



What Story do I tell myself?

Found in Translation 2024

Z.M.

Born a refugee

One single room, one window, 7 members, 1 family, my family.

This is how I spent the first 15 years of my life. Within that reality, I always wanted to be the human carrying the message of love and peace, but my story didn't start with either one. I was raised in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon within a community filled with abuse, violence and continuous conflicts. People were killed intentionally or accidentally. We always heard gun fire and there were bombings and shootings. And we actually got used to it... but deep down, I worried: What if someone I love gets killed?

In 2006, when I was just six years old, war erupted between Lebanon and Israel. It was the first time my family and I fled a war, seeking a "safe" haven, Ukraine. My whole life fit into one backpack. I felt fortunate that Ukraine was a safe space while other refugees, including my dad, did not have that privilege. As Ukrainians, we evacuated. As a Palestinian, my dad stayed behind. How is it possible that a single document can separate an entire family?

My face froze as tears filled my eyes and my hands shook as I said goodbye. Would this be the last time? We eventually returned to Lebanon after the war ended, but life remained harsh in the refugee camp.

I was ashamed to tell my school friends that I come from a refugee camp because of the associated stereotypes, and I was ashamed because I had to study in the bathroom at times. I lied repeatedly, feeling shame for my endless fabrications about home. *This reality broke many pieces in my soul.* I am not good enough. I am stuck. Will this nightmare ever end?

At the age of 15, violence erupted once more, with bombs and gunfire shattering our lives. Our home was entirely consumed by fire, leaving us with nothing. I used to have a small memory box containing childhood and family photos; I lost that too. *And more broken pieces within.*

Moving for a new start

In 2021, after the devastating explosion in Beirut and as the situation in Lebanon worsened, we decided to have a fresh start in my second home, Ukraine. These were going to be my best memories. I would no longer create them in boxes. And we finally found stability and began enjoying life again. Then the war in Ukraine began, shattering us once more. *More and more broken pieces within.*

Back on the move

A little girl waving goodbye to her dad, a man crying as he said goodbye to his wife. Thousands of people struggling to get to the train—that meant safety, that meant life. My legs were shaking as I was terrified that something bad could happen to my mom and my younger siblings as we were escaping the war in Ukraine. In a cabin that's meant for 2, we found ourselves 12 people squeezed together. How do you find strength and hope, fleeing a war and knowing deep down that at any moment you could get bombed with your whole family?



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Having survived two wars and become a refugee twice as half Palestinian/ half Ukrainian, what story do I tell myself? As more pieces break inside of me, I wonder about my home. What does 'home' even mean to me now? I was born a refugee and continue to be one? I am tired of this situation. I feel sad about what my mom has gone through. I look at Sandy and Karim and wonder if they will be able to get over fearing for their survival.

In that confined space, while escaping the war in Ukraine, standing body to body, terrified, my mom looked at me and said: "Z.M., we should sing." And so, we all did. We sang Ukrainian folk songs, and with each song, our resilience grew stronger. At that moment, I felt internal freedom; not even a war could take it away from me. I knew if we made it out alive, we would not allow ourselves to become victims in life again; instead, we would become warriors and fighters. We fight with our education, with our resilience, and we fight with our words. And we survived.

Reframing my story

I started sharing my story and realized how storytelling became my weapon, a healing power I started to use to collect the shattered parts of my story. Talking about my pain and letting it all out freed me from the mental prison I had within. The way I narrated my story to myself has changed my life forever. Why have we become so afraid to share our true emotions with each other, hiding behind our achievements when asked about who we truly are? Little do we realize that sharing our vulnerabilities is what actually brings humans together. That's how we heal collectively.

I remember sitting with Palestinian delegates during a global summit to discuss our shared traumas and our definition of 'home.' It wasn't until this storytelling circle that we truly understood each other's struggles. I looked at everyone. I smiled. I knew we all felt belonging while sharing our stories, we felt at home. All we needed was this safe space where we were seen and heard. And I wondered: Could we create safe spaces for others if we had never had for ourselves? We decided to found a global storytelling movement to create safe places because we never had them.

In the community where I was raised, people were never taught ways to express themselves; their expression of generational trauma often manifested as violence. What if we were taught healthier ways of expression? What if we were given the space to express ourselves where we are heard and seen? The world would undoubtedly be happier and more peaceful. That is what we will do: change the world, one story at a time.

Today, we're reshaping the narrative we tell ourselves. Through the power of storytelling, I was able to change how I perceive my own story. Instead of hiding behind the fact that I come from a refugee camp, today I stand confidently as twice a refugee and say it. I'm no longer ashamed because I had to study in the bathroom at some point; rather, I'm proud I fought for my education.

We cannot choose what happens to us, but we can certainly choose how we react to it—to me, that choice made the whole difference. Wars and violence bring so much trauma and pain. However, within these traumas, there is also space for collectiveness, inner freedom, and hope. Occupation may steal our homes, wars and genocides may kill the people we love, but they will never take our spirit away. They may restrict our external freedom, but the freedom we have within—this, they can never take. Nothing could stop us from being full of life and stories. This is our true power.



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It's true that these struggles break so many pieces within. Yet within these broken pieces, I've created more space for light to come in, to come out. *It is within those broken pieces that I created a home within and today I carry it with me wherever I go.* That's the story I tell myself today—a story of freedom, light, and home. If I could reshape my story, so can we, collectively!