

**We Refugees**

Digital Archive on Refugeedom,  
Past and Present

# Experiences of Refugeedom, Past and Present

Curated collection of documents  
from the We Refugees Archive

# Imprint

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*“Escape can be an act of resistance. An empowerment. A departure. The refugee can be an actor, an activist, a rebel, someone who has snatched his life and the lives of his loved ones from the clutches of fate.”*

Ilja Trojanow, 2017

We Refugees Archive is a growing digital archive on refugeedom, past and present. It focuses on individual micro-histories and the city as a microcosm of refuge and new beginnings.

On the following pages, selected sources showcase historical and current experiences of refugees in different cities for the sake of giving people a voice and agency back.

**On the possibilities and impossibilities of comparing historical and current experiences of flight**

We Refugees Archive approaches continuities and breaks in individual experiences of people who have fled to different cities today and in the past.

Drawn from self-testimonies, poems, texts and photos about and from Vilnius and Paris in the 1930s as well as today's Palermo and Berlin, their experiences of flight, of new beginnings and with support networks, their visions for the future and questions of identity provide insights into continuities and discontinuities.

**What's in a name?**

The We Refugees Archive refers to Hannah Arendt's 1943 article by the same name. Arendt's ideas about forced migration and lawlessness that she developed in "We Refugees" and other writings and based on her own experience as a Jewish refugee and stateless person for over a decade are still relevant for experiences of flight and refugeedom today and only gain in urgency.

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# **The Decision** to Flee and Experiences of Flight

*“A refugee used to be a person driven to seek refuge because of some act committed or some political opinion held. Well, it is true we have had to seek refuge; but we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical political opinion.”*

Hannah Arendt, 1943

The great variety of reasons that lead people to leave their homes and flee becomes especially apparent on the biographical level. Flight is usually carried out in stages and can often last for years. At best people eventually find a place where they feel safe and can imagine a future.

The panic-stricken and sudden flight of many Jews from their Polish homes escaping the invading German Wehrmacht eastward to the still neutral and safe Vilnius in the autumn of 1939 differs in many respects from the flight experiences and persistently insecure and desperate situations described by young refugees in Palermo or elsewhere today. Structural violence and hopelessness, as well as persecution of people on political, racial, religious, or ethnic grounds or because they belong to a certain social group is pervasive. And the social perception of what makes a person a „refugee“ changes just as much as the legal basis of the concept and its consequences. Refugeeedom is always constructed and mutates in different historical, national and soci-

al contexts.

In most cases, the lack of authorized and protected routes for people on the run means that they must expose themselves to risks to life and limb in order to reach a safe haven. The traumata experienced en route often haunt refugees for life. And they are further encapsulated in certain spatial phenomena that symbolize both the existential experiences of refugees and their wish to move on and the political tendency to push back: these include the Mediterranean and so-called **No Man's Lands**, which came into being during the Second World War as lawless dead ends in border areas. The area near Suwałki on the former border between occupied Poland and still unoccupied Lithuania is just one example among many. **No Man's Lands** and dead ends are still emerging in Europe and worldwide today: lawless non-places, where refugees are forced to hold out for an indefinite time and under life-threatening conditions.



# Why do people flee?

“In the first days of the month December, the Germans suddenly issued a decree that the Jews should store up food for three days. In the city [Suwałki], there was a turmoil. One did not know what this meant. I went into the city in order to go shopping but on the way I noticed how the German police led Jews, Jewish women and children. The turmoil got even bigger. People started saying that all Jews will be expelled from the city and sent away to the Lublin Reservation. I immediately returned home and started preparing myself and the children for our flight. Soon, the Christian woman from next door came running to me and said that the Germans are already coming for me. I managed to escape with my children from the apartment through the backdoor and hid in the basement.”

Pese R., 1940

“We both grew up in the midst of civil war without a government. We always saw soldiers with guns and checkpoints. Parents were always worried, you were sure to go out in the morning but not sure to come back in the evening. A lot happened in my family, even my father left one morning and never came back. My brother went to university one morning and never came back. I was in this situation all my life, for eighteen years. I often thought about the possibility of dying and I stayed alive instead. For example, when I went to school one day, they opened fire in the bus I was riding in. A person near me died, I felt the warmth of his blood. I thought I was hurt and I went outside. You don’t get to tell all this the way we went through it. You could die for no reason. That’s the reason why I left.”

A., 2009

“Let me say something. All those who have taken this way to get here have not done so for pleasure! If you took this upon yourself, it’s because you couldn’t live in your country anymore. If someone asks me for information about the journey, I am sincere and say that they escape death with it, but face another mortal danger on the way through the Sahara and across the sea.”

Giovanni, 2008



# On the Run

“Every escape is planned clandestinely. At home everything is kept secret from one’s confidants, en route everything is entrusted to the random fellow travelers. During the flight, groups are set up, alliances are formed, information and basic foods are exchanged. Accompanied by swallows. Later on, the loneliness sets in. On the run – a community; afterwards – an individual. Each in a different way, on their own.”

Ilija Trojanow, 2017

“The night sank as always into their nocturnal home, everything darkened, soon completely dark. [...] But the night eclipse had no power today: on both sides of the road you could see fire, far and near, villages and shtetlekh [Yiddish term for villages in Eastern Europe mostly inhabited by Jews before the Shoah] were burning. [...] On both sides we saw the fires and thought: The illuminations of the twentieth century. There you have all the dreams of equality, peace, a better man [...]. We had the feeling that we had left a cemetery behind us ... Not much strength remains after such a day, especially not faith. First, you have the idea of selfish suicide. Going away, escaping from this terrible misfortune, going away, escaping at all costs. Don’t look around, don’t think, don’t feel and don’t sympathize. But afterwards, when you are already in minor danger, then the question comes up: What’s it worth all the rescuing? You run to the world when the world is a wild animal ...”

Zusman Segalovitsh, 1947

# Flight and Trauma

“One day we will find a language for this. A way to fit it all in the mouth then swallow into the folds of history. There will no longer be the torn photograph, the rusted spoon, the broken cigarettes, the woman’s body floating in a sinking boat. That child, face down in the sand, will disappear. Remembering itself, the sea will no longer speak for the sky. Blue will simply turn back to blue. There will be no metaphors, only movement and land and documents and a tongue held still between dulled teeth. I don’t want to die in a language I cannot understand [...].”

Maaza Mengiste, 2019

“I know I feel that compared to the suffering others have gone through or are still going through, I should hide in a corner ... I know that quite well. But you have to collect the sufferings, the big and the small. Collect for the great chronicles of human suffering. Sufferings that make even hell itself seem pale – future generations should pass this on so that future generations can start living differently.”

Zusman Segalovitsh, 1947

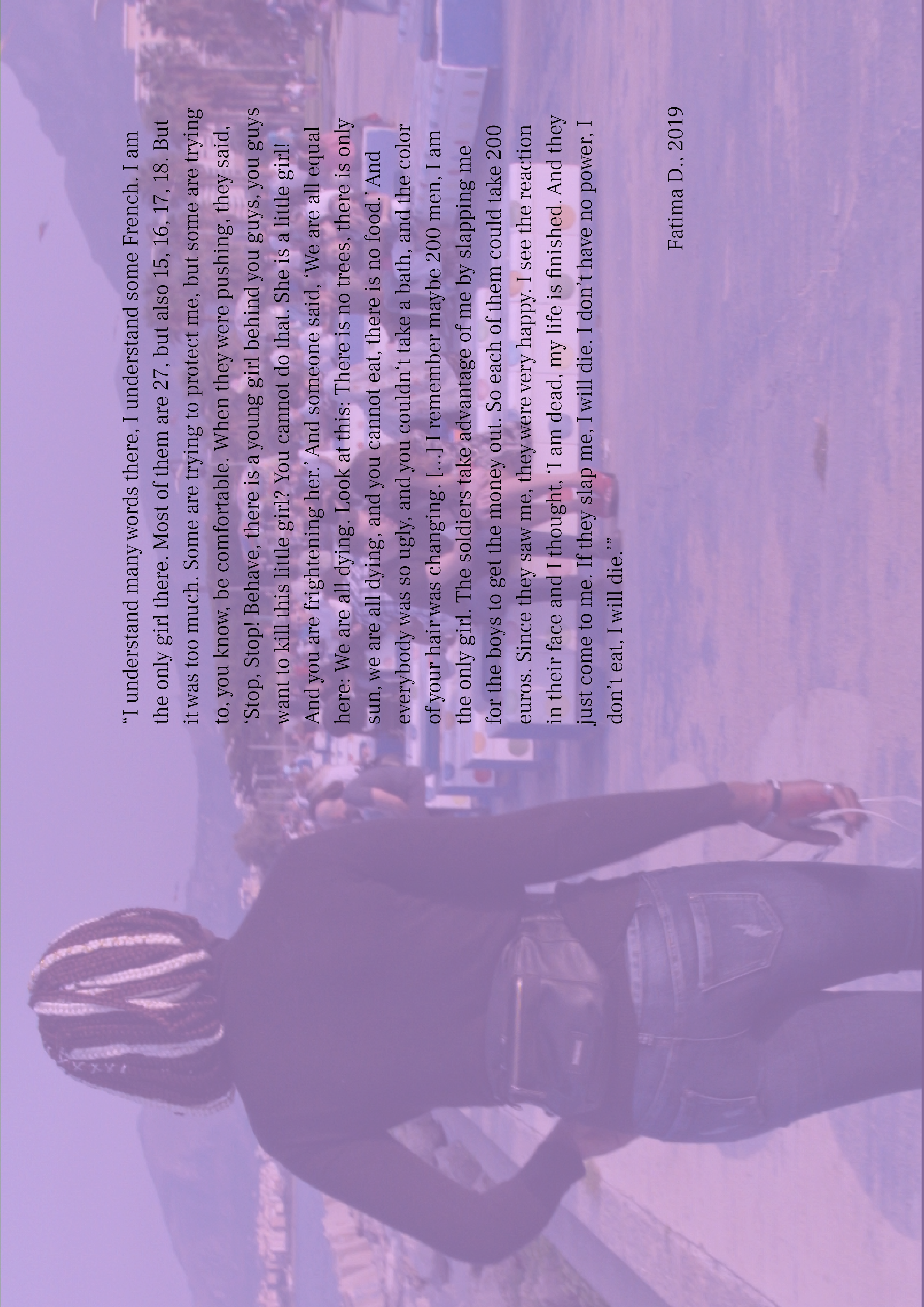
# Spaces of Flight and No Man's Lands

“We, on the other hand, who came to the Lithuanian border, wandered about ‘no man’s land’ for three weeks in horrible conditions. Kotlinska, an elderly lady, got ill and died there. We also buried her in ‘no man’s land.’ Blumberg, owner of a big glass-store, committed suicide, and his wife went insane from her sufferings. The dentist Shtern from Suwałki went insane, too.

At the Lithuanian border, the Germans arrested me and my daughter and they took all the money that I had and then sent us back to Suwałki.”

Pese R., 1940



A woman with dark hair, wearing a black turtleneck sweater and blue jeans, is walking away from the camera on a city street. She is holding a white cord in her right hand. The background shows a city street with buildings, trees, and other people. The image has a purple tint.

“I understand many words there, I understand some French. I am the only girl there. Most of them are 27, but also 15, 16, 17, 18. But it was too much. Some are trying to protect me, but some are trying to, you know, be comfortable. When they were pushing, they said, ‘Stop, Stop! Behave, there is a young girl behind you guys, you guys want to kill this little girl? You cannot do that. She is a little girl! And you are frightening her.’ And someone said, ‘We are all equal here: We are all dying. Look at this: There is no trees, there is only sun, we are all dying, and you cannot eat, there is no food.’ And everybody was so ugly, and you couldn’t take a bath, and the color of your hair was changing. [...] I remember maybe 200 men, I am the only girl. The soldiers take advantage of me by slapping me for the boys to get the money out. So each of them could take 200 euros. Since they saw me, they were very happy. I see the reaction in their face and I thought, ‘I am dead, my life is finished. And they just come to me. If they slap me, I will die. I don’t have no power, I don’t eat, I will die.’”

Fatima D., 2019

“We decided to leave Africa because we understood that our lives were at risk. Now we continued our journey.

Standing with two hundred women, men and children, we went across the desert in a pickup truck. We were sick, close to dying, but we were able to reach Libya. When we arrived in Tripoli, my second child was born. He was only five months old when we went across the Mediterranean Sea for eight days, along with 270 people.

We arrived in Lampedusa two weeks before the October 3, 2013 in a shipwreck in which so many people like us, and children as small as ours, lost their lives. Our boat was also about to sink but we were lucky that help arrived in time. I have a beautiful memory of our arrival on the island: generous people, kind rescuers. But it was all very brief.”

Yurdanus, 2019

## **The Water**

To Bassem and Doa, for their love,  
and their bravery.

For the one of them who drowned.

(Tell It)

The Water carried my body.

The Water didn't carry my body, it was  
my body

carried

the Water.

(Tell It)

When the sea is calm, the boats keep coming,

When the summer ends, the boats don't stop.

Shipwrecks begin.

(Tell It)

Malta mon amour, how many shoeless bodies  
at the bottom of the sea?

(Tell It)

Sublimation is when solid turns to gas,  
without becoming liquid

I wish I died like that, without becoming Water.

Jehan Bseiso, 2019

# Questions of Identity: Continuities and Ruptures



*“Our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are.”*

Hannah Arendt, 1943

Identity is individual and multiple by nature. It is constantly in flux and the sum of various complementary, contradictory, breaking and ongoing influences. This is true for everyone – refugee or not.

For most people, however, flight means a life-changing rupture, the consequences of which have a decisive influence on life at the place of refuge. This rupture is usually accompanied by a (partial) loss of the social status one had in society before the flight. At the place of arrival, people lose control over who they are perceived as by their environment.

When refugees try to build a new life, then and now, most are unable to proceed seamlessly with

what was previously acquired and accomplished. For most people, however, the separation from family, friends as well as the uncertainty about their and one's own fate is at least as consequential as the loss of status, job and property.

Flight, however, is not a one-way street and ruptures are not inevitably insuperable. Refugees' identities are, however, characterized by a reciprocal dynamic between self-image and external reduction. The own perception of identity is confronted with the structural and systemic disenfranchisement, discrimination, and the dictates of integration to which refugees are subjected. Any approach to the question of refugees' identities must confront the above.

# What does it **mean** to be a “refugee”?

“In the first place, we don’t like to be called ‘refugees’.”

Hannah Arendt, 1943

“The fugitive is usually an object.

A problem that must be solved. A number. A matter of expense. A point. Never a comma. Because he/she is no longer erasable, he/she must remain a thing.

There is life after the flight. But the flight acts upon oneself for a lifetime. Regardless of individual imprints, of guilt, consciousness, intention, desire.

The refugee is a human category of its own.”

Ilija Trojanow, 2017

“Initially, I didn’t want to be two things in Germany: Jugo [sometimes derogatory term for people from former Yugoslavia] and refugee. [...] I wanted to learn German even better, so that the Germans in my presence wouldn’t have to be at pains to hide the fact that they thought I was stupid. So every now and then I would tell new acquaintances that I came from Slovenia. The Alpine republic had been in the headlines the least and, I hoped, I would be seen more as a skier than as a victim.”

Saša Stanišić, 2019

“We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.”

Hannah Arendt, 1943

“I am at this moment without documents in Palermo and there is nothing I haven’t done to integrate myself, the language, the social activities, artistic things, I have done everything. But at the same time, I am on the side of those who do bad things and they are denied the documents, and I am on that side, but I have done everything. I have helped people, I have helped myself, I have integrated myself in every way, 360 degrees. But I am without documents, just because I don’t have a passport. So my identity is no longer that of Diawara B., all the work I have done to integrate no longer counts. My identity will always remain that of the migrant.”

Diawara B., 2019

# Is arrival possible?

“Warsaw. Shouldn’t I be ashamed to say it? It’s hard for me to mention it, but how many times have I wept in exile for my home town since I left it? Today, once again, my eyes filled with tears when I listened to a detailed and extensive message from Warsaw.

Some twenty years of social activity in Warsaw. I know every stone there. Everything in me was feverish when they told me about it. What is happening there? [...]

I record the news from there only because in the future, if I live to see it, I will be able to check how news reached us. It is characteristic of the situation and of the sad state we find ourselves in.

Isolated from the world and cut off from the milieu that was dear to us.”

Herman Kruk, 1941

“If we are saved we feel humiliated, and if we are helped we feel degraded. We fight like madmen for private existences with individual destinies, since we are afraid of becoming part of that miserable lot of *schnorrers* whom we, many of us former philanthropists, remember only too well. Just as once we failed to understand that the so-called *schnorrer* was a symbol of Jewish destiny and not the *schlemiel*, so today we don’t feel entitled to Jewish solidarity; we cannot realize that we by ourselves are not so much concerned as the whole Jewish people.”

Hannah Arendt, 1943

“When I prepare zighinì, I relive many pleasant and painful memories. All the familiar smells, the faces of loved ones. I think of my brother who is no longer with us, my father whose fate I don’t know, my sister who lives in Canada and my husband whose whereabouts are still unknown to us.”

Yurdanus, 2014

# Identity and Language

## **The Slight Difference**

Thus spoke to Mr. Goodwill  
A German emigrant:  
“Of course, it stays the same  
If I say **Land**, not land,  
If I say home, not **Heimat**,  
and poem for **Gedicht**.  
Of course, I’m very happy:  
But I am not **glücklich**.”

Mascha Kaléko, ca. 1938



New Beginnings and  
Visions for **the Future**

*“In order to rebuild one’s life one has to be strong and an optimist.”*

Hannah Arendt, 1943

People flee not only to escape any kind of life-threatening danger. Flight implies a future, a look ahead, where the hope for a safe arrival is combined with the individual will for a new beginning and concrete visions for the future. Hannah Arendt already pointed to the etymological core of the German word Zukunft (“future”), which literally carries the movement of coming-up-to-someone. She thus signaled the potentiality of a radical freedom through mobility, which is inscribed in the concept of the future itself. Thus, that which lies ahead of someone does not necessarily accrue from or is determined by the past, but rather builds on the individual to actively participate in shaping his/her and the collective’s not-yet.

This migratory time continuum, however, is often hampered by almost insurmountable obstacles of the present. Refugees often spend years in a state of uncertainty and forced inactivity and suffer from legal discrimination, racism and the indoctrinated feeling of a debt to the host society. Thus, the possibilities for a new beginning and building something for oneself are often subjected to extremely different and uncontrollable conditions, which in turn depend on temporal, spatial, political and individual criteria. Social access via language, education, community and mutual cultural recognition remains of fundamental importance.

# Hopes

“The refugee doesn’t have to be a stranger to the fullest extent to lose himself. He does not have to get lost to get lost. [...] While he integrates himself, ergo standing in line, trying not to attract attention, spasmodically concentrated, not dancing out of line, he longs for arrival, the utopia of all refugees.”

Ilija Trojanow, 2017

“When I came here, I expected so much: it’s Europe, it’s the world in which human rights are operative and respected. I thought I’d have peace, could develop my ideas and have the right to study. But unfortunately, I was disappointed because when I arrived, they took us to a sort of cage, which was surrounded by military. A minor in a cage, a prison, lacking even the right to breathe clean air!”

Diawara B., 2019

“Every refugee has already made himself a home, found a roof over his head, received some clothes, had lunch in an auxiliary kitchen, participated in the second round of registration ... The refugee’s teething troubles are far from over and he is far from standing on his own feet. [...]

The telegraph department of the post office was always full, overcrowded, one envied the next. Why? One doesn’t really know why, but for the time being one envies the other:

- He telegraphed to America.

- There you see, this one got a telegram from Palestine. Each of them wanted to do what the other did. Each thought that he himself had been made a fool and the other knew better.

Here you live on the fact that everyone builds up his own glimmer of hope:

- An uncle in America ...
- A brother in Argentina ...
- A certificate ...
- An affidavit ...”

Herman Kruk, 1940

# Acting in a New Language

“We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.”

Hannah Arendt, 1943

“The first thing you can do is to strive for language, without language you cannot communicate. I don’t think school is the only way to learn Italian. You can also get a job, learn a trade. I also worked in agriculture and learned Italian there.

Since I arrived in Italy, I have lived in Palermo. I can say that Palermo is my city. [...] I thought about how this place could speak to me. When I talk to Italians, they help me, but how can I do the same? To understand is the most important thing. I understood that I must go to school. I went there again for eight months and finished my terza media [comparable to High School in Italy].”

Marrie S., 2019

“When you are born in a country where your parents are foreigners, you also lose pieces of your name; my name is Igiaba Ali Omar Scego, but when my father went to write the name for the documents, Ali Omar disappeared, so for everybody now I’m Igiaba Sciego, a bit strange. By Somali tradition I am not Igiaba Sciego, I’m Alì Omar Sciego. So I discovered that here in Italy, besides the fact that you do not remember the name of the foreigner, you also lose the name ... And then in Italy they also tend to change your name. I remember that my brothers never called them by their names: Mohamed was called Amedeo and [...] they called him Bucatini, like pasta. I never understood why but all the neighbors called him like that.”

Igiaba Sciego, 2009

“Through his name he becomes conspicuous – because others think they can grasp him by his name. In distant countries, some refugees cut off some consonants from their own name. Arriving requires that you secure a simple pronunciation of your name. Or to put up with another pronunciation. Getting used to it. In order not to be losing your name completely. [...]”

Ilija Trojanow, 2017



# Should I Stay or Should I Go?

“In the accommodations of the Jews, too, no joy could be found. They learned Lithuanian but no longer believed in the stability of the new circumstances. Various rumors were passed from mouth to ear. Each day has its own rumor. Each day has its own fear. [...] But the fear did not subside and the suffering continued to grow. The Jews of Vilnius knew that they were the only ones left of the whole of Polish Jewry and that a miracle had saved them, but they did not know what tomorrow would bring and they did not believe that they could stay in peace. Worried and frightened, they roamed about.”

Benzion Benshalom, 1943/44

“Quite a number of refugees have done nothing at all but looking for ways to flee on somehow. Passports were given to all of them. The visa problem was also solved quickly: on many streets of Vilnius new “consuls” had been established, who usually issued visas for all countries of the world for a small fee. Almost all the ambassadors in Kovno were also happy to issue exit visas... At that time, many refugees even escaped from Vilnius via Vladivostok to Japan; via Odessa to Palestine etc. The refugees sold everything just to get the necessary money in valid dollars to pay the travel expenses. [...]

In these days I often talked with Noyekh about fleeing on, many refugees now decided in favor of. Of course, we were also afraid of possible retaliation given our former activities in Poland. [...]

Furthermore, where should I go now? To America? And there be sentenced to plead with Ab Cahan and others. I have been to America and know what Yiddish life looks like there. That is no place for me.”

Mendel Balberyszski, 1967

# (Missing) Perspektives

“We too have a task. In the meantime, while we live in the reception centers, we should strengthen ourselves and go to school. There are people who do nothing but eat and sleep. It is true that there are conditions that drive you to do nothing. We all need someone, someone to encourage us to do things here.”

Marrie S., 2019

“We are without money. Without friends. Without connections. Without hope. No carfare. No shoes. No medicine for Stephen. School won't keep him if we can't pay. Bloody money. It's humiliating not to have any. Oh, how the friends distance themselves, like from a plague. Mediocrity is usually associated with ruthlessness. Chemjo is a genius. He is quixotic. He can only make music. No business. Oh! Dearest Chemjo! Having money is not nice. But not having money is terrible. A bank account is a great way to prevent depression. [...] And we have to pack, soon we won't have a place to live either. We've never been 'refugees' as we are now.”

Mascha Kaléko, 1940

“We were all melancholic when the train entered the well-known Vilnius station. Behind us lay a difficult wandering, a war gambled away and our own burnt yesterday. A dark future lay ahead of us, the prospect of a bitter exile and an indefinite morning. The only thing that warmed our hearts was the great hope for the future victory of the widely ramified allies over Hitler’s black forces.”

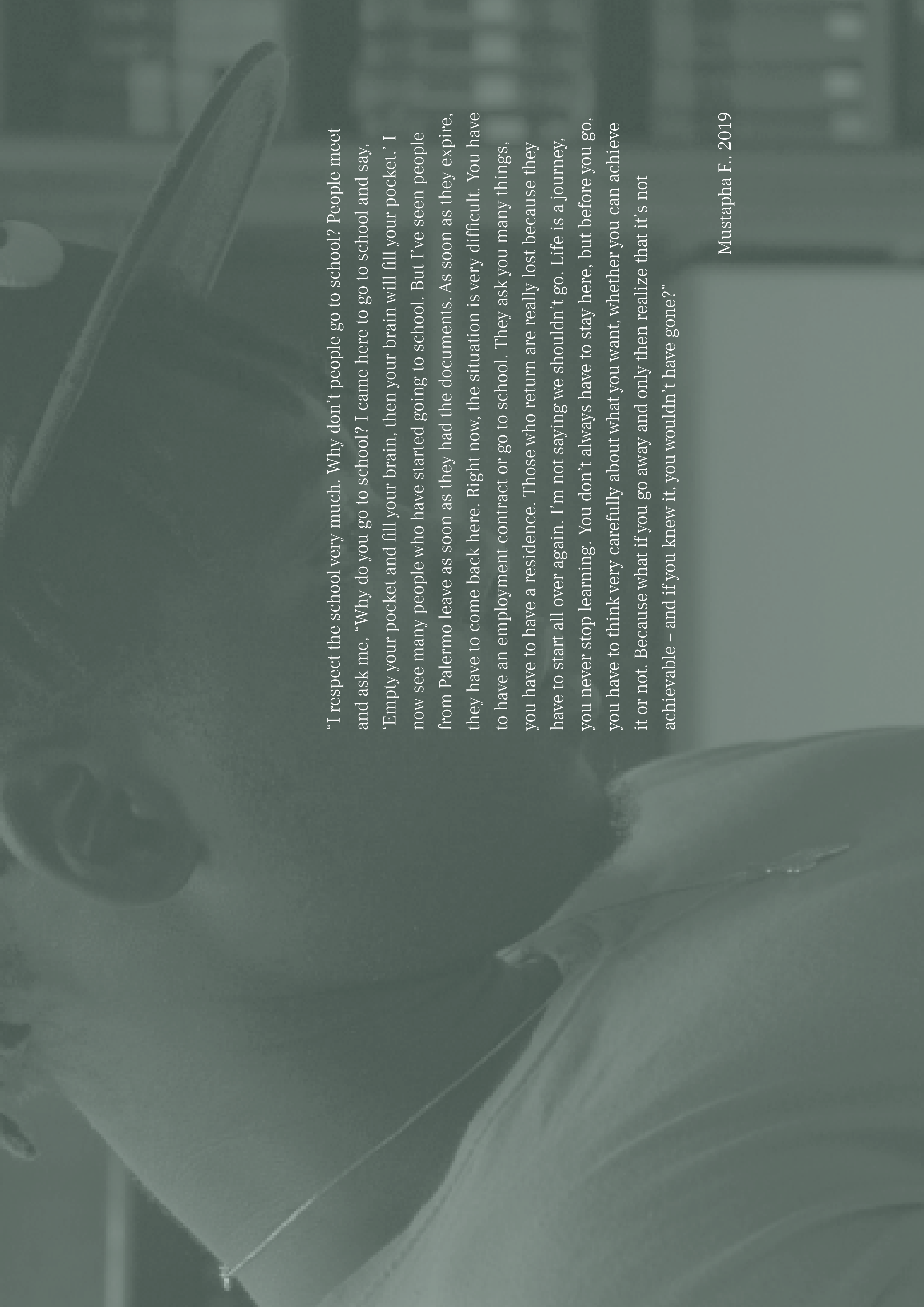
Pinkhxas Shvarts, 1943

“There are no words for my suffering. This day has turned me into an old man. No, not an old man. I want to be young, strong, and persevering. To make it through – I want to and will make it through!

Everything is really lost. This is how I think when I hold the ticket I paid for at “Intourist” [the official Soviet international tourist agency] for the Kovno-Vladivostok train. No more going to America. The Bolsheviks saw to that. All they’ve got for me is a piece of advice: either to go to the Polish Legion in Canada and from there inform for them [...] or to procrastinate for six months until [...] until I am among those submitted to the trials of the German Huns.

Unless some miracle happens, everything is really lost. What is happening around us makes clear that, first of all, we are hostages of Germany. It’s the beginning of a new era, perhaps the hardest of my life. I put myself in the hands of fate and wear the yellow patch, as Christ wore the crown of thorns.”

Herman Kruk, 1941



“I respect the school very much. Why don't people go to school? People meet and ask me, “Why do you go to school? I came here to go to school and say, ‘Empty your pocket and fill your brain, then your brain will fill your pocket.’ I now see many people who have started going to school. But I've seen people from Palermo leave as soon as they had the documents. As soon as they expire, they have to come back here. Right now, the situation is very difficult. You have to have an employment contract or go to school. They ask you many things, you have to have a residence. Those who return are really lost because they have to start all over again. I'm not saying we shouldn't go. Life is a journey, you never stop learning. You don't always have to stay here, but before you go, you have to think very carefully about what you want, whether you can achieve it or not. Because what if you go away and only then realize that it's not achievable – and if you knew it, you wouldn't have gone?”

Mustapha F., 2019

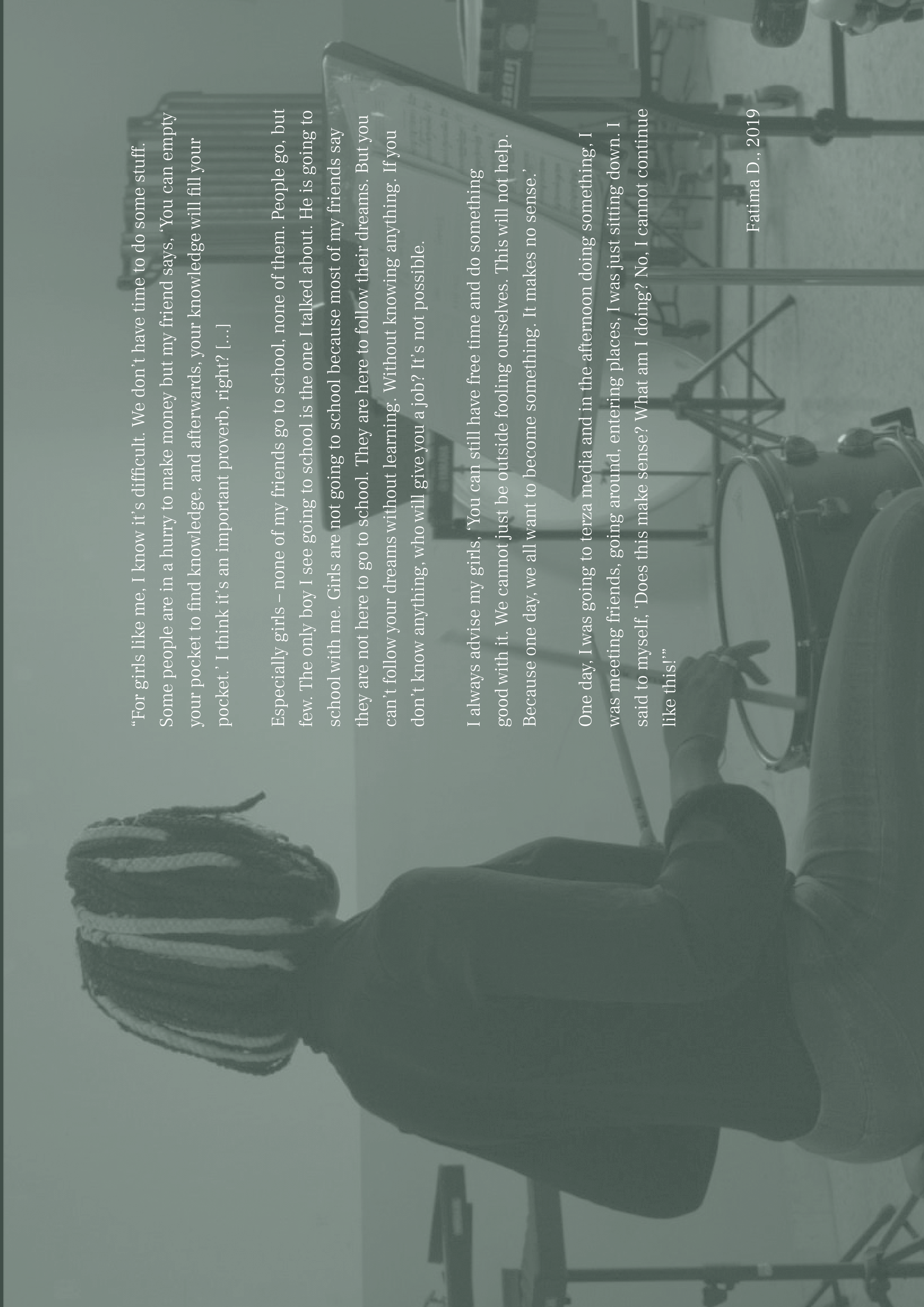


# “How can you follow your dreams without learning?”

## Fatima D., 2019

“A class in the gymnasium of war refugees – so far, suitable desks of the school type have not been made ready for the students; that is why they have to do their written works with their notebooks and books laid on their knees.”

Inscription on the back of the picture



“For girls like me, I know it’s difficult. We don’t have time to do some stuff. Some people are in a hurry to make money but my friend says, ‘You can empty your pocket to find knowledge, and afterwards, your knowledge will fill your pocket.’ I think it’s an important proverb, right? [...]


Especially girls – none of my friends go to school, none of them. People go, but few. The only boy I see going to school is the one I talked about. He is going to school with me. Girls are not going to school because most of my friends say they are not here to go to school. They are here to follow their dreams. But you can’t follow your dreams without learning. Without knowing anything. If you don’t know anything, who will give you a job? It’s not possible.

I always advise my girls, ‘You can still have free time and do something good with it. We cannot just be outside fooling ourselves. This will not help. Because one day, we all want to become something. It makes no sense.’

One day, I was going to terza media and in the afternoon doing something, I was meeting friends, going around, entering places, I was just sitting down. I said to myself, ‘Does this make sense? What am I doing? No, I cannot continue like this!’”

Fatima D., 2019





“When I started studying I was very happy, that was what I wanted. I started to see things from a different perspective. My challenge was to learn the language quickly so that I could speak to people. The community I was in gave me the tools to get involved, they trusted me. I finished eighth grade, but my studies in my country are not recognized. Then I was able to go to a scientific high school, and that is thanks to the Waldensian center and also to the city. Many people supported me. ‘You’re a smart kid who wants to do good, we’ll help you!’ I studied in two schools at the same time. I started acting, I worked in a theatre production where I played the leading actor.”

Diawara B. 2019

**Support Networks**

*“Now ‘refugees’ are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by refugee committees.”*

Hannah Arendt, 1943

Support networks of and for refugees were and are of central importance for the initial period and further life after the flight and work then as well as now alongside and with each other. Since state support structures are often inadequate, a complex network of local, transnational and global, state and non-governmental, institutional and informal organizations and initiatives is often developed to provide material, psychological and legal assistance to refugees in order to facilitate, as far as possible, a fresh start.

The example of the Polish Jewish refugee community in Vilnius clearly shows how aid orga-

nizations interlink their support network with a central coordination office in such a way that aid could be mobilized, if not smoothly, then at least productively for the emergence of self-help structures. The importance of civil society support initiatives and networks, in which local politics and administration, religious communities and charities join forces, is also evident today. The situation in the Sicilian capital Palermo demonstrates, for instance, the enormous importance of a local support infrastructure that lays the foundations for refugee collectives and for a self-confident migrant identity.

# Legalization

**Diawara B.:** “I have tried everything: to learn the language, to immerse myself in culture, to do everything to become a Palermitan as it should be. Because behind every right there is a duty. So, I tried to do my homework.

But the thing I didn’t understand is the fact that after doing all these things, the Palermo police headquarters refused to renew my residence permit just because I don’t have a passport. I have all the documents but only a few of my passports. So, in the end I didn’t understand: Am I from Palermo or am I not from Palermo? Many guys are in the same situation.”

**Leoluca Orlando:** “In this situation we must distinguish, we must distinguish between what is the responsibility of the Municipality and that of the police headquarters. The municipality is competent to give the registration and the registration according to the law. The current Salvini law tells the mayor that he must not give the registration, but I gave it nonetheless. We have signed hundreds of registry entries. By registering, one becomes visible and can access the residence permit. So, the basic theme is if you have a current registry entry in Palermo? If not, you must ask! If you ask, it is given to you. [...]”

**Diawara B.:** “This so-called Salvini decree which is then law has abolished humanitarian protection. Having abolished humanitarian protection, when I turn eighteen, the period in which I had protection as a minor will end. And in that moment, I become invisible. [...] Since this Salvini law in my opinion is against the Constitution. My competence of the Municipality is to give the registration to all those who had humanitarian protection when humanitarian protection expires. I give them permission with the personal registration, with which they can have a residence permit, they can have an employment contract with which they have a residence permit.”

Conversation between Diawara B.  
and the mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, 2019



# Solidarity

“I feel love for the person that advised me to go to school and not do certain things. I feel love for the person that rescued me from the sea.”

Marrie S., 2019

“I would like to emphasize that all the good that has happened to me does not mean that it happened only to me. Each of the refugees will be able to tell about the good deeds that other Jews from different circles in Lithuania have done for them. [...] According to the well-known saying that ‘one recognizes a friend in need’ – Jews in Kovner Lithuania have shown themselves to be warm, soulful, warm brothers. They understood – in the noblest way – how to alleviate the material hardships of their unhappy brothers and sisters from Poland. With extraordinary friendship, they endeavored to heal both the wounds of the heart and soul of those who had fled. [...] I recognized the Litvaks [Lithuanian Jews], both as individuals and collectively. I testify that they deserve the most honorable title – which sounds particularly proud in the terrible times of today – they were human beings!”

Moyshe Mandelman, 1951

“When I arrived in Palermo, I was sick and crazy. They rescued me, they took me to the hospital, cured me until I got myself back. This is big love: Someone who doesn’t know you, is not your parent, gives you food, a place to sleep – that is big love. I am very happy for the people in Palermo, for the entire Palermo and entire Italy. I don’t have any places to go, I am not going anywhere. My place is Palermo. [...] I am now a Palermitan!”

Kadija J., 2019

# Help for Self-Help

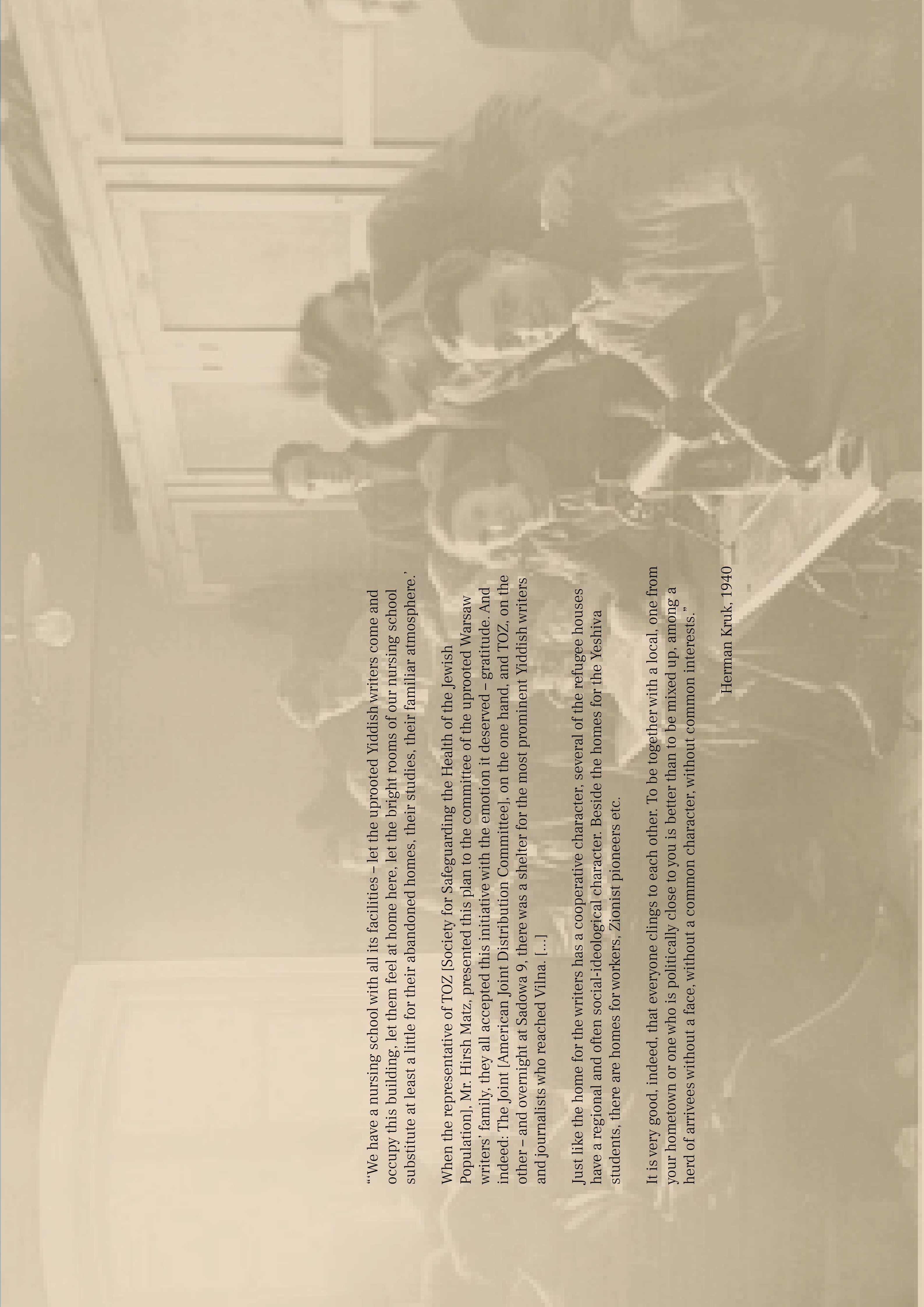
“I took this opportunity to be the person I am today. Today I am here, I speak the Italian language thanks to the opportunities I was given in Palermo. The school is like my home, I feel great. Here in the center of Astalli I was welcomed. They made me feel that I am not only a migrant who eats and sleeps, but they helped me to arrive here. I had a great time, I no longer live in the center of Astalli, but the doors are always open. I had a relationship with them that I always think about, some of them taught me proverbs, sayings and things that I like very much. It was very important to me, I showed them that I deserve their help.”

Mustapha F., 2019

“I myself also quickly made a connection, but not to American literature. Because I could speak English well, but between speaking English and writing in one language, I don’t need to explain to you what that means... Well, I got in contact with the emigrant paper, with the *Aufbau* [...] of Manfred Georg, yes. He knew me, I knew him from Berlin, from Ullstein [publishing house], I had often had something in his newspapers and he printed almost everything I sent him, only I didn’t send him so much, because I’m not a frequent writer, I’ve never been. But when I sent him something, I usually got such wonderful letters that there really was actually a status for me in emigration, you know, I wasn’t absolutely uprooted, because I wasn’t a German poet in Germany anymore, but I was a poet who wrote for emigrants in emigration and that was something.”

Mascha Kaléko, 1973





“We have a nursing school with all its facilities – let the uprooted Yiddish writers come and occupy this building, let them feel at home here, let the bright rooms of our nursing school substitute at least a little for their abandoned homes, their studies, their familiar atmosphere.’

When the representative of TOZ [Society for Safeguarding the Health of the Jewish Population], Mr. Hirsh Matz, presented this plan to the committee of the uprooted Warsaw writers’ family, they all accepted this initiative with the emotion it deserved – gratitude. And indeed: The Joint [American Joint Distribution Committee], on the one hand, and TOZ, on the other – and overnight at Sadowa 9, there was a shelter for the most prominent Yiddish writers and journalists who reached Vilna. [...]

Just like the home for the writers has a cooperative character, several of the refugee houses have a regional and often social-ideological character. Beside the homes for the Yeshiva students, there are homes for workers, Zionist pioneers etc.

It is very good, indeed, that everyone clings to each other. To be together with a local, one from your hometown or one who is politically close to you is better than to be mixed up, among a herd of arrivees without a face, without a common character, without common interests.”

Herman Kruk, 1940

“After the uprising, we were put into other centers, I was brought to Scicli. They saw that I wanted to study and told me, ‘We will look for the best suitable place where you can use your talents. Where you can learn and achieve much.’ They sent me to Palermo, I still remember, it was the 4th of December 2016, they sent me to Casa Mirti of the Waldensians [...], and I immediately went to school. I arrived on Friday afternoon and on Monday I started school.”

Diawara B., 2019

“I don’t have any parents here, I don’t have anyone to help. But there are people who rescue me and are really helpful in my life because they take me to school. It’s up to me to go to school. I know what I want in life and I also know what I want to be in the future. So, I agreed with them to go to school. I am taking my diploma, terza media.”

Fatima D., 2019

**Cities  
of Refuge?**

*“In Paris a stranger feels at home because he can inhabit the city the way he lives in his own four walls.”*

Hannah Arendt, 1943

Since time immemorial, cities have been spaces of opportunity for refuge and plural coexistence. Already in the Torah, the special meaning of cities as places of refuge is mentioned. In the age of globalization, cities are increasingly becoming motors of change in dealing with refugees and migrants. Thus, urban spaces are inherently linked to hopes for the future and experiences of migrant self-empowerment and community as they are to experiences of marginalization.

In more and more cities around the world, there is growing rebellion against the legal exclusion of people who – irrespective of the respective national jurisdiction – arrive in urban centers and, out of necessity, live there without papers. This is by no means a new phenomenon. It is in

continuity with the 1930s and 1940s, when cities around the world offered shelter to a large number of people fleeing Nazi persecution.

The cities of Paris of the 1930s or Vilnius of 1939/40, as temporary places of refuge, represent an important part of this tradition just as the efforts of Palermo or Berlin build upon it.

In the context of the nation state, urban resistance is regularly limited: the precarity of many migrants often prevents them from actively participating in the city. And while more and more cities declare themselves as Solidarity Cities, they neglect to sufficiently address the issues of (institutionalized) racism and deportations that are prevalent in situ at the same time.



# Room for Hope

# Room for Resistance

# Room for Oneself

“Our hope was not undermined if we were able to build such a camp amongst ourselves in these difficult days. I walked through the empty streets and could not forget the faces blushing with excitement and the flaming eyes of those passionately burning ones. Vilnius, Vilnius! Will you take them under your wings? Will you be their refuge until the fury is over?”

Benzion Benshalom, 1943/44

“Palermo is a good city for me because since I came here I have learned many things. I have found good friends. It is my home town. Even where you are at home, you can have problems. Maybe there used to be few Africans here [...] But the city has changed. Now there are many Italians here with Africans. [...] Yes, Palermo for me is a beautiful city. When I arrived in 2016, there was more racism. Maybe they didn’t know the people from Africa, that’s why there is racism. Now the situation is improving, they are used to us more.”

Marrie S., 2019

“Palermo is a beautiful city, but also very painful. It has many problems of vulnerability, the vulnerability that so many migrants and many local people experience equally: A vulnerability such as work, housing, inequality. There are many neighborhoods like Ballarò, where all the inhabitants live with problems – for the migrants it is even more burdensome because they have very complicated and sometimes discriminatory administrative and legal issues.

Palermo is a difficult, wonderful city, full of hope at the moment and famous on an international level for being the welcoming city [...]. We have a mayor who, fortunately, through a very articulate and good speech, still allows us to obtain positive results here in Palermo, but we must not forget that we must continue to fight and be vigilant for the defense of rights that apply to all.”

Giulia di Carlo, 2019

“The enchanting Berlin resembles a colorful decorated box, hidden in the chest of an oriental grandmother, she surprises me with gifts from Pandora when I open it. The stranger may get lost on Berlin’s streets, but he will find a place under the sun.

Berlin is a city that does not seek identities or affiliations, its identity is colorless. This is what makes it such a charming and popular city. Berlin does not accept that there is only one particular color for itself and its inhabitants. It tries to form a new identity from the different identities.

On a German website I read a quote by Jean Paul: ‘Memory is the only paradise from which we cannot be driven out.’ And so now I know I’ll never leave Berlin. I have a home in this city and an exile of memories.”

Widad Nabi, 2018



“The writers heard about the Garden of Eden in Vilnius [...]. They moved there when Warsaw was not able to protect them any longer in the same way.”

Emanuel Ringelblum, 1940

“At that moment, Vilnius was a huge Jewish refugee center. Refugees came here from all over Poland: rich Jewish factory owners, merchants, deputies, senators, writers, journalists, actors and simply the Jewish intelligentsia and workers. Everyone and all were looking for a place of refuge. In this first period of the war Vilnius hardly suffered at all. [...]

Vilnius became the source of a new Jewish renaissance – a new Jewish national thought, a Jewish democratic spirit and the Jewish revolutionary movement. The new Jewish secular school was produced and built in Vilnius. Vilnius was known for its huge cultural treasures accumulated over centuries, for its libraries, for its philanthropic, economic, medical and all sorts of other institutes; for its synagogues [...].

It is precisely this old familiar Vilnius that has now been enriched with new intellectual forces, which stranded here from all corners of Poland.”

Mendel Balberyszski, 1967

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## Interviews

Interviews with Marrie S., Diawara B., Fatima D., Kadija J. and Mustapha F. on 12-13. June 2019 in Palermo © Minor Kontor.

Interview with Giulia di Carlo, sociologist and cultural mediator in Palermo on 13 June 2019 © Minor Kontor.

Conversation between Diawara B. and the mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, in the town hall of Palermo on 14 June 2019 © Minor Kontor.

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