, we lived in a small, 20 square metres apartment. I didn't have my own room, of course. Even our bathtub was placed in the kitchen, because there was no other place to put it and none of the other rooms had water supply."*

Despite the modest living conditions, their living expenses were not low. Her father was the only one working and they had expenses with prolonging their visas as well. Their visas would be prolonged only if their father was able to prove he was earning enough money, otherwise they would have to return to Bosnia.

After a long time, after they were able to change their status from temporary residency to permanent residency, refugees in Slovenia at that time were able to apply for Slovene citizenship, preconditioned with several requirements (knowledge of Slovene language, permanent job and resignation of citizenship of Bosnia

1 'Bosanka' – a female coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina; often used in derogatory sense;

and Herzegovina etc.). *"We were able to get Slovene citizenship when I was already in high school. I think I was 16 at that time. My father was the first one to get the citizenship, on the basis of working and living in Slovenia for several continuous years. One of the conditions was also permanent employment and certificate of Slovene language. I remember helping my father getting ready for his exams a lot."* After their father got the Slovene citizenship, the rest of the family members were able to apply for it as well.

"Things were very hard for a year or so. After that we started to meet new people, neighbours, and friends. Most of them our fellow countrymen. I made a lot of friends in school as well and I was learning the language really fast."

As she was browsing through her memories of childhood and growing up, she kept silent for a while. *"War and the situation described changes people. As a child you feel and know that something is wrong, that something is serious, bad, although you cannot fully comprehend the situation. These circumstances make you realise that material things surrounding you, your peers or how other people see you, are not really important. There are more important things in focus. It is a matter of survival and the important thing is to feel safe with the people closest to you. Questions like 'What is going to happen tomorrow? What is happening to people who stayed behind? What does the future hold for us?' keep coming to your mind. There is no time nor place to focus on yourself. At least not in the classical sense. 'Will we get the papers or not? How will we manage to get through the month? Are we going to get visa or not? Will our father be able to earn enough money?' These were the basic existential questions. Questions of (social) security. As I got a bit older, at around 10 years of age, I was able to understand everything and I would often listen to my parents talking. I understood our family situation and my parents' worries to the smallest detail. I was involved in finding solutions for our family situation already as a child. I was the one who was learning the language the fastest, so I would often write job applications for my parents, help them with finding a bigger apartment, fill our application forms for citizenship etc. Whatever needed to be done, I was involved in doing it. In this sense, I had to grow up very early in my life."*

On the other hand, her parents were the most important companions on her journey through life. *"All the problems connected with*

2 'čefurka' – pejorative expression denoting the female inhabitants of Slovenia that are of Serbian/Bosnian/Croatian ethnic origin;

war and our moving around, everything that came our way, we were able to overcome together. My big support were also the friends I made in Trbovlje. I was lucky to have them as friends, lucky they accepted me. Listen to me. Understood me. This has always been a great comfort to me. And we have remained friend all this time."

As a teenager she used to dream, think and question her future a lot. She considered education as key element of her future, a way to a better life. Education as key to a good job. Social stability. Independence. *"A visa for a promising future. A future different from my parents"*. In high school and at university she was always at the top of her class. She finished high school with honours, ranked at the top of all competitions. *"Being successful in school was a way of self-affirmation. It was my way of getting acknowledged and respected by my school friends and peers. Approval and praise from the teachers and surroundings. I believed it would be easier to be accepted if I am successful. People would see the potential in me. Talent. A promising future. Not just a refugee, migrant. Stupid, stereotypical 'southerner' or 'čefurka'"*.

Emina finished her studies in Ljubljana and got a bachelor's degree in international relations and master's degree in strategic market communications. Before finishing her studies, she worked in a marketing department in Trbovlje, which later on turned into a permanent employment. Despite her stable job, after a while she desired a change, mostly because of the relations in the company and the environment she was living in. In terms of quality of life, it wasn't offering her enough. In the meantime, she met her future husband, who, at that time, found himself in a similar situation. Both of them never stopped dreaming. And their dreams led them across the national border. Due to stable economic conditions, better employment options and favourable social policies they decided to move to Austria. Late fall of 2013, with a suitcase full of life experience, they moved to Klagenfurt to stay close to their families. Both of them have moved quite a few times in their lives, but for the first time together. In Klagenfurt they have created a home together – a family.

Being a foreigner – "Once you leave your country, you forever remain a foreigner, everywhere you go."

Moving to another country means being a newcomer. A foreigner. What is Emina's personal experience with being accepted? And more importantly: What does she herself find most foreign? And where is her home?

"I think there are two sides to this story. When you are a child, it is easier. At that time, being a child is enough. Even if you don't know the language, you get to communicate through other means, through play. Play is all it takes. Children are generally more open than adults."

In Klagenfurt (Austria), where she is living at the moment, the feeling of being a foreigner is the strongest. *"I have been dealing with my identity here the most. I don't know... maybe issues are starting to catch up with me. But I think the fact that my current environment is conservative, intolerant and closed for foreigners and migrants, plays a major role. This environment is extremely intolerant to refugees. Especially from Syria. Towards all 'southerners'. Even Carinthian Slovenes. Due to the vicinity of the national border with Slovenia, many people are even more intolerant to Slovenes than (other) 'southerners'"*. She is convinced that current socio-political situations around the world and Europe, the increase in migration and current migration politics (the raise of extreme right-wing parties and (right-wing) populism) play an important role. Media play the most important role when it comes to presenting social (un)reality, because they keep putting these themes in the centre of attention, reporting on them in a biased and stereotypical manner. *"The media report about foreigners, refugees, migrants on a daily basis, but highlight only the negative things. As if all refugees and migrants are pure evil – rapists, religious extremists, do-nothings. I feel the pressure... even if the report is about other foreigners, like refugees from Syria, I often feel as if it is about me. I guess I feel a part of them. This whole thing started to be too much of a burden, so I stopped following the news on the radio and TV. I feel like people don't think for themselves. They still take everything they read in the newspaper or hear on TV or radio for 'a fact'. The 'living truth'."* She feels that people everywhere treat her differently because she is

a foreigner. *"They are less friendly with you. They put less effort into getting to know you. I get the same feeling when I'm at the doctor, when looking for an apartment or when arranging bureaucratic matters at the institutions. You are often 'the last one in line'. Even at the employment office they treat you as someone, who is here only temporarily, in the line of "Oh, maybe you will find a job in Slovenia as well." When I left my job here in Austria, a lot of people were asking me if I am going back to Slovenia now. It often happens that people consider you financially less capable or even stupid. I've experienced this a few times. My German is fluent, yet people tend to speak to me as with a small child. Very slowly, supported with hand gestures. It hurts my feelings and makes me angry."*

As a newcomer, immigrant you constantly have to prove yourself at everything you do. As Emina points out, one has to be more educated, work harder, be nicer... all this in the hope to be accepted one day. *"I am tired of having to adapt my whole life, learning, trying, accepting new environment and circumstances.... trying your whole life to get accustomed to, to fit in... but still being treated as ...I can't really find the right word... someone, who had committed something wrong. As if you always have to defend yourself. As if you have done something wrong, but haven't."* She also finds it a great injustice that foreigners don't have the right to complain about anything. *"One has to accept everything that is offered to you and be grateful for it. Regardless of everything you have achieved, in the end you are always being looked down on. The business world, which I have been working in, on one of the managing positions, is an illustrative example of this. Being a woman one has to fight all the time, prove yourself, but being a woman and a foreigner at the same time, makes it twice as hard. It takes a lot of will and drains the energy out of you. It is tiring and sometimes you just want to be like 'everyone else', the majority. On the one hand, I don't want to deny my identity and don't want to be like everyone else, but on the other hand, I don't want to stand out anymore."*

This being said, Emina is also angry at herself. She is proud of her achievements and experience, yet she still finds herself in situations of feeling small and helpless in the company of her natives. *"I am angry at myself for it. Not at others. I still often act like a small, helpless*

child, ashamed and afraid he might say something wrong. To mispronounce a word. I should remind myself more often of the things I've been through in my life and be proud of myself. I should stop hiding. I often hold this against me. Rationally, I know I am worth just as much as anyone else, that being different doesn't mean being less worthy and I have no reason to be ashamed. I just wish I didn't stand out. There are times I wish I was completely unnoticeable. Invisible. As if I have internalized this pattern, this notion that we, 'foreigners', newcomers should always feel like we are worth less. This is something I would like to surpass. Overcome. I would like to have more sovereignty. To be louder... Of course, not all people in Austria are close minded and conservative. I really shouldn't be generalising."

Once you leave your country, you are forever and always a foreigner, Emina stresses.

"Everywhere you go. Even if you return to your native country. For the people there you will also be a sort of a foreigner. Because you don't live there anymore. You didn't grow up there. You are someone who doesn't know and has not experienced the hardships of local people, you are someone who has made 'a better life' for himself abroad. Up West. It is interesting for me when we are driving back from Bosnia to Austria. We are driving from Bosnia... across Croatia... and Slovenia. Back to Austria. And where do I feel most at home? If I had to choose one place, I would say Slovenia. I grew up there, I went to school there. I finished my studies there. Spent most of my life there. I have my friends there. And I feel accepted there. But nonetheless, even in Slovenia, I am a 'foreigner'."

Emina does not associate home with a country or homeland, not even with a specific place. *"Home is where the family is. I have moved a great deal in my life, but was able to call any place my home, because I was there with my father and mother. Later on also with my brother. Today with my husband and daughter. Home is made of emotional ties and personal relationships. Home is where you feel safe. Where you feel unconditionally accepted. Where you can turn to in times of trouble. Everywhere I go, I will be some kind of a 'foreigner'. But my world is made of relationships. The warmth of genuine personal relationships. Family. Friends. People I got to know here in Austria and found themselves in a similar life situation as*

myself. Similar life situations bring people together, connect them. And this is what offers you the feeling of belonging."

And what does she herself find as most 'foreign'? *"The thing that I find it hard to understand is people judging other people without getting to know them. Without wanting to know them. This is the thing most strange to me. A person not giving a fellow person a chance. Regardless of our 'origin', nationality, religion etc., we are all people. After all, every community, every culture – as homogenous and united as it may seem – is diverse, vibrant. People are different. Regardless of where we live and where we come from. The borders are within ourselves. In people's hearts."*

"Nobody leaves his home, unless his home is a shark's mouth"
(Warsan Shire)

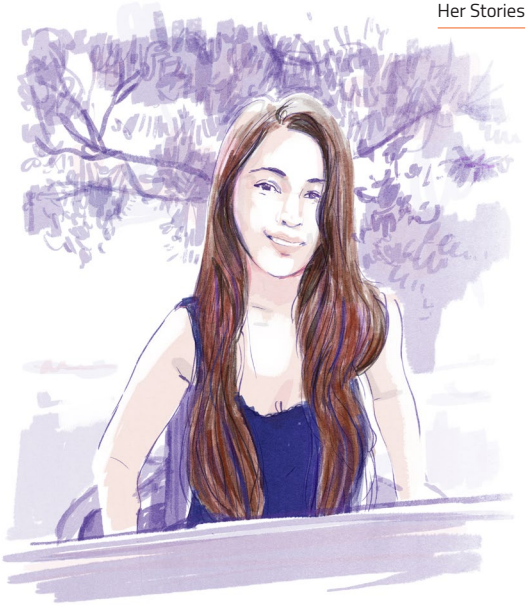
The topic sparked our conversation and as we were approaching the end of it, I asked her how she, as a young and educated person would comment current socio-political situation and the migration policies in Europe? What would she like to tell the world (European institutions, decision makers, schools and people)? Last, but not least, what message would she like to pass to the women, who find themselves in similar situations?

"What I would like to tell people is that refugees are not tourists. I would like to ask those people who lack empathy or turn a deaf ear to refugees if they themselves would, without any reason, leave their home? Would they leave everything they ever had behind? Everything they ever were? Would they head into the unknown world with empty hands, with only fear and uncertainty? I am angry. I can openly admit to being angry and sad at the things. They don't know what war is ... people don't know what war is. Refugees and migrants left their homes because of their situations, but they had a home once too, a family, work, a certain social status, many of them high education. They had a life, like all of us, until their life was torn into pieces. People don't know what it means to fight for life, to be desperate, to be afraid of not knowing what tomorrow brings, will you still be alive or dead. Will

your loved ones be still alive tomorrow? These are people whose lives are filled with trauma. I disapprove of the migration policies and media coverage. The focus is on refugees and migrants being presented as pure evil. As if they were not human. As if we didn't live off the same sun. As if we don't have common problems and challenges. We are facing climate changes. Famine. Wars. I am angry at the fact that people believe fake news and stereotypical presentations. That they don't think by themselves. That they don't give a fellow human being a chance and don't even want to get to know him. Under their own terms".

She would like to tell women refugees and migrants to never give up. *"Don't give up. You have to stay optimistic and fight. Focus on a brighter tomorrow. A better future. I still believe that once the effort will be paid off. That every person gets what he or she deserves. You don't know how many steps are still ahead of you, but you shouldn't give up. When things get most difficult, tell yourself: "I can always quit tomorrow!" The world is large and spacious... you need to move further. There are still good people in the world. Someone simply has to welcome you somewhere, but you have to be persistent. Don't stop, fight. Move on."*

The story of one's smile



I have decided to follow Jesus

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I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back. Though I may wonder,
I still will follow;
Though I may wonder, I still will follow;
Though I may wonder, I still will follow;
No turning back, no turning back. The world behind me,
the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back. Though none go with me,
still I will follow;
Though none...

***

I met Genalyn in her home, on a beautiful Saturday morning in June 2019, in the back of their garden in Hales, Buzau, Romania. Coincidently it was her birthday. She turned 24 years old. When I met her, she seemed a bit shy and I was a bit anxious, not knowing how our encounter would develop. Now looking back, I'm smiling. It was pure joy to listen and talk to her. We laughed a lot and we free-associated most of our thoughts.

The story of Genalyn Flores Petre, originally from Inopacan, Leyte, Philippines, is the story of a girl who was brave enough at a young age to trust her heart and God to make some life decisions that impacted every part of her life, forever. I was impressed from the very beginning by her sincere way of expressing herself and by the openness towards me, literally a stranger. I felt immediately that I should take enough time to listen carefully to whatever she wants to share with me. While she was developing her story, I was happy to see in her eyes and in the way she expressed herself nonverbally, the honesty and her firm belief that when you truly believe in your heart and God, literally anything is possible. She fought for her happiness and decided to leave her family and her country at a very young age, to follow her love to another part of the world, Romania.

Her story is also cross-cultural, because it offers details about how it feels to change not only the familiarity of the country you're living in, but also to adapt to a completely new culture, with everything it brings along: local habits, food, language, communication, friends, family and love. Only through reflection and reliving those memories, we realize how strong we were in making some decisions that continue to influence our life path for the rest of it. Genalyn is no exception to this rule and thinking about her and how young she is, I feel she can be a true inspiration for many of us, in terms of honesty, truth, sincerity, trust and love.

What are the challenges and the great satisfactions of her story, you are about to find out in the following pages.

The significant moment that would bring her in the situation of deciding to move to Romania goes back to late October 2015,

when she met her future husband on the internet. However, her story begins much earlier, when she was left without a father at the age of 9 and being the youngest of five siblings, she learned that if you want to survive, you have to work for it, even if you are only a child. Originally from Leyte, an island in the Philippines, she has three brothers and one sister, all of them being older than her. She describes her family with great pleasure and you can tell that she feels very connected with them and they have a very good relationship. She describes herself as being part of a family who is not rich at all, and especially after her father's death, the family was confronted with great financial difficulties. Her mother had a small shop at the local market and most of the time she helped her with whatever was needed. At the age of 18, she moved to Manila, the capital of the Philippines and she started to work as a maid. Because she needed the money and she had to have a full-time job, she stopped going to high-school for a while, having in mind her objective – to earn enough money and one day return to school and finish high school. It was a good plan. She managed to finish her studies while working, staying close with her family all the time. Her mother is a very important person in her life. Genalyn inherited a wonderful voice and interest in music from her. Music continues to play a central role in her life, just as it used to be very important when she was living with her mother. In the hardest times of her life, music seemed to be the relieve she needed to feel safe and happy again, because no matter how hard life can be at times, it's always a blessing to have your passions and significant others close to you.

Genalyn is also a spiritual person and another constant in her life is her faith in God. She is a Seventh Day Adventist by birth. After finishing high-school and getting another job at her uncle's herbal shop, she started praying to God to send her a good man to be her husband. So she met Bogdan, online and they started to communicate, developing their relationship from a distance. It was late October 2015 when they started to engage in online conversations. The relationship developed so much that almost one year after

they've met, he decided to go to the Philippines to ask her to marry him. Bogdan travelled more than 40 hours by plane to get to her place. Now when he talks to me, he says it was worth every second of it. They say the secret of their relationship is honesty and self-affirmation. They both expressed their intentions and expectations, their values and principles from the beginning. Both of them wanted to commit to a long-term relationship and were in search for the love of their lives back then. Even though she knew she was close to moving away from her country and embracing a new life together with Bogdan, for Genalyn leaving the Philippines was never easy. Her mother was anxious and worried for the safety of her daughter. It was hard to believe that a man would travel the world just to make her daughter happy. Bogdan's initial plan was to stay in the Philippines for one month. Enough time, he thought, to meet the extended family of Genalyn and to visit the country as well. In the end, he stayed one more month, because there was not enough time. He wanted Genalyn and her family to feel safe and secure with him, wanted to allow them enough time to be ready to say goodbye to each other, to whole-heartedly bless their relationship and marriage.

For Genalyn that was a time of great joy and happiness. She was surrounded by her family and the man she loved was next to her. When the moment of actual departure came closer and she had to say goodbye to everything that was her life history up to that point, sadness appeared as a natural grieving process. Migration was a personal choice for Genalyn, she followed her heart and dream to build a family with the man she loves. But separation is never easy. Migration usually challenges every part of our identity and she was to be tested as well.

She has blurred memories of the moment when she left the Philippines. She doesn't remember exactly if it was night or day. But what she does remember is her impression from the window of the plane, when she saw her beloved country from above and when she realised with surprise and impact that inside of her, sadness was fighting with happiness. She allowed herself to sigh and cry and Bogdan was there to soothe her, to carry for her.

After another 48 hours of travel and intense feelings of what was about to happen in her life, she arrived to Romania, where Bogdan's family fully embraced them at the airport. She felt the cultural shock right from the beginning. In the Philippines, when you meet someone for the first time, you just shake their hand, but here, in Romania, people are kissing each other on the cheeks. So she felt shy and somehow inappropriate, but happy at the same time, because she realised that Bogdan's family will be a great support for her and she can consider them her family as well. Another dimension of her cultural shock was also the food. At the beginning, she didn't like the taste of Romanian food at all. She barely could stand the smell of it, but with time she developed quite a taste for it and now she plays by mixing recipes from the two cultures. She loves her new country, she is telling me how warmly she was received here and how well treated and accepted she felt from the beginning.

The couple initially wanted to get married at the Romanian embassy in Manila, but it was not possible, so Genalyn applied for a visit visa in Romania. They actually got married on November 27th, 2016 in Romania, a day of amazing memories and happiness.

It is widely recognized that an individual's capacity to remain himself during periods of changes is fundamental to his sense of identity, which she experienced emotionally. Establishing a sense of identity means maintaining stability in the face of changing circumstances and life cycles. But what is the impact on the identity level when you choose to change your country, language, life habits and the people around you? How can a person survive this internal earthquake?

For Genalyn the internal earthquake started when she settled into her new home in Hales, close to Buzau city – Romania. All of a sudden, she found herself alone, with nothing familiar around. Bogdan started working again, because he had to provide financial support for the family and Genalyn remained alone in her room, most of the time. The great barrier she had back then was the language. Even if they lived with Bogdan's parents in the same house, she couldn't make conversations, because she didn't know Romanian

and they didn't speak English at all. It is important to mark that the language change is one of the most difficult problems immigrants face, because language is a social product, with a genetic and functional link to all practical activities carried out by a man in society. Language is one of the most traditional elements of culture and the most resistant to change, because it is the fruit of the culture that nourished the individual from a young age, to create and assimilate the image of the world around him. So, no wonder Genalyn started to feel more and more depressed, bored, wondering what she was going to do in this new country, where nothing seemed familiar, so far away from her family. She was also pregnant and the intensity of emotions during the pregnancy can overwhelm the mother. Luckily she found a best friend in Romania and she was able to share some impressions with her as well. This is how she found out she is not the only one who experienced such intense emotions of sadness and inadequacy. Despite the good emotional support offered by her husband and people around her, despite her conscious thought that she doesn't have any real reasons to feel that way, she felt helpless in her efforts to change her mind-set. So she continued to struggle with those feelings for quite some months, including the period after she gave birth in 2017 to a beautiful baby girl named Katya Sofia Petre. She offered herself time to heal from the separation from her country, mother, family.

Looking at me and telling me this story, I can see it on her face how difficult this period must have been for her. Smiling, she tells me it's difficult to understand those intense feelings of sadness, even for her. I cannot say anything. I just stand there, listening to her and trying to understand her emotional experience.

When we had the conversation, her daughter was 2 years old and they have such a beautiful and close relationship. She is the main person in her daughter's life, spending time with her 24 hours a day. She feels now very much adapted into her new country. She managed to overcome the sadness and mixed feelings about her new life here. Now she is able to laugh, enjoy the house, the surroundings,

the people, the food and the air of Romania. She tells me she loves everything about this country, which treated her so well from the very beginning. She is happy with her choice and she thinks that when she goes back to the Philippines to visit her family, she will miss Romania as much as she missed the Philippines when she left.

At the end of our conversation, her husband joins us in the garden and they both want me to mention that they think their marriage has the most important elements that ensure sustainability, peace of mind and happiness. They believe those elements to be harmony, understanding, tolerance, respect and kindness.

Fight for life

Vinicius de Moraes: **Happiness**

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Sadness has no end
Happiness, yes
Happiness is like a feather
What the wind brings to the air
Fly lightly
But he has a short life
The wind must not fall
The happiness of the poor resembles
To the great illusion of the Carnival

We work the whole year
For a moment of dream
To make a costume
Of king, or pirate or gardener
Then it all ends on Wednesday
Sadness has no end
Happiness, yes …
Happiness is like the drop
Dew on the petal of a flower
It shines calmly
After it swings slightly
And it falls like a tear of love
My happiness is dreaming
In the eyes of my sweetheart
It is like this night
What passes, what passes
Looking for the aurora
Speak softly, please …
Because she wakes up as cheerful as the day
Offering kisses of love
Sadness has no end
Happiness, yes …

***

My name is Cleidiane. I arrived to Italy in March of 2004. Before I never thought about leaving Brazil. I became a single mother very early in my life, which unfortunately, is very common in my country. Many girls become single mothers very early in their life, because the men often leave them after making them pregnant. The same thing happened to me (smiling with hidden pain). I became a mother when I was only 19 years old.

When my son was 3 years old, he got sick with a disease called Osteomyelitis, a bone infection. I had to work at that time in order to feed my family. After my son was born, he never saw his father. His father had already left us and ran away while I was still pregnant. So nothing… (deep breath). My son was seriously sick and the whole situation became very complicated. I had to stop working and my son had to go to a hospital. The first time he was admitted into a hospital, he spent two months there. When he was discharged, I was able to start working again, doing small odd jobs. I was working as a tailor in my cousins' factory. I learned the trade from my aunty, who also got me job. At that time my son needed physiotherapy, but unfortunately, in Brazil it is very difficult to sustain the process of physiotherapy, even just a little. After being discharged from the hospital, my son was supposed to undergo rehabilitation treatment and attend physiotherapy at the hospital. The hospital was very far, 250 kilometers away, which was too far for my resources and availability. The physiotherapy was scheduled 3 times a week, which would mean visiting the hospital 3 times a week and that was impossible for me to do. I turned to Prefecture for help and he helped me by arranging a place for the two of us on a small bus which takes sick people to the hospital, but that was not sufficient. In fact, at that time our situation got really complicated and it became impossible for me to maintain my job and take care of my child at the same time. In 2004 things got even worse, we had to go to the hospital again, because my son needed a major surgery. The operation was scheduled for January 2004, but this time in a different hospital, in the capital city, 600 kilometers away. Due to the lack of resources, it became impossible for us to travel to the city, to live there in the time of the surgery. Fortunately, the Prefecture granted us a place to stay in the city during the operation and recovery. Despite this, we still needed money to live there, for food, transportation etc. I asked my cousins to pay me for the work I did, but they didn't have the money. I was worried about the whole situation and I didn't know what to do.

I had a most precious work of art in my possession. It was a handmade embroidered portrait and was very important to me. I decided to sacrifice it and with the help of the church we were able to collect donations for it, which would cover our expenses. Finally, we were able to leave for the capital and arrived to the hospital, where my son was admitted and being prepared for surgery. But no… Everything was not going according to the plan. Before the surgery, one of the internees in the hospital discovered that the surgery they were about to perform should not proceed. Due to some small error with the measurements. If the doctors decided to proceed with the operation, my son's situation and his health could have gotten worse. Fortunately, the internee spotted the mistake and the surgery was postponed, so we were again discharged from the hospital, heading back to the place where we were staying. The place was located very far from the hospital and I didn't have money to spend on bus or taxi. We had to walk for a long time to get back, in the scorching summer heat of Brazil, with my sick son. It was like hell. My son was crying (starts crying herself), because he was so weak. My heart was full of pain at that moment and I thought to myself I had to do something. At that point I took the decision to take a major step and save my child.

My mum knew a family that had been living in Italy for a long time. She asked them for help in bringing me to Italy to work. After a lot of problems and issues they were able to help me come to Italy and offered me a place to live. I lived with them for two months. It was with a heavy heart and full of worries that I left my son with my mother and left for Italy. After two months, the family I was living with, moved to another city and I was left here, alone. I was having problems with the language and arranging my legal status, because my time of legally staying in the country expired and I became a 'clandestine'. I turned to my fellow co-nationals for help, because they were the only ones I could trust and communicate with. Unfortunately, most of them gave me advice to go into prostitution, to them this seemed like the only possible solution to

my problem. I wanted a normal job, so I tried to look for work as a house cleaner, babysitter and finally got a job as a waitress in a restaurant. While working there, I also met my future husband. But my mind was focused only on bringing my child to Italy as soon as possible and secure the medical treatment for him. It was a problem, because I was an illegal and I couldn't bring him to Italy. But that didn't keep me from going around doctors, with my son's medical documentation and trying to find a doctor that might be able to help him. In the summer I found a job at a hotel near the beach and met a colleague, who knew a specialist doctor. We contacted him and send him my son's medical documentation. According to him, the operation was possible, but to be sure, he would need to examine my son and he told me that I should bring him to Italy as soon as possible. At that point the relationship with my future husband was developing and we were becoming very close. He knew about my problems and wanted to help me and take care of me. Despite being warned about our relationship many times by his family and his colleagues. He is a police official and I was a Brazilian illegal. Our relationship was also not easily accepted in the society. People were warning him that I was only taking advantage of him. But he was firm in his decision, sincere with me and helped me solve the problem with my son. After a few months dating, we got married in April 2005 (calls her husband for the date). Only two days later we already left for Brazil in order to bring my son back to Italy. It didn't take long to come back to Italy and we quickly proceeded with arranging the documentation to get the operation done as soon as possible. The operation succeeded and the doctor kept following my son's recovery up until 2017. Thanks to God, my child is now cured and healthy. Despite the prejudice from my husband's family at the beginning, they helped me a lot in taking care of my son.

All the situation affected my personal life a lot. I arrived to Italy to get the treatment for my son, but then got married and got a daughter as well. There is no reason for me to return to my country, maybe in the future, when we are retired.

My dream to study became true. It was impossible to do it in Brazil, because I come from a very poor region and for a single mother studying presented only a luxurious dream. Remaining in Italy, I am able to work for my dream. I changed my job and started attending evening school, made many friends and got my high school diploma. I started thinking about a dream I had – to study international relations. I wanted to become an ambassador, but that is not possible now, due to my age. But I still like to study it at a higher level, even if I can`t become an ambassador. I can learn and get tools to help others. I would like to do something in the field of climate change and help the environment in my region, as it has a very dry climate, with lots of drought. During my studies I came to know about the UN based international organizations and agencies working in the field of environment. I contacted them for future collaboration in doing something particularly for my region. I hope that I finish my master's degree at the university, which is planned for November (2019).

Even after living in Italy for 15 years, I feel divided in two. Once, when I was talking to a man from Senegal, he said to me: "We, foreigners who settled here in Italy, have our belly button divided in two; feeling inside the origins, but living here a different reality, which is now a part of us."

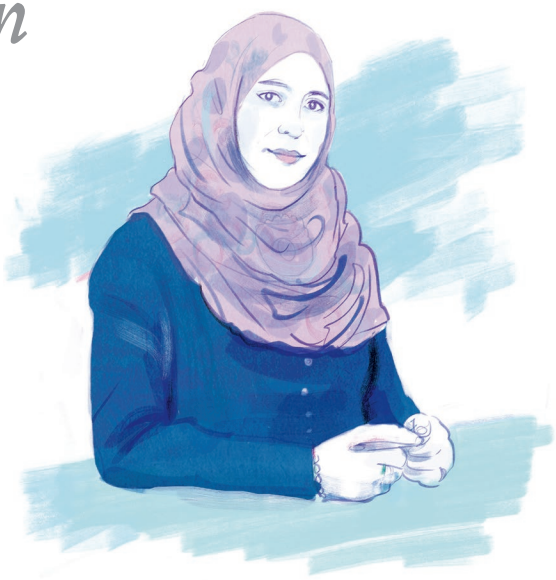
My life here and now is calm and quiet. But because of the changes in the political climate, the last two years I have been feeling uneasy. I don't feel as safe moving around as I used to. My son, who was the reason I came to Italy in the first place, was adopted by my husband and became an Italian citizen, but he also has his Brazilian origins. Every time he is offended, he feels them very much. If you don't have the Mediterranean or Italian look, you are considered a foreigner in the society. After all, you can't go out into the public, proving your citizenship with your ID to everyone. Because of these reasons – the general situation and social misconceptions – I try to warn my son to be extra careful. I raised him up to be respectful to elders, to respect the law and the institution. If he finds himself

in a situation of misbehavior because of facial profiling, he will be informed enough to handle these kind of situations with strength and intelligence. I personally don't want to apply for Italian citizenship, because I don't want anyone blaming me of taking advantage.

I am also involved with an organization that works in the field of sharing traditions, cultures, languages and gastronomy of various countries of the world. The association was founded by Italian students from different backgrounds. I am hopeful that with our work we are able to break some prejudice, which are born unjustly.

I am convinced things in my life took the right turn. Even if at times I suffered, I am proud of my choices and happy.

An extraordinary Algerian woman



Little Red Riding Hood

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Once upon a time there was a sweet little girl. Everyone who saw her liked her, but most of all her grandmother, who did not know what to give the child next. Once she gave her a little cap made of red velvet. Because it suited her so well and she wanted to wear it all the time, she came to be known as Little Red Riding Hood. One day her mother said to her: "Come, Little Red Riding Hood. Here is a piece of cake and a bottle of wine. Take them to your grandmother. She is sick and weak and they will do her well. Mind your manners and give her my greetings. Behave yourself on the way and do not leave the path, or you might fall down and break the glass and then there will be nothing for your sick grandmother."

The Little Red Riding Hood promised to obey her mother. The grandmother lived out in the woods, a half hour from the village. When the Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods, a wolf came up to her. She did not

know what a wicked animal he was and was not afraid of him. "Good day to you, Little Red Riding Hood." – "Thank you, wolf." – "Where are you going so early, Little Red Riding Hood?" – "To grandmother's." – "And what are you carrying under your apron?" – "Grandmother is sick and weak and I am taking her some cake and wine. We baked it yesterday and they should give her strength." – "Little Red Riding Hood, just where does your grandmother live?" – "Her house is a good quarter of an hour from here in the woods, under the three large oak trees. There's a hedge of hazel bushes there. You must know the place," said the Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf thought to himself: "Now there is a tasty bite for me. Just how are you going to catch her?" Then he said: "Listen, Little Red Riding Hood, have you seen the beautiful flowers that are blossoming in the woods? Why don't you go and take a look? And I don't believe you can hear how beautifully the birds are singing. You are walking along as though you were on your way to school in the village. It is very beautiful in the woods."

The Little Red Riding Hood opened her eyes and saw the sunlight breaking through the trees and the ground was covered with beautiful flowers. She thought: "If a take a bouquet to grandmother, she will be very pleased. Anyway, it is still early, and I'll be home on time." And she ran into the woods looking for flowers. Each time she picked one, she thought that she could see an even more beautiful one a little way off, and she ran after it, going further and further into the woods. But the wolf ran straight to the grandmother's house and knocked on the door. "Who's there?" – "Little Red Riding Hood. I'm bringing you some cake and wine. Open the door for me." – "Just press the latch," called out the grandmother. "I'm too weak to get up." The wolf pressed the latch and the door opened. He stepped inside, went straight to the grandmother's bed and ate her up. Then he took her clothes, put them on and put her cap on his head. He got into her bed and pulled the curtains shut.

The Little Red Riding Hood had run after flowers and did not continue on her way to grandmother's, until she had gathered all that she could carry. When she arrived, she found, to her surprise, that the doors were open. She walked into the parlor and everything looked so strange, so she thought: "Oh, my God, why am I so afraid? I usually like it at grandmother's." Then

she went to the bed and pulled back the curtains. Her grandmother was lying there with her cap pulled down over her face and looking very strange. "Oh, grandmother, what big ears you have!" – "All the better to hear you with." – "Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!" – "All the better to see you with." – "Oh, grandmother, what big hands you have!" – "All the better to grab you with!" – "Oh, grandmother, what a horribly big mouth you have!" – "All the better to eat you with!" And with that he jumped out of bed, jumped on top of poor Little Red Riding Hood and ate her up.

As soon as the wolf had finished this tasty bite, he climbed back into bed, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly. A huntsman was just passing by. He thought it strange that the old woman was snoring so loudly, so he decided to take a look. He stepped inside and in the bed, there lay the wolf he had been hunting for a long time. "He has eaten the grandmother, but perhaps she still can be saved. I won't shoot him," thought the huntsman. So he took a pair of scissors and cut open his belly. He had cut only a few strokes when he saw the red cap shining through. He cut a little more, and the girl jumped out and cried: "Oh, I was so frightened! It was so dark inside the wolf's body!" And then the grandmother came out, alive as well. Then the Little Red Riding Hood fetched some large heavy stones. They filled the wolf's body with them, and when he woke up and tried to run away, the stones were so heavy that he fell down dead.

The three of them were happy. The huntsman took the wolf's pelt. The grandmother ate the cake and drank the wine that the Little Red Riding Hood had brought. And the Little Red Riding Hood thought to herself: "As long as I live, I will never leave the path and run off into the woods by myself if mother tells me not to."

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I am watching the person I am writing about, while she is organizing a big event in one of the most popular hotels, the Marriott hotel, in the historic city center of Vienna. I can see she has everything under control. She's going around, phoning, briefing the women that will be on the stage in the next seconds. You can tell 52-year-old Rachida knows what she's doing and she loves doing it. This woman doesn't

shy away from anything. She invited women from different Arab countries to this event to represent their traditional fashion. Rachida could organize this whole event quite self-reliant and fill the big hall with women, make them laugh and inspire them. She could even win over the managing director of the well-known Austrian traditional Trachten shops, Tostmann, to grace her event. Through her work and her self-confident way, she has many contacts in Vienna. But how did she come to where she is today? A capable, successful woman, a strong personality with a big network. A mother, an advisor, a trainer in adult education, specialized in occupational integration in the job market in Austria. From the town of Blida in Algeria to the center of Europe, Vienna.

There are two decisions Rachida took and has never regretted. These decisions changed her life totally. The first big decision was marrying and moving to Vienna 25 years ago. It was not easy for her, because it meant leaving the place she had known her whole life and going with her husband to Europe in 1994. She left her house in Blida, 50 kilometers from Algier, where she was born in 1967. She left her family, her whole country for a whole new adventure, with a man she hadn't known for very long, but she fell in love with. Before that she studied Sociology and English Linguistics. As the eldest of five children, Rachida went to a Catholic kindergarten and school, where she learned Arabic, English and French. Her mother was a very pious woman, who taught her many important values, like respect and tolerance. She grew up in an interreligious environment – it was like a preparation for her later life in Vienna, as an obvious Muslim woman, who's trying to engage with and empower other women. Rachida got to understand many of life's lessons through her father as well. He was a fighter for independence of Algeria and taught her how sometimes you have to persevere, insist until you get what you're aiming for.

The second decision Rachida took was to stay in Austria, despite the separation from her husband. Actually, she decided to walk away from her marriage, because she was sure that she wanted

a functioning family life. She and her husband were journalists and worked in different countries for several media houses all over the Arab world from 1994 till 2012. Rachida served as correspondent for the Middle East Broadcast Center (MBC) and worked at the MBC in London. She also wrote articles in French language. Because she has always loved travelling, Rachida had a great time working and travelling with her husband.

Although it was a great decision, which changed the course of her life, Rachida didn't think a lot before marrying her husband and leaving her hometown for Vienna. It was not an easy decision, but it was the right one. Actually, Rachida had other plans for herself. Before she met her husband, she was taking courses at the British Council in Algier and wanted to continue her studies in London. At that time, the 90's, the military coup between the Islamists, who took up arms and the military deployed in the streets of Algier. The armed conflict between the Algerian government and various Islamic rebel groups began in 1991. Rachida remembers that time during the Algerian Civil War. It was a good time to leave the country for her and her family. Today Rachida says she doesn't regret marrying her husband, even if they got divorced ten years after. Even if there were reasons for her decision, because she was the initiator of the separation, she is very respectful towards her ex-husband and the father of her son. Not only because they lived together for many years, and he was the father of her son, but also because he died some years ago. You can really sense the honorable way she is talking about him. The only thing she tells is that he wasn't a family guy and lived mostly for himself and his work. It took two years until she was divorced. Both of them were intellectuals and so was their divorce. Very rational and civilized.

This experience taught her a lot. All of a sudden, she was alone with her seven-year-old son. She had to do everything alone. Today she calls herself an expert in everything in life. Rachida had good friends standing by her and she knows where she can get support, if needed. Thanks to her family, she has always been self-confident and

strong. Her family always allowed her freedom to choose her own path and to be independent. As the oldest daughter, she had many responsibilities, ever since she was a young girl. And that's something which helped her in coping with many things in life. Because she always knew she had to be a role model for her four younger siblings. Rachida calls herself a dominant, leading personality. But still being alone and being foreign wasn't easy for her. When she told her family about the divorce, which took place 2004, her father provided her with the advice to come home if she wants to and she'll have the support of the family or to stay where she is and overcome life, because she's capable of that. He trusted her. And that gave her more confidence going her own way.

As a single mother, there were many challenges she had to face though. Besides being foreign and having no family in Austria, there were times she didn't know if she's doing everything the right way and was questioning many things. Her solution was to read a lot and get advice from professional people. Until today, she and her son have remained best friends. Their relationship isn't like the relationship of a mother and a son, they are best friends. And still Rachida tells how hard it is to raise a child alone, without a father, to fulfill all your duties of working, being there for your son and having your own life. Rachida today is single and very content with her life. She would marry again, if she found the right person, who respected and valued her.

When Rachida moved to Austria, it was much easier to emigrate than today, she says. Without any complications, in a very short period of time, she gained residence and work permit. She began to work after two months only. She knows how privileged she is and wants to help people who have many difficulties migrating today to a whole new society, which is often racist and not welcoming. She's working as a consultant for migrants and refugees. Because she had a similar experience, she has a lot of empathy and understands what these people are going through. When she was divorced, Rachida quit her career as a journalist and wanted to have more time for

her son, so she couldn't travel as much as she used to. She started working as a self-employee for an embassy and did translation jobs. She finished trainings as a consultant for migrants and is a trainer in adult education. After many years of hard work, Rachida is a senior expert today. She worked for the International center for migration, many NGOs and associations. Her aim is to help other people to integrate and have a dignified life.

Another goal, and struggle at the same time, is to change the perception about the Muslim woman in the western society. Rachida is different and far from every possible prejudice people could have on Arabic or Muslim women. She proves in her everyday life she is neither oppressed, nor is she an uneducated Arabic woman. She's educated, successful and she's trying to help other women follow their path of self-fulfillment. On an everyday basis, she's continuously working on changing the image of Muslim women in Austria. Rachida met many people in her life, who were surprised that there are women like her, women who make their own decisions, who live independently. She wants to show everyone that Muslim women are also entrepreneurs, doctors, trainers, politicians and educators. Maybe there are still some oppressed women, but you can find them in all European societies.

Even if politics and the public opinion is often Islamophobic, this woman stays optimistic and loves life. And that's the reason why she is able to overcome every challenge in her life. She's lucky, she says, because she never really faced racism in Austria. Maybe because of her very strong personality, she says while smiling. But she wonders how people would go to other places in the world to see new cultures and history, but when people come from there to live with them, they get hostile. Living in another country, with a different culture, is not always easy, because to a certain extent you have to adapt and be flexible. But you also have to work harder to get accepted and be understood, you have to think in a different mind-set then yours. Her ingredients for a happy life are to always be positive, be open minded and always make the best out of every

situation. This is her currency, she says while laughing. And still life has some hard moments for us to live. Even if they can be unbearable, we need them to stay humble and thankful. Two very hard moments in Rachida's life were the death of her father and the death of her mother some years ago. It's still breaking her heart that she has been away from them for so many years. She's a religious person and because of that she knows she will meet them again someday and that gives her hope and strength to continue her way.

To always educate herself, travel and stay positive, that is what she wants to achieve. And she also has one more important dream to pursue – to build a school for children in the Pacific. Actually, this was her father's dream, but he died before fulfilling it. When Algeria was a French colony, Algerians were sent there and left behind without anything, Rachida explains. Someday, she will go there and give back from what was given to her.

Looking for soil

Expensive birds

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One fine day, Nasreddin Hodja arrived at the market of Akşehir. As he dismounted from his little horse, he breathed in the scene around him – shoppers bustled, vendors chanted, donkeys brayed, cattle lowed and chickens clucked and squawked. The air was rich with aromas of good food and fresh flowers. It was a beautiful day for shopping.

As the morning sun started to warm, Nasreddin made his way through the stalls, pausing here and there to try sweet morsels, feel soft silks and inspect fine ceramics. Enjoying everything immensely but finding nothing that piqued his interest so much as to detain him, he wandered on through to the animal stalls. How funny they were – the cows, lazily chewing cud and swishing their tails; the chickens clucking and bouncing around each other; the goats with their eyes askew, nibbling on things they shouldn't. He amused himself for some time petting and teasing some small goats with the ends of his robes, which they longed to take a bite out of.

"Ho, ho, ho, not today, my little friends!" he laughed as he pulled the material out of reach of their probing jaws.

He dusted off his hands, still chuckling to himself, and started to walk on when something caught his attention. A cry from a bird vendor brought him back to the enclosures for further inspection. He approached vendor – a young man, calling enthusiastically to passing customers, bidding them to come closer. Had he heard him correctly? He looked down at the bird for sale – sleek feathers, two scaly legs and a shiny beak. He leaned in closer – the bird cocked its yellow eye at him and started to emit a low growl. Nasreddin frowned back at it before straightening up to address its owner: "My friend, this is a bird!"

The vendor blinked. "Why, yes, Hodja sir, it is."

"It is?"

"Yes, sir."

Nasreddin's frown deepened as he considered the young vendor, who shifted his weight on his feet uneasily under the old man's gaze. "If it is a bird, my good friend, then why do you ask for a price of 50 akçe?! The other birds –" he pointed to the chickens in the next stall – "cost only 5!"

"Ah," nodded the vendor, understanding now Nasreddin's point of contention, "a very wise question, sir, very wise, indeed. Well, you see – this bird is a parrot!"

"A parrot?" Nasreddin's frown darted back down to the bird's storm-grey feathers and curved black beak. Indeed, it was no chicken.

"Yes, sir, a parrot. They're very special birds, you see? He can talk!"

"Talk?!" blurted out Nasreddin, indignantly, and gaped at the parrot. It gave a loud squawk in response. Nasreddin's frown returned. "Hmm… What can it say? I want to hear it t–"

"'ELLO!" squawked the parrot. Nasreddin's jaw hit the ground. The vendor beamed.

"Go on, Oscar, say someth–"

"'ELLO!" The parrot once again cocked his beady eye at Nasreddin. "'ELLO! 'ELLO! 'ELLO!" And he finished this outburst with a loud squawk.

Bursting with pride, the vendor turned back to Nasreddin. "So, you'll take him? I think you'll agree – 50 akçe is a bargain for an animal such as this!" But his smile faltered as he met Nasreddin's gaze, which was full of laughter. In fact, there were tears rolling down the old man's face! His whole

belly shook with chuckles as he looked at the vendor and his verbacious bird. Nasreddin said nothing as he walked away. He only tapped his nose and, still laughing, winked.

The vendor could still hear him howling as he disappeared over the hill on his little horse. Never mind, he would sell the bird soon enough to somebody else. He had plenty of interest. There were crowds teeming around him to hear the parrot talk. He was busy all afternoon coaxing the parrot and bargaining with people. He thought he had a sale secured with a father of two young girls who were completely enamoured with Oscar when his pitch was interrupted by the loud cries of a new vendor who had set up shop near him. The crowds were starting to move over that way. What was he up to?

"100 akçe!! 100 akçe!! Roll up, roll up! 100 akçe for this very special bird!"

The vendor picked his way through the crowd who were laughing and chattering excitedly. When he got to the front, he was met by a gobbling turkey on a leash of string.

"Ah, my friend, you've come to take a look, eh?" Nasreddin Hodja grinned down at him, holding the string at the other end. "Look, look, please! It's a bargain, I'm sure you'll agree!"

Exasperated, the young vendor shook his head. "Hodja, sir, this is a normal turkey, like you can buy anywhere. You can't sell this bird for 100 akçe!"

"But you are selling yours for 50 akçe!"

"Yes, but mine speaks!"

"So what?!," quipped Hodja, tapping his temple, "Mine thinks!"

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This is the story of Fehime. Originally from northern Turkey, she has now lived in Slovenia with her family for the past 8 years. She is a mother, a teacher and a spiritual person – religion, she says, is at the core of her life. She believes that God is the source of everything – nature, food, rain, family...all things, good and bad, come from him. In Slovenia, she enjoys celebrating the local holidays in addition to

the Turkish ones, such as Ramazan bayramı and Kurban bayramı, which are times for cherishing family and those you hold dear.

First steps / Unfurling

Sometimes she missed them, but the future was exciting. Her mind kept escaping back to the village and her grandparents and uncles that she left behind – her big comfortable house, her warm and welcoming family. She left it for, Ereğli, a larger town where there was a school. With this move, the first chapter of her life closed and the next opened with school. Little did she know at the time, as she vigilantly combed back her hair in anticipation of another day, that this was the book laying out its chapters for all her life to come. The only thing that Fehime wasn't excited about that day was her math class. The teacher seemed unusually strict with her and Fehime sometimes didn't understand why. Her sister's voice brought her back from her daydream as she called to her that it's time to go.

During math class, she glanced nervously around the classroom to avoid her teacher's gaze. Numerous neatly combed heads in black uniforms were diligently scribbling into notebooks all around her. She was used to following most of her lessons effortlessly, but now her mind wandered anxiously as she felt the teacher's eyes on the back of her head. If she were to ever be a teacher, she would encourage the students to think with their own heads! In her childhood brain, there was at the time perhaps an inkling of how much of a reality these thoughts would come to be, in more than one way.

Moving around / Scattering

In fact, she chose it to be her profession only a few years later. An even bigger town awaited her. Its bustling roads and busy streets were quite different from her childhood village, but she soon grew

to love Kastamonu. The girls she shared a flat with became her family and this town full of historical richness, surrounded by natural beauty became her home. Like everyone, Fehime wanted to secure a good future for herself, but she also wanted to do something she was passionate about. She chose to study teaching, so that she might help children grow to their full potential. A time of great change followed – one in a series of many. After graduating, Fehime found a job in Turkmenistan. Teaching is a laborious task, but seeing children learn and develop into unique individuals made it more than worthwhile. She loved being around children and, soon after, she wasn't only surrounded by them in school. That year, she got married and had her first daughter, Beril.

Only a few years later, she moved again – this time further than ever before, to Dublin. Serin, her second daughter, was born there. She was again surrounded by the bustling streets of a big town, before relocating to Belfast. She felt at home in Ireland, a land full of foreigners from many different countries.

A place to grow

Walking down the street, Fehime could feel the piercing looks of passers-by. As always, she was the only woman wearing a headscarf in the misty morning in this little town nestled in the Alps. The cafés she was passing were full of chatter even at this early hour, but she did not understand much of it, even after a few weeks of language lessons. Luckily, just like her, most Slovenians spoke fluent English and she made friends easily. Because she didn't speak the language, she was not able to teach in Slovenia. But her family soon began to flourish there – her youngest daughter, Masal, was born and together they were making a happy home in the outskirts of the city.

Nevertheless, that morning, she was walking to school with her little Serin clutching her hand. Serin had only been going to

school for a few months, yet Fehime was already left with her final hope, as her previous complaints made to Serin's teachers and the school counsellor seemed to have no effect. As her daughter's frown disappeared behind the classroom door, Fehime made her way to the head teacher's office and once again explained that her child comes home from school every day sad and scared, sometimes complaining about pushes and kicks. Yes, she understood that kids are not used to having foreign children in class, but how can Serin ever improve her Slovene if her classmates are constantly teasing her about her accent? She had even developed a stutter in the past few weeks – that's how stressed she was! With the head's assurance that something would be done about the situation and doubts about it, Fehime left the school.

Every child is an individual. Every child has specific abilities. They need the best soil to bloom. The school system can be unfair, as it expects the same things from all students. But the Montessori method is not like that. These are the things Fehime thought about as she watched her youngest daughter carefully sculpt the clay into a head of a bunny. It took some convincing to get Serin off the TV screen that afternoon, but the child seemed to have forgotten all about the cartoon now.

Sure enough, the school authorities weren't doing much to help Serin. So Fehime would often sit down at her computer and read about Montessori philosophy. She may not have currently been working as a teacher, but she was determined to be the best parent she could. She wanted her girls to form their own learning objectives and be good people in their own unique way and that's why she was inspired by it. As the girl chattered away, Fehime listened for the stutter. Since Serin had begun her speech therapy, it had gotten a lot better.

Times of change are never easy, but in that moment, Fehime felt sure that her family can overcome everything – they can grow to love this country, they can make many friends, her daughters can learn the language and Serin can thrive.

Closure

Before our book closes, allow us to spare some words about its beginning or rather the process of how this publication came to be. The initiative for the book came from four volunteers, active within Humanitas, who are especially interested in the field of migration and refugee issues. Working in the field, they have identified the need to open spaces and offer opportunities to women with migrant and/or refugee experience. A space, where they would be able to tell their own stories and as the protagonists in their stories, would be able to present all their special, unique, (un)usual and above all human characteristics, often overlooked in the society by stereotypes. After discussing it with project partners and representatives of target group we all came to the same conclusion that the need for such opportunities is present all around Europe.

A lot of things happened in between that first coffee meeting and publication of the book. In April, 2019 the first of the activities took place in Brežice, Slovenia. A group of youth workers and people, interested in the project, from all four partnering countries, meet for a week long training, where we were discovering the field itself, the situation of women with migration and/or refugee experience in different countries, learning about methodologies, challenges and technical issues connected to publication of a book. The participants of the training then continued with the work of 'collecting stories' in their own environment and preparing the stories in cooperation with the project coordinator in Slovenia. The result is now here, you are reading it, and we are confident is demonstrates the high level

of commitment from all the people involved – the people in charge of collecting the material as well as the women, who have decided to share their stories for the publication. We believe the publication is a great result in itself, yet it brings other results as well, which are not apparent at first sight – it brings us new friendships, skills, competencies, opens us new perspectives and brings new ideas.

All the above mentioned brought us all together again in November, 2019, when most of the initial team met again, this time in Ljubljana, in order to evaluate the project and to officially launch the book. In the 5-day meeting/training, we did a lot of evaluating, reflecting, promoting of the project and brainstorming about where and how to take this project forward. We paved the road for the book with a Living Library event, where the visitors also had a chance to 'read' some of the stories from the book in person. The bookshelf of our Living Library was full of 'powerful women', where the women from our publication undoubtedly belong.

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