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The Man with No Chance

Interview with Amine by Lisbeth Kovacic and Birgit Mennel

Amine Germaine

Amine is 23 years old and has lived in Europe for about 5 years, where he has tried in vain to gain legal status in countries like Greece, Switzerland and Austria. Amine speaks Darija, Arabic and Greek and French among others. This interview was recorded in French and edited for publication.

Would you tell us how you left your country?

I left Algeria with a work visa for Turkey, because I had problems at home that'd I'd prefer not to mention. So I went to the capital, Algiers, and asked for a visa for Turkey with my passport; after I crossed the river, or sea, as they say.[1]

I stayed in Greece for four years; I stayed doing many different kinds of jobs: I worked as a waiter in a restaurant for six months and later as a DJ, among other things. I had an asylum card[2], a "red card", like the *ausweis* here. However, while you receive that card when your asylum case is being examined, in Greece you can work right away. So, that's the difference between the "red card" in Greece and the *ausweis*, because here you don't have any rights. You

are legal for a certain amount of time, be condemned to wait... the negative decision regarding your asylum... and then... waiting to be expelled.

But to go back to my situation in Greece: after a while I started having problems: they revoked my "red card" because they didn't want to give me asylum and I had to start doing anything to get some money, and you know, Greece was already in crisis. I was really stressed because of my precarious situation and then, one day, I got into a fight and was imprisoned, but not in a prison for undocumented workers, but a prison for criminals.

Afterwards, I left Greece, because there was nothing there for me, no work, no documents, nothing at all. I left on foot, I hitchhiked, I took buses and trains...; I crossed Albania, then Montenegro, Serbia and then Hungary. On the border between Hungary and Serbia the police stopped me. Since I didn't want to ask for asylum in Hungary, they sent me to Serbia, but the second time I tried, I made it across.

In total, the trip to come here in Austria took me 28 days, including all the days and the hours spent in prison, because I had problems with the police during the whole thing: in Serbia, for example, the police don't imprison people, they take your money; in Hungary, instead, you have a problem with prisons: either you ask for asylum or you go to prison or you're immediately expelled... but like I said: the second time I won!

Did you meet a lot of people on your trip? Are there only men who travel like you did or did you also meet woman?

No, only men, no women (laughs).

And what did you do to avoid leaving fingerprints ?

Ah, well, they took my fingerprints in all the countries I crossed, but if they take your fingerprints in countries like Albania, Montenegro or Serbia, that doesn't change anything. And even in other countries like France or Italy, they often take your fingerprints for a routine check, so it's only to see what you've done before. It's just a normal check, they come and ask: "*Ausweis, bitte*".

And how did you decide where to go? Why are you in Austria now?

Well, because I heard people talk about Austria: they said that it is a country that respects human rights, that's why I came. But when I arrive in Austria, I didn't have the experience of these human rights, there is nothing at all: those rights don't exist for us.

Besides, I can't imagine going to France, first of all because in Algeria everyone talks about the difficulties you find there. If you happen to have your identity checked there, they don't joke around. That's not like what I've experienced here, where I asked for asylum and I still have the possibility of changing countries, in the case they don't accept me here, because they won't send me to Algeria right away.[3] A long time ago, my whole family migrated to France, they all went with visas. But I myself didn't want to go to France, because I don't like France due to its colonial past...

So when I arrived in Austria for the first time, I applied for asylum and I found myself in Traiskirchen for 15 days, I received the "white card" and I was transferred to Salzburg. After only two days the police gave me a paper saying that I had to leave the country in three days, because my asylum request was denied. So I left the

country and I went to Switzerland, to Basel/Fribourg – this time not on foot but by train because now I'm in Europe (laughs). Once I arrived in Switzerland, I made the application for asylum mandatory in countries where you can't live *sans-papers*. But that application wasn't even considered because of Dublin. So I spent three months in a prison for undocumented aliens and then they expelled me to Austria again. Here, I asked for asylum a second time, about eight months ago. I spent another 15 days in Traiskirchen and they put me to the door because I had crossed the border of the Bezirk Baden; and after having made that mistake the third time, they forced me to leave the *lager* in Traiskirchen. Ever since then, I've been living either on the streets or in *Schubhaft*: the first time for 18 days, the second time they imprisoned me for 20 days, and the third time I was there for 25 days – so I've spent eight months here in Austria, three of which in Schubhaft. I did a hunger strike three times to be freed.

Have you ever received information on any possibility of legalization?

No, no one has ever talked to me about that. When I had the "white card", I went to talk with Caritas about the possibilities of working legally, because I had seen an advertisement. But they told me I couldn't work, because "*Asylanten*" don't have the right to work. In fact, the three most restrictive countries in Europe in terms of foreigners' right to work are Austria, Switzerland and Germany. When you get an asylum card, you can't work, there is no work, there is only the other kind of work. And even with the "grey card"[4] or with asylum the difficulties continue... you have the right to apply for welfare aid and housing benefits, but you still won't be able to find work, because you are visibly a foreigner here. So what are you supposed to do, a house costs 500 to 600 Euros per month; and you have to eat, buy clothes...

So, to finish, why did you come to the refugees' protest camp?

Because it's a place where people who want to can live together. For me it's a right. I like this protest that helps undocumented aliens, most of all I like the Austrians here. I'm looking for help. And help... help for me isn't only material help, it means that there are people, Austrians, who'll give you a hand, who ask you what you do... You now, like you are speaking with me, you've already helped me a lot. This protest, for me, its about the relationships that we can have.

And for the future… do you have any concrete idea?

I'm still looking for a solution for my life, documents that will give me the right to work, so really, I don't at all... I only want a document like the "grey card", a document that will let me move about in the streets without stress, because when I walk through the streets now, I'm afraid. I am always on the go, I move around and there are a lot of dangers for me, there is the Schubhaft waiting for me. I've already gone on a hunger strike three times to get out and I've risked my health, my life, just to get out. I don't know what I should do now.

I can still change countries. To do so, I have to erase my fingerprints with fire or acid. That's my idea. And I'll live badly, illegally, like a *sans-papiers*.

Aren't you tired?

No, never. I don't sleep.

[1] Amine is referring to the river Evros.

[2] After a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in January 2011 deportations to Greece were temporarily halted in most EU-countries including Austria.

[3] As there is no readmission agreement between Austria and Algeria for persons who have illegally entered the country and as negotiations between the EU and Algeria regarding a readmission agreement are not advancing, Algerians cannot be deported to Algeria. Nevertheless Algerians only rarely get a tolerance card in Austria and are kept in the status of illegalized persons.

[4] Amine is referring to a non-expulsion card.