



Interview with refugee from Ethiopia Eskedar Maštavičienė: 'Lithuania is my country'

The subject of migrants, refugees is among the most discussed themes in today's adult education community of Europe. Epale supports and initiates discussions aimed at familiarisation and understanding of refugees.

In the beginning of September, at the discussion festival called 'Būtent' ('*Exactly*') organised in Lithuania for the first time, the Education Exchanges Support Foundation invited to an open discussion: '*Refugees - compassion or our fears will take over?*' Ilma Skuodienė, the Head of Foreigners Integration Programme, Caritas of Vilnius Archdiocese, and refugee from Ethiopia *Eskedar Maštavičienė*, who has been living in the country for over a decade, took part in the discussion.

Ilma Skuodienė (hereinafter – I.S): Our today's topic is refugees. It is a very sensitive, frequently distressing, but important topic. Before starting the discussion, I would like to draw the attention to the definition of a refugee. The mass media use two definitions, but society is often mixing them up. I would like to specify them: first, refugees who were forced to leave their country. Because of war, prosecution, lack of democracy and human freedoms. It means that their home country no longer manages to protect their rights and they are forced to flee. While, in the public sphere only one definition generalising all groups as migrants is used. But migrants are those people who choose this way of life, their decisions are pre-planned, they come to or leave Lithuania because of family, career, education, study reasons. They are in control of their life and that makes them different from refugees.

A participant of our discussion is refugee from Ethiopia Eskedar Maštavičienė who has been living in Lithuania for over a decade. Let us start from a question about your country of origin, where you grew up, matured as a personality – how would you describe it and what does it mean to you?

Eskedar Maštavičienė (hereinafter – E.M.): I came from Ethiopia. It is a cradle of mankind. The country of coffee. But today I find it emotionally difficult to talk about my home country... My country is also Lithuania – I've been living here for over 10 years.



I.S.: We would like to ask you about the circumstances that make people leave their home country, so that we could understand, would now the answer how to help. Refugees – who are they? They are not migrants, but an exceptional and highly vulnerable group.

E.M.: Even refugees can be of different types. When talking about Ethiopia, a refugee can be a political refugee, a woman or a girl running away from female genital mutilation (FGM) or forced marriage, they are people who are not free to choose how and with whom they want to live, besides homosexual relationship is also prohibited in our country and it is punishable by a sentence of imprisonment. There can be a number of reasons.

I was 20 year old, a young student who joined the others on the streets in protest of the government and fraudulent elections, unfortunately the country has been run by the only one party for 27 years. This made me flee Ethiopia. I had no idea where to go, I had no plan or vision what the future holds. The first thought that came into my mind was to flee to neighbouring countries. But only after coming there you realise that you are not safe there either. In my case, we fled from Ethiopia to Sudan. I was wearing a t-shirt, shorts, while the Sharia law is effective in Sudan – women must have their body, hair covered. I had to find clothes for the money I had in my pocket to avoid any problems. We spent only a couple of weeks in Sudan. Because the civil war between South and North Sudan broke out. When the war broke out, it turned unsafe there not only for us, refugees, but also for Sudanese. At that moment all you have got are hope and faith. I found a person in Sudan who gave us shelter... He said: 'Eskedar, don't be scared, the God destined a man for you, you will meet a man who will welcome you, help you, don't be afraid to walk your path...' I find it too hard to talk about it...

And I started to believe. The only way to flee Sudan was to ask 'human traffickers' to take us to Tripoli, the capital of Libya. We agreed with them, paid the money, some people gave everything they had. We travelled for nine days, we did not have enough water – you cannot have that amount of water that would be enough for 36 people travelling in one car, but not in a bus, but in a jeep. All seats were removed from it and people crowded next to each other, one on each other. And the heat in Sahara is boiling. Every time when the car had to go up the hill, we had to get off it and walk in unbearable heat. And you cannot expect sympathy from traffickers, because you are nothing more than a commodity they are carrying – they do not care how you feel, what you went through, or what kind of person you are. You get off, get in, continue your journey. And people who are travelling are very different, with different experiences. Some of them left their families, children, others, as myself, left their parents who know nothing about you. We came to Libya, but then you are imprisoned here again,



so that they could get some more money from you. I had to call my parents, saying where I am, so that they could send money. And you have no idea what the next stop holds. I had to pretend on the journey that I am from Somali and going to my embassy, that's the only way I could travel in the country.

Many things happen until you reach a safe country. But when you find a safe place, it does not mean that everything was sorted and you reached the goal. Society does not understand they say that you came to Lithuania for the only reason to flee to the other country. But a person has dreams, aspirations. I am lucky that I found in Lithuania what I was looking for. I had an opportunity to continue my studies here, to acquire education, and I stayed. And there are people who cannot find their place in Lithuania. Young people, for example, from Eritrea, who are escaping from military service, hardly finished ten or eleven forms, they flee from the country to evade life-long military service. They find it difficult to find their place in Lithuania, as they are not educated, they cannot find job, unless integration programme will be successfully implemented in Lithuania. But it is still hard, one year, two years, or ten years as in my case took to recover emotionally from what you went through. You have to be mentally strong to forget the experiences and to try to build your new life here. We came from Libya in a small fishing boat, the sea was rough and when I see today people drowning, I think I could have been one of them. That's how compassion is born.

I.S.: When we talk with refugees we always ask about their journey to Lithuania. It is a hard experience, it seems that even problems they are running away from are not that dangerous as the journey itself. Of course, there are refugees who were tortured, mutilated. But they experience so much pain, tension during the journey that a person cannot recover for next five years. One lady told me: 'you have no idea what it means for forty people to get into a ten seat boat, you cannot take anything, babies are held in the arms – you are nothing more than a thing, if you disturb on the boat, they can even throw you out'. This journey to safe countries, such as Lithuania, leaves a deep scar and impact on integration. Eskedar, many people ask, why Lithuania?

E.M.: Why not Lithuania? The question itself is not correct. When we were in Malta, Lithuania was the first country that offered us to move in. True, it was sort of an experiment, as it was a new practice for Lithuania, at that time Lithuania was not a Schengen country yet, there were no treaties signed at the European Union scale regarding share of refugees, there was not a common EU programme, we were moved under a bilateral treaty between Lithuania and Malta. We came. The plane landed but nobody knew what to do next. Another adventure began. The driver who was taking us to Pabrade did not speak English and nobody could explain us where we were going. It is a strange feeling when you do



not know yet if it is a new beginning. Because you have to apply for asylum and you do not know if you will be granted it. Uncertainty.

Later on, the United Nations Organisation agreed with the Migration Department and we were moved to Kaunas, Rukla. We were waiting for an answer for three months. At one point we got frustrated of waiting, six of us were waiting in Kaunas, I went for a walk, it got dark and I got lost. And I did not know how to go back. I still remember that moment, when I was somewhere in a suburb, I was trying to stop a car but nobody would stop. I saw four guys, I went to them and asked for the way, but they did not speak English. Then one of them came back with a car, he was going to take me to the police station for help, and we were passing a shop which I recognised. When leaving I asked him for a phone number and three years later I called to thank him. And he could not believe that I learnt Lithuanian in three years and that I am thanking him in Lithuanian. Then he invited me for a walk in Kaunas. Sometimes it does not matter what language you are speaking or where you are from, having a good heart and ability to help is enough, and he was the person who helped me.

I.S.: Eskedar, you moved to Lithuania in winter, in January. And it was a very cold month, about minus 20. From warm Malta to freezing Lithuania.

E.M.: It was extremely cold in Malta – only 10 degrees above zero. Imagine, you live in Sahara, Libya, you come to Malta and you feel cold. But later we came to Lithuania... it is such a feeling when you realise that you cannot walk, as everything seems moving under your feet. Next day we went to Caritas or the Red Cross, we asked how people can live here as feet are burning from freeze... Shoes were open, people wear this kind of shoes in spring. Since then I was saying that winter is beautiful only on TV screen. But actually I do like winter, we go sledging, it is a real fun.

I.S.: What Lithuania did you see when you came and what do you see now, after 10 years? What changes? How did your relationships with people change?

E.M.: Changes start from a person. If the situation is not changing, you have to change your attitude to the situation. If one day I did not dare to take kids by sledges instead of a bus, I would not have learned to enjoy winter. Changes start from you. I can tell that Lithuania has changed, though somebody may say that it has not. But I changed as a person being here. Every country, every culture teaches you, enriches you and you change. For example, when I just came I thought that Lithuanians are closed, cold, but now I understand that people simply do not smile in winter. You have to know culture to



understand that people are not what may look from outside – Lithuanians are not cold. You have to learn a person. To learn culture.

I.S.: Try to weigh – what is more important? To teach refugees to adapt themselves or to teach society to accept them?

E.M.: There are many countries, cultures, people in the world – life is too short to learn all them. But I think it would be enough for everyone to learn to be open. I remember one conversation with a skinhead in Panevezys. Sharp conversation. He looked at me with hatred and contempt. It was not a nice behaviour. I asked him why he hated me. He said: first, learn to speak correctly, then you can ask me anything. I said to him if you do not accept me and teach me, how can I learn anything? It was a harsh conversation, but when we finished he was no longer angry at me, as he had no reason to be angry, he was angry at emigrants who come have babies and flee. One can learn hatred, same as love. At that time I could have ignored his hatred. But I think we both changed after the conversation, learned something. I understand that not all skinheads know why they are skinheads. He will probably change in the future. On the other hand, I think that he realised that there are people who do not accept unreasonable hatred, they want to hear arguments. Maybe he will have a sound argument next time. We need to help both sides to talk to each other. Of course, I demand from myself more than from society. Because it was me who came, it is easier for me to change, to understand. Instead of closing up, be angry for not being understood.

I.S.: Eskedar, do you feel yourself a part of the Lithuanian society today, do you feel accepted, that you could represent Lithuanians?

E.M.: When you go mushroom picking every summer, I think you really are a part of this society. There are things that are characteristic for Lithuania only, which do not exist in my culture, like making potato dumplings. I even teach my children to speak Lithuanian rather than my mother tongue. The world is one. There are no walls that separate people. That is why I do not feel different than you. That was my argument to the skinhead – one blood runs in my and your veins. The same blood group. Either in a black or any other person.

I.S.: You have three children. Do you children feel accepted in the society? Today we do not talk enough about children, their integration.



E.M.: That's a difficult question. We often discuss it in our family. We are scared that our children would not be mocked at. Every child can encounter bullying at school, especially who is different, smaller than others, or taller than others, or darker than others. My little daughter suffered from bullying. I tried to teach her to change the opinion of the person who is bullying her just for looking different. A week ago we met a little girl who told my daughter that her mum told her that people with dark skin are devils. The girl was eight or nine, born in England. They talked a lot and later my daughter told me that the girl changed her opinion and said even if her mum says so, she does not believe that. Yes, we will have to face it. But children will change the situation. We live in an open society, global world. I believe that they will change the situation.

I.S.: What would you recommend about changing the situation in educational establishments? I will tell you one story: a brave, beautiful girl came to a nursery for the first time, but a few kids after seeing differently looking girl started to cry. For three days, as soon as they see her they cry. Why? Is it a lack of information, education? Because the situation is getting tense. How should teachers educate, change children's opinion and to raise global citizens?

E.M.: That's a difficult question. Education is important, but the main school is family. While children are young, they take values from their parents. You need to think what world you would like your children to grow in. You can change yourself for children's sake, to make society more open, harmonious. The role of education is important, but family is the most important thing.

I.S.: What future do you see for your children in Lithuania? What are your plans? Refugee's integration takes seventeen years...

E.M.: Seventeen years are long and not long at the same time. I do not know what the future will bring. I am here today. And while I am here, I will try to learn everything I can. I thought that I already know Lithuania, but recently we travelled in Panemune, visited fort hills, castles, it's so beautiful and so many places to discover. I do not know how long it will take. I will always keep my values, that the most important things are humanity, sympathy and help to a person, whatever he would be by his history, origin, language, culture, or religion. But I do not know where the future will take me to.

Question from the audience: You mentioned that refugee's status lasts seventeen years. What does it mean for a person to have such status?



E.M.: It is not a status actually, but it is average term of being a refugee. I have been in Lithuania for ten years and I already can apply for Lithuanian citizenship. Then it would be safe for me even to go back to Ethiopia. Because I am no longer Ethiopian citizen and Ethiopian state would have less power over me, as Lithuania would protect me. But a person can be scared and never go back. Being a refugee takes seventeen years on average.

I.S.: Yest, surveys were conducted showing that a person's life in exile takes about seventeen years, that's why the United Nations constantly highlight that people cannot be kept in refugees asylums for long. There are people who live like that for ten, fifteen years. Let's say Syrian situation – Syrians are fleeing to Jordan, Lebanon. Every third person is a Syrian, but they cannot be kept closed in asylums. We have to create conditions for refugees' children to go to schools, to acquire knowledge, so that they could be engineers, teachers, lawyers when they grow up, one day they will have to go back to Syria, to restore the state of Syria, to restore schools, legal system. That is why we cannot keep them in refugees' asylums, as exile lasts not one or two but seventeen years on average.

Question from the audience: What is more important for refugees – sympathy or help?

I.S.: We should put an equality sign between these two words. They are equivalent. Without sympathy, there will be no help. One needs to put his heart into relationship with a person, into understanding. One thing when an educated person comes, who knows languages, has a profession, the other thing when a person who suffered from heart-breaking losses, or injured, or probably with disability comes, their integration process is different. You cannot help without sympathy, while integration without help is impossible.

E.M.: I agree. Help can also be understood in two ways. Some need an opportunity to be given, so that they could realise themselves.

I.S.: I have a question for the audience. Why are Lithuanians scared of refugees? Many Lithuanians emigrate, they travel, work, study, have families abroad, but they think about Lithuania as their own flat, they just leave and lock the door. Polls are astonishing: over 70 per cent of Lithuanians do not agree to accept refugees. They do not want to work together, to live in neighbourhood. What determines such attitude?



Reply from the audience: Lots of young people who are not scared of refugees went away, while elderly people are scared as they do not know what kind of people they are. Elderly people are more closed.

E.M.: I do not agree that elderly people are more closed. I do not think that elderly people determine this result of the polls. I have a friend who is older. My children call her nanna. She is over sixty, we go mushroom picking to her place in Ignalina every year. She was born in exile, in Siberia. I learned much about Lithuanians' deportations to Siberia from her. But could today's school age kids in Lithuania tell anything about the Lithuanian exiles, their experience? Not much talks about exile in public sphere. I have another neighbour who grew up in Siberia. And they accept me as I am, they do not think that I am an alien, immigrant.

Question from the audience: Eskedar, what do you do now?

E.M.: A person has many roles. I am mum, wife, teacher, lecturer, businesswoman, traveller and humanitarian, public life participant. I like what I do. Lithuania gave me all this.

Question from the audience: Ilma, do you receive any reproaches regarding your activities, for example, why you save refugees' children, maybe you should better help Lithuanian children?

I.S.: Yes, constantly, but the answer is simple – I live in global Lithuania, the world is moving and migration is unavoidable. That is one answer. When I have to deal with state institutions, public organisations, politicians and I have about priority to be given to Lithuanians, I say: if we really care about our children, we should focus our special attention on integration of refugees and their children. And it applies not only to refugees but to everyone moving into Lithuania. We have to learn to accept them, to show how we make our potato dumplings, to help them to understand us. Integration without interaction of two communities is impossible. Opinion is being formed now that it is responsibility of non-governmental organisations or state. That is not true. Integration is responsibility of society. Every person must make his own contribution, like showing direction to the city, clinic, or simply asking how others are doing, if everything is understandable, just being hospitable. We are happy to see Lithuanians accepted in England, that they find jobs in Norway, that they study in Italy or Spain, we have to try our best to accept people coming to Lithuania in the same way. We are a global country. Our decision to join the European Union proves that as well. Now we have to prove it by actions rather than by talks.