

I am La Yeonu. Initially, I was a refugee who came to South Korea to escape the dangers of the war in Syria. Now, I have naturalized and live in Jeju Island as a South Korean citizen, working for an organization that helps immigrants.

The direct reason I came to Korea was the war in my homeland Syria, but even before the war, I wanted to leave due to the stifling lack of freedom there. Simply walking on the street with a female friend would attract disapproving stares, and during elections, the anonymity of votes was compromised as soldiers would stand and check at the ballot boxes.

I fled to Turkey to escape the dangers of the Syrian war, but I couldn't stay there long, and the only country I could go to immediately was South Korea. I came to Jeju Island with a visitor's visa. I pondered with my younger brother whether to stay in Jeju or go to the mainland, where many Syrians lived.

I thought staying within my familiar culture would hinder my adaptation to Korean society. I fully understand the desire to rely on people who share the same language and culture in a foreign country. However, I thought that since I came to Korea, I should have the courage to adapt to Korean society.

I first resolved to learn Korean. I wanted to know what people were saying to me, more than wanting to converse with them. I came across many immigrants who initially heard Korean as swear words and got more hurt as they understood the language more, leading them not to learn it.

But I think differently. If I understand what people are saying, they can't speak thoughtlessly. I also realized that Koreans don't just curse at immigrants for no reason; it mostly happens out of frustration when communication fails.

I didn't learn Korean by reading books or in school. I would be pulling radishes in the field from

five in the morning and ask the lady working beside me about what she said out of curiosity. As I gradually understood and could converse in Korean, I became able to work in jobs dealing with people. I became a barista selling coffee and also interpreted for refugees from the Arab world.

As I learned Korean, I realized I needed to understand Korean culture and history. To adapt to Korean culture, I decided to face it head-on, staying till the end at company dinners even though I couldn't drink, and began studying Korean history starting from Dangun and Gojoseon.

After encompassing Korean language, culture, and history, I took the naturalization test and became a Korean. When I said I was preparing for naturalization, some mocked me, asking if naturalization was a snack sold in convenience stores. But when I succeeded, the same people asked me for tips. I was overwhelmed by calls and texts from strangers.

Since there were no cases like mine, I understand their curiosity. But everyone only saw the result of my naturalization, hardly showing interest in the effort and mindset I put in the process.

I believe naturalization should not be approached merely as a means for immigrants to live comfortably in Korea. It's a procedure to undertake after making efforts and practicing to live with Korean people, and deciding that I am ready to be a part of this society. Such determination is necessary to interpret and understand the language, culture, and history well.

People often say I am amazing because I speak fluent Korean. But isn't speaking Korean a basic requirement if you decide to live in Korea? At least communication should be possible. Of course, not everyone can master Korean like me. It was really hard for me too.

That's why institutional support is needed to help immigrants learn the language. Instead of just putting them to work for their labor and then firing them when communication fails, providing immigrants with the minimum opportunity to learn Korean and start economic activities once prepared would allow more immigrants to become healthy members of Korean society.

I want to talk about a brother who has been with me to this day. I learned from him that an open mind is really important. When I first came to Korea, I had no place to stay, and a brother running a guesthouse offered to live with him. Living with him, I learned healthy ways to communicate with people. There's no special secret. I just tried. I imitated his words and actions and asked immediately if there were words or expressions I didn't know.

There's a Korean proverb that says you can't spit in a smiling face. Of course, I was rejected sometimes, but as I actively mustered courage and conversed, many people around me started to laugh and cry with me and care for me.

I want to tell immigrants living in Korea to start trying anything from now. One of the conditions for my naturalization was having assets of over 60 million won, which seemed impossible to achieve. When many around me said it wouldn't be possible and it would be difficult, only the brother said, "Just start now." He even posted "Yeonu 60 million won!" on the gate of the guesthouse we lived in.

I focused on that as my goal every day. And now, I live as a naturalized Korean. My dream has come true. The people around you during difficult times are really important, so I try to be that person for others.

Just like I became a Korean, what is something you desperately wish for in your life right now?