

## From Aleppo to Europe: Father's Point Of View

Another day has passed, full of dread, shelling, sniper's bullets, and hundreds of people being killed. For Malik and his mother, Amina, this has become an everyday life and all they thought about during those days was how to survive – how to get water and food, medicaments and gas bottles for cooking and lighting the lamps. Amina was very old and weak. There were around twenty elderly people, living alone in their neighbourhood. They were determined to carry on, to stay with their memories in their country, the only one they have known.

As the night fell, Malik could hear his own thoughts and some shooting in the distance. He remembered his wife and their two children and his face wore dark strained look. They had never thought about leaving Aleppo but when the offensive started escalating they realised that staying would mean simply... dying. At that time they decided to pay smugglers \$1800 in total to get his wife and their two children out of Aleppo and lead them to safety. Days of anxiety and terror became weeks and weeks became months. Malik could not stay in this hell of a home any longer. They had to go.

The next morning, Malik finally stood up from the broken chair where he had been sitting all night thinking of an escape plan. He went into the other room and he tried to wake up his mother. She didn't move. He tried again and again, losing hope and his eyes brimming with tears. She had passed away in her sleep. Amina couldn't take everything she had been through and the illness had taken over her. He covered her body with a blanket and kissed her forehead one last time. Then, he went out... alone.

Malik was determined to get out of Aleppo and it didn't take him long to get rid of their few remaining possessions. He used the money to pay human smugglers \$ 400. He set off on his journey, trying not to listen to the people screaming in terror and pain. Syria wasn't a home for Malik anymore. It was a dreadful place, a genuine battlefield. He travelled by bus to an informal camp in Latakia. As border restrictions have narrowed the options and "No Entry" signs were erected elsewhere, the only remaining paths out involved difficult and dangerous illegal crossing overland into Turkey. The large group he joined was split into two before they started walking. They waited until nightfall. One group was shot at and intercepted by Turkish police while Malik's contingent were handed over to a Turkish smuggler and taken to Gaziantep.

As Malik had abandoned his backpack so that he could face the hard road ahead, he was cold, hungry and completely exhausted. But he kept walking until he saw a building – it was a small shop. There was a woman and a man sitting

on a table, smoking. When they saw the miserable father, they opened up a bottle of water and gave him some crackers. No one said anything mainly because of the language barrier but Malik put his hands together and said “Thank you” in Arabic. They helped him find a man called Khaled, who ran a clothes factory in Gaziantep. Malik was able to work there informally and earn some money to get to Canakkale and pay another smuggler to help him cross the Turkey – Bulgaria border. Two weeks had passed and Malik finally arrived in Canakkale. He felt desperate after his first attempt to cross the border failed. His fake Swiss passport was confiscated but fortunately he wasn’t detained. He longed to see his family again and he knew he would try a hundred times. Not having anything but his hope for a better life, he set off for Istanbul.

In the Fatih district, past an outdoor market and down a narrow alley, the tea houses and kebab shops cater to Syrian refugees. The menus are in Arabic and so are the conversations mainly about the best routes and prices. That was the place where Malik had to make contact with Abu Salman, a smuggler with reputation and negotiate over price and destination. A boy invited him to a shabby hotel lobby next door where he paid and received some instructions and details for the journey.

Everything went as planned and the following night he was in a bus to the nearest border checkpoint Hamzabeyli – Lesovo. Malik glanced at the people in the bus – they all seemed exhausted and terrified, but still believed they could reunite with their families and start over again. Every part of a smuggled trip is a matter of luck. Hiring the right smuggler is only the first hurdle; getting into Europe is just the beginning of the long journey to a brighter future. This time Malik was lucky - they made it! They were in Bulgaria, hiding in a forest somewhere near the border.

They had been walking all night long and Malik was on the edge of his strengths, struggling with bronchitis due to the cold night showers the autumn had given. They fell asleep at sunrise to be waken up by dog barking and caught by the Bulgarian Border police. They were sent to a refugee center in Harmanli where the administration prepared the documents and then police officers transported them to Vrazhdebna shelter in Sofia where mostly Syrian asylum seekers are accommodated. When they arrived, they went into an office where there were two men and one of them greeted him in Arabic. Malik told them his story and they explained all about how he can apply for humanitarian protection or get a refugee status within a couple of months. He couldn’t be happier! He could get a job as well and save money, which was one of his goals.

Two months have passed and Malik has been doing fairly well – he managed to find a part-time job in a car service near the capital and he could even sleep there. He was granted humanitarian status and received a travel document. With the help of his coworker Ivan he has read several articles on the European migrant and refugee office webpage : France, Italy and Germany. They spent hours trying to figure out how to find his family. Finally, on the Italian one, they found a picture of all the staff and refugees there – he saw his wife and their children! He has never been so happy in his life. Now, he was optimistic and determined to get to them. It was time to continue his journey.

The easiest but the most expensive way to get to Sicily was by plane. As he hadn't enough money for the air fare, they thought of a solution: France. Ivan has a cousin living in Paris with his family and he could probably help Malik. He was so touched by his offer he didn't hesitate and accepted it. Malik had saved enough money to afford train tickets. It was going to be a long ride though. The stops were Sofia – Belgrade – Budapest – Zurich – Paris.

But first, he had to get to Sofia. The next morning, he packed his belongings and said goodbye to his boss and to Ivan – he could not be more thankful. Ivan gave him a ride to the train station in Sofia. The short time he has spent in Bulgaria will stay in his heart. And who knows? He might even come back one day. He bought his ticket to Belgrade, said his goodbye and got on the train.

Nothing was wrong until he got to Zurich when he wanted to buy his ticket for Paris. One of the cashiers called the police because she thought his documents were fake. After all these things happening in the world because of refugees, the woman did not want to risk it and let him on the train to France. Malik had no time to waste, the family of Ivan was going to wait for him at the station. His train was in two hours and he could not afford to be late. After an hour of checking his documents and asking him numerous questions the police officers finally let him go even though he didn't understand at first since his English was very poor. He got on the train and fell asleep almost immediately.

He woke up when the train arrived in Paris. He couldn't believe he was here already. He got off the train and saw a sign saying “Gare de Nord”. He found his way out of the station and at the entrance he spotted a family holding a paper with his name on it: “Malik Hassan”. He just hugged the couple and said “Blagodarya” which means “Thank you” in Bulgarian. When they got to their home and showed Malik his room, he asked them a favor – he wanted to write to his wife. He wanted to tell her everything that happened. The next day, they wrote an email to the institution and the Italian representatives reassured them that the news are going to be passed to Malik's family.

The man shifted uneasily and nervously, his tired eyes scanning the dull Paris train station as he nibbled onto his dry lips, trying to look for his family or at least a familiar face. Months have passed since he last saw his family and the excitement of finally seeing his loved ones made him smile. In the back of his mind though, there was the feeling of uneasiness and anxiety as well. Would his son recognise him? Would they be happy to see him? Would they come? Or some other obstacles would separate them again? All these questions filled his mind and he let out a loud sigh of weariness.

The morning was cold, yet comforting at the same time and Amir felt really excited to finally see his father in France. He looked at his family, smiling nervously as they reached the train station, quickly getting onto the train. During the travel to France, Amir thought about his friends and the language he learnt, how grateful he was to the people who helped him and took care of him, even if he was different somehow. It was scary for him, yes, but he felt excited at the same time to what new adventures he would find in the new country he was going to.

A few hours passed until the train finally stopped in Paris, making Amir's heartbeat quicken up, he missed his dad more than anything else and he was sure his mother missed him, too. Getting off the train, they looked around finally spotting a familiar figure, the boy's dad. Amir's eyes filled with happy tears as he ran towards his father, hands wrapping around him as the boy sobbed loudly. His father returned the hug, arms wrapping around his family as he nodded, sniffing slightly right after.

Finally he was with his loved ones, tears now rolling down his cheeks due to the rock falling off his heart and a calm feeling taking over him, a happy emotion he had forgotten due to the months of sadness and depression he went through, struggling to go day by day. It was tough and distressing experience, but he was sure his family suffered as well. 'I've missed you ..so much.' he answered before smiling warmly through the tears, hands holding them as close as possible.

From now on, they were together, together against the world as a family. Although it might be difficult, they will carry on and cope with the difficulties.