

Lifestory: Ahmed Shihab Hammood

Name: **Ahmed Shihab Hammood**

Date and place of birth: 6/8/1996, Al Anbar, al Ramadi

Civil status: Refugee

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We meet in a newly renovated house of Slovenska filantropija, the key national NGO, working with immigrants in Slovenia. Ahmed works there as a volunteer, he helps forming a bridge between immigrants of diverse ethnicities and NGO staff. Staff that we meet in the house treats him as a coworker. After short introduction to his closest colleague, he invites me to their meeting room where we start the interview. He is a pleasant and intelligent interlocutor, quite open to talk about how he - together with his mother, younger sister and brother - fled from Iraq almost four years ago. However, his memories of his childhood and teenage years in Iraq are more difficult to address. He tells me on several occasions that his Iraqi life, together with friends and all the people that he left behind is over and belongs to the past. His future is, as he almost proudly states, now in Slovenia ...

I. Ahmed's History

Ahmed was born in al Ramadi, the capital of Al Anbar territory in western Iraq, 300 km from the borders with Syria where he lived for from 2006 till beginning of 2017. His home was a comfortable house in suburban area where he lived together with his parents and two years younger sister and five years younger brother. Even though he was only seven when the war started, he had a happy childhood. The family was (and still is) very close-knit. His parents had a very good relationship. His loving mother, an English teacher by profession, dedicating her life to wellbeing of her family as when starting a family quit teaching. His father, a dermatologist and a professor on medical faculty was his role model, always ready to teach him something new. Ahmed faced the first tragedy in his life when his father died of a stroke seven years ago. He was a key figure in the family and after his death Ahmed - as the oldest child - slowly took over his role.

II. Departure/Arrival

His story as a refugee started at the end of 2013, in December, when the Iraqi military entered his city of Al Ramadi. People from Al Anbar area were against the government, so they gathered and formed a protest which lasted for a year, which triggered a military operation in al Ramadi by the Iraqi government. Military interventions came together with random bombing of the city. A lot of innocent people were killed and a lot of rebels gathered to fight back. Ahmed's family stayed in occupied Al Ramadi for around 2 weeks, eating only basic food, but as they weren't safe, decided to leave the city and fled to Baghdad. Only a few days before they left, ISIS came in and took over the ruined city.

In peaceful time, the road to Baghdad usually took one hour, but at that time Ahmed's family travelled around six hours to get to the capital as the usual road was dangerous to travel. They stayed in Baghdad for only two weeks as the authorities regularly asking them for their IDs and checking their suitcases. They decided to flee on the south, to the second biggest city Basrah. They stayed there for around nine months, but with militants on the streets and racist bullying of his brother and sister and his rejected application to high school due to racial tensions between suni and shia, Basrah wasn't so different than Baghdad, so they left for Baghdad where they stayed for around a year.

During that year, they got a call from a number which wasn't Iraqi, and when they answered, they didn't recognize the man until he told them he was their relative, living in Sweden for last eight years. As they told him what was happening to them, he suggested to leave Iraq immediately. When they said they don't know where to go and that they were scared of taking the boat to Greece, he suggested he could buy them fake passports to fly from Iraq directly to Stockholm where they could seek asylum. As they just wanted to leave Iraq and find a safe place as soon as possible, the family agreed to the plan and quickly sold all of their property for a really small amount of money so they were able to send forty six thousand dollars to the relative to buy them passports. After the money transaction, he directed them to Turkey where they never heard a word from him again.

As immigrants they needed to act fast, being penniless they borrowed some money from a family friend, took the boat and headed to Greece. They arrived on the island Lesbos, happy and convinced the nightmare was over. What seemed as a new and optimistic start soon turned into the beginning of even worse situation. As the borders were closed they lived for seven months in a tent, which was cold and wet in March and very hot and dry in June. People were bitter and frustrated; they had only 15 toilets and four showers with cold water for 4000 people. On top of that, Ahmed was also blackmailed and bullied as some men tried to establish dominance and even financially benefit from people's misery that they have been facing at a camp. All of that time family waited for their place in relocation program, not knowing where, if ever, will be relocated. Luckily they came on the turn and in August

2016 were taken to Slovenia. They were firstly placed to the asylum house in Ljubljana, where they got interviewed and got their fingerprints taken. Later that day Ahmed and his family were taken to the asylum house in Logatec, 30 km from the capital. They filed in the application for their legal status and in November 4th got their refugee status. A huge burden falls off his chests. Whole family was relieved as they are finally able to settle down in their new country.

III. New life in another country

Although life in Slovenia is not easy - they moved three times in only 10 months - he and his family feel good in Slovenia and regard it as their new home country. They are not missing Iraq as there is nothing left for them. Their house is sold, their city ruined, their friends and family displaced around the globe.

After short stay in an asylum house in Logatec and then in a private apartment in a small town near the capital, they found a cozy home in an attic apartment in Ljubljana. They have all support they need. Each of them have their own social worker that is available 24/7. They are also entitled to 300 hours of Slovenian course. His brother and sister are already integrated in Slovenian school. His mother mostly stays at home, recovering from kidney operation. Ahmed, as the most talkative member of the family, already have lots of acquaintances and even some friends.

However, his difficult past will always be a part of him and can be best described by his own words:

»Now I hear people saying to me that I am safe, have an accommodation, live with my family in safety, and should forget about the past, However, I get depressed and anxious and feel really scared every time I remember our trip to Europe.

My questions are and always will be, will I ever feel normal again? Will this whole thing that happened to me hit me hard in my thoughts? Will I ever stop having nightmares about it?!«

Despite pressing memories and all that Ahmed and his family went through in the last years, he dreams big. Unlike his younger brother and sister that both want to become doctors, Ahmed does not yet have a clear idea about his future profession but he is certain he will become someone successful, proud of what he is and does. He is only 20 but has already experienced more than some people in a lifetime. He coauthored a three-lingual dictionary and successfully collaborated with many social workers, teachers, NGO activists, young Afghani, Iraqi, Persians and Syrian immigrants. Even a mayor of Logatec wanted to finance the dictionary after talking to school in Logatec. He spends most of his days working as a volunteer in Slovenska filantropija, meeting his new friends and helping his mother and younger siblings. However, the project he is mostly proud of and currently takes most of his free-time is writing an autobiography about his past three years that he has spent as a refugee. He still loves learning new

things. His short-term learning plan concerns a 300-hour Slovene language course. He is confident and optimistic about his future. After all he has been through he feels he is prepared for anything and life cannot get worse at it was.