

From Lebanon to Romania: The experience of one Syrian family

Simona Monica Pascariu, AEIDL correspondent in Romania.

On the 3rd of March 2016, 15 refugees found asylum at the Regional Centre for Accommodation and Procedures for Asylum Seekers in Galati, Romania. They had travelled from Greece with the help of the International Organization for Migration. Among the refugees was the Aboaisa family, two adults and three minors.

Only eight days after their arrival in Galati, the family already have a desire to settle there, despite having previously heard only bad things about Romania. They feel they have integrated well and the head of the family, Mohammed, a chef by trade, has started to cook for others at the centre.

Having arrived in a country without war, and met people who want to help them, Mohammed, 39 years old, and his wife, Khaieria, 37 years, can relive the moments of terror experienced on their journey from Syria to Galati.



Source: www.hotnews.ro

The route taken by the Aboaisa family on their journey to Romania: Aalmane - Tripoli - Hermel (Lebanon) - Al Qusair - Homs - Idlib (Syria) - Antakya - Izmir - Istanbul - Izmir (Turkey) - Lesbos - Athens (Greece) – Bucharest - Galati (Romania).

Mohammed's story¹

"I was working as a cook in Lebanon. I returned to Syria from Lebanon because the rules there were very difficult for us. In our country there is no peace. At any time a bomb or a missile can kill you. For myself, my wife and my children's safety, I decided to leave my country, where even the schools were closed. I had no destination in my mind when we left. I just wanted to find a peaceful country. I didn't know anything about Romania, but I hoped to get to Germany eventually. We left Syria about three months ago, travelling on foot, by car, by boat. I had 9 000 US dollars. I also borrowed some money. We travelled through all countries illegally. I paid for everything. No one asks you if you have children, only how much money you have in your pocket."

¹ Syrian refugee narrated facts. The veracity of the story could not be verified by other independent sources.

"It was a living hell, passing through the hands of traffickers and people smugglers. From Syria to Turkey we walked day and night. From Turkey we made our way to Greece. The guide left us no time to rest. I honestly thought that we would never get to Europe... Several times I thought this. When we went from Syria to Turkey, through the woods I thought we were lost, and wouldn't be able to find our way back. Then, we were stranded for a long time on a overcrowded and sinking boat, until a fisherman rescued us. In Greece, we spent nine days in jail. Throughout the journey we were afraid, but especially at sea because it was insecure, there were too many people on the boat and it felt like a hopeless situation", said Mohammed.

The journey took a month in total, and eventually they decided to go to Romania, a country they previously didn't even know it existed. "There was nothing official, but the information I had was that Romanians were poor people, the refugee centres were miserable and you had to beg to eat. *'Romania, not Romania, poor people, bad people'*. When we arrived we saw something different, which completely changed my opinion."

"We are happy now that we made this choice and we want to remain in Galati, mainly because the people we've met here are nice people and they treat us very well. I went out of the centre with my family and people were kind to us. A woman gave my children fruit and a man gave them some money", explained Mohammed, who now wants to get a work permit so he can find a job as a cook or to open a restaurant: "I would like to be able to open a small restaurant here in Galati. If they try it just once, the customers will never leave because they'll love the taste of my food."

Unlike Mohammed, his wife Khaieria did not previously work, but now she wants to enrol in a cosmetics course and to work as a beautician in Galati. So far, Khaieria is the only woman in the refugee centre in Galati and this makes her stay much more difficult, but she is determined not to give up.



Mohammed and his wife Khaieria (source: www.viata-libera.ro)

The couple, like other refugees brought to Galati, have already completed the asylum application procedure, for which they were fingerprinted and photographed, with the data being entered in a European database. Following the submission of the application, they must receive a response / papers within 30 days. If they are not satisfied with the answer they get, they can challenge it in court. Pending the outcome of any appeal, the refugees can stay in the centre. They can also go outside the centre, thanks to the provisional identity documentation they already received. The family meets its own needs with a small daily allowance it receives from the Romanian government.

The local welcome

On their arrival at the Henri Coanda – Otopeni airport in Bucharest, the 15 refugees, including the Aboaisa family, were transported to Galati, on the banks of the Danube (237 km east of Bucharest).

As they were making their way to Galati, to be accommodated at the Regional Centre for Accommodation and Procedures for Asylum Seekers (CRCPSA) Galati, in front of the Drama Theatre Fani Tardini, a group of (also!) 15 people were protesting against immigration. The unauthorised protest was organised by members of the United Romania Party, some of whom were holding placards with messages such as "No to migrants" and "Romania, the country of Romanians" (In Romania, like in other European countries, nationalism has experienced a resurgence in recent years, dispelling the hope that it has disappeared when Romania became a member of NATO and the EU).

Fortunately, the protest lasted less than an hour. It was an isolated incident and the local community did not participate or pay any attention.

It was also strongly refuted by the staff of the Regional Centre for Refugees, local NGOs and representatives of [AIDRom](#) (Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania), which support projects such as “Support for asylum seekers in Romania” and “Assistance for resettled refugees” (see box).

The Refugees Centre in Galati

For those seeking asylum in Romania, the journey is a difficult challenge. At the beginning of March 2016, the Refugee Centre in Galati hosted 27 asylum seekers, despite having a capacity for 250. The immigrants arriving so far have come from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan and other high risk countries.

The centre has kitchens with stoves and refrigerators, bathrooms, a playroom for children, a prayer room and a room equipped with computers and free internet access. There is also a modern gym with bikes, a running trail, strength machines, table-tennis, other multi-functional equipment, as well as outdoor soccer, tennis and basketball. The accommodation policy at the centre is an open one, but applicants are required to comply with certain rules and procedures.



The children's playroom (source: www.viata-libera.ro)

If they want to continue living in the centre after obtaining their papers, it is possible for another year, in return for payment of an affordable rent. In order to support the asylum seekers to cope financially after the integration period, the centre has formed a partnership with the County of Galati Employment Agency, which helps refugees start a business or find a job in Galati. To date, those availing of this have found jobs in light industry or in the services sector.

For refugees arriving in Galati, a small amount of aid is also available from the Turkish community. The Muslim community in Galati is small (about 100 inhabitants according to the 2011 census) and most are of pension age (their children have emigrated to Turkey or Western Europe), so their capacity to help financially is limited. However, for foreigners at the Centre for Refugees in Galati, the material and moral support of the Turkish community is essential, especially in the first weeks of their stay.

“We are here to help”: Examples of two AIDRom projects

Under the AIDRom umbrella (www.aidrom.ro and <https://www.facebook.com/AIDRom-883889831718569/?fref=ts>) a number of projects have been developed to help refugees to overcome the challenges they face. Two of them are briefly presented below.

The project, “Facilitating the integration and development of skills for independent living of refugees, creating a network of local support” (<http://www.aidrom.ro/proiecte/integrare-refugiati-relocati-2/>) was first implemented successfully in Timisoara. The objective was to provide socio-economic advice and assistance, facilitating integration and creating a support network to assist refugees resettling in the town. The project seeks to support the integration of beneficiaries by creating operational leverage in the communities where they live. It offers counselling, labour market access, material assistance (payments for accommodation, food, clothing, and medical

services), Romanian language courses and cultural accommodation. The refugees, children and adults, can also benefit from specialist psychology services.

The project, "Support and services for asylum seekers in Romania", (<http://www.aidrom.ro/proiecte/asistenta-solicitanti-de-azil/>) aims to support asylum seekers for a period of six months after their arrival. The project is implemented in partnership with the Romanian National Council for Refugees and is funded by the General Inspectorate for Immigration.

The overall objective of the project is to improve the situation of asylum seekers in Romania by establishing a system of social and material assistance, complemented and specialist services, in order to improve the living standards of asylum seekers in Romania. The project is implemented nationally, focusing especially on the six centres for asylum seekers in Romania, namely: Bucharest, Timisoara, Giurgiu, Galati, Somcuta Mare and Radauti.

Useful links (in English language):

<http://www.euronews.com/2015/04/10/waiting-to-join-schengen-romania-a-new-gateway-to-migrants-heaven-and-hell/>

http://www.rri.ro/en_gb/the_first_syrian_refugees_received_in_romania-2544303

Useful links (in Romanian language):

<http://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/criza-imigrantilor/familia-de-refugiati-care-auzise-tot-ce-e-mai-rau-despre-romania-si-s-a-stabilit-in-galati-ne-am-schibat-impresia-complet.html>

<http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-20858943-exclusiv-interviu-unul-dintre-refugiatii-sirieni-ajunsi-romania-cum-ajuns-familie-sirieni-din-liban-galati-trecand-prin-mainile-traficantilor-oameni-calauzelor.htm>