

When a little girl burst into the Bari Territorial Commission



It is a fresh and rainy afternoon in March 2018 at the Territorial Commission of Bari, Italy. As every day, the three EASO caseworkers deployed there are performing their regular tasks. They prepare litigation notes, update information on the national registrations database, release COI publications and supervise the front office to receive new incoming requests from applicants and lawyers. The amount of work is considerable, considering that the Secretariat of the Commission schedules about 20 interviews of applicants for international protection per day.

The last applicants scheduled for the day have just entered the rooms where, in the presence of a cultural mediator, they will recount their entire story to the Commissioners who will then decide on their cases. All the previous applicants who arrived in dribs and drabs throughout the day, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by a staff member of the reception center in which they are hosted, have already left.

The office is calm and quiet. The only noise that breaks the silence is the *clickety clack* of keyboards. All of a sudden, the sound of small steps resonates. Puzzled, the three caseworkers look up. What was it? Who could possibly be making such a sound when the Commission is almost empty?

The answer quickly becomes apparent: a pair of wise eyes of a maybe-5-year-old girl is staring at them. She smiles, joyful, says nothing and runs away down the corridor. Someone wants to play! The three caseworkers start chasing her for some time, then find a little spot in their office and give her coloured pens. Soon, her drawings are magically transformed into paper airplanes which begin flying all over the room. Her contagious laughs stands out amongst those of the three caseworkers.

When her mother comes to look for her and leave the Commission at the end of her interview, the girl leaves behind a fresh and cheerful feeling amongst the three caseworkers in her wake, as well as some paper airplanes.

The mother, an Ethiopian, had left her country of origin some years before to run away from her family which kept her in captivity and repeatedly beat her after she got pregnant. She had reached Niger, where she became victim of human traffickers who sold her and forced her into prostitution in Libya. She delivered her baby girl all alone and, after two years of slavery, finally managed to pay off her debt and embarked with her daughter on a rubber boat. Her destination:

the Sicilian coasts.

This is the story of the little girl and her mother, a story of persecution, violence, maltreatments and danger, just like so many others collected and recorded in the Commission.

It is a story that the three caseworkers re-discovered only recently, almost a year after their meeting, when, by chance, they fell on the transcript of the interview released by that woman and the decision on her case. Imagine their surprise, but also their joy, when they found out that, after an attentive analysis of her testimony and memories, the Commission decided to grant them refugee status.

Reading the file and uploading it into the national database, the touching warm smile of the little girl reappeared for a second on their three faces, recalling the little girl's contagious laugh. How good it is to know that both mother and child are safe now, and that their new life is just about to start.

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