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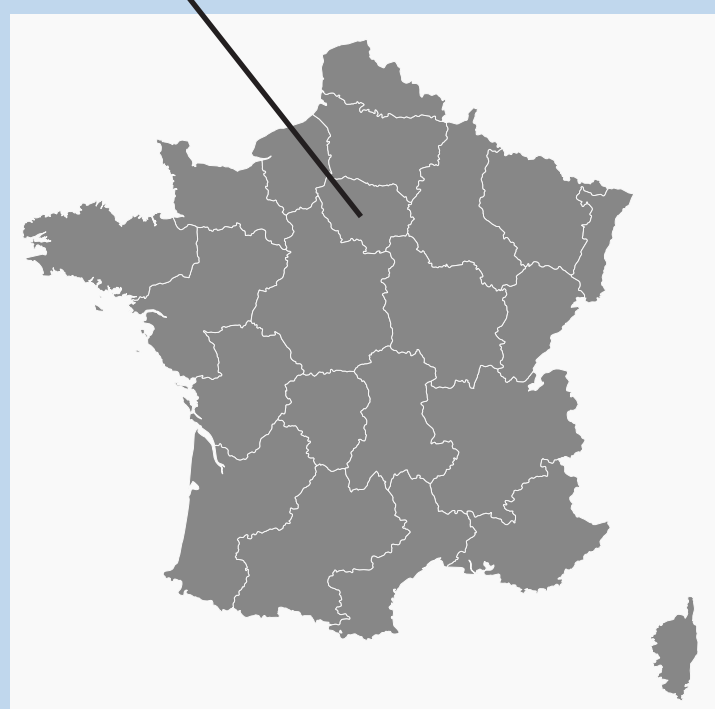
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My spring study abroad experience in Montpellier, France, a mid-sized city just off the Mediterranean coast, was crucial to forming my Burch Fellowship project for the following summer. Europe's attention to the Arab refugee crisis was intensifying, and my studies of French and Arabic lent themselves to a project with Arab refugees while staying in France. So in mid-May, I headed to Paris to spend two months working with Syrian asylum seekers.

I had two primary goals for my project for my time in Paris. The first was to work with refugees in an administrative context, to observe and aid Syrians going through the asylum seeking process. I had gathered from folks in Montpellier that this

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Paris, France



WORKING WITH SYRIAN REFUGEES IN PARIS

process was arduous and confusing, so I hoped to gain a better understanding of what obtaining asylum really looked like. The second aim of my project was to carry out a series of interviews with Syrian refugees about their experiences of escape and resettlement in France. Often the media coverage of the Arab refugee crisis is littered with overwhelming statistics, but rarely had I heard in-depth personal accounts that shed light on why so many people were fleeing Syria. With an internship in place and fundraising events lined up, I anticipated the opportunity to engage my newly improved French and longtime studied Arabic and to continue my work with Arab refugees that had begun in North Carolina.



The majority of my weekdays were spent interning for a small NGO, Association Revivre, with an office in the city hall, in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. Syrian asylum seekers of all backgrounds would come for advice and consultation on the asylum seeking process with, of course, the goal of eventually receiving refugee status. I assisted in explaining government paperwork and walking Syrians through the different steps of the process. Many of our clients knew little to no French, or had experienced very recent traumatic events preventing them from thinking and operating at full speed. In addition to translation work in the office, I accompanied Syrians to local administrative offices such as the police office, the office for refugee protection,

and the court of asylum rights.

Before even beginning the mountains of paperwork, almost entirely in French, asylum seekers in France must receive a voucher form from the local police office. Accompanying Syrians to this office exhibited some inconsistencies and bureaucratic ineptitudes that are common throughout the French asylum process. Several times I waited in line starting at six in the morning with Syrians for over five hours behind several hundred other asylum seekers with the same goal. Two times, my client and I were rejected for not having a meeting scheduled, despite this requirement was never being posted as official government policy. After receiving the voucher form, French asylum seekers have less than three weeks to write a fully typed explanation of why they need asylum, and why they feared returning to their homes in Syria. This document is then circulated through a four-month review process, after which the asylum seeker is interviewed, or rather interrogated, to confirm that their responses to a provided translator align with the claims of persecution and threat in their written story.

Apart from learning the ins and outs of the French asylum process, the most fascinating times in Paris were when I spoke one-on-one with Syrian refugees about their experience living through war torn Syria, escaping, and then resettling in France. Through attending local conferences, fundraising events, and lectures surrounding the Syrian Crisis, I was able to meet journalists, ex-political prisoners, a Free Syrian Army general, and a wide array of Syrians

now residing in Paris. Each interview that I completed provided personal insight into the grim realities of the Syrian warzone as well as a unique story of loss, frustration, or hope for a better future. Moreover, at one conference, I met a professor at the American University

of Paris, who invited me to audit his course on the History of the Middle East since 1945, which provided historical and political background to the issues that have molded the modern Middle East and some of the crises we see today.

Despite the host of obstacles and frustrations, the Syrians I interacted with last summer were some of the most upbeat, resilient, and hopeful people I have met in my life. They dream of returning to Assad-less Syria, of rebuilding their broken country and living with dignity, freedom, and peace of mind. These upbeat individuals were



the same ones that told me stories of being tortured in prison, who felt the gaseous sting in their eyes and mouth during the Ghouta chemical weapon attack of 2013, and who saw their friends drown as they floated in the Mediterranean. The Syrians I met inspired me to better appreciate simple human interaction as well as the daily privileges that are often taken for granted. Thanks to the Burch experience, I now aspire to devote my life to helping people in need, people who are experiencing undeserved pain, suffering, or loss. I would like to thank Mr. Burch and the Burch Fellowship Committee for allowing me this eye-opening and life changing opportunity.

