

THE STORIES: ABDUL



First name: **ABDUL**

Last name: **KHALED**

Age: **36**

Country of origin: **AFGHANISTAN**

Living in **Greece** since: **2002**

SHORT SUMMARY

Abdul was born in a village near Kabul, Afghanistan in 1981. He has a sister who lives in the UK. His mother still lives in Afghanistan and he has lost his father. After fleeing Afghanistan, he went through an Odyssey before he finally integrated into the Greek society. His story until he managed to consider himself as a part of the community is sad, however full of glimpses of hope.

“DO YOU HAVE A PASSPORT?”

ABDUL’S STORY

He left Afghanistan in 1999, while still in school, after his father was assassinated because of his political beliefs and his life was in danger. He passed the borders with Iran alone and spent in Tehran two and a half years in the house of a relative of his. Convinced that there is no future for him there, since he had no rights and opportunities he abandoned the country trying to reach Istanbul. When arrived, he found some fellows from Afghanistan who

helped him to find a job in order to buy a small inflatable boat, his “ticket” to cross the sea borders with Greece. He stayed in Turkey for one month, where he was able to earn a small amount of money. Some of his fellows already knew the route to the borders and joined them until the beach. It was the first time in his life that saw the sea and he was anxious for the upcoming passage, because he did not know how to paddle. He and his fellows, among them Said, an Afghani whom Abdul met in Istanbul and considered him as his friend, waited until the night. Said was smoking his cigarette, watching the lights of Chios (an island near the borders) and was telling Abdul that the day after they would find themselves in Europe.

THE PASSAGE TO EUROPE

Along with other 13 persons, they got onboard on 3 boats (he was with a family of five — a mother and her four children) at 1:00 o’clock in the night and began their journey through the Aegean Sea. After a couple of hours, they saw some very big waves coming onto the boats and Abdul, as the only man on his boat, tried to take control of it, but he was not able to turn the boat. As a result, the water overflowed the boat but fortunately it did not sink. After the storm has passed, they were not aware about the position of the other boats. They were exhausted and tired, but they saw the beach and started hoping again. They arrived at Chios at 10 o’clock in the morning, without knowing where the other boats were and stopped by a cafeteria by the beach in order to buy something to eat. Someone from the cafeteria called the police and after 10 minutes two policemen arrived and asked, “*have you your passport?*”. It was the first phrase he heard. He did not know what a passport is, since he

The wife of my employer cooked a fresh meal every day for us.

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left from a war zone illegally and he did not know nothing about the official procedures. He answered, *"I am from Afghanistan"*, they asked him again, he said no and along with the family (all of the children and their mother were crying) he entered the police car. The policeman opened the door of the car and said welcome. Abdul then realized that it was the first time that someone was so kind to him and started hoping that he really is in a European country whose authorities are kind, helpful and treat the others with dignity. When he arrived at the police station, the chief of the police department, with the help of an Iranian interpreter, asked him if he knew where the other boats were. He didn't know and the chief started yelling and pushing him. They detained him with other refugees who were in the police department and although it was hot outside, they kept turning the air-condition volume to the highest temperature, making their accommodation in the cell a living hell. He stayed in the cell for 2 nights and then he transferred to a camp operated by the UNHCR where other Afghans were moved and where the conditions were more humane. He later learned that one of the two other boats were sunk and his passengers were collected by an Egyptian ship travelling to Bosphorus. All of them were alive, except from Said who was drown in the Aegean waters. He stayed in the site for three months and took a document which allowed him to travel along Greece along with a ticket to Athens.

When he arrived at Athens, he visited Victoria Square, where other refugees stayed and asked where he could sleep, because he was exhausted. They sent him in a park, where he saw other persons sleeping on benched and the floor. He felt lost, hopeless, without gravity and could not believe the state he was living in. Some of the refugees in the park were staying in an abandoned house which he tried to enter, but the others prohibited the entrance and did not let him stay. After some days had passed, sleeping on the benches

and having lost his hopes, an employer who was exploiting refugees, making them work illegally, without insurance and social security, paying them 5€ for a twelve-hour work, proposed him to work in a place outside Athens. Having in mind that this was his only option, Abdul bought a ticket and went to Thebes, where the employer waited him in the station and transferred him to an agricultural region with crops. It was night and led him to a place with tents, where other Afghans were staying, sleeping on the floor. However, he was happy, because he finally found someone from his country and living in the same situation. The day after, he was transferred in a field in order to collect tomatoes, among other unknown people, under the hot sun. After two weeks of this routine they stopped working and were told to pack the tents. In the meantime, he and his fellows had found another employer and found an abandoned house to stay. They had no electricity, no water and they lighted up fires when they wanted to cook or to be heated. One night, he was feeling so dirty and he could not stand himself, so he went to the terrace of the house and found a pond with rain waters and he washed himself with the water from the pond. He spent 5 months in total in Thebes and his last employer has paid them only half of the amount that had agreed upon.

TRYING TO FLEE GREECE

Not being able to take it anymore, Abdul decided to leave the country through Italy. He travelled to Patras (from where the ships to Italy depart) and spend his first night under the stars. He was receiving a daily meal from the church and was trying to find ways to get onboard illegally, since he had not any papers. One day, he tried to hide himself in the floor of a truck which was going to Italy. When an officer found him during a control in the truck started beating him with punches and kicks to his head. Since he could not resist using violence

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he started screaming and the officer left him alone. Losing his hopes that he would not be able to leave Greece, along with five other fellows, he went to Sparta, where they were able to find a job in the fields, collecting oranges. He stayed there for 8 months and then returned to Athens (in 2004). He went to apply for asylum, however in the police station the refugees were beaten, so, he left the department. Returning to the park, someone proposed to stay in an apartment with 14 other refugees, asking from each one 65€ per month! Through his roommates he managed to find a job, placing tiles in houses, as a member of a crew, managed by a very good man, Mr. Nikos, who was Greek and helped very much to learn the skills and the language. His wife was cooking every day a fresh meal for Abdul and Mr. Nikos helped him to develop him professionally and to set up his own business in placing tiles during 2006, when Abdul was given the pink card (asylum claim) and could issue his documents (bank account, social security number and so on). Abdul managed a crew of four persons in his own business, he bought a car, he was able to live in dignity and in a nice house.

I do not complain about the bad moments, they make me stronger.

FINANCIAL CRISIS IN GREECE

Greek economy was hit extremely hard by the economic crisis, fact that affected Abdul's business. He could not repay his loans, he could not pay his employees and within a year he practically lost everything. It was then when decided to abandon Greece once more, having in his pocket some savings (about 1500€). He decided to follow an alternative route, not from Italy, but from FYROM with three other friends of his. In the borders between FYROM and Serbia, the authorities of the latter caught them, they threatened them with their guns, they stole a large portion of their savings and sent

them back to Greece. When arrived in Greece, they went back to FYROM and passed the borders with Serbia. In Serbia, some smugglers proposed them to transfer them by a taxi to Hungary, asking each one of them 500€. They paid them, however the Serbians moved the group to Kosovo, instead of Hungary (!) they told them to get off the car and left, where some armed men arrested them and searched them in order to find money. Since they had not any on them, they released them.

He somehow managed to get on a train with direction to Austria. During the journey he has been asked by the ticket collector to show them his passport. He only showed his pink card, which had already been expired and when he got off the train in Austria, he was transferred to a police department in Vienna. During his stay in Austria he was transferred from authority to authority for 45 days, from one cell to another, having terrifying nightmares when finally he was able to sleep. After they found out that he had departed from Greece, he was deported to Athens, he felt that he was in Afghanistan, his hometown, feeling free.

BEING PART OF THE COMMUNITY

In 2012, he obtained the refugee status and joined the Afghan community in Athens as a member of the Board, decided to help other persons to integrate in the Greek society and to avoid the situation he has been himself. He enrolled in an on line Greek course offered by the University of Athens and through the community he has managed to find a job, working in an advertising company, placing plexiglass ads. Two years later, he registered in senior high school and although he had not documents, the director of the school communicated with the Ministry of Education, confirming that he could attend the classes and helped him with his lessons. The first time he listened to the school bell

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ringing after 19 years, the voices and the laughter of his classmates, he felt that he was born again. In the meantime, he left the job at the advertising company and joined the department of interpreters in the Ecumenical Refugees Programme in Athens. In the community he is responsible for the cultural projects. He also gives directions to the newcomers for the documents necessary in order for them to be enrolled in school. Only this year, under his guidance, 6 refugees were registered in Greek schools and encourages the members of the community to get involved in actions and activities that will help them integrate into the Greek society.

After his adventure and fifteen years since he stepped his foot on Greek soil, he states that his integration was difficult, but worth it. "Language is one's identity. When you speak the same language as the society you live in and your attitude is nice, no one judges you by your appearance and your colour, no one sees you as a foreigner. I have met many Greeks who treated me right and I do not complain for the bad moments, such events make you stronger". He currently is engaged and he hopes to create his family in Athens and is waiting for his application to obtain the Greek citizenship. He plans to pass the exams for the University and acquire the skills for a job that will enable him to help other people and make the society better.