

## A Different Perspective



Rome, 15th June 2018

The more time I spend working with Mediterranean Hope, the wider my eyes are opened to how very different the lives of people on this planet can be.

Sara<sup>1</sup>, one of the Syrian women participating in our humanitarian corridor project, meets me once a week for English conversation. Although proficient in English when she lived and worked as a teacher in Syria, since arriving in Italy with her husband and two small children, the focus of this Arabic-speaking family has obviously been on learning Italian. In that context, her English has become rusty and she is determined to recover the fluency she once had, since this might make her more attractive to potential employers.

Sara, like all of those participating in the project, is actively seeking employment. This is not simply to help the family to become financially autonomous but, from her perspective, something of a psychological necessity. Four years of living as a refugee have taken their toll. The family have witnessed horror and death. Equally as challenging, however, has been the loss of their homes, jobs, structure and autonomy. Sara is highly qualified but would gladly work in a factory, not only to improve the family's financial position but primarily to recover something of the sense of purpose and stability that she has lost.

During our English conversation sessions, we've been working on interview practice. As we've considered standard questions which interviewers might ask, it's become clear that Sara's self-esteem has been shattered. It's also evident that Sara has difficulty in calling to mind parts of her old life, which can make it hard for her to give the kind of examples which often form the basis of a response to these standard questions. The effects of trauma run deep.

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<sup>1</sup> Not her real name

As we worked through the Guardian’s “top ten interview questions”<sup>2</sup> we came to “Describe a time when something went wrong and how you dealt with it.” The example Sara gave was simple but shocking. She described teaching a class of infants in Aleppo when bombs fell for the first time. She spoke of the distress of the children, as well as her own rising sense of panic. She talked about how she had to master her own fear in order to reassure the children, how, in order to quell their panic, she told them that this was simply a drill and calmly got them out of the classroom to a place which the teachers had designated to be safe. Indeed, the children were so persuaded by her calm approach that they did not hurry - a different problem to be tackled



without undoing the good work she had already done.

This is not, I suspect, a typical response to a standard interview question - at least not in the UK where we have not experienced bombs dropping for over seventy years. Viewed through a British lens, Sara’s experience is fairly unique. However, my conversation with her was a stark reminder that, across the world, what people experience on a daily basis could not be more different. We are unwittingly cocooned by what we see around us. And I wonder this: were people to be fully conscious of the daily tragedies experienced by our brothers and sisters in other places, and were people to have a sense of how that compares, in relative terms, to the challenges experienced by some in our own country, would the climate of hostility to migrants continue to prevail?

<sup>2</sup> <https://jobs.theguardian.com/article/the-top-ten-interview-questions-and-how-to-answer-them/>