

I Have Survived Torture

A refugee's road to recovery:

Anglavi's story

- The difference refugee status can make to a torture survivor

They are an instantly recognisable cultural symbol, as iconic as Big Ben, red telephone boxes or fish and chips. The giant double-decker buses of London are British through and through.

And so it is that six days a week, nine-and-a-half hours a day, behind the wheel of any one of the 6,500 diesel-powered monoliths that traverse the streets of inner London, you'll find 33-year-old Kokouvi Anglavi – originally of Togo but thankful now to hold a passport that confirms his right to be considered as British as the buses he drives.

"Route 91 – Crouch End to Trafalgar Square; 476 – Northumberland Park to Euston; 341 – Tottenham to Waterloo..." Anglavi begins rattling off the diverse routes for which he can be rostered in any given week. From his vantage high in the driver's seat these streets of London surely seem a million miles from the life he knew in Togo. It was early in the 1990s that Anglavi joined the young people's political party, the Action Committee for Renewal (CAR), which called for genuine democracy to be established.

One afternoon, as Anglavi helped with a leaflet drop near his home, he was picked up by government soldiers. They took him to a camp where he was detained in abysmal conditions for close to two years – denied even the briefest contact with his family. His small cell contained more than 20 people, which meant people either continually stood or sat in a hunched position. Lying down to sleep was impossible. Each day they would receive a meagre portion of bread that was meant to sustain them, even though they were used as forced labour beyond the camp's walls. Anglavi was repeatedly beaten and brutalised. "People would die right in front of you," he says quietly. "Then you would be made to dig their graves and bury them."

The most feared experience by those being held was to be hauled out of the military prison in the middle of the night and loaded onto trucks. This they knew meant almost certain death. Those taken were transferred to an army shooting range to be used as human targets.

Nearly two years had passed since Anglavi had been imprisoned, and now it appeared it was his turn to be callously gunned down. However, when the soldier in charge of this particular death detail recognised Anglavi as an old school friend, he allowed him to escape.

So much time had passed without word of him that when Anglavi arrived at his own home, his family could not believe he was still alive, if only barely. During the next six months he received medical treatment – he could not see properly, he vomited his food, he could not sleep and there was blood in his urine.

When physically able again, Anglavi, galvanised by his experiences, started to participate in political activities once more. At one large protest the police came and videotaped all those involved. For safety he left home to stay with his uncle, who in turn hid him temporarily elsewhere.

Two days later his uncle returned to tell him the devastating news. Anglavi's home had been burnt down, his father had been trapped in the blaze and killed, there was no trace of his mother. His four sisters were all away at school at the time but word soon reached them and fearing more reprisals they fled into neighbouring Ghana. It would be many years before Anglavi would see them again, even longer before they were reunited with their brother.

Anglavi was helped to flee to Britain. Initially he was held in detention here by the Immigration Service, and after release was twice denied international protection by the Home Office.

Having been put in contact with the Medical Foundation, his case file today, nearly seven years on, is an inch-and-a-half thick. It stands as a lasting testimony to the attempts made to have his story believed; to help him come to terms with his experiences in detention; and to have him reunited with his sisters.

The quest to be recognised as a refugee was a long and draining one. Initially denied by the Home Office, and then again on appeal, he was granted a judicial review thanks to the tenacious work of a new lawyer, an immigration specialist found for him by the Medical Foundation. Anglavi had been told to prepare himself. Should that review have failed he would be returned to Togo within days.

This time, however, with all the facts assembled – a forensic medical report by a Foundation doctor, letters of support from local MPs, and the presence of two witnesses who knew first-hand the veracity of his story and had travelled from Germany to give evidence – Anglavi received refugee status.

Meanwhile, after repeated attempts to find his family with the help of international aid agencies, he at last received news they had been located. Joy was tempered with distress when he learned that the second eldest of his four sisters, Adjom, who would today be 19, had died of malaria whilst in exile in Ghana.

With the support of the Medical Foundation he gained an emergency loan to travel to Ghana to see them, verify their identity, and bring them home with him. Officialdom was not convinced and on the first occasion Anglavi had to return to Britain empty-handed. Only after submitting DNA tests to establish beyond doubt his relationship to the girls, were his sisters allowed to join him.

Taking care of them has been his priority since the day they landed. Initially he worked as a pastry chef. Having qualified as a teacher in Togo, he began teaching French at a secondary school in Essex but found that job too stressful. And now Anglavi works for the First Capital bus company.

"In the beginning I was having a very hard time," he says. "I was very depressed. The Medical Foundation was a fantastic help... they helped me to get my life back. "Receiving refugee status has transformed my life as well. I have a good job and have made great friends through First Capital. It is hard to forget the past but now life is good for me and my sisters."