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“I live like these animals, like the bats… only at the night”

Interview with Simo conducted by Birgit Mennel

Simo Kader

Translated by Jason Francis Mc Gimsey

Simo is 28 years old and has lived for about 10 years in Europe where he has tried in vain to gain legal status in states like Italy, Switzerland and Austria. Simo speaks Darija, Arabic, Italian and French among others. This interview was recorded in French and edited for publication.

Can you first tell me why you wanted to leave Morocco and how your departure was?

In Morocco, I played soccer and when our team was invited to play a match in France, it was a great occasion for me. This because I didn’t live in one of the Moroccan cities that are next to Spain. Take Tangiers, for example: it’s only 7 km from Spain, so for the

people who live in Tangiers it's a little bit easier to leave the country. But for me, it was a bit more difficult because I lived in a city 50 km outside Casablanca. And when I realized I wanted to leave the country, I knew that I'd need a good sum of money for the trip. So, that match in Bordeaux fell into place perfectly, that's why I said it was a good occasion. I came directly to France and then I traveled to Italy.

But your decision to leave didn't just fall from the sky, did it?

Of course not! I wanted to leave the country for a long time. In Morocco, I didn't see any future for myself. I played soccer, I worked sometimes, but I didn't see any future. Most of the time I did nothing, I had nothing to do. And even if you do work there, for example when playing soccer, you only live day to day. You only think about today and tomorrow, but you can't think or even see a future, because in Morocco, in Africa – the future doesn't exist. You live day to day, and you don't earn more than what it takes to but cigarettes and eat. So, I talked with my family, and I told them that I wanted to leave the country. They told me that I didn't know France; and then they wished me good luck, and that it was my life and that I wasn't a child anymore.

So when I came (here in Europe), I didn't imagine living the life I live now. I thought I'd continue playing sports. I always wanted to play soccer, that was my idea, playing soccer. But I didn't find the chance – because of the documents. I imagined finding a team to play soccer with. In 2010, for example, I played with a team in Salzburg, because that team accepted me even with just a "white card". But I could only participate in the training, not in the regular matches. So since I didn't have papers, I couldn't continue to play for the team. Because I only had the "white card", the

asylum card. So you see: that card means nothing, you are nothing with that card.

How old were you when you left?

I don't remember, maybe 20 or 21 years old.

Did you ever talk with your friends in Morocco about wanting to leave?

No, with no one.

So you didn't know anyone else who wanted to leave?

Of course. A lot of my friends wanted to leave for Europe.

And why Europe? What did you expect to find in Europe?

Europe, it's quite simply because Europe is next to Morocco.

If not, would not have gone to Canada, for example?

Canada, that's something else, because its far and the trip costs a lot. And plus, I don't know the country's mentality; I do understand the mentality of Europeans. I don't know, I didn't want to risk living with Canadians or Americans. I have a brother in Canada who can't easily return to Morocco, because he owes the bank and he can't find the means to pay them back. Leaving for Canada or America is also another possibility... There is no future in Morocco and in the United States or Canada or even Europe, you see people who are rich, who live life well. And for us, we

don't have any of that. So, you start to think of leaving for elsewhere to find a good life. For me, I went to Europe because, as a Moroccan, I knew the European mentality.

What did you do before applying for asylum in Austria? You said you'd come to Austria in 2010, years after you had already been in Europe. What did you do all those years?

When I was in Italy, I had an apartment, I worked. Italy is Italy. But you see, the work that I did down there, in Milan for example... Do you know Milan? I ask because, down there, there are only people working under the table, there are a lot who work above all with... hash, cocaine, in short, all the drugs. Often, that's the only kind of work that you can find in Italy if you are *sans-papiers*.

I started with that kind of work, because I didn't know anyone who could give me a regular job; first I was in other cities in Italy looking for a regular job in Italy, but I didn't have any luck, there was always the problem of being *sans-papiers*. So, since I didn't have family in Italy or in Europe and I was forced to do that kind of work to find the means to rent a house and to have at least a little bit of money. Doing that kind of work is easy and, at the same time, dangerous: it is easy to find the materials for that job, because most North Africans I met in Milan do it; and when you sell a lot, its good if you find other who sell that stuff for you in the streets, it's the first thing you do – sell in the streets, even if it is the most dangerous work at the same time.

On the contrary, here in Austria, since I am *sans-papiers*, I can't work at all, I can't find a regular job or even an under the table job. Without papers you can't do anything. That's why I need to forget,

because without work, without anything at all, you do things to pass the time because above all you must avoid thinking about the present moment. I don't want to constantly think about my problems anymore.

Economically, do you end up finding more or less the same situation here as in Morocco – only that you no longer live with your family and you always have problems with the police?

Look, if you want to earn 100 Euros in Morocco, you really have to work a lot and you have to be ready to do anything. Here, in Europe on the other hand, you can make 100 Euros easy – you run the risk and either you earn the money or you find yourself in prison. There isn't anyone who gives you 100 Euros like that. You have to do that work and whether you earn 100 Euros, 1000 Euros or 10,000 Euros depends on your clients. You only have to know what days to work, because the police aren't always around. And that's what you have to understand. With all my experience, because I've already fallen many times, like in Milan for example, where I sold drugs somewhere you can make a lot of money, but at the same time there are also big risks.

Did you try to obtain a legal status when you were in Italy?

Yes, I tried to find someone to marry me but I didn't apply for asylum because, in Italy, no one applies for asylum. The Italians don't give asylum to Moroccans, to North Africans, and you end up in the street. I lived in Italy for 8 years and I suffered the most there. I was in prison there, the first time for a year and five months, then for another eight months – afterwards, it just went on like that. I was in jail because of the kind of work I started to

do. The first time was hard, because in Morocco I had never been in prison. I didn't know how prison worked. But the second time I was experienced and I knew what to do and how to avoid problems with the other people inside; people who have raped women, people who have killed... you find all nationalities in prison, so you have to know how to behave with everyone. And you also have to know how to behave with the guards, who are mostly really racist – above all against North Africans: we are known for drug trafficking, you see it in the newspapers everyday, plus we are Muslim...

Now, I don't worry about documents or papers anymore and I don't think about money. Because I'm sick of it and really tired. I don't want anything at all. If you see the messages from my mother and father, I don't know... they've grown older and me too. The experience that I've had here in Europe has completely changed me. In Morocco, I was another person, I had friends, a family. Now, I live alone, I don't have a family. I don't know anyone.

You see what I'm saying? You, if you imagine going to Morocco without any money, without documents, *sans-papiers*, without knowing anything about it, without knowing the language. What would you do down there? 100% you'd do something, I don't know what exactly, but you would start, for example, to steal, or deal to eat, to smoke or just to live.

What I most experienced in Italy was racism. Because North Africans in Italy only deal, that's clear. So, because of that, Italians are against North Africans, maybe not 100% but at least 50%. You see it in their gestures, the gestures of people that you meet. Me, as a Moroccan, I couldn't go into certain clubs, for example. At first, I didn't understand why, I didn't really get what the problem was. I had everything that was required, but I couldn't go into a club.

Don't you ever think about going back to Morocco since you don't really have any perspectives for regularizing yourself here in Europe?

What would I do down there? Look, I'll tell you again about the mentality. For me, returning to Morocco now would be difficult, most of all because of the Moroccan mentality. In Morocco, people don't have a very clear idea of what Europe is, of the suffering and the criminality. They still think that Europe is paradise. So, going back without anything, for me, would be really difficult. In Morocco, you live with your family and when you wake up, you mother or father gives you money for cigarettes, so you can buy what you want.

People don't have a very clear idea of what Europe is and they say whatever. They thing that everything is possible in Europe. But, after ten years in Europe, that perspective changes. And when you come back from Europe, they say "look at him, he spent ten years in Europe. Where are his papers, where is his car?" That's it, the Moroccan mentality: people see luxury cars and want the same, or even more... To tell you the truth, I don't see any future for me in Morocco. But here in Europe things are still possible for me, because I am still young.

Does you family need you?

It's normal to help your family out. But at the moment, here in Austria, I can't help my family. I did when I was in Italy and in Switzerland, yeah, because I could still earn a little money taking big risks. My family thinks I have a life here. When I talk with my family, no one understands me.

But, at the moment, my life is really complicated because I applied for asylum in Austria for the first time. So, if I want to go to another country, because I see no future here in Austria, its 100% sure that I'll be expelled to Austria because it's the first European country that took my fingerprints. That's not good for me. If, for example, I left to Denmark, I would only be there three or four months, and then they would send me back to Austria again.

After everything you've experience here, what do you still expect from Europe?

For the moment, I want to see my family, just that. I don't want anything for myself. I feel dead and alive at the same time. Only my mother, my father and my brothers and sisters count for me. I don't want anything for myself. But at the same time, I know that I can't go back home. I'm 28, so I can't live with my father and my mother anymore. I can't take their money to buy cigarettes. I would like a house and a decent life, I would like to do the things I like to do.

And what do you like to do?

I like to live peacefully. But here in Europe, I still have to search for this beautiful and peaceful life. For the moment, I live like an animal, like a bat. An animal that only lives at night. I always have to come up with something when I see the police so I don't have to talk to them, to avoid being checked. If not, I'll find myself in the "Schubhaft", the detention center, prison. Or I'll have to change countries. But right now, I only think about Austria. I don't know what will come after. For now, I'm in a more or less

“regular” situation here in Austria[1], and after I don’t know. If there are problems, I’ll leave the country.

My situation can be described like this: I live a shitty life, sorry for my language, but for the moment it’s really a shitty life. Currently, I am “regular” in Austria, ok. But I live in the streets, I sleep at the church, and I don’t know anything about the future.

How did you come upon the refugee protest camp here in Vienna?

A friend, I lived in a Heim (a foyer) with him in Vienna, told me that there were people helping others here. He didn’t talk to me about political things, he mostly talked about the space. I don’t like politics, I’m a normal person. But he told me that there were people who spoke German who could help me day to day. And that’s important for me, because I already have problems buying a pack of cigarettes because I don’t speak the language, I get by with gestures.

Would you say that this camp and the movement around the church have changed something for you?

Yes, it’s changed a lot. You know where to sleep and where to find people who can help you, if you need a shower, for example. That’s a great thing. It’s always better to be able to choose the place where you want to be. In the end, that’s how I live. And if I live in the streets, it’s also because I prefer this shitty life to another shitty life in house for asylum seekers.

[1] In 2012, Simo presented a new request for asylum after receiving a negative response from the first. In the meanwhile, he can still be put into detention and then be expelled to Morocco.