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The Story of an Adolescent Afghan Refugee Who Became an Entrepreneur in France

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5.1 Introduction

The continuing violence, war and political instability in Afghanistan have been creating waves of Afghan refugees for over 20 years (Tamang 2009). Unaccompanied minors in particular are now one of the largest subsections of Afghans arriving in Europe (OFRA 2016). Afghan refugees often leave their homes carrying few personal belongings, often little more than their clothes, having only just managed to survive the disaster (Tamang 2009). This applies particularly to unaccompanied Afghan minors, who embark on a dangerous journey to reach northern Europe with very little money and who are socially isolated and sometimes armed with incorrect information (Sanchez-Cao et al. 2013). This “acute refugee movement” in Afghanistan (Kunz 1973) increases the risk of traumatic events.

The aforementioned study shows that some people also leave their country after similar events for reasons related to their own sociological background (Connor 1987). In this case, for the Hazara ethnic group, to

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which Jamshed belongs, migration is their traditional way of life and does not seem to be dictated only by emergency situations, such as war (Tamang 2009). Moreover, Afghans are considered new refugees according to Paludan's criteria (Paludan 1974).

In this chapter, we report the case of an Afghan adolescent who became an entrepreneur at the young age of 18.

5.2 French Refugee Information and Data

France, like the majority of the European countries, is experiencing a massive increase in the influx of refugees and has received the third highest number of refugees after Germany and Sweden (Eurostat 2016).

According to the 2016 report by OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons), France achieved the highest number of acceptance of first-time applications (38% of 85,726 applications). The largest numbers of requests came from Sudan (5868), Afghanistan (5641), Haiti (4854), Albania (4599) and Syria (3562). The unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in France are from Afghanistan, DRC, Syria, Angola and Guinea (OFPRA 2015).

In addition to having numerous refugee asylum applications, France is one the gateway countries used by refugees and migrants trying to reach target countries, such as Great Britain and Germany. For this reason, thousands of refugees have settled in various camps in the north of France, such as those in the area around Calais (Babels 2017).

An application for asylum can be made from within France, either on arrival at the border or from an administrative detention center. Once the application has been evaluated, in the case of a "normal procedure", the local organization responsible for the process provides an asylum application certificate. If the applicant does not fall within the criteria of the 2003 Dublin Regulation, then the prefecture does not issue the certificate, but submits the application under the "accelerated procedure". OFPRA is the responsible body in the first instance, and it can decide to grant the applicant refugee status or subsidiary protection, or it can reject any such protection. The National Court of Asylum (CNDA) examines potential appeals against a negative decision from OFPRA or against an

OFPPRA decision granting subsidiary protection if the asylum seeker wishes to obtain refugee status.

5.3 Methodology

We first discovered Jamshed in an article in the local press, which portrayed his integration into French society and his dynamism in a very positive manner. The headline reads: “Afghan refugee in Correze at the age of 14, Jamshed opened a grocery in Brive five years later” (Moutte 2017). We were struck by the journalist’s report of Jamshed’s entrepreneurial spirit at such an early age and by his positive attitude, which stood in stark contrast to most readers’ comments on the newspaper’s website.

Collection of the data consisted of three successive interviews, which were not recorded, but during which notes were taken. The exchanges were held in basic, yet adequate, French. The first contact with Jamshed was made when the interviewer came to his shop as a customer and had an informal, one-hour discussion, during which the functioning of the shop was also observed. Jamshed was very relaxed and very talkative about his story, his motivations, the sacrifices he has made and the advice he could give about how to integrate successfully into rural France, just as described in the newspaper article. He gladly agreed to a more thorough study. We also sought out the opinions of other shop owners in the neighborhood, which overall was quite positive.

The second interview was a little more formal. It involved following an interview guide based on guidelines for contributors to this volume. This also took place in his grocery shop, between Jamshed operating the till, since he was too busy to schedule an exclusive appointment.

The aim of the third interview was to complete the information-gathering process and to address some uncertainties. For this last meeting, two interviewers were involved, and it was more difficult to obtain further information. The interview seemed to trouble Jamshed, who felt that our questions were too complicated. He did not understand why we were interested in the financial aspects of his business or his links with the local Afghan community. The meeting was therefore much less fruitful than the previous two because of his reluctance to respond to what he

considered to be overly detailed questions. It seems to us that Jamshed had expected a journalistic investigation intended to produce a promotional advertorial, something that he has mastered to perfection. Our questions, which pointed out some inconsistencies in his story and asked him to go into certain aspects in more detail, obviously disturbed him. He did, however, authorize us to publish this information without asking for a right of review.

5.4 Background

Jamshed's story is that of a brave boy. He and his family, who belong to the Hazara ethnic group, were living in Baghlan, in northern Afghanistan.

They decided to escape to Iran in order to safeguard themselves from the unsustainable political and economic pressure in Afghanistan. His father, a taxi driver, and his mother, a teacher, could no longer work because of the country's insecurity and instability, which was constantly worsening. He explains: "We could not survive any more in those conditions and we escaped to Iran. While my parents remained in Iran, I continued my journey, determined to arrive in France. Now my family is all back in Afghanistan because is getting a little better."

At the age of only 14, he found himself making a very difficult choice—one that required courage and determination—the choice to leave Iran. He started this dangerous journey with a small group of Afghans in June 2011. He commented thoughtfully: "We left suddenly because the smugglers are the ones whose decide when to leave and sometimes they put pressure on us to go in order to fill the number of the people in the cars. I was the oldest, so I had to make the decision to leave. Otherwise my father would have had to leave and it would be difficult for the whole family."

He left Iran with a bag full of dreams and hopes. The difficulties encountered on his journey were numerous, yet Jamshed, when describe his travels, had the ability to make the journey seem almost easy. He summarized it in such a way that it was almost impossible to glean any details. "We were going from one country to another and the smugglers avoided telling us where were we. It was quite difficult, but fortunately we made

it”, he claimed, almost as if he wanted to forget his experience. Despite the difficulties encountered during his eight-month journey, he was lucky enough to get in France in February 2012.

He said: “I didn’t have money any more, I didn’t know where the train was going and I discovered Limoges accidentally. I went to the police station and the police brought me to Tulle. They sent me to a group home, and then the children’s judge sent me to Treignac” (a Social Centre for children; editor’s note)”.

Jamshed was living in a community home that hosted unaccompanied foreign minors. The minors are then monitored by the Department of Social Services for Childhood. He lived there for two and a half years, from 2012 until June 2014. There were 65 people of different nationalities in the group home.

Jamshed learned French in a very short time and he began attending high school, followed by a two-year vocational course in cookery. “I always wanted to come in France. When I was studying geography, I was particularly attracted to the country”, he stated.

He is the only one of his family living abroad. He said that his brother wants to come to France, but he advised him against it because living abroad is too complicated. Even though he is proud of what he has accomplished, living outside his own country is still difficult.

5.5 Business Data and History

Once Jamshed had obtained his qualifications, he tried to find work in several restaurants, eager to gain some work experience and to become independent. Unfortunately, the only available work to him was washing dishes. Following this position, Jamshed started working at an Afghan grocery in Pau (south of France), where he was inspired by the business model. He said proudly “I did not want to adapt to this type of work after my diploma, but I wanted to have my own business”.

At the age of 18, Jamshed moved back to Correze, to the commune of Brive la Gaillarde, where he obtained a license to sell alcohol, as well as a food-handling certificate, and opened a grocery store, financed with his own savings. He has named the shop Alimentation Générale de Brive

(General Grocery of Brive), and it is located between the railway station and the center of town. On May 2, 2017, the first anniversary of the shop's inauguration, Jamshed appeared to be satisfied with how the business was performing. Having made many sacrifices, he set out on this entrepreneurial venture risking all the money that he had saved and investing around 15,000 euros.

The name "Alimentation General de Brive" seems to emphasize that the place has something to offer every type of client, making them all feel welcome. Indeed, different types of customers frequent the store. The grocery is open every day, from 10 am to 2 am, including weekends and holidays, which are the days that bring in the most revenue. Jamshed already has one part-time employee and he is planning to increase his working hours to 35 hours per week. We have observed that Afghan refugees tend to replicate this business model in other regions of France. The names of the shops are usually Alimentation Générale followed by the name of the local area or street.

Jamshed chose to open his shop in Brive because he knew the place well, because it is the main city of the Department and because there is very little competition from other groceries at night. His initial plan was to open the shop on the city's main street, but it was difficult to find a suitable commercial space. He said that he still plans to develop the business and move to the center of the city.

Like many typical local shops, the store sells various types of products (food, beverages, fresh produce, cleaning products, etc.). Other than Afghan rice, there is no stock of ethnic products. Indeed, the customers are multicultural and typically are local shoppers. The price seems to be relatively high compared to other shops. Jamshed stated: "The products are of good quality, especially the wine, and we offer night service too, so the prices are somewhat higher." He works with traditional wholesaler suppliers, like many other French store owners. A small part of the shop contains fresh fruit and vegetables. He confirms that he would love to have more space in order to offer a larger fresh produce department.

"I have a good relationship with the neighbours", he said, "I do not want to create problems. Our customers must not make noise on the street, we learned this during the training for the alcohol license." When we told him that he has a good reputation in the neighborhood, he

became irritated; it appears that he does not want to draw attention to himself.

In future he would like to have his own restaurant: “That was my first job” he said, “but for the moment I cannot do that”.

5.6 Enablers and Constraints

Jamshed’s success can be explained by the support he has received from institutions, the role of the community and the strength of his entrepreneurial profile.

5.6.1 Profile

Jamshed is an ambitious young man. He mentioned that one of the biggest motivations for his entrepreneurship was to be independent. The dream of finding independence and freedom is what repeatedly emerged from our discussions with him. This allows him to focus constantly on his goal. “If you want something, you have to plan it in advance”, he said with confidence.

He learned French in just five months, explaining: “Work at school, work in life and stay serious were the daily teachings of my parents. It is also thanks to my parents, who always taught me the important values, that I am here today; it is all in my heart.” Jamshed was determined to break down all ethnic and cultural barriers. He has done his duty and integrated well into French culture and institutions. “As refugees, we should not be connected only with our community, but we should put all our effort into integrating with the local community. Otherwise we will remain isolated because of cultural and language barriers”, he stated.

The dream of running his own business gave him the determination to make numerous sacrifices and give up many things in order to save money. He continued to work even though the jobs did not satisfy him, never having the luxury of being simply an adolescent. Jamshed, when starting his business, had no access to any outside funding or tax reductions. He also makes points to the high taxation rates of the French

government: “But I am happy, I am not remaining just a passive refugee, I am paying all my taxes. I think that as refugees we make a good contribution to the country.”

Jamshed loves to plan; it is one of the aspects of his character that enabled him to establish his business. He said determinedly: “It needs a good plan to do this. I was thinking about this project for a long time”. This helped put him in a position to start a business. He said happily, “I know what I am going to do in ten years’ time because I am already planning for it.”

5.6.2 Institution

Unaccompanied minors, as a particularly vulnerable subset of refugees, benefit from special assistance. Once they have entered France, they are usually entrusted to the Departmental Council through the Social Welfare Service (ASE). This allows single foreign minors to benefit from socio-educational and legal care and support until they reach 18 years of age (AIDA 2016).

According to Article 21 of the French Civil Code (law no. 93–933, July 22, 1993—art. 50 JORF), an isolated minor who has been cared for by the ASE for at least three years before the age of majority (i.e. under the age of 15 on arrival), can claim French nationality. Jamshed, therefore, having arrived at the age of 14, applied for French nationality at 17. He obtained French nationality on June 23, 2015, only 3 months after he was eligible. “The judge was surprised that I had learned French so soon and completed my professional schooling so quickly. I think this worked in my favour in getting French nationality just a few months after my application”, he commented.

Sometimes, due to the inefficiency of the structure and the lack of administrators, children are obliged to wait until they turn 18 to be able to lodge their asylum application with OFPRA. Fortunately, this was not the case for Jamshed.

Jamshed was also grateful that throughout the administrative process and the opening of the grocery he had always been well treated: “I think French people like it when refugees try to integrate into their culture. Especially when you are a hard worker; then they seem happier”.

5.6.3 Community

Jamshed admitted the fact that the members of the Fondation Claude Pompidou had helped him to build his future: “I have very good memories. Some of the educators come into my store; they are professionals who do their best to encourage young people to succeed in life.” Having extended our interviews to include a few of the neighboring shops, we observed that Jamshed had a very good reputation in the surrounding area.

Major encouragement for Jamshed came from his former employer, an Afghan who has been living in the south of France for many years. When Jamshed started working and living with him, he was able to save more money and he learned how to manage a grocery. He considers this man a big brother and a mentor, who offered him all the moral support he needed. “I was inspired and encouraged to run my own shop, which was my dream”, he affirmed enthusiastically.

5.7 Conclusion

Jamshed’s story is part of a widespread history of refugees, where strife and suffering are compensated by success. Most of the time refugees do not have a good public reputation, especially among adolescents; therefore, writing about Jamshed was a pleasant experience. Nevertheless, some holes appeared in his story during our interviews, which prevented us from capturing the whole panorama of his story. For example, on being asked whether he has good links with the local Afghan community, his replies were always laconic and skeptical: “Not so much”. However, it appears his shop is a meeting point for some of the Afghans living in Brive. They come to have a drink, to talk about their day and to exchange news, especially in the late afternoon. Similarly, difficulties arose when we asked questions about his financial status and his journey from Afghanistan to France. Most researchers encounter this problem, because refugees might be reluctant to answer due to the fact that they are afraid that their position in the community may be jeopardized. Therefore, as a survival strategy, a refugee might not be completely honest about their true opin-

ions, or they might wish to promote a particular version of their reality (Jacobsen 2003). Furthermore, Jamshed attracted us with his seriousness and kindness, and he was also very punctual in every meeting that we had. The passion that Jamshed has for his work gave us hope that he would advance farther in his career by being an example to his fellow adolescent citizens.

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