

# THE HELL OF BEING AN ASYLUM SEEKER

By Mark Haddon

Last year Oxfam asked whether I'd visit one of the projects they help fund, then write about it for *The Observer*. It's exactly the kind of thing a liberal, *Guardian*-reading novelist should be doing. Except that I don't fly. Because I know with absolute certainty that I'll die in a fireball of aviation fuel shortly after take-off. And visiting one of the projects that Oxfam helps fund would doubtless mean landing at some jungle airstrip in a 30-year-old Tupolev, possibly dodging mortar rounds on the descent. The amount of Valium I'd have to take to get me there would probably eradicate all memory of the trip.

So they put me on a bus instead. To Victoria. In London. So that I could visit the Migrants Resource Centre and meet a group of asylum seekers. Victoria not being Cambodia I wouldn't get much exotic local colour (run-down boarding houses round the corner from green squares ringed with large, cream Georgian town houses, if you're interested). But the bus was going to stay on the ground the whole way, which was good for me.

I had a rough idea of what we'd be talking about. I knew a number of refugees who'd come to the UK in the past. And I knew something about the UK's current asylum system, from newspapers, from TV and from the radio. In particular I knew that it was neither generous nor efficient. But I'd never met anyone on the receiving end.

Now I have. And nothing has made me this angry in a long time. We bellyache about the abuse of human rights overseas. But there are thousands of people living here, right now, in one of the richest countries in the world, forced to live in poverty. They are denied basic rights and services which the rest of us take for granted. And this is not an accident. This is government policy. And we should be ashamed of it.

The first person I get to meet is Sergey. Sergey is a doctor from Armenia, 47 years old, a married man with two sons, aged 10 and 11. I've seen photographs of Sergey before we meet. He is square-jawed and good-looking, with close-cropped black hair. But the photographs were taken a year ago and when he comes into the room I don't recognise him. He has lost several stone. He walks slowly and has trouble breathing. Every so often

he has to pause and gather his energy before carrying on. When he talks, however, his eyes light up. He is passionate and a lot funnier than most of us would be in his position. He is not only a good man, but good company, too. He apologises repeatedly for his poor English and tells me that he would not be here were it not for the kindness of the staff at the centre.

This is his story.

'When I was in Armenia I was very happy. Everything was OK for me, for my family, thank you God. I have a new car. In the city I have a good home. I have four hectares of land. I have horses. With my friends every week I have a picnic, a barbecue. I was lucky, lucky, lucky. I had popularity because I help many people to survive. It is my duty as a doctor. So everybody knows me. In the street they say, "Hello, Doctor." The police know me. They say, "Hello, Doctor." Even the Russian KGB, they say, "Hello, Doctor."

'But after Soviet Union break up, there is life without law. There is mafia. There is killing, many times. My friends. My neighbours. Tomorrow maybe me.'

Quite by chance Sergey was witness to the murder of a politician. He tells me the details but asks me not to print them in case it puts his family in danger.

'Police officers, they come to me and ask what I see. I say nothing. I am afraid. I have wife and children. I cover everything up. After that my life was worst, worst, worst. My friends tell me, KGB looking for you. And if KGB want to kill you, they will kill you.'

With the help of friends, Sergey managed to escape from Armenia hidden in a truck, sending his wife and children to stay with relatives. He reached England after nine days and assumed that he would finally be safe. He was refused asylum and became homeless.

'I sleep in road. I sleep in park. In playground for children. And I catch this killer illness. One time, this person wake me up and say, "Hey, how are you doing?" I look down and see all this blood. Ambulance come and take me to hospital.'

While sleeping rough, Sergey had contracted Hepatitis C, one of the 10 per cent of sufferers who get the disease for



**No place like home:** Margaret (left) is from Uganda. She and her two children have been in and out of detention centres for three years. Mariam (right) is from Ethiopia. She still thinks highly of this country. 'The law is good,' she says. 'But when they put it into practice...'

unknown reasons, though living on the street cannot be good for anyone's health. He got no treatment and, as often happens, the disease led to cirrhosis of the liver. Sergey will be dead within two years. A transplant could save his life, but he doesn't qualify for one because of his asylum status. Eventually, Sergey found his way to the Hounslow Law Centre. They got him registered with the National Asylum Support Service. He was given a room in a shared house and seen by a doctor who told him he should eat three meals a day, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Sergey has to do this on £35 of vouchers each week. These have to be spent on food and basic toiletries and nothing else. They have to be spent in one supermarket and that supermarket is not allowed to give him any change. He is not allowed to earn any more money.

Some time after he escaped from Armenia, Sergey's wife managed to get to Italy. She works as a cleaner there and lives in a single room with their sons. They are forbidden from visiting their father, and Sergey is forbidden from visiting them.

Sergey could be saving people's lives. He is not asking for money. He wants to work. He is an innocent man who has committed no offence. His only mistake was to hope that when he reached the UK he would be treated like a human being.

And Sergey is not alone. My host at the Migrants Resource Centre (MRC) is the indefatigable Nazek Ramadan, who herself fled the war in Lebanon in the mid-Eighties and runs many of the projects at the centre. Nazek is like a particularly efficient big sister, and when Sergey lists the people to whom he is most grateful over the past few years, Nazek comes in just behind God, and just in front of Mario Marin Cotrini, the MRC's legal adviser.

The centre does exactly what it says on the tin. It offers refugees and asylum seekers advice, practical help, language lessons, a crèche, computer access and a place to meet other people in the same boat.

Nazek and her colleagues, however, realise that one of the biggest problems asylum seekers have to face is the way they are portrayed in the media. Everyone I spoke to at the centre said they were treated well by the public until they admitted that they



were asylum seekers. One of them said he was relieved when he became destitute because the public treated homeless people better than they treated asylum seekers.

Most of those who write about asylum seekers have never met one. So Nazek set up a media group, in order that journalists could talk to asylum seekers, and asylum seekers who wanted a voice could talk to journalists.

Nazek hasn't yet risked exposing the members of the group to anyone from the tabloid press, but they have had a fair number of cynics through their doors, all of whom have gone away converted, one of them so moved that they asked a homeless refugee to come and live in their spare room. Most of what we read and hear about asylum seekers is wrong. For a start, there is no such thing as a 'bogus' or 'illegal' asylum seeker, no more than there is a bogus or illegal mortgage seeker. Everyone has the right to apply for asylum. If they have a justified fear of persecution then the host country is obliged to protect them. This is set down in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. No country has ever withdrawn from the convention.

Consistently, however, the British government and its officials attempt to define its obligations to refugees as narrowly as possible. Sometimes they do this with breathtaking frankness, as in this refusal letter from the Home Office to an Algerian woman: 'You claim that you were ill-treated during detention, tortured and raped. The secretary of state does not condone any violations of human rights which may have been committed by members of the security forces... [but]... to bring yourself within the scope of the UN Convention, you would have to show that these incidents were not simply the random acts of individuals, but were a sustained pattern or campaign of persecution directed at you by the authorities.'

It's worth reading that paragraph again. The Home Office is telling this woman that they don't care if she has been raped, tortured and imprisoned. It will help her only if she can prove that this was done repeatedly and according to some kind of plan.

Sometimes the government mounts legal battles to rid itself of refugees, as it did recently when it was condemned by the ▶

◀ UN for winning a high court case to return refugees to Baghdad and Basra, thereby setting a precedent for removing refugees to other war zones.

Sometimes, the government alters the law itself to make it easier to remove asylum seekers. In 2004, for example, it became an offence for asylum seekers to fail to provide a proper immigration document to establish their identity and citizenship. This was hugely controversial. It is almost impossible to obtain a passport in countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Many asylum seekers have no choice but to travel using false documents. And most have no knowledge of UK asylum law.

The second person I talk to is Mariam from Ethiopia. Mariam does this rather unnerving thing that Philip Pullman's witches do. She's in the room for a good 10 minutes before I realise she's there. And it's not because she's shy and retiring, either, because when she finally appears from beneath her headscarf she radiates warmth. I suspect it's a combination of personal talent and a skill that's been acquired by all the asylum seekers I talk to, the ability to blend into the background, to become invisible, to avoid trouble.

Mariam's daughters reached the UK long before she did and she spent the first few weeks in this country tracking them down, with help from the Red Cross. I ask her why the three of them chose to come here as opposed to anywhere else. 'Outside the UK, you ask people and they say the UK is the father of the world, the carer of the world.'

After all she has been through, Mariam still thinks highly of this country. 'There are human rights here. There is democracy here. The government is also a good government. The law is good. But when they put it into practice...'

The supposed reason for a tough asylum policy is to prevent the UK from becoming a soft option for people seeking asylum. But Mariam is no different from anyone else I talk to. She simply had no idea how asylum seekers were treated here. Just as you or I have no idea how asylum seekers are treated in Ethiopia, or Armenia. Neither Mariam nor Sergey came here expecting to be supported by the state. But neither did they know that the state would stop them working to support themselves. In truth, the numbers of asylum seekers who come to the UK, or to any other country, rises most dramatically when major conflicts erupt around the world, the break-up of Yugoslavia, for example, or the war in Iraq.

Mariam found her daughters and applied for asylum. Soon after this she was told by the Home Office that she was being 'dispersed' to Glasgow with only one of her daughters. Dispersal is intended to be a way of sharing the job of housing asylum seekers among councils throughout the UK. But it is often used in a way that seems designed to make staying in this country as uncomfortable as possible.

Mariam is not allowed to do paid work, but not working is clearly impossible for her and she devotes much of her time to voluntary organisations around London. She is also known as a source of good advice, and while we are talking a young man from Zimbabwe shows her his own letter from the Home Office saying that he, too, is being dispersed to Glasgow in two weeks' time. Mariam, being an indefatigable optimist, tries to get him to look on the bright side. Yes, it rains in Glasgow. It's cold. But the Scottish legal system is slightly less draconian and there are some activities laid on for asylum seekers. If you are positive you'll find people to talk to and things to do. Later in the day I find myself remembering this conversation when Nazek tells me about a string of attacks on asylum seekers in Glasgow over the past few years, including two separate murders.

Mariam and I talk about politics and I ask who she'd vote for if she was eligible. She says, 'Labour. Because I am on the side of people, of the working class.' It sounds odd, coming from

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## **'What has happened to me? I am a father! I am the head of the family. But I cannot help my two sons. I am like a dead man here'**

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Mariam, because there is something of the old-fashioned conservative about her. As there is about Sergey. As there is about all the people I speak to. These are people who believe in the importance of family, of duty, of self-reliance, of hard work. I am reminded of Norman Tebbit saying, 'I grew up in the Thirties with an unemployed father... He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it.' These people have done something a great deal harder than getting on their bikes and I can't help thinking that if they were a few shades whiter and born this side of the Channel then Norman Tebbit would hold them up as shining examples to the rest of us.

Getting to the UK takes money. It takes connections. It takes determination. The sheer difficulty of the process acts as a brutal filter. These are not just ordinary people in trouble who deserve our sympathy. These are extraordinary people who have done something momentous to save their lives, or the lives of their families, and who deserve our admiration for it. Nazek sometimes looks around the room during classes and meetings and is amazed by the qualifications of the people she is looking at. There are journalists, dentists, engineers, teachers, civil servants. Some are homeless. All of them are desperately poor. None of them is allowed to work. Forget that they're human beings for a moment. In purely economic terms this is a ridiculous waste of money and skills.

The third person I meet is Margaret. She is broken and sad and I feel bad that she's travelled across London leaving her children with a friend in order to see me. She is nervous and can't bring herself to meet my eye. She stares at her hands or glances over to Nazek for reassurance.

I start by asking why she had to leave Uganda and I regret it immediately. It's a horrible story and she has to stop several times because she is crying. I tell her we can talk about something else, but she insists.

I realise later what a stupid question it is. It's the one every refugee gets asked when they apply for asylum. It's the one asked in every newspaper article about the subject, every television report, every radio programme. Is this person's claim justified? Did these things really happen to them?

You couldn't spend five minutes with Sergey, or Mariam, or Margaret without believing their stories. But to ask whether they might be lying is to miss the point. The point is this... Imagine what it must be like to live this kind of life, to leave everything behind, your job, your family, your home. To travel to Stuttgart in the back of a truck. Or Oslo. Or Rotterdam. Any place where you don't speak the language. You have no friends. You sleep in the street, or share a house with strangers who speak yet another language. Imagine living on £35 of Asda vouchers a week. Imagine not being able to see your family. Then ask yourself what kind of experience would make this kind of life preferable to going home?

This is the situation in which asylum seekers find themselves. For those with children it is worse.

In 2005, Margaret and her two children were taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre. Her youngest was a year old. 'They told me they were deporting me. I didn't know what was going on. My daughter was taken out of school. It was a very difficult time for us because they don't tell you when you are going to come out of detention. You have to communicate through a solicitor. It



Human writes:  
**Mark Haddon**  
 with **Nazek**  
**Ramadan,**  
 who fled  
 the war in  
 Lebanon  
 and now runs  
 many of the  
 projects at  
 the Migrants  
 Resource  
 Centre

was like a prison. If you have kids it is difficult because you cannot go outside. They can only play in this one big room with everyone. But kids need to run around. They need their freedom.

"There was no education and the food was really horrible. Burgers and chips almost every day. And it was served at one time, so if your child is sleeping they don't eat. And when my baby was sick I was not allowed to have Calpol in the room because they said I might kill him."

Margaret's lawyer applied for judicial review and after six weeks she was finally released. The following year she was detained again. By this time she was receiving psychiatric treatment. "They came to my house very early in the morning and they packed everything I owned. I told them I was sick. They said, "We are not here for a joke." They took my kids to another room and called the police to help them take us to Harmondsworth detention centre. I was there for 10 days. They took my kids away and didn't say where they were taking them. Then they locked me up. They don't speak to you. They just bring you food. They think you can eat without seeing your children. I told them I wanted to see my children, but they would not talk to me."

Margaret was eventually told that she would be reunited with her children at Gatwick airport on the flight which was to take her back to Uganda. "There were five big men and two women who came carrying my children. When we reach the plane I tell them I am not going. They start abusing me, using all kinds of words. They wanted to put handcuffs on me, but I refused. I was screaming and the kids were crying because they did not understand what was happening. One man got hold of my head and another sat on my back and forced me down. Then the pilot came and told them to offload me."

Pilots have intervened in this way on a number of occasions. Many people, when they are manhandled on to a plane, become distraught, as well you might if you were raped, tortured or imprisoned in the country you're being sent back to. But people who act in this way can be charged with various offences, resulting in criminal records which will seriously undermine any asylum claim.

Margaret was put into a van and driven to a police station. 'I could not even sit because of the pain in my neck and my back.

They were using all this kind of language: "You fucking idiot. Why did you refuse to go?" They said they would tell the police I had hit them. They said I would be arrested and get a criminal record. We got to the police station and they said I had assaulted them. But the police were so good to me. They said, "We are going to listen to both sides. And we have to take you to a hospital to get photographs of your injuries in case there is a court case."

Margaret and her children were taken back to Yarl's Wood and kept there for another four months. "The place was so dirty. It was horrible. My kids used to cry. My daughter kept on asking when we would leave. I did not know what to tell her."

When she was eventually released Margaret was given accommodation by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and she found her daughter a place at a local school. NASS then told her they were going to move her to new accommodation in another borough. This would mean removing her daughter from school all over again. Margaret decided her daughter's life had been disrupted enough. So she and her daughters now live on a friend's floor.

How did we end up treating human beings in this way?

Mario, the MRC's legal adviser, came to the UK in 1978, with his wife and sister-in-law, after escaping from Colombia, where the government had 68,000 of its opponents behind bars. They were terrified and knew nothing about asylum law. All the immigration officials who dealt with their claim, however, were helpful, courteous and surprisingly knowledgeable about Colombian politics. The three of them were granted temporary admission. The following year they were given full refugee status. "I can only be grateful to the UK for the protection offered to me and my family during those difficult days... After nearly 30 years here, I have two children and one granddaughter. We feel British. When I come back to the UK after visiting my elderly parents I always feel as if I am coming home."

Mario's is not an isolated case. I've spoken to a number of refugees who arrived in the UK 10, 15, 20 years ago. Most were impressed and surprised by the warmth of the welcome they received, and none of them went through the demeaning experiences that many of today's asylum seekers go through.

What happened during those intervening years? Of course, there has always been racism and intolerance, but only in ▶

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**Replace the words ‘asylum seekers’ with the words ‘blacks’ or ‘Jews’ and you start to see how pernicious the media treatment is**  
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◀ recent times have these sentiments been allowed to drive and shape official government policy.

Most people don't know the number of refugees seeking asylum in this country (in 2007 there were 23,000; a tiny fraction of the 700,000 people from overseas who were allowed to register for work in the UK). Most people don't know an asylum seeker. Most people can't point to a way in which the presence of asylum seekers has affected their lives in any way, for better or worse. Consequently the prejudice asylum seekers face is based on almost total ignorance.

The government could change this. It could treat asylum seekers well and present this as a badge of national pride. It could let them work and celebrate their contribution to the economy. It would be cheaper. And it would have little effect on the numbers of people seeking asylum here.

The government does not do it, in large part, because it wants to curry favour with the editors and readers of the tabloid press. And the *Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Express*, the *News of the World*, together with their competitors, have done more than any other body to stir up hatred of asylum seekers. Here is a tiny selection of 'asylum' headlines from the past 12 months:



It's not simply that many of the stories are false, and that most of them are deliberately misleading. It is the relentless negativity of the whole campaign. And the depressing fact that this is where the majority of people get their information about asylum seekers from.

We have become so used to this kind of rhetoric that it seems almost normal. But turn the clock back 40 years and replace the words 'asylum seekers' with 'blacks', or turn it back another 30 and replace them with the word 'Jews', and you start to see how poisonous it really is.

There have been a number of sympathetic headlines in the past year. Most of them sat above articles about Gurkhas who had been refused the right of resettlement in Britain, articles about interpreters working for the British army whose lives were in danger if they remained in Iraq, and articles about Al Bangura, who plays for Watford FC and was threatened with removal to Sierra Leone. All of these articles talked about injustice. All of them treated their subjects as honourable people. And all of them demonstrated how simple it is to transform an abstract hate figure into a living, breathing human being.

At no point has the government made serious efforts to do

something similar. On the contrary, it has consistently tried to keep the most influential tabloids onside. These papers would have us believe that this is a story of 'us' and 'them', of British citizens besieged by foreigners wanting a share of our hard-earned wealth. But there is no 'us' and 'them'. There have been refugees coming to this country for as long as records have been kept: Huguenots, Jews, French Catholics, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Ugandan Asians... If you can't find any in your family you're probably not looking hard enough.

We forget about these people because yesterday's refugees no longer look like refugees. They're our neighbours, our colleagues, our grandparents, our in-laws.

When I came home from my day at the Migrants Resource Centre I got out a large sheet of paper and wrote down the names of all my friends and family. Then I imagined an alternative world in which no one had ever been granted asylum in the UK. One by one, I began crossing people out. More than a quarter of them vanished. Most of them dead in concentration camps. Or unborn because their parents had died in concentration camps. Shortly after Sergey was told that he had a fatal illness he received a letter from the Home Office informing him that he was being removed from the country. The MRC got in touch to explain that he was seriously ill. The Home Office wrote back saying that this was no problem. They would provide a medical team to fly with him back to Armenia.

Sergey was taken to Colnbrook detention centre where he was put in a room measuring 8ft x 12ft. He was locked up for twenty three and a half hours a day and let out for 30 minutes to exercise. There was a camera in one corner monitoring his movements.

With only days to go before Sergey was put on a plane, Mario Marin Cotrini threatened the Home Office with judicial review and they released him.

Until a couple of weeks ago, Sergey was living in a shared house with two other men. One of them had serious mental health problems. When this man received a letter saying that he was going to be evicted he became distraught and decided to set light to the house. This happened at night. Sergey was sleeping. He had been prescribed tranquillisers to help with the constant anxiety from which he suffers. Thankfully, being a doctor, he knew that the pills were bad for his damaged liver, so he refused to take them. Consequently, when he smelt smoke he woke up immediately and was able to get out of the house in time. He rang 999 and two policemen arrived along with the fire engine. They asked him to come back to the station to answer a few questions. He was more than happy to help. They handcuffed him, locked him in a cell overnight and told him to report back with a solicitor.

I ask Sergey what he wants from life. 'For myself I want to be kind. If you are cold I can give you this jacket. But this jacket, it is rubbish. If you say you need money I have no money to give you. What has happened to me? I try to be kind, to be kind, to be kind. I want my two sons learning that. To be kind. To be polite. To be gentlemen. I am their father, I am the head of the family, but I cannot help. I am like a dead man here.'

Just before I leave the Migrants Resource Centre, Mariam comes up to me with a folder with all the certificates and awards she has received for her voluntary work. We look through them together. At the back of the file, however, are all her letters from the Border and Immigration Agency concerning the progress of her asylum case. I ask if I can read them. She tells me to go ahead. They are mostly boilerplate stuff, acknowledging the receipt of papers and informing her of delays. But I notice that at the bottom of every letter is a slogan written in capital letters: 'WORKING FOR A SAFE, JUST AND TOLERANT SOCIETY'. ★

The MRC publishes *The New Londoners* newspaper for Refugee Week, which starts tomorrow. For details, see [www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk](http://www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk)