Finding Home

This year TIME is following three refugee families fleeing the war in Syria. Each began 2017 with a new baby, in a transit camp in Greece.
NOWAYHOME
A SYRIAN FAMILY SEEKING ASYLUM GETS AN ANSWER
BY ARYN BAKER / KASTORIA, GREECE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNSEY ADDARIO

ILLHAM ALARABI IS ONE OF THOSE INDOMITABLE women who takes everything in stride. The kind of unflappable mother who can single-handedly extract her oldest son from a squabble with a bully, soothe the teething pains of another and bathe a baby, all while supper simmers on the stove. Traveling 1,500 miles from her bombed-out village near Deir ez-Zor in Syria to Greece was a hardship, to be sure, but she always comforted her family with faith that they were headed for something better. Even life in squalid Greek refugee camps, where she spent eight months pregnant with her fifth child, offered opportunities to make friends, build communities and find something to laugh about, whether it was the bad food or the midnight treks to the portable toilets in the snow.

But after more than three years of relentless optimism, first as a refugee in Turkey, then again in Greece, she finally gave into despair one day in March. Slumped on a chair in a shabby hotel room in remote northern Greece, she watched her four oldest sons ricochet from bed to wall to floor and back again, barely missing the sleeping baby. Her oldest son Wael, 7, has never set foot in a school. He says he wants to be a teacher when he grows up, but he struggles to write even simple Arabic words, like baba, for father. “We have been here [in Greece] for a year and two months,” says Illham with a sigh of defeat. “If we had put these kids in school from the beginning, they would at least be reading Greek by now.”

Like the tens of thousands of other Syrian refugees that flooded across the Mediterranean and into Greece over the past two years, she and her husband Minhel Alsaleh had counted on being relocated elsewhere in Europe as part of an E.U. plan to redistribute the asylum seekers to lighten the burden on the
countries at the front lines of Europe’s migrant crisis. They are one of three families TIME is following as part of a year-long project on the lives of babies born in Greece’s refugee camps. One family is on its way to Estonia. Another is still waiting to hear news of their future.

But doors across Europe are slamming shut. Little more than 13,000 of Greece’s 27,000 refugees eligible for relocation in Europe have been processed since October 2015, when the agreement first went into effect. It’s unlikely that the rest will be placed by the program’s end in September 2017. Meanwhile upcoming elections in France and Germany—the two countries that have taken in the largest number of Europe’s refugees so far—feature populist candidates stoking anti-migrant sentiment. Yet the number of Syrians fleeing their country for refuge abroad continues to climb, reaching a new milestone in March: more than 5 million in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, plus the 884,461 applying for asylum in Europe. As the war grinds on, with news of a major chemical bomb attack on the province of Idlib on April 4, there are likely to be even more. The number of refugees reaching Europe fell last year in the wake of an agreement between the E.U. and Turkey, but that deal is also at risk as tensions mount over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s crackdown on dissent.

Illham and Minhel did eventually receive a placement from the Greek Asylum Service, after a bewildering application process and months of interminable waiting. Despite the fact that both have family in Germany and put it at the top of their list of desired countries, in February they were matched with Lithuania—a seemingly arbitrary decision. They were not happy with the choice. “What kind of country has less than half the population of Aleppo?” mused Illham. “And has a woman for President?” said Minhel of the country’s head of state Dalia Grybauskaite. In fact, he was more worried about Lithuania’s poor economy and high unemployment rate. But at the same time they were relieved that their long journey in search of safety and stability seemed to be finally coming to an end. “I got Lithuania and it was bad, but at least it was a step forward,” says Minhel. “It was better than nothing, and my children would finally get to go to school.”

The only thing standing between Greece and their new life was a security interview at the Lithuanian embassy in Athens. The interview was grueling, says Illham. They asked Minhel about his military service, and why he defected. (“I didn’t want to continue when the regime started shelling civilians, its own people,” he says he answered.) They asked Illham if she would continue to wear her headscarf and if she was a militant. (“I found this to be a very silly question. How would I go fight when I have children?” she says she responded.) Still, they had no reason to think they wouldn’t pass.

On March 1, they were informed by
the Greek Asylum Service that Lithuania had rejected their application. Officials there cited unspecified “security reasons” in their rejection letter, and there is no chance for appeal. “It’s a big shock,” says Illham, still reeling from the news. “I have headaches. My teeth, my eyes, my whole body is hurting me.”

“We have been waiting for so long,” Minhel adds. “And then to be rejected from a country we didn’t even want. It’s painful.”

Both have gone over the interview in their minds multiple times, trying to figure out what might have triggered the rejection. Minhel’s military service was no different from that of thousands of other Syrian applicants, he says. Indeed, his defection puts him at even greater risk of persecution from the regime. But he can’t figure out what else it could have been.

Officially, the E.U. member nations committed to the relocation scheme can deny applicants only for reasons of national security and public order. So far across the E.U., 858 applicants have been rejected, or 7% of the total. But Lithuania has rejected 18% of applicants, according to the Greek Asylum Service. Lithuania’s ambassador in Greece, Rolandas Kacinskas, would not speculate on the reasons for rejection, as he is not formally involved in the interviewing process. Still, he notes that his country, like many others, only wants refugees genuinely committed to staying, not ones simply waiting to take advantage of liberal E.U. travel laws to search for work in wealthier nations like Germany. It’s a fact, he says, that not all the refugees granted asylum in Lithuania stay. “You can tell the people who are looking for the economic opportunities from the people who are genuinely interested in integrating and settling in Lithuania. Our goal is not to take a person knowing that next day he will run from the country.”

Minhel admits that he did little to convince the Lithuanians that he was enthusiastic about moving there. But it’s unfair, he argues, to push refugees into countries they know nothing about, when their lives are already so laden with uncertainty. Of course they want to go to countries where they have family, and where other refugees have made a success out of exile. Syrians may be running from war, but they are also running toward hope. Not just hope for security, but hope for a better future, for them and for their children.

Still, there is a silver lining to the rejection, says Minhel. He can now apply for asylum in Greece, a country that, despite its crumbling economy, has warmly welcomed the refugees and has seen little of the anti-migrant rhetoric and violence apparent elsewhere in Europe. The countryside, he says, reminds him a lot of his home back in Syria, where he was a farmer. “I have no problem to work here as a shepherd, in agriculture, a driver of a tractor. I would do any work. Europe is not going to pay you for not working. I want to live, I want to provide money to my children and educate them.”

Even Illham brightens at the prospect of a life in Greece. It may be difficult, but at least it provides a direction, and the chance of building a home for her family. But in doing so her relentless optimism is likely to be tested like never before.

—With reporting by MOHAMED FAREEJ/Thessaloniki

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