

There's No War Here, No Threat

We're sitting at a café at Stockholm Central Station. Ali sips his tea and points at the well-known "ring".

"I came down there", he says. "There were people everywhere, and a lot of them were running." He smiles as he remembers. "Everyone talked funny. Everything was different. I was happy, but scared. What would I do now? What if one of the people was plain clothes police and they arrested me?"

It was the morning of the 23rd December, 2008. The people hustling and bustling around him were passengers on their way to wherever they were going to celebrate Christmas. The then 17-year old Ali had arrived by train from Malmö, having hidden in the train toilet since he didn't have a ticket. It was the last leg of his trip from Afghanistan. A trip that had taken 3 months. Ali knew that he needed to make his way to a place called "The Migration Board". He started to walk in a random direction.

"When I got to the Slussen area I saw some Swedish flags and thought maybe I'd found a building where there were authorities who could help me", says Ali, "but it turned out to be a hotel." He mustered up the courage to ask a taxi driver outside the hotel for help. "The taxi driver was from Iran and spoke Persian. He drove me to the Migration Board in Solna for free."

Ali was lucky to make it there. It was the day before Christmas Eve and the Migration Board office was about to close. They took his fingerprints, weighed him and gave him a banana. Then he was driven to a halfway house.

Ali spent his first Christmas in Sweden alone in a cold room. The place was full of other newly arrived boys. "I didn't even know what Christmas was. I had heard the word 'Christmas', but I thought that it had something to do with New Year. We didn't do anything during the whole day. Everyone was suspicious and nobody trusted anyone."

Refugee transportation rings don't pay any attention to festivals and important days. The flow of refugees fleeing their homes doesn't ever stop. Right now thousands of people are desperately trying to get to Europe in the hope of a better life. They pay professional refugee smugglers. They hike for days through the mountains between Iran and Turkey, paddle in rubber dinghies over the Aegean Sea, and are squeezed to death under trucks travelling from Greece to Italy. And the number of children fleeing to Europe alone is only increasing.

Voices that are critical of immigration would like us to think that these children travel to Europe on comfortable tickets as so-called "anchors", to then prepare for their families to come later. They have most likely not read the facts in reports such as the one by the UN's refugee agency UNHCR.

The truth is that their trips often take months, sometimes years. Many are sent back, taken into slave-like work situations in Iran, or into miserable refugee camps in Malta. Others live in overfull apartments in the mafia quarters of Athens and are forced into prostitution. Many never see their families again.

Ali is one of the ones who was lucky enough to reach Sweden in 2008. He has large attentive eyes and laughs often. He's dressed in jeans and a training top. His backpack full of school books is next to the coffee table, and he has had an important test the day before.

He was born and raised in Iran, but his family is from Afghanistan and belongs to the Hazara people. Despite the fact that Hazara people speak Persian and have the same religion (Shia Islam), they have a very low status in Iran. "Even Iraqis have better contact with Iranians than Afghans do", Ali explains. "'Afghan' is even a swear word in Iran. I was bullied in school and understood that I would never get a good job even if I went to university."

Like millions of other Afghans, the family chose to move back to their home country a few years after the fall of the Taliban. Ali's father travelled ahead of the others to Kabul in 2004. He had money with him in his baggage so he could rent a house and had gold for the older brother's wedding. "One evening dad was going to catch a taxi in Kabul to go and see a friend", Ali tells. "But instead, two other men jumped into the taxi and threatened him with a pistol. They drove him to a suburb outside of the city and took everything of any value he had. Before they left they shot him in the arm and the knee."

The father was found by a charity, was treated and survived. But shortly after, he was kidnapped, perhaps by men who'd been tipped off by the previous thieves. "They probably thought he was rich since he had so much money with him in his bag, and since he'd lived in Iran."

The kidnappers contacted the rest of Ali's family in Teheran and demanded they pay a ransom. They were forced to sell everything, and a month later the father was free. The family came to join him in Kabul and were reunited, but also destitute.

After a while the father was able to get a small kiosk, and Ali started back at school again when he was 15. "There were thousands of students there", he tells. "We didn't have a blackboard, books or even a toilet. I was a calm boy, but the others fought with me all the time."

Ali chose to leave school and help his father by cycling to the market and buying fruit for the kiosk. At the same time he was disappointed in his father who had promised that life would be better in Afghanistan than back in Iran. Instead it was dirty, poor, and dangerous. Regularly, they heard explosions from suicide bombers. "The first time, I was just 200 metres away".

Ali decided he must leave Afghanistan, but his father refused to let him go and confiscated the money he had saved up. Ali worked to make more money by doing small jobs for various traders at the market. In the end his mother agreed to help him. In secret, she sold the gold necklace she had previously saved up to buy for his future wife.

Ali started the journey together with his cousin of the same age, Najib, in the autumn of 2008. First, they travelled back to Teheran. An elderly relative there helped them to pay a smuggler who would take them to Greece. The first stop was Urmia, in northwestern Iran on the border of Turkey. "A Kurdish man drove us out into the forest", Ali tells. "We got to a cottage where there were around 50 other people, mostly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. We had to leave anything made of metal that could be reflective or shine in the dark. In the night, we walked for 5 or 6 hours until we came to another village. Another smuggler came and drove us to a garage where we had to wait until it was night again.

We were then picked up by enclosed trucks and squeezed in between the fruit crates in the back. The journey to Istanbul took 13 hours and a Pakistani boy almost died due to lack of oxygen. "We lifted him up to the ceiling of the truck so that he could get air, but it didn't help. We screamed and screamed until the smugglers stopped. They were angry and said that the police could come for us any minute."

After a few weeks hidden in Istanbul, Ali was driven in the middle of the night, together with his cousin Najib and a few other older boys, to the border of Greece. The smugglers gave them an inflatable dinghy and they were given instructions to paddle towards a source of light. It was very windy and the weather was bad. "I couldn't swim and I was scared to death. But I thought that either I'd make it or I'd die. One of the boys had made the trip before and been sent back. That was lucky, because nobody else knew how to paddle or what we were supposed to do when we arrived. We never would have made it without him."

They reached dry land at dawn and punctured the dinghy, as the smugglers had told them to do. They walked up into the forest and took out the dry clothes they had with them in plastic bags. They went two by two, so as not to draw attention.

Several days and bus journeys later they reached the notorious Greek harbour city Patras, home to many illegal immigrants. After a few weeks in a dirty tent and after being beaten by the police, Ali and Najib were able to find a spot in a cramped hatch under a truck.

"We had heard that we should try trucks with number plates from countries such as Sweden. They weren't checked as often."

The truck drove on board the ferry in Italy, but once they arrived at the other end they weren't able to get out. The truck just kept driving for several hours.

"We couldn't move, I lost all feeling in my feet and started to panic. We banged on the box until the truck stopped."

When they got out, three Italian police were waiting for them. The driver must have heard the banging and notified the police over the phone.

“We were dirty and covered in oil. At the police station I vomited several times. They drove us to the hospital to take samples. Once we were there Najib said we would have to escape, otherwise they’d send us back to Afghanistan.”

They ran, found a train station and managed to make their way to Rome, and then on to France. “In Paris we slept outdoors in parks, it was very cold. We were given some food in a church. But suddenly, Najib disappeared. I don’t know why. Maybe he was tired of me? I’ve never heard from him since.”

Ali got to know an Afghani boy who asked what Ali wanted to do with his life.

“I said I wanted to study. He said I should try to get to Sweden. ‘If you study there’, he said, ‘you can become something’. I didn’t even know where Sweden was.”

Together they continued by train to Germany and Denmark. They avoided guards and police at the stations. They froze and were hungry.

But on the day before Christmas Eve they stood there, at the Central Station, in Stockholm. The boy that Ali had been travelling with was greeted by a relative, and disappeared after saying a simple “Goodbye”. Ali was alone again.

The tea has gone cold and the people around us at the café have come and gone, and others have come and gone after them. Ali continues to share how he’s built up his life in Sweden, step by step, with the help of halfway houses and language studies.

“The school here is like a palace”, he says. “There’s even a swimming hall!”

But the journey hasn’t been easy.

“I had lost my family’s telephone number”, he explains. “We weren’t able to make contact until after 6 or 7 months. I cried a lot when we talked. Thought about everything I’d managed to build up here, a good life, whilst they were still in Afghanistan.”

He also made peace with his father. “He was happy for my sake. Said that he was proud, that I had become a man. He hadn’t thought that I’d survive the trip.”

But just a few weeks later, his father had fallen ill and died. Ali’s life fell to pieces again. The loneliness and guilt were too much. “I tried to take my life.”

Ali leans forward across the table and rolls up his sleeves. He has two large scars across his wrists. Still, the attempted suicide was a turning point. He describes how the doctor at the health centre saw how he was doing and organised therapy for him. “And the nurses were fantastic. They called all the time and asked how I was doing. Even on Christmas Eve.”

Christmas 2009 was Ali’s first “real” Christmas in Sweden. He was invited to come and celebrate at a teacher’s house from school. After an hour-long conversation with the nurse on the morning of Christmas Eve he decided to accept the invitation. He

chose a long sleeve shirt to cover the scars and asked the staff at the place where he was staying if he should have a present with him. “Buy a box of Aladdin”, was their advice.

“It was a great Christmas Eve, even if I didn’t know the language so well back then. The family had many questions about me, but it was hard to explain. We ate and sang together. I had never been in a Swedish home and didn’t know how to behave, or how to eat. I waited for the others to see what they did. But I never understood why we were watching Donald Duck!”

After that hardest first year, Ali determined to intentionally build a life in Sweden. He got a part-time job shovelling snow, got his license, worked at McDonald’s, got help with his homework from the Red Cross, and eventually even found somewhere to live.

Today he is 21 years old, has a residency permit, and studies Economics at university. He is active in an association that helps unaccompanied refugees. At the same time, he has a full-time job at a home for newly-arrived refugees and works the night shift. “I’ll probably be working this Christmas Eve”, says Ali. “That’s good. The children are in the same situation as I was. I understand what they’re going through.”

But what about him? How is he now?

Ali laughs again. Like so many times during the interview.

“I guess I can’t call myself happy deep down”, he says after a while. “It’s lonely without family. But things are good and I’m doing well. There’s no war here, no threat.”

- Last year 3578 unaccompanied refugee children came to Sweden. The majority of them are from Afghanistan, but an increasing number are from Syria. 16% were girls.
- 82% of the children whose cases were handled last year were given residency permits in Sweden, and 401 unaccompanied refugee children had their applications denied.
- Ali is one of those who has shared his stories in the project “Hello Sweden”.