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Building Social Bridges
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Role models

Denmark



Mohammed

“We should learn as much as possible – for our own sake”

The way to Denmark

Before Mohammed came to Denmark, he had a good life in Syria. This was before he had to flee because of the war. Mohammed had a good education as a lawyer and English teacher from the university, had a good job, a house and a car. Both his parents worked and they were a very happy family. Then came the war, and 1-2 years later almost everything was gone. There was no work, no money, the house was bombed and he lost both his parents. His two brothers had already travelled to Turkey. At that time, Mohammed had never been outside Syria and had never imagined having to leave it. They still thought at the time that the war would end and he tried to find a job at the border, but it was impossible. Mohammed also got married, and when you are married, you have a responsibility to your family, and must make sure that they are well. When Mohammed's wife became pregnant, they had to find a hospital where she could give birth, so they decided to travel to Turkey, where his brothers and two uncles lived. To cross the border, they had to travel 180 kilometres at night. It was dangerous because they had to avoid being seen by the Syrian army, but they knew they had to try. When they came to Turkey, they were very happy at first. Now they had the family around them again, but then the realities kicked in. Suddenly, Mohammed had to take care of a child and he could not get a good job in Turkey because as an asylum seeker he did not have any identification papers. So they had to travel again.



Mohammed was 27 when he came to Denmark in November 2015. He arrived together with his wife, their child, his two brothers, one brother's wife and a friend. They walked all the way to Denmark from Turkey, and went to the police station in Padborg where they were registered and then sent to the asylum centre Sandholm. They were there for 6 days after which they got personal identification cards and came back to a temporary asylum centre in Jutland, where they lived about 15-20 days before they moved to the asylum centre in Børkop near Vejle. It was a cosy asylum centre in Børkop. It was temporary and there were only 2-3 employees and about 27 families waiting for asylum. Mohammed and his family helped with practical tasks there like painting, sorting donations and moving furniture, which was fun. After a few months, they had an interview in the Sandholm centre where they talked about their way to Denmark and why they applied for asylum, after which they got their residence permit, and Mohammed and his family moved out of the asylum centre and into a house in Børkop.

Getting through the difficult beginning

The most difficult thing for Mohammed in having to find his way in Denmark was to have to put his life from Syria and his experiences as a refugee behind him, and think ahead about his new life in Denmark. It was hard when everything around him was new and different. Especially when he did not know anyone and did not know the language. Then he had to be very strong. In the beginning, Mohammed got the experience that it was very difficult to understand the Danish system. It was easy to compare Denmark with Syria every time a problem arose, and think that it was easier at home. For example, it could be a problem just to have to go into a store and buy a SIM-card for his phone, and not know what it was called in Danish, or whether people understood English. Then he thought about his homeland and remembered how easy it was there. Mohammed's uncle had a mobile phone shop in Syria, so Mohammed used to just go there to buy a SIM-card. He then learned that in Denmark you buy a SIM-card online, but when you are an asylum seeker you do not even have a credit card, which makes it more difficult. Another challenge was to learn the Danish language and culture and understand how the system is connected. He was also very insecure about many things. He had heard and was afraid that there were many racists in Denmark and he did not know how to learn the language, get a job or find a place to live.

There are two things in particular that have meant that Mohammed has managed to get through the difficult start. The first is about accepting his situation and the new life, even though it can be really difficult. After a while, he became used to his situation. The point is not to forget about his country, but in his head and heart Denmark has become his new country. He will always feel like a Syrian and will always have Syria and the memories of it in his heart. He knows many people who fled to Denmark over 30 years ago, who still have the key to their old house and their old passports from their home country, even though they speak fluent Danish. He thinks this is healthy, because you do not become a whole person if there is no room to remember your past. He has been asked many times if he will move back to Syria if it becomes peaceful again. He used to want to go back, but does not feel that he can say yes anymore. Now he has children who grew up in Denmark. For them, Denmark lives in their hearts and they would miss their friends and the Danish system if they went back to Syria. Even though he misses Syria, he chooses to stay because of the children. That is his first priority.

The second thing that has helped Mohammed is to overcome negative thoughts and memories. Here, people and friends he has met in difficult situations have helped him through it. Mohammed has been through many bad things, and has needed help to move forward. When he arrived at the asylum centre, they asked if he needed help, but at first, he always said no. He was not used to receiving help and wanted to fend for himself. He had to learn to receive help. For Mohammed, it helps not to think so much about the negative

Facts about Mohammed

Name: Mohammed Abdullah Alwan

Gender: Male

Age: 31

Nationality: Syria

Education: Lawyer and English teacher from Syria.

Profession: Service technician at Comwell Kellers Park Hotel in Brejning, Denmark.

Interests: Mohammed loves sports and plays both football and judo, in which he has won three championships. He is passionate about Arabic calligraphy, where he can write in three different styles. Mohammed always remembers his father's saying - "we must learn a little about everything and everything about a little thing". It has become his way of life. He always tries to learn new things and improve his skills.

Languages: Arabic, English, a little Turkish and Danish.

Find video interview with Mohammed on the project website:
<https://buildingsocialbridges.eu/>

emotions and memories. His first priority is to think of the family. Not of the dead, but of the living. He still has nightmares, bad days and gets scared, but he has learned to cope with it. He does not want to forget it because, it is a part of him that he does not want to lose. For Mohammed, the clue is to find a way to get through the bad days. For him, walking on the beach or playing with his children works. If he is busy playing with the kids or relaxing and looking at nature it helps. In Syria, he often went to the beach. He loves it. The best is when he walks alone along the beach, both when he is happy or sad. Then the negative thoughts stop.

The way into the Danish society

For Mohammed, there are some special people who have helped him find his way in Denmark. He has gotten to know people in Denmark in different ways and has learned to reach out to people when he has needed something, and has asked for help. This has meant that he has gotten to know people both at the asylum centre and when he moved to Børkop. He has also met many people through Facebook and those he already knew. That way, his network has gotten bigger and bigger. The Red Cross also has special projects where you can, for example, get a Danish contact person, which Mohammed has made use of and met Dorte and her husband, with whom he is good friends today. It has helped, especially with understanding the Danish system. If you are alone, it is difficult to cope, so you need help.

Mohammed has met some particularly important people in the beginning when he came to Denmark, which has had a great impact on his life. The first person to tell him "you are safe, you must not think about the past, but about the future", was the head of the asylum centre in Børkop, Birgitte. She is one of the best people he has met in Denmark, and has had a great impact on the way he views his life in Denmark. They still have contact today. Birgitte has supported Mohammed and his family psychologically and has always been there for all of them at the asylum centre. Mohammed became the contact person to Birgitte, on behalf of his family, because he was the only one in their family who spoke English and because he was the one in the family who was most open to speaking with others. When Mohammed and his family came to the asylum centre, they had nothing to do, so they talked to Birgitte and came up with some ideas. Mohammed's wife suggested that they arrange a party and invite the local residents from Børkop to dinner and show that the asylum seekers were good people and not dangerous. They also wanted to use the party to talk to the locals about the fact that asylum seekers also need help. Birgitte liked the idea and they worked for 2 days to prepare. The asylum centre was close to the city centre in Børkop, and a lot of guests came and the residents talked to a lot of local Danes. Mohammed and some of the local Danes in Børkop had the idea to meet once every two weeks to practice Danish and get help with different things. The locals in Børkop were very focused on learning about culture, so they started meeting every week and talking about everything, and then Mohammed taught some of them to read Arabic. There were many small mutual activities where the asylum seekers and the local Danes met. Over time, it became easier to contact the local Danes and talk to them.

Shortly after Mohammed and his family came to Denmark, Birgitte from the asylum centre got Mohammed the opportunity to participate in a program called "Fast Track ". This was a collaboration between Vejle and the Red Cross Asylum Centre in Børkop. The purpose of the project was to get refugees integrated into society quickly, where refugees had the opportunity to go to language school in Vejle and learn about the Danish language and how to get a job, even before they got a residence permit. It was a very important step for Mohammed. Through Fast Track, Mohammed got an internship at the Comwell Kellers Park Hotel, which

was close to the asylum centre. This is also, where he works today. At Comwell, Mohammed met his then boss Lars Ole. He became the second important person in Mohammed's life after he came to Denmark. Mohammed feels very fortunate to have come to Comwell and to have met Lars Ole, who he describes as a father to him. Without him, Mohammed would not be Mohammed today. When he came to Comwell he was almost like a dead man and it has been like a kind of hospital for him. Lars Ole is a very understanding and helpful person who has helped Mohammed with everything in his life. Not only in the job, but also if there was a letter from the municipality that was difficult to understand, and they have also talked about how Mohammed felt. Lars Ole told Mohammed that he should focus on the Danish language first. It is good to have a job and there is plenty of time to learn what happens at work, but the most important thing is that you can communicate at work in Danish. Lars Ole has taught Mohammed that by learning Danish it is a way to show respect for Denmark. He has also taught Mohammed that we can achieve whenever we want. It is something Mohammed has embraced and passed on to his friends. When you as a refugee want to stay in Denmark and make a life here, then you have to work for it, but if there is no one to support you and be there for you, then you cannot manage. Comwell Kellers Park, Mohammed's colleagues and his new boss Michael mean everything to Mohammed, because they were his first step into Denmark.

Good advice

Although each person's situation is different, Mohammed say to those who come to Denmark as a refugee that they must choose first and foremost to focus on their lives in Denmark, and try to forget the bad experiences they have had as refugee . It is important that you decide to want Denmark and life here. If you do not accept that you are in Denmark and your situation here, even though it may feel difficult, then it can be difficult to start a life here. There are always new things to learn, and Mohammed has already learned an incredible amount in both Syria and Denmark. We must continue to learn so that we can do our best. Start by learning the language and learn it as fast as you can. You only have to go to school if you want to study and get an education. Otherwise, the way forward is to go out and talk to people and find a job. This is the key to learning about the culture and everything else in Denmark. Although it may seem hopeless to commit to learning Danish and getting to know people when you do not know if you can stay, Mohammed believes that it is important to learn as much as you can for your own sake. Mohammed himself has tried to be in an insecure situation for 8 years, where he did not know if he could stay in Denmark. Here his father has helped him. His father has been in the military in Syria, which is really hard work. One has to do many difficult things such as running 20 kilometres every morning and be able to get up at 5 am. and eat breakfast in 10 seconds. His father taught him to appreciate learning things for his own sake. Even though it is hard, exercise does something good for you, not for others. You build your body and get healthy from it. In Denmark there are many things to learn and new people to get to know. It can seem hard to learn a new language, but you can also see it as not only learning Danish because you are in Denmark, but that you actually get a gift by learning a new language that you will always have with you. Denmark gets nothing out of you if you speak Danish, or get good friends. When Mohammed lived in Turkey he learned a little Turkish and made good friend there. They still help him even though he does not live in Turkey. Even if Mohammed is sent out of Denmark, he knows that he has learned Danish and made Danish friends for himself. He also thinks that when he helps someone in Denmark, they might remember him and miss him if one day he is sent back to Syria.

It can be hard to know how to get to know other people and make friends in a new country. Here Mohammed has found many good opportunities. First of all, the Red Cross asylum centres can help and it is the easiest way to meet people. Both staff and volunteers are very open and helpful. There are also many Facebook groups where people help each other and meet. He has met several friends on Facebook. When you first meet one person and get to know them, you quickly meet another. When there are 2 friends, they easily become 4 and then later 100. Work or internship is also a good place to meet someone who can help you meet new people. When you start meeting others, it is important to find courage and be strong so you dare to talk to them. It is important not to be embarrassed and afraid to make contact and talk to people you do not know. One must dare to say hello and smile. Where Mohammed lives, people smile when they pass you on the road and if you smile back it is free and a good start to be able to say hello. The easiest thing is to be honest and good to others. Then they trust you and open up to you. Of course, there will be some people who do not want to meet new people. It can be difficult, but never give up. We always need people to support us. In a society where you are alone, you need help with all kinds of things. You have to trust yourself and believe that you can handle it and that there are people who want to help you, and then it will come.

It can also be a good thing to help others. At the asylum centre Mohammed get help and so he offered to help others in return. For example, to sort donations or translate between the other residents and staff. That way, Mohammed has gotten to know more people. For example, Tove, whom Mohammed has met through Venligboerne, which is a social movement about being kind, respectful and helpful to refugees and other people who need help, which started in North Jutland in 2014 and later spread in Denmark and Europe. Tove has helped Mohammed with various things when they first came to Børkop, such as donations like clothes and toys. Shortly after meeting Tove, they started the Venligstøtterne together. It is an association where they help refugees and other people in the municipality who need help, with money and other things they need. It can make a big difference for people if they are helped to get a driver's license so they can get a job, or pay for airline tickets for family reunions. Mohammed is not so active in the association anymore, but when he has time, he helps out. It means a lot to Mohammed to be able to help others and give back when you yourself have received help.

The future

Mohammed has achieved a lot in Denmark. He has chosen to live and be happy. He has a good life and everything one can dream of. A happy family, a good job. Although not his dream job, is he happy about it. He is going to take a major course at work as a swimming pool technician, which he is really happy about. Then he can get a certificate for his technical abilities. He does not care about money as long as he gets along well with his colleagues and feels happy at the start and end of the day. Economically, the next project is to buy a house next summer. Mohammed and his wife are in the process of saving up money to buy a house in Børkop. As parents, they need to think about saving up for the future and taking care of their children.

When he has finished the new course at work and figures things out with the new house, Mohammed wants to complete his Danish education and go back to language school. Then he would like to continue his studies and maybe work as a lawyer or policeman one day. Mohammed has a dream of working in the Red Cross one day. He does not know if it will happen, but he will always work to make that dream come true. He also has a dream of getting citizenship in Denmark. He knows it can be hard, but he keeps dreaming. He is a handyman,

so he will always work to make his dreams come true. He has always trusted that he could make his dreams come true. That is why he's where he is today, because he knows he can. No one can say it is impossible.

PARTNERS

COORDINATOR



**VEREIN NIEDERSÄCHSISCHER BILDUNGSINITIATIVEN E.V.
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