

THE STORIES: ASHKAN



First name: **ASHKAN**

Last name: **SELFİ**

Age: **45**

Country of origin: **IRAN**

Living in **Portugal** since: **1988**

SHORT SUMMARY

Ashkan escaped from Teheran at the age of 14 by his father decision and to reunite to the brother who lives in Portugal. With strong family support, great persistence, hard work, and honesty, he overcame the very hard first years and faced the language, socialisation and integration difficulties he experienced. Formed his own family and today manages a large food distribution company in Portugal. He actively supports the new refugees in their journey of adaptation and inclusion into Portuguese society.

“MY SON ASHKAN WILL GO TO THE WEDDING!”

THE CONFLICT

Following the Revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980), there was a large exodus of people from Iran to escape violence and lack of freedom. Most people wanted to go to the United States. As a second option, came the countries of northern Europe, mainly Germany. Some families, with relatives

abroad, tried to get their children to go to those countries, to escape the 2-3 years military service and the religious militias that were on the streets encouraging young people to go to the war front and fight.

THE ESCAPE OF THE SELFİ BOYS

“My brother was 18 at that time. My father sent my older brother away to escape the war. He paid a trafficker for that purpose. My brother ran away on a donkey, a camel and on foot. He crossed the border of Pakistan, - a very tense period, because there was no communication. Through another trafficker he got a passport. He was trying to go to the USA, where our uncle lived. He was arrested at Frankfurt airport and threatened with deportation. He explained that he was considered a deserter by the government of Iran. If he went back there, he would be executed. He asked for asylum once he would be killed in Iran. He was informed that he could not stay in Germany, but that he could go to Portugal. When he warned that he was in Portugal, the family ran to buy an atlas, because nobody knew where this strange country was!...”

ASHKAN'S ESCAPE

Meantime revolution and war worsened, as well as the living conditions.

“Our house in Tehran was close to the state TV station and the bombings were constant.”

In addition to the bombings, the Ashkan family suffered persecution from the militias (religious police). They always felt in danger. Family members were not very religious and people knew about it.

At school, children were visited by martyrs who had lost their arms and legs in the war and also by those who were going to kill themselves in the name

I got very strong family support.

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of religion. It was an atmosphere of terror.

One day, Ashkan' father went to the market to buy two Persian rugs. With Ashkan (14 years old) by the hand, he went to the Consulate of Portugal and said: *"My oldest son, who lives now in Portugal, is going to be married. I would like someone to represent the family at the wedding. My son Ashkan will go to the wedding!"* At the Consulate was granted to Ashkan a visa for one week.

ARRIVAL AND LIFE IN PORTUGAL

Ashkan arrived in Portugal in 1988. When he left the airport, he saw for the first time in his life a rainbow! But this initial idea of beauty changed quickly, when he saw the poor houses around the "2nd circular"...

The first years were very hard. He missed his family very much.

"I received every week a letter from my father. Every Wednesday I received a letter and cried compulsively"

One day the letters stopped coming. He wrote to his father and received a letter from his mother telling him that his father had disappeared.

"My father had been arrested for sending his sons out of the country. He was imprisoned, incommunicable for 2 years. No one knew his whereabouts. After this period, he was forced to go to war, but since he was already 60, he stayed there less than a year"

Meantime, Ashkan already attended the Secondary School of Paço D' Arcos, and in parallel he learned and perfected Portuguese. But he had great difficulty in making friends. He was known at school as "the Arab". *"They thought I was a terrorist or something similar"*

NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

Until one day he decided to join the student association of the school. His situation at school started to change. He made friends and participated actively in school activities.

"I made friends I have until today. Really deep friendship. We're friends still today. One of them is even my son godfather. I was welcomed by their families. They invited me for Christmas. They also took care of me, as I was young I wanted to do this and that and they...Wait, take it easy... do not get involved in this... They were true friends..."

Life continued to change. At the age of 18 he got a job at a pizzeria in Cascais. He studied and worked. He started to make money and as his brother got married, he decided to move away and live alone.

One day, his brother invited him to work together. His brother wanted to start a company to supply a restaurant in Cascais. He resigned from the pizzeria and started working with his brother. He got up every day at 3:00 am to fetch potatoes, tomatoes, onions at the Ribeira Market, in Lisbon, and carry back the goods by train to Cascais. They made some money, which allowed them to buy a small van and expand the business. They went on to supply three more restaurants.

Gradually, they are recognized by the Cascais restaurants as good workers, honest and fulfilling deadlines. *"By 3:00 am we were already on our way to the market. That was the only way to ensure that we could get the best products. We were always the first to arrive"*. The fame was growing and the company too.

You have to take risks and show entrepreneurial capacity and determination.

LIFE IN PORTUGAL

As the expansion of work, the social and community life of Ashkan has also been intensifying. Already established economically, Ashkan met his first wife. She, of Brazilian nationality, gave Ashkan a new perspective on life. Ashkan travelled to Brazil. There he met the family of his wife and created emotional bonds that are present until today in his life. *"It's still my family, my Brazilian family"*. He has a son, now of 14 years old. He projected in his son all the hope for a new world. After a while, however, the marriage came to an end and Ashkan divorced. Despite the separation, he maintains a good relationship with his ex-wife, having opted together to share custody of their son.

About two years ago, Ashkan met his second wife. She, senior food technician, started working at Ashkan's company. Ashkan was delighted with the lady. *"I was very impressed by her strength and of course her beauty"*. They started dating and after a year they got married.

Today, Ashkan owns a large food distribution company in Portugal. As a successful businessman, Ashkan has the financial means to support the refugees, especially those from Iran. As he felt this drama in his own skin, and now having the position he has, he feels obliged to help them.

He has refugees working with him, has helped others to establish direct contacts with support institutions and other initiatives.

During our interview we were interrupted a few times to Ashkan answering his mobile to deal with refugee issues.

Only 10 years after his escape, Ashkan meets again his father, mother and sister.

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