Easy to Hate

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How do you walk in the shoes of somebody who doesn't have shoes, someone who has lost everything? The horrors that many immigrants see on their dangerous journey to reach Europe, or their fears and sufferings when they arrive, are an interesting story for the reader, but are their reality. We have already heard so many of those stories in the news, aiming to shock us and attract our attention and usually presented with frightening statistics and numbers, difficult to take in. But behind the story there is a person. I feel like sometimes we tend to forget that. My personal experiences taught me that shame goes hand in hand with sadness. Shame makes us close up and detach. And when something traumatizing happens in your life, detachment is the worst way to go. The war, the journey, the fight, the rape might be over, but they live in your head and affect your behavior. It is easy to judge and jump to conclusions. It is easy to hate the different. But even though we are all different and unique, we are still all human.

"I love people.
I hate the fact that they are separated
into groups made so
easy to hate"[1]

I arrived in Spain in 2018 to do a master's program in Migration Studies. Apart from all the political economic and social issues in my home country, Bulgaria, I was always very disappointed with the level and methods of education there. When I was studying for my bachelor's in Sofia University I got the opportunity to do an Erasmus program in Germany, so my doubts were fully confirmed. Where I was born was not for me. Not just because of my academic ambitions, which I could pursue only if I left, but also because I was feeling like an alien in that society. The homophobic, sexist, xenophobic, hateful language is normalized and even valued, since it is used by politicians and news reporters. I grew up with verbal and physical violence. My first sexual contact was violent. Events also normalized in my post-communistic home country. I was suffering.

For my first year in Barcelona I was incredibly happy and excited. I worked for a big company as tech support in Bulgaria before I left, so I could save up some money to follow my dream and study abroad. My family also helped me financially and I could dedicate all my time and efforts to my studies. I met

1. S. Ikoga, Easy to Hate, 2022, [online] anti-discrimination-backpack.blogspot.com. Available at: <http://antidiscrimination-backpack.blogspot.com/2014/11/easy-to-hate-by-stefan-ikoga.html>

incredible people on that master's program and made friendships for life. For the first time I felt like I was in the right place, like I wasn't bothering anyone. I was studying in English and I met some Bulgarians when I arrived, so the language barrier was not that big of an issue like it was in Germany. Everything was a dream come true. The master's program wasn't very expensive for people from countries from the European Union. The price was up to three times higher for people coming from third countries. The highest prices were reserved for the Arab world countries.

After we graduated, my friends from Canada and Belgium went back to their countries and found a job in our field. They are surrounded by their friends and family; they have healthy relationships and speak their native language on a daily basis. I couldn't go back… After everyone I felt close to left, I was terrified, but I knew that I had to do everything possible to stay in Spain. Living in Bulgaria is not an option for me. I found a job in the logistics department of Amazon with English and German. I already had my residency documents when I was applying, so I didn't have any issues signing a contract. It took me less than a month to get hired. I had a very good salary, private health insurance, and after the temporary contract I got offered a permanent one. I can't say that it was all rainbows and roses, since I personally believe that working for big companies is like a laundry machine for the soul. But at least I had financial security. I have struggled and I am still struggling with many things. I have felt discriminated against, although on very rare occasions and three years after I graduated I am not able to find a job in my field, despite all my qualifications. I was volunteering for organizations working with refugees, I wrote a research report as a volunteer that I presented at a United Nations conference, but drove myself to absolute exhaustion trying to balance everything on my own. And still, from a legal perspective I can't say that I have encountered many difficulties. I wanted to study, I got accepted to study, I wanted a job to pay the rent and I got a job. I don't want to spend more time of my life doubting my qualities, I know I worked hard and deserved every opportunity I had. But most of those opportunities were possible to begin with because I come from a European country. My friends from the Southern Mediterranean for example have a very different experience. I can't stop thinking about the words of this year's winner in the competition "Sea of Words". She is from Syria and she said: "We are not welcome anywhere in this world."

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Very often discrimination has the function of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Generally, people like to believe that they are good, that they behave well and they like to attribute those qualities to their character. But close your eyes for a moment and imagine that every day, every day when you go out, you are treated as a criminal. You are looked upon with disgust or made fun of. Not because of your personal qualities, or behavior, which you are capable of controlling, some less, others more, but because of characteristics that you can't change even if you wanted to. Like the color of your face. Now imagine that you don't speak the same language, so you can't even defend yourself. That you spend every day in fear because you are residing illegally. For everything you want you have to fight ten times harder than the people born on that piece of land. Traumatic experiences don't always have to be a dramatic event. Sometimes we slowly dehumanize someone until they carry so much anger inside that they don't see the point of following the rules.

Refugees trying to evacuate in Gibraltar (Spain) on a small motorboat (Shutterstock.com).

And then we treat them even worse from the higher ground of a good person. A person who already has a home, a family, security, love, understanding, and a steady job.

Michelle Marta is also from Syria. She was born in Aleppo before the civil war started and had a really happy childhood there. After the first bombings her mother was categorical that their family had to emigrate. Their family separated and Michelle, one of her sisters and her mother moved to a small village in Bulgaria, where they had family members. "At first when I arrived, I didn't speak a word of Bulgarian and I thought it sounds weird as a language. I didn't think that it is possible to learn it. I was shy to speak even the little I could in the beginning. I was speaking only in English. At some point I realized that if I have to continue with my life in this country I will have to learn the language for my own good. I started to speak with many errors. Everyone who has learned a new language knows that feeling. In school I was just a listener – I was concentrating on only trying to understand and that helped me a lot. After a year in Samokov (Bulgaria) I moved to Sofia, the capital. I had exams in the school there and I was terrified because of the language barrier, but in the end I managed great." She says: "Of course, there were people who tried to insult me, because I am Syrian. As if it is something shameful. I was little and I was taking it personally because it was too early in my life for insults of that type and I was still very sensitive about my nationality. I had recently left Syria, and the civil war had just started, so I really didn't like to

hear bad things about my country. After some time I just accepted the fact that some people are like this by nature." Michelle was a child and didn't even understand what a civil war is, but she was forced to leave everything she had behind, her house, her sense of security, the unity of her family. One of her sisters stayed in Aleppo with her father, because she didn't want to leave before finishing her bachelor studies and then they moved to Germany. The airport in Aleppo was still open at that time and they could travel without any major issues. But the memory of the forceful escape is something that doesn't fade away with time. "I know that we have to live in the present and not think about the past, but the past of a person who left their country, their home and everything is not just the past. It is a part of them, and to forget it means erasing something from your identity. I was studying in one of the best schools in Aleppo, property of my aunt. I helped build it and you can't even imagine how happy I was. Now this school is all ruins. I saw pictures with all the windows broken, the windows from which I have screamed so many times, or I was observing the cars outside when I was bored in class. When I was leaving I remember clearly the moment when we closed the door. I remember myself wondering if I would ever come back. I stayed a little in the neighborhood trying to save all the memories I had before going to the airport. I was trying to memorize the streets where I was running with my flip flops or riding a bike and my parents were trying to make me go back home. I really didn't want to leave. I didn't want to move to a new country. Then in the car, on our way to the airport, I was observing the city. I didn't want to blink so I didn't miss anything. I was looking so carefully trying to memorize everything from my home city, because I didn't know if I would ever come back. It was like I was hugging someone so tight before saying goodbye. I felt like I was choking, I wanted time to stop so I could stay there, or at least carry something with me, to have it forever, so when I missed Aleppo it could reconcile me. I was so confused, but in that moment I realized how much I love Syria and how I have lived my best years there. I realized that no matter where I go I will carry my love for Syria. I believe that I will go back some day. I believe I will walk in the streets of Aleppo again, the streets that have seen and been through so much!"[2]

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After a traumatic event, almost everyone experiences at least some of the symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Most often these are nightmares and sad thoughts about what happened. The normal reaction of shock to the mind and body as a result of a traumatic event becomes PTSD when you cannot cope with the experience. The memory of what happened and the emotions you associate with it are constant. You don't feel better every day; on the contrary, you feel that things are getting worse. Post-traumatic stress disorder is diverse because the nervous system and the threshold of tolerance to stress are different for each person. Sometimes the symptoms seem to appear for no reason. In other cases, they are triggered by something that reminds you of the initial traumatic event, such as a noise, an image, certain words, or an odor. Those symptoms can lead to non-functional behavior, detachment and alcohol and drug

2. A. Ivanova, et al., *Otvŭd pregradite*, Sofia, Sofia University, Faculty of Journalism, 2019, pp. 62-70.

abuse. Trauma is not what happens to us. It is how we deal with it. Do we have someone to talk to? Sharing those experiences can be the best thing to do for coping with trauma. It can also be very difficult.

Mohamed (21) is one of the many who decided that the Mediterranean Sea would not be an obstacle between him and his brighter future. He was born in Tétouan, Morocco, and he didn't want to spend his life in misery. He told me: "I was studying in university and I saw that here young people don't have a future. They don't do anything. They can't find work. I didn't want a life like this. My parents cried for days when I told them what I wanted to do, but they knew that they can't stop me, if I have decided to leave." His story is worth writing a novel. He started his journey by going from Tétouan to Ceuta on a motorbike with a friend, who knew a policeman at the border, so they let them enter. Then he spent one year in Ceuta secretly trying to get on a ferry to Algeciras.

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He told me that he tested every possible way to hide somewhere on the ferries to the south of Spain. "I tried almost every day and the police kept catching me. Some of them already knew me," he laughs. "Sometimes they spray you with water, sometimes they beat you up. The police batons hurt the most. A few days after I arrived, they beat me up so badly that I couldn't move my right arm for two weeks after." But if you are a minor, the police don't have the right to send you back to Morocco. He wasn't carrying any documents and lied that he was indeed a minor. "I tried to climb the ropes of the ferries and hide inside. Once you climb the rope it's done. But you are also very visible up there while you are climbing. I spent a lot of time trying to hide under trucks parked in the ferry as well. Every truck is different. You have to know them and where to hide, because if not, you can die very easily." One day he succeeded in hiding under a truck and arrived in Algeciras in December, at night. He had to sleep in the cold outside and find a way to get to Barcelona where he had some friends who could help him out, without even speaking the language. "The truck drivers saw me, but they didn't want problems with the police, so they let me go and asked me not to tell that I have arrived like this." Mohamed is currently studying gardening in the mornings and Catalan in the afternoons. At the weekends he plays football. He also works as a volunteer for some projects in different parks in Barcelona. He says it was difficult to start studying because there were many people who just see that he is Moroccan and don't want to deal with him in any way. I am so impressed by the strength of Mohamed's spirit. "I know that I am a good person. Good people attract other good people. The others can't affect me. I don't care, I'm not afraid."

Moroccans are one of the most discriminated groups in Spain. Most of them entered Europe illegally and they are famous for stealing and selling drugs. Two of my Bulgarian friends have a little bike shop in Raval (a neighborhood in Barcelona) and they are currently having a lot of trouble with a group of Moroccans on their street, who are threatening them, causing problems and they even broke the door of the bike shop. Why? We assume because one of my friends is gay. They have been complaining to the police for a while now with no result. I am scared for my friends and, naturally, I am angry that someone is putting them in danger. My friend escaped Bulgaria because of the high levels of homophobia and now he has to face the same bullying after putting in all the effort that one needs to when you start your life in a new country. Everyone on the street

is afraid of that group since they have history of being violent.

I always thought that the opposite of love is hate, but it is not. The opposite of love is fear. One of my favorite authors – Mikhail Bulgakov, who was writing in Soviet Russia and most of his work was banned by the Soviet government – says that fear is the worst sin. He satirizes the obedience he observes in his fellow countrymen towards the tyrannical regime at the beginning of the 20th century. Bulgakov blames them for being so scared of losing the little comfort that they have obtained, with their support for the party and he sees that fear as the fuel for all the evil and human suffering. I have to say that I see the same pattern today. In very different but comparably terrifying circumstances, I can see that same fear in people all over Europe. With the panic around COVID-19, inflation, unemployment, climate change and so on, it is in our nature to cling to every piece of security that we can find. When we are scared, we don't have time for empathy. In our panic we always cause harm, and history has already proven it on several occasions. I realized that in my fear for my friends I was calling their neighbors – the Moroccans. I wanted to insult them and I was angry at their culture, which doesn't accept my friend because of his sexuality. But my next interview made me shake off all the prejudice I built so quickly.

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Saida (43) showed me the other side of the coin and reminded me that the Moroccans include people like her too. She told me something that I haven't thought about before. Somehow she managed to find a positive aspect of the lockdowns during COVID-19: "At least for some period of time we were all equal. Nobody could travel." Every person that I talked to for this article shared that they had an idea of the legal difficulties they will meet when they arrive in their destination country. In Barcelona, for example, there is the mechanism of *arraigo social* (social rooting). It is a temporary residence and work permit designed for those foreigners who have been living in Spain for three years under an irregular situation. It is one of the easiest ways any non-European Union national has to legalize their situation in the country.[3] And still in that period of three years, they cannot leave the territory of Spain because they wouldn't be allowed to come back. In the cases of everyone in this article, their families can't apply for a tourist visa to come visit them either, mostly for economic reasons. So, apart from the stress of discrimination, the poor work conditions (for this three-year period immigrants can only find illegal jobs) and the language barrier, we can add the bonus of not being able to see your family for several years. No exceptions. Saida used to work as an esthetician in Morocco. Now she works as a cook illegally. She is smiling and tells me that she just has to be patient and it is okay. "I had many days on which I cried a lot. You want to go buy something from the shop and you can't. Times are getting difficult in Spain as well. After COVID-19 it is even more difficult to find a job." She was born in Fez, but she spent fourteen years working in Tangier. I asked her if she regrets her decision to come to Spain and the answer was: "No. In Morocco you work so much and earn nothing. Here it is hard, yes, but much better." I can fully relate. Saida also tells me that the most important thing is that

3. Balcells Group, "Arraigo Social in Spain: 14 Most Frequent Asked Questions", 2022. Available at: https://balcellsgroup.com/arraigo-social-in-spain/

we help each other. "Otherwise we are lost." It makes me think. As a woman who was raised in a strictly patriarchal country, my achievements, skills or intelligence were always undermined. So I grew up with the constant need to prove that I can do everything on my own. I didn't accept help. I didn't share. I was just bumping my head against the wall, but I didn't want to let anyone nearby, because I was afraid that they will make me feel how I felt when I was growing up – worthless. My fear and pride were detaching me from everyone and everything. The fact is that no one can do it on their own. Sometimes we don't even realize how we help others or how they help us, but without collaboration, interaction and support we are all lost. I hope Saida's wisdom stays with me for a long time.

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At first I was worried about being able to find people with an illegal status who would be willing to share their story. I am aware that in that situation it takes a lot of courage to speak and this article would not have been possible without the people who trusted me with their fears, feelings and hopes.

Yassin, who is exactly my age, 28, came to Spain three years ago. He didn't hesitate for a second when I asked him if I could interview him. He explained to me in great detail the options that Moroccans have to enter Spain and kept repeating how lucky he is compared to many of his friends. The options are two: if you work and you earn 300 euros or more per month you can ask your employer for a letter of proof for your income and with that letter the embassy gives you a tourist visa for Spain or France. Otherwise, if your income is too low they are afraid that you might not come back. Not a very effective policy in my friend's case, who came to Spain like that and stayed as planned. The second option we are more familiar with: on the bottom of trucks, in small fishing boats, hiding on ferries and so on. Yassin was not afraid to ask for help. His brother has lived in Spain since 2002 and was waiting for him at the airport when he arrived and then hosted him for the first four months. After that he asked for help from the NGO Cáritas in Barcelona. Yassin explained that he often had to lie to them in order to receive help. He says that if you are not very dramatic about your situation they wouldn't assist you. In the meantime he was able to find a job in a little shop from 9 am till 12 am for 30 euros a day, since he couldn't sign a legal contract. "And still for the first year here I was very happy. I was fascinated by the life in Barcelona. I met so many new and interesting people and the city is so beautiful! By the second year I started missing my family, my hometown, my neighborhood." His father is pensioned and receives 150 euros per month and his mother doesn't work, so none of them can request a tourist visa to enter Spain and visit him. He says that he thought that people here are open and warm, but in the anonymity of the big metropolitan city he sometimes feels alone. "In Morocco, in Tangier if you have to stay in the hospital the entire neighborhood will come to visit you, to bring you food and wish you well. But here it is not like this." I asked him if he felt discriminated against and he said: "Yes, of course. Every Moroccan has felt discriminated against here. Most of the people hate us, before we even say anything." And added: "But I understand it. There are a lot of Moroccans who wouldn't behave like this in Morocco. The prison here is not like the prison in Morocco. The first time they catch you here they would probably just warn you, but not fine you or arrest you. Most of the Moroc-

cans that are robbing and selling drugs on the street would never do that in our country." He tells me that he will help me with everything he can for my article and he does. He gives me the contact of his friend who arrived here "less comfortably".

I was terrified. We arrived at Cádiz at midnight. It was all dark, we were so scared and then the police came. They questioned us all night. I hadn't slept for three days

Jamal arrived in Spain on a small inflatable boat. He had to plan it and save money for almost a year. Then he had to search for traffickers to take him to Spain. The trip cost 1,500 euros. It took twenty-three hours to reach Spain and there were one hundred people in the boat, four of them women. He says it was like in the movies. "You can't even imagine it. In Morocco the sea was calm, but closer to Spain it was very angry. We had to sail through huge waves and it was freezing cold. There were enormous fish attacking us. Everyone was vomiting. I was terrified. We arrived at Cádiz at midnight. It was all dark, we were so scared and then the police came. They questioned us all night. I hadn't slept for three days. All I could think about is that they will return me to Morocco and all that suffering was for nothing. The Spanish authorities told me they will let me go, but I was sure they were lying."

Jamal is now twenty-five years old and he is studying to be a personal trainer in Barcelona. He has to wait three months more before he can apply for legal residency, but he also has to find a fixed contract for a year. He says it's difficult and he misses his family and his mother's cooking so much. His parents knew what he was going to do and they cried a lot, he says. "But I left Morocco for a better future. I want to help them out financially and from Europe I can do that. Life is hard and we have to stand tall! *Ojalá* I succeed! "

It is indeed difficult when different cultures clash. We all get raised in a specific environment and we thought that things work like this or like that and that is the only correct way. Then we left the territory of our country and we saw that there are other ways, but they are thought with the same insisting tone. Intelligent people with developed critical thinking can find it hard to shake off the values they grew up with, even if they don't personally agree with them. What to say about the masses? It is such a long journey to change our perceptions of this world on an individual level. Those perceptions that make it so easy to hate. And it will be much longer on a societal level. But I want to think that it is possible because if you break us to the core, we are all the same. Flesh, bones and hopes. I believe that we deserve equal opportunities to follow our dreams. Having dialogue and using every possible tool for achieving more tolerant migration policies in the Mediterranean is crucial. The Mediterranean has already seen enough horrors.

"There are no evil people in this world, just unhappy people."

Mikhail Bulgakov