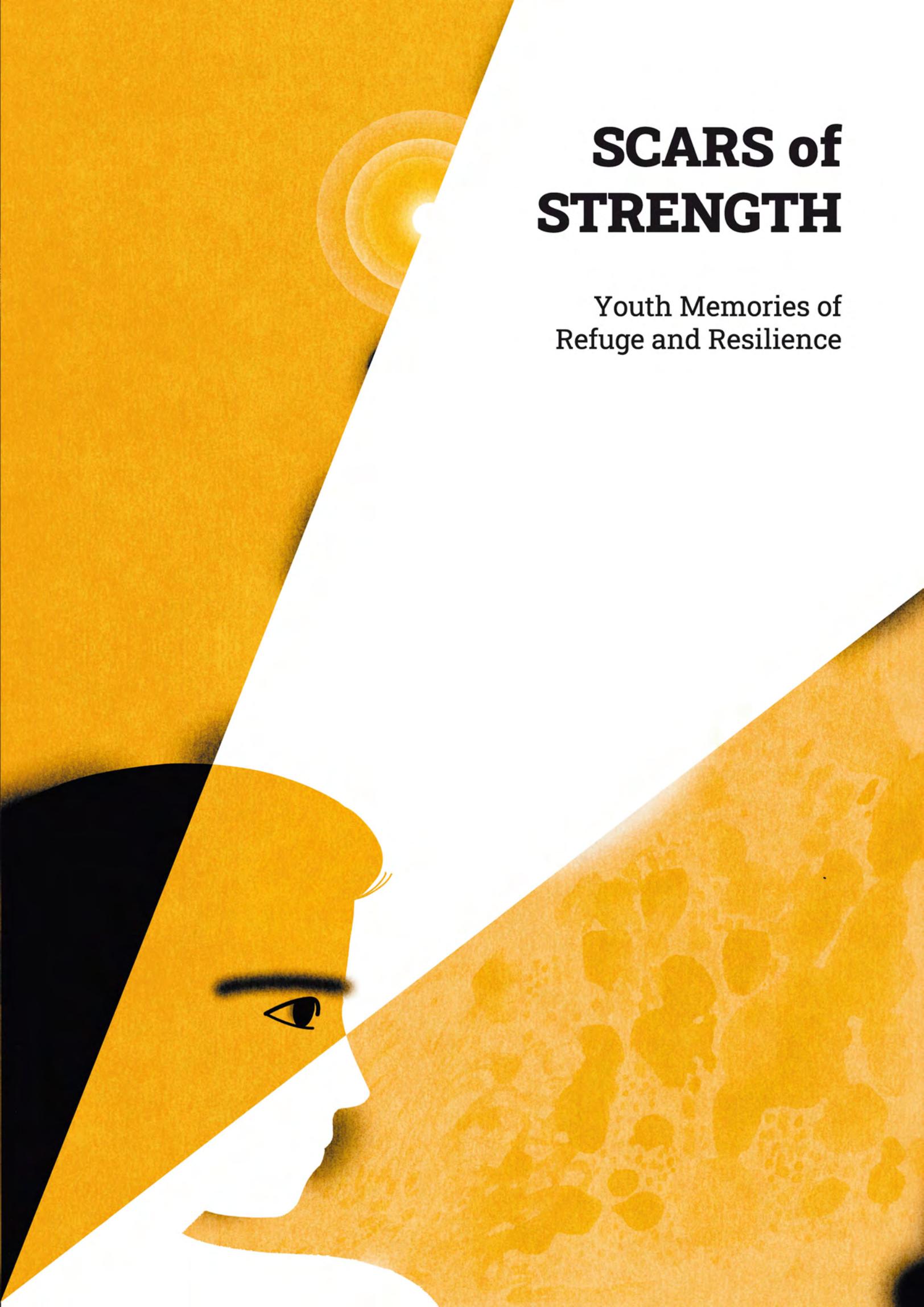


SCARS of STRENGTH

Youth Memories of
Refuge and Resilience



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INTRODUCTION

With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the topic of war has recaptured the attention of Europe. Communities across the continent host refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people.

Each person has a story. Each story is woven from threads of our common humanity – pain, loss, suffering, joy, hope, courage and strength, to name a few. The designs are unique, yet the feelings are shared. We see ourselves in these stories and wonder how we would have handled the unimaginable. Where we would have found strength to continue? How can we create a better future?

In the following pages, 14 young people from five countries (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine) share their wartime experiences of flight and displacement. All stories are true, the result of several workshops in which the authors collaborated with experts in oral history and graphic novel design, to identify the focal points of their journeys and organize them into narrative form. Utmost care was paid to authenticity, with authors striving to overcome language and cultural barriers to recreate their perspectives at these key moments for the reader.

This book is the product of a project entitled "To Tell Our Stories: Youth Memories on Refuge and Resilience", that was organized by **Libereco – Partnership for Human Rights, the Gustav Stresemann Institut in Niedersachsen** and **East SOS**.

March 2011. Aleppo, Syria.

On a sunny day, Safi felt a mixture of excitement and anticipation as he closely followed the events of the Arab Spring unfolding across different regions of the Arab world. He believed that the time for change had come and dreamed of a better future for his country.



All eyes were on Tunisia where the revolution erupted and the corrupt government fell. People celebrated in the streets, waving flags of freedom and justice

The moment Safi had been waiting for had finally arrived. He was inspired by the scenes of courage and determination displayed on the streets of Tunisia, capturing Safi's attention.



Protests erupted in Syria, demanding freedom and democracy!

Safi felt more awake than ever before.

Have you seen it? I can't believe it!

This is the opportunity I had been waiting for — the chance to see my country rise up and break free from the grip of tyranny!



17.05.2012

Safi participated in all the demonstrations available to him, in search of freedom, equality, and justice.

On a warm spring day, under clear blue skies with a refreshing light breeze, there was a big protest at Aleppo University. Safi felt hopeful and determined as he joined others in waving Syrian flags and holding pictures of heroes.

He climbed onto a platform and spoke with passion and conviction, demanding freedom and democracy for his fellow Syrians:

The people want to overthrow the regime!

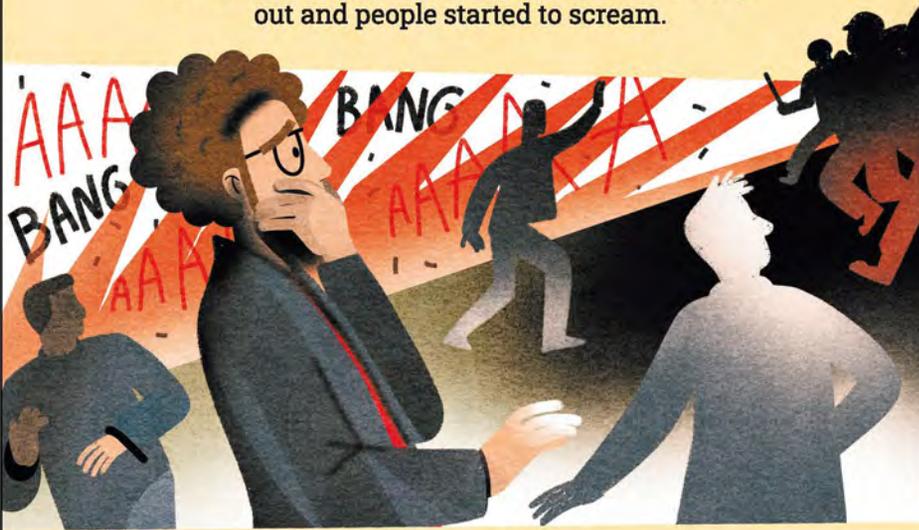
We want freedom and dignity!

A free and independent Syria!

One united Syria!

The students and professors looked at Safi with admiration and respect, proud to have young people fighting for a better future for their country.

Suddenly, everything changed. Gunshots rang out and people started to scream.



Safi looked around in shock, realizing that the peaceful protest had turned into a dangerous situation.

Fear and anger filled his heart but he refused to give up.

I will stand up for truth and justice, even if it means risking my own safety.



Trying to escape the chaos, Safi found himself caught in the middle of the fighting.



As he tried to run, he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. A security officer had knocked him down.



Pain was coursing through his body.

Safi felt alone and weak, separated from the other protesters. But he refused to give up hope.

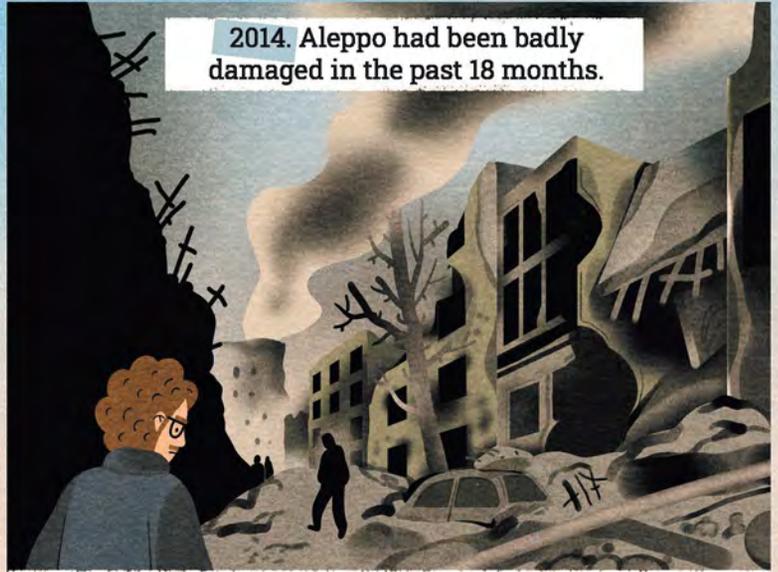


2013. When the peaceful protests had ended and war had broken out in Aleppo, Safi volunteered in many humanitarian organizations to assist refugees and victims of the war.



Safi had a kind heart and a brave spirit. He wanted to bring hope and kindness to those who had lost everything.

2014. Aleppo had been badly damaged in the past 18 months.



Once, there was a terrible bombing. Safi rushed to help the injured and to provide first aid.

It was a shocking scene. Among the rubble and blood, Safi saw an entire family lying lifeless. Aunts, uncles, cousins... young and old... twisted and broken...

like the branches of a family tree struck by lightning.

Safi felt pain in his heart. Tears filled his eyes.

Summoning his strength, he carefully started to remove the bodies. He placed them side by side and gave them a humble yet respectful goodbye. He prayed for their souls.

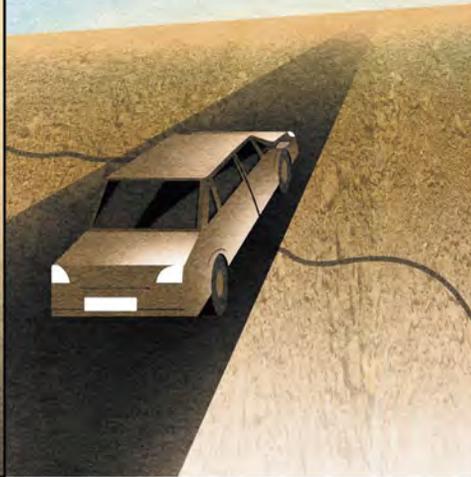
May you rest in peace.

I promise to keep fighting to end the violence and suffering. I am determined to bring about a better future.

Though the humanitarian work kept him busy, Safi managed to graduate from the Faculty of Dentistry in 2019.



But the situation in Syria deteriorated. Safi's humanitarian work and political views made him a target for the regime. He had no choice but to flee.



2020. The journey to Turkey took 20 days. Turkish soldiers repeatedly captured Safi and beat him up as he attempted to cross the concrete barrier between death in Syria and life in Turkey.



2021. He got a job in an Istanbul clinic. Safi worked hard, wanting to give the best dental care to his patients. However, some patients and colleagues treated him unfairly and disrespectfully because he was from Syria.



And yet he persisted. Eventually Safi gained refugee status in Turkey and began his new life.

Sadly, he faced racism every day, even from his neighbors. To fight against this, he became active on social media, speaking out against racism and Turkey's involvement in Syria.



Safi strongly believed that raising awareness and educating people could change their attitudes. He shared his own experiences publicly and his messages stressed the importance of living together peacefully and being tolerant.

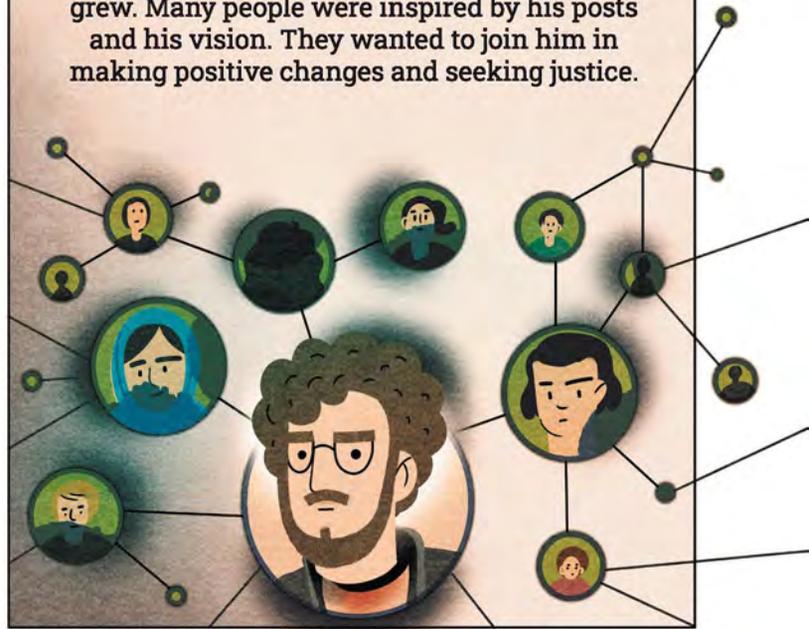
In his everyday life, Safi felt lonely and discriminated against. The derogatory comments about his Syrian heritage stung deeply, leaving him feeling isolated and excluded.



However, he kept trying to make friends and build understanding with his neighbors. He wanted to bridge the gap between cultures and promote love and acceptance.



As time went on, Safi's social media network grew. Many people were inspired by his posts and his vision. They wanted to join him in making positive changes and seeking justice.

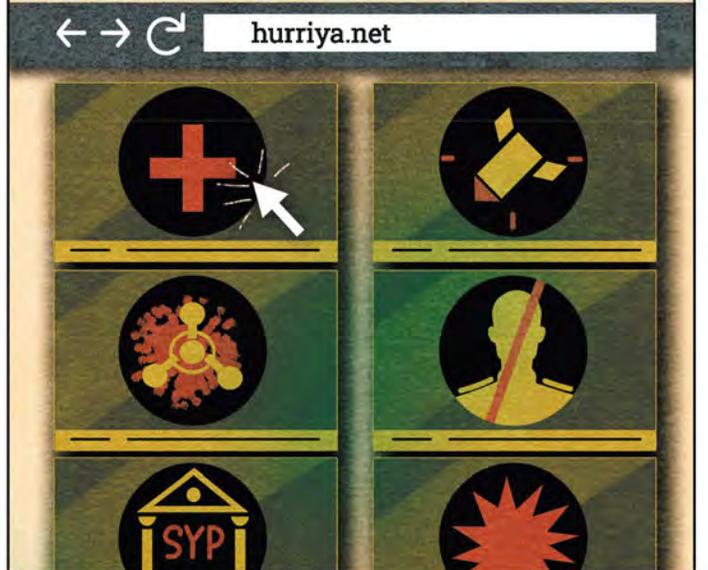


Unfortunately, two of Safi's activist friends were arrested by the Turkish police because of their work against racism and their support for Syria. This event deeply affected Safi and made things difficult for him.

2022. After the situation worsened in Turkey, Safi needed to flee again. He succeeded in obtaining a visa to enter Europe. In Germany, he applied for political asylum, seeking the safety he longed for.



However, Safi didn't stop his political activities. He co-founded an online magazine with some friends called "Hurriya" (Arabic for 'Freedom') which focused on Syrian affairs, provided political, economic, social, and humanitarian analyses, and supported justice and freedom for the Syrian people.



In Germany, Safi met a fellow activist on Twitter. She was also from Syria and a deep love blossomed between them. Safi and his girlfriend sat on a bench in the park, holding hands and enjoying the peaceful surroundings.

Since we first connected on social media you have become very important to me.



Safi looked at his girlfriend with affectionate eyes.

I admire your bravery, your passion for doing what's right and your strong dedication to freedom.



I want to be with you, to build a future with love and purpose. Every moment we spend together is special to me. We share a deep connection.



His girlfriend leaned closer and shared her love for him too. They embraced knowing that they had found something truly special.



As the sun set that evening, they were thinking about the words of the poet Mahmoud Darwish:

"And we love life, if we find a way for it."

ونحن نحب الحياة،
إذا ما استطعنا إليها سبيلا

