

REPAIR PROJECT

AUSTRIA

MUSA'S STORY



Forty-five-year-old Musa fled Syria and was separated from his family for two years before being reunited in Vienna. Now he volunteers with the Red Cross, using his life experience and language skills to support other asylum seekers and refugees.

"In 2015, I arrived in Austria from Syria. It was a dangerous journey, just getting here was traumatic. When I arrived, I didn't know what to do; my cousin told me to go to the police station and register, so that's what I did.

I received a positive asylum decision in January 2017, began the reunification process immediately, and my family arrived in September 2017. Things went relatively smoothly for us, but it's harder for people now. My wife had to attend the Austrian embassy in Beirut. At that time, thankfully only she needed to go, but now all family members have to attend – including young children, even though it can mean a dangerous journey.

Before my family arrived, we talked daily and did everything possible to stay in touch, but that was only possible because our family ran an internet cafe and always had a connection. My wife and sister ran the business after I left, but sold it along with everything else to make ends meet before coming to Austria.

I was alone in Austria for two years before they arrived and constantly worried about them. In Syria there were bombings, and the militias were recruiting children, to join the fighting. I was terrified they might take our kids.

When I first arrived things were difficult; learning a new language, a new culture, finding new friends. Fortunately, I met an Austrian family: Papa Ernest and Mama Bernadette, as I call them. We are still in touch and I have two warm-hearted, retired Austrians as my surrogate parents. That relationship was, and is, so important to me. They helped me through many difficult situations; took time to talk with me, to go for walks, and visit places - they made the world of difference. The village where I stayed is really small, but people there were very good to me.

I used the time before my family arrived to learn the language because I thought: we are a large family and once the five children arrive I won't have time. After a year I'd reached an intermediate level.



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AUSTRIAN RED CROSS

To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

Someone once said that language is the key to the world. It's very important that people coming to Austria learn the language, it can prevent a lot of problems. Learning German has enabled me to find a job and in school sometimes the teacher needs to talk to the parents. Without the language, it could be a real problem.

I worked in a hotel kitchen for a few months. It wasn't really my field, but I wanted to integrate and learn the language. Unfortunately, I had an accident and was in hospital for three days. After that I decided to focus on office work instead, but I still suffer back problems.

Training to work in an office was tough. I'm not a native speaker and hadn't been to school in 25 years. Thanks to that training I managed to find an office job, but I'm still studying to develop my computer skills. It's a challenge to work, study, and raise a family simultaneously. I study at weekends and it's hard, but you have to fight for the future; otherwise, it will be nothing.

Our children are all between 11 and 19 years old. Our eldest daughter, Aya, had to complete language studies before she was allowed to attend high school, but now she is there - she is doing really well. Our second daughter attends a vocational school and is looking for training, our twins are also looking for training, and our youngest daughter is in high school too.

In Syria before the war life was much simpler. Here in Austria life is complicated. There are lots of things we are not familiar with: appointments, bureaucracy – it can feel that everything is difficult. As parents we try to allow our children to grow up 'normally' in their new country but also want to preserve our own culture.

At the Red Cross I volunteer helping people with the asylum process; with documents, contacting the social welfare office, and translation. I know how difficult it is for families, what they have been through, and what they left behind. Maintaining contact and keeping families updated is crucial, and empathy is also important because it's a complicated, stressful process.

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Family reunification takes too long, and that is really hard on families. The family member who has asylum is lonely and worries constantly about their family, while the family members they seek to be reunited with are stuck, often in desperate situations. That goes on for month after month, and year after year.

Appointments need to be scheduled more quickly, and authorities' decision making needs to be faster. Too often, I see families break apart from the stress. For people with subsidiary protection, even once they are granted protection, they have to wait another three years before they can just apply for family reunification. Then they have to fulfil income, housing, and insurance requirements, and there is still no guarantee their application will be successful. It can take more than five years. Imagine the strain on a family, the impact on the children.

People arrive with high hopes – for safety, and a better life for their children but in reality it's difficult to establish a new life without government support. The media has highlighted this a lot. What they don't highlight is the contribution people and their families make to the country, or the positive outcomes when adequate government support is in place.

As a family we have experienced racism openly directed at us, it is frightening that people feel it is ok to do that in public. We appreciate the safety and opportunities we have found in Austria, but when that happens it can be hard to stay optimistic.

Images are for illustration only