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Daisy Lady: Hülya "Hissu" Kytö



Left Tereza Brhelová and right Hülya "Hissu" Kytö.
Picture: Tereza Brhelová.

Love, peace and understanding. Those are the emotions I felt when I visited the Daisy Ladies café in Turku, only a few steps away from the town's river Aura. When I arrived at the café, I was immediately hugged by the comforting environment. I smelled fresh coffee and *pulla*, the sun was shining through the decorated windows and I could hear loud *"huomenta"* from the inside of the building. And there she was, a vital energetic Turkish lady **Hülya "Hissu" Kytö**, who could have retired a long time ago, only if she wanted. But she doesn't. *"I can't live without people, it would be too boring. I have to keep doing something,"* she says when we sit in the Daisy Ladies' conference room and Hissu places her full diary next to her. She is going to celebrate her 50th anniversary of living in Finland this month. But how did this happen?

From Turkey to Turku

"How did you appear in Finland? You come from Turkey, right? So how did you come from Turkey to Turku?" I ask and start the recording on my phone. I have a feeling that this story will be stronger than I originally thought.

"From Turkey to Turku, that's nice," Hissu says and starts to tell her story.

Her hometown is Istanbul, she lived there with her family for several years after she was born. *"My element has been water ever since then. I have to be around water, that is why I chose this area,"* she refers to the place, which is very close to river Aura.

The family moved to Ankara after a few years, and they lived there for fifteen years. Hissu even went to a medical high school there, she wanted to become a chemist. *"My biggest role model was Marie Curie, I don't even know why,"* she says.

Hissu had three sisters, but one of them unfortunately died when she was ten. The family moved back to Istanbul because they could not stay in the same house after their daughter's death so Hissu had to finish high school in Istanbul. However, shortly after her graduation a life changing opportunity occurred.

"My uncle, my mother's brother was a doctor. And he lived in the United States, in Texas. Since my uncle knew about my dream of becoming a chemist, he invited me over. He told me there were a lot of possibilities," Hissu explains how she got the opportunity to study abroad and her eyes sparkle. *"It was a fairytale for such a young girl,"* she adds.

She went to the United States, all alone, and stayed in Texas with her uncle. However, it was very difficult to pass all the exams because of her poor language skills. Suddenly, after two years of studies in the United States, she got a letter from Turkey. It said that her father was very ill and she needed to come back immediately. So she did. But her father was waiting for her at the airport, not ill at all.

"It was just a game. They were worried that I would meet a man and get married, so I would have to stay in the States," Hissu explains how shocking her finding was. Little did her fam-

ily know that their game would actually help Hissu meet her future husband.

"There was some blond guy in New York and we ended up on the same plane. We talked and I asked him to send me a postcard, because I was collecting them at that time. But I didn't know where he was from, so I asked him. And he said Turku..."

Homesickness and Knocking on the Door

After struggling to get a permission from Hissu's family, the young couple got married. Firstly they moved to Canada, because Hissu's husband worked there. But on the 27th of May 1971 Hissu arrived in Turku.

"I had my first shock here, when my husband took me out to show me the city. We walked for half an hour and I asked him, where is the city. We just passed it, he answered," Hissu laughs as she remembers her first impression of Turku.

"Are they calling this city? was my answer to him."

The beginnings were hard for Hissu, since she was practically the only foreigner in Turku at that time, she did not know the language or anyone except from her husband.

"My husband was a typical Finnish man, he did not laugh, did not talk. I started to miss my old days, my home," Hissu explains how the honeymoon ended and she felt homesick.

"But I was stubborn and I realized that I wanted to come here. So I decided that I have to survive."

Hissu's stubbornness showed itself in how she decided to handle the situation. Hissu calls it *"you just knock and ask"*. And that is what she did. She loved theatre and wanted to participate because she was "only" a housewife, which was too boring for her.

"So I went to the principal of the Turku's theatre and asked if I could participate. He laughed at me. But this is just a proof of how a terrible woman I am. I just go and ask people if I can join." Hissu laughs at her life's attitude.

However, she really wanted to work and theatre was not her path, so she started to work in an office with a copy machine. She didn't even need language skills or a work permission for a work like that.

Later she started to work for the Red Cross. She met a few people and then got the opportunity to join a Finnish-Turkish Culture Association. *"And just like that they chose me to be a chairperson. That was good,"* Hissu humbly remembers.

And then another moment of *"knocking and asking"* happened.

"I saw a prime minister at a meeting. I didn't understand what he was saying, but I liked him."

So I found what party he belonged to, went to their office, knocked on the door and told them I would like to join." Hissu still remembers how they laughed at her. But they let her in and allowed her to make coffee for them at their meetings.

"And that is how I met our current president and former minister of foreign affairs. All those big names are my friends now."

You Just Have to Make It Happen

Next challenge appeared just a short time after Hissu managed to get into the company of the politicians who are now in the lead of the whole country. Hissu became employed in the city's educational department.

"They told me to found a school library. So I did. They gave me a room, some books and ugly shelves. I painted them, I painted the windows. I put some pictures on the walls. And I made an opening. I invited everyone. And they were all so surprised!"

At that time, Hissu was already able to speak Finnish language, even though she says to this day that it is not perfect. She became an important contact person for international relations in Turku. She kept in touch with the Turkish embassy in Helsinki and helped to organize some international events between Turkey and Finland. She even joined UNICEF and was chosen to be the chairperson for the organization in Turku. She organized musical charity events in Turkey during the 1980s.

Working with Migrants

It was at the end of the eighties, in 1987, when Hissu got a chance to work with asylum seekers in Finland. Just like any other challenge in her life, she accepted it and started to take care of Vietnamese refugees in Turku.

"It was a huge turning point for me, working with these (kind of) people. They had terrible stories," she remembers. *"I couldn't even eat for several days..."*

Working with Vietnamese people wasn't easy for Hissu. They didn't know each other's language and their culture was very different. *"It was a very difficult time for them and us as well."* This was Hissu's beginning of working with asylum seekers. Later she founded the International friendship society. She also needed to show the city that the number of migrants was increasing and the city should provide her with financial support to work with them.

"So, I had an idea. I knocked on a few doors. I organized an international night. I walked up to one restaurant, asked them to give me a space to do it and told them we can teach them to cook different meals. And they agreed."

At that time, there were over 30 nationalities living in Turku.

The Creation of Daisy Ladies

Knocking on the doors and organizing an international night was only the beginning of a very long path for Hissu. As more and more foreign people kept coming to Turku, they were in need of a variety of support services. Since Hissu was the main contact person for asylum seekers, she had to deal with the new challenges brought along by the growing immigrant population in Turku. The situation was tense and got to a point where she was threatened by some immigrants who felt disappointed for not receiving everything they were asking for. There was even a bullet in an envelope one day. And that was a breaking point for Hissu.

"Nobody could do anything, because nothing happened. You are supposed to die first." She describes how the police could not help her albeit being blackmailed. She became so scared that she had to go on a sick leave. The retirement came only a short time after that, in 1996. Hissu was only 50 years old but so burnt out she didn't know what to do.

Everything changed in 1999. There was a huge earthquake in Istanbul, her hometown. She decided to go back to help the people in need. She spent two weeks with them and got an idea.

"I saw the women there. And I realized I want to help just ladies," she says about founding the organization Daisy Ladies. And why Daisy Ladies?

"I like daisies. They grow everywhere, they just need sun and a little water. And when you try to pull them up, it is not easy, because their roots are so strong. They are like women."

2000 was the first year of Daisy Ladies. There have been hundreds of women coming to the organization ever since then. They come from all over the world — China, Latin America, Africa, Poland, Romania. Everyone can come there, except for little children.

"If the small kids come, mothers don't learn anything. Mothers need to get strong first, then they can open an umbrella and the children hide underneath it. And there is only one way to become strong. That is education. Nothing else." Hissu explains how women learn the Finnish language or how to sew, to be a valuable part of the Finnish society.

There is only one rule in the Daisy Ladies organization: to respect each other and never put other people down. Hissu gets emotional when she thinks about all the ladies who have gone through the organization.

"You know, sometimes I look at my CV and I don't believe my eyes," she laughs. *"I am turning 74 soon, but I am still working. I still have ideas, I don't know how. I have to do something for people. Then I feel happy and strong and it is like I will never die."*

Hissu still keeps coming up with plans for the future of Daisy Ladies. *"I want my organization to grow and spread awareness about violence against women, that is very important."*

She ends the story by pointing at her diary. She has some meetings to attend after deciding to open a public garden in Turku. She knocked on a few doors, asked a few people and it worked. Just like anything else she decides to do.

Author's Note

When I searched for the meaning of the name Hissu, I only found the meaning of each letter in the name. H is for humble, a saintly quality. I is for inclusive, never leaving others out. S is for sincere, a model of truth. S is for smile, it gives you face value. U is for unite, you bring people together. I wouldn't be able to find a better description of Hissu if I tried. I felt welcomed, equal and like home, when I was talking to this daisy lady. I even got a little present at the end of our session. Thank you, Hissu, for giving me the light.