WITNESS TO WAR

François, 16, shares the chilling story of his escape from one of the most dangerous places on Earth.

A TRUE TEEN STORY

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I Escaped From a War Zone

The civil war in Syria left François and his family running for their lives.

A loud explosion woke François (fran-SWAH) Jacob at 6:30 a.m. It was September 9, 2012, and a war was raging in his hometown.

François, then 14, lived with his mom, dad, and brother in the Middle Eastern city of Aleppo, Syria. There had been fighting in their neighborhood for months. But this was different. The Jacob family was trapped in the middle of an intense battle.

Outside the window of their apartment, François saw soldiers in the street. The men were shooting at terrorist snipers hidden in buildings nearby.

Bullets were flying everywhere, making it dangerous for the Jacobs to leave. They decided to wait. As the hours ticked by, François needed to break the tension. He put on headphones to block out the noise from the fighting. Then he began playing a video game. The object of the game: to hunt terrorists. “I played for two hours,” says François. “The terrorists in the game took his mind off the real terrorists outside.”

By 2:00 p.m., gunfire still peppered the Jacobs’ street. They knew they had to flee.

Time to Run

The Jacobs’ only escape route put them in full view of the snipers.

“We didn’t have time to think,” says François. “We just ran.” They sprinted a block and ducked behind a wall to pause and catch their breath. Then they kept running.

The gunfire never stopped. “We were without any protection,” says François. Finally, they made it to their car and drove to a relative’s home in a safer area.

Vocabulary

snipers: people who shoot guns from hidden places
oppressive: cruel and unfair
civil war: a war between groups of people from the same country
refugees: people who have been forced to leave a country because of violence or a natural disaster
visas: official documents that allow people to enter a country
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SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW

Answer these questions about “I Escaped From a War Zone.” Fill in the bubble next to the best answer to each question.

1. What is the main idea of this article?
   A. The civil war in Syria is the deadliest war in history.
   B. ISIS is a terrorist group.
   C. Much of Syria has been destroyed.
   D. Because of the war, François’s family left Syria for safety in the U.S.

2. Why do you think the author included information about François being hit by a bullet?
   A. to show the daily danger he faced
   B. to show he had a bulletproof vest
   C. to show that bullets are not as dangerous as people think
   D. to show how his home was destroyed

3. In the first section of the article, the word tension means ______.
   A. fighting
   B. pressure
   C. danger
   D. relief

4. Which phrase from the text helps the reader understand the meaning of the word tension?
   A. “to hunt terrorists.”
   B. “They knew they had to flee.”
   C. “took his mind off the real terrorists”
   D. “dangerous . . . to leave their home”

5. You can infer that François ______.
   A. will join the Syrian army one day
   B. rarely thinks about his old life back in Syria
   C. worries about his friends who are still living in Syria
   D. knows how to shoot a gun

6. Which statement does the text support?
   A. Not many people have been killed in the Syrian civil war.
   B. The Syrian war has gone on for years.
   C. François and his family are the only Syrians to come to the U.S.
   D. Peace talks are happening in Syria.

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

7. The article says that the war made life in Aleppo “nearly unbearable.” Write down three examples from the text that show some of the hardships François and his family faced.

8. François wants to bring attention to people still suffering in Syria. Do you think that sharing his story could help lead to better conditions for the war’s victims? How?
A week later, François’s father went home to gather some belongings. But the Jacobs would never live there again. Their neighborhood was soon destroyed.

**A Brutal War**

The war in Syria started in 2011. It began with peaceful protests against an oppressive government. At first, François and his family hoped the protests might help change Syria for the better. But then things turned violent. The country exploded into a civil war.

Several major rebel groups, each divided into smaller groups, are now fighting for control of Syria. Some groups want freedom. Others, like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are terrorists. They want to bring death to their enemies.

Aleppo was once a beautiful city full of history. François loved growing up there. But the war made life nearly unbearable.

Schools closed. Electricity was shut off for days at a time. An explosion shattered the window of Mr. Jacob’s barbershop. The price of food and fuel skyrocketed.

One day while walking outside, François felt a sharp pain in his side. A bullet had bounced off a fence and hit him. Luckily, it was fired from too far away to cause serious injury. It lay on the ground at his feet. Unhurt, François just kept walking.

**Escape to America**

More than 200,000 people have died in the Syrian war. Millions fled their homes and are now refugees living in terrible conditions.

The Jacobs were lucky. François’s uncle Joseph is a U.S. citizen. After a long wait, he was able to get visas for the whole family.

François, now 16, arrived in the U.S. on October 4, 2014. His family settled in Nutley, New Jersey. “It’s a new start,” he says happily. “It’s America!”

Still, he can’t forget the friends he left behind. By sharing his story, he hopes to bring attention to the terror that others still live with every day. Says François, “I can be their voice.”

—Sarah Jane Brian