

The 38-year-old Jaber Mawazini from Geuzenveld made an 18-day journey as a refugee from Syria six years ago. He has studied in the Netherlands, learned the language and is a member of a sounding board group of the municipality of Amsterdam. He has been nominated as Best Newcomer, an election in which exemplary refugees are put in the spotlight.

Anyone can vote for the Best Newcomer on the internet. The prize is an initiative of the Best Newcomer Foundation. According to the organization, the election symbolizes the newcomers who enrich the Netherlands. According to the organization, Mawazini, who lives in Amsterdam, is 'a mastermind who is committed to connection and integration'

Mawazini now lives with his wife and two daughters in Geuzenveld, right opposite a windmill from 1632. There are not many mills in Amsterdam, so it is really special to live here. It is an old mill from the seventeenth century. Very nice."

When did you think 'I have to go'?

That was in Dec 2015 when Syria was not safe for me anymore. I went to Turkey and stayed there for three days to arrange the ride to Europe. It went via Greece, Serbia, Austria and Germany to the Netherlands.

Why did you want to go to the Netherlands?

I have two brothers; one lives in Austria; the other in the Netherlands. I wanted a reunion with one of them. Then, I made the decision to come to the Netherlands. It is a dangerous route from the village near Damascus, where I come from, to the Turkish border. I crossed the border into Turkey without travel documents.

Was it a lonely journey?

Along the way you make friends with people who are also fleeing. The first time I crossed the border into Turkey, I was arrested by the Turkish army. In my second attempt, at night I had walked for five hours. A day later it went well, although I fell to the ground jumping from a separating wall between THE Syrian-Turkish border, in the middle of a piece of no man's land. "Leave me here," I said to a friend who also wanted to cross the border. But he managed to motivate me not to give up and to persevere. "Do not forget, your wife and daughters are waiting for you". His friend said.

From Turkey to Greece, I was on a boat, a rubber boat. You have to arrange all that on the spot. With 45 people I had never met before. At 7 o'clock in the morning we gathered on the beach, on our way to a Greek military island. There we waited fifteen hours for a ship that could take us to the next island. We received papers from the Red Cross with which we could cross borders in Europe. In total I was on the road for eighteen days

Were there other countries you could go to?

There is little future in Lebanon. Syrians are not treated well there. Other countries in the region are also difficult, such as Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Egypt. These are countries that no longer accept Syrians. And in Turkey, family reunification is very complicated. We were still researching to live in Saudi Arabia. For example, my father-in-law lives there. But we couldn't get a visa or find a job. Syrians are no longer allowed to enter.

Here in Europe, there are opportunities to develop yourself. That worked in the Netherlands. I studied here. It was once a dream in 2003 to study in Great Britain. It didn't work then. But here in the Netherlands I was given the opportunity to develop myself further.

In the Netherlands? Where do you end up?

The first year you will be in asylum seekers' centres. From Ter Apel, Veenhuizen to Budel. I have travelled all over the country. It's a stressful period. You constantly wonder what will happen and whether you can get a residence permit. It is mainly waiting. And you weren't allowed to learn the language in the meantime. I thought that was a shame, especially if you have nothing to do for a long period of time. In the asylum seekers' centre, I made it clear that I wanted to do something, volunteer or something, to get in touch with people. But the first step for me was learning the language. When I ended up as a volunteer in a computer room, a language teacher gave me a book with which I could learn Dutch. I absorbed that book. I learned everything from that book. Fortunately, I had finished it before I was transferred to the next asylum seekers' centre. In the end I ended up at the asylum seekers' centre in the Bijlmerbajes. Only then did I get the right to learn the Dutch language and was allowed to do so at the Free University.

You know what also helped you learn the language? Lots of Dutch songs. I love Wim Sonneveld. His song 'Het Dorp' reminds me of my village in Syria. And 'At the Amsterdam canals' is also beautiful.

Where did you study?

If you want, you can find your way in the Netherlands as a refugee. It is good to first integrate and to learn the values of the Netherlands well. I had the opportunity to study at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. I ended up there because I was doing research into the situation of refugees in the Netherlands. Gradually I became interested in the stories of the many asylum seekers and the opportunities they have to integrate. Although I have also seen that a large group is unable to do so, because they have traumas from the war, for example.

An Erasmus professor asked me why I wasn't going to study. I thought I was too old to study. I was 35 years old. But the professor thought I should try to get an education. That worked.

Can you get a job?

That is actually the only difficult thing in the Netherlands. On the job market, I feel like a second-class citizen. I want to contribute to society, but I can't get hired. It is resumed that the Dutch have better skills than I have. This happens because of culture, identity and the Dutch labour market system. At this moment, I am doing a traineeship at the municipality of Amsterdam. Hopefully I can stay there a little longer.

And what about Dutch hospitality?

The Dutch feel hospitable, but everything is measured here. When you are invited to dinner, they first ask how many potatoes you are going to eat. In Syria it is impossible to ask that question. In the asylum seekers' centre too, it was carefully recorded that everyone received the same package for breakfast, for example, with a slice of cheese for everyone. Sometimes you are invited in the evening, but only for coffee. Yes, hospitality is experienced differently here. This is something I researched in my master script.