On the Run: The Narrative of an Asylum Seeker

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SUMMARY  The object of the article is to try and understand how a young woman managed to live through the experience of losing everything that was dear to her, first of all of her sister being “sold” to an old man, then of being threatened with death, then having to leave the picture of her mother behind, and then traveling into the unknown to a new existence in a country that she had never heard of—until she was told the name by the immigration police. It is the story of how to create an experience out of chaos, and how to come to terms with it through looking back and groping for words to give shape and sense to what has happened. In a wider theoretical perspective the article explores the problem of the interplay between the lived experience and the story in the making. This might indicate a dichotomy between experience and narrative, and that acting in the world, in this case being on the run, is lived experience, whereas the telling is just that—telling, thus removed from the drama of getting on with the living of it. That is not how I see it. When I was in the middle of unraveling Ada’s life story I read an article by Sarah Lamb, “Being a Widow” (2001), where she shows that the widow’s story is part of her lived life. However, I find the distinctions in approaches very subtle and have, in fact, never quite seen how anything concerned with human experience, let alone one’s own life story, can be seen as outside of lived life, outside of reality, like a text. It is true that to the person in this account, a young asylum seeker in Norway, it may seem at times as if the story she is telling is about somebody else. “Sometimes I don’t know who I am. How can all this have happened and yet I am still alive?” she asks. Nevertheless I was inspired by Lamb’s insistence on the creative practice, and indeed experience, of the narrative presentation itself. Although I have encouraged Ada—as she will be called here—to tell her story, I have done so with a small feeling of doubt. Is it really the case that a forgotten period needs to be recaptured in order for people to feel they own their own lives? She herself has said, “If I told people everything that happened, nobody would believe me and I wouldn’t know what words to use either, or how to start.” [Keywords: minor refugee, narrative, loss, memory, coping]

How to tell the story
How to find the words

For Ada and persons like her—asylum seekers, international runaways—terms like globalization, migration, identity, and experience are unknown. What such persons relate to is living from day to day after a problem has made them run away. They are not travelers in the sense of discovering places. “Home,” in terms of “belonging” and “native soil,” is what they have run away from. Their notion of life is mobile and may be merely related to the kitchen in the asylum seekers’ home where they have their meals and chat together at the end of the day.
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(see discussion in Rapport 1997:73 ff.). Their primary concern is less about a sense of identity than about an identity or ID card, though the card may only be given temporarily. Their dream is to possess a passport. If they tell their life stories at all, they tell about what happened before the “problem” occurred or after they had sought asylum in a given country.

This article is about a young asylum seeker in Norway. She does not talk about her country as “home”; she usually says “in X” (name of the country). When she meets with her fellow asylum seekers they talk a lot about “before” (when they were still in, for example, Eritrea, Nigeria, or Somalia) and “after” (waiting for an answer from the immigration department in Norway), but they seldom talk about the “problem” (that which made them run away). A friend of Ada’s, a young man, said to me as we were drinking tea together, “The immigration people here asked me for my identity papers—they thought I’d thrown them away. Who’d think of looking for one’s ID papers when a problem arises? You just run away.” When I asked Ada if she knew the particular reason behind her fellow asylum seekers’ request for a permit to stay, she just shook her head. “It’s not common for people to talk about what’s happened to them. People never talk about themselves like that. We keep our stories to ourselves.” What they do talk about is the rumors about who was sent out of the country and in what way, and how the police came in the middle of the night to take people to the airport—children screaming, people hiding from the police. Questioned more closely, nobody had actually seen those things happen, but the stories lingered on as a theme of conversation, emphasizing their own precarious state. For a narrative to be a “liberating experience” (see Sheldrake 2001:18) there must be some bond between the teller and the listener. There is a bond between them of anxiety and loss, it is true, but acting on their own, far from the conventions of storytelling they were used to, they may not know how to start, and when they feel that a genuine interest is lacking they quickly give it up. At night Ada stays in her room at the absorption center, although she does not sleep. The house is then the boys’ territory. “They run about in the corridors, scream and bang the walls. It’s terrible.” What they are doing, perhaps, is telling their story in the only medium they have available at the time, their voices and their fists.

Parkin discusses the importance of mementos as transitional objects in people’s experience of displacement and says there is “very little data on what people take and what they have, within the often limited time for making such decisions and consultations and sometimes in the context of unspeakable violence” (Parkin 1999:305). The young man I mentioned above had taken nothing with him at all; he was surprised about how anybody could even ask about identity papers in such a situation of crisis, and the same is the case with other young refugees with whom I spoke. When they come to the asylum seekers’ home in Norway, the State equips them fully. They receive a parcel containing everything they need: clothes, toilet things, towels, sheets—even pots and pans, cups and plates. They keep these until their papers have been processed, and they are either sent to a place where they can live, study, or work, or alternatively are sent back to their own country or the country to which they first came in Europe, which, according to the Schengen agreement, is the country that should carry the responsibility for them. Ada relates how overwhelmed she was by getting so many things and how good it was to be able to take the same things with her when she was transferred to another camp. At the very beginning of her flight, she took a little picture of her mother with her. This was left behind long ago when she had to continue her flight from the place she had thought was relatively safe. When she arrived in Norway she had nothing, and even her
“private mementos of mind” (cf. Parkin 1999:308), her memories, were mixed up and confused.

With the help and generosity of Ada, I shall present part of a story of an asylum seeker, her story, both “before” and “after” the problem arose, and the story of the problem too. But of the flight itself, a horrendous run across continents, she can only retrieve bits and pieces from memory, and even what she can remember she cannot easily put into words. The story I tell in this article will alternately develop, reveal, and conceal Ada’s experience as it unfolded during the first months after her arrival in Norway when we met and during the months we waited for her papers to be processed. Suddenly a beam of light might come to Ada in a forgotten item of memory, an impression lingering on after a bad dream, a forgotten fact reappearing unexpectedly and causing reflections as if she were looking from a distance upon somebody else’s life, as if she were a witness to what had happened to her, rather than being the actor: “That is X-land! Those people are crazy.” “My uncle is crazy, we never respected him.” “I never trusted him. I never trusted anybody, only my sister.” The form of the narrative I am presenting here will to a certain degree reflect the fluctuating quality and painstaking retrieval of memory—the repetitions, the ever-returning doubt and anxiety.

She says she would like to tell everything that has happened to her and that she wants to be honest with me. But when she tries, she gets stuck in some detail while the sequence is lost. She has, as I have mentioned, no mementos to support and evoke the stories of the past, maybe only her own reflection in the mirror. She looks thoughtfully at her own image: “We looked alike, my sister and I. But she had a different character, she was softer, I was always fighting. Even my uncle was scared of me, that’s why he hit me so much.” There are shops in the city selling African food. Ada goes there frequently to look around, buy cream for her hair, skin ointments, and—not to be forgotten—okra, the rather sticky vegetable that seems to invite a lot of good memories of walks to the gardens outside the village, of preparing meals, eating, laughing, in those days when things seemed uncomplicated, when she was still not “thinking,” as she later said to me. “I just did what I had to do and in the evening I went to bed. I never thought about the past like I do now, or what’s going to come later. Now, I think all the time.”

Time and again she has wondered how it is she keeps thinking all the time. “Before” was not like this. According to her own rumination, “thinking” started only “after” she came to Norway and she became aware of her situation. I shall come back to this later.

The Arrival

Early one morning in November, Ada awoke to the noises of the boat slamming into the quay, heavy shutters opening, and human voices, apparently calling out to each other. There were no familiar sounds. She had got used to not hearing any words she could understand. She struggled out from her hiding place behind a container in the hull of the ship and pulled her clothes straight. Then she made for the exit, quickly walking across the bridge in between two trucks driving ashore. In her jeans and sweater and short cropped hair, she could have been taken for a helping hand on board. She had a dark complexion, but then so many have that now, even in Norway. It was cold. She felt bewildered. Where was this? There was a street and some little wooden houses of different colors along the street, and patches in the gardens were white. Was this what she had heard talked about as “snow”? Somebody had told her, she did not know where, that
there was a country far “north” where one could perhaps be allowed to stay. The man had said it was very cold there. He had talked about “snow.” Was this the place? Was this “north”? She looked around. She felt the cold through her thin clothes and the pain of hunger in her stomach.

There came by an elderly woman walking with a shopping bag. Quickly, Ada went up to the woman and said, “Please can you take me home with you? I’m so hungry.”

The woman looked surprised, but not unkind. She said, “I can’t give you the help you need. I’ll take you to the police station.”

Hearing “police” the young girl started to cry and said, “Please, I’m scared of the police. Help me!”

The woman said, “The police in this country aren’t evil. They’ll help you. They know what to do. Don’t be scared.”

So they went to the police station. There for the first time she heard herself defined as “underage.” What was that? She could not understand. She was 17. What age was she “under”? The police asked her all sorts of questions, and then took her in a car and they drove off. Less than an hour later she was in a big house with many rooms, with many young people. She saw black boys who must be Africans. She met two other young girls, both of them from places she had never heard of before, but they had arrived in similar ways as herself—suddenly, after stops in countries whose names were unknown to them. She had arrived, but soon it would become clear that this was only the beginning of yet another situation, not as life threatening as it had been so far, but difficult in unforeseen ways. This place was an asylum seekers’ center for young refugees, about whom the authorities still had to make a decision. She learned yet another definition of herself: “asylum seeker.” She had never realized that she was one. She had just fled blindly from situations that were intolerable, hoping to find a place where she could be safe. She was now an “underage asylum seeker.” She was in a country where they considered people under 18 to be “minors.” When the civil servant from the Department of Foreign Affairs explained this to the young asylum seekers in an information session, many of them laughed and all of them were puzzled. They found the “underage” and “minor” thing a constant source of merriment and used it as a joke between themselves. “Remember you are ‘underage.’ “This is only for minors,” and so on. So far in her life, Ada had learned one important lesson: One is never “under” any age when it comes to suffering.

The Encounter

Lamb says that her interlocutor, the widow Kayera Bou, sought her out, sought the anthropologist—something that, she says, “has often occurred in other relationships between an anthropologist and the subject of a life story narrative” (Lamb 2001:17). In the relationship between Ada and me we sought each other out, but for different reasons. It was a significant encounter for both of us. It was not as an anthropologist that I sought her, but her story and personality later captured my interests as an anthropologist and I have found her story important to tell in order to cast light on similar life histories. They are around us everywhere. Young people like her are next to us in the queue at the supermarket, next to us in the cinema, sitting on a bench at a railway station when we pass them to catch a train. They have been waiting, some for years, to get their “papers.” We usually do not get to know them and, as private persons with busy lives, we make little effort to do so. I had seen them for many years, seen the loneliness and sometimes despair in their body language, but I had had neither time nor opportunity to meet any of them.
Mid-December 2002: I decided to go and pay a visit to an asylum seekers’ home just outside one of the cities of Norway. I knew it was a so-called receiving center for minor refugees. The inhabitants talk about it as “camp” or “mottak.”

They would have to stay there until their situation had been considered, and they had been taken for an elaborate interview at the Department of Foreign Affairs (in Norwegian: “Utlendingsdirektoratet,” always mentioned in the abbreviated form, UDI), where they would be registered and their legitimate status as asylum seekers would be looked into on the basis of how trustworthy their life story seemed. It is an interview that is feared by the asylum seekers, not because the interviewers are rough in any way, but because it is known that somehow the “truth” will come out, and they must be able to give an account in this foreign environment that is considered to be “true.” How—in this orderly state—will they be believed when they explain what made them run, how hard it all was? Ada said, after a few weeks in Norway, “People here all talk about Iraq and the Middle East. It’s war there. They say there’s no war in X, so why are so many of us here? They’ll never believe me!” When the asylum seekers tell each other about what happens at the interviews, the UDI looms large, the institution becomes a threatening and relentless personality that nobody has yet met and whom they dread. When they have been to the interview and “met” the UDI personally, they emphasize to the others—those who are still waiting—the point of telling the “truth.” The officials are able to “see through” them. The fingerprints that are taken on arrival play an important part in their stories. “Remember your fingerprints go everywhere on the computer, it’s no use lying. They’ll find out.” “Fingerprints never lie.”

For a long time I wanted to invite a few asylum seekers for Christmas dinner. For a long while I had thought about approaching some of them, particularly the unaccompanied minors, who, judging from newspaper reports, seemed to be arriving in the country in increasing numbers every month. For a long time too, the worst time of the year for me was Christmas. I share this with many people, I know. This is the time when underlying family conflicts surface and make themselves particularly painful. I thought, why should I dwell on these frustrating relationships for yet another Christmas, when there must obviously be people who need somebody’s care? So, I suddenly found myself in a house where the noise was sky-high and numerous young men shouted and talked at the top of their voices. It was cold outside, minus 20 degrees Celsius. The few people I saw outside were shivering in their brand new practical clothes (provided by the UDI). I saw no girls. Finally I met a young man in an office and made my request. He was friendly and said that the center would have no objections to my invitation as they had little to offer for Christmas anyway. He did ask me to consider the girls first of all, as there were only three girls there at the moment and 60 young men, and he was afraid the girls felt a little isolated. He went with me to a room, where he introduced me to a young boy and three young girls. One of them was Ada. My effort to pay attention to somebody outside the conflict zone of demanding relatives brought another person into my life who for a long time now has made many other problems fall away as insignificant.

“We didn’t understand what you came to do,” Ada said some time afterward. “We thought you were from some office. We thought you came to find out something about us. We liked the invitation, though. At that time everything was still new to us. We didn’t even know we were asylum seekers. I’d heard the word “asylum” at school, but didn’t quite remember what it was about. We thought we’d be able to find a job and stay somewhere. We were all like that—never thought that we could be deported, that we had to apply for stay permits.
Only later we discovered it was so hard and that there were so many of us. We heard about the UDI—about the interview. Then we got worried. When we met you we weren’t so worried. We thought everything would work out all right. That is why we could smile and joke. Later we started to worry.”

During our little Christmas party Ada was lively and entertaining. She told about her flight in a casual, easy manner. It sounded like a fantasy tale, and we did not really grasp what it was all about. She said she had lost her sister during circumcision, but even this she said in a tone of voice as if it was not quite real. She laughed when she talked about her country: “crazy” X. Later I found out that Ada would often laugh when she told or thought about something that was incomprehensible. The line between laughter and tears was very thin, but this evening there was only laughter. We did not press for more information and we did not know what to believe. There was a striking difference between Ada and the other girl who had responded to our invitation (the third girl had in the meantime been sent to another camp). The second girl was a pale and silent 16 year old from Somalia. She said nothing about her background and listened like us to her friend’s story.

We invited them both to come again, but they did not. I suddenly realized that they might not have money to come as the camp was at a distance of 40 kilometers by train. So I called again, and this time there was a note of despair in Ada’s voice. They had been informed about the “big interview” that would take place with the UDI, immediately after New Year. It was serious, they understood. People could be deported. They must tell the truth. They were entitled to a guardian during the interview. Could I be that guardian? I said, “Yes.” A relationship of commitment between us had now been established and she would have to tell me, if not the whole story, at least part of it. Like the widow in Lamb’s account who wanted to tell her about the suffering of widows, Ada needed to tell somebody about the suffering of being an orphan and a refugee (cf. Lamb 2001:17). It was a different Ada who turned up that afternoon. She still had her elaborate Afro-style wig on, but her face had nothing of the smiling carelessness it had shown on Christmas Eve. This was a girl who would need to continue to fight for her existence a bit longer and who had discovered that her story was just one of many similar ones, and that she had to “compete” with the others for a legitimate place in this country. Yet she was not prepared to tell any lies. She had already heard many accounts in the camp about people who had told lies and were always found out. The moral of these narratives seemed to be: “Tell the truth or you will be deported.”

The interview that Ada was waiting for at the time and which all refugees go through after their arrival in Norway is considered a crucial event on the road to a legitimate identity. As I have indicated already, the interview is conducted by officials at the Department of Foreign Affairs (UDI). It is decisive in establishing the asylum seekers’ “true” age and identity and reasons for fleeing his or her country. For minors, like Ada was at the time of the interview, the procedure should ideally not take any more than six months, though it is not easy to guarantee this because minors are arriving in great numbers every day. The minor has a right to a guardian during the interview, to see that the child is not getting exhausted. The guardian is appointed by the UDI, and if the minor already knows a person he or she trusts it can be arranged for this person to be made the guardian on the minor’s request, as it happened in Ada’s case. The minor seeking asylum also has the right to a lawyer to appeal the case should the request for a stay permit be rejected. I will point out that although part of the life story here is also represented in the report of the interview, my presentation here, particularly when Ada herself
is talking, is based primarily on the numerous talks we have had at meals, at bedtime, and in many other casual situations where her past experience flows over and needs to be told. Ada talks openly with whomever shows an interest in her experiences, and in the beginning she felt a great need to talk. However, the whole story still remains to be told, if it needs to be told. It happens sometimes that she goes to her room and does not want to communicate with anybody. Those hours, she says, are very sad and very “dark.” She feels she is alone, that she will be sent back, that she cannot trust anybody. Then she is also plagued by guilt toward the people who have been kind to her, and guilt toward me because she fears she may not trust me. We have agreed that we need to talk about this from time to time and accept that her trust in me as well as in other persons needs to come slowly and without worry or guilt.

The Flight

As we were cooking dinner the night before the interview, she told me how “everything” started about a year ago. This was not the entertaining version we heard on Christmas Eve. “Everything started in January 2002. I came here in November 2002. So much has happened in those months, terrible things, but I am still alive.” It began with her sister being married off to an elderly man, who was himself already married. A group of village women demanded that her sister be circumcised, and they performed it. “These are elderly women. It’s a kind of organization. One can just call upon them to come and do it, and they come. Some live in the village. Those who did it to my sister came from outside.”

Three days later her sister started to bleed and then she died. “I don’t remember how it all happened. Suddenly she was dead. But she said before she died, ‘Don’t let them do this to you! Don’t let them kill you!’ I told my uncle: ‘You killed my sister.’ I told him this in front of other people. He was furious. If he ever finds me he’ll kill me.”

She thought she might have had a kind of breakdown after the death of her sister. She knows she was in a hospital for about a week. Then she came home to her uncle and aunt. Nobody spoke with her, nobody showed her any sympathy or affection. She was alone with her grief. She thought she was about to go mad. It must have been two weeks or less after her sister died that the following happened. She was in bed in the evening when the man to whom her sister had been married came along to see her uncle. “He came with another man, a lawyer or something. They said that my uncle should give the money back that the man had paid for my sister. My uncle said he had already spent it. The man said he could take the other girl as compensation. So my uncle signed the paper.”

Ada was scared. She remembered what her sister had said. The same night she crept out of bed and went to the cupboard where she knew her uncle kept his money. She took all the money that was there and quietly left the house. For a long time her uncle and aunt had been bad to her and her sister. They wanted to get rid of the two girls in whatever way possible. The uncle had said many times that they were a burden to him and that they ought to be grateful he had them in his house at all. She traveled by pickup taxi the rest of the night and finally arrived at the place where she heard her mother had lived as a young girl. With a little picture of her mother, the only one she had, she went around in the streets of the small town, asking people if they had known her mother. She met a woman, who said, “Yes, I knew your mother a long time ago. I hear she’s dead now. You can come and stay with me till you find other relatives.” So she went and stayed with the woman, who had a husband and some little children.
The woman had a business of some kind. She traveled around, buying and selling things. Ada stayed in the household and looked after the children. One day the family received a message that the woman had died in an accident. The husband was beside himself with grief. Ada was left to look after the children. One day they went to a place where the widower had a farm. They were going to pick up something. The children were playing, and Ada grew thirsty. She went to the nearby river (lake) and drank from it. The villagers became angry. They said she had committed an offence by drinking from the river (lake). It was a shrine, they said, and she would have to be sacrificed to the gods. They tied her to a tree and said they would come back for her the next morning. The man who had lost his wife was scared. He could do nothing. He left and she never saw him or the children again. It became dark, and she was terrified. She screamed and screamed. The place they had left her was called the Dark Forest. Suddenly a man came, carrying a gun. He said he was a hunter of big game. She told him what had happened and he untied the ropes. He said she could come with him, so she traveled with him to the city of B. It took many hours. First they walked through a little desert; later they took a bus to a big city. She remembers the color of the bus. It was white. For the rest she does not remember much of the long journey. In the city of B she stayed with the hunter and his wife and their two small boys. They were Muslims, and though she was not a Muslim, they were nice to her, but all the months she was with them she never went to church. She stayed inside the house and wept a lot. She helped with the household activities. “I don’t remember much. I stayed inside. I wept. I thought of my sister. Sometimes I saw her face in front of me. I thought about her all the time.”

The Truth

The day after we had the long talk in the kitchen, early in the morning, we went for the official interview. It lasted for most of the day, with small breaks in order for Ada to recover from the dark memories that now came washing over her and made her shiver and cry. But her voice remained firm throughout, concerning the exact data she could remember.

She said to me before we went inside: “I don’t want to say anything that isn’t true. Yesterday I thought I shouldn’t mention I’d been to Denmark and Spain, but I think I’d better do it. They took my fingerprints in Denmark. They’ll find out.” Ada did not wear a wig that day. Her fairly straight, short hair made her look older. Her face was haggard with lack of sleep and from her worries. From time to time during the interview she would pull at her hair and bury her head in her hands. When the interview came too close to the most painful things she cried, and when we had our little breaks she would walk to and fro silently and stand by the window in the little waiting room, looking out. In the streets young people were walking, laughing, carrying a coke or a schoolbag.

The questions were all asked in Norwegian and translated by an English-speaking interpreter. This seemed strange since we all understood English. However, it is the rule, since the interview follows a standard procedure that is meant to be the same for everybody, whatever their mother tongue is, or whatever other languages they speak.

“What was the name of the man your sister was married off to?”
“Leon.”
“What was the color of the first bus you traveled in?”
“It was white.”
“What was the name of the man who saved you from being sacrificed?”
“Mika.”
“What was the name of his wife?”
“Ana.”
“What was the name of the lake you drank from?”
“They called it the Big Lake.”

And so the interview went on in order to establish the truth content of the narrative. Not once did Ada hesitate to give the exact information. When the long flight across Europe started, however, it all became blurred. Day and night fused, and so did countries and continents. She lost her points of orientation from the moment she left the city of B. She struggled to understand how she had managed to get from there to Copenhagen, then again from Spain to Norway. They were not even places on her mental map. She had never heard of them before. Later when I showed her an atlas she was surprised how far she had traveled. What was the route between the places? She still could not find the answer. Talking again and again of the events leading up to the flight and what happened on Ada’s arrival in Norway, she and I gradually accepted a blank space, a no man’s land, a vast non-place (Augé 1995) that is not only anonymous, but simply without characteristics. Cities were all the same, railway stations were all the same, boats were of different kinds, but in none of them did she travel as a regular passenger. They were different only in their possibilities for hiding places. Whereas for a traveler a railway station can be boring, yet comforting in the sense that it is a stage of arriving somewhere, for a refugee the station is a very insecure kind of space. There are other people there in the same capacity, trying to find a place to hide, but can they be trusted? Probably not. Ada lost the little she had of belongings and money at the railway station in Madrid when she dropped off to sleep for a few hours. People meet by accident, disappear again like in a fog, never to be seen again, even their names unknown or forgotten. “If only I could remember the family name of the hunter’s wife. She was kind to me. Maybe she’s in a refugee camp somewhere. Maybe somebody could help me find her.” “Who was the man who took me away? Who was the man who gave me this identity card? I don’t know”… “He just came and said I had to travel on alone. He took her somewhere else, with her little boy.” As it appeared later, the card was a false one, belonging to a black girl with Spanish citizenship. Ada had never seen either an ID card or a passport before and had no idea that one needed these documents to get into a country. She did not know about the importance of borders.

Traveling as refugees do, on the floor of cars, under containers in ships, hidden somewhere in a train, the sense of time and space is soon lost, and with this loss, memory becomes confused. There is nothing left to attach remembrance to anymore. We know from literature how important a sense of place is for memory. What Augé (1995) describes is the fragmentation of attention that the modern person experiences in the places that are outside of social interaction, like hotels, airports, supermarkets—in short, places where we are only in transit. But the persons Augé talks about are coming from somewhere and going somewhere. The supermarket or the airport is a brief stop in an otherwise ordered life with homes and schools and companies and universities. For refugees the places they pass through constitute a trajectory not only through nonplaces, but through no man’s land and spaces where no routines can be established. Ada traveled through continents and countries without knowing the names of any of them. Day and night were the same and the conception of time faded away. Her experience was one of anxiety and confusion, but she attaches her memory to little substories like this one: “We were at the bottom of this car. There were
many people in the car, but only the other woman, her son, and I were hidden. The driver of the car threw a blanket over us to cover us up. We could only get out for a few minutes after dark."

"Where was it?" I asked.

"I don't know. The trip took a long time, maybe two weeks. We only once got out of the car in daylight. The driver said for us to cover our faces as if we were Muslim women. So we understood that this must be a Muslim country. Some time later we got on this boat."

"Were the woman and the little boy still with you?"

"Yes, we hid under some containers. We didn't see any people. There weren't any passengers. It wasn't that kind of boat. I don't know what kind of boat it was."

The Fear of Schengen

For many weeks after the interview, from time to time Ada would come back to the details that had been written down by the interviewers. On the whole she was satisfied with what she had said, but certain themes had not been made clear enough. When they asked about her health she had forgotten to say that she had bad stomachaches and that she sometimes did not know what she was doing or where she was. Later the psychologist explained to us that these were among many other posttraumatic symptoms. "Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know where I am. It makes me scared. Am I mad?" Another problem, of a lesser degree of seriousness, has to do with concepts. One day we were traveling by train and passing a frozen lake. I pointed it out to her. "Look at the lake, just one big plane surface."

She looked. "Is this a lake?" She looked upset and I soon understood why. She told me, "I said in the interview that I drank from a lake, but I made a mistake. It didn't look like this. It was running, it wasn't wide like this."

"Was it a river?" I asked.

"Yes, but I couldn't remember that word. We call everything with the same word in my language. It's a word which means anything with water. We must send a letter to the UDI as soon as we get home." We did so, and she added that she was scared of Denmark and asked if she could please stay in this country, because she felt safe here.

The interview made many things explicit, and it gave her a certain pride that she had been able to answer most of the questions. One of the interviewers had told her, "I'm not the one to decide on your case, but I do believe your story." Ada would repeat this to herself and to me from time to time. "You see, I told the truth. She believed me. It makes me feel good."

Having found acceptance for her narrative, not only from me, but from the interviewer at the UDI, she gained mental energy. As she managed to put more of the bits and pieces together and look at them in a detached light—most often when together with me—she obtained a temporary sense of wholeness. The abyss became less frightening. Part of her story had never been lived in the sense of consisting of conscious acts; it had simply been suffered through. She had hung on to life for nearly a year; she did not live it in the true sense of the word. Now, by telling and retelling she managed to make a bridge between her former life in X and her life as a refugee in Norway, but the year that passed in between could only be retrieved in bits and pieces—"If only I knew how to start, how to find the words," she repeats. I try to reassure her that maybe we can let the gaps be there without being frightened of them. Maybe the untold parts are not important in order for her to feel happy, anyway.
We went to a crisis psychologist the other day. During the long session of trying to cast light on the dark areas in her memory, he advised her not to be scared, but to trust that by confronting the difficult periods, she would regain her memory, her sleep, and her stability. He assured her that she was not “mad”—a word she herself had been using many times to describe her anxiety. “Am I mad?” she would ask when suddenly she did not even remember what to do with the book she had in her hand or the food she was about to prepare. When we were out on the street again after visiting the psychologist, she said decisively, “I do not want to go back there again. If I get a stay permit in this country and can be safe, then I shall be able to sleep again.”

Ada has told what she can remember of the many things from her life before the flight, but from different angles and from different perspectives. The narrative is set in X and there are a lot of gruesome as well as funny details. She tells how her uncle took her to a place where criminals were hanged and people could come and see it. It was horrible, yet it seemed a normal thing at the time. Now she often thinks about it as something that must be bad for children. She showed me the marks she had all over her body, partly from “treatment” by a medicine man when she had stomachaches, partly from beatings by her uncle and aunt. She also remembers funny situations from school and from going to the market to help her aunt sell vegetables. She and her sister were always together. She felt strong then. The quality of the narrative would move between agony—her cruel uncle and aunt, her sister’s death, the fear when she was captured by the villagers—and fond memories of walking to the little, bustling town on the way to school, being always with her sister, laughing together about their “crazy” neighbors, feeling strong, never thinking about the future. The tone of the arrival at the end of her journey is one of relief and wonder and, later, anxiety. How surprised she was to find out that she was in a country where she was considered “underage,” how well all the refugees were received by the Norwegian government, all the things they got: clothes, plates, cups. If only she could stay here. Then anxiety takes over: “What if I can’t stay, where will they send me?”

The story of the flight itself, which had lasted ten months, is one of terror and big blank spaces of oblivion, or events she cannot find the words to portray. There are times and places she cannot account for at all; she just shakes her head and says she cannot remember. It is “gone.” Time and again we try together to retrieve the memory of the long journey, but there are so few places and names to tie the experience to that we always end up with just a few turning points in the trajectory. We go through them systematically: it was the lake/river where she drank some water and was accused of sacrilege. The villagers tied her to a tree and threatened to sacrifice her to the angry God the next day. Later it was the city of B. She saw nothing of the city, just sat inside and wept. The couple was kind to her. They had two young boys. Then something dreadful happened there (later she found out that a civil war had started while she was there). The man and one of the boys were killed by a group of men breaking into the house. The woman called out, “Come, we run.” Then they were on the floor of a car for a long time. It was Denmark at some stage. Was it Copenhagen? She does not know. Then it was the railway station in Madrid, and then finally the small place on the coast of Norway where she asked the woman for shelter and food, and then the place where she is now. When I gave her an atlas to look at, she spent hours every night peering closely at the maps and asking me questions about countries and distances. Was Denmark so close to Norway? She now understood why it had taken her so long to get to Norway: she had started from Madrid! What happened then? There was this man who traveled with her on a train; later they parted. She did not know where he went, but he had been kind. She got on to a boat.
Must we start again from somewhere along the route—the city of B? Yes, she fled from that city with the widow and the son of the man who had once rescued her when the villagers wanted to kill her. The man had just been murdered. The three of them traveled together for a while, at the bottom of a car, maybe for several weeks. Suddenly they had to part. A man came and took the woman and the little boy away. He said to Ada, “You have to travel alone now, here is a paper that will help you to get into any European country.” She took the paper. They were at a railway station. It must have been in Europe somewhere. The paper was false, she later came to realize, but she had never seen such a paper before, anyway. She had not even seen her own birth certificate. Her uncle had told her when she was born and under what name she was registered; this was all she knew. She traveled on boats and trains and in cars; sometimes she paid, sometimes people let her come with them. By this time the widow had gone, and she was traveling alone. After a long time she arrived in a city with many white people, but also many black faces. A woman came up to her and asked her if she was from X. The woman said she could come and stay with her. She cannot remember what they talked about or how many days she stayed with this woman. She rested there. One day, the first day maybe—she is not sure—the woman said, “Shall we go and have a cup of coffee in a café? We can’t stay indoors all the time.” They sat down in the café. She cannot remember what they ate or drank.

Suddenly somebody came up behind her and asked if she had identity papers. “How did you come to Denmark?” said the person. He was a policeman.

“Denmark,” she thought, “Is that a town or a country?” She pulled out the paper she had been given by the man who took the woman and little boy away with him at that railway station a long time ago.

“So you’re Spanish?” the policeman asked, looking at the paper.

She said “Yes.”

Where was Spain? She had no idea, but she kept affirming it: “Yes, I am Spanish.”

“Then we have to send you back there,” the policeman said. They brought her somewhere where they took her fingerprints. After that they took her to a house, gave her a room, and she stayed there for several days. Was it a hotel? She does not know as she had never been to a hotel before, but it was nice and clean, though the room was small. Was it a prison? She does not know. The door was locked. Every time they left after asking her questions, they locked the door. There was a person there who looked after the place, a guardian or something. She asked him for paper and a pen so she could try and write down what had happened to her. He gave it to her, but said it was useless to do so as nobody would read it anyway. She wrote a lot on that paper, about why she left, about her sister who died, about all her suffering on the trip. She felt a certain relief from writing it all down. She wrote and wrote for many hours, but when she had finished the guardian said he could not give it to anybody to read. So she tore the paper and just cried and cried. She felt as if she had lost everything. When the police came to take her away again she said she did not want to go anywhere. She threw herself on the floor and said she did not want to leave. They put handcuffs on her and carried her to the car. There were three police officers, one of them a woman. They took the handcuffs off when they walked with her into the plane. All three of them went with her to Spain and they tried to talk nicely with her in the plane so nobody would understand what it was about. In Madrid (a place she had never heard of) they left her at the airport, and the Spanish officials turned a blind eye to her presence. Later, other refugees she met at the railway station told her that the Spanish did not care.
They let anybody into the country, but did not give them any help either. If they died, they died. People sleeping in the railway station talked about it like this: “Spain,” they said, “is in one way an easy country, in another way difficult.” She soon experienced that herself. Soon after she left the airport, where nobody tried to stop her or ask for any papers, she found her way to the railway station in the city. There, a lot of other people in a similar situation were camping. That was where she was told about how it was in Spain. She found a bench to lie on, but did not dare to sleep. Finally, after several days (she believes, but days and nights are one continuous blur) she fell asleep and when she woke up all her belongings were gone. After this the story becomes very confused. She can remember that she went about in the street and asked for money. She does not know how she traveled onward, but a man came and said he knew of a country they could go to. They traveled together for some time. He was nice. He was from Turkey, but she does not know where he was going.

“Did he want anything from you?” I asked.

“No, I think he was just nice. He said he had been through things himself, that he had been a refugee. He wanted to help.” He did not come to Norway, but he must have helped her somewhere to get on to the boat. She does not know. Suddenly he was gone and she was alone again.

When Ada talks about this part of her flight she seems to be more concerned with Denmark than with anything else that happened: “Oh, my God, Denmark. I will never go there. If they send me there I will die!” Until she looked in the atlas she thought that Denmark was about as far from Norway as America. Was it so close? If they had not taken her fingerprints there she would never have said she had ever been in the place. A long time after her deportation from Denmark she arrived again in a northern country, this time in Norway, after crossing the European continent once more. Her lament is: “I only wanted to feel safe. My God, if they send me away from Norway, it will be to Denmark, and they will send me to X or to Spain. They are evil people. What shall I do?” For a long time after we met, every conversation would end up with her anxiety about being sent back to Denmark.

This became worse when she turned 18 and was sent to an asylum for adults. There the theme every day seemed to be the “Schengen agreement,” which apparently says that the first country a refugee arrives in is the country that must take the responsibility. Ada says, “We all talk about ‘Schengen agreement.’ What is Schengen? Who is Schengen? We don’t know. The only thing we know is that it’s about sending us somewhere else—that nobody wants to keep us. We know Schengen is bad for us refugees.”

In the beginning, she said she needed to talk in order to “ease her mind.” Each time she talked for a while, she said she felt a little bit more relieved. Gradually I think I can understand a little of her experience. Sometimes she will cry, sometimes she just laughs in disbelief. “Those people in X, they’re crazy. Circumcision is forbidden by law, but they all, government and everywhere, force their daughters to have it done. They’re mad. My uncle’s mad too. He didn’t have it done on his own daughters, but to my sister. I told him, ‘You killed my sister. I shall tell the truth about you.’ ”

At other times, remembering Ada’s other examples of “craziness,” I myself get upset, while she calmly resumes her activity after yet another disclosure. She pulls her dress up and reveals scars upon scars. “This is from the time my uncle nearly killed me.” She quietly covers herself again. “He said my sister and I would never find anybody else to look after us. We ought to be grateful to him. I wish I could show him that people can love me. He should see me now!”
The scars on her body will never disappear. “Look at these scars. I can never wear a skirt, look what they did to me, but I don’t care as long as I can stay here and get an education. I can wear trousers.” According to her the sadness in her heart will also remain. We talk a lot about how one can live on with great sadness, how things can still continue, how one can work and have children and yet know that the sadness is there, close by. We agree that at times one may be happy and relaxed, but the sadness can easily surface again. When she talks about the death of her sister the sadness is at the forefront, and this will always remain. “I know I can never forget her, sometimes she is so close, I can see her face.” Her sister had begged her to make sure their own name would remain, and that Ada ought not let the bad thing happen to her as was done by the village women. Ada has kept her promise, but she can never be completely happy having lost her sister. She wants to live and be happy, be with people who love her, but sometimes she sees the face of her sister and she feels this sadness again. “It is as if she is sitting close to me, just as if she is alive. I can never, never forget her.”

**Thinking**

I have shown how certain themes come back again and again in Ada’s story: the events leading up to the flight, the meanness and cruelty of her uncle, the stupidity in X (women and young girls are circumcised all the time, people die, people are killed), and the flight, but only as far as the city of B. After that there are only two points with a name: Denmark and Spain. Ada’s memory moves back and forth between these two poles, but what happened in between is gone; only the man who helped her is mentioned from time to time, and so is the widow who was suddenly brought in another direction and whose name she does not know, and the arrival in Norway, being defined as an asylum seeker and as under age. Then her story takes a reflexive mode. She describes how strange it was that she should meet me and be part of a family in this strange country and how much she has learned these last months, and says she will never go back to X if she can help it—that she has nobody there who loves her, that she would only roam about the streets, and that nobody would care. The conversation now turns to her anxiety over waiting for her papers. Will she ever get permission or will she be sent back? Should not we write another letter to the UDI to beg them not to send her back to Denmark or Spain? Once at the camp, a whole family was sent back to France, though they had only been in France for a few hours and they were in Norway a whole year. They had screamed. The police came at night; all the refugees woke up. At this point the conversation inevitably swings back to Denmark, and it can only be temporarily banished by talking about the expected happiness if permission to stay is granted. If it is, then we would have to think seriously about her education. How might we systematically work at filling the gaps in her education? She wants to become a nurse. At this point Ada would talk about education in X and how the schools were sometimes closed for weeks or months on end because the teachers had not received their pay. She used to enjoy reading and learning, and was at the top of her class. But one day her uncle decided he did not want to spend any more money on her education. She was then in the middle of form three. “I was an orphan, nobody cared. Some neighbors said they could help us to get to the capital, to stay with people they knew there, and maybe get an education or some work. They knew our uncle was violent. But my sister and I used to tell each other, ‘How can we expect strangers to love us when not even our own uncle does.’ So we just stayed on.”
We often talk about X and about village life there: “Sometimes I miss it so much—the fruits, the garden, the people everywhere, the smells. My sister and I were always together. Nothing seemed difficult when we were together. I did not think before. It is only after I came here that I started to think.” I found this an interesting comment and wanted her to explain further. “Before, I used to get up, go to school, go to the market to help our aunt, go home, cook, and do my homework. My sister and I were always together. Sometimes we were beaten. We never got enough food, but I did not think about the future the way I do now. I did not think about anything, I just did things, and in the evening I slept. Now I stay awake and think about what has happened, about the future, and I worry. It was not like this before.”

I believe what Ada is trying to make clear is her discovery of reflection, which came about as a result of her life being ripped apart when her sister died. Everything was bearable until then. Everything was just the way it was. There was no question about other alternatives of living. Before that time the suffering had been unquestioned. Through her experiences of the last year and a half, Ada’s life has changed from being undifferentiated to being a daily act of attention (Schutz 1980:51). The thoughts keep tormenting her and forcing her to scrutinize one event after the other. What was self-evident before gains new meaning and wonder. She muses, “How come my sister and I never decided to leave together?” They had taken it for granted that they would always be together, yet look how abruptly it all changed. She had never thought that life could be different, that she would ever live somewhere outside X. She had never thought about whether she was happy or unhappy. Now she thinks of nothing else. Will she ever feel safe? Will she get her permit to stay? Will she get an education? Will she be happy? Will she ever trust people? Can she trust me, when she comes to think of it? Is she mad when she forgets where she is, when she rips a banknote to pieces because she has forgotten that she has one in her hands, when she wakes up thinking that somebody is after her with a knife? “Sometimes I’ll laugh and talk, but in my heart I think of my sister and about all those horrible things that happened. I wish I didn’t think about these things. How can I forget? How can I stop thinking?”

Just as I was finishing this account, with Ada spending many days on the couch feeling “sick” and not able to stop thinking, we received a message from the UDI that she had been granted a stay permit. As of this moment, she has been admitted to a class for immigrant youths in which she will learn the language and the history of her new country.

Notes

1. Later I learned from Ada that railway stations are popular among refugees for the following reasons: it is always warm there, in the crowd one is not noticed or stared at, one can look around in shops and bookstores without having to use any money, and consequently there is a chance of meeting others who are spending their day in the same way.

2. This is a concept that was coined for this purpose and did not exist before refugees started to arrive in Norway. It comes from the verb motta which means to receive.

3. I am grateful to Nigel Rapport’s reading of the draft of this article. Among other useful comments, he made me aware of the similarity between Ada’s story and Primo Levi’s description of his “year outside the law” in Auschwitz.

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