

EXPRESSIONS FROM THE HEART





Light and Darkness

Light and darkness, two contrary situations but also deeply intertwined. They are fully dependent on each other and in a strange way, they feed off one another. Throughout these difficult years of the humanitarian and refugee crisis, refugees, migrants and Greeks have experienced their individual crises separately, but also together. From Eidomeni to Evros, the Aegean Islands, Piraeus port and across the mainland, thousands of kilometers, thousands of people went through the deepest darkness to the brightest light. They lost everything, yet rebuilt their lives.

From the beginning of this tumultuous and unprecedented era for Greece, SolidarityNow stood close to all these people with its programs in Athens, Thessaloniki and Ioannina. *"We do not know what the mist is. We make everything in the light"*, wrote Yannis Ritsos*. At SolidarityNow we learned the hard way, along with our field teams and those affected the most by the humanitarian crisis, that the deepest darkness is just before dawn. This was also the case with little Rayan, a 5-year-old refugee from Iraq, who was born with a vision impairment but didn't let this become an obstacle in his life.

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* Greek poet.



This booklet is devoted to darkness and light, to little Rayan, who with the initiative of SolidarityNow's social service and his kindergarten teacher in Sindos, managed to convince KEDDY¹ to reopen the kindergarten in the Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind in Thessaloniki.

The story of Rayan is the reason to believe that where there is a will, co-operation and a common outlook, there is a way. Only then, may darkness become light.

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1. Centers for the Differentiation, Diagnosis and Support of People with Special Educational Needs, currently KESY.



Tea has already been served in the living room and we are discussing how the family's life was back in Iraq.

CHAPTER 1

Little Rayan

"I want to tell the people who have been forced to leave their country, who came here and are now trying to rebuild their lives, that they have to work hard to make their dreams come true".

We are in Sindos, in an apartment building where refugees and asylum seekers are accommodated under the framework of the ESTIA program². Together with Diler, a kurmanji interpreter and Maria, a social scientist, we climb to the top floor of the building. In front of the doors of the houses, the residents have left their shoes on the mats. We ring the doorbell and little Rayan opens the door; his parents, Mohamed and Turkiya, and his little sister, 4-year-old Rondek, are standing behind him.

Following their ritual, we take off our shoes and sit on the makeshift sofas that the family has put on the floor. Turkiya is preparing tea and we are talking to Rayan and Rondek. Today is Rayan's birthday; the 5-year-old boy who was born with a visual impairment is about to celebrate his birthday with us. He is very active, playing with his sister, drawing, sitting in his father's arms and telling us some Greek words. Mohamed tells us that the name Rayan means "door of paradise" while Rondek means "tears".

Tea has already been served and we are talking about the family's life in Iraq. The 28-year-old Mohamed and the 26-year-old

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2. The Accommodation Program of the organization (part of the ESTIA program - Emergency Support for Integration and Accommodation) is implemented by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union.

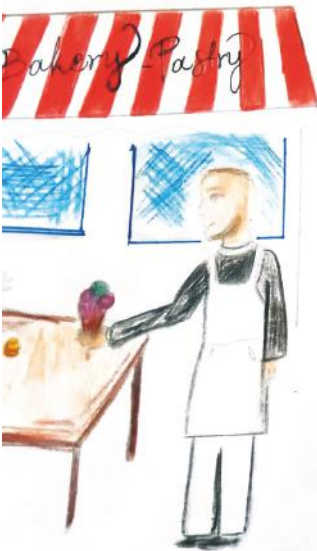
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Turkiya have been married for 8 years. "I saw her and I told my parents to ask her hand in marriage", Mohamed says, and Turkiya adds, "and I said yes!". Life in Duhok (town in Iraq) before the war was nice, says the couple. Mohamed worked in a pastry shop and his wife was raising their children. "It was good, we were with our relatives, our people", Turkiya notes. Their only concern was their first-born, who was born with a visual impairment. They asked for many expert opinions in Iraq and Turkey, but they only learned about his condition in 2014.

They left Iraq in 2016. In 2017, they arrived in Greece through the difficult path of the Evros river. They have been living in an apartment managed by SolidarityNow. Despite its difficulties, life is full of surprises. With the help of Maria, the organization's social scientist, Hara, the children's teacher, the Head of the Thessaloniki's

Iraq: before War..

"Life at Duhok, the town we used to live in before the war, was very nice".



state Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind, Rayan was accepted to attend classes at the Center's reopened kindergarten for children with disabilities, and he is the first refugee student!

The first day at school was very touching for our little friend's parents. *"My teacher's name is Maria. I like my new school very much because I am playing music and various games"*, he tells us, and adds that when he grows-up he wants to become a dog, and a lawyer for dogs and a dentist while his sister wants to become a child and a doctor. *"Our son's condition has improved. Now we wait to see if he will be able to see. We thank Maria and all those who helped Rayan to go to school"*, Mohamed stresses, with appreciation.



The journey of the family once they were forced to leave Iraq. They arrived to Greece in 2017, having gone through a very rough path, the Evros river. However, despite all the difficulties, their life still holds in store for them some great surprises!

- *"I want a simple life for my family, medical care for my son and a job. So far, I had never stopped working. If I get a job, we will stay in Greece, otherwise what will I do here with two young children?", says Mohamed, who worries about the future. The couple had started Greek courses at SolidarityNow's Blue Refugee Center in Thessaloniki,³ but due to Rayan's condition, they were unable to continue. "We have to learn Greek, we live in Greece", he emphasizes.*

Time has passed and the children have to go to bed, as they have to wake up early tomorrow and go to school. Rondek, who is more attached to her father, sits in his arms, while Rayan draws lines and suns on a piece of paper. Before saying goodbye to the family, we ask them if they want to send a message to the people who will read their story. *"I want to tell the people who have been forced to leave their country, come here and are now trying to rebuild their lives, that they have to work hard to make their dreams come true".*

"I want to say a big thank you to Greece for accepting us, as well as to all the people who helped and are still helping us", Mohamed concludes.

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³. The Blue Refugee Center is supported by UNHCR and UNICEF and funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union.

CHAPTER 2

The Power of Education Can Change Minds or How SolidarityNow helped reopen the School for the Blind in Thessaloniki and how little Rayan became its first refugee student!

The white neoclassical building with the neo-baroque and rococo elements that today houses the Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind in Thessaloniki, has many stories to tell. It has been around for three centuries. However, we'll look into the story of little Rayan, the first and only student in the Center's kindergarten, which reopened after 3 years of being shut.

We are in the depths of winter. The leaves from the trees have covered the playground located in the courtyard of the Center. Opening the entrance door, the sound of a piano and children's voices are heard singing to an unknown rhythm. The Director of the Special Primary School of the Center, Mr. Vassilis Messaritakis, waits for us at his office. The imposing building located in Vassilissis Olgas street, has housed the Center since 1948. Besides the kindergarten, there is a special primary school, and a boarding school where blind children from different cities of Northern Greece are accommodated. The children who attend the school have the opportunity to learn braille, to read, but also to undergo ergotherapy (finger mobility, e.g. how to use scissors, etc.), speech therapy, and physiotherapy.



SolidarityNow's team visits Rayan and his family at the apartment where they've been staying at for the last months in Sindos.



"For blind children, defining concepts is very difficult. They get stimuli through a special training program. Their training is not only related to the cognitive part, but also includes other factors", Mr. Messaritakis says.

Little Rayan enters the office with his nursery teacher. He greets us in Greek and sits on the sofa quietly. Coming to school was a true breakthrough. His presence has mobilized so many people, and **thanks to SolidarityNow's efforts, in a short period of time, many achievements have been made.** In particular, **the kindergarten of the School reopened and a nursery teacher was found, as well as the means of transportation that would bring our little friend from his home in Sindos to the school.** *"We want to support these children, whether they are refugees or migrants, or even Roma, because we provide specialized training. Parents may have the opportunity to send their child to the neighborhood school, but this way the child who needs specialized training will lose his or her self-reliance. Through special education we explore children's potentials by building on their abilities",* adds the Director.

Rayan's registration to the Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind in Thessaloniki is also an act against racism, which has been growing in our country during the past years. *"We are educators, we are interested in children. When we leave children in a house, whether they are Roma or refugees, these children will not only be isolated, but over the years they will be progressively marginalized. The special school enables them to open up their spirit and gain critical competences and skills",* notes Mr. Messaritakis.

Rayan says goodbye to us. Time has passed. The classrooms are empty and the sound of the piano as well as the children's voices are now silent. Mr. Messaritakis organizes his office, replies to phone calls and tries to complete his

- duties. Before saying goodbye to each other, he talks about social stigma and the importance of education, a force that can change minds and consciousnesses. Many parents of visually impaired children, send them to neighborhood schools to avoid being stigmatized, but unfortunately the result is the exact opposite. *"Parents need to be sensitized to help their children. They have to understand that their children need to be taught to stand on their feet and to have the strength to deal with the challenges of everyday life; they need to have skills to handle their social, personal and professional relationships. What is education? It is a constant effort for the child to acquire all the necessary equipment to deal with everything that has to do with real life".*

CHAPTER 3

Where there is a will, there is a way

Will, cooperation and a common outlook can move mountains.

We are in SolidarityNow's van and we are heading to Sindos. It is late afternoon and the winter's sunlight starts to disappear from SolidarityNow's offices; we try to replace it by switching on the lights. Before we visit the family's apartment we sit with our team and Maria Rapti, who works at the Social Service of the organization's Accommodation Program. We talk about 5-year-old Rayan and his story; the countless appointments with doctors in AHEPA University General Hospital of Thessaloniki, the hope that he will be able to regain his vision completely and the cooperation with the state, which reopened the kindergarten for children with disabilities in the Thessaloniki's Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind and gave to a refugee child the right to attend classes.

"The chemistry between a social scientist and a beneficiary is important", says Maria. "I admire the fact that these people came to a foreign country and are struggling to survive under difficult conditions. They are trying to create a better future for them and their children".

- **"Where there is a will, there is a way"**, they say, and little Rayan's case is a solid manifestation of this. In cooperation with Hara, his teacher at the kindergarten of Sindos, Maria reached out to the Diagnostic and Support Center and asked for the child to be enrolled in a special kindergarten. The Thessaloniki's Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind reopened its kindergarten and Rayan is the first refugee student to attend. All the obstacles were overcome. A new teacher for Rayan was appointed, a dictionary (kurmanji-greek) was found, NGO METAdrasi⁴ sent an interpreter to help the student and the teacher in the educational process and a taxi transfers him daily from Sindos to school. Moreover, the Center's director helped Rayan socialize in school and now he interacts and plays with the primary school children.

Little Rayan's struggle to go to school, to play, to dream, to do all the things that his peers are able to do, has been overcome. *"I am glad we have done it. I feel kind of satisfied. I find it is very important that we have helped a refugee child with visual impairment go to school, something that will help him in his personal development. Rayan's case opens the door for a wider collaboration with the Thessaloniki's Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind, which offers services not only to children but to anyone who has visual disabilities"*, notes Maria, who has been part of the SolidarityNow team since April 2018.

These last words of Maria make us believe that Rayan was not only lucky for himself but brought luck to others too! He is a great example for all children with special needs helping them to understand that impairments should not prevent them from succeeding in life. All children can and should be educated; most importantly though, they must dream of their lives as they want!

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4. The program is implemented in the frame of providing qualitative interpreting services to primary and secondary schools with the funding of UNICEF.



Rayan is the very first refugee student of Thessaloniki's Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind, thanks to the help of SolidarityNow. Today he paints, plays music and various other games which he loves!



● Katerina Kousouri

Illustration

Katerina Kousouri is studying Communications at Deree College. This collaboration with SolidarityNow happened through a unique Honors course which requires extra hours of community service aiming to inform students about the refugee crisis.

"I was given this wonderful opportunity to contribute to SolidarityNow's very important work and efforts which I accepted with immense pleasure. I was very moved reading Rayan's story but also very proud and happy for all that he and his family have achieved despite the difficult conditions and obstacles. So, I thought I'd create a series of sketches, showcasing their journey. But I also wanted the drawings to portray an innocence, as if a kid had painted them and we watch the story through his/her eyes. I really hope that I've achieved that".

A Big Thank You,

- to Mr. Vassilis Messaritakis, Director of the Special Primary School of the Center for Education and Rehabilitation for the Blind in Thessaloniki, who encouraged and supported the reopening of the school's kindergarten.
- to Hara, the first teacher who welcomed with love Rayan in Sindos, laying the foundations for this wonderful collaboration.



This is our common ground

European Commission

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