



# Modern Sheroes

**papatya** 

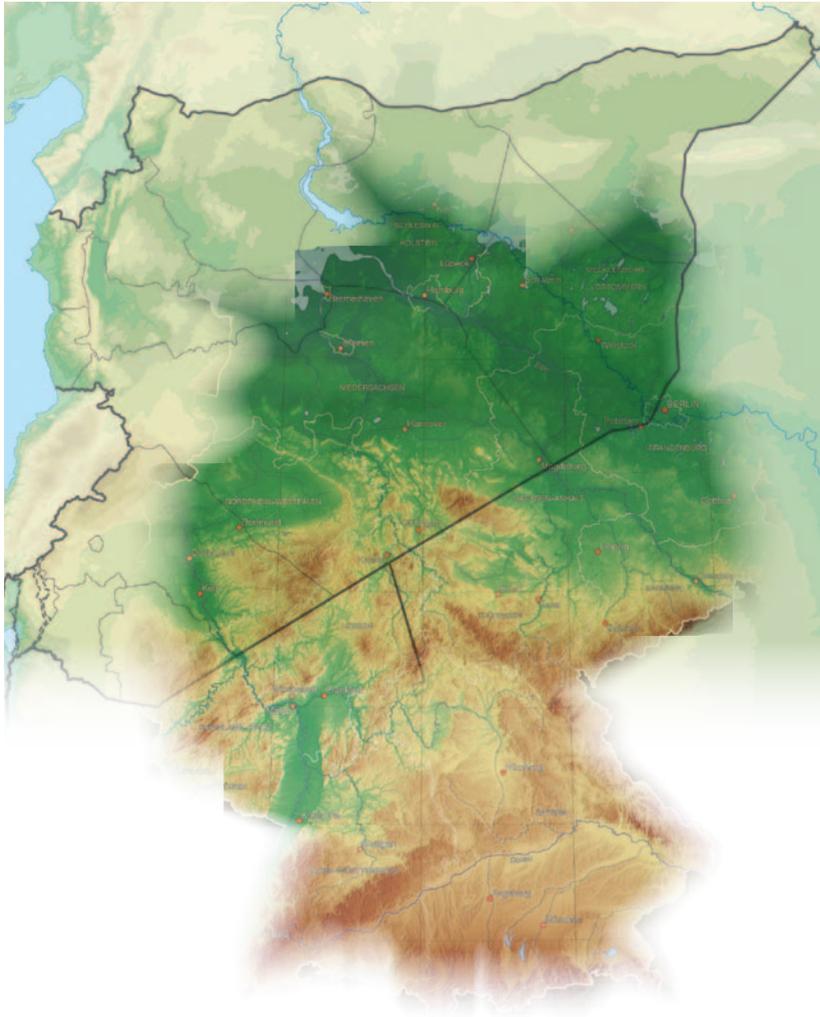
anonymous crisis shelter for girls and young  
women with a migration background



is a crisis shelter for girls and young women with a migration background who have fled home because of domestic problems and who need to be sheltered anonymously. Since 1986 Papatya has helped women in emergency situations and assisted them on their journey to leading self-determined lives. We have often wondered what has become of them. This is why we contacted them and asked what happened to them after they had left Papatya. These are strong women who have forged their path in life and who despite many ups and downs never gave up on their goal: leading a self-determined life. In this book, we want to tell some of their stories.

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First I would like to tell you the story of Jamila, a Kurdish girl, who came to Papatya a couple of years ago. Jamila grew up with three other siblings. When she was still a toddler, her parents fled with her to Germany. There she attended school, first primary and then secondary school and gained her "O"-levels. After school she started an apprenticeship to train as a geriatric nurse; she is still working in this field today. Jamila sought refuge away from her husband, who she had been forced to marry shortly before. On leaving Syria, this stranger was supposed to join her in Germany a couple of days afterwards. Everybody was looking forward to his arrival, apart from Jamila.

## Jamila

Her suffering began when she happened to overhear a telephone conversation between her parents and her uncle in Syria. Her parents promised that she would wed a paternal cousin whom she had never even seen before. Jamila had in fact been suspecting something like this to happen for some time because her older sister Ayla had been due to marry this cousin. But she had fallen in love with a Yesidi man and married him. Jamila was shocked and refused to accept this promised marriage just like that. She was livid, stormed into the room and shouted at the top of her voice: **"Forget it! I'll never marry him or anyone else from Syria!"**

Her mother threw her out of the room and everyone stayed silent about what had happened.

Despite all this, her father managed to take Jamila with him to Syria, under the pretence of visiting family there. Jamila travelled with him after he promised to abide by her refusal to get married. He only asked her to meet the young man and then take her decision. Jamila knew immediately that she did not love this boy and would never do so. Her father naturally broke his promise and everybody urged her to agree to the betrothal. Today she says that she felt she was being brainwashed. Jamila was threatened; she had to do what society expected of her. Nobody listened to her and then the worst thing happened, the forced engagement ceremony took place.

**She felt she had to! She just could not refuse. Her father threatened her again and said that if she did not sign the wedding contract, it would be all over for her... He obviously threatened her in German, so that none of his relations could understand him. He went on to happily tell the gathering that his daughter had agreed to the wedding.**

A couple of days later, they flew back to Germany. During the flight her father threatened her again, saying that if she spoke to anyone about what had happened he would... (He did not finish the sentence, but Jamila knew only too well what he meant.)

Back in Germany, she confided in a friend who told her to find help and to resist. This was when she started living in two worlds. She lived a double life of pretence and could never just be herself.

She could not tell her boyfriend about any of this either, as she was afraid (that) he would leave her if he heard about the engagement.

**One day Jamila could not stand it any longer and ran away.** She ran away from all the hurtful remarks, like when she was told that she was not her parents' daughter but just somebody they had picked up at random on their flight to Germany. She also ran away from the strict rules that she had to obey.

She wanted to decide herself what to wear, when to come home and how to run her life. She ran away from a marriage she did not want and from the insults she suffered. She ran away from having no power at all. She wanted to lead a self-determined life.

**Today she says coming to Papatya was like winning the lottery!**



## What happened to Jamila after Papatya?

After leaving Papatya, Jamila moved into a women's shelter somewhere in Germany close to where her boyfriend lived, with who she is still together. Jamila could only stay in this shelter for three months, as there is a limit to how long one can stay there. She was very lucky to find a very dedicated social worker who helped her dealing with the bureaucracy and finding a place to live by herself. There followed a year on unemployment benefits, as the people from the Job Centre gave her the time to solve her private problems. So Jamila managed to get some peace.

**Her plan to go back to school living on Bafög (Federal Education Assistance) failed, because she would have needed to supply the administration with proof of her parents' income. But Jamila could not resume contact with her parents, nor did she want to at this time.**

So she decided to take part in an internship in Malta where she learnt about media design. She lived there for two months and participated in a project that dealt with intercultural issues.

Looking back, she says that this was a very meaningful time. For the first time in her life she felt free and discovered a completely different lifestyle – a life that was so much freer and more beautiful!

Back in Germany, she moved back into her flat, which meant taking a big step towards her goal of leading a self-determined life. For the first time in her life, she was independent and able to say:

**“This is mine. I can do whatever I want.”**  
**She is very happy that she does not have to justify or explain herself or obey someone else any longer.**

But there certainly were obstacles she had to overcome. The past always caught up with her, especially when she wanted to start new friendships. How open could she be with new friends? How much could she share? In the women’s shelter, Jamila met Sabine. They immediately got on well. Jamila often babysat Sabine’s son, and this led to a friendship that still holds today. One day – and completely by chance – she ran into a former friend in the street.

Her heart skipped a beat. Had she been found out? And she was relieved to see that that it was Elli. After all this time, Jamila was very happy to see someone she knew from the past, a familiar face. It turned out that Elli was in town visiting her cousins and she introduced Jamila to them. Jamila met them regularly and spent her free time with them. Actually it was not so difficult getting to know new people after all! One big problem, though, remained: She could never tell her true story. Jamila had to lie to her new friends and got more and more tangled up in these lies. One day it all blew up and she decided to put all her cards on the table.

Obviously by then, she had started to trust them a little bit and she wasn't afraid any longer that someone would condemn her for what she had done.

**Jamila has one message for girls in a similar situation: “Don't tell each other everything and do not exchange photos!” because she had some bad experiences by doing just that.**

After she had left Papatya and settling in to her new life, she contacted a girl she had lived with before. They actually had been good friends, until she told her that Jamila's parents were sitting right next to her and that she should return home.

Certainly there are some difficult times when you start anew. In the beginning you feel all alone in a new environment and a flat of your own. You ask yourself: is it right, leaving my family? What have you gained? Now you are here all alone in a flat. Sure, you aren't "imprisoned" any longer, but you feel lonely. Jamila's boyfriend was a great support. He accepted her with all her ups and downs, but he let her choose her own path. If she felt bad, he said: "Well, just go home then. If you can't stand it any longer, you can be sure that I will always stand behind you."

His affection and words made her think. Jamila decided to go on fighting. She often tells herself: "Don't go back, you have achieved so much already!"

Her own flat still feels like an absolute luxury for her. Here she feels safe and she can also “repaint the walls as often as I want to.” Nobody meddles in her affairs any longer.

**Jamila would like to tell other girls: “Live your life and live it intensely and the way you want it! If your parents really want you back, you can still knock on the door ten years later and say: Here I am! But first try on your own and decide for yourself what you want to do.”**

By now she is enjoying her life so much that she says: “I will never go back!” It is not as if she hasn’t tried to contact her family at all. After about two and a half years she visited her parents again, as she wanted to see them and to explain her reasons. Unfortunately, it became clear very quickly that nothing had changed since she had left. So Jamila decided to stay in contact by phone but to reduce the number of calls as her family still managed to exert pressure on her. There was no place for that any longer in her new life.

In this way she takes away their hope that she will return one day, but she also takes away the pressure that would otherwise weigh her down.



## What do you think you need to make your own way in the world?

Jamila also recommends that you get some therapy and find help. Unfortunately her therapist was not qualified but she still thinks that doing a course of therapy is necessary to overcome trauma and depression by working through your story with someone else.

### **A strong will and courage!**

Every day you have to tell yourself over and over again: “I can do this!” Whenever I was feeling low, I just needed to think about all the problems in my family. Then I was happy again that I could now decide myself how to live my life.





Dilek came to Papatya in 2005. She was nineteen and came from a strict Muslim family who belonged to a family who belonged to a very strict orthodox strand of Islam.

## Dilek

Dilek was born in Turkey and grew up in a small village in eastern Turkey. When she was ten, her mother brought Dilek and some of her siblings to Germany, but some brothers and sisters still live in the village.

**Family members had to observe very strict rules. Women are not allowed to work and all female members had to wear a heard scarf. Dilek was only rarely allowed to leave the house, or meet friends. She also had to do a lot of housework. Her father was a very violent and all the family members suffered from his rages.**

Dilek's older brother also was violent towards her and beat her. Within her extended family, intermarriage has been common for generations. Many spouses are taken to Germany from the home village. Most are married against their will, just as Dilek was.

In 2004, she was married to her cousin in Turkey. He also was against the arrangement but could not resist their parents' decision, either. It took months until her future husband agreed to the wedding and started to look forward to coming to Germany. Once he had

received his visa for Germany, it became imperative for Dilek to leave her family. This she did with the help of a social worker; she then came to Papatya.



## What happened after Dilek left Papatya?

Dilek moved into assisted accommodation, where she shared a flat with three other girls. She lived there for one and a half years and first gained her basic school leaving certificate, then a more advanced educational certificate and eventually her “O” –Levels.

At the same time she qualified as a social assistant and did many internships, one in a nursery and another in housekeeping, amongst others.

**Dilek worked very hard to get her qualifications and was eventually able to reap the rewards. At the moment she is in a period of transition. School is over and now she does not know exactly what she should do.**

Dilek actually wants to be a policewoman, but she is not sure whether she can realise this dream. Until the next police recruitment test is offered, she wants to work. So currently Dilek is applying to work as a social assistant at different nurseries.

Today she says what were the most important three steps that she took after leaving Papatya.

**“The first step was leaving the family. The second was getting my education and the third is that I have become myself.”**

Because after Papatya, Dilek came out of the closet and she now stands by her homosexuality. To admit this to herself was another great step in her life. Dilek says that before she hadn't even known what being homosexual meant. And that it is only afterwards that she knew that she had fallen in love with a girl when she was thirteen. At the time she had been ashamed and thought that there was something wrong with her. It just didn't seem possible for two women to love each other; today she is in a happy relationship with a woman.

She gained a lot by leaving her family. She was able to get an education, something that had never been regarded as important in her family.

She has also come to know many new people with very different personalities and – obviously- herself. She has also made some good new friends, even if she is still a bit careful on meeting new people. She says that she only talks about her story if she is a hundred percent certain that there is no danger.

**She still has no contact with her family. It is only occasionally that she exchanges some emails with a sister of hers. Dilek is sad about not seeing her siblings and she also sometimes misses her mother. She also has a bad conscience as her sister has told her that after she left life in the family became even stricter and that she too thinks about leaving.**

Dilek is sad that she cannot help her, first because she is afraid of endangering herself and also because she cannot support her sister financially. But she stays strong and clings to the path she has chosen.

Dilek says that in order to do so the most important thing is to find and make friends. Her circle of friends has grown quicker than she ever thought possible. School, Papatya and her hobbies have helped her. "If you don't do anything, you will never meet anybody!" she says.

The girls she shared the flat with also helped. She never had the feeling that she was alone and when there was a crisis, there was always someone to turn to.

“It was a tremendous change for me when I left the protected space of Papatya to start a life of my own. Even though I had lived in an assisted shared flat at Papatya, I hadn’t yet found out about the nightlife and diversity of Berlin.”

**An exciting and successful time had begun.**



## **What advice would you give other girls?**

**“Go on your journey step by step not too fast, but not too slow either. Always focus on your goal and have patience. If you are calm and honest to yourself and your friends then you can manage everything.**

**Try and have a number of things you strive for, not only one. If you have courage and a strong will, then you are on the right path.”**



Alma was born in Turkey in 1985 as the fourth oldest of eight siblings. She lived in a small village where almost everyone was related to each other in some way. For decades all marriages, including her parents', had been arranged. Her parents never really got on with each other, fighting with each other all day long and also in front of the children. Her father often beat her mother. This Kurdish family lived according to very strict rules and these were harshest for the girls in the family.

## Alma

Alma was never allowed to meet with friends; school trips and festivities were also off limits. It was one prohibition after another, the reason always being that otherwise the family's honour was in danger. Because it was already considered problematic if a girl was seen outside of the family. Beatings happened quite often in Alma's family; her father was very violent and even dragged her through the flat if she had disobeyed one of his rules. The older the girls grew, the more vicious the beatings became. Alma's mother had always been a housewife. In Turkey her father had been a farmer; later in on in Germany the family lived on welfare.

When Alma was eight the family paid traffickers to flee via Russia to Germany. Some of her siblings had to stay with an uncle in Turkey for want of money. Alma and three more children went with the parents.

Alma's father was a member of the PKK and politically very active. When Alma was a young girl, she experienced an attack on the village by the army. The women and children were herded together in the school and had to witness some men being shot. This event triggered the family's eventual flight.

**When she was sixteen, Alma was engaged to marry a stranger in Turkey. He was a paternal half-cousin. Her parents had selected her husband from within the family, to compensate for her sister being allowed to marry outside of the family. But as they lived in constant strife, Alma was never given a choice.**

After Alma had finished school, she was married against her will. Her husband came to Germany and sought asylum. Until the wedding he lived in the parents' flat and slept on the living room sofa.

**When Alma insisted that she did not want to marry this man, her father kept threatening her with a knife and beatings until she agreed to the wedding. Her own wishes were ignored completely; she had no say in the matter.**

Eventually she got married. She was so angry that for two months beforehand she refused to speak with her future husband, but she certainly could not keep this up for ever. So she ended up at the centre of a huge wedding party. She fulfilled her marital duties and tried her utmost to make the marriage work. But given the husband she had, it proved impossible.

She was “lucky” to escape a civil wedding ceremony as she argued, “as an unmarried woman she had a better chance of getting a place on a training course or a job.”

Alma tried to kill herself twice, once before the Hoca-wedding, the second time when she was already a wife. It wasn't just that the marriage was a burden, but her husband was also very jealous. She wasn't allowed to speak to other men, let alone meet anyone.

Eventually she could take it no longer; she told her husband that she had been forced to marry him. Until that moment he had thought that she had done so voluntarily. He was shocked but appealed to her sense of duty to make the best of the situation. After this Alma slept on the sofa for five months, which wasn't a solution either. She told her parents about it, but they only reacted with a lack of understanding.

She was told repeatedly that she had managed to find a great husband and that she would never find a better one. In spite of all this, she moved back in with her parents, where things got even worse. Because she had lost her virginity, she was controlled even more and put under pressure. Her father and ex-husband told her that she had to face death if she was ever seen with another man. Her ex-husband started spying on her. Alma could do nothing; only at work was she able to find a little peace.

While all this was going on Alma researched the web to find ways of escape. With the assistance of a social institution she decided on leaving her family and came to Papatya as a first step.



## What happened to Alma after Papatya?

**While still at Papatya. Alma had her name changed and found a job.** Having employment was a condition for leaving Papatya. As Alma was too old to receive state support or to be able to move into assisted living, she decided to stand on her own two feet and started to build a life of her own.

She shared a flat with a girl from outside and lived there for about one and a half years. Obviously her flat mate asked her sometimes about her family, background and parents, but Alma managed to avoid giving incriminating answers. Only after five months did she find the strength to tell the truth about her past.

**Today she says that she “still finds it difficult to trust other people in these matters.” Initially she was rather shy and felt very lonely. She also suffered from depression, but she managed to recover. Time and therapy helped her in this. One day she started feeling better and she managed to start her new life.**



**What were the three most important steps that you took after leaving Papatya?**

- 1. I changed my name**
- 2. I took my life in my own hands**
- 3. I completely broke off all contact with my parents**

**What did you gain when you left your family? And what “price” did you have to pay for it?**

**I have won my freedom,** an identity of my own (despite changing my name) and a life.

**I have lost the security and protection of a family.** Even though I had never had it with my own family, I had always longed for it.



## **What strengths did you already have within yourself to cope with life away from home? What did you have to learn?**

I never gave up hope of leading a better life in freedom. This gave me the inner strength I needed to get through all this.

**I had to learn to trust other people and to become more outgoing.**

## **Do you still have contact with your family?**

Yes, my younger sister also managed to escape and also lives in my city. I have severed all contact with the others.

## Who believed in you? Who supported you?

The carers at Papatya, Fatma Bläser, and later on all my friends who knew about it.

But you also need other people for support. You arrive at Papatya with nothing but the clothes on your back and some personal items and you then have to start at the bottom and build up your life from scratch. Financially and especially mentally it's very hard.



## What wishes and hopes do you have for your future?

I think that I have managed to leave most of my past behind me and to look ahead. I wish that all this finally comes to an end that nobody has to suffer under such circumstances any longer.

## After Papatya, were you ready for independence?

**Yes, I was.** This year I have fulfilled my dream and have become self-employed.



## What advice would you give to the girls living at Papatya today?

**“If one door closes, another one opens. Never give up hope. The world is open to you and you have already taken the most important step: to escape from hell. And what is really important: education!!! Read books, go to school, study, and show everyone what you are capable of!”**





I meet Nora in Amsterdam. It's not as if she lived there, neither do I, but we wanted to spend some time together and relax. She works a lot and as the boss of a home care service with over a hundred employees she has little time for herself, but she is very proud of what she had managed to build up all alone.

## Nora

We've agreed to meet at the Cafe Americain on Leidseplein. Here she is: her large eyes beaming at me, brown locks tumbling around her face. She's a petite woman in her mid-forties who looks rather like a young girl. I think that she looks too thin, and I notice the dark circles below the eyes. She looks as if the slightest gust would carry her away, but she is, in fact, tougher and stronger than most.

**She, who has mastered so many crises, says that last year was hell for her.**

I met Nora when she was nineteen. Then she was still called Nuray, just about to graduate with her A-levels, and had just run away from home.

For a while she found refuge at Papatya, before moving into the shared flat for young women where I then worked as a social worker. She couldn't take it any

longer, being treated by her parents as nothing more than a maid... merely taking care of the household and her two younger siblings and being obedient and never speaking up for herself. She had no time to study as her parents thought it a waste of time, she being a girl and anyway she was supposed to get married soon. She was beaten for trifles but felt that the unfounded insults and the name-calling were worse. All the while she kept on trying to please everybody. She knew she couldn't go on like this, she wanted a life of her own, she wanted to get her A-levels and study medicine to become a doctor.

**Nora makes full use of her newly found freedom in the shared flat; first she cut off her long hair and then turns blonde. She jumps right into her new life and exudes optimism and happiness. Finally she can take part in an excursion to England; she spends her summer holidays with a friend in Greece and falls in love for the first time. She has her life ahead of her and she wants to have it all!**

As long as everything stays new and exciting, Nora can brush aside her pain about the split with the family, but after a while sadness catches up with her. She will never be able to see again those she loves, such as her grandmother who had brought her up in Turkey. Nora feels uprooted and alone; her boyfriend is in Greece and there are a lot of catfights in the shared flat. Shortly before the start of her A-level exams, she stops eating. She's getting thinner and thinner but she passes the tests with an iron will.

Her grades aren't good enough to study medicine, so she starts training as a medical technical assistant. Her first flat on her own is on the ground floor, not the best place for a young woman. A neighbour starts harassing her, so she decides to move in with an elderly sick man and work as his domestic help. She also takes care of an old lady and for a little pocket money does her grocery shopping.

**Her anorexia now rules her life; everything revolves around eating and not eating. She fails the final exams twice and only scrapes through at the third attempt. She has reached rock bottom. Nora knows that she has to break the cycle of anorexia and depression, knowing she is in danger of dying. A new love turns up, and with him a new faith – Nora gets baptised and is now a Christian. Both give her new strength and a substitute family.**

After more than six years of no contact with her family, Nora is invited by an uncle to attend his son's wedding in Turkey. He vouches for her safety and Nora and I spend a week in a village in Anatolia. I act as her quasi-bodyguard, in case Nora is in danger, but she is lucky and there are no problems. Her parents do not attend and once her father finds out that she was invited, he is very angry, thinking that as she is no longer part of the family, she is no longer his daughter.

She moves to southern Germany to live with her German boyfriend. They get married and have a daughter. **Only now at the birth of his granddaughter does her father soften a little. In his eyes, her honour**

**is a trifle rehabilitated and her life style is somewhat acceptable. His son-in-law might be German, but all in all, it's better than nothing!**

Nora's two siblings, who carried out their parents' wishes and did as was expected, cannot make anything of their lives. Her brother has failed his A-levels and now drives a taxi; his arranged wedding to a Turkish girl was doomed to fail from the very start and leads to massive debt for his parents. His sister lives on welfare and runs from one doctor to the next because unhappiness has ruined her health. At sixteen, she had taken refuge in a marriage, wanting to escape her parents. Now she is divorced, longs for a child and feels that her life is over. She is jealous of her older sister, but was never courageous enough to escape. After all, it was rather comfortable in the bosom of the family; she never had to take on any responsibility for herself.

**In the small town, Nora feels dissatisfied and bored. Being a mother isn't enough for her; she wants some intellectual stimulation and a job. When her husband finds employment as a teacher in Stuttgart, she is happy and starts working as a lab technician. But putting down mice all day is not what she wants, so she starts a training course in health management.**

Nora has always been interested in politics. Her father called her a communist, something she is a little proud of. In Stuttgart she becomes involved with the Social Democratic Party and she wants to voice her opinion, be heard and make a difference. She is often out in

the evenings; her husband and child manage quite well without her. Slowly she and her husband grow apart until she finally moves out. For her daughter's sake she lives nearby. The little one should have both parents and not suffer because of her parents' separation.

Using her knowledge of Turkish, her energy and creativity, Nora tries to establish a German-Turkish business network, but it doesn't generate enough profit to survive.

### **She goes about setting up a home care service.**

In the beginning she is responsible for everything and has to be a jack-of-all-trades. She learns a lot "by doing" and enjoys helping old people. Her organisational talents pay off; her charm and optimism open hearts and convince those who doubt her ideas. Her business thrives while relations with her ex-husband turn icy. It's a challenge to organise her daughter's education and care; the little girl is unsure which of her parents she should side with and whether she is allowed to love both of them. The divorce proceedings add to the pressure; her ex-husband and she fight for sole custody, but have to accept the court's decision on joint custody of the child. Meanwhile, there's a new man in Nora's life; she spends more time at home and longs for some kind of family life.

Her daughter spends alternate days with her mother and father until she is twelve. At that age, she says

that she wants to live exclusively with her father, who has moved in with his new girlfriend and her three kids. Nora doesn't understand that the child has to defend her place in father's heart and new domestic arrangements. Nora feels deeply hurt and tries everything – the youth welfare office, the courts and gifts – to keep the relationship with the daughter going. But the less she sees of her, the more the child turns away. Nora thinks that the father and his girlfriend egg her on, and she might be right. Her daughter eventually refuses all contact with Nora. One might think that her own story is repeating itself, were the circumstances not different.

This is when we meet in Amsterdam.

**I am proud of Nora. I admire her energy and vitality and her courage to start all over again.**

She is successful in her job and has a husband who supports her and whom she loves. She has achieved so much, but not everything. The lack of contact with her daughter eats away at her nerves and strength, but the last word on this subject hasn't been spoken...





For this interview, I've made a special appointment with Dunya. I want to find out what has happened in her life since she left Papatya and how happy – or possibly unhappy – she is with her “new” life. She turns up quite stressed, as the underground trains once again aren't running, due to what is now known as “interruptions of operation”. She catches her breath and then says that she's looking forward to the interview. It is quite a while since she has told her story to anyone, as her hectic schedule as the mother of a small child working full time does not leave her any spare time.

## Dunya

It is two months now since Dunya – after her maternity leave – started her dream job as office administrator at the Foreigners' Office. Every day now starts at four o'clock in the morning and ends some time between ten and eleven o'clock, when she collapses onto her bed.

**Dunya left home about seven years ago. Her reason for leaving her family was that she was supposed to marry a husband that her parents had chosen for her, a fate that she shares with so many other girls.**

She says: “There were eight of us children at home. When I was only six, I was promised to the son of a friend of my father's. I grew up with the knowledge that I would never be able to choose my partner in life

freely. I did not know anything else. But when I was told that I was to move to Turkey and live there for good with my husband, I had enough. I might have been able to accept my “betrothed” being brought to Germany. Then I would have sacrificed myself for the “honour” of my parents. But go to Turkey? Never!”

Even apart from the planned forced wedding, life in her family is not easy for Dunya. She experiences a lot of domestic violence and all the girls are subject to total control. Dunya’s father, for example, know her school and bus timetables by heart, so he always knows where she is supposed to be at any given time.

**She plans her escape from her family for two years. She has to think about everything. She also hardly ever has the time to research anything; there is always somebody at home, listening in and spying on her. Privacy is something that Dunya does not know at all.**

And on top of this she is terribly afraid of wishing for and planning something that is absolutely forbidden. When the media spread the news that Hatun Sürücü has been killed, Dunya’s father merely remarks: “The slut, she deserved it!” This remark throws Dunya back into confusion for a long while and for months she is paralysed with fear.

In Turkey preparations are underway and a flat is being furnished for the young couple: time is running out. She now knows that she does not want to marry her “betrothed”.

**At this time she does not even know the word “forced wedding”. She also does not know that in Germany, where she has grown up, forced weddings are forbidden and that her parents could be punished for it. And because she does not know all this, she also does not know whom to trust.**

Because of all the pressure Dunya is under, she withdraws more and more from the people around her. Her school grades also decline dramatically. A teacher who will turn into a “guardian angel” for Dunya eventually notices this. She organises a counselling session at a women’s shelter and covers for her at school so that Dunya can go to the appointment. When it become obvious that it too dangerous for Dunya to stay where she grew up, the teacher pays her train fare to Berlin and even gives her some money to “help her start a new life.”

When Dunya arrived in Berlin, she has already had a boyfriend, in secret, naturally. When they get to know each other, he does not know her story. But still Dunya hopes that he will help her, as a friend or as a partner. She longs for support, as she does not know yet how strong she is on her own and what life will ask of her now that she has no family any longer.

The months at Papatya aren’t easy for her. From the shelter she tries to stay in contact with her family and every couple of weeks calls them at home. She suffers from a bad conscience and feels bad about having caused pain to her family by having gone away. In

the beginning the family begs her to return. But one day her father's mask drops and he insults and abuses her terribly on the phone and even threatens her with murder should he get his hands on her. This is when his daughter breaks off all contact. Financially, all isn't well either. No state institution feels responsible for her; no one wants to support her. When immigrating to Germany, her father had given incorrect statements about his identity and this is now used against his daughter.

**Fortunately her relationship with her boyfriend and his parents improves fast and with them Dunya finds the support she is looking for so badly. His parents treat her like a daughter.**

She is full of praise and respect for her parents-in-law: "Even though they are Turkish, they live differently than most of their compatriots. They don't denigrate other lifestyles. Most Turkish families would never have accepted a girl living on her own for their one and only son. But my father-in-law was quite the opposite and always said: "Give her time, she needs some space to find herself and then she will tell us about herself." You see, in the beginning I was too ashamed to tell them my history. To be proud to be a girl and not to be ashamed of the violence I experienced, all of this I have only learnt very slowly living at Papatya."



## I ask her whether she has ever thought of going home.

**“Since leaving, I have never thought once that I wanted to return. I do not trust anyone in my family, not even my siblings. Nobody stood by me.”**

“One year after I had fled I heard that my father had married my underage sister off to the brother of my former fiancé. She is now living with him in Turkey. He has learnt absolutely nothing from the fact that I fled. He thinks “honour” means that he finances the entire wedding of my former fiancé with a new wife in order to make up for my “loss”. So now his honour is reinstated. That how my family thinks. It is not my world.”

Dunya continues: “When I moved in with my parents-in-law, I first felt a bit strange. The first night with my boyfriend under one blanket was so strange, I couldn’t sleep all night. To be so close to a man, I had never known anything like it. I had the feeling that I was doing something forbidden.

I had arranged with Papatya that I would stay with his family for two weeks on probation. Right from the start I helped with all the housework. This was to be my contribution to our life together because I did not have any money at all. My friend always had to give me the money to buy something occasionally. But I always felt bad about that.”

**Only after someone processing her application to get an education grant becomes interested in her “story” and supports her case, does Dunya receive the money that she is entitled to as a student. Dunya feels as if she has won the lottery when she holds the approval notice in her hands.**

Now that the financial matters are cleared up, she and her boyfriend start looking for a flat. Initially they do not tell his parents, because even though they are a modern Turkish couple, it is inconceivable that a young unmarried couple would live on their own. Actually her boyfriend had not planned on moving out from his parents before their wedding. But Dunya cannot live on her own; being alone in a flat at night frightens her too much.

I want to know whether she has ever had any therapy to help her deal with what she has experienced. Dunya states: “No, only once, very briefly. That was when me father-in-law got very sick. I had really grown to love him, and his illness dragged me down completely. He always said, “with you I have been given a second daughter.” But I wouldn’t completely renounce some kind of therapy, as I suffered from depression for three months after my son was born. I could not stop thinking about how anyone can treat their kid so badly, like my parents had, and that completely destroyed me.”

Even after moving together into a flat, Dunya’s life stays turbulent. The fear of being found is her constant companion. Years have passed but she still feels

threatened by her family, and with good reason, as she finds out one day.

**Her father's connections reach far and wide and after all these years he is still intent on finding out where his daughter lives.**

The last experience of this kind is still fresh.

She says: "As Germany doesn't permit two citizenships at the same time, I wanted to give up my Turkish citizenship. I was almost at the end of the process and only needed one more piece of paper and I called up the Turkish consulate in Cologne. On hearing my name, the clerk there suddenly asked me whether I did not want to call my father? He just couldn't understand why I had broken off contact with my family and supposed that my father would be very happy to hear from me. At first I could not breathe, but then refused very clearly and hung up the phone."

Half an hour later the clerk from the consulate rang back.

**"He had called my father and told him that I was fine!"**

All of this is so frightening as this clerk knows her current address. Dunya is afraid that it could be passed on to her father. This would mean she could lose her hard fought-for anonymity and she would have to fear for her life once again. So she contacts people who have

helped her before in order to get a non-disclosure order reinstated. As a consequence she finds out that her father has been harassing the head of the consulate in Cologne for months in an attempt to locate her. Annoyed by all this, the head of the consulate had “ordered” the clerk to facilitate a contact by phone in order to get some peace in the family!

**Dunya still feels threatened from time to time. At the back of her mind she always knows that her family will seek revenge on her. So he has to adapt in order to minimise risks. She always has to think one step ahead and calculate what could result from her actions and decisions. But she feels that by now she can live a fairly normal everyday life.**

However, apart from fears and setbacks, a lot of positive things have happened in Dunya’s life and some of them are so unusual that even we at Papatya are surprised. Long after Dunya has left Papatya a major German weekly newspaper contacts us to ask whether we know a girl who would like to have her story published. Celebrities and non-celebrities were to be given a dictaphone that they should carry around with them to tape their thoughts and feelings during the day. The whole project was to run for three weeks.

This sounds interesting and we asked Dunya whether she was interested. She agreed immediately. After the story was published, the journalist responsible for the story calls us and says that a couple had contacted them wanting to support Dunya with 500 Euros, despite

not knowing her identity. Initially Dunya thinks that somebody is pulling her leg. She asks for the couple's phone number in order to thank them for their gift. The five-minute conversation turns into two hours on the phone. They like each other and Dunya is invited to visit them at home. Later on she is also invited to join them on a holiday in France, which turns into Dunya's first holiday in her life.

**Her benefactors support her with 150 Euros a month until the end of her vocational training and they grow quite close.**

Dunya: "Sometimes it was also difficult because they had something quite different in mind for my life than I had. They would have wanted to support me even more, like helping me to study abroad but I was so happy to have my "little nest" with my boyfriend and his parents that I did not want to move. It was a bit difficult for both of us to accept what the other wanted. But we managed and now we stay in contact."

From 2008 on, Dunya starts wishing for a child, She is longing for someone to be waiting for her at home. She, who has grown up with seven siblings, can hardly bear the silence in the small flat she shares with her boyfriend. Her brain, though, tell her to wait. Once she has her traineeship diploma she gives herself permission to fall pregnant and two years later her first child is born. This is when she feels she has come "full circle", as she expresses it. But she sometime still feels frightened thinking about the responsibility that she has taken on with her son.



## I ask her what a girl needs in order to make her way and not stumble:

“You absolutely need someone to talk to and cry with, when you feel the need. In the first few months and also later this was always Papatya and less so my boyfriend. I did not want to burden him too much with my problems and at Papatya you know that they are experts so I knew that they would advise me to do the right thing. And I also think that you need a structured daily routine. I could accept the strict rules at Papatya quite easily as I was very independent very early on and had to assume responsibility for my actions. After all, I had to do a lot for my parents early on and had to interpret for them when I was only ten years old.

On the one hand this helped me become independent rather early on but it also took away a large part of my childhood. I still cannot really give up responsibility completely; there’s always some kind of tension. Sometimes when I see my son playing, I think I wouldn’t mind changing roles giving up all responsibility for an hour or so.

**Well, and I also think that you need a lot of discipline if you want to go on a journey like mine, I mean leaving you family and starting anew. Somehow I always knew what I wanted and never became insecure about it. Like about not wanting to go back or what I wanted in life. I always knew that.**

I always trust my “gut feeling” and that has never proven me wrong. In the beginning, Papatya’s rules set boundaries for me. Then I would not have trusted myself to do that. But now I have found new roots here.”



**At the end of the interview I want to know what she has gained and what she has lost as a result of her decision to flee her family and I also want to know about her goals:**

“I have paid a high price because not everything was bad at home. We stuck together as a family. When I came home from school, my mother had always cooked something; this is something that I think of to this day.

**Losing my mother was the highest price I had to pay. On the other hand, I have gained my freedom and a self-determined life.**

I have also gained a great partner. He always says: "I will support you, no matter whether we are a couple or not". He and my child are worth paying any price. My next goal is to be able to go on holiday with my family one day. Apart from that, I feel my life is in balance, specially now that I work and find fulfilment in it."



Impressum:



Hergestellt mit finanzieller Unterstützung des DAPHNE III Programms der Europäischen Kommission. Für den Inhalt ist ausschließlich Papatya verantwortlich.

Satz und Layout: Henrika Prochnow

Druck: Laserline, Berlin

Fotos: Titel: Maria Lanznaster/pixelio.de, S. 4: Wikimedia Commons, S.13: MEV, S.14: Peter Smola/pixelio.de, S. 20: Sebastian Göbel/pixelio.de, S. 29 und S. 51: Stephanie Hofschläger/pixelio.de, S. 30: adamgregor/clipdealer.de, S. 38: Dieter Schütz/pixelio.de

**papatya**  is a crisis shelter for girls and young women with a migration background who have fled home because of domestic problems and who need to be sheltered anonymously. Since 1986 Papatya has helped women in emergency situations and assisted them on their journey to leading self-determined lives. We have often wondered what has become of them. This is why we contacted them and asked what happened to them after they had left Papatya. These are strong women who have forged their path in life and who despite many ups and downs never gave up on their goal: leading a self-determined life. In this book, we want to tell some of their stories.



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