



THE REFUGEE  
JOURNALISM  
PROJECT



# LIMINALITY

The Refugee Journalism Project was started in 2016 and is based at London College of Communication, part of University of the Arts London. It supports refugee and migrant journalists to re-start their careers in the UK. Some have worked as senior journalists and were imprisoned or exiled for their activities, others had their studies or training interrupted by the outbreak of war. In 2018-19, the project was delivered in collaboration with The Guardian Foundation, Refugee Council and University of Derby. It was funded by Open Society Foundations, Aziz Foundation, Google News Initiatives and London College of Communication.

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# INTRODUCTION

A year ago, I stood in front of a packed seminar room in London College of Communication. It was induction day for the latest group of the Refugee Journalism Project. We had run out of seats and the room was hot and uncomfortable. More people turned up than we had expected.

As the participants took turns to introduce themselves, I became aware of the challenge that lay ahead. Each person spoke passionately about what they had achieved, and the careers they had led in their home countries. There were former editors-in-chief, managing directors, heads of departments, correspondents and award-winners. Their countries of origin encompassed 20 different nations, and their specialisms included human rights, social activism, global health care, geopolitical analysis, gender equality and civic empowerment. Their remarks were peppered with hints at the violence, oppression and hardship that some of them had escaped.

And yet since coming to the UK, most had experienced rejection, disappointment and ever-diminishing confidence, to the extent that some had almost given up. The standard of their collective résumé and their level of skepticism towards the British media scared me. What could our small project offer them? How would we make this forgotten wealth of talent once more visible and relevant? An exchange from that day would prove to be emblematic of the answer to these questions.

Prior to the induction, a participant asked if she could bring her baby to the session. Concerned about safety and practicality, I had declined. And yet, she arrived with her baby anyway. She refused to let a barrier be imposed on what she saw as an opportunity to improve her situation. I came to learn that this wonderfully defiant spirit was common of RJP participants; it was the fuel that propelled them to make the most out of the opportunities that were presented to them. They were hungry to deepen their understanding of British media, to improve the fluency of their written English and to take advantage of influential new networks. My role was simply to be their match-maker and advocate — they would do the hard work.

This blend of resilience and grafting has led to bylines on national media platforms, internships at national newspapers, paid freelance commissions and scholarships to full-time courses. Importantly, their contribution to the UK, through self-representation, has been recognised and valued.

They have interacted with tutors, journalists and editors from Trinity Mirror Group, Index on Censorship, Thomson Reuters Foundation, The Guardian, The Financial Times, BBC Arabic, Bloomberg TV, BBC News, Al Jazeera English, Channel 4 News, ITV News, BBC World Service, and The Sun. The contribution from those in a position to effect change is extremely valued, but it is a reciprocal relationship, and as much about the shifts in

perception or behaviour that RJP participants can elicit in those who they have come into contact with.

However, I am not complacent. There is still so much to do, particularly at a time when this sort of work is being undermined and discouraged by the growth of national populism. According to a report published by the UNHCR in May, the unemployment rate amongst the UK's refugee population is at 18%, three times that of the UK-born population. And sections of the British media continue to frame refugees as victims, criminals or scroungers, tainting the public's attitudes towards migration.

Specific data on the numbers of refugees working in media roles is difficult to track down, but I have yet to be persuaded that diversity in journalism has radically shifted from City University London's 2016 research that found significant under representation of all ethnic groups and religions in British journalism. It not only matters what stories get told, but also who is doing the telling. Journalism in a functioning democracy needs to come from multiple perspectives and to reflect the interconnected world that we live in. This is not just an ideological or moral argument. Reports have consistently argued that it makes financial sense, with diverse organisations reporting higher levels of innovation, creativity and employee satisfaction.

Liminality is the state of being in between; of belonging neither here nor there. With it comes disruption, anxiety and invisibility. But this stage of being in limbo is a temporary state of existence, so with it comes the hope of future transformation and empowerment.

Through the exhibition and this accompanying publication, which mark the close of the current round of the RJP, we hope to tell this transitional period of migratory life from the perspective of persecution, freedom, and resettlement. It takes a humanistic approach, encouraging critical thinking about how we perceive human beings who have to leave their home countries, but who are survivors.

**Vivienne Francis**  
Director, The Refugee Journalism Project

## SUPPORT IN THE STRUGGLE

**Mentoring refugee journalists gave me the chance to support and learn from my mentees,**  
says Naomi Larsson

I remember one particular meeting with my mentee earlier this spring. He'd just had a training session with the RJP at the Guardian and was excited and a little overwhelmed to have stepped inside such an institution. We sat chatting under some trees near the office and I assured him that I often feel the same way.

Later, he would tell me this meeting was a huge turning point for him (we spoke about applying for a master's in journalism, and he's now at journalism school on a full scholarship). Although I haven't told him this, it was hugely significant for me too.

From my somewhat limited experience, I believe the most fruitful mentoring relationships work when both are open and willing to share concerns, fears, successes and hopes without feeling embarrassed or judged in any way. I think the meeting achieved that. We spoke about confidence, our

insecurities and how we're both limited by impostor syndrome. It's something we all struggle with at times, and that's why projects like this and other mentoring schemes are so important. It gives you someone to fully believe in you.

Being a mentor to two wonderful people has been so valuable to my own growth, both personally and professionally. Getting to know them over the last year has been an absolute joy, and seeing them both build confidence and produce brilliant work over this time has been even better. They are remarkable storytellers and I've been happily reminded of why we all become journalists in the first place. Their drive to produce stories comes from such a pure place. One mentee, Loraine, is starting a blog to share the stories of her migrant community in Coventry. My other mentee, Momodou, has written a moving and critical piece of the British media's impact on the migrant experience.

The dedication of all those involved in the project continues to astound and inspire me. I am so grateful for what they have taught me about resilience, about living and working in the face of hostility, about the daily experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in this country, and life in their home countries.

I hope that I have been able to help in some small way — even just being a supportive ear. Journalism needs collaboration, it should cross borders, it should tell stories from marginalised voices and communities. The refugee and exiled journalists involved in this project are doing that, and it gives me hope for the future of the industry here. ■



# RESIGNIFYING



What's in a headline? Power, political agenda and misrepresentations of refugees and commonly used on tabloid front covers.  
**Alejandro Abraham-Hamanoiel Rodriguez**

When discussing the refugee crisis, it is sometimes hard to pinpoint exactly what we are talking about. On the one hand, 2015 saw a real increase in the number of people hoping to gain asylum in the European Union, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, it also prompts a discussion on a particular set of public policies, the health of the global economy, the cultural policies of individual states and even the climate crisis. In short, the refugee crisis has become a narrative through which we attempt to explain a number of social, political and cultural changes in Europe in the last decade.

Although this crisis is real and affecting millions of people, it has been mainly told by intermediary institutions and not often by those most directly affected by it. Think-thanks, international NGOs and media organisations in particular have the power to represent these events and therefore bear an incredible responsibility. Unfortunately, not all representations are created equally. Alongside journalism that attempts to humanise and contextualise a complex situation, there has been a constant stream of representations which have framed refugees as a threat and a burden.

In the UK, tabloid newspapers have used the crisis to advance their political agendas. Refugees have been talked about as 'others', as outsiders intent on endangering a supposedly unique way of life. As with all nationalist narratives, these stories attempt to unify an imagined community by ostracising minorities and promoting a mythical past of perfect harmony. It is not surprising that far-right movements and political parties are beginning to once again gain a foothold in our politics. However, these representations are not only men-

dacious but highly selective. The crisis is often reported without any historical context, almost as a new phenomenon void of any connection to our colonial past or to recent foreign policy decisions. Tabloid newspapers can do this by resignifying events, individuals and even words.

Media power does not only entail the capacity to suggest which events deserve our attention and highlight actors or institutions, it allows broadcasters and publisher to give meaning to these occurrences.

The media do not only tell us what happens but often suggests what it means, not only in opinion pieces but in the simple retelling of facts. Journalism theory has long documented the varied ways in which journalists and editors imprint their own perspectives, and sometimes those of media owners, into their reporting. Responsible and objective journalism recognises this tendency and finds ways to ameliorate it. Irresponsible journalism hides ideological agendas in the reporting of apparent facts. Forcing particular meanings into words, individuals and events indoctrinates rather than informs, evident on the front pages of tabloid newspapers.

Despite sometimes appearing messy or improvised, the design of a front page involves decision-making. Each word in a headline is precisely calibrated and each image carefully chosen to attract audiences and transmit the gist of a story. Front pages are also the main spaces where new narratives are constructed and new meanings attached to words and events. Visual gags, silly puns and sometimes shocking language help to cement the world-view of the journalists and editors.

The close analysis of front pages often results in deep insights into the objectives and

prejudices of particular publications, betraying a consistent ideological slant carried over years. The prevailing narrative on the refugee crisis and the pejorative meaning now generally attached to terms such as 'migrant,' 'asylum seeker,' and 'refugee' have in grand part been fashioned on the front pages of The Daily Mail, The Daily Express and The Sun.

Despite their influence on our shared narratives, tabloid newspapers do not have a monopoly on telling stories about refugees. The same process of resignification that has distorted the words 'asylum seeker' from a person in need of help and shelter into a burden and threat to society, can be employed to bring back its original meaning. Better still, new journalistic voices can help to construct a more positive depiction of refugees and highlight the contributions they make to their new communities. One of the objectives of the Refugee Journalism Project is to confront some of these misrepresentations with honest and open reporting.

Challenging the prevailing meaning attached to events, individuals and words is a critical tool in developing media literacy. Semiotic analysis is often used not only to unearth the assumptions of particular representations but to subvert them. Practices such as 'culture jamming,' where advertising messages are undermined by their own commercial rhetoric, or 'the commutation test,' where key elements on a sign are substituted or extrapolated to highlight their meanings, can be useful to challenge the narratives constructed on tabloid front pages.

As a part of the closing event of the RJP, visitors will be invited to take part in a resignifying workshop, analysing and subverting tabloid front pages and coming up with alternatives. ■



Photography: Veronica Otero

## FAMILY ENCOUNTER: TOGETHER WE SHARE AN EMOTIONAL BURDEN

Earlier on this year, Refugee Journalism Project's Veronica Otero accompanied journalist Zozan Yaşar to Kurdistan-Iraq for a family reunion. The result is a moving collection of intimate, photographs and interviews. Veronica Otero

Every year hundreds of people are forced to flee their own countries to seek safety. Over the past year, in my role as project co-ordinator, I have worked with people coming from many different backgrounds. I have had the opportunity to get to know some of them well, share experiences and hear their stories told in their own words.

Everyone has a story. The trauma narratives told by many of our participants, fleeing their homelands and also in their appeal for asylum in the UK, has given me a personal perspective and a bigger understanding of the struggle and obstacles faced by many of them.

Two years have passed since Kurdish journalist Zozan Yaşar fled Turkey, seeking safety in the UK. Her experiences of war, arrests and torture, as well as months of being away from her loved ones, continue to have a tremendous emotional burden on her. Uncertainty over her future also affects her psychologically, socially and physically.

I think that by sharing our feelings, we can achieve some psychological relief through not having emotions building-up inside. It releases tension and eases the burden of feeling stress, anger, sadness, like the entire world is on our shoulders. These emotions need an outlet, otherwise, they will start to eat us up inside.

I started my interview with Zozan by showing her the images and letting her express her feelings with each image. When her family appears in the photographs, she does not respond immediately, but then burst into tears and started talking about how hard everything was, how bad living conditions were in Turkey, and the difficulties of adapting to life in the UK.

Zozan was keen to stress that her motivation was not to com-

plain, but to explain her life: "It's painful because of all the stress and trauma I'm going through. I still feel scared, I don't sleep. I think too much and can't sleep. It's very hard to live here where I don't have family. Everything is good but it's very difficult to keep going."

She tells the story about the agony of being betrayed by her country and people she loved. Her story begins with her not being able to go to school. During her childhood, her region was taken over, her village destroyed and her family were forced to move. She taught herself to read and write, and after many fights with her family managed to enrol in the University of Istanbul where she received her degree in Political Science and International Relations.

Since her adolescent days, Zozan's cultural background has made her a target of political discrimination. Her first arrest came when she was only 23 years old, in 2012, while she was working with a charity that empowers and supports women in her city, Diyarbakir. She exclaims, "it was horrible, horrible, horrible. This really changed my whole life."

In July 2016, a curfew was attempted in Turkey by members of the military. Turkish soldiers with tanks took to the streets in Istanbul and other key places, many people got killed and injured. Now working as a journalist, Zozan was arrested and harassed many times.

Barely holding back her tears, she says: "I wasn't safe in the city, every day police were following me to my house, they were harassing me and a lot of things were happening. I was taking medicine for my mental state... I was about to commit suicide.

"Every night at 3 am I was waking up, I couldn't sleep. I was standing in front of the window

of my house thinking of how to kill myself”.

In light of the dangerous circumstances and fearful of being arrested again, in December 2017 she decided to temporarily leave her country until things were settled down. But when she learned that her house in Istanbul had been raided by the Turkish police, she decided it would be safer to seek permanent refuge in the UK.

Early on this year, I accompanied Zozan for a reunion with some members of her family. She confesses to me: “During one-and-a-half years here, I was always struggling in my heart, always asking myself when I will see my family again. When that time will come? I thought it won’t happen ever, it will never

happen. It’s something endless. I was always with this feeling inside me.”

As she cannot return to Turkey, she arranged to meet them in Kurdistan-Iraq, which they could reach by car, crossing the border with Turkey. A new and strange place for them but the closest to the feeling of home. “I wanted my family to see that and make this big gathering together on a meaningful place for me. That is why I wanted to go to Kurdistan-Iraq,” she says.

This reunion was not only the first time Zozan was seeing her family since she left Turkey, it was also an opportunity for confrontation and reconciliation. Her mother’s emotional plea demanded “why can you not come back?”.

Zozan tried to keep the atmosphere light and keep the news from her deepest, darkest feelings from her family. “My mum became sick because of my life, because of what happened to me. She was at the hospital for almost a year,” Zozan continues, “so we don’t talk about most things openly because I don’t want to hurt her again.”

The ongoing fight inside her mind of what to and what not to say, what to do, what comes next, is having an impact on her health and wellbeing.

My documentary photography includes her struggles and feelings about her past, her encounter with her family, her fears of missing a life without them and her hopes and plans for the

“I wasn’t safe in the city, police were following me to my house. I was taking medicine for my mental health... I was about to commit suicide.”



future. “I know nothing will help me more than working hard, being a helpful person and advocate for solving political issues.” But she is unconfident about this happening. “When you’re in need you can’t really help anyone, this is the reality. I’m in need and I can’t do anything for the people around me.”

However, Zozan has started taking steps towards achieving her goals. She has recently moved to London where she’s received a scholarship to continue her studies in Middle East politics at SOAS.

My approach is to present these photographs in their almost untouched state. I have only used photographic software to adjust white balance, but not altering anything else. I’m treating them as a digital negative.

I intend to keep the mood of the moment as original as possible. I decided to present them using various series of correlative photographs, focusing on the candid emotion in real-life.

The dialogue focuses on the subject, not on my photography

or editing skills. I want the viewer to look at these portraits and be drawn in by the silent emotions and sincerity of the subject.

By shifting the debate away from statistics, labels, status, and refocusing on the emotional impact in a familiar context, with my images I hope to create a sense of empathy. To understand each other and not to judge one another.

I know it is not easy, but I hope with this project the audience will have a better understanding of what displaced people in similar situations are going through. I want to achieve this by drawing attention to the emotional burden, by triggering emotions. ■

*Family encounter: together we share an emotional burden will be exhibited at Liminality at London College of Communication.*



## UAL STUDENTS HELPING TO DEBUNK STEREOTYPES

Creating work for the Refugee Journalism Project helped students challenge their own — and others' — perceptions of refugees. Dalia Dawood

How can creative practices positively contribute to the way refugees tell their stories and how they are perceived by Western audiences? This is what four UAL students who have collaborated with the Refugee Journalism Project have considered when applying their respective artistic disciplines to refugee stories.

Coming from different artistic backgrounds, the students responded to requests for illustrators, sculptors and writers to work alongside refugee journalists on the project, with the aim of enhancing their stories of censorship and exile creatively.

One is Arushi Gupta, a graduate from MA Illustration at Camberwell, who learned about the Windrush scandal while working on the project. Arushi was commissioned to create an animation that would accompany a written piece by RJP participant Michelle Fuller about the hostile immigration environment to which victims of the Windrush case, and others, were subjected.

Told as a mythical story, Michelle's article portrays then Home Secretary Theresa May — whose harsh immigration policies meant many people without legal paperwork were deported or detained — as a witch locking people up in 'dungeons' (aka detention centres). "The metaphor of the witch made it more creative for me to come up with the visuals," says Arushi. "I grew my own sense of awareness about what happened through illustrating the article, and I aimed to simplify this

complex story through the drawings.

"I see myself doing more work like this in the future: going into something that is incorrect in the world and trying to make it correct — or at least putting the idea out there for people to know about it."

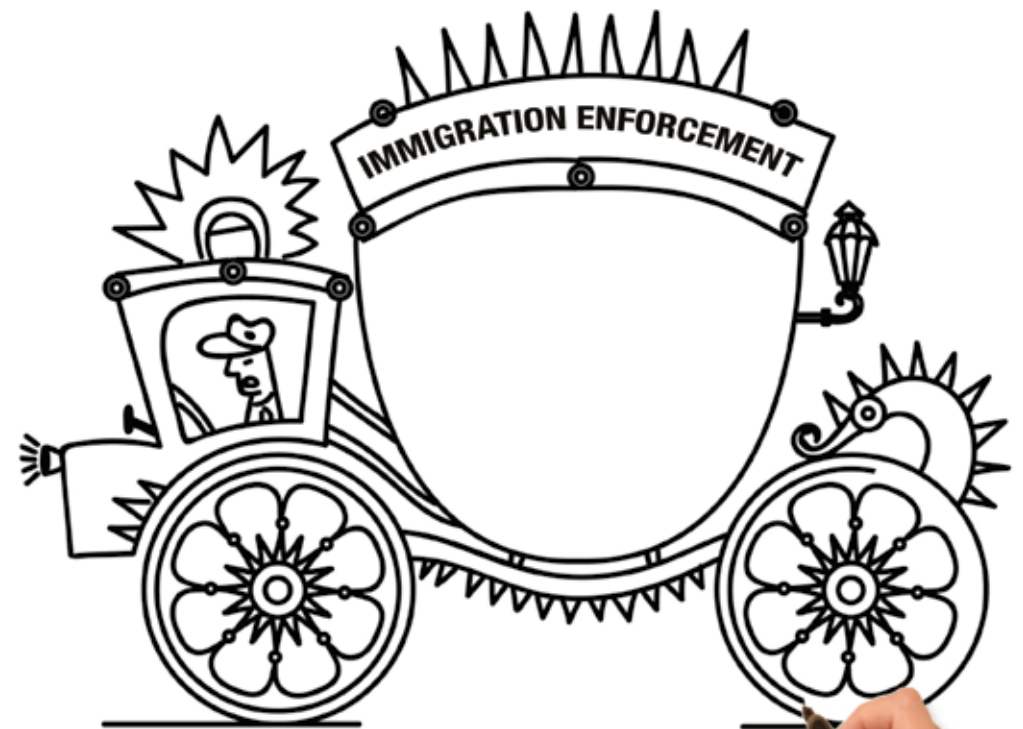
Nick Marcenaro Torres's self-described 'gritty' and 'semi-realistic' illustrations seemed the perfect fit as visuals for refugee journalists' articles, which is how he contributed to the Refugee Journalism Project. One of his drawings brings to life a story about obtaining immigration status and the crushing experience of having your identity reduced to one label: refugee.

He portrayed this visually as a group of people entering a building where they would claim refugee status. Their individual identities are clear: doctors, lawyers, journalists, enhanced through the use of colour. Emerging from the other side, with a sign above their heads saying 'welcome to the UK', the

people are grey, their mouths covered and labelled 'refugee'. "I wanted to make it clear to the audience that it's about transforming people into labels and taking away their humanity. I used comic book half-tones and two block-colours to emphasise the division," he says.

During the project, Nick became aware of his own 'misconceived perceptions' of refugees after meeting refugee journalists through the project. "I hadn't realised I had a stereotyped image of refugees in my mind, but seeing how professional and inspiring these journalists were changed my perception."

Nick made a connection to his own family, who had to leave Colombia when he was young because of the ongoing conflicts. "That made me think that I am not very different from a refugee: my family had to escape a horrible situation, too. I felt connected with the stories of these people; we have both been subjected to discrimination.



"I felt connected with the stories of these people. They are no different than me."

Images: Dalia Dawood, Arushi Gupta, Nick Marcenaro Torres





They are no different than me."

Even feedback on his illustrations have helped Nick to rethink how he portrays people. "I was unconsciously falling back on stereotypes, which is the opposite of what this project aims to do, so I'm glad that it has made me more mindful — I felt humbled to work on this project; it opened my eyes."

BA Journalism graduate Brittany O'Neill wrote articles for the project blog [migrantjournalism.org](http://migrantjournalism.org), including an interview with Ziad Ghandour, who fled his native Syria for the UK, where he began working with the BBC. "I wanted to support something that I'm interested in and to offer my skills," Brittany explains. "I have followed the refugee crisis in the news, but working on the project was the first time I had engaged with refugees. I felt grateful to meet professional people from different backgrounds and write about them."

The project inspired Brittany to volunteer at a refugee camp on a small island on the border of Turkey. "I wanted to do more to help. Working alongside professional journalists who are treated differently made me more frustrated at the state of the refugee crisis in the UK. These exiled journalists all have the same intention, but they're being silenced in their own countries and not given many opportunities here."

"That's why it's crucial to have an organisation like the Refugee Journalism Project, which helps to debunk negative perceptions that exist about refugees by sharing their stories in a positive light, which we don't often see. The media is usually demonising refugees, but I think they deserve more than that."

Going into his final year of Fine Art Painting at Wimbledon College of Art, Henry Glover welcomed his biggest challenge yet — literally — by making a life-size sculpture for the exhibition based on a brief from RJP participant Kerim Balci.

The task was to portray two figures, based on real journalists who have been sentenced to life for writing about the hostile conditions in their countries. In their prison cells, the two figures would be covered head-to-toe in banned newspaper articles that symbolise the danger of their professions.

It's quite a leap from what Henry normally creates: "I usually make small ceramic works, but this project appealed to me. They wanted my expertise on the types of materials that we could use and the practicalities of building something that could be dismantled and transported."

Henry's involvement also included his creative input to the art piece. "I suggested an alternative version, which sees the two figures embracing each other in a prison cell, or comforting each other." Bringing his interpretation to the work, Henry suggested evolving the piece to one that he feels would 'promote a hopeful image'. "I felt it would be less hard-hitting or shocking for people visiting the exhibition to portray it this way, without detracting from the important message about how the two journalists are being punished and censored for doing their jobs."

Pushing himself beyond his comfort zone was sobering, says Henry, as it teaches you to compromise. "You're doing something for someone else and you want to meet their vision even if you're more comfortable doing it differently. I've never dared to make something life-size until this point, or to take on a proper commission, but it's a pressure I welcome because I learn through the process." ■

The pieces from Arushi Gupta and Henry Glover will feature in Refugee Journalism Project's *Liminality* exhibition.



## OBJECTS OF RESILIENCE

**During times of adversity we are drawn to things that strengthen our resilience and evoke happy memories. Vivienne Francis**

Turning the delicate handle of the music box triggers the chords to 'La Marseillaise'. For journalist and activist Zozan Yaşar, this simple rendition is an important reminder of the struggle of her people. "As a Kurdish woman with all my experiences, getting a music box with a revolutionary song was very important as Kurds have been fighting for their revolution for decades."

Two years ago, Zozan came to the UK fleeing persecution. As a young woman separated from loved ones and facing the immense challenge of rebuilding her life, the music box became her way of keeping connected with home. "My friend gave it to me. She is a very close friend of mine and it was very important to have this as a gift from her."

During times of adversity we are drawn to those things that strengthen our inner resilience by transporting our minds to a different place, or that help us evoke memories of happier times. Feelings that can give us the strength to positively adapt to our circumstances.

The term resilience is frequently woven into the complex narratives of migration. Understandably so. Surviving torture, imprisonment, homelessness or conflict, and then starting again in an unfamiliar, possibly hostile new country takes a depth of resilience that fortunately most of us will never require.

Resilience can be drawn from religion, relationships, or physical endeavours, but it can also be found in small seemingly insignificant objects which, for a few precious moments, can help us find comfort and stability.

Last summer, some of the participants on the Refugee Journalism Project took part in a video production workshop at London College of Communication where resilience was the central theme. Lecturer Errol Murray invited the group to construct short interviews and sequences based on an object that gave them strength in times of adversity. From a miswak designed to magnify the impact of daily prayers, to a stone painted by a child 20 years ago during a holiday to the Crimea, the result was a rich

collection of stories about personal treasures.

"The students took the workshop as an opportunity to expand on their technical and storytelling abilities," says Errol. "But the workshop also gave them a window to look back at their extraordinary experiences over the past few years, and to recognise the changes in their lives."

Reflecting on the workshop he concludes: "It was humbling and heart-warming to work with people who have overcome such overwhelming circumstances, and yet were ready to put their experiences aside and continue working in the professions that they love. Surprisingly to me, the students' stories were generally not based within conflict, but of passion, and warmth and hope."

Inside Zozan's precious music box, there is an additional layer of resilience — a few fresh cloves. "Cloves mean love and eternity of love, so when I smell it, I smell Kurdistan and love. In London, I often miss my country, and when I do, I take this music box, smell it and feel better. This is something of my family, my homeland and my experiences." ■

*Photography: Veronica Otero*



*A selection of the films will be screened at liminality at London College of Communication.*

# “I WAS ARRESTED FOR REPORTING THE TRUTH”

Mimi Mefo Takambou is an award-winning Cameroonian journalist. At the beginning of the year, she came to the UK as writer-in-residence at English PEN. During her stay, she attended some sessions with the Refugee Journalism Project. Brittany O’Neill

Mimi Mefo was jailed by the Cameroonian government in November last year after being accused of spreading fake news. Her imprisonment sparked national and international outrage with the viral sharing of the hashtag #FreeMimiMefo.

According to the 30-year-old journalist, her arrest wasn’t a complete shock as there had been a build-up of resentment towards her from government officials, as they became increasingly infuriated because she reported on their wrongdoings; exposing the senseless violence towards innocent civilians.

“Cameroon is my home and I care about the civilians that have been affected by the government propaganda regime,” she says.

Since conflict first broke out in 2017 between the Cameroonian English-speaking regions and the French majority, there has been an escalation in violence. According to the United Nations, since 2017, more than 1,600 people, including children, have been killed, more than half-a-million internally displaced and 1.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance. It recently warned that the situation was one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in Africa.

“All I was doing was reporting on the atrocities that I had witnessed or heard from trusted sources, but the government in my country did not like

that,” she says as we informally converse across a coffee table in the colourful function room of London’s Free Word Centre, an arts organisation that champions the power of politics and words.

Mimi’s sharing of reports through social media platforms alleging that the Cameroonian military had shot and killed an American missionary was evidently the tip of the iceberg for the local authorities, provoking them to carry out her arrest.

“I was in prison for four days and if I had to thank anyone, it would be to anyone who was involved physically or emotionally — the support on both a national and international scale was incredible,” she recalls.

The unjust actions of the Cameroon authorities led to fellow journalists and local supporters in nearby Anglophone towns protesting for her freedom. This grew to nationwide and international mobilisation. Simultaneously, the UK government placed ongoing pressure on Cameroonian officials until they eventually announced her release several days later.

Her treatment also led to English PEN, an organisation that defends writers around the world whose human rights are under threat, offering Mimi a five-month residency to continue her journalism in the UK — a temporary reprieve from the persecution and violence of her home country.

Miles away from the local conflicts she reports on, Mimi feels very much at home living in the heart of London. “The people here are so friendly, they remind me of the people from English-speaking regions back in my country,” she says with a warm smile.

Journalists and citizens alike continue to live in fear of the ongoing hostility from the Cameroonian authorities as a punishment for reporting the truth. Despite the persecution that she had been subjected to, as well as the suffering she has witnessed, Mimi radiates positivity and is determined to never give up on exposing truths.

“Journalists in Cameroon continue to live in danger and people fear they could be kidnapped or arrested at any point in time for speaking out. If we journalists are afraid to do our jobs by giving a voice to the voiceless, then who will?”

“I urge international communities to continue to mount more pressure on the government of Cameroon to tackle the issues with press freedom. If not, the violence under the government’s propaganda regime will go from bad to worse.” ■

*\*This interview was conducted in the summer of 2019; Mimi is no longer in London.*

Photography: Elina Kansikas for Index on Censorship





Photography: Zula Rabikowska

***"If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means". Theresa May, Tory Party Conference, 5 October 2016***

Citizens of Nowhere is a project about the experience of citizenship, nationality and belonging on a political, cultural and social level. The project is a personal response to the 2016 Brexit referendum where 51.9% of the British population voted to leave the European Union, and the increased racism and xenophobia that followed.

I was born in Poland and moved to the UK as a child with my family in 2001. Citizens of Nowhere is based on my family's experience of immigrant life in the UK. The Brexit referendum was a turning point for my identity, as it was the first time when I became acutely aware of my 'otherness' and 'unBritishness' as I was unable to vote. The newspapers, media and graffiti became rife with slogans such as "immigrants go home", signs such as "NO POLISH OR EASTERN BLOC" appeared in Oxfordshire or cards reading "no more Polish

**"The portraits of my family are in constant flux, changing and adapting like our immigrant identities in the UK."**

vermin" posted through letterboxes in Cambridge, to name a few.

This project developed from a place of frustration and powerlessness about my own future in the UK as an EU immigrant. 77% of Eastern Europeans living in the UK have experienced racism and xenophobia (Migrant Youth, 2017) and in the year immediately after Brexit, the Home Office estimated that hate crime increased by 41% (Home Office, 2017). I used my own experience of xenophobia and racism and feelings of exasperation with the political situation to create a project that challenges the notion of citizenship, explores Polish immigrant experience in the UK and questions the process of obtaining citizenship, known as naturalisation.

# CITIZENS OF NOWHERE

# OBYWATELE ZNIKAJĄ

**Frustrated at my powerlessness regarding my future in the UK, I launched a project about the experience of citizenship, says**

**Zula Rabikowska**



"Many of the images we see of refugees, migrants and immigrants portray them as burdens on society or victims of oppression". (Gharib, 2018) The physicality and trauma of the immigration journey dominates a large number of visual narratives, but immigration does not end with the journey. This project traces the immigration journey of one Polish family from their time of arrival in Glasgow in 2001, through Brexit and leads up to the current year, and exposes how the effect of the referendum changed their relationship with Britain. In *Citizens of Nowhere* I challenge the depiction of immigrants as "burdens" and create representations that allow the audience to empathise with the subjects' experience.

*Citizens of Nowhere* is an experimental stop-motion animation created from medium format and 35mm analogue portraits. I shot portraits of myself, my sister and my mum in our family home in East London. I wanted to imprint the journey of migration into the physicality of the image and soaked my film rolls in English Channel salt water. In this way, I was able to mark the geographical identity of the British Isles in each portrait. This results in different layers of distortion, which visually mimics the required process of "naturalisation" and the degree of erosion of immigrant identity. I also used a process known as "red scale" where the colour negative film is loaded 'backwards' and the images are shot through the protective semi-transparent layer on the back resulting in reddish-orange filter. Through this alternative photographic process I explore my own feeling of "un-belonging" within the British culture and society.

Physical journeying and displacement is what underpins any migration journey and to incorporate further movement in my work I printed out the analogue photographic portraits and created a stop-motion animation. As a result, the portraits of





myself and my family are in constant flux, forever changing and adapting, like our immigrant identities in the UK. Each portrait peels and rips resulting in a physically incomplete portrait, echoing how my family's own immigrant identity was shaped by British politics.

The portraits are also punctuated by other photographs of events, such as my mum holding up her naturalisation certificate with the portrait of the Queen hanging in the background. I also photographed Polish food products, our family home, and interiors of Polish shops in London, which I inserted in between the portraits. The fusion of these elements with the portraits creates a scattered, kaleidoscopic image of a Polish family living in the UK. The animation incorporates interviews with my mum and sister about our experience in the UK. The language keeps switching between Polish and English, which creates a disorientating and sometimes alienating effect.

Citizens of Nowhere is particularly pertinent in the current political climate. With Brexit on the horizon, EU migration has fallen to a level last seen in 2009, and there are more EU8 citizens who are leaving than arriving. The project sheds light on the experience of adaptation to the UK and seeks to connect with other individuals and communities that have gone through a similar process. I hope to inspire a change in the way that immigrants are depicted by newspapers, media and politicians. ■



# WORKING WITH THE GUARDIAN FOUNDATION

Through journalism workshops, participants gained mentors, skills — and a new community.

Emma Jones

The Guardian Foundation is an independent charity which supports media under threat, promotes diversity and empowers children and young people to engage with the news.

We were involved in the Refugee Journalism Project from the outset. Our role was arranging and running workshops that were delivered by some of the Guardian's leading journalists. These took place over 10 months and gave us the opportunity to meet, get to know and follow the progress of the participants.

The workshops themselves were fascinating. Participants were given insight into some of the great stories published over the last few years, the work that goes into producing these stories, and the techniques that have been changing how journalists engage with their audiences. Some of the highlights were hearing about John Domokos travelling with a group of Syrian refugees as they walked from Budapest to Austria, how Jon Henly put together an immersive and moving story on wildfires in Australia, and some of the fascinating journeys Sarah Bosely has made over the years covering global health.



Photography: Veronica Otero



All the journalists shared their stories and experiences with such generosity, but what we found most rewarding and interesting was hearing from the participants themselves.

We first met the group at the beginning of the year, when many of them did not know each other, and it has been a pleasure to get to know them over the months. During the workshops I was always interested in hearing their perspectives and the issues they brought up. It made those of us who work in the West confront some of our assumptions and what we often take for granted, such as access to information, functioning institutions, and even ideas about what journalism is at its core.

It reminded me of what a privilege it is to have a free press that enables us to question authority, explore a whole range of issues and communicate with people around the world. Also, of how ignorant we can be of the circumstances these people face. The participants were always eager to learn and excited to be at the Guardian, but always brought with them their own wealth of experience and were more than comfortable sharing their opinions. The workshops always became more of a conversation than a lecture, infused with respect, enthusiasm and warmth.

The last workshop was as good-natured as the rest, with the discussions on podcasting going on much longer than the scheduled three hours. What was clear from the exercise they did pitching their





and the stories they wanted to tell, stories we don't hear enough in the mainstream press.

At the Guardian Foundation this is what we aim for, to help everyone share their stories whatever their circumstances, and we have enjoyed and valued working with London College of Communication and this group of participants. We look forward to the next project, and to seeing what the first cohort go on to achieve. ■

own stories for a podcast was what a close group they had become, offering each other insightful advice, constructive criticism, support and a generous dose of good humour. It was clear they had been learning as much from each other as from the workshops, even if it was something as simple as how to say 'cheers' in the numerous languages spoken by the group. While the project offers so much in the way of mentorship, skills development and contacts, what I had not foreseen was that it would give people a community.

Moving to a different country can be isolating and unfamiliar for anyone, so being able to meet people in a similar situation can make such a difference. I think this can be even more impactful when coming to a country under the additional circumstances experienced by some of the participants, combined with the ambition of wanting to break into a profession that can be as tough as journalism. Having that network can be invaluable, and I hope the one that was created during this project can be a source of support long into the future.

Reading the stories they had written for Refugee Week was a chance for us to hear their voices



*Emma Jones is Project and Admin Officer at The Guardian Foundation*

*To read more about the work of The Guardian Foundation, please visit [theguardian.com/the-guardian-foundation](http://theguardian.com/the-guardian-foundation)*

As part of this year's Refugee Week, a time when the UK celebrates the contribution of refugees, The Guardian Foundation invited the participants to write articles that reflect on the experiences, challenges and aspirations of displacement. Some of the following stories were originally published on The Guardian Foundation's website.

[theguardian.com/the-guardian-foundation/2019/jun/14/refugee-journalism-project](http://theguardian.com/the-guardian-foundation/2019/jun/14/refugee-journalism-project)

Refugee Week ran from 17 to 23 June 2019.  
World Refugee Day was Thursday 20 June 2019.

# I CAN LAUGH AT MYSELF, SO DOES THAT MAKE ME MORE BRITISH?

Once Syrian, always Syrian, but since I don't have a Syrian passport, and can never receive one, I have decided to become British. I already live and work here, and even drink tea and complain about the weather. What else is there to it?  
Abdulwahab Tahhan

Six years ago, I arrived in the UK with hopes and dreams — and a lot of ambitions. Everything I knew about the UK was from the films I watched, the BBC programmes I listened to and the information I saw online about studying in the UK. I had never spoken to a British person before arriving here, but being a refugee from Syria, I did not have much choice about which country to settle in. I studied English literature at university in Aleppo, and I was very disappointed to find out people here do not understand Old English. I thought the UK would be a place where I could live and work, and become an integrated citizen.

After applying for asylum at the Home Office in East Croydon, I had to hand in my Syrian passport along with all the other identity documents that prove I am from Syria. I haven't seen my passport since. Instead, the Home Office provides a refugee travel document, which lets refugees travel visa-free to many European countries for up to three months. Though it was great to have and I did travel to places, there were many things I could not do since I was not a British citizen — for example, vote in the general elections or travel to countries like Italy and Turkey without a visa.

After living and paying my fair share of taxes in the UK for six years, I have decided to apply to become a British citizen. This does not mean I can give up my Syrian nationality — though I'd happily give it up — because it is not allowed by the Syrian

constitution. Once Syrian, always Syrian, but since I don't have a Syrian passport anyway, and can never receive one, I have decided to become British. I already live and work here, and even drink tea and complain about the weather.

Becoming a British citizen is a joy many people might not understand. When a refugee is granted asylum, they can't go back to their country of origin. The new host country becomes home, but only temporarily. A law-abiding refugee doesn't automatically become a UK citizen after a set number of years, but has to submit an application. This has caused me, and other refugees I have talked to, high levels of anxiety and stress. To this day, I have nightmares of being deported back to Aleppo.

Throughout my six years here, many people have asked me if I would change my name when I became a citizen. I would love to because, to be honest, having a Western name would open up more opportunities for me abroad, especially if I want to teach English. I am also tired of being stereotyped as a Syrian refugee who speaks good English but cannot drink alcohol or eat non-Halal meat. I haven't decided what name I would go with, but I won't deny that thoughts of having a popular posh English name have crossed my mind.

It is in no way a rejection of who I am or where I am from. I am not rebelling against my values, though I have questioned a lot of the beliefs I grew up with. I simply want to be able to choose a name I feel more comfortable with living here. But the hassle I would have to go through to change my name on every document stops me from doing it.

The process of becoming a citizen of this country is not an easy one. I have survived war in Syria, and I while the application I am filling out now does not top that experience, it comes a strong second — it is definitely tougher than applying for a PhD. If a refugee wants to become a citizen in this country, or if an immigrant wants to become a permanent resident, they must pass a 'Life in the UK' test. With all my culture shock over the past six years, I thought the nights out, the tubs of Marmite, the fish and chips, or all the times I watched footie would have prepared me to pass the test. But the 153-page textbook has chapters on history, geography, sports, laws and British values.

The test was introduced as a mandatory requirement under the Immigration and Asylum Act in 2002. When it was launched, the Guardian ran an article quoting Sam Henry, the former president of the Scottish Association of Teachers of History, who said: "I find the whole thing appalling. It is riddled with errors and it is the most turgid, abysmal piece of writing I have seen in a long time."

The idea is to help a newcomer understand the

duties and rights of being a British citizen and how they should integrate in their host community. Yet I don't see any consensus on what Britishness means. Instead of informing us about the NHS, the system of government, the police, education and other serious and relevant topics, the book has sections that most British people I have talked to have no clue about.

The part about the constitution and laws were useful, but even many of my British friends could not answer the questions in the sports section; I've started to question their Britishness. Why would knowing that Sir Steve Redgrave won five Olympic golds medals for rowing make me any more British? How come many of my British friends don't know who Dame Kelly Holmes is? It's not a thing that people here are born with or ever need to know to be successful at any job, unless you're interviewing for a sports pundit job at Sky.

There were questions about pop-culture, such as where are the O2 and SSE arenas? Living in Southampton for three years before moving to London, I had neither the opportunity nor desire to look up the O2. Maybe the test is there to encourage me to consume pop-culture and buy tickets to concerts? There were some questions about the dates of Father's Day and Valentine's Day, which are not exclusively British — and thanks to social media, I don't think anyone would forget them. If they do, maybe it's because like me, they're trying to avoid the misery of having no partner on Valentine's Day. Other questions include 'what are the ingredients of an Ulster fry?' — a Northern Irish breakfast with ingredients I wouldn't be able to pronounce or recognise in the supermarket.

The thing I appreciated in this book was one true sentence: "The ability to laugh at ourselves is an important part of the UK character". I can see that, since I have been living the Brexit comedy tour for the past three years now. I am trying to laugh at the fact that I need to pass this test in order to become a citizen, while some of my British friends take mock tests online and fail them. Will questions about the number of national parks, pub opening times and dates/names of battles make me British? Is this a key way to integrate into society?

The test is not fit for purpose. If the Home Office is serious about integrating people, they could commission a review of what life in the UK means for refugees and what helps them integrate. I came to this country a refugee and worked as a cleaner; now I am teaching English at a University College London summer course. I have built my life here and met inspiring people who helped me understand the system — 'Life in The UK' did not. At most, it was an expensive gate-keeping exercise. ■



Illustration: Fajur Rahmat



# WHAT COULD IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF REFUGEES? LETTING THEM WORK

Homelessness, dispersal and detention takes its toll on the well-being of those seeking refuge. Another blow comes in the form of long-term unemployment and the loss of professional identity.

Ernest Zhanaev



Refugees already face immense challenges to their mental health. They have feared for their lives and those of loved ones, and they have been terrorised by a harsh asylum procedure in the UK that treats them like criminal suspects.

The anxiety is compounded by delays in asylum decision-making, and the inability to meet basic living costs during the process. According to research conducted by a group of psychiatrists in 2009, around a third of refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression.

Once my family's safety was guaranteed and we settled in the UK I felt great relief, gratitude and a desire to contribute. Being part of one of the most vulnerable and deprived sections of British society, I anticipated being accepted by the community to replenish my energy and become re-employed.

There were many tough aspects to my arrival in the UK — the immigration officers shaming and harassing applicants; the unlawful detention and intimidation; the official offering me and my pregnant wife rotten and crumbling accommodation with no water supply (photo 005, 006 and 007). But the hardest blow to bear came when I started looking for work. I had no idea how difficult it would be, and coming as it did when I felt secure and almost able to live freely again, it felt like a betrayal.

Job-seeking is full of distressing surprises for any refugee — from language barriers and a lack of support from the government, to exploitation and the ignorance of local employers. It is yet another form of limbo. But despite the frequent disappointment, what persists is hope: to survive uncertainty and to see a future that lasts more than a few days ahead.

# “Despite the frequent disappointment, what persists is hope: to survive uncertainty and see a future that lasts.”

With only half of the refugee population able to secure a job — even though refugees tend to have a higher level of education than the general population, according to an academic study — is it the most vulnerable and segregated community in the UK? A Home Office survey, published in 2010, reports that “refugees who described themselves as being in good general health were more likely than others to be employed”. I would suggest that it is the other way around. Employment improves health, especially mental health.

A World Health Organisation report identified unemployment as “one of the main factors associated with poor mental health outcomes for refugees”. The question of allowing asylum seekers the right to work is raised in the liberal media from time to time.

But what about people who have already been recognised as refugees in the UK? In theory, they have the right to work, but can they take it up?

The provision that refugees “are entitled with the right to work” is enshrined in British law. However, the legal phrasing sounds more like it is an honour and privilege rather than a right.

The Home Office guide on “right to work checks” starts by describing illegal employment and the penalties, which does not seem a good way to encourage potential employers. Even one large national media organisation I applied to was not sure about who had the right to work in the UK; a message from them where they were squeamish about my status is still fresh in my mind. Only on page 22 of the guide does it unequivocally state that a person with refugee status “has unrestricted access to the labour market”.

And if you can find work as a refugee, then it’s

not likely to be the best deal. In 2016, a study by the OECD and the European Commission in Europe found that refugees are hired for jobs below what their level of formal education qualifies them for and earn half that of those born in the UK.

Meet my friends, Aliya and Abdul (not their real names). Aliya who fled a Middle Eastern country, is a refugee. Abdul, who is from a West African country, is now permanently settled in the UK.

“I wanted to find a job that would fit my skills,” Aliya says. “[But] I realised my experience did not work in this country. I needed to survive, but I also strived to continue my career.”

Abdul shivers as he recalls his experience of job-seeking, as if it had happened just yesterday: “Conditions so stiff. Opportunities are not the best. Sweatshops. Dead-end jobs. You do the job nobody wants — working hard to earn little money. Cleaning jobs, security work, dangerous work. But, there are no other options.”

The situation for my friends and me is not made any better by Jobcentre Plus officials, with their punitive practices of reducing, delaying or stopping payments, even when you stick to the rules and procedures.

“I had a really bad time with Jobcentre Plus,” says Aliya. “JSA [Jobseeker’s Allowance] was not enough to cover living expenses, bills and taxes. So I started freelancing as a translator and researcher but it was not enough to survive. I felt hopeless.”

Abdul, who was a teacher in the predominantly English-speaking country he fled, indignantly recalls a Department for Work and Pensions official telling him he was only suitable for care work.

“Nobody recognised my previous experience. Employers were obsessed with my right to work first, then my skills. Jobcentre people treated me like trash,” Abdul says.

In my case, even though my Biometric Residence Card issued by the Home Office clearly shows my right to work, temporary or permanent, potential employers have refused to offer me a job as soon as they have learned I am a refugee. This is despite my fluent English, professional experience in advocacy work and three university degrees. Some potential employers said I needed to gain UK experience first, but I wasn’t sure if that was an excuse because of my status.

“I was rejected a few times when potential employers heard about my status,” Aliya continues. “I was denied a chance to prove my skills, but the interviewers insisted during the job interviews that I had not had enough UK experience, and lacked confidence in mastering English.”

When I was commissioned to write a report for a national think tank, I felt encouraged. But my next

experience turned awkward. A short-term employer who had learned about my status has persistently avoided to sign a contract and even refused to pay for the services rendered.

“I was asked by some employers to work for free, which is a disaster for me when I am struggling to cope,” Aliya says. She exhales and looks frustrated. “My colleagues, who knew my status, exploited me by giving me extra tasks to do. I routinely faced racism in my job.”

Gaining UK work experience did not make my CV any more attractive. I have not been invited for a single interview since I started indicating what kind of a right to work I possess, as it is now demanded by employers on their application forms.

Fortunately, I am still able to work with organisations head-quartered abroad. (photos Geneve 1 or Geneve 2) Aliya and Abdul, meanwhile, have become students to gain the UK experience that local employers often demand.

There are, of course, some positive cases. I interviewed one refugee in Coventry who managed, through volunteering and with the support of well-wishers, to secure his dream job as a football coach, just two years after he arrived in the UK.

That’s more the exception than the rule. But I wish there were more such examples.

Turning down a refugee for a job because of their status rather than skills or knowledge is pure discrimination. What’s more, it is counterproductive: the would-be employees face poverty and mental health difficulties; the economy and the employer lose value; the community and the state sustain losses.

Somebody once said to me “you need to downgrade yourself to get hired.” How much do refugees

need to downgrade themselves to be recognised as humans?

New guidelines issued in May by the UNCHR and the International Organization for Migration, and supported by the UK government and leading charities, encourages British employers to hire refugees who have the right to work. The report cites some great examples of collaboration between not-for-profit organisations in partnership with some large employers in helping refugees find work.

Among them is the NHS, which in partnership with the Refugee Council, Glowing Results and London Metropolitan University, developed a tailored programme for helping healthcare professionals adapt to the UK. Almost a hundred doctors out of 600 participants have since found employment. Another example is IKEA, which partnered with the charity Breaking Barriers to train more than 150 refugees, eventually employing about a third of them.

In Germany, a joint survey by the UNHCR and OECD found that 80 per cent of employers who had hired refugees were broadly or fully satisfied with their work, while 73 per cent of US employers surveyed reported a higher retention rate for refugees than for other workers.

Why does it take the intervention of global organisations to help refugees exercise their rights in Britain? Many employers in the UK apparently need help to understand the regulations.

One of my recent attempts to secure a job ended fruitlessly and traumatising again somehow. A well-known NGO, declaring among its many principles the promotion of human rights and protection of refugees, cancelled its full recruitment process allegedly due to a lack of eligible candidates. It came after the second interview in a row during which I had to prove my right to work.

Another employer even agreed to work with me but, to my surprise, had a change of heart on my way to their office. Hiring me ‘would not work economically for the business’, I was later told.

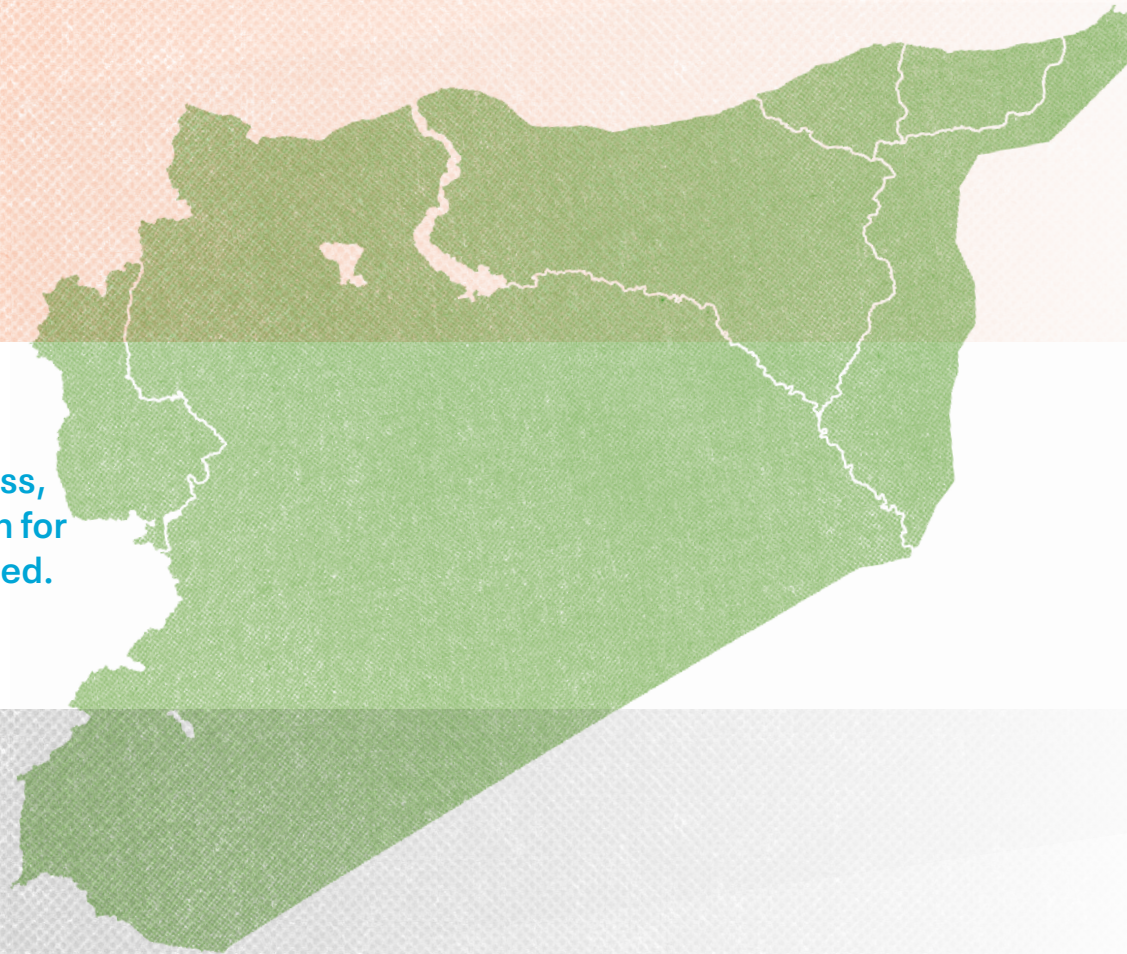
My specialism, international relations, is demanded by employers who are mostly located in London. I have been turned down many times because people were not comfortable with the fact that I live in Leicester. To some interviewers this East Midlands city sounded as far away as Tokyo or Johannesburg, even though it is just an hour’s train journey from London. (photo Canary Wharf 1)

Working is not a privilege, it is a right. I am not asking for refugees to receive positive discrimination and to be privileged over others. What we need is to be allowed to help ourselves simply by taking up jobs. ■

## “Sweatshops. Dead-end jobs. You do the job nobody wants — working hard to earn little money.”

# SYRIA: A COUNTRY BORN OF TOLERANCE

When I tell British people that I come from Syria, it is often met with two responses. Either a silent awkwardness, during which people feverishly search for something to say that is not war-related. Or the bolder ones simply ask me, "What is Syria like?" Jad Salim\*



Where to start? It's difficult to say. There is and has been so much happening in the country where I was born. Do people want to know what our history is, or about our customs and traditions? Or do people want to know what Syria was like before and after the civil war that devastated it?

Britain is known for its culture of tolerance, but what may surprise people here is that Syria is in fact a country born of tolerance. I came to the UK in September 2018 as a refugee. I had been a TV reporter at an international channel based in Damascus, but I was on the receiving end of the Syrian government's regime of intolerance.

I made hundreds of TV reports both before the war started in 2011 and know how to produce a broadcast package about war and politics. But trying to tell people in my adopted country about Syria is something quite different from showing a

particular event as a journalist.

Unfortunately, I witnessed first-hand the ongoing conflict that has destroyed the country. Its population of 23 million has now been reduced to 18 million as a result of hundreds of thousands of deaths and many more displaced people.

It often surprises people I speak to in the West Midlands town I now call my home that Syria was once one of the world's safest countries, but now is ranked by the United Nations as the most dangerous place to be.

Talking about Syria would take hours or maybe days. The country has rich resources, a Mediterranean climate and Syrian people were known in the Middle East for their vibrant culture and deep knowledge. But what many people do not know about — Europeans in particular — is the diversity of the country. This was what distinguished Syrians

**"For me, this is what Syria is about — coexistence and tolerance. But the regime has attacked its own people."**

from many other Arab countries before the crisis.

There was diversity in terms of religion, different sects within religions, a variety of cultures and beliefs. I was born in a city called Rmelan, which is 1,000km northeast of Damascus, and it was a strange and beautiful patchwork of diversity and

cultural integration. My classmates were Christians, Muslims, Armenians, Kurds and Assyrians (descended from one of the oldest civilisations in the world), who proudly brought and shared their diverse backgrounds and cultures to school.

My father speaks the principle language of Syria, Arabic, but is also fluent in Aramaic and its Syriac dialect. My mother speaks Arabic and Kurdish. This is just one example of the harmony and coexistence we grew up in, not to mention the fervent respect for religious beliefs among all. A far cry from the media representation of Islamic State and the violent tyranny of its jihadis. Once, Syria did not offer fertile ground on which Islamic extremism could grow, but groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda have taken advantage of a country in disarray and fear.

As a journalist, I interviewed a wide range of people from various religious, political and community groups. I covered a meeting in 2004, during which a Christian cleric told me: "The subject of coexistence in Syria is part of everyday life and this didn't happen overnight. It is rooted in Syrian people since ancient times." Just under a decade later, an Islamic scholar said: "The people of Syria from time immemorial have hated the sectarian wars that were sometimes imposed on them, as is happening today."

For me, this is what Syria is about — coexistence and tolerance. Sadly, the regime, which tries to portray itself as a defender of Syria's diversity, has attacked its own people and led to the destruction of lives, finances and freedom, not to mention our beautiful cities and archaeological sites.

The civil war in Syria started in 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring. Syrian people came out into the streets and demonstrated against Bashar al-Assad, demanding economic and political reform, freedom and an end to corruption.

His henchmen gave people a stark choice: "Assad or burn the country." It was a slogan that was said, scrawled on walls and followed through with. It was Hobson's choice. The country has been destroyed, people have been killed, tortured and displaced.

Syria is in its ninth year of bloody conflict. A cruel war has been the result of an infrastructure crisis, political unrest and harsh economic conditions. The war has shifted from being a civil, internal crisis to an international one, with the main victims the Syrian people.

So, when British people ask me what Syria is like I say: "We're known for our tolerance, just like you." But the country's tolerance has been challenged. ■

*\*Name has been changed.*



# A PLACE OF REFUGE

Every night a house in Coventry opens its doors to the city's homeless asylum-seekers. **Lorraine Masiya Mponela**

It's quarter past eight in the evening, and a small crowd gathers outside a row of terraced houses on a residential road in Coventry. The air is filled with voices from all over the world. Most people have hung around the neighbourhood all day waiting for the shelter to open. On busy nights, some will be turned away.

Once inside, everyone is allocated one of the compact bedding areas. It is cramped, tense and there's no such thing as privacy, but most have no choice — it is the only safe, warm place to sleep that night.

For almost twenty years, Coventry Night Shelter has been offering emergency temporary housing to those caught up in the UK's immigration system. Most have had their asylum ap-

plication refused, and while they prepare to appeal, have no legal right to housing or benefits payments. Without friends or family to rely on, they are effectively homeless.

Victor Iringere fled to the UK from Nigeria in order to escape the persecution he suffered as a gay man. At first, he was able to support himself with his savings and the kindness of friends. But eventually his money and his ability to seek favours ran out.

"I felt completely lost, broken, rejected abandoned, distraught, helpless," he says. "I couldn't see any hope. The feeling was I had lost everything."

An old friend recommended that he get in touch with Coventry Night Shelter. Victor was able to stay there for a week, while he

sought a more permanent solution to his housing problem.

Victor is just one of hundreds who have passed through the shelter's doors since it first opened in 1999. It began as part of Coventry Peace House, which was the idea of a group of local activists, including Penny Walker. She felt motivated to do this work after watching the devastation created by the wars in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and partly due to changes in her personal life.

"When my youngest child went off to university it felt that this new phase of my life enabled me to work more effectively for peace. With a friend, I went off on a three month walk to consider how this might look, staying in peace camps and housing co-operatives along the way."

The opening of the centre overlapped with Penny's other voluntary work. International conflict had not only spurred her to campaign for peace, it also led her to offer her support to those fleeing war. Penny initially volunteered with the Midland Refugee Centre, but when that closed, she had other ideas.

"A few of us volunteers realised that although we didn't know a lot about refugees, we knew more than other people around us and therefore had a responsibility to help. We opened Coventry Refugee Centre, later to be named Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre."

She noticed that one of the big needs in the local area was emergency housing for those claiming asylum, or whose visa status made them ineligible for public funds. Initially, they started by offering ad hoc housing to those who were temporarily homeless. But by 2004, Penny and her team had re-modelled a part of the building into a dedicated shelter, and formally opened what became known as

Coventry Night Shelter.

When the shelter temporarily closed to install underfloor heating, supporters of the project offered accommodation to as many shelter users as possible in their own homes. As Penny recalls, "when we re-opened I asked one of them why they had come back to us rather than stay with their host. I knew he had received the offer to stay; surely sleeping in a house with a bed was better than sleeping on the floor at the shelter. He replied that this (the shelter) was his home and he felt awkward as a guest.

"That sense of home was something we tried hard to achieve. Limited though the shelter is, it is nevertheless a place where people are welcomed and accepted, without question, as valuable human beings."

Through the arts and literature, she wanted to educate the public to improve their understanding, and ultimately their

acceptance of refugees in the local community.

"The people who used the night shelter were an enormous help in this. The first book we wrote together, 'I Came Here for Safety', told their stories, not only of why they had left, but what had happened to them in this country."

But it was whilst writing the book that a tragic event took place. "We had a suicide at the shelter. Sufian, whom we didn't know, hung himself from our Tree of Heaven in the back garden on the second night of his stay."

For Victor, the challenges of declining mental health were ever-present for the asylum seekers at the shelter. Though his biggest fear was having to sleep on the streets at night, he was also disturbed by having to leave the shelter at 8.30 every morning with nowhere to go until it opened again the next evening.

"I cried more than I have cried in my entire life during that period. I could break down at any time, every day I cried. I was mentally disturbed. I never thought I would be homeless in my life.

"Because there wasn't enough space, I remember one night I had put my bedding just

behind the kitchen door. Some people were not happy with me occupying that space. One of the shelter users kicked my bedding away as he said I was blocking the way. It's scary coming into a new place, let alone when you experience hostility."

Penny left the Peace House and the night shelter in 2011 to work on projects in another city, Leicester. She looks back on it with mixed feelings. "When I would walk into the shelter and everybody was lying down on the floor, I felt like I was walking into a slave ship. I hated that feeling — me in my own bed and own bedroom, while in the shelter we could only offer camp beds and floor space. Whatever I did in solidarity — giving up my passport, sleeping out during the Peace Festival, nothing would alter that power imbalance."

Penny's ultimate vision is to have the shelter close due to no-one needing to live in it any more. However, she admits that this is an unreachable dream at the moment with so many fleeing conflicts.

For Victor, the support and encouragement he received via the shelter has had a big impact on his life. He was able to move on and find more permanent accommodation in a hostel and became a volunteer on the shelter's steering committee, and this year became part of the board of trustees. As his asylum claim has been approved, he has been offered a paid role as a co-ordinator.

"I have a passion to make things better for others," Victor says. "As an 'expert by experience', I thought I was well positioned to keep this work going. I am fortunate, and I am happy to be able to use that to help my people where I can." ■

Top left: Victor Iringere sought refuge in Coventry Night Shelter when he had no home; Below: Penny Walker, who helped to launch Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre.



Photography: supplied by author.



## PERSECUTED FOR GOING AGAINST MY PARTY

**I was harassed when I walked the streets and I received threatening phone calls. They sent me letters wishing my death sentence. My crime? Falling in love with the wrong person. Mahbuba Jebin**

Back in 1998, I was a prominent student activist in Bangladesh, known for my writing on women's rights and for campaigning against human rights violations and war crimes. It was while I was at university that I was introduced by mutual friends to the man who would become my husband, and the reason why I would later have to leave my country.

I remember him from that first meeting as an unremarkable, thin man wearing sunglasses and a red t-shirt. He didn't make much of an impression on me. There was a natural hostility between us as we held opposing political ideologies, during a time when there was a lot of conflict between supporters of Bangladesh's two main political parties: the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Later, we both became presidents of the student wings of the two opposing parties, and hostilities between us escalated. But we had one thing in common: our lives were threatened by a right-wing Islamist political group. The university's security had intelligence that an attack was being planned by Islami Chatra Shibir.

After completing my master's, I moved to Bangladesh's capital city Dhaka and I started to do journalism alongside politics. In 2007, a military-backed caretaker government took possession of the country. The government banned many types of political activity. Senior politicians were tortured, threatened and detained in prison.

*Photography: supplied by author*

That summer, I met my future husband a few more times through friends and a deeper bond developed between us. Perhaps it was because, since politics was forbidden, we were walking the same dangerous path. It felt different when I talked to him, something I did not feel when I talked to anyone else. There was no vanity in his words. His honesty, simplicity and personality attracted me strongly, and very soon, to my surprise, I found some changes in my heart. I came to realise that my fate was tied to this man.

Our affair developed quickly. We thought about and discussed everything together. He was kind, caring and respectful to me, and I found he had an affectionate heart. At first we kept our relationship hidden, although our non-political friends helped us meet. Within a few weeks, we decided to tell our families that we would get married. It was not easy, but we convinced them to accept our decision.

We got married in July 2007. Our marriage was the talk of the political scene. Bangladeshi media praised us, since through our relationship they could see the beginning of the end of hostility between the two political parties. After a month, there was a spark of movement against the government. Our names were put on an arrest list and we escaped to a remote mountainous area. It was not a honeymoon, but we were able to stay away from the city until things died down.

The first year of our marriage was trouble-free, but the political atmosphere worsened as the country entered elections in December 2008. My party ended up forming a coalition government,



and this was when our problems really started. My former comrades started to oppose me. They spread rumours about me because I was married to the enemy, and I lost everyone's trust. Government thugs took over our business by force. I was harassed when I walked the streets and I received threatening phone calls. They sent letters wishing a death sentence on me.

It was a suffocating atmosphere. I thought the walls around me were holding me down. I stopped going outside. I forgot the morning sun and the silver colour of the full moon. When opponents of my party started to mysteriously disappear, I concluded that Bangladesh was not safe for me anymore. The party I had spent so many years tirelessly campaigning for was finally in power, but I knew that my love was the most important thing.

Life in the UK was tough for my husband. Behind the serious face, he has a soft heart inside. His strong love, support and encouragement is what motivates me. Even though I was happily married, far away from Bangladesh and had permanently left its politics, for several years my opponents continued to spread rumours about me on social media. Even those at the highest level of Bangladesh politics threatened me. This made me distraught.

All my enemies' efforts to destroy me have been in vain, thanks to God. When your back is against the wall, there is no option but resistance and survival. As hard as my life is in London, I get great comfort from our son. He is an angel.

My biggest regret is that I was forced to leave my other loved ones behind. I couldn't go back to see my father on his deathbed because the Home Office held my passport at the time. I couldn't imagine worse news. On the phone, I heard my dad was going to die. I heard how he was trying hard to breathe, but his heart was shutting down.

My dad closed his eyes for the last time as he held my mum's hand. My sister was sitting beside them, sobbing. The doctor listened with his stethoscope for a heartbeat. He checked for a pulse, and a worry line appeared on his forehead. The doctor removed the oxygen mask from my dad's face and covered him with a sheet in silence.

My mother was crying. From a distance, I could hear some random conversation. After that, I could not hear anything. My brain stopped working. I was stunned. I cried all night. I didn't know what to do.

Each time I remember that moment, I feel deeply guilty that I could not be there. It is the greatest sorrow of my life. Many years have passed, yet I can't hold back my tears when I think about it.

The fact I love my family makes me regret leaving Bangladesh. But that's also why I was forced out — I dared to fall in love with the wrong person. ■

# HOW TO MAKE INTEGRATION MUTUAL

Multicultural communities are taking part in 'mentalising' sessions, that help migrants build cohesion. **Margarita Novikova**

A year ago, I travelled to Nijmegen, in the Netherlands, to do some research for my university Master's degree. I also took part in a mentalising session dedicated to helping multicultural communities build cohesion and mutual understanding.

Dr Jacques van Hoof is a Dutch neuropsychiatrist and a founder of the charity Stichting Proment, which brings groups of migrants and local people living in Nijmegen together. I felt like a bad student at the session he ran, because I completely forgot to bring my "important object", a personal belonging that symbolises for its owner. For me, it would have been an oblong-shaped orange coffee cup, a gift from my son who bought it when he was first paid for writing an article. It would have been the perfect choice, a symbol of a new era in my son's life — and in mine. It would have been lovely to tell the cup's story at the session: mentalising in Nijmegen starts by storytelling.

In Stichting Proment's training programme, participants "focus on the balance between beliefs and opinions on the one side, and on emotions and feelings on the other side," explains van Hoof. "So, in a safe empathic environment we try to find out what people really think and

feel. We are slowly peeling off the layers of emotional resistance: this also includes overcoming fears of losing identity and overcoming the tendency to think in black and white and to compete."

Van Hoof says that he has adapted the four weekly sessions, each of which last two hours, to promote mutual understanding within multicultural communities. "As far as we know," he says, "we are the first to experiment with applying mentalising promotion techniques in groups of people from different cultural backgrounds".

My short trial session made me believe that using these methods in the UK could help both newcomers and residents in mutual integration. I like the idea of "mutual integration", as it contrasts with the humiliating version of integration

**"You recognise yourself in the stories of others and common emotions we have; through sharing feelings people can connect."**

proposed, for example, by former prime minister Tony Blair, who recently responded to the challenge of global migration by demanding that migrants integrate themselves.

"People do not consider strangers safe, they stay in their little bubble and connect with people they know," says Anisah Ina Rutten, a Dutch mental health care professional who works with psychiatric patients. She lives and works in Nijmegen and has just finished her third mentalising course, so she can use these methods in her work and everyday life. Migrants and refugees are her specialism.

"Refugees' problems are more complex: there is a language barrier, a cultural barrier [...] if there is PTSS (post-traumatic stress syndrome) it makes a mental state unstable".

Anisah worked with one refugee family from Syria: a construction worker, his wife and their two teenage sons. The parents had tried to learn Dutch but nearly failed. Talking to them, Anisah discovered that "maybe only in a couple of years they can do a little better: they were not people who study easily. They stayed in their own system where the mother takes care of the family, the father is working hard and making sure that his kids are on the right path. These people have good intentions." In the Netherlands, the boys were legally obliged

to go to school but constantly skipped classes as in Syria they already were able to work. It led to problems with neighbours, the police and the school.

"But if you connect with them," says Anisah, "you see that they are friendly people with the good intentions, they do their best. It is very easy to say 'oh, these migrants do not integrate, they do not learn the language, their kids do not go to school, they do not listen well', but they get in trouble in a system totally different from what they had in Syria."

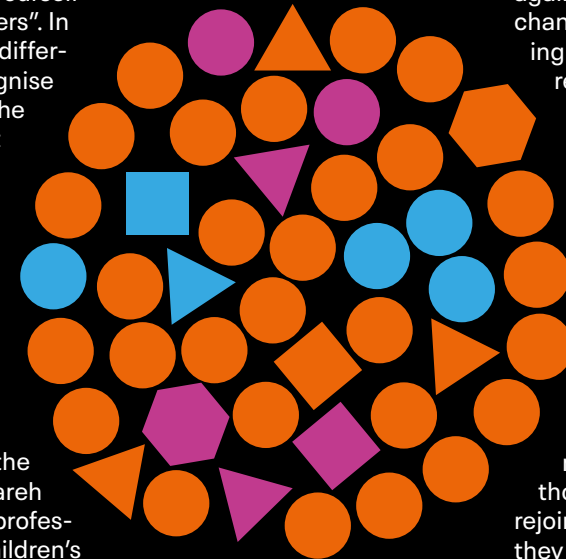
Mentalising in a diverse group of people, says Anisah, "makes you recognise yourself in the stories of the others". In those stories people of different backgrounds "recognise the common feelings, the common emotions that we all have as human beings. Suddenly that woman or that man, strangers, are the same people as you. Through sharing these feelings people connect. This is what makes mentalising so powerful."

Anisah heard about the training from Nora Bahareh Nouri, a mental health professional working at her children's school. Nora is a refugee from Iran, who came to the Netherlands 19 years ago with her husband, when she was 21. Since 2008 she has been working with parents and children. Nora has attended van Hoof's sessions as a participant and now takes part in running them.

"As a refugee, I thought it was valuable to reflect on myself and my own story," she says. "I became more confident about myself and I felt that I understood life better." Her husband also took part in the training. "It was nice that we

could talk about it before and after the course."

Could mentalising groups in the UK benefit newcomers and local people too? Peter Fonagy, a professor at UCL and the author of important publications on mentalising, calls it "a beautiful, aesthetically really pleasing process of internal daily renewal" because it helps people develop understanding of others through awareness of themselves. However, he warns that "normal" mentalising is often a challenge to those with a background of severe adversity — and, sadly, many refugees



have experienced trauma. This obviously makes it even harder for them to fit into a new cultural environment.

This also causes difficulties with understanding the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others, and it even becomes difficult to regulate one's own feelings. "In the absence of this capacity," Fonagy adds, "a person may find themselves exaggerating the significance of emotional experience [...] and not be able to manage

memories of traumatic events very well".

Moreover, if people cannot trust others, they cannot properly take part in the dialogue essential to mentalising. "Mentalising as a process — and its primary aim — is about collaboration", says Fonagy. However, for people who have been through traumatising experiences, that collaboration could seem risky. "As soon there is adversity, as soon as my existence is threatened, I have to protect my existence," Fonagy says.

But without communication, according to Fonagy, "you relive the same thing again and again." It would be possible to change this through developing trusting and supportive relationships. "Someone taking an interest in the subjective experience of the traumatised person, 'accompanying them' as they explore their thoughts, memories and linked emotions is the most helpful thing that can happen," concludes Fonagy. "In this way they can feel it is safe to become curious about other people's thoughts and feelings and rejoin the community which they often feel too isolated from to benefit from its support."

It seems to me that Professor Fonagy describes precisely what they are doing in Nijmegen. Van Hoof agrees but warns: "Because [people's] cultures are different it is extremely difficult to find the settings and timing. We are now searching for the proper methods. This is work in progress."

I cannot resist repeating here the conclusion drawn by Anisah: when people from different backgrounds share their feelings, they connect and thus cannot be hostile. ■

# I'M RUSSIAN BUT I'M NOT A SPY!

When we came to the UK, I never expected that my nationality would be any kind of problem, but I've found it very difficult to be Russian and live here in the North. **Victoriya Holland**

It was December 2017, my husband and I had just moved back to the UK from Malta and we were walking with our cat down our street in our newly-adopted home town of Wigan. Yes, it's an odd thing to walk a cat, but he likes it.

Our cat went over a fence and into a neighbour's back garden. I started to call him back, but my husband Andrew asked me to not speak in Russian in case it worried our neighbours, or would make

them be rude to me in future. For the first time in my life, I felt embarrassed to be Russian.

I guess there was a good reason for my husband's paranoia. December was the month that Sergei and Yulia Skripal were mysteriously poisoned in Wiltshire. All the news channels led on stories that speculated who was behind it. The Skripal case was on everyone's lips: my husband's colleagues, supermarket cashiers, and even man-

agers at the National Careers Service where I regularly went to look for job opportunities.

During one of my visits, a friendly employment manager quietly whispered: "Victoriya, is it true that the Skripal family was poisoned by Putin's spies?" I'd spent much of the previous three years living abroad, so I certainly had no idea who was involved in that crime! Even if I still lived in Russia, I'd likely have been none the wiser.

At the time, it felt like negative information about my country and its people was being beamed into every house; so much so that I started to worry about if British people would accept me. As I feared, it wasn't good. In Wigan, a former industrial town in the north-west of England, 64% of people voted for Brexit. It is not a place known for having many foreigners, or indeed of anyone from outside Wigan. When we came to the UK, I never expected that my nationality would be any kind of problem, but I've found it very difficult to be Russian and live here in the North.

A few months ago, a local recruitment consultant told me that my CV and experience in journalism and PR were impressive but that he would never introduce me to his clients because of my Russian accent. He suspected that I would not be able to sell a story to a journalist or to write good copy. After that, I cried all evening.

My friend Irina, who lives in Sheffield, also told me that every time somebody asks her "where are you from?" She feels uncomfortable. "Once, I heard how some of my colleagues were mocking me behind my back and making jokes: 'Look, our Russian spy is speaking again with someone in Russian. She's reporting secrets about the UK to her boss.'"

It is hard being a Russian in the UK right now. Fortunately, most people are not xenophobic, but because of the many negative news stories and lazy stereotypes of my country, some of us are left feeling uncomfortable.

In Wigan, I spoke with a few refugees about their experiences of being outsiders, some telling me horrible experiences: "My friends walked back home late evening, when they noticed the car," recounted Hassan from Sudan. "Some people inside opened the windows and started to throw eggs at them. My friends didn't do anything to provoke it. They just calmly walked home." Hassan told me that he'd never encountered any xenophobic jokes or unpleasant comments from people, but he expects to because of his friends' bad experience.

"Human nature generally is racist to one another. This is something we were born with, it's not something we learn," Kunil Ali Nur from Somalia told me. "It does not matter which colour of nationality you are — it's the same everywhere.

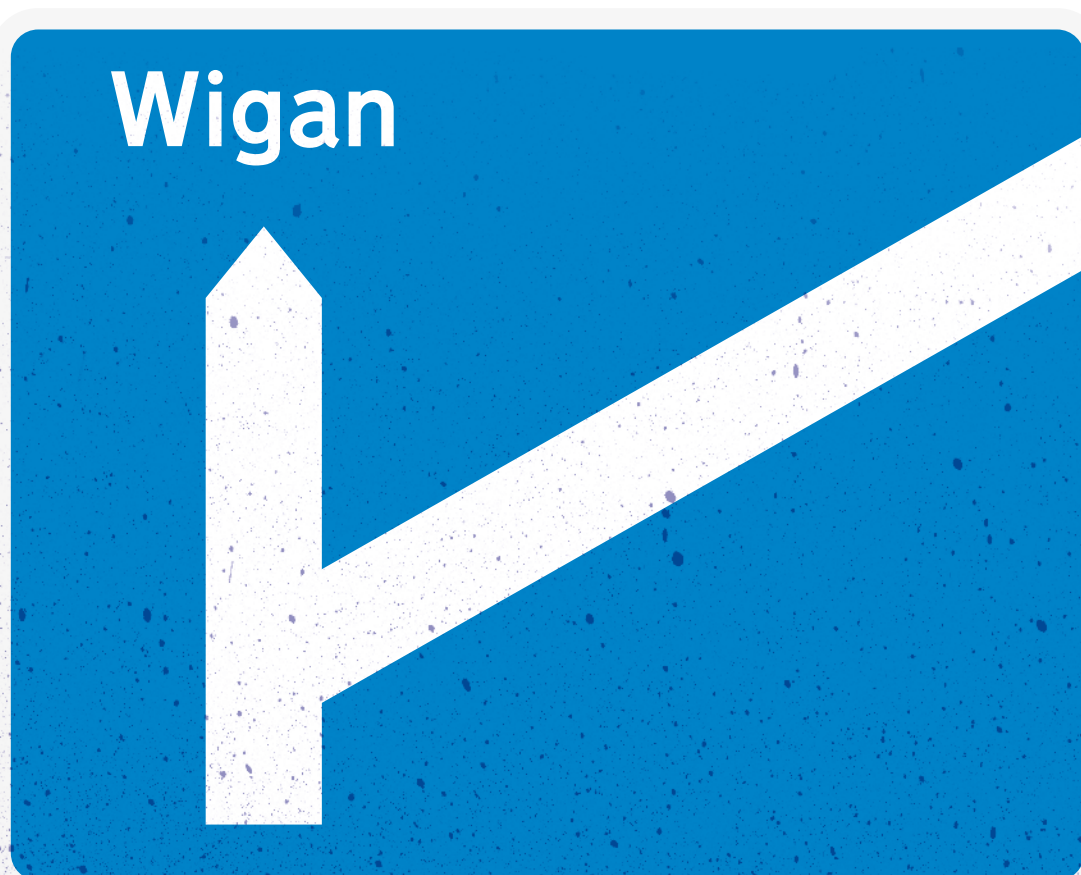


Even in my country where we all have the same religion and skin. What is most worrying to me now is that it has become a political tool. Some to be repressed... and to propagate divisions among society." He has been living in Wigan for 10 years and loves the town: "When somebody tells me something insulting, I will firstly think — what's wrong with him? What is his background? Lack of money, no job, no food? I'm not offended, I know that xenophobia is natural for humans."

I don't want to believe that racism is part of human nature. We all are different and should accept that. Russia has a population of over 140 million people. A few hundred of those might work for the government as spies (but I really don't know any of them, honest!) while the rest are just average people — butchers, builders, sales managers, doctors, teachers and journalists like me. We don't see the real stories behind each person. If you trust in stereotypes, then people from the Middle East are terrorists, Russians are untrustworthy spies, Germans are fascists intent on European domination, the French are angry gilets jaunes, the Irish are alcoholics, and so on. So let's not, shall we?

Each time you meet a foreigner, please try not to notice the colour of their skin or the accent in their voice, but their soul instead. Don't judge their clothes, but do shake their hand if you notice that they've spent all their money to look good for a meeting with you.

Above all, please, when you do hear someone with an accent that is different from yours, don't assume it will cause them problems with work, because it won't. That person has spent years learning a second language — your language, and they could definitely learn how to be the best in your business, if only they were given the chance. ■





Photography: Zozan Yaşar

## “AS A SURVIVOR OF A GENOCIDE, IT IS SO DIFFICULT TO SLEEP”

Five years ago, Majhor Abdullah Haji witnessed the slaughter of thousands of his fellow Yezidi people at the hands of ISIS. Now in the UK, he is fighting for the right to a new life, free from persecution. Zozan Yaşar

“I’m frustrated with the government for its lack of support to me as a survivor of genocide, but at the same time so grateful to the British people for their kindness,” says Majhor Abdullah Haji, an asylum-seeker in the UK.

As a member of the Yezidi religious minority, Majhor survived the genocide (recognised as such by the United Nations) that unfolded in his place of origin, Shingal, in northern Iraq. His current situation is uncertain as he faces possible deportation back to Iraq. In the meantime, Majhor

is not eligible for housing or other government support, and is unable to work or study.

He has been living in Penzance, Cornwall, for the last year. The Home Office has rejected his asylum claim and he is technically homeless, though he has survived through the support of a local activist. When I met him, Majhor recalled both the experience of genocide in Iraq and his asylum struggle in the UK.

One night in 2014, ISIS attacked the area around Shingal and slaughtered 6,000 Yezidis,

who the militant group consider infidels. They kidnapped children, seeking to indoctrinate them and force the women into service as sex slaves. “It was a massive panic and everybody was shouting, and it was like gunfire everywhere and a lot of kids, disabled people, old people,” Majhor says, as he recalls the events when ISIS attacked his city. “They separated women and children from the men, and they took the men to a different area where they killed them and put them in mass graves. Then they separated the women from their kids, [who they] used as future ISIS soldiers.”

Since, only half of those held by ISIS have managed to escape, sometimes with the support of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. More than 75 mass graves have been found in Shingal and its surrounding villages. The fate of the others remains unknown.

The Yezidis have been subjected to as many as 74 massacres over the centuries because of their religion. The ideology of those around them puts them at extreme risk of another geno-

cide. Majhor says that the Yezidi people “never harm anyone because we are not allowed, even if your enemy is attacking you and treating you badly.” For him, humanity should come before everything else.

Majhor lost his family, relatives and friends during the ISIS attack. Like many other survivors he stayed in a camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Due to the poor living conditions and sense of insecurity, he left Iraq and crossed the Turkish border with the help of smugglers. After a dangerous journey to Europe, he joined thousands of refugees in the former site at Calais known as the “jungle”.

He stayed there for two months, where “it was very difficult to live as Yezidis. [The jungle] was divided into different groups — Kurds, Turks, Afghans, Arab — and the majority were Muslim.” He describes how on one occasion he and his Yezidi friend were attacked by 50 camp inhabitants for not attending the mosque for prayer. “After establishing that we were Yezidi by asking us questions about Islam, they put us in a caravan and beat us really badly. Then a big fire broke out. The police and army were there, but these people told us they would return to kill us.”

Majhor and his friends broke the door and escaped through the back of the camp. He made it to the UK in a lorry, inside a small storage box, which he says could only have comfortably fit a child. He emptied it, got in and taped it again from the inside. “I still have pain in my knee and my shoulder,” he says. After 16 hours in the lorry, Majhor made it to the UK.

Majhor thought that once he reached the UK, as a survivor of a genocide, he would be treated well. He hoped that the Home Office would quickly grant him

asylum and look after him. But instead he was interviewed for hours and asked many questions about the events during the genocide, his religion, the situation in Iraq, how he got to the UK.

The Home Office stated 15 reasons for rejecting his application, claiming he could go and live in the Iraqi cities of Basra and Baghdad, or in other countries. He mentions how, before the war, Shingal was 90 per cent Yezidi and only 10 per cent Muslim. “During the attack the 10 percent joined ISIS and they attacked us. So how can I live in a community which is 100 per cent Muslim? It is impossible, at least psychologically. As a survivor of the genocide it is so difficult even to sleep. You relive it every single night, how we lost our people.”

Majhor was surprised by the lack of intervention from Western countries while ISIS invaded his city. “They have huge power, all of these armies, aeroplanes — [yet] they haven’t tried to help those women being captured by ISIS,” he comments. He feels disappointed once more by the lack of UK government support for his people. He finds it sad that it gives money to the Kurdistan regional and Iraqi governments to protect Yezidis, instead of dealing directly with the people. “Not even the UK government believes Yezidis should run their own lives,” Majhor exclaims.

“I would like the British government to listen to the people who were persecuted by ISIS and had to flee. To me, it seems they don’t believe the victims,” he adds. For him there is not much difference between the way the British and Iraqi governments have treated him. But, he says “the people in the UK are really nice. You can find thousands like Anne” — he is talking about Anne Norona, manager of the Yezidi Emergency Support chari-

ty, which helps displaced Yezidis in the Middle East and Europe. He thinks ordinary people, not the government, represent “the real face of the UK.”

After two-and-half-years in the UK, Majhor thinks he has found some stability and safety, and has achieved some of his aims. But he doesn’t forget how difficult the government makes it for him. “I have suffered a lot in the UK. I was nearly ready to commit suicide and if Anne hadn’t found me I probably wouldn’t be here to say this.” Majhor has lost faith in the commitment of Western governments to human rights. To him the question is: if the British government doesn’t give Yezidis protection here in the UK, how can Yezidis be protected in Iraq?

It has been a year since the Home Office refused Majhor’s first asylum claim and told him he was no longer entitled to state support. After Anne opened her door to Majhor, saying he could stay with her until they found a solution, he got a solicitor and made a new asylum claim. Nearly ten months later, he is still waiting for a response. He fears being turned down again and possibly being deported.

According to Anne, asylum-seekers such as Majhor are at the mercy of an overstretched immigration system. “They are not only genocide victims but victims of our increasingly hostile anti-immigration system,” she tells me. “The Home Office seem to have little insight into the suffering, or the oppression and systemic persecution.”

Majhor is now waiting for his last asylum interview. “[Because] I am not allowed to work or study, I am suffering psychologically,” he says. “I constantly think about the ISIS attack. I’m reliving the situation every day because I’m just sitting here, doing nothing.” ■





# DELAYED ASYLUM DECISIONS WASTE NOT ONLY TIME BUT OPPORTUNITIES AND NHS MONEY

One was accepted, one rejected: Home Office decisions can make or break a refugee's mental health, says Shakib Mohammad Afzali

For asylum-seekers, the real ordeal starts not in their countries of origin, but in their host countries. Many in the West think that refugees flee an oppressive regime, a civil war or life-threatening events and that once they reach a safe Western port, their plight is over. But they also run towards a new life, a new home, a new career — and the problems they face in their new-found land might cause as much harm as the ones they escape. When people hear about asylum decisions being

delayed for years, they usually think of the time wasted. Few realise that applicants in these situations also risk losing their good mental health, their opportunities and their determination to succeed. Haidar Mohammad\*, an Afghan asylum seeker, had to fight for six-and-a-half years for a permit to stay in the UK. In the meantime, he was detained twice, with the threat of deportation. "I was in limbo for six years, hopeless and helpless," he says. Those wasted years hurt Haidar, especially

knowing how it all could have been so different, like it was for his friend Ahmad Shah\*. Their contrasting stories illustrate what a huge difference to people's lives can be made by the quality of Home Office decision-making.

Ahmad was already in the UK as an MA student when he realised that Afghanistan was no longer safe to go back to. He sought asylum and while continuing his studies, he was given permission to stay within eight months. No detention, no attempted deportation, no obligation to sign in at a Home Office reporting centre each month. With his refugee status he was able to find a part-time job at a local pharmacy and won a scholarship for a second master's degree. He is now working at a reputable institution as a manager. As Haidar was going down, Ahmad was going up.

"If you were to compare us at the beginning of this story, I was in a much better position," Haidar says. "I held a high-profile position back in Afghanistan. I was at the head of an organisation that dealt with VIPs. I was meeting ministers on a daily basis."

If they had been dealt with by the same asylum caseworker, one with a neutral approach, Haidar's case would also have been judged more "straight-forward," as the Home Office glossary puts it. He had the original of the threatening letter he'd received from the Taliban in his hand, and he had sought asylum on arrival at a British airport.

But luck was not on his side. After a brief interview at the airport, he was handcuffed and put in the detention centre, to spend the night with a refused asylum-seeker who had developed a mental illness and was about to be deported from the country. At the time, it didn't cross Haidar's mind that this man's ordeals were ones he might face in the coming years. He was particularly relieved when, after an upsetting week's stay in the detention centre, he was told that his case was "on fast track".

That fast track took him to a fast refusal three months later.

In the meantime, Haidar was released to stay with a distant friend, who agreed to provide him with accommodation in a storage room in the back yard of his house, leftover food from the kitchen, £20 a week as pocket money and plenty of advice. From him, Haidar learned that he was entitled to free accommodation, but he should have asked for it when he sought asylum. He was stuck in the back yard, and would stay there for four years.

The 'fast track refusal letter' came with surprise. The refusal letter was about him... Or was it 'her'? In the letter, the incompetent officials in charge of his case had managed to turn him into a woman from a different country altogether, and therefore

decided he hadn't needed to flee the Taliban. Re-requesting a review of the decision on these grounds didn't help Haidar. The Home Office accepted its mistakes but claimed that these didn't relate to the reason for their decision. He was refused, full stop.

Anxiety and the fear of deportation turned into a nightmare for Haidar. His host advised him to hire a solicitor. That required a lot of money and even when his family back in Afghanistan helped out, he didn't receive the service he hoped for. If you are an asylum seeker, there is only one thing that is worse than having an incompetent case worker: having a greedy solicitor. "I was hit by something even worse," Haidar says. "Having many greedy solicitors."

That hurt his mental health profoundly. Haidar was diagnosed with severe depression and was referred to a mental health clinic.

As if this wasn't enough, he was detained on one of his monthly visits to the reporting centre. Haidar was transferred to a detention centre near Oxford without any explanation. It took him ten days to convince Home Office officials that his case was still pending and no final decision had been taken. "The [detention] officer told me that I was detained by mistake. He got angry at the people on the other end of the phone while trying to clarify my position."

Haidar was released without an apology.

In the limbo that lasted six and a half years, Haidar's father passed away and he lost several other family members. A funeral hurts all the more when one cannot attend it.

Forced migration always comes with the baggage of loss. The loss of one's country, the loss of a career, of a network, a reputation, the safety of a cultural and linguistic home, relatives, friends and the loss of hope to return. Six-and-a-half years after his flight to the UK, Haidar won permission to stay in the UK at an immigration tribunal. While his friend Ahmad had used those years to build a new life in a new place, Haidar added to his list of losses: of patience, of trust in the system, of his mental health and his energy.

Incompetent decisions or deliberate obstruction by Home Office staff leave many immigrants unable to cope with the challenges of a new life. It forces them to depend on state benefits and places a burden on the mental health budget of the NHS. ■

\*The two Afghan refugees interviewed for this report are given pseudonyms to prevent any harm to their relatives back in Afghanistan.

# THE PANEL: WHAT'S IT LIKE BEING A REFUGEE JOURNALIST?

Three journalists reflect on their experiences of going from reporting the story to becoming it. Robert Wabudeya\*, Momodou Musa Touray and Jad Salim\*

## ROBERT WABUDEYA

In December 2015, the Ugandan opposition politician Amama Mbabazi was holding a rally in Western Uganda as part of his presidential campaign. The government wanted to stop the rally from taking place and there were stones being thrown between rival groups of supporters. The day after the rally, Mbabazi's head of security Christopher Aine went missing. One of the local newspapers published the story, and as an investigative journalist, I wanted to find out what had happened.

After investigating Mr Aine's alleged arrest and torture I invited leading politicians and officials to appear on the political show I used to host on Ugandan television. I aired the evidence I had collected about Aine's disappearance and we discussed it. Immediately afterwards I started receiving phone calls from private numbers, warning me to leave the matter alone or lose my life. My number was public, but these calls worried me more than usual, and I stopped picking up. Yet I continued investigating because I knew that what I was doing was in line with my profes-

sional duties. I wanted the public to know the truth.

Days later, I went to meet Christopher Aine's sister. I don't know who alerted the police, but I was arrested whilst conducting that interview. They blindfolded me, smashed my voice recorder, handcuffed me and beat me severely with batons all over the body. I didn't know where I had been taken, but after taking off my blindfold and handcuffs, I could see that I was in a cell on my own. It was dark and small, and I was forced to eat left-over food and given dirty water to drink. All of my clothes were taken off, my hand was burnt with a sharp hot knife as I was trying to resist the torture, and my testicles were squeezed. All of this was done by men in police uniforms, who entered the cell wearing masks. They wanted me to stop reporting about the bad things that the government was doing.

At some point I fell unconscious and the next thing I

realised, I was in hospital in fresh clothes and attached to a drip. I would be injected and given tablets by the doctor. The ward was being guarded by police officers and after a few days, I was to be discharged and taken back to the cell.

On the day of my discharge, I asked the doctor to allow me to use the toilet, which he accepted. Because I was not perfectly well, police officers allowed me to go and use a ground floor toilet without an escort. I was well known as a journalist and the case that led to my arrest had been a big story, so it was easy for people to recognise me. So, as I was entering the toilet, a good Samaritan saw me and asked what had happened. After a brief chat they helped me to escape and later to begin the journey that would lead me to the UK.

Fast forward a couple of months and I'm in London, having hastily departed Uganda amidst threats to my personal safety. I'm reading the news from back home, as I do every morning. I see an article reporting that Christopher Aine has resurfaced in Uganda just the previous evening, following several months with no word as to his whereabouts. His re-emergence took place during a televised press conference, where he appeared alongside a brother of President Yoweri Museveni. My first emotion is joy. Thousands of miles away from Uganda, a story I had initially broken is now being completed. At the same time,

"I don't regret exposing wrongdoing"

however, I feel disheartened. Mr. Aine is professing to have voluntarily gone into hiding, and denied having been arrested at any stage by the authorities. Knowing how the state works in Uganda, I have serious doubts about whether he was telling the truth. The more likely outcome is that he was threatened and a cover story had been concocted to conceal the true reasons for his disappearance.

I have been asked many times since arriving in the UK whether or not I stand by my decision to expose this story, despite the tremendous problems it has caused me personally. Has it been worth it, and would I do it again? The simple answer is one that surprises some people: yes, it was worth it; and yes, I would do it again. Corruption on the part of powerful state structures and the individuals who are responsible for acts such as these can only be exposed by taking the kind of risks which I took in order to reveal this story. The personal price I have paid has been huge, but if light is not shone on such wrongdoing, the overall cost is far greater.

## MOMODOU MUSA TOURAY

In April 2003, I joined a long queue at the Home Office with scores of people of different shades and stripes. All individuals with their own stories, but what bound us together was the fact that we were all asylum seekers looking to be settled in the UK.

The lady in front of me was reading the Sun, a tabloid newspaper that seemed to wage a campaign to curb the number of migrants and asylum seekers who they accused of 'sponging' off the state.

"How can the UK lecture African journalists when its coverage of migration is so appalling?"



Illustration:  
Nick Marcenaro Torres

I was one of the accused, a journalist fleeing a brutal dictatorship in The Gambia.

The paper's editorial column set the tone for its anti-migrant campaign. It complained: 'the laws aren't tough enough'; 'the problem of asylum-seekers is out of control'; 'the government must stem the flood of people entering Britain illegally.'

The media's portrayal of refugees' stories has helped foster a hostile environment for migrants and refugees in the UK. I know this because I am a journalist. I know well how the media machinery works. And in this instance, I am not covering a story: I am the story.

I was editor-in-chief of The Gambia's Daily Observer, a leading newspaper in Banjul. As an editor and gatekeeper, most of those refugee 'stories' would have been consigned to the opinion columns. The vitriol and inaccurate reports were nothing but lies and propaganda packaged as news.

Britain is an island with a very long history of providing safe refuge to those fleeing conflict, persecution and poverty, but refugees and migrants are now the scapegoats and an ugly xenophobic nationalism has taken root in the body politic.

The tabloid press in particular continuously fuel the migration inferno with alarming reports. In the year I arrived in the UK, the Sun ran a front page article which alleged that Eastern European immigrants had killed and eaten swans on the Thames,

and the Daily Star alleged in a story published the same year that Somali asylum-seekers had stolen, killed and eaten donkeys from Greenwich Park.

The stories turned out to have been fabricated. The papers were forced to retract the stories after complaints to the press regulator. Was this journalism? Not by my standards. Xenophobia? Certainly.

I once confided to a fellow African journalist that in the UK sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between the politicians and the journalists. They sound so much alike. The western press freedom organisations that are always within earshot of African journalists and lecturing us about the need for robust journalism have so much work to do at home.

It is sad to say but I have seen better journalism coming from The Gambia than the bile I was seeing in the UK press. The UK press has a global reputation for championing liberal values and press freedoms. But at times they fall short in living up to those lofty ideals.

Despite poor press freedom, the Gambian media cover the stories of migrants with pathos and compassion. The way we report migration in The Gambia, with moderation and in the spirit of social justice, is radically different to the UK media.

We are the smallest country in mainland Africa and in the most volatile region of the continent, prone to civil insurrection and the mass displacement of people. Yet at no stage could I recall that we had vilified migrants in the media. In fact, we don't even have a derogatory slur for migrants.

Why is this? Firstly, migration is not a political issue to be weaponised for votes. And secondly, most of our newsrooms are peopled by migrant journalists from neighbouring countries. These are people we can relate to as they are colleagues, friends, neighbours, partners and so on. You see why diversity and inclusion in the media matters.

There are fine journalists in the UK press who have covered the migrant issues with fairness and objectivity. But what I would like to see are the good journalists calling out their rogue colleagues who violate the ethics of the profession.

That's why it was heartening to see Kelvin MacKenzie, the former editor of the Sun, own up to his past 'sins'. In a 2015 Guardian column, he wrote: "In my time as Sun editor, I maligned minorities. But I've come to realise how language demeans incomers."

We in the Gambian media take our responsibility to foster cohesion and social harmony seriously. We are too well aware of our fragile multicultural societies where the wrong use of language could trigger violence and social upheavals. We have seen the impact of xenophobic violence in countries like South Africa and it is awful.

I worry that the UK is heading in that direction. Since the Brexit vote we have seen a spike in hate crimes and xenophobic attacks on migrants.

#### JAD SALIM

When I decided to become a journalist in 2003, I was fully aware of the risks and challenges that might face me in my career. I was also aware that I might have experiences that could lead

to psychological and physical harm and possibly arrest.

But I never expected to become a war correspondent. I never expected to watch and document what happened when the Syrian people rose up against the country's regime in 2011 and then observe when that uprising turned into a crushing war that continues to destroy the country and its people.

There were bombs and exploding barrels, as well as heavy artillery and mortars. I saw it with my own eyes. It was like watching a war movie. In 3D. Directed by President Bashar Assad. Starring the regime, rebels and terrorist militants.

I remember when I went to the southern suburb of Damascus, Darayya, in 2013. I was one of the first journalists to cover what was going on there. The horror of the scene was a tough one to bear. I could see destruction wherever I went, I could smell death and gunpowder. A single three-second shot was powerful enough to sum up the devastation. So, imagine the entire scene after a two-minute television report.

I had to come face-to-face with people's suffering and also experienced my own painful moments. I became part of my own news story.

When I was reporting clashes between government forces and Islamist militants in Darayya in

2013, I was targeted directly by militants firing mortars.

Blood flowed from my head until it covered my entire face. I lost consciousness and was taken to Shami hospital in central Damascus for treatment. The moment is hard to describe. Maybe I was lucky because I was wearing body armour and there was someone who could help save me. Thankfully, I received treatment, which meant relief for my family and friends.

But we must not forget those journalists who have not been able to heal their wounds and live in very difficult circumstances in order to tell the truth about conflict. Some of them were left injured and some of them were killed. One of the most notable to lose their life was the American reporter Marie Colvin, who was apparently killed at the hands of Syrian government forces in the Baba Amr neighbourhood of Homs in central Syria.

All this violence and terror is happening in a country languishing near the bottom of the list of 176 nations ranked for press freedom.

My parents tried to pressure me — beg me — to leave this dangerous profession. The fact is I could not listen to them or even think about it. I was so passionate about continuing to work to illustrate the tragedies and suffering of the people.

I filmed their destroyed homes and listened to their voices, which called for freedom, peace and security. I often tried to combine the voices of

dissidents and loyalists in my television reports which were keen to show there may be a political solution to end the war in Syria. But that left me in as much danger. Because of the threat against my personal safety, I decided to escape Syria. So, I left my home, my memories, my friends, my dreams and my family. I left the fame that I had created for myself and joined the convoys of millions of Syrians who fled the country because of war and persecution. I ended up here in the UK.

Reporting on war in the Middle East is a risky business for a journalist. Syria alone has seen journalists being captured, jailed and even assassinated. Today, unfortunately, we journalists continue to suffer during wars despite the rapid development and spread of news. Imagine what it would be like to be a reporter to work in a country ruled by a repressive regime that proclaimed 'Assad or burn the country' when the president's power was challenged.

Now that I am a refugee in the UK, having lost everything I had previously had in Syria, I could only bring with me a few books that inspired me to take up journalism. I have not lost my soul, my heart and my mind. I am still a journalist and I am trying to progress in my career and continue the trade of journalists who died in war in order to convey the truth.

Syria's war will end one day and I think that Assad and his regime, which destroyed more than 70 per cent of the country and led to the displacement of more than half of its population, will eventually disappear, along with the Islamic terrorist groups. They have not been able to kill me, nor those others who have been welcomed into the UK. ■

*\*Names have been changed.*

"I never expected to document my own country's descent into war"

# PACIFIST WARRIOR: SHEILA HAYMAN

Sheila Hayman is a BAFTA-winning documentary filmmaker, prize-winning journalist and novelist. She also runs a creative writing group for torture survivors. Marsha Glenn gets to know her better.

Illustration:  
Nick Marcenaro Torres



When Sheila Hayman was growing up, there was nothing visual at all in her house. Both her parents were mathematicians. Her mother was a teacher and father was a professor. They were very much in love with classical music and took Sheila and her two sisters to concerts. But Sheila has no memory of paintings hanging in her house, of going to art galleries or even much to the cinema. Perhaps, she says, this is what encouraged her to become a filmmaker.

In order to know Sheila, you need to know her hobbies and passion for life alongside her contributions to the media and charity work. In this exclusive interview with the Guardian, Sheila shares her life experience. She's not under the microscope to talk only about her successes.

## THE JOURNEY OF A FILMMAKER

Let's start with childhood. During those days frequent rows between her parents left her anxious and insecure, but she discovered she was good at school and set about trying to be top of the class, in the misplaced hope that this would make her happy and popular. Needless to say, neither of these worked out. But her dream was always there: to have access to the visual world, to be creative and to solve the mystery of happiness.

As soon as Sheila stepped through the door of university, things started to change. Even before her final exams, she managed to get three job offers from different media companies. Sheila took a job with the BBC as it seemed the most creative to her. At the interview, she remembers, "I was interesting enough to be memorable, but not enough to be a danger to the corporation's reputation." Then, as now, the BBC was looking for a middle-class face and voice

that they thought could connect with the target audience. Sheila was the perfect fit for them. She also found that it was a great time to be in television. Next, working with Channel 4 in the early days of its journey, she was lucky enough to be given the funds and freedom to create her own work. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because of her personality, she has never had much luck as a director-for-hire on other people's projects.

One day Sheila got a call from the Fulbright Commission, offering her the BAFTA Fulbright Fellowship, which she used to go to Los Angeles to learn screen-writing. Up to that point, Sheila felt she was living a life she'd inherited, with the values and many of the habits of her family. Moving to LA was an opportunity to reinvent herself overnight.

Her intention was to move from documentary into drama film-making; but here she hit her first professional roadblock. Whether through anxiety or habit, she found it impossible to let go of the rational part of her brain and release the dreamy, playful creativity that screen-writing demands. Sheila has always found it hard to access her daydreaming zone unless it is about food, inventing recipes or baking cakes. The dream of drama film-making had to be abandoned — at least for the time being.

But she was in California, where the internet was in its infancy. Sheila's BBC documentary 'The Electronic Frontier' aired to a television audience about how the digital would change everything — which, as we now know, it has.

Sheila's film-making experience is also deeply influenced by her interest in music. Her passion for music is perhaps inherited from her ancestors. She is the

great-great-great granddaughter of the composer Fanny Mendelssohn and great-great-great-great-grandniece of Felix Mendelssohn. On the other side of her family, her grandfather was a brilliant self-taught pianist who could repeat anything he heard even once, note for note. Sheila herself is a violinist and claims to be into all music genres. She says, "There's only good and bad music, [though] very aggressive rap to me falls under the bad music, I'm afraid."

During her childhood Sheila's father might enjoy the indulgence of lighter classical music, but her mother was totally rigid. To her it either had to be classical music, or nothing. Once her mother even refused to allow Sheila to go to see the then newly-released film 'The Sound of Music'. But Sheila's own experience of motherhood has brought the opportunity to experience the magical world of Disney musicals.

Sheila has made several films about musicians and music, some of which were made ten years ago but are still being played at screenings around the world. But most of her music films rarely generate income, having to be done instead only for love.

#### **VOLUNTEERING AT FREEDOM FROM TORTURE**

When Sheila's children were small, she decided to take a break from her film-making, not wanting to be away from them on location or in long edits. So she dived back into creative writing. However, she couldn't settle into the writer's solitary lifestyle, so she decided to do some volunteer work. Freedom from Torture, a UK charity that supports torture survivors, was the closest organisation she could find, so she just walked in. Sheila's expertise in writing im-

mediately came in useful there. In the fifteen years she has now put in as coordinator of the creative writing group 'Write to Life', she has found that Freedom from Torture's clients have been blessed with one very special gift: they all have amazing stories to tell. They have come from different backgrounds, gone through unimaginable pain, survived and now can finally transform the experience into a beautiful piece of art.

"I look at it like this," Sheila says. "The pain, the emotion they need to express is like rocket fuel: our job is to sheath it in the beautiful cloak of words," — and increasingly now, film, poetry, music and soon comedy too. "But it would be so wrong to tell them how to write about their experience as the pain and struggle solely belongs to them. My job is as a midwife, helping it to come out".

Compassion for others is also something Sheila can remember growing up with. Her father came to this country as a refugee from Germany. As a mathematician, he was always keen to meet colleagues in his field who might come from anywhere in the world. So there were always visitors. When Sheila was little, although it was no longer legal in England to refuse people accommodation due to their skin colour, it still happened a lot. So visitors from Japan, Louisiana or India would stay in her childhood home. That childhood experience of embracing other cultures has shaped much of her life. Now, she can't even think of living in a mono-cultural society and missing the opportunity to share cultural interaction.

#### **GRATITUDE TOWARDS LIFE**

Sheila loves Easter. She also loves the surprise of a singing blackbird in the darkness of the early winter mornings. On the

other hand, climate change bothers her lately. Still she would like to keep her positive hat on. "I am most thankful for my physical health," she says. "If you have energy then a lot of things seem to be possible to achieve." For many years she has adopted an active lifestyle. She always appreciates her family and friends in life. She cherishes the fact of living in the most cosmopolitan, tolerant society in the world. Although she had a difficult childhood, she admires her mathematician parents' great and unique intellects. Sheila also inherited her parents' intellect. She has always had the ability to think from different perspectives, and this has helped her to stand out. Her friends say she is special and unusual (to some extent weird!). For Sheila the downside of being "different", in her experience, is feeling isolated.

#### **GO GREEN AND HEALTHY**

Sheila is a very energetic person; she enjoys making films because she can immerse herself in a total intellectual, physical and practical process using her eyes, hands, muscles and brain simultaneously. Her main hobbies are swimming and cycling. She thanks her father for introducing her and her sisters to swimming from an early age and she still goes swimming almost every morning. Not being a morning person, this helps wake her up and has become a preferred form of meditation. Last summer Sheila and one of her sisters went on a swimming holiday around the Lake District. Sheila, who lives in central London, always travels by bicycle if her destination is within a 45 minute radius. She says, "It is good for the environment and good for you. You see things and breathe as well. I am too impatient to wait for public transport".

**"The pain they need to express [their experiences] is like rocket fuel: our job is to sheath it in the beautiful cloak of words."**

Sheila has a creative and unique style of dress, which helps people to remember her even after just the first meeting. Some of her dresses are tailored by herself, though lately she has had little time for this creative outlet. Her collection of antique brooches includes a Chairman Mao badge bought in China in 1982; her jeans mended with

deliberate flamboyance are style statement items.

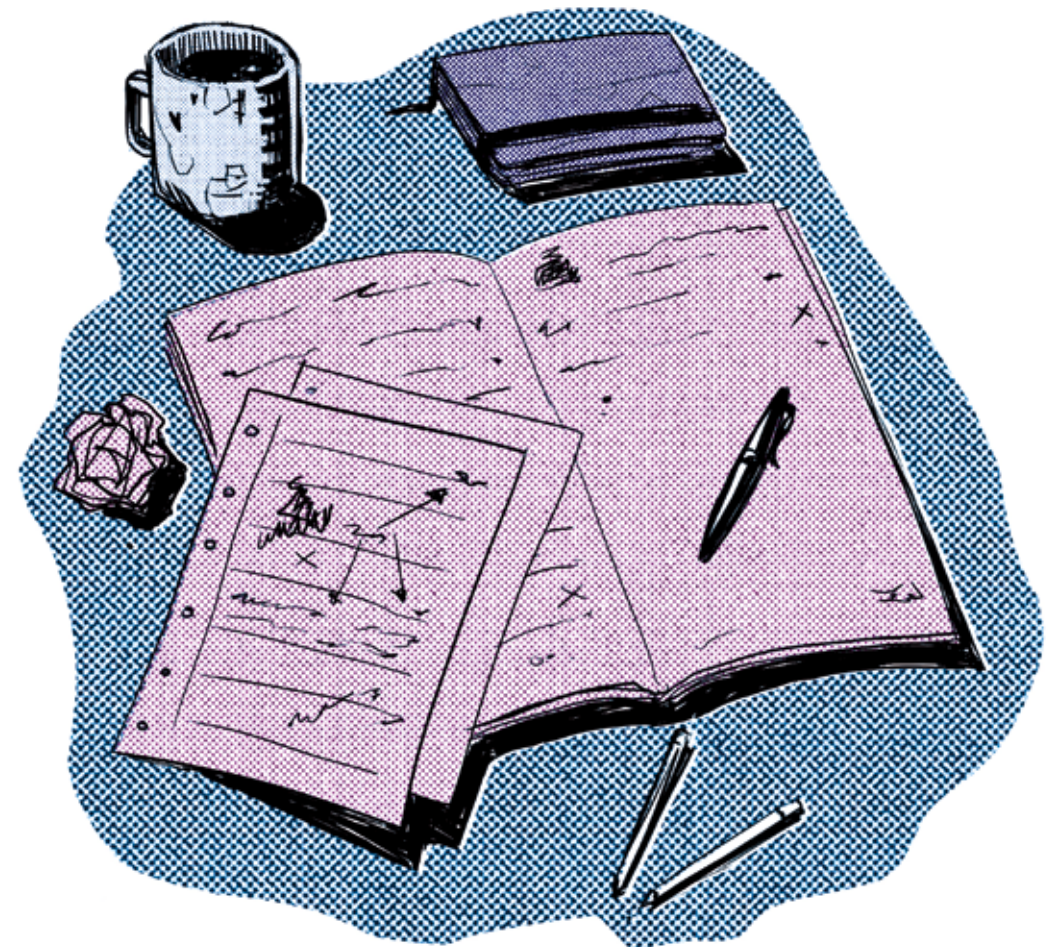
#### **THE SECRET OF AN ACTIVE DAILY LIFE? TERROR!**

Sheila has a typical habit of sending emails to herself and keeping to-do lists about tasks as they arise. Otherwise, the number of different responsibilities she sets off with on a daily

basis wouldn't get done.

But there is another force, rather more personal and intense, that motivates her to keep focused on her daily routine: terror. When Sheila's father was only seven years old, he became a victim of Nazi persecution. For that reason, Sheila as a child didn't get the expected support she might have hoped for from a father. On the other hand, her mother was controlling, with a rather puritanical attitude to emotions. Little Sheila grew up with a feeling of terror and uncertainty, always expecting the sky to fall in. There was no one to tell her 'everything will be all right. You're not responsible for any of this bad stuff.'

This terror has trained her to always be alert, keep do-



ing things, and be on top of everything. Although she says she mostly enjoys life, she still struggles with the sense of terror and is looking for a way to put it behind her once and for all. It's this personal experience of trauma that has helped her empathise with her clients at the charity.

#### HAND-PICKED SUCCESS STORIES

Sheila praises 'The Electronic Frontiers' and 'Mendelssohn, the Nazis and Me' as her two most memorable films. They both have multiple narrative threads, which makes the work more exciting. Their continuing success has brought the opportunity to go to places, making networks around the world. Although Sheila had several accidents during the rushed production of the Mendelssohn film, breaking her nose and thumb in separate incidents, she carried on and finished it. Now, looking back, she finds that was a great achievement in her career and personal life.

Sheila has written three comic novels and she counts those as her much-loved success pieces. Sheila believes that "comedy is a part of the fiction-writing genre, you can still play with your reality in the story. After all, making people laugh out of your own misery is a great form of art." She had the rocket fuel for this comic-writing coming from countless sleepless nights due to looking after kids, going through an identity crisis when the family needed more time and attention.

#### NOT ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF LIFE

There are occasions when Sheila does not feel like getting out of bed but again, she is too frightened and impatient to be a procrastinator. She prefers to get jobs done. She finds it hard to sit



down and do nothing.

Sheila says she still has her childhood insecurities, doubting her self-worth, and has made a few wrong decisions about career and financial investments out of paranoia. She realises that "damage has been done long ago in my childhood. I don't think it was intentionally done by my parents. It seems like an endless encounter I can't get victory over." Sometimes, it has led her to sabotage even her own success, future and mental health.

Sheila is also conscious of what critics say about her — that she can come across as bossy, arrogant, interruptive and dominating. She knows there is some truth to this, so she takes the criticism as a learning curve.

#### MOVING FORWARD

For the past two-and-a-half years Sheila has been working intensively on a documentary project about human and artificial intelligence. She has been fascinated by this topic since making a film in the 1980s about robots. As a Director's Fellow at

the Boston MIT media lab she was able to closely monitor the development of the trend. She is, not surprisingly, outspoken on the topic. As Sheila says, "machines only know the codes. As machines and robots can't operate in the human world, people who are running this cultural trend have decided that we need to be trained not to feel the need of the real and eventually not to have the real world at all. Human beings are turning into only voices and fingers. Human empathy, humour, intuition, emotion — all the things that exist in the natural world — are basically being deleted".

Sheila believes this is a radical and important story that has to be told — and it might be her most important project yet. Afterwards, she would like to set herself free to travel while keeping carbon emissions lower, going back to comedy and working with little children. ■

Visit Sheila's website:  
[www.sheilahayman.com](http://www.sheilahayman.com)

# PERSECUTION HARSHER, RESETTLEMENT HARDER: ASYLUM IN LONDON NOW AND 150 YEARS AGO

Refugees transform their old and new countries alike. Since the Victorian era, London has been importing refugees, and exporting liberal ideas. Kerim Balci

Britain might not be the best country to seek asylum in, but it has traditionally been a fertile refuge for trailblazer nomads. Some of them, like Karl Marx, arrived with their genius intact but needed the freedom of London to produce their magnum opus. Others, like Farrokh Bulsara, would never have become Freddie Mercuries if not for the creative atmosphere of the UK. Ziya Pasha and Namik Kemal, refugee journalists who stayed a short while in London in the late 19th century, might not have gained universal fame, but their years in London had a profound influence on the mindsets of the founders of the Turkish Republic. Britain's capital is where Turkish national identity and parliamentary ideas were first conceived.

A hundred and fifty years later, Tarik Toros and Turan Goruyilmaz, two Turkish journalists, are retracing their footsteps. Whether they will influence future Turkish reformers is yet to be seen, but a comparison of the two stories is revealing enough. In the last century and a half, persecution has become harsher, resettlement harder and English courts have replaced the Houses of Parliament as the

bastion of rule of law in the eyes of the refugees.

#### "ENGLAND IS NOT LIKE FRANCE"

Ziya and Namik landed at Dover on 28 June 1867. On board the ship, Ziya, already 38, told his younger colleague that "England is not like France. Nobody can deport us from England." Only a month ago, the two members of the Young Ottomans Society had been smuggled out of Istanbul by the French Ambassador, but when Napoleon III decided to invite Sultan Abdulaziz to the International Paris Exhibition, national interests outweighed French commitment to freedom of expression. The two spent the following three years in London, publishing 89 issues of *Hurriyet* (Freedom), a newspaper that shaped the intellectual discussions in Istanbul.

Ziya and Namik were fluent in French but only had poor English. They were well-funded by the opposition figure Mustafa Fazil Pasha, a half-brother of the Khedive of Egypt — and in the Victorian era, a fezzed Ottoman was seen as authentic, not strange. They opted to live in upmarket houses around



Back in Turkey, Ziya Pasha and Namik Kemal sitting among other giants of late Ottoman era Turkish literature: (left to right) Ibrahim Sinasi, an unknown person in uniform, Ebuzziya Tevfik, Abdülhak Hamit Tarhan and Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem. The photo was shot at a certain Foto Yusuf at Uskudar, Istanbul. It should have been shot in the first half of 1870s, before the exile of Namik Kemal to Cyprus. Coloured by @tatliea. Image in public domain.



Namik Kemal in Paris with his friend Kapipashazade Rifat Bey, also a member of the Young Ottomans Society. Image in public domain.

the latter's aphoristic style left a lasting mark on their writing.

When the titans were not clashing, Ziya and Namik found repose at London's parks and occasionally at the British Museum reading room. At the time, Karl Marx was there working on what would become the first volume of 'Das Kapital', but they never met. Marx's teachings wouldn't attract their attention either. Namik adored London's capitalist pace of production. "If the means of wealth in Istanbul are tied to the hour-hand of a clock, they are tied to the minute-hand in London," he wrote in Hurriyet. When they covered the first ever clash of industrial workers and employers in Sheffield, they approached it not from a class struggle perspective, but as a question of freedoms. Tarik, 47, came to London in March 2016. His younger colleague Turan followed in May the same year. After Ipek Media Group, where

Tarik was a general manager of a successful TV channel, and Turan was working as a producer and anchor-man, was taken over by brute — and brutal — police force, both had fallen out of love with journalism in Turkey. In London, they were hoping to establish themselves as players in the global league of English-language media.

But the midsummer nightmare was yet to come, on the night of 15 July 2016, in the form of a thwarted coup attempt. It was 'grace from God' in the words of President Erdogan, who skilfully used it to turn Turkey's already suffocating illiberal democracy into outright authoritarianism. On 21 July, Erdogan launched his counter-coup. Both Tarik and Turan were implicated in the witch hunt that followed. On 25 July Turan's house in Turkey was raided, together with the houses of 42 other journalists. They were all accused of in-



Being in his late 20s Namik Kemal grew a beard in London so as to look more mature. Image in public domain.

volvement in the coup attempt. Horrified to see his name in arrest warrant lists while he was already in the UK, Turan decided to seek asylum in September.

It took almost two years before he was granted permission to stay. Turning from the representer to the represented is always a difficult experience. He had covered stories of Syrian refugees in the past, but never thought of becoming a refugee himself someday. But if making that decision was difficult, to wait for the Home Office's answer was even worse.

"When you are an asylum seeker, you become a seeker of asylum stories," Turan remembers. "It became harder to wait when we heard that applicants who arrived far later than us were given residence permits,"

Turan remembers. "At some point we started to wait by the window for the postman. That envelope from the Home Office never came."

The call of journalistic duty forced the two friends to abandon their ambition to go global, and instead start a small YouTube channel, MoonStar TV, where they would try to fill the vacuum created by the closure of 189 media outlets in Turkey and the censorship of social media.

Piccadilly Circus and navigated English intellectual life under the guidance of French tutors.

The following three years were coloured with brandy — which, Namik believed, was a must to digest English food — with occasional visits to nightclubs or the newly-opened Turkish bath at 76 Jermyn Street, and 'a few imaginary, and a few real soul mates,' if Namik was not altogether showing off in his letters back to Istanbul.

This wasn't a case of desperation made more comfortable through indulgence. It was their way of observing a society in flux. Ziya and Namik experienced their first parliamentary election in 1868 when Gladstone's Liberals won power. As polemical poets themselves, they loved to listen to the lengthy clashes between Gladstone and Disraeli in the House of Commons. The former's rhetoric and



A lithograph celebrating the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, featuring the sources of inspiration of the movement. Namik Kemal is given a central role and the angelic figure carrying the "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" slogan is the angel of freedom from Kemal's 'The Dream'. Image in public domain.

Tarik Toros and Turan Goruryilmaz's MoonStar TV channel reached 67,000 subscribers in two years. PHOTO: From YouTube broadcast of MoonStar TV on 6 June 2019.



Turan Goruryilmaz at the green-box studio of MoonStar TV, made out of green curtains. 8 June 2019. Photograph: Kerim Balci



**THEN, THE SULTAN CAME TO LONDON**

Ziya and Namik had spent only a few weeks in London when they learned that Sultan Abdulaziz would extend his Paris visit to London. That visit would mark the first split in the small Young Ottomans group in the city. Ziya abhorred the idea of meeting the Sultan in person and went to Brighton when his delegation arrived at Charing Cross station. Later, it was revealed that he had sent the Sultan an apology letter demanding an amnesty and the right to return home.

Neither Ziya nor Namik were against the Sultan. In fact, they couldn't conceive of an Ottoman society without a unifying royal figure. When Ziya wrote his famous book 'The Dream', his unexpected suggestion to get rid of the influential grand vizier Ali Pasha had come from the Sultan himself. When the Sublime Porte suggested taking out 2,000 subscriptions to Hurriyet, in an apparent attempt to buy off its critics, Ziya was ready to write his reverential article "Long Live Sultan Aziz, bravo to the Porte!"

Hence, when the Sultan was received by Queen Victoria, neither felt annoyed. And nor was the Sultan annoyed to see three Young Ottomans following his entourage on a visit to Crystal Palace, their red fezzes standing out from the crowd.

On 14 May 2018, Erdogan came to London for a three-day official visit, which included tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Turkey was due to have an election on 24 June and this gesture was seen as a boost to Erdogan's public image.

Turan's asylum application was still pending, and Erdogan's visit made him angry and fearful. He knew that Erdogan was visiting world capitals with extradition request lists. "When



First page of the first issue of Hurriyet (Freedom) published at 4 Rupert Street, London, on 6 July 1868. Public domain.

you are an asylum seeker in this country, and the President of the country you fled is given the red carpet treatment, it hurts," he told me. The British willingness to champion human rights, universal legal standards and freedom of expression, and its equal readiness to establish friendly relations with a country that does not meet any of these values, hit Turan hard.

"Heaven forbid!" Tarik responded when he heard about

Ziya Pasha's letter of apology. But, at some point he deliberately missed a remote encounter with Erdogan: "His convoy passed through the street where our office is. I didn't even bother to look. I was so alienated from him."

**FREEDOM IN A LONDON PRINTING HOUSE, FREE BROADCAST FROM A LONDON KITCHEN**

For almost three years Ziya and Namik introduced their readers into the theory of liberalism and constitutionalism. Neither would live long enough to see the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, when words first published in Hurriyet would become the slogans of the emerging constitutional monarchy.

The demise of Hurriyet came from within. When Mustafa Fazil, soon to join Ali Pasha's cabinet as finance minister, informed Namik in late 1869 that he wished Hurriyet to cease publication, Namik quit the newspaper. Eventually, he turned back to Istanbul, and joined Mustafa Fazil's entourage, only to be exiled again three years later.

But Ziya had a personal interest in continuing to publish Hurriyet: to bother Ali Pasha. He was quite successful in that. When he published an article by Ali Suavi, in the 67th issue of Hurriyet, implying assassination as a way of removing Ali Pasha from office, he found himself involved in a lawsuit. While released on bail, he fled to Geneva, where he would publish Hurriyet until its 100th issue. He was only able to return to Istanbul after Ali Pasha died in 1871, and had charmed the Sultan with one of his rather sycophantic poems.

A hundred and fifty years later, Turan and Tarik decided to speak back to Turkey through a Periscope broadcast. MoonStar

TV began in Tarik's kitchen in London. Soon they moved to YouTube, which would not only take care of hosting and information security, but also would help monetise the channel.

In June 2017, when they uploaded their first video, they had two subscribers: themselves. In less than two years they reached 67,000 and over 5 million monthly viewings. Turan's measure of success is the same measure used by Hurriyet: "We are banned in Turkey. We are four people overall. We are still working from a house, using a green-box studio made out of green curtains and we are able to bother the authoritarian regime. This is success!"

For Tarik, who works six days a week as a driver for an international pizza chain, MoonStar TV is a mission that they could not ignore. "Me and Turkey are like a divorced couple. We may have been divorced, but this does not change the fact that we have had shared lives. Half of the journalists jailed in Turkey are my colleagues. In the absence of a free media in Turkey, I have a responsibility to speak out," he explains.

**THE DREAMS THAT NEVER CAME TRUE**

One day, Ziya Pasha was sitting on the grass at Hampton Court Palace. While thinking about his exile from the Ottoman Palace, he fell asleep and dreamt a fantastic vision in which he had a lengthy dialogue with the Ottoman Sultan. He was able to convince the Sultan that Ziya's sworn enemy Ali Pasha was the stumbling block for all reforms. The lengthy essay 'The Dream', which is largely believed to be the first example of Turkish fantastic literature, has influenced the thinking and writing of many intellectuals to follow, including Namik Kemal, who would pen his

own 'The Dream' while in exile in Cyprus. Namik's 'Dream' was a utopian account of the awakening of the Turkish people's desire for freedom. It became a source of inspiration for several generations of Turkish activists to come. The kind of advanced civilization he envisioned for Turkey in 'The Dream', was nothing but a description of London.

Today, Turan and Tarik's dreams are no different. They dream of a time that Turkish people will enjoy the same rights as Britons and the same rule of law; a time that people will be able to express their thoughts freely; a time that a change of president won't change everything in the country in a single night.

But they themselves do not appear in these dreams. "If one day Turkey enters into a restoration and if we can be of help in that, we would be happy to do so. But that contribution will be from afar," Tarik told me. "My story in Turkey was left half unwritten. My heart is broken for the Turkish people. Nothing will do away with that brokenness."

**ZIYA AND NAMIK REMAINED BROKEN TOO.**

Ziya Pasha died in 1880, age 55, after three consecutive appointments as governor of Syria, Konya and Adana, all arranged to keep him away from Istanbul, and all short enough to prevent him from engaging in any reform project.

Namik Kemal died eight years later at the age of 48, while in exile in Chios. He had developed pneumonia during his previous exile in Cyprus. On his deathbed, he was reading Victor Hugo's 'Les Miserables'. ■



# CONTRIBUTORS

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Shakib manages the Afghan Herald Facebook page and Twitter account. It focuses on covering news about Afghanistan. Before coming to the UK, he worked at Kabul University. He was formerly Manager and Chief Editor of ABLE publication, and wrote articles for Citizen Image.

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Dalia is a freelance writer and associate lecturer at London College of Communication. Her writing often focusses on her Middle Eastern heritage and food culture, as well as giving a voice to marginalised creatives, namely Muslims and Arabs, and their experiences in the West.

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Vivienne Francis is the director of the Refugee Journalism Project. She is also a Reader in Social Justice Journalism and Knowledge Exchange at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. Her work focuses on media representation and diversity.

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Loraine is originally from Malawi. She has worked as Action Researcher and Lecturer in her native country. She is now a community activist specializing in issues affecting the BAMER (Black and Minority Ethnic and Refugees) community.

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Margarita is a former Russian journalist and award-winning artist filmmaker. She has co-authored an independent documentary project about the Soviet coup d'état which was built from snippets of 50 interviews and resulted in web doc Putschyourself.org.

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Veronica has been providing support as project administrator for the Refugee Journalism project since 2018. Prior to this, she graduated from London College of Communication with a first-class award in BA (Hons) Photojournalism and Documentary Photography.

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Zozan is a Kurdish journalist from Diyarbakir. She worked in Turkey, Kurdistan and other areas of the Middle East for the Voice of America news channel and several Kurdish media outlets. As a member of Amnesty International, she wrote several stories about human rights violations.

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Ernest is a human rights advocate based in the UK since 2014. He was instrumental in making the Kyrgyzstan parliament adopt the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and latterly to pass legislation for greater financial transparency in electoral law. Also, he edited English news for the independent Ferghana News covering developments in Central Asia.

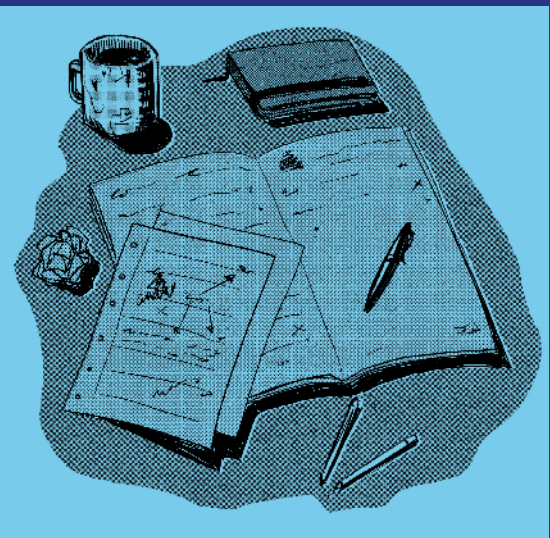
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