

# Do Good Storytellers Have Better Chances of Receiving Asylum?

A large room with white walls. A single chair is placed in front of one of the walls. The woman sitting in the chair seems exhausted when she starts talking about her interview. *“It seems like a challenge, feels like a word game. That they are going to twist your statements. They will just look for something you miss and then they turn that against you. That gave me the biggest stress.”* The described scene is from the 2024 documentary *“Die Anhörung”* (the hearing). In the film, director Lisa Gerig re-enacts the interviews conducted by the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) with asylum seekers. Hearings that are otherwise held behind closed doors. Re-enacting interviews means in this case that the interviewers appearing in the film are in fact working for the SEM and conduct asylum interviews as part of their jobs. The four asylum seekers have all requested asylum in Switzerland and their asylum claims were initially rejected. What makes the interviews feel so real is the fact that asylum seekers and SEM employees meet for the first time in the film. Interviews are conducted in pairs according to [SEM guidelines](#) and



Movie cover:

<https://www.cineman.ch/movie/2023/DieAnhoerung/>

are accompanied by interpreters, minute-takers and in a second part by the lawyer of the asylum seekers. The game immediately turns serious.

*“You have a duty to co-operate”,* the questioner opens the first interview. And *“only if you provide complete and truthful information will we be able to examine your asylum application”,* states the questioner of the second interview. The asylum seekers are explained their rights and obligations and then the real interview begins.

## Finding the truth

What is the truth? Which memories are real, and which are just made up? These are the questions that take the most prominent place in the movie. In reality, all of the four asylum seekers had their asylum claims rejected initially. However, the film shows how complex the search for the truth is. Various strategies are used by the authorities to expose lies and to detect signs of credibility. Asylum seekers are interrupted in the middle of a story and are being asked about another topic. Later the interviewers return to the point where they interrupted the story and the asylum seekers have to continue their story. Although the interviewers are constantly looking for indicators of credibility, the search for the truth requires probably more than that. This is



Movie director Lisa Gerig:

<https://www.nihrff.de/filme-2023-anhoerung/>

also what one of the asylum seekers criticises in an interview for a human rights organisation after the release of the film. “As far as the asylum interview is concerned, you need much more than that. You need to know the cultural behaviours and the specific cultural and political problems and, above all, be able to understand them.”

### Credibility assessment

As there is often no clear evidence on the basis of which an asylum application can be accepted or rejected, the trustworthiness of the asylum seeker's statements is usually evaluated in the light of a credibility assessment. In accordance with art. 7(3) of the Swiss Asylum Act, statements are unbelievable, in particular when submissions are insufficiently substantiated or contradictory in essential points, do not correspond to the facts or are significantly based on falsified or falsified evidence

According to the Asylum and return manual of the Swiss Federation, Stereotypes, sweeping statements, generalisations and statements without a personal reference, which could also be told by an uninvolved person, for example, do not contribute to the trustworthiness of a statement. If, on the other hand, a person who claims to have been in prison can give a differentiated description of everyday life in prison, their personal situation during imprisonment or their persecutors, this is an indication that the person tells the truth.

## Changing roles

*"Do you think you can distinguish the truth from the stories that come to your table?"*, asks one of the asylum seekers. Towards the end of the film, the positions in the interviews are being changed. The asylum seekers now sit at the other end of the table and ask questions to the SEM employees. *"You have the power to make a decision. What do you think about this?"* an asylum seeker wants to know from the SEM employee who has just interviewed her. The SEM employee isn't sure how to respond to that. *"You can take your time to answer. If you're uncomfortable, you don't have to answer."* Silence. *"We can move on to the next question,"* the employee finally says. This is one of the moments in the film that shows that the search for truth is a fiction or at least a highly uncertain matter. *"Do good story tellers have a better chance of gaining asylum?"* *"This is not generally the case"*, replies the SEM employee, but it would definitely make

her work more complicated. However, the impression remains that good story tellers are in fact in advantage. Someone who is well prepared for the hearing, can present their story coherently is most likely to be more credible than a person who struggles to tell their story in an coherently.

## Conclusion

But if the search for truth is so difficult, what other options are there? The film doesn't try to answer this question. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how a fairer procedure would be possible. The search for truth is also a question that repeatedly occupies the courts and no solution for finding the absolute truth has been found there either. It is probably best to accept that sometimes the truth cannot be found. However, one must be aware that errors in the context of analysing the credibility of an asylum application can have extremely serious consequences. And this is exactly why



*"After the interview you are being left alone. No one cares about you."* Screenshot from the film

this film is so important. It doesn't solve the obstacles for asylum seekers on their way to master this procedure successfully. But it gives asylum seekers a voice to express their own view regarding the interview procedure and may even open some viewer's eyes on all the obstacles and uncertainties of the procedure that asylum seekers are facing.

### **Accessibility of the movie**

The movie is accessible for free under the following link:

[https://www.playsuisse.ch/detail/3461610?utm\\_origin=sharing.link&locale=fr](https://www.playsuisse.ch/detail/3461610?utm_origin=sharing.link&locale=fr)

However, the movie is only available in Switzerland and EU member states or by using a VPN.

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