

Living as a refugee

“I obviously had extremely mixed feelings when I was forced to leave Burma. I’d naturally prefer to live with my family. But if I had stayed, I would have probably ended up in prison. It’s a very difficult choice to live with as a refugee.

Thein Tun Zaw is known as Justin. He was given this name during the five years he spent in Hong Kong as a refugee who had fled to the city on his own. He is now 32 years old and has been living in Järvsö, Sweden, for the past eight months – a long way from his biological family who he left in 2003. Justin is a Buddhist and dreams of being able to work with something that changes the lives of all those who are suffering in Burma. Each month he saves as much money as he can to send to needy children. When asked why he left Burma, he turns serious, saying that leaving his homeland was the most difficult decision he has ever made.

“It was due to politics and my family’s involvement,” he explains. “I hope that my family are alright; I’ve only spoken to them twice since I arrived in Sweden, and I know that the phones are tapped, so we can’t speak freely. They check everything in Burma: phone calls, letters and e-mail,” he says. “I miss my mother enormously. She is 75 years old and I really hope that I’ll meet her again,” he says with a tear in his eye.

Justin explains how he left Burma as quickly as lightening – his older brother had arranged everything for him. He was forced to leave his dying father and ageing mother behind, without knowing whether he would ever see them again.

“My father has since died, but I would do anything to meet my mother again – simply to see her,” he says.

Justin went to school until he was 16 years old. After that he took various practical training courses and worked as a waiter, a photographer and on ships. The cruise ship he worked on went to Hong Kong, the city in which he also spent five years as a refugee before coming to Sweden. He talks about friends who were injured, tortured and killed during the years he lived in Burma. And about the discrimination and his feelings of loneliness and social exclusion in Hong Kong.

“If you’re a refugee in Hong Kong, people think you’re worthless. They don’t even want to talk to you,” says Justin. “They sometimes walk away in the middle of a conversation if they find out you’re a refugee.”

He slept in a square with other refugees and made several good friends, although he often felt extremely lonely.

“To start with I simply wandered around, but we found a church where we could get food, so we ate lunch there every day. It meant such a lot,” Justin explains. “Even though I’m as Buddhist, I like going to church. There was a sense of security and community there and I helped to cook food and I made friends. If you’re doing good, it doesn’t matter whether you’re in a church or a temple,” he says.

After a while Justin was given refugee status in Hong Kong and the rights of a refugee. This meant that he could rent a room and had the opportunity to go on courses in web design, cooking and agriculture. Through UNHCR he also received the chance to seek asylum in Sweden.

“I was both extremely happy and extremely scared to go to Sweden,” he says. “I thought that people might view me with suspicion because I look Asian, but it hasn’t been like that.” When he arrived at Stockholm’s Arlanda Airport he thought that he would have to live in a tent with other refugees and he smiles as he recalls the police officers who laughed and said, “No, here in Sweden you live in a house.”

“I’d never seen snow before and simply had to taste it immediately,” says Justin. “I love snow and have even tried snowboarding.”

Justin likes living in Järvsö, even though it can also feel small at times.

“In Hong Kong I got used to living in a big city; 7-Eleven became important to me, for example” he smiles. “We often spent a whole night there when we had nowhere else to stay. We drank a Coca Cola that lasted the whole night so that we could stay indoors.”

Despite his friendliness and openness, Justin feels a lot of grief and fear. During the first few months he didn’t even dare to open the curtains. This was a sign of the trauma that has stayed with him from his life in Burma. Justin talks about what it can feel like to be a vulnerable refugee. About threats and social exclusion.

“I have seen friends go mad due to their experiences; men who have jumped out of windows, and another who set himself on fire in prison. I meditate to stay in control of my body and thoughts, instead of the therapy sessions that I have been offered.”

He currently lives in an apartment of his own and attends the Forsa Folk High School for adult education, where he is studying photography and Swedish. The elderly couple who live in the apartment above his, have become like extra grandparents and Justin and the couple often visit each other.

“I often invite them to eat food that I have cooked,” says Justin. “I find the recipes on the internet. We see each other a lot at the weekends,” he says with a smile and shows me a photograph of when he also visited their relations. “I practise Swedish all the time and sometimes I go to the gym. But I try to save all the money I can.”

He dreams of getting married and having children in the future.

“I’d like to live an independent life, without social security benefits,” says Justin. “I have two arms and two legs and want to work. It doesn’t have to be a high-flying job – I don’t mind washing up. This is the first time in many years that I can sleep well at night and eat my fill. If anything bad happens, I can call the police. This gives me a sense of security that I’ve never felt before,” Justin explains. “I’ve always dreamed of being able to help others and I hope I can get that kind of job in the future.”

Marja Anne Casparsson

Treating foreigners as equals

“Protection of refugees is an extremely important issue for churches in Europe and is based on the Bible,” says Doris Peschka, general secretary of CCME, Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe “This consists of welcoming foreigners and treating them as your equals.”

She emphasises the inhumane situations that often arise today, in which refugees can find themselves in limbo for more than a decade. Churches have attempted to change this at EU, national and local level.

“Our main message is that everyone needs to be treated with dignity,” continues Doris. “And even when people’s asylum applications are rejected, we need to be there to support and help them. Even in more difficult cases it’s part of our task,” she says.

Thein Tun Zaw, a 32-year-old Burmese man, can testify to one example of how churches take responsibility for refugees when all other authorities fail. He has lived in Sweden for the past eight months, but his journey here was a long one. He spent five years as a refugee in Hong Kong – which was often a difficult and lonely time.

“If you’re a refugee in Hong Kong, people think you’re worthless,” he explains, “They don’t even want to talk to you.”

At first he slept on the streets, among thousands of other refugees. They gathered in a square where they lived their lives, completely lacking contact with other inhabitants of the city.

“To start with I simply wandered around, but we found a church where we could get food, so we ate lunch there every day,” he says. “It meant such a lot. Even though I’m a Buddhist, it felt totally right to go to church; there was a sense of security and community there and I helped to cook food and I made friends. If you’re doing good, it doesn’t matter whether you’re in a church or a temple,” he adds.

Doris Peschka believes that churches can encourage politicians to adopt a more compassionate approach to refugees’ situation; the key is to face up to reality.

“Turning words into action is a major issue during the Swedish EU Presidency,” says Doris. “We don’t need to agree on everything, but it’s important that we come together on the issue of resettlement. That’s why churches are calling for an increase in opportunities for resettlement within the EU, which will thereby also cater for the needs of the most vulnerable. As churches we also want to help in receiving refugees and meeting their needs,” concludes Doris Peschke.

Marja Anne Casparsson