

Arif



It happened on my way to school. After my mum had made breakfast for me, I was walking down our street. My friend Amir was living a few doors down. As usual, I had my basketball with me. Amir and I used to play on our way to school. He came out of his house and I passed the ball to him, and off we went! All of a sudden, we heard gunshots. Amir pulled me towards the entrance of one of the houses. In doing so, he may have saved my life. I don't know, maybe.

More and more gunshots. Everyone was running away; frightened and scared. Suddenly, we saw men with weapons shooting out of windows at the tanks in the streets. The tanks belonged to the government. Shortly afterwards, we heard an explosion nearby.

Amir and I sought refuge in one of the houses; the door was open. We didn't know who was living there, but we felt safe inside. We waited in the house until everything was over, until everything was silent.

From that day on, my mum didn't want me to go to school anymore. Oh how I cried. I've always wanted to

become a doctor. My mum then started to teach Amir and me at home, that way, I would still learn new things. My mum is a teacher. The situation became more and more dangerous. The schools in our neighbourhood were closed, and there were military checkpoints everywhere. My mum even got arrested, even though she didn't do anything. My dad then had to pay a lot of money to get her out of jail.

On that day, my dad told us that we were going to leave the country. We had to leave all of our friends behind, our house, all of my belongings: my basketball, my Xbox, my Harry Potter collection. I was only allowed to take the most important things with me. We put our money and our identity cards in one of those plastic gloves used by doctors. It was nothing like the journeys I had taken before. It was dangerous. My dad showed me on the map where Europe was. I was so happy because I wanted to go to school in Europe. If you don't go to school and learn new things, you don't have a chance in life.

Here in Austria, I go to school like all the other children. I can speak German quite well and have already made a few friends. When I'm a doctor, I want to go back to Syria to help the people there. During the war, many people have been injured or have fallen ill. They are in dire need of help.



Nasrin

When we were kids, we used to play football in the market square back home. Boys and girls together. Well, it was mostly the boys, but I used to join in too. One day, I wasn't allowed to play with the boys anymore because I had become a young woman. From that moment on, boys and girls weren't allowed to play with each other. Just imagine that! I had to stay at home like my sisters. Girls stay at home and do the housework; they are not allowed to go to school or play in the streets. Their only role in life is to get married and to have children.

From then on, I also had to wear a full-body veil, a burka. As a woman, I wasn't allowed to go out or to go for a walk without a man accompanying me.

Back home, unfamiliar men were forbidden to look at women who were not wearing a veil. This would be a major sin, Haram! However, I wanted to learn about the world, I wanted to learn about new things, like other countries and other languages.

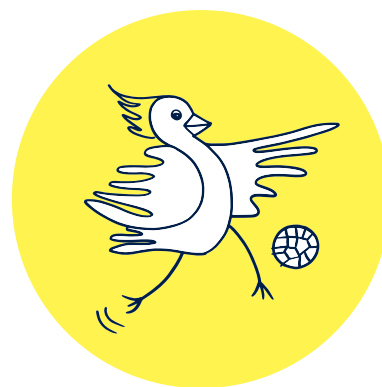
Then came the day when everything changed in my life. It happened in the same market square where we used to play football. It happened on a Friday. There were a lot of people. They were on their way to Friday prayers, to the mosque, where we Muslims pray. My dad was among the crowd of people in the market square when it happened.

A bomb attack. 17 killed, they said. Nothing but a number in the newspaper. This time, however, it was my dad who was among the dead. This time, my family was affected.

All of a sudden, the world was no longer the same. My dad: dead. My life: in ruins. My uncle wanted to take everything away from us. He also said that the time had come for me to get married. I was only 14!

I didn't want to get married! I wanted to make my own decisions. That's why I left my country and my family.

Lina



When I'm dancing, I feel free. I forget that I miss my home and my grandma. As soon as I turn up the music, my whole body wants to move. I close my eyes and I let the music take me away. I let the music take me to our house in Syria where I used to dance with my friends. Out of joy. Simply out of joy.

The bomb took that joy away from us. It ripped off the front door and parts of the roof. My family and I then had to leave the country.

When I listen to music, I think of Turkey from time to time. We stayed there during our flight. All of us children always had to keep quiet there. I danced like a stone there, always completely stiff, very little movement. Any proper dancing was happening in my mind.

Here in Austria, I can finally be who I want to be. Here, no one is bothered by the fact that we are Kurds; a minority living in the northern part of Syria. Our language was forbidden in Syria. No one was given an identity card. We weren't allowed to have Kurdish

names. A lot of people didn't like us Kurds, and we were often treated badly, including by the government. With the war, things have only become worse. Everyone is fighting with everyone. I don't know why. Everyone against everyone. The Kurds, the Sunnites, the Shiites, the Alawites and the Christians. In the past, we didn't have any problems. Everyone was living together in total harmony in Syria. I don't think that this will ever be the case again, even after the war is over. Dance is a language understood by all. When someone is dancing, others see, understand and feel.



Faizal

I still remember when my mum told me that I had to leave the country because life in Afghanistan was too dangerous for me. I didn't want to believe her. On my own! She told me that she was already too old to come with me, and that I had to go to Europe on my own. I didn't sleep that night, I was crying. To Europe, on my own?! I couldn't even imagine doing it.

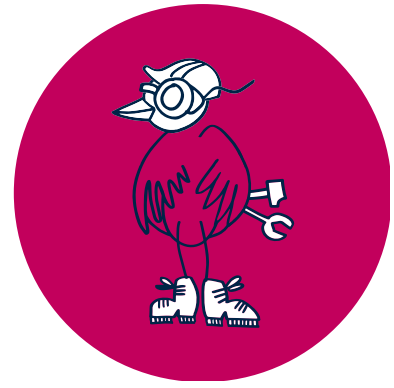
In the past, my mum and I used to sit on the large carpet in our living room. The carpet had always been a place of rest for our family; a place where we would sit together and talk, sing or listen to mum's stories. My mum knew how to read the pattern on the carpet, she could read in it as if the carpet were a book. A book with many tales and stories, and we would listen carefully. She would tell us about gardens full of flowers and hidden treasures. The stories were wonderful. There were also stories about the war, guns, helicopters and tanks. The war had been going on for such a long time in Afghanistan.

While my mum was telling us these stories, my sisters were looking for mistakes in the carpet. I was listening

carefully. Now I'm being told, while sitting on this beloved carpet, that I have to leave my family behind and go out into the world on my own. Someday, you might also read my story on a carpet.

I crossed high mountains in the back of several lorries, passed through cold valleys on foot and fought against the stormy sea in tiny boats to finally get to Europe. Whenever I had the chance during my journey, I went to the mosque and sat down on a carpet. I tried to read their patterns for hours on end. This gave me the strength I needed to continue my journey.

Unfortunately, I've never learned how to weave or tie a carpet. One of the first things I bought in Austria was a carpet – a little piece of home.



Zahra

Back home, well not our home, but where I come from, from Aleppo. Aleppo? Why doesn't anyone know about it? It is the second-biggest city in Syria, and it is bigger than Vienna. Anyway, in Aleppo, back home in Syria, most people are Muslims. Back home in the Islamic world, people have always loved patterns. Patterns and ornaments. Do you know any? The patterns on carpets, on tiles, on tables, in books, everywhere. You do? My dad used to design patterns, on tables – that's what we call intarsia.

He created patterns by using small pieces of wood of different colours. He would place the first piece of wood on the table, then another one next to it, then another and another. On and on, slowly, until a beautiful pattern became visible. Symmetrical. What a wonderful table.

I've liked these patterns ever since I was little.

If one piece of wood were missing, the pattern would no longer be complete. There would be a gap. My grandma... I miss my grandma. She couldn't come with

us. The journey would have been far too dangerous for her. She was almost blind and wouldn't have been able to flee. She might have even endangered us. That's what my dad always told me.

The map of Syria is like a mosaic, there are so many different regions. Today, all these regions are fighting with each other. I don't understand why people have to fight and to destroy the pattern.

My grandma, she would touch a mosaic with her fingers and would be able to tell which pattern it was and which colours were used; how fascinated I was by this as a child. She knew every mosaic pattern.

Someday, I want to learn them all. I want to design patterns with colourful pieces of wood or colourful pixels on a computer. An image on the computer is like a mosaic, no pixel is allowed to get lost. If even one gets lost, the image would be incomplete.



Azmi

I left home with my little brother Samir, who was 7 back then. I was responsible for him. We had to leave because otherwise I would have had to join the army, and I didn't want to do that. I don't want to kill someone or be killed by someone else in war. My little brother was very sad because his twin brother couldn't come with us. The three of us wouldn't have made it, because time, and time again, when Samir had lost his strength and couldn't walk anymore, I had to carry him on my shoulders.

We arrived in Turkey. We had to wait for the boat on the beach and then make sure that no one saw us. We were hungry. Samir was hungry. The only foodstuffs we had left were a few dates and some milk powder that my mum had put in our rucksacks. The boat didn't come. That's why I had to go to the next village – secretly – no one was allowed to see me, otherwise everything would have been over. Alhamdulillah! I made it to the village and the boat came the next night. We had to throw our rucksacks into the sea because there wasn't enough space on the boat. It was crowded. It was crammed with people.

Our rucksacks: gone. Our blankets and clothes: gone. Everything was gone. We didn't have anything else but the clothes we were wearing. We each had our own identity cards, I had taken the money and Samir, a photo of his twin brother. I also saw Samir quickly putting his Lego car in his pocket. On the boat, I got so hungry because I had given all the food to Samir. We made it across the sea. I never want to be hungry again in my entire life. Never again.

Here in Austria, I'd like to become a cook. I'd like to open up my own restaurant and serve Syrian dishes. I've felt very welcome in Austria. There was a woman who let us stay at her house. She's become like a second mum to me. Now, I have two mums: one in Syria and one in Vienna.