

TREK WITH MIGRANTS



USA TODAY reporter Kim Hjelmgaard followed migrants last year as they made the arduous 1,500-mile journey from Greece to Germany. Four months later, he met again with one family after they settled in Austria. Here is his account of their reunion.

Reem Helani, Mohamad's mother, looks out the window of the family's apartment in Austria.

PHOTOS BY KIM HJELMGAARD, USA TODAY

Reunion with a Syrian pal

His family settles in Austria, yet life is still unsettling

Kim Hjelmgaard
USA TODAY

DORNBIRN, AUSTRIA I arrived at the Helani family residence at the edge of the Eastern Alps — 6 miles from the Swiss border and 2,300 miles from what's left of their home in Syria — during an agonizing rite of passage.

Mohamad Helani, 12, was fending off a wedgie from his friend Sasha Griesser.

"He is fun, we play catch, hide then seek, bike a little, but not much. I am the winner of most of the wrestling contests," said Sasha, 13, who speaks a slightly softer form of Arnold Schwarzenegger English.

The pair met after the Helani family's journey from Damascus, Syria, to Europe, which took them through more than a dozen countries and caused brushes with death, sickness and despair — but also gratefulness, acceptance and moments of joy. The journey is still unfolding.

I last saw Mohamad four months ago in Presevo, Serbia. He was traveling north on the so-called migrants' trail through the Western Balkans, along with his father, Jihad; mother, Reem; and Essam, his 8-year-old brother.

Our paths collided late one night in a run-down hotel in an Albanian-speaking part of southern Serbia. Mohamad was the only one in his family who spoke English. He was calmly defusing an argument with the hotel owner about the cost of the room.

The next day, Mohamad told me how he wanted to be a pilot. He also confessed that math was not his best subject.

After we parted ways, he kept in touch via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger about the family's attempts to find the most promising place to apply for asylum. Germany and Sweden already were filling up. They'd heard stories of ill treatment in Scandinavia. They decided on Austria.

"Austria is good. The people here and in Europe are so kind. They like us here," he said.

SUBSIDIES AND SUSPICIONS

As Mohamad spoke, 6 to 8 inches of snow accumulated outside the three-room apartment in Dornbirn where the Austrian government lets the Helanis stay rent-free. The family relies on donations and gets a government stipend of \$785 a month. The decor is 1970s beige-brown. Mohamad and Essam share a bunk bed in a room off the kitchen.

I didn't tell Mohamad that I read a story on my train ride here about a small German town that



Mohamad Helani joins in a snowball fight outside his family's apartment in Dornbirn, Austria.



The Helani family serves lunch to their friends. From left, Jihad, Mohamad and Essam Helani; Larena Watzenegger and her mother, Sabrina; and Reem Helani.



Source ESRI
KARL GELLES, USA TODAY

just banned asylum seekers from a swimming pool because women complained they were being sexually harassed. Or that allegations of sexual attacks by refugees surfacing in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden and Finland were fueling a Europe-wide backlash against people like him.

At Dornbirn's train station and town square, small groups of cold migrants from a nearby camp run by Austria stood out from the weekend shoppers, cafe-goers and people in skiwear. More than a few times, I saw a clear look of annoyance on passersby. Mohamad did not seem to notice.

The idea that Syrians and other Middle Easterners in Europe may have acted improperly did weigh on Mohamad, especially after the New Year's Eve sexual assaults on numerous women in Cologne, Germany, plus the Nov. 13 terror attacks in Paris that left 130 people dead.

One of the first things he said after greeting me with "I missed you so much" was he feared Europeans would think all Syrians were capable of such behavior.

NATURAL INTERPRETER

The Helanis moved three months ago to Dornbirn, Austria's 10th-largest city with a population of 46,000, sandwiched between Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland in the Rhine Valley. Three weeks ago, they got an apartment.

Mohamad appears to be thriving here. He speaks English as well as Arabic. His German is coming along. Nearly every day someone from the local refugee camp phones him to be a go-between. A man from Iraq must go to the police station, can he communicate that? A Somali needs to find a doctor, can he help?

As we were drinking tea with his mother and father, Mohamad got a phone call. "Auntie, what exactly is the problem?" he said in English before speaking to the woman for 15 minutes. After he hung up, I asked why he called her "auntie." None of us can say her name, he explained.

Around midmorning, Sabrina Watzenegger — a friend the family had met at a local playground — stopped by with her daughter, Larena, 4. Mohamad said Watzenegger has been a big help. She was going to take them ice skating the next day. "This family is my family," she told me.

After lunch, we all had a snowball fight. The Helanis insisted I borrow a snowsuit.

The horror of Syria is never far away. Mohamad's father took out his phone and showed images of where his father's house once stood — now a pile of bombed-out rubble — in Douma, a Damascus suburb that is a stronghold for rebel groups fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Douma and other Syrian towns are still besieged and people are starving, the United Nations said.

Helani stopped showing photos to send a text message to his sister trapped in Douma.

Husain Huda Mohammed Kaher, 36, has three children, the youngest age 5. He said his sister often would not answer for three days. That was sometimes a sign that food was scarce, or it simply meant her Internet was down. He always feared the worst. An hour later, a message came through.

"I am trying to stay alive and praying that the war will end

The horror of Syria is never far away. He shows a photo of a small bowl of rice that constitutes a daily meal for six people.

soon," Kaher wrote back. He said his sister weighed about 170 pounds before the civil war but is now down to just 88.

He showed me two more photos she had sent: a small bowl of rice that he said constituted a daily meal for six people. The other was the shell of a Russian bomb that Kaher's family had converted into a makeshift heater.

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

Young Mohamad has formed his own ideas about why his home country's nearly 5-year-old civil war, which has killed several hundred thousand people, rages on.

"Syria is at the center of everything," he said. "From there, you can easily go into Russia, you can easily go into Iraq, you can easily get to Africa, wherever you want. Before the war, it was Syria that was making all the food for Syria, but also for all these other places."

Mohamad also thinks about his future and has dreams of going West. "I would like to see California and Hollywood," he said. "Rihanna, she is often singing about California."

Later, I decided we should go out for dinner. I was buying. When Mohamad immediately suggested McDonald's, I objected, thinking we should go somewhere more memorable. But when the Helanis all appeared to brighten at the prospect of the Golden Arches, I went along.

It was about 8:30 p.m. As we set off on foot through snow-filled streets, I assumed it would be a short walk into the town's center. It turned out to be a 45-minute hike. Every few minutes, a snowplow thundered past. By now, the snow was falling thick and fast as if we were inside a shaken snow globe. I found it increasingly difficult to discern the road ahead. The Helanis did not appear bothered by this at all.