Meherit’s Story – Her Journey to Nottingham from Asmara, Eritrea

I was born and had always lived in or close to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. I was married with three children and I was expecting my fourth child. It was the year 2000.

We had heard that lots of our friends had been arrested and false accusations had been made against them. One day, the police came and took my husband, Binyam. They accused him of plotting against the government. They said that he had been planning with the other people that had been arrested. Binyam was imprisoned for three months – they pressurised him into saying he had done something he did not do. The conditions in Eritrean prisons are terrible: cramped, dirty, dark and dangerous.

My children (aged 3, 5 and 9) and I escaped to my grandparents’ village, which was one hour from Asmara. Life was different and so it was difficult. There was no running water, there was water from a well; there were no toilets or electricity.

We found out that Binyam was being released from prison. The authorities had no evidence to support their accusations so we returned to Asmara. My brother was getting married and we stayed for the wedding. Then the police arrested Binyam again, he was a threat because he was a trained soldier. I became more and more worried when one of Binyam’s friend’s wives was arrested. I was so scared. I decided we had to leave Asmara – it was not safe to stay, I had to think of my children so I decided to escape to Sudan. I could not talk to Binyam about it as he was imprisoned so I wrote a letter to him and left it in our house so that he would find it when he was released. The only person I could tell was my Mum - you couldn’t trust anyone.

I returned to my Grandad’s house. My grandad had contacts. He knew a man who could drive us into Sudan. We first drove to Keren (90 miles north of Asmara). My son became sick and we had to stay in Keren for three days. I was so worried we wouldn’t be able to continue the journey. When he started to recover, we set off again. It was so hot. We would walk for an hour and take a break for half an hour and walk again. It is not a hard walk but because I had small children, it took us much longer. We did this for about a week. My Grandfather’s friend was still with us and he helped to carry the children. For the next stage of the journey, we had the choice of a camel or a car. I took the car. It took two days in the car but the car broke down on the way.

We finally reached Kassala, Sudan. We stayed one week there and rented a room in a house. I had taken all of our money and my mother had helped us financially. I paid a man from an agency to arrange the papers to travel to Khartoum (capital of Sudan).

We travelled to Khartoum on a lorry full of around 20 people: men, women and children. The journey was 250 miles. We stayed there for a month, living with a family friend. I speak only a little Arabic so it wasn’t easy. While we were there, I bought a visa for the UK – it cost a lot of money, which I was running out of. I flew from Khartoum to Heathrow.

This whole journey took 3 months from leaving Asmara. I didn’t have a mobile phone so I would telephone my family from a hotel. I would telephone my brother who lived in Germany and he would send us money.

Because I had a visa, I came straight through customs at Heathrow and I immediately claimed asylum. We were sent to a hostel in Camden. It wasn’t too bad; I remember we ate sandwiches. The food was so different, it was difficult, we were so hungry and we couldn’t cook in the hostel - we were there for three months. We were living in one room and my youngest son, Amanuel was born there.

We had to wait until my application for asylum had been processed. I had to attend an interview in Liverpool. I was given a rail pass and get the train to Liverpool. The interview was for ten minutes and I didn’t pass the interview. This time was very close to the birth of my youngest son so the journey and interview were hard.

We didn’t really make friends with other families in the hostel. We did talk with another Muslim family and there were two other Eritrean families but people often moved on after a short time. They left us there because I was pregnant. We were supplied with food, bread, one piece of toast and milk, cereal, soap, tea, sugar – just small necessities. We were not given money, just food.

I would never want to complain about how we were treated. I had a terrible journey and the British government gave me a home. It was so much better than where we had come from. Lots of other people were complaining. The hostel staff used to ask me how life was and why I wasn’t complaining as everyone else was. I was grateful for what I had.

Some of the British people were friendly, some were not; we did feel safe though. I found it really hard because I wasn’t able to speak English.

After three months in the hostel, we were sent to Nottingham. We knew we were not going to stay to be able to stay in London – there is a strong Eritrean community in London. I received a letter to say we were going to Nottingham. We were sent on a coach with an Afghanistani man and his son. We were sent to ‘Refugee Housing’ on Alfreton Road.

After some time in the hostel on Alfreton Road, a social worker came and took us to a house in Sneinton. Some people in the community were very racist towards us. They threw dog dirt at our windows and made racist comments towards us; some people though were friendly. The children went to Windmill Lane School. After six months, I had appealed for a second time and we were given, ‘leave to remain’ which meant we could stay here.

We lived for one year in Sneinton. Once I had leave to remain, the council had a responsibility to give me accommodation. I went into a hotel called The Park Hotel. For a month we were living in one room again. We had to leave the hotel during the day which was difficult with the baby and young children. I kept my daughter and eldest son at school in Sneinton. Friends used to bring in food for us.

Next we moved to Highwood Hostel for five months. It was horrible but I tried to make it home. There were no other Eritrean families there an only the reception lady was my friend. We then found out there was a house available in Lenton Abbey. We came to look at it and I cried. It immediately felt like home. I didn’t have any furniture or anything. Not everyone is friendly here but we’re ok. It’s a mixed area.

The children transferred to Beeston Fields School. They were good to us. The teachers, especially the head teacher, were really kind. If the children didn’t do their homework because they couldn’t do it, they weren’t cross. They seemed to understand. The children were happy at school and made friends. I started going to learn English as soon as I could. We became a part of the Eritrean community in Nottingham. We meet monthly and support each other in any way we can.

During this journey, I did not know anything of my husband’s whereabouts. After three years, he was released from prison and escaped from Eritrea. He thought we were in Sweden so first went to look for us there and then the Red Cross told him we were in the UK. He first went to Leeds and then found us in Nottingham. We couldn’t believe it when Binyam arrived. My three youngest children didn’t recognise him. My youngest daughter kept talking about the man who smoked, who was in our house, who was actually her Father.

I am extremely thankful for what I have. When I return to Eritrea to visit my family, I feel as though I stand out, I feel guilty for what I have. I am now British. My home is here as my life is my children and they are here. I came here for them. My two eldest children have gone to University and have degrees and my youngest daughter will start a degree in September. My only wish is that I lived near my Mum.