

In Hiding, Fleeing, Then a Refugee, but Most Importantly Alive

April 2016

Maria* fled from her country, Eritrea, in 2011. Thanks to the support of the St. Alphonsus Parish, Maria's cousin was able to welcome her to Manitoba in September 2014.

Born in Eritrea, Maria spent about ten years of her youth hiding from her own government. She relates that, in her country, there is a law stating that when one reaches the eleventh grade at school, in order to complete schooling and attend university, one must go to the Sawa military camp. Maria explains that it is compulsory for boys and girls alike.



St. Alphonsus Church

The government states that this National Service, as it is called, is for one year. But in reality, it is for an indefinite length of time. Once you get there, there is no leaving. It is the government's way of recruiting child soldiers.

Maria, like many other young men and women in Eritrea, refused to go to this military camp, even though that meant the end of her schooling. Her nightmare was just beginning. Maria explains that, even when you accept to quit school, the government forces you to have an identity card which you can only obtain at the military camp. Government personnel often do random searches in the country. If they find someone without an identity card, they are sent to the camp in Sawa.

Moreover, no one in Eritrea is authorized to leave the country, even those who have served. Maria had no other choice than to go in hiding for ten years before being able to flee, on foot, with the help of a smuggler.

Maria confides that, in her first attempt at leaving Eritrea, she was arrested and sent to prison for three weeks. She was very fortunate that one of her friends was successful in bribing the prison's director with money. That is how she was released.

Finally, in 2011, after having walked through hills and mountains for two nights while hiding in bushes during the day, Maria arrived, exhausted, in Ethiopia.

The journey that had cost her \$3000 US, the smuggler's "fee", was far from over. Once in Ethiopia, Maria knew she was safe from the Eritrean government, but there was still a river to cross! She knew people who had perished, swept away by that river.

Maria then received her refugee card. Although there was finally no need to hide, living conditions in a refugee camp were difficult. No electricity, no schooling past the elementary level, no work therefore no possibility of earning money, and not enough food for everyone. Maria was dependent on help from next of kin.

Finally, Maria's cousin living in Winnipeg was able to get her out of the refugee camp, thanks to a private sponsorship. The young Eritrean woman landed in the Manitoba capital on September 23, 2014 after 13 years of hiding or living in deplorable conditions.

Maria points out that, in order for her to be sponsored, her cousin had to count on the support of her Catholic parish of St. Alphonsus. The parish became a co-sponsor of her immigration by specifically attesting to the fact that her cousin was a serious person who would be well and truly able to support her for one year. Also, the parish priest helped fill out the necessary forms and submit them to Citizenship and Immigration Canada. All this support has been greatly appreciated.

It has been a year and a half since Maria's arrival in Manitoba. She has had a steady job for more than a year now and is a tenant at a transition house. She concludes saying she wants to start living again.

**Her name has been changed for security reasons.*