

Dima's Story

“In the second half of the Sixties my grandfather moved to Bologna to study medicine, taking with him his two children. A few years later, despite being offered Italian citizenship, he decided to leave the country with his whole family, now with four kids, to return to Syria, his homeland.

My father, 17, will find himself having to learn Arabic and live in Damascus.

As an Italian native speaker, he will have no difficulty in establishing himself as a tour guide and building, together with my grandfather, a small empire. Meanwhile, he marries a Syrian woman of Palestinian origins, with whom he will have four children. And that's where I come in.

The outbreak of war in 2011 interrupts our happy fairytale: my father is co-opted by government officials and forced to collaborate as a translator, participating in military training and arms trading between Italy and Syria.

On one of these occasions he comes to learn that the military helmets supplied to the Syrian army bearing the words "Made in Italy" were actually made in Israel.

This was actually known by the people who held higher positions, and when my father, naively, told the officers that he knew, he was soon threatened, sent to prison for three days and ordered to keep this information for himself.

This was the straw that broke the camel's back. We are now in 2014 and the borders are not yet closed: my father asks for a visa to go to Italy but he is denied twice. He therefore decided to contact my mother's sister who had lived in Spain for many years, and she was able to help him obtain a tourist visa to Spain.

Thanks to the deals between countries of the Schengen area, he then manages to eventually get to Italy, where he obtains international protection.

Through family reunification practices, he finally manages to get my mother and my two brothers, who were still minors at the time, to Italy.

For my sister and I, however, things are not that simple since we were both already of age.

My sister goes to Lebanon to apply for a visa for Italy as a student but she is denied, the cost of the operation is € 5,000. She then tried to apply for a visa to enter Spain to reunite with my aunt, but was again denied, and again, the cost was another 5000€.

Exasperated, she decides to try to illegally cross the border between Turkey and Greece.

For € 10,000 she buys a fake ID but she is soon stopped at the airport. She tries a second time (another € 10,000), but again she is stopped at the airport.

The real problem wasn't the fake documents but the lack of knowledge of the Italian language that left her literally speechless in front of airport officials.

Her last option was to try to reach Italy by sea, so she buys a ride aboard a Russian dinghy (2000 €).

Once she realizes the real size of the boat and the actual number of passengers, she's scared for her life and changes her mind, but the trafficker points a gun to her head and forces her to board. The crossing is not easy: twice the waves force them to turn back and on the third attempt the boat capsizes. Fortunately the Greek coast is close and she can swim. On Greek land she is given a provisional document with which she reaches Athens and from there, thanks to a false Italian identity card paid 1500 €, she finally arrives in Italy.

For me, the journey was even more difficult. In 2012 I was pregnant and I was living with my husband in Duma, on the outskirts of Damascus. Isis and rebels competed for the outskirts of the capital, they were daily bombings and I was forced to flee, first seeking refuge in my parents' house, then trying to obtain a visa for study purposes (the cost would have been € 5,000), but by now it was very difficult to

get one, so my father suggested that I try the road through Turkey, but I know I can't take the same journey as my sister: I have a little girl and it's too dangerous.

A sudden call, however, seems to give some hope. Dad got direct contact at the embassy that could help me get a visa for Italy. I drop everything and go, but as soon as I enter the embassy, I am sent home.

Desperate, I head to Aksaray Square: I buy two life jackets, some tape and plastic bags. I go to the smugglers' meeting area and buy a ride for the next day. I paid 4000 € each, and with this price I was promised a trip on a safer boat. That night I couldn't sleep.

At dawn I receive a message with the coordinates for the location of the departure, my daughter and I are ready to leave.

That same day, I received another phone call from my father, with the promise of another visa. There is no time to think it through, I abandon the sea route (losing the money) and go back to the embassy and 15 minutes later, I have my passport stamped. I will later discover that those 15 minutes were the most expensive of my life: € 1000 / minute.

In November 2015, I arrived in Italy for the first time with my daughter.”