

REPAIR PROJECT

AUSTRIA

SEPIDEH'S STORY



When Sepideh left Iran for Austria in 2014, she never thought it would be four years until she saw her twin brothers again.

I arrived in Austria with my mum in September 2014 when I was 17 years old. My parents had divorced and fearing religious persecution my mum felt she had to flee. My younger brothers, twins, had to stay with my father and weren't allowed to travel with us.

After our parents divorced, we had always lived with our mum. But about two years before we left for Austria, my father decided he wanted us to live with him and took us away. I was around 16 at the time, and my twin brothers around 11. I stayed briefly with my father but became ill and he allowed me to return to my mum.

The heartache of being separated from her sons, coupled with the threat of religious persecution made her feel she had to leave the country. A year after my mum and I left, my father also decided to leave, to Germany, leaving the twins in Iran with our grandmother.

When my mum and I first arrived in Austria, it wasn't easy. The asylum procedure took a year-and-a-half, during which we had to live in an asylum center in Klagenfurt. Eventually, we received a positive decision and moved to Vienna.

Almost ten years on and our lives are good. I have my job, my flat, and our family is coping. Since 2018 I have been working for the Austrian Red Cross, starting as a volunteer and now on a full-time basis.

The twins arrived on 31 October 2018 – we had been apart for more than 4 years. Before the twins arrived, it wasn't easy, but now we are all together, everything is better.

Initially, our family reunification application was rejected because my mum didn't have official custody of the twins - the legal system in Iran had automatically granted custody to their father. We appealed the rejection, but it took a really long time. We managed to reach my father and convince him to go to the Iranian embassy in Germany to transfer custody of the twins to my mum. Even after that, it still took more than a year to overturn the original rejection, and another four months after that for the twins to join us in Austria.

The Red Cross supported us throughout, but it wasn't easy. My mum couldn't speak German so I had to interpret for her, communicating with authorities



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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

and officials on her behalf. My own German was far from perfect, which added to my stress. I was young, I wanted to be free from obligations and worries, but instead I had a lot of responsibility.

My brothers were also struggling in Iran. Living with their grandmother was not easy, and they often called us and cried on the phone. They said they couldn't take it anymore, even that they wanted to take their own lives or cut off communication altogether.

My mum's distress was heartbreaking. She was in despair. She struggled to learn German, stayed at home all the time, didn't want to do anything new, didn't want to work, didn't have any friends. We were living in a very small flat and she cried a lot. When her father passed away in Iran, she couldn't even go to say goodbye or attend the funeral. It was heart-wrenching to see her in such distress, I felt so helpless.

At the same time, we were doing everything we could to bring the twins to safety. There was another worry that, if they turned 17 in Iran, they would have to undertake military service. Their birthday was approaching and we still didn't have a positive decision on the family reunification application. We feared it could take another year or even longer and if they went into military service before the decision arrived, that could be the end.

I felt guilty that I was safe in Austria while my brothers were still stuck. Learning German and studying was my mental escape. I was offered a place at the University of Vienna, which was amazing. But I had to work and study at the same time, and after one semester it was too much and I dropped out.

I concentrated on my job at the Red Cross and found other job opportunities, in catering and accounting. Now I've started studying again, this time civil engineering, and I am hoping I can balance study and work better this time.

My mum is so much better now. After the twins arrived, she started training as a beautician and for the past two-and-a-half years has been working in a salon.

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The first two years were not easy for my brothers, they were traumatised by the process and their experiences in Iran, but their main issue was disruption to their education. All the schools we went to, so many schools, rejected them because they couldn't speak German. By the time they knew German well enough, they were 18 and too old for mainstream school.

They decided that even if they couldn't go to mainstream school, they would attend evening school. One of my brothers has built a successful career - he started at Starbucks and is now a shift manager. We see each other a lot, we often go out together at weekends, or to my mum's place and spend quality time together there.

My brothers were alone in Iran, both minors, without either parent or their siblings. But despite their vulnerability, the authorities were slow to act and very strict with the process.

It's important to consider the unique circumstances in each case, there should have been alternative ways to establish my mum's custody claim and my brothers' right to travel, without having to rely on my father presenting himself to the Iranian embassy in Germany.

The family reunification processes should facilitate exactly that - bringing families together - but before my father went to the embassy the rules were doing the opposite, they were keeping us apart.

Images are for illustration only