

•*Pazardjik, Bulgaria*•

I'll always be dark-skinned




A documentary photo series
By
Dimitar Assenov and Future Association







Pazardjik, southwest of Plovdiv, has 97,000 inhabitants, including 30,000 Roma, mostly Turkish-speaking and Muslim, who live in an outlying district. Some of the Bulgarian Roma in the Bordeaux metropolis come from here and the surrounding villages. The first time I met Dimitar Assenov in Pazardjik, he showed me a large building and said with a smile: “This is the typical house of a person living in Bordeaux !”



I know the people in the neighborhood who live in Bordeaux now.



Others are in Germany, like the grandmother's son, whom I'm going to get.

She lives alone in a small house next to her son's big empty house.







Dimitar Assenov was born in the neighbourhood in 1967. His father worked in a battery factory and his mother in a carpet company. He remembers that at the time about 40 young people from the neighbourhood were studying at the university. There were places reserved for Roma, with no tuition fees. “It was socialism,” he says. In the buildings adjacent to the Roma neighbourhood, apartments were reserved for soldiers and civil servants. This was called “socialization”.



Dimitar (everyone calls him Mitko) studied at technology and chemistry school, and later worked as a bus driver and truck driver. In the 1980s, an American foundation, CDR Associated, supported the creation of associations in several Bulgarian cities to fight against discrimination towards Roma people.

He founded his own in 1986, which he has been running ever since. Future Association helps elderly people with physical and psychological difficulties as well as young people. His association is the only one in the district, he is the only Roma of the ten professionals on the team (psychologist, social worker, therapists...). Future Association is financed by the State through the municipality.



Are you
okay,
Dora?

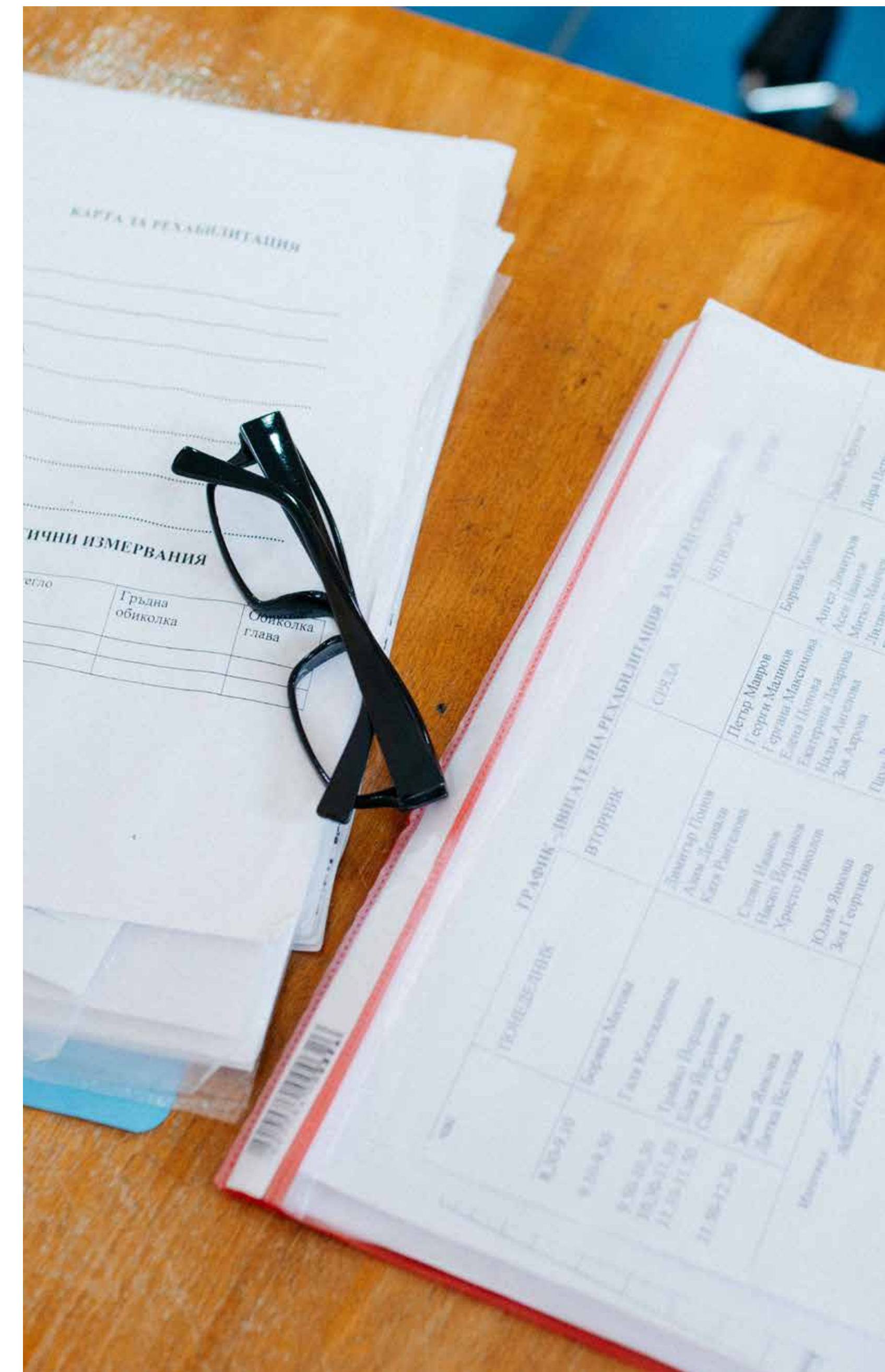
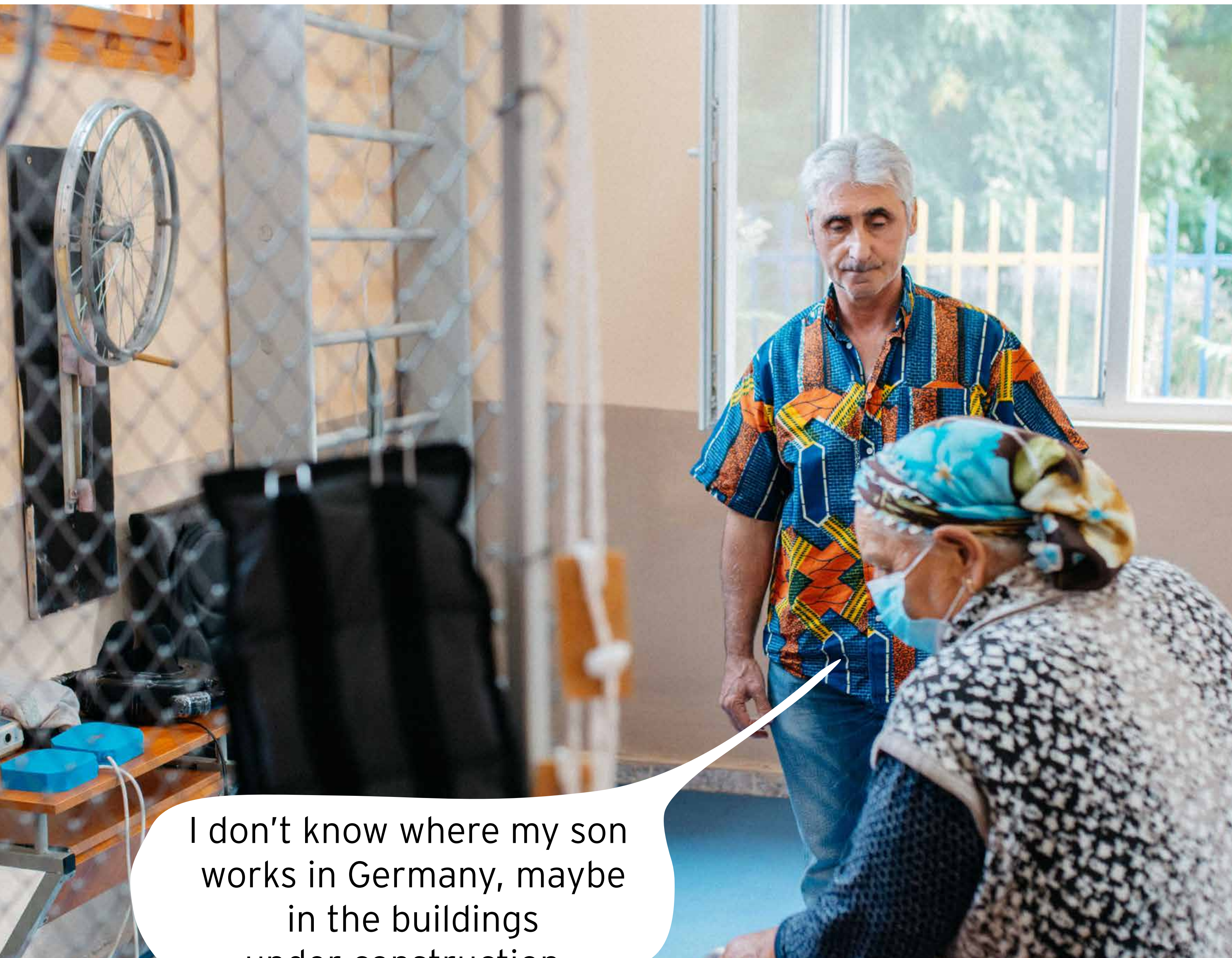
Is it your coming
today ?

The driver is on
vacation!

Your car is nice.





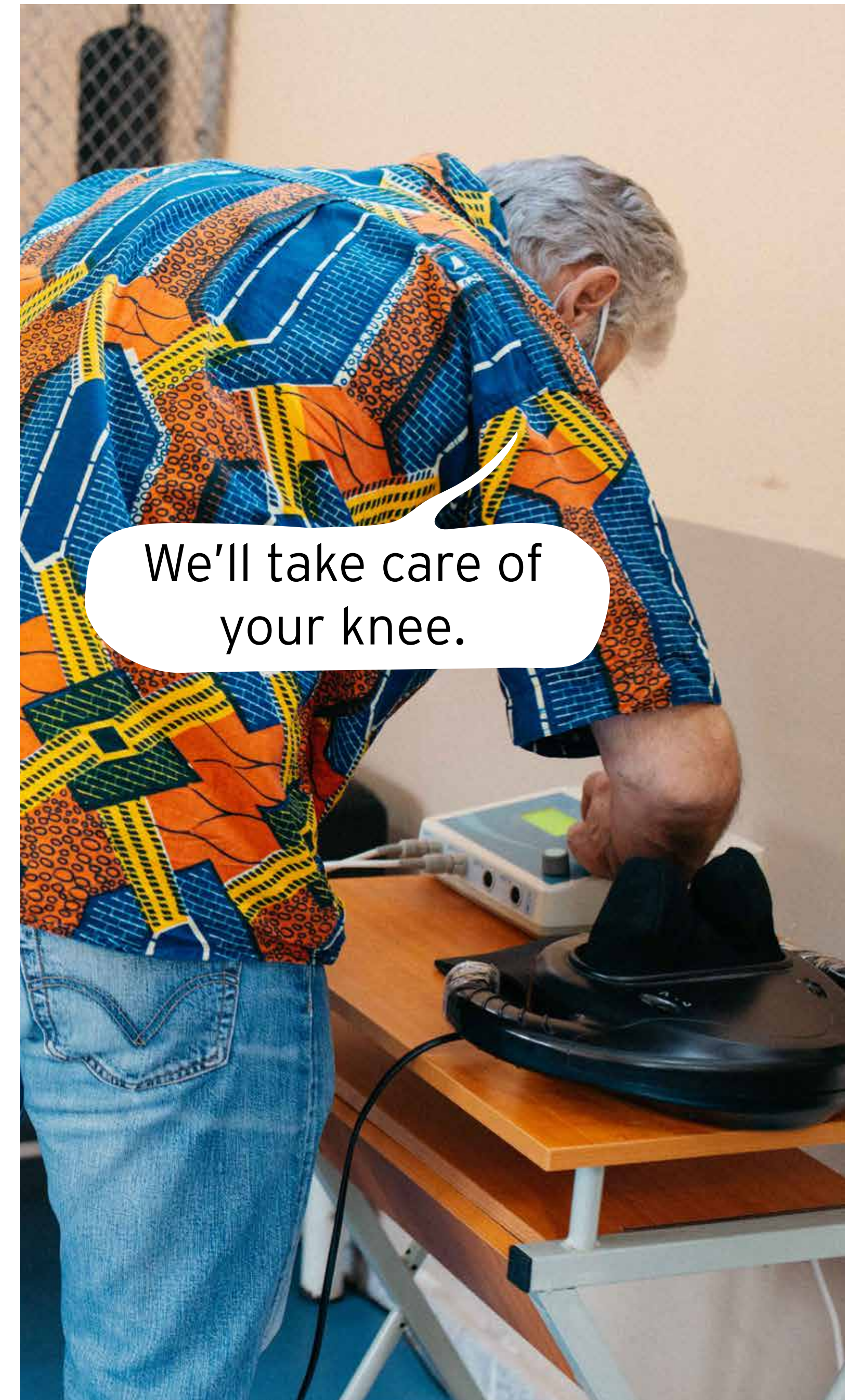


Luckily, I have my daughter. She was working in Greece but she came back to take care of me.

My son comes sometimes in the summer.



We'll take care of your knee.



The French man asks
in what field you
worked before.



In school cleaning and then
in a cannery.

The company closed ten years
ago. I would like to work again!
I'd like to work in a mushroom
cleaning factory.



But you are
72 years old!





It's the schedule, the elderly come on their own or we go and get them.

ГРАФИК НА ПОТРЕБИТЕЛНИТЕ МЕСЕЦ септември 2021г.

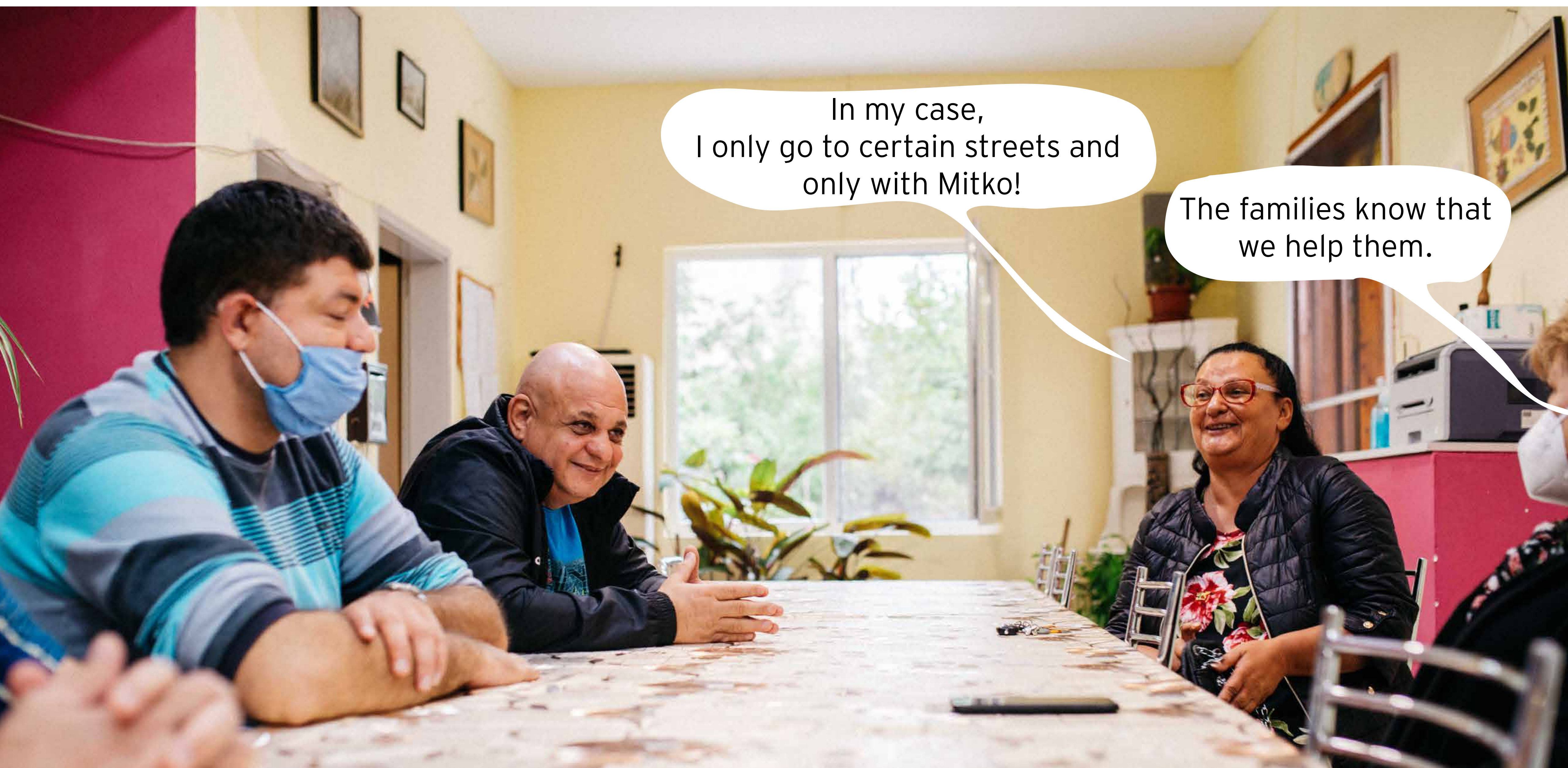
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		11.10 – 11.50 Трудовотерапия	9.10 – 9.50 ЛФК 10.00 – 12.30 Група за „Човешки отношения“	13.30 – 14.10 ЛФК 15.30 – 16.10 Трудовотерапия
	8.30 – 9.10 ЛФК	11.50 – 12.30 Трудовотерапия		8.30 – 9.10 Психолог 9.10 – 9.50 Трудовотерапия
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		8.30 – 12.30	9.50 – 10.30	



I told Christophe that you were not Roma but that you had friendly relations in the neighbourhood.

Everyone knows me here.
I don't have any troubles.





In my case,
I only go to certain streets and
only with Mitko!

The families know that
we help them.

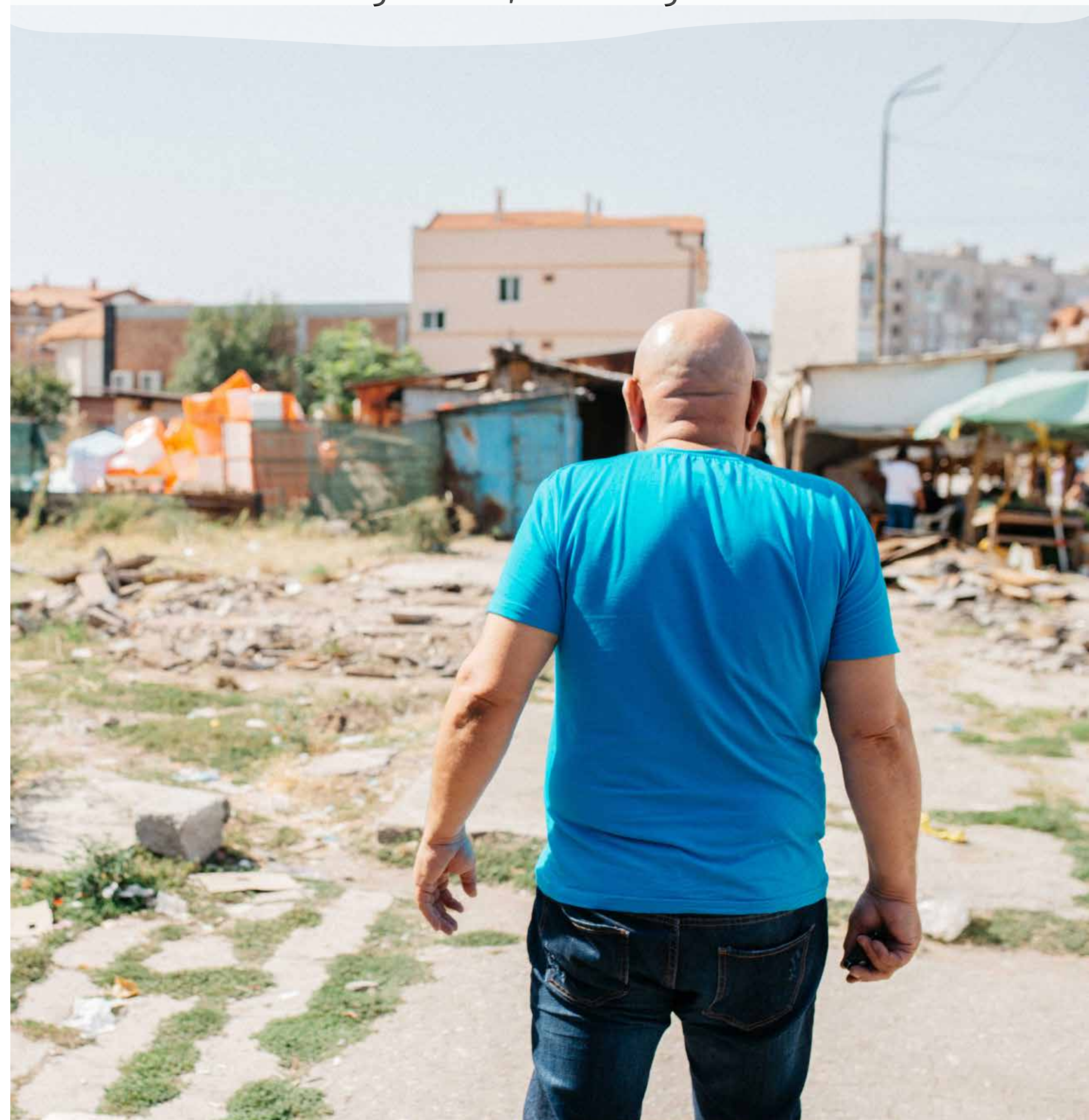
It used to be people with a good education who went to Canada or the United States.



The current emigration really started ten years ago, with the economic crisis, when many lost their jobs.



They left to work for better wages. It is an economic migration, nothing else.



Here, Roma can only clean the streets or work in the fields without being declared.

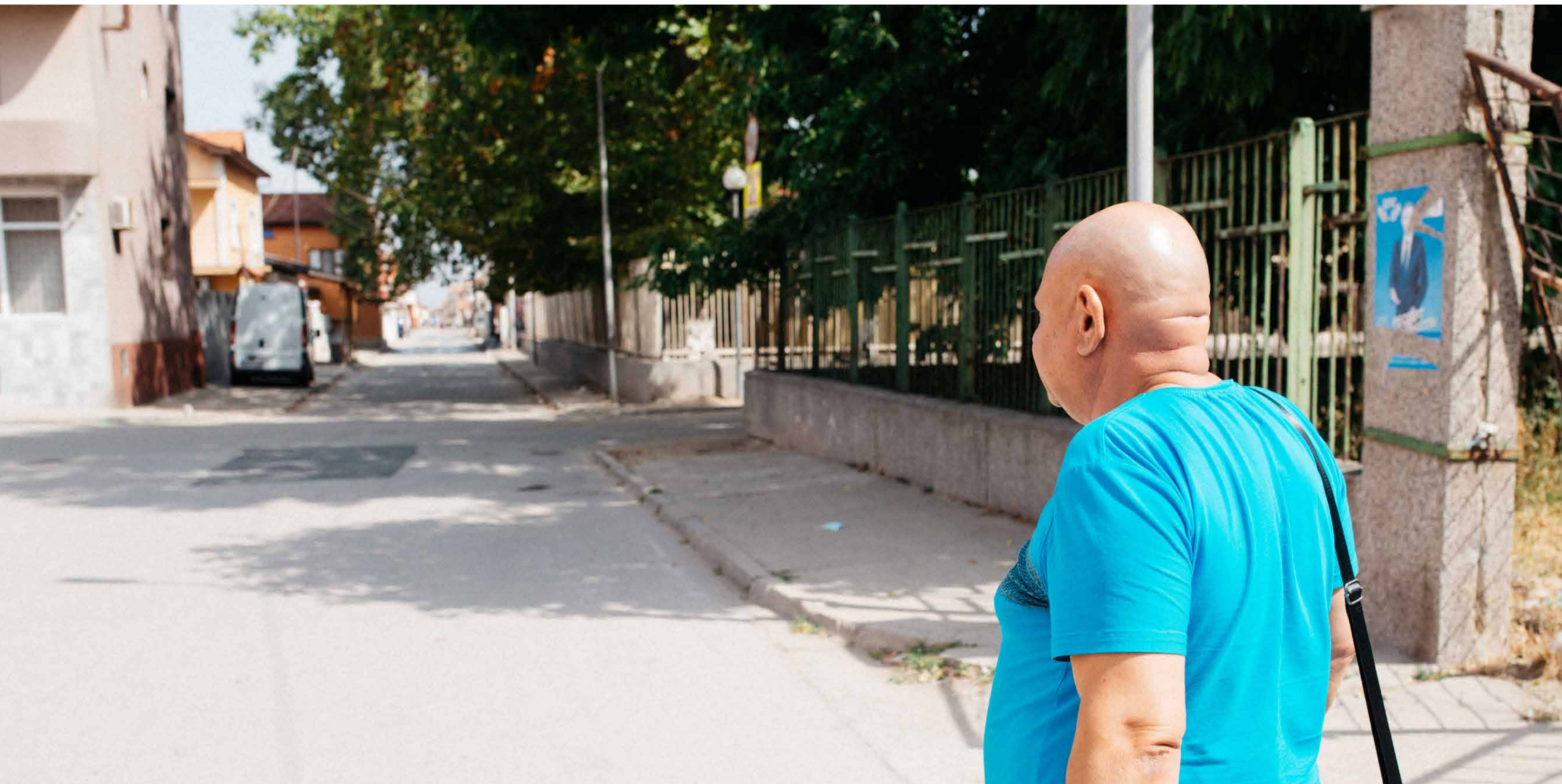




The median salary here is 310 euros. If you lose your job, you get 50 euros per month.



80% of the people here live with the money they receive from their children living in Europe.



We walk through the neighborhood again, Dimitar points to the houses: “That one is in Germany, that one in England; there, the son is in Turkey, there, in Sweden...” Every house has someone abroad. Like Dora and others we will meet. Dimitar adds: “They come back in the summer, for weddings.”





Zarko, they want to ask people in the neighborhood where their children live.

Why do they ask? I have a son in England and a daughter in Germany!



I sold pigs and worked in a battery factory, but it closed down. I have 150 euros of pension per month.



How am I supposed to survive?

When children come here, they say that our shops are more expensive than in Europe!









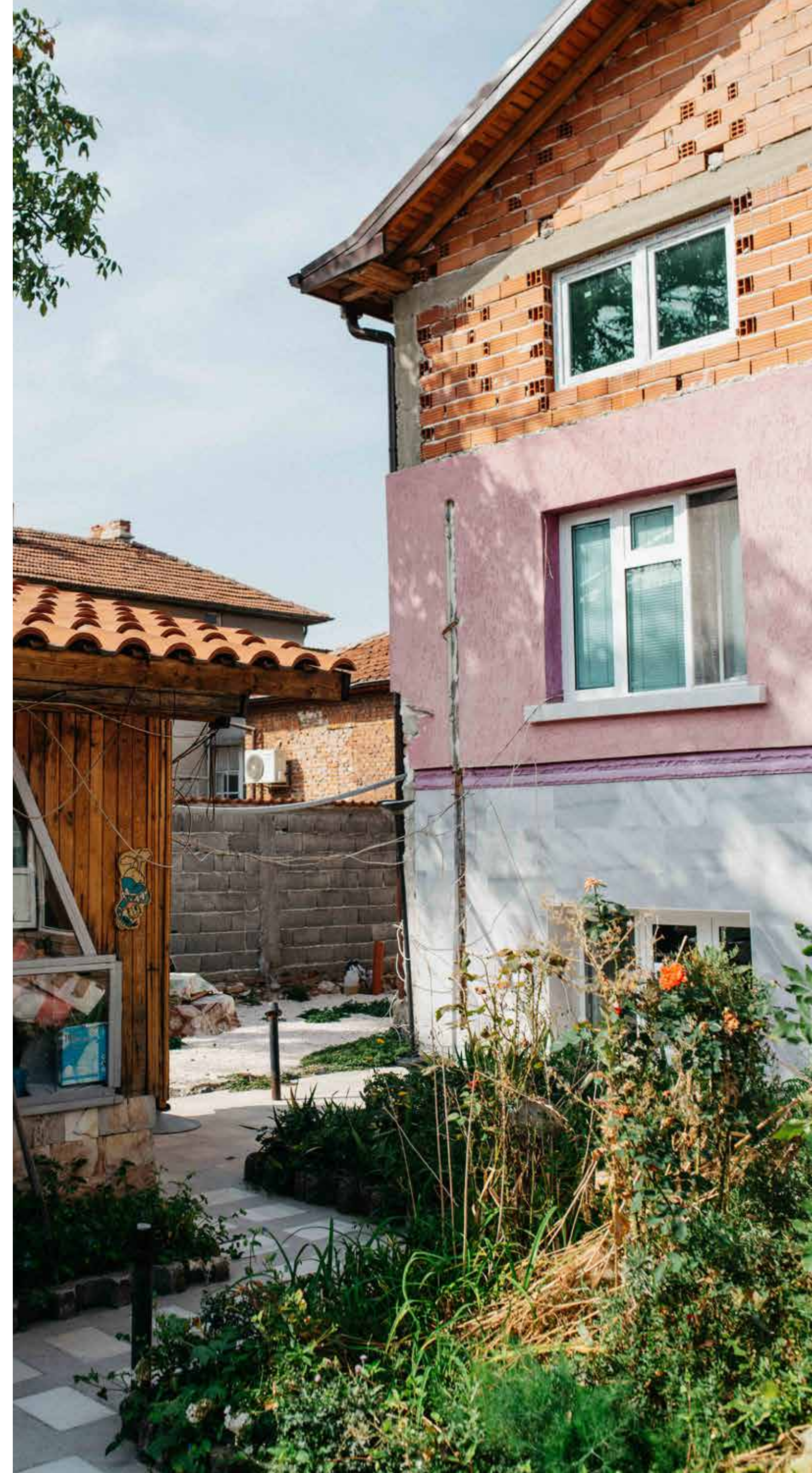
MESCID-I
EBU BEKİR



Dimitar tells me: “If you know how people live here, you can know how to help them. Otherwise, it is not possible. They think that people in Europe, unlike here, look at them as human beings. They need to be taken as trustworthy people. They also want an education for their children, so that they have a better chance than they do in a country where they are not discriminated.”



Ethnic statistics are forbidden in Bulgaria, as in France, but Dimitar has his own. He estimates that today only 2% of young people from the neighbourhood study at university, much less than in his youth. In Germany, 7% of the young people from the neighbourhood are university graduates, 6% in Austria and 17% in Turkey.





In order for me, there is God, Bulgaria and my family. I love my country. I had an offer to work abroad in 1996, but I stayed here.



Our son lives in Germany, he promises every year to come back, but he won't.



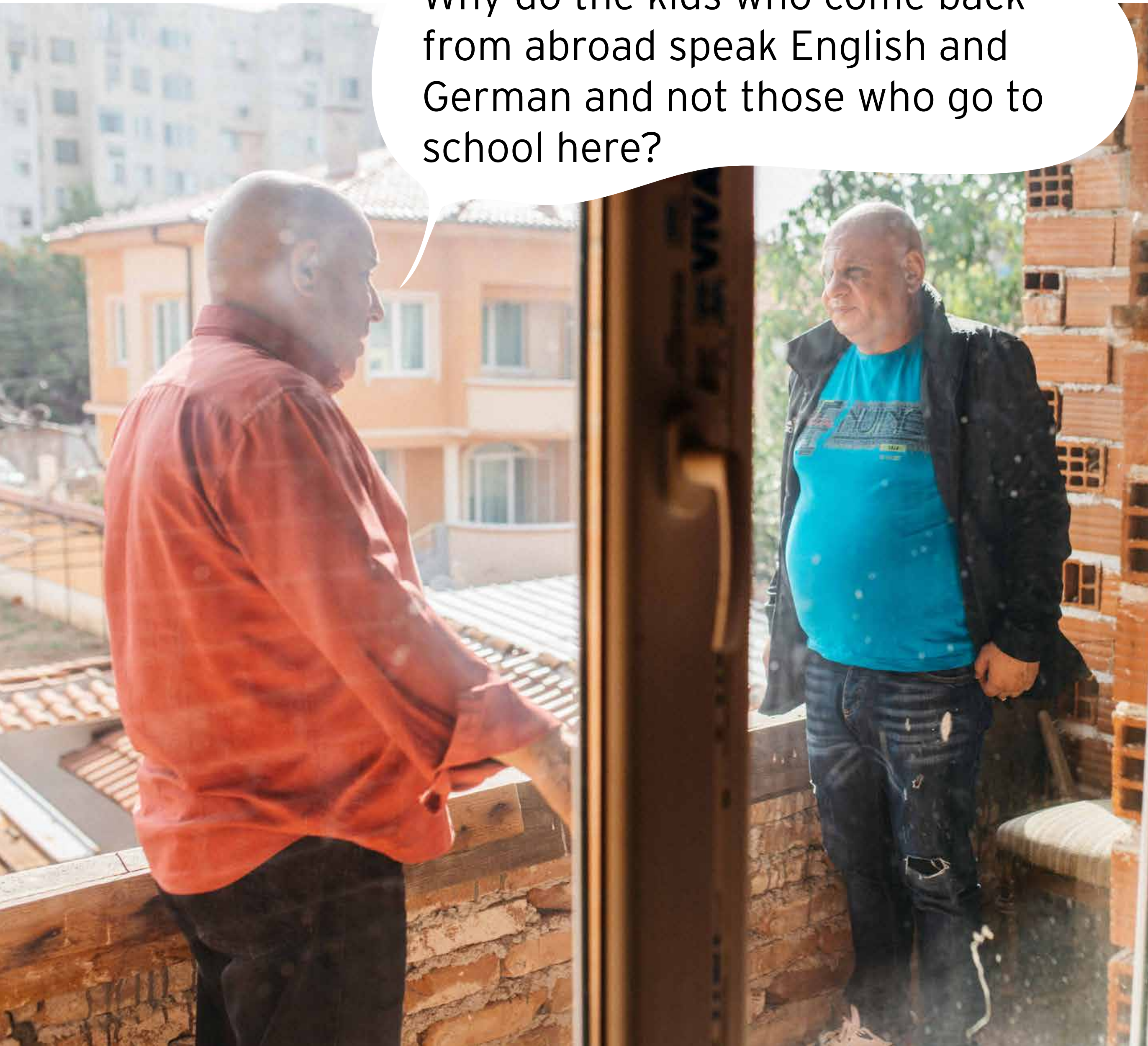
A nephew went to university; he is going to be a manager in a factory.



Our daughter is in Sweden; she is married to a Syrian Christian.

Dimitar introduces us to some friends, Sasho and Yanka. The district is divided into houses, often brightly coloured and quite large; some old and damaged buildings; and small houses in more or less good condition; then dilapidated housings, a sort of ghetto within the district itself. We are in a large house. For the other inhabitants of Pazardžik, the whole Roma neighbourhood is seen as a ghetto.

Why do the kids who come back from abroad speak English and German and not those who go to school here?

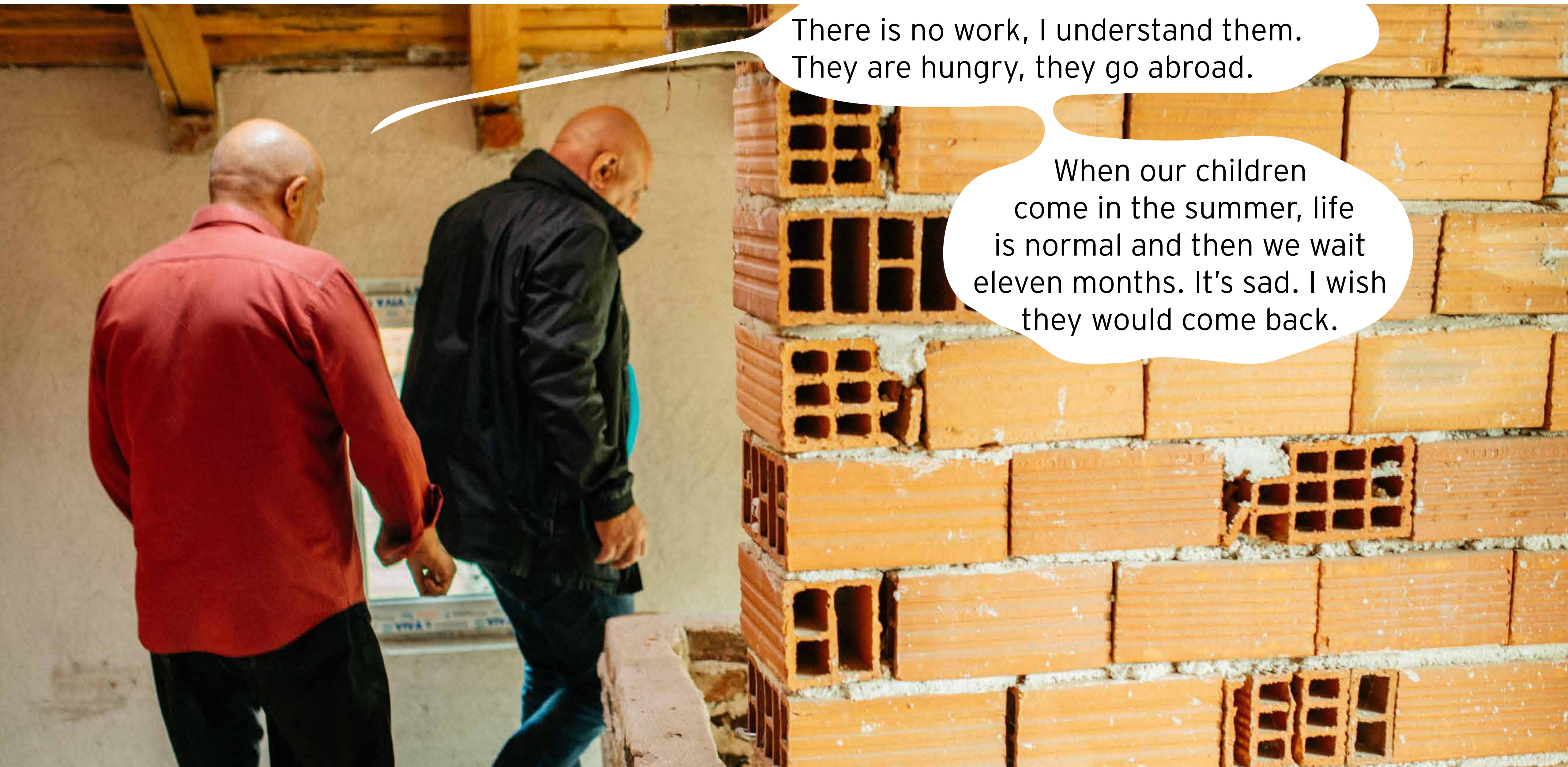


My grandson from Germany doesn't speak Bulgarian! He says "Nein" all the time!



After working for a long time in a company, Sasho now works for the local church and the municipality. He says that the inhabitants don't go out of the neighbourhood much. Only a minority of Roma go to the center of Pazardžik and even fewer have connections "in town".

Pointing to a scar on his skull, he says that several years ago there were problems in the neighbourhood with Islamists, “Taliban Roma”. Perhaps that is what they call the women in hijab and the bearded men we met. Mitko speaks modestly of the old and the new Muslims, specifying that Christians and Muslims have grown up together and that they live in peace.



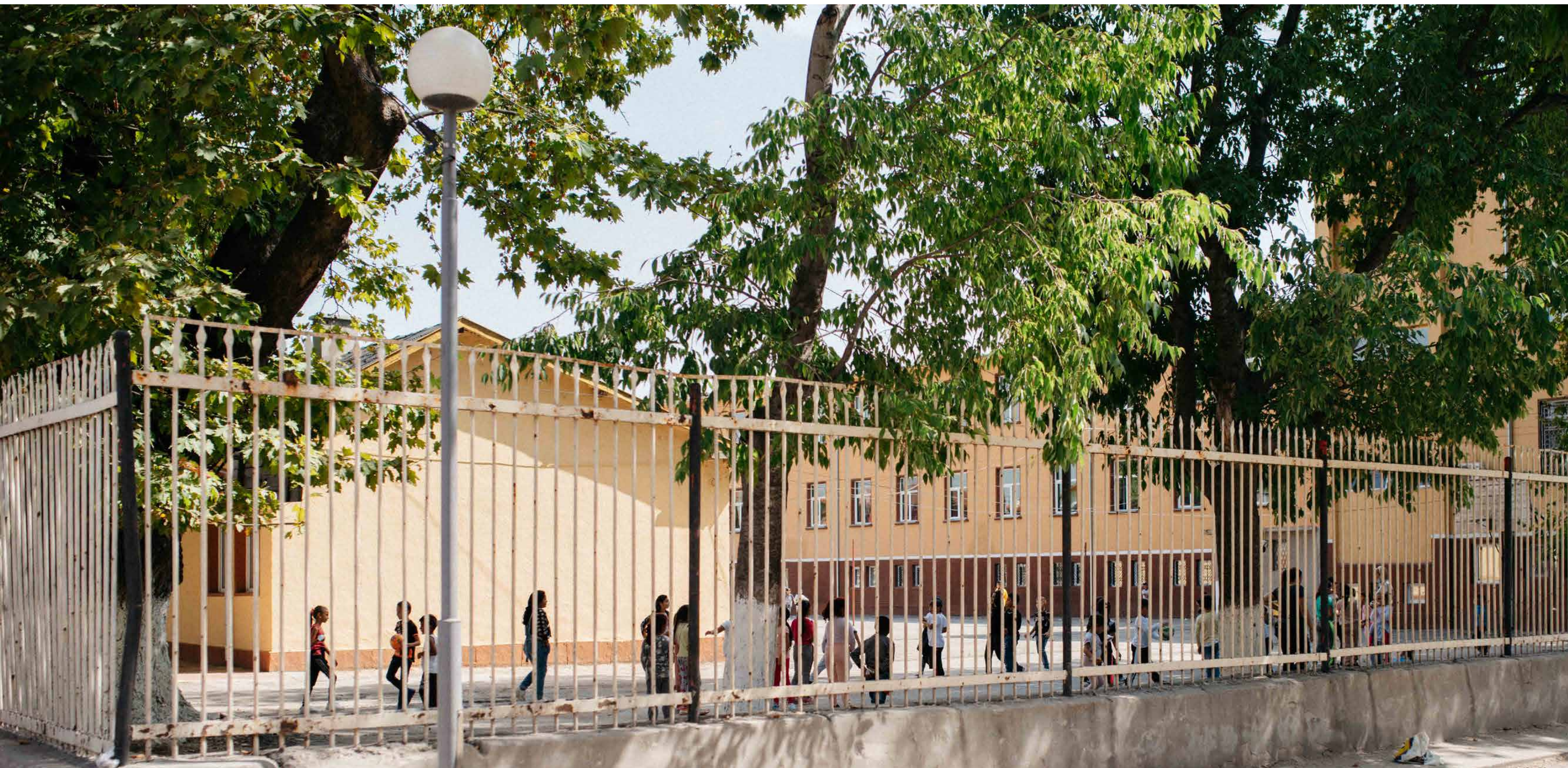
There is no work, I understand them.
They are hungry, they go abroad.

When our children
come in the summer, life
is normal and then we wait
eleven months. It's sad. I wish
they would come back.

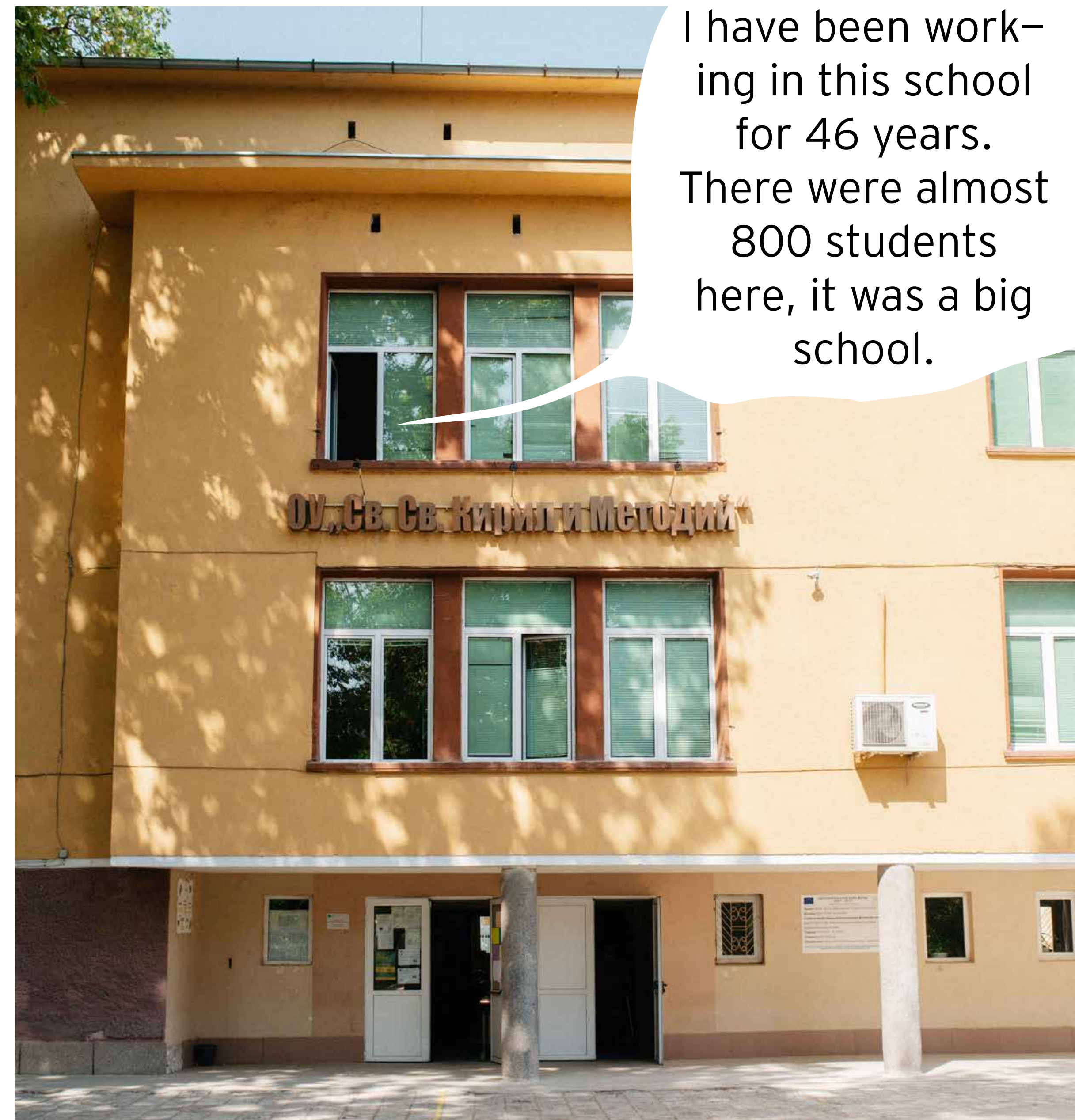
I sometimes wonder if I will not
go abroad myself.



The headmaster of the local school, Vesko Chirdarov, was Dimitar's teacher. When he welcomes us, he solemnly declares that Dimitar was a good student and that he has become a “good person” who helps others. Dimitar told me several times how important it is to set an example so that people in the neighbourhood think it is possible.

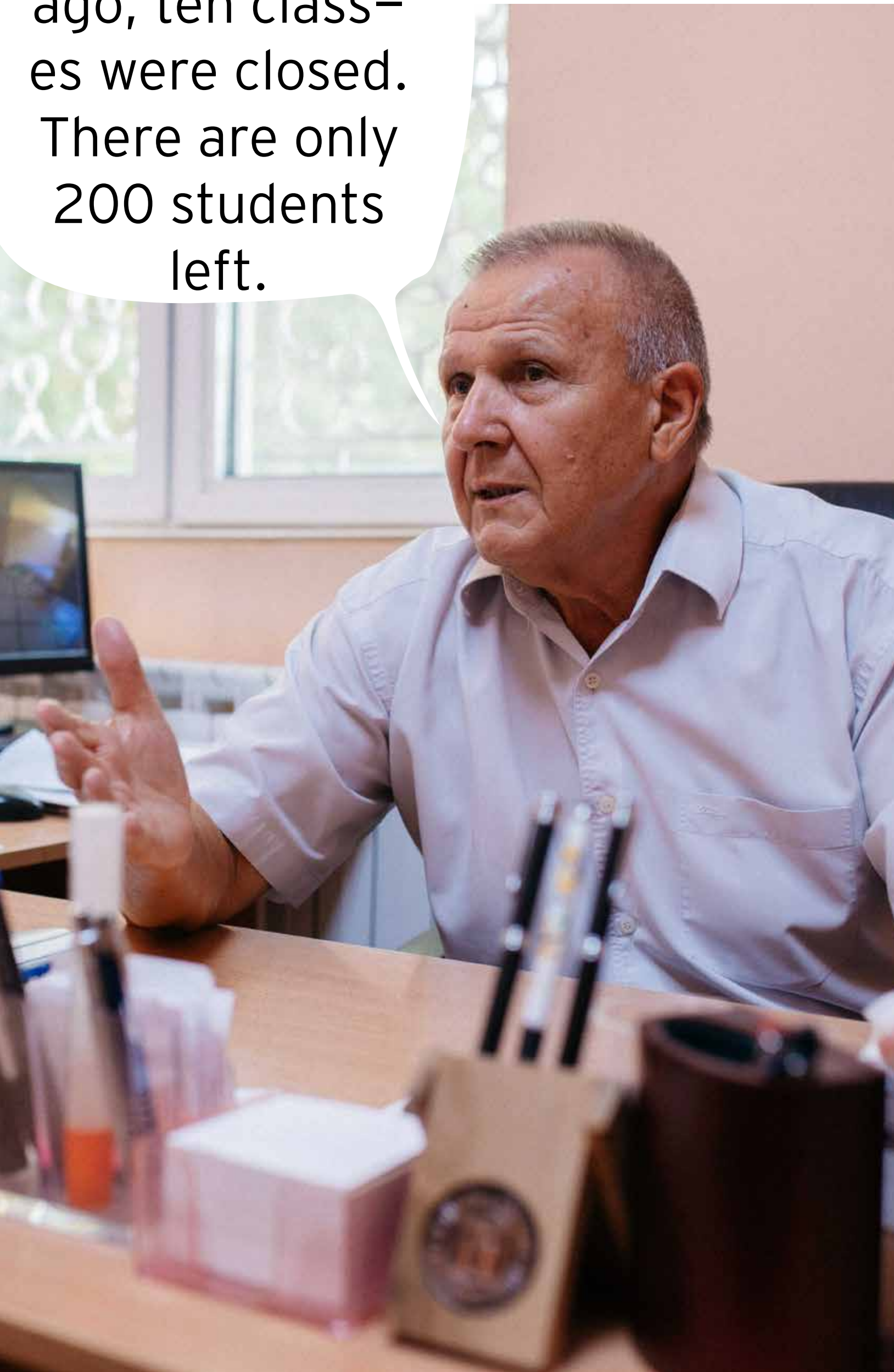




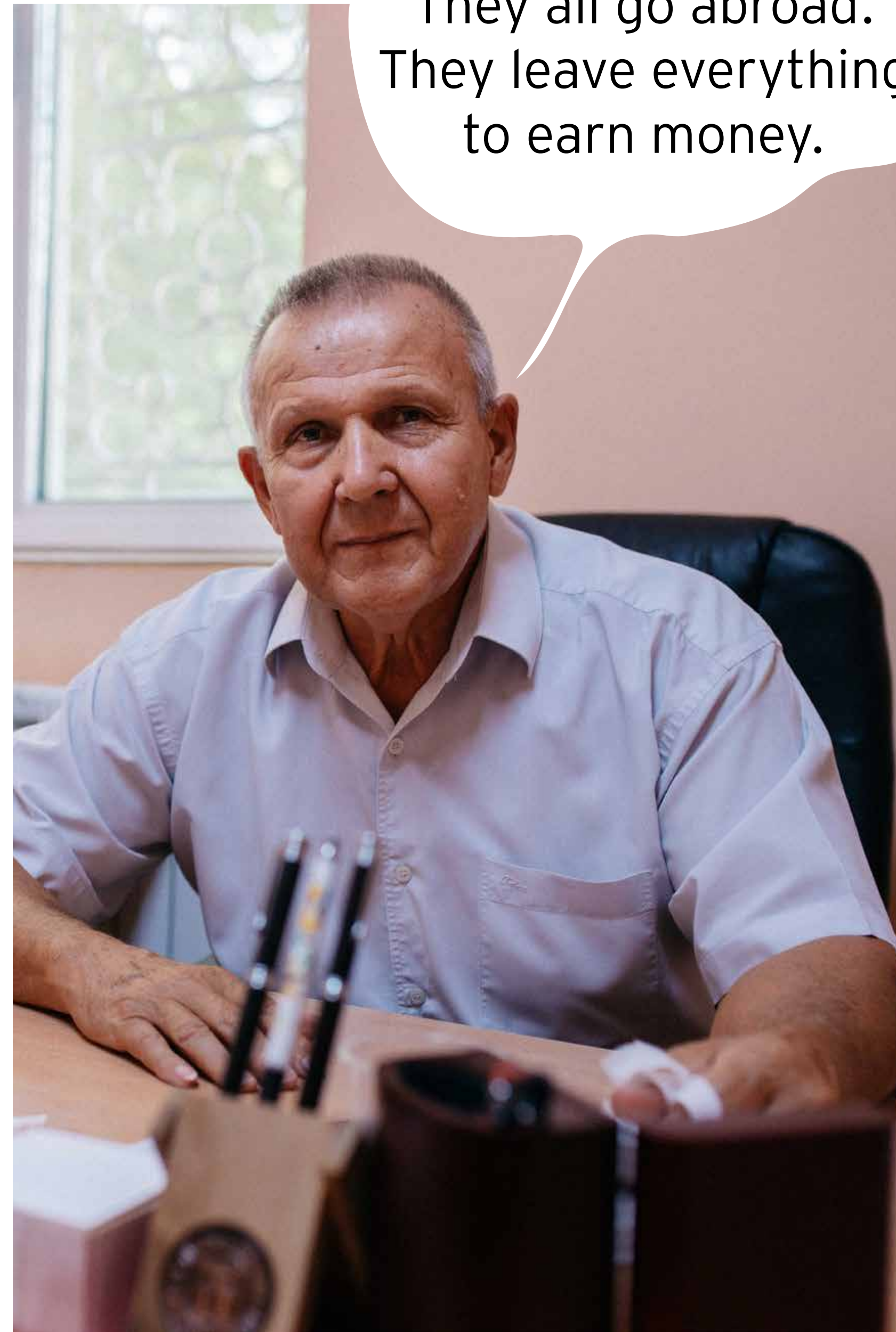


I have been working in this school for 46 years. There were almost 800 students here, it was a big school.

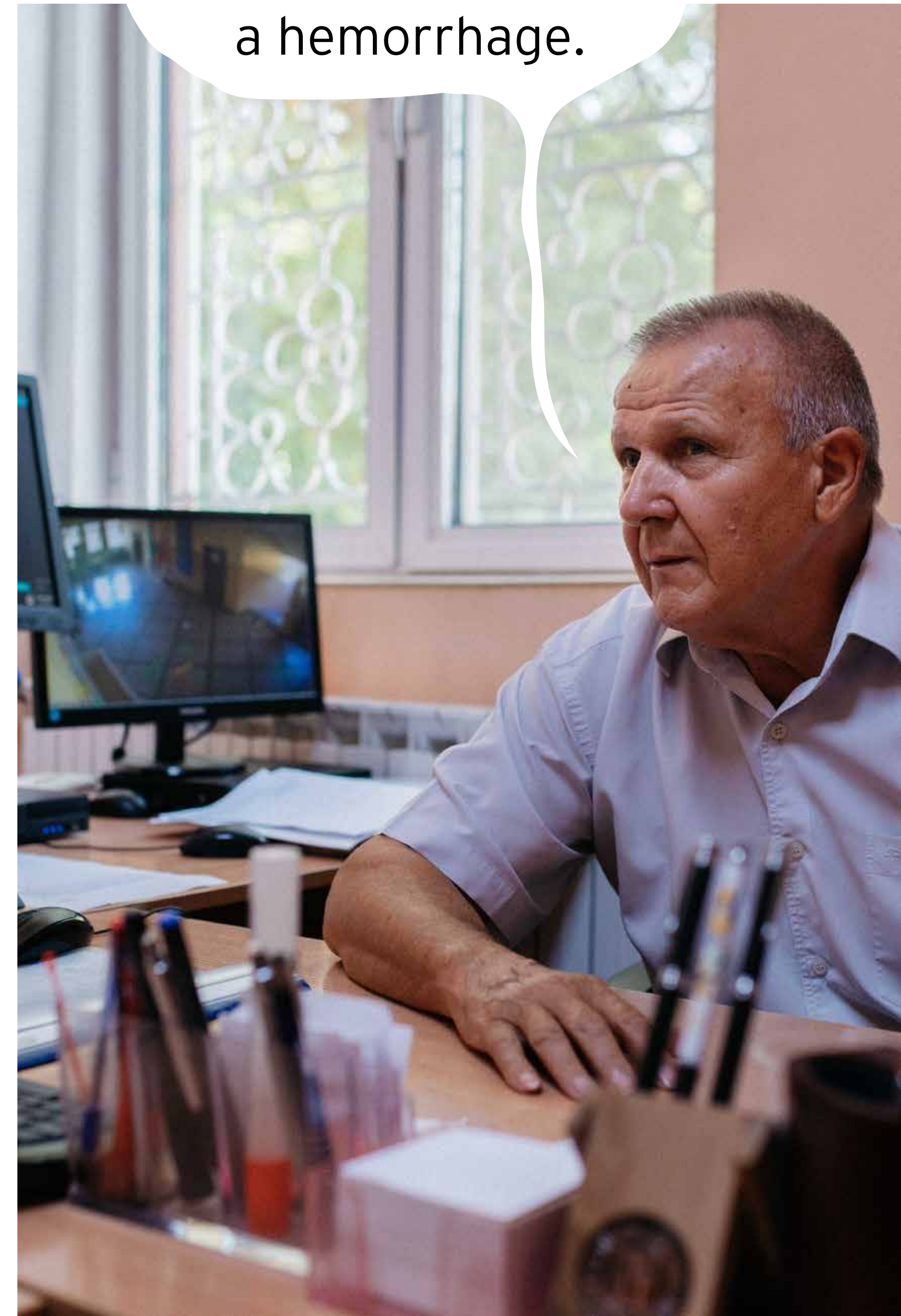
Four years ago, ten classes were closed. There are only 200 students left.



They all go abroad. They leave everything to earn money.



It's like a hemorrhage.





I say to Dimitar that often nobody understands anything in France, that for many, Roma are more or less all the same, even that Roma, Romanians and Bulgarians are more or less the same. The identitarian mindset lumps everyone together. Dimitar takes a breath before explaining, once again.

“In Bulgaria, there are about 40 different groups of Roma with different customs, ways of life, languages and dialects. They are separated, they do not form a homogeneous group. Some speak Roma, some Bulgarian, some Turkish. Some are Muslims, others are Christians, Orthodox, Evangelical or without religion. They go to European countries according to acquaintances or families who are already there.”

“It is the outside view that makes them one group and here Bulgarian society looks at them badly. If a Roma does something as well as a Bulgarian, the Bulgarian is preferred because he is not a Roma. That’s all. It’s not official segregation but you can’t go to the cafes and restaurants in the city centre, to the aquapark either, even if you win a court case. They would rather pay the fine than let Roma in. For work, it’s the same thing.”



My daughter has a good job, she could emigrate, but she decided to stay here after her studies in Russia.



She told me: if I leave, who will take care of you and this country? That touched me, I'm lucky.

Daniela is Dimitar's assistant. She was born in Pazardžik, she is not Roma. She is our interpreter and during our stay, she never stops talking to us about Bulgaria and its history. She takes us to Velingrad, capital of springs and spas in the Balkan Mountains, then to a church where the Ottomans massacred Bulgarians. We observe with her the skulls preserved under glass.

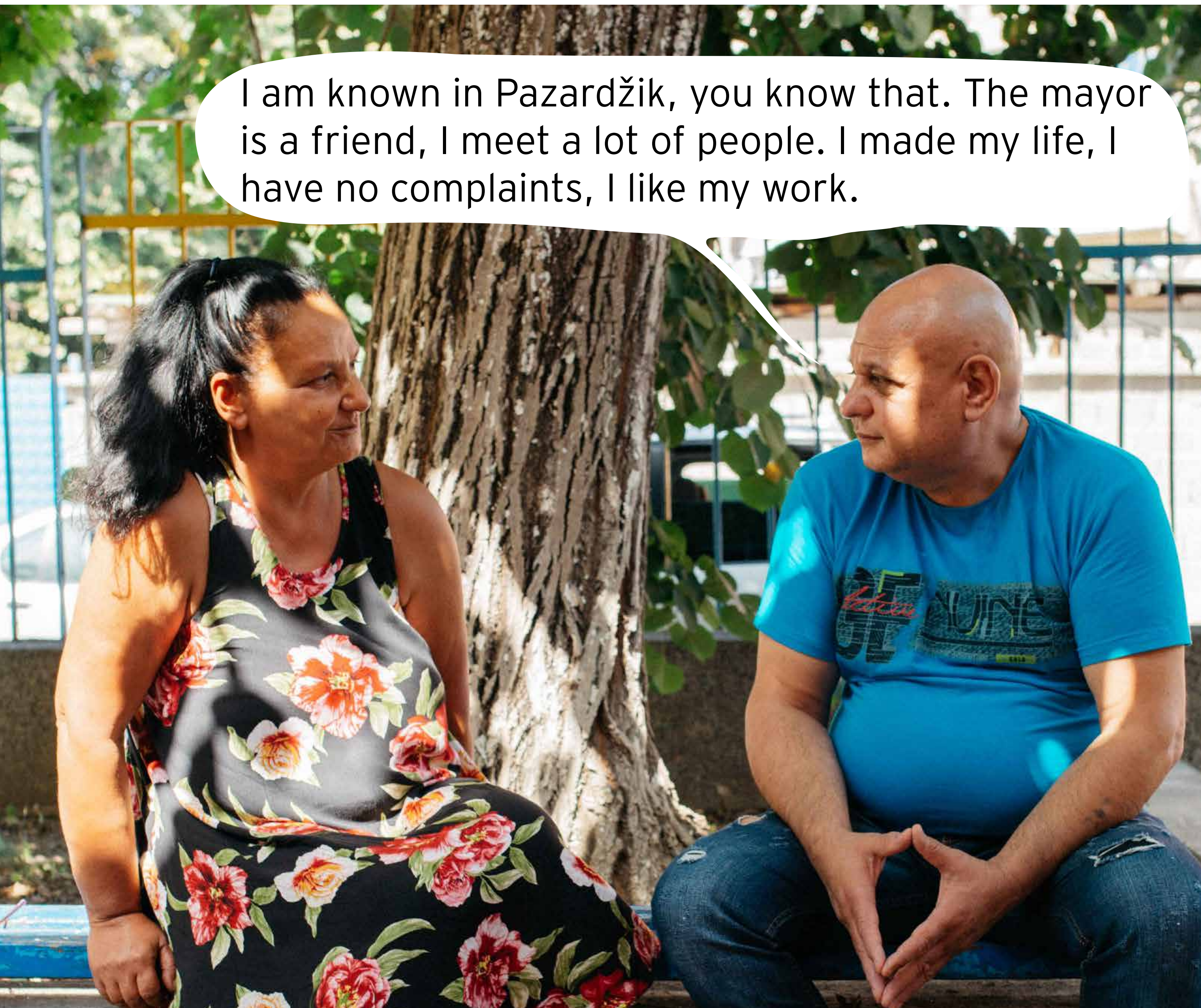
She hates the fact that only Roma neighbourhood are seen from her country. She can't stand that Bulgarians are mistaken for Roma in Europe, when so many young graduates are emigrating too. In Italy, a shopkeeper once asked Daniela to leave his shop when she said she was Bulgarian. He thought: Roma.



The Roma say there is no work, but you have to look for work to find it! There are a lot of things we prefer not to say. For me, there is no segregation against the Roma.



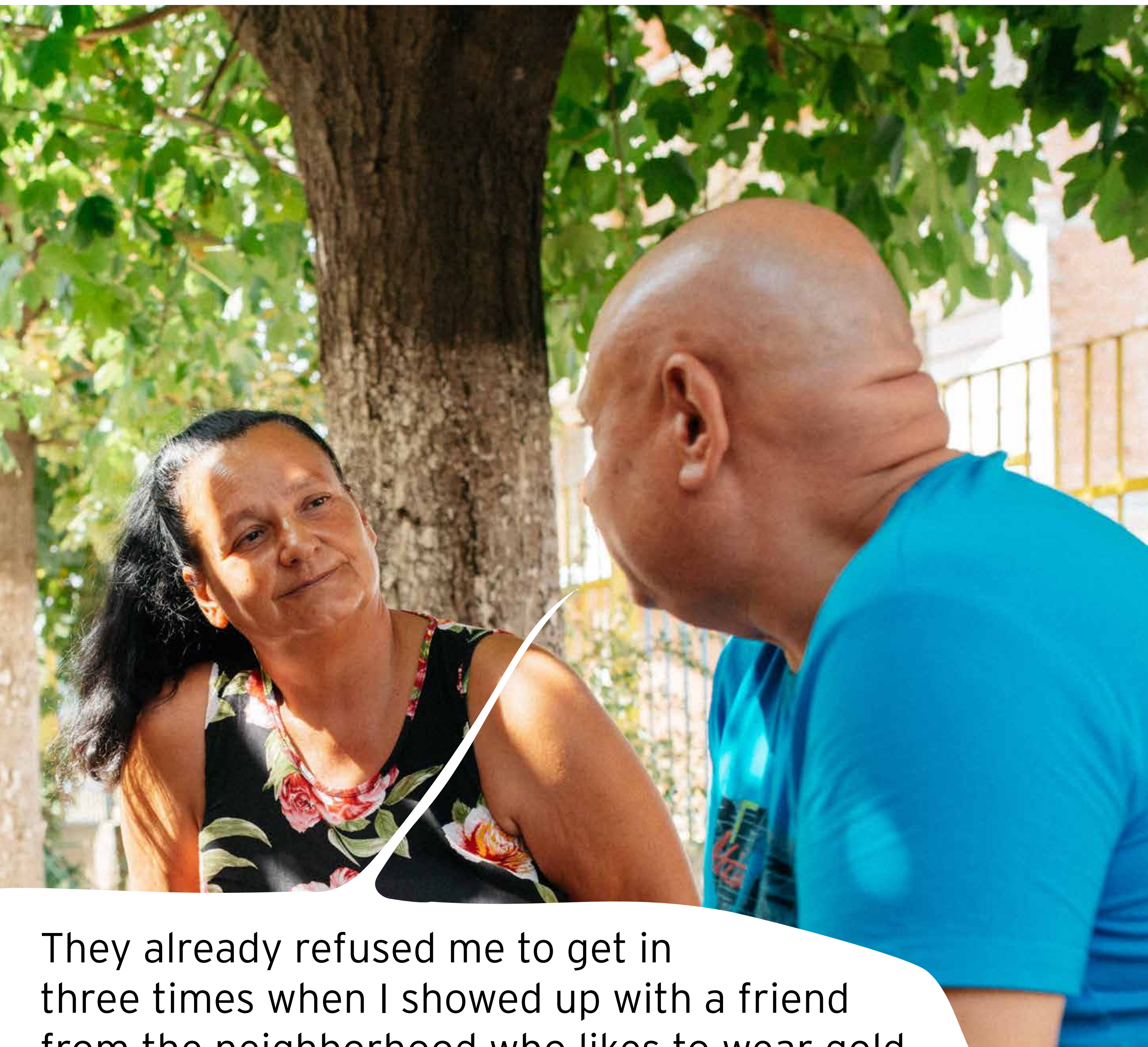
We don't agree on everything with Mitko. I have my own opinions and he has his!



I am known in Pazardžik, you know that. The mayor is a friend, I meet a lot of people. I made my life, I have no complaints, I like my work.



See the restaurant where we ate last night with the French?



They already refused me to get in three times when I showed up with a friend from the neighborhood who likes to wear gold.

We were told that there was no room and that we couldn't book.





I am a director, but I'll always be dark-skinned.



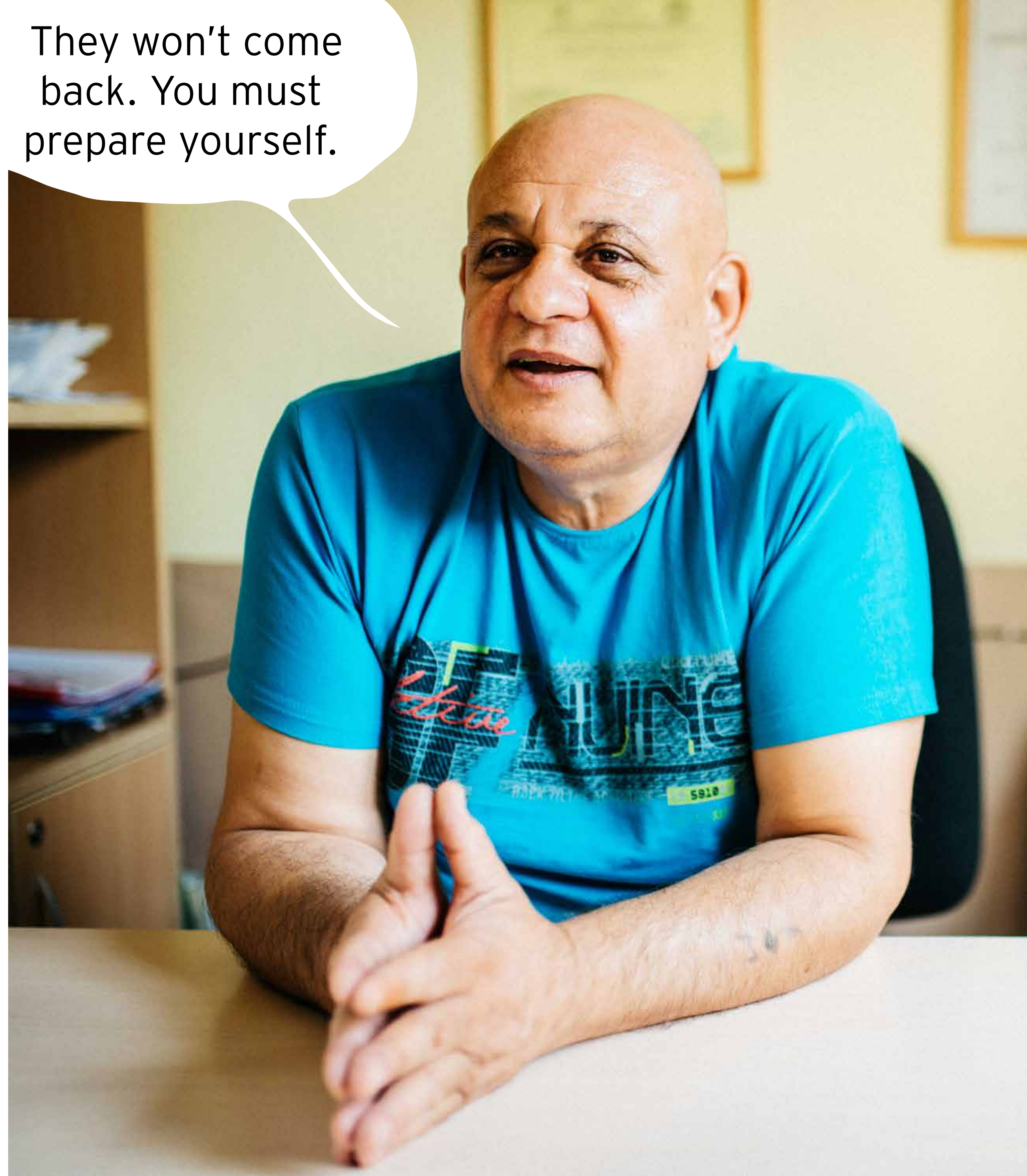
A lot of people have gone to Europe and this will continue.

There is no future here.





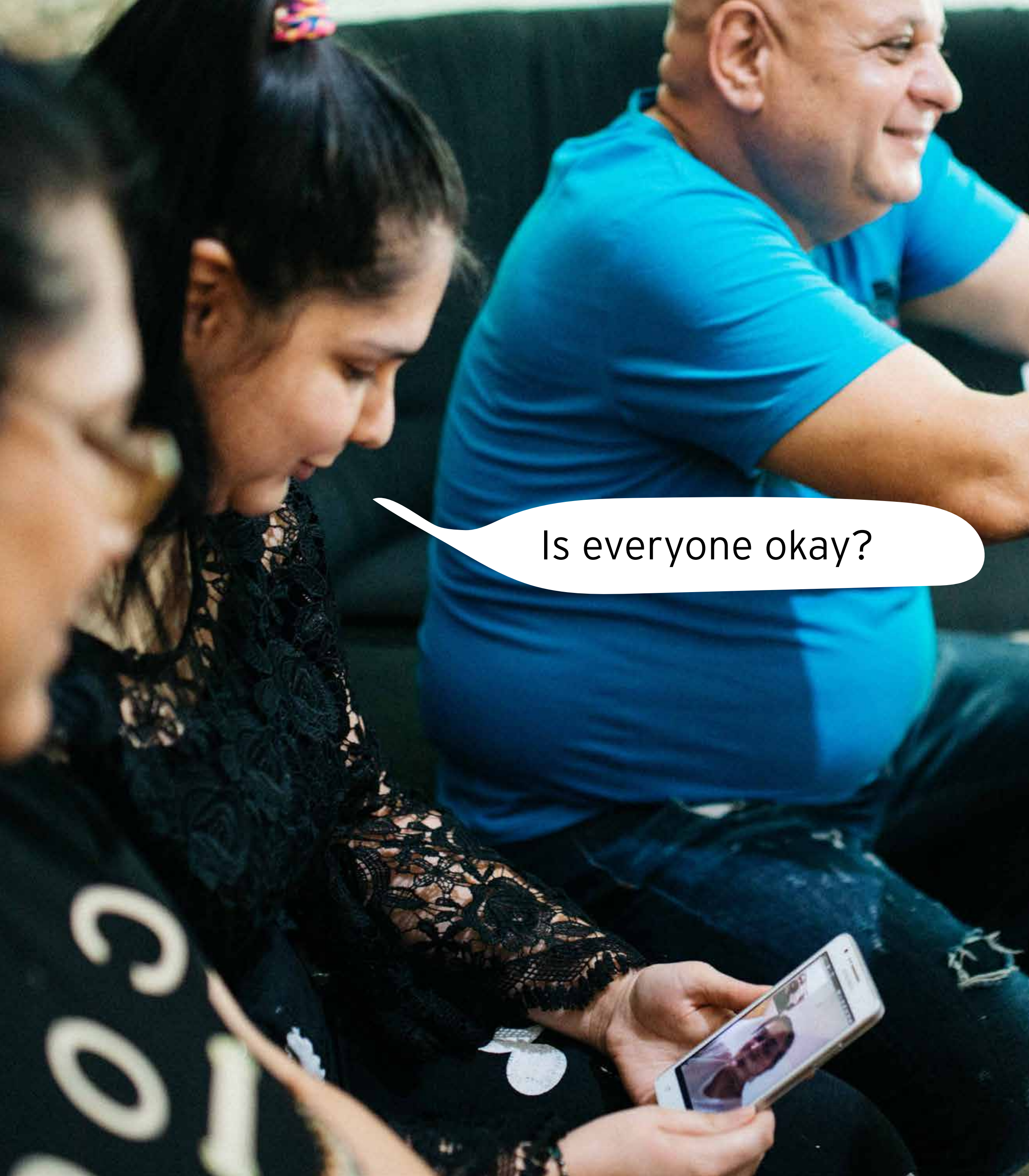
The children will speak French, German or whatever, and the parents will work. They will stay in Europe for their children.



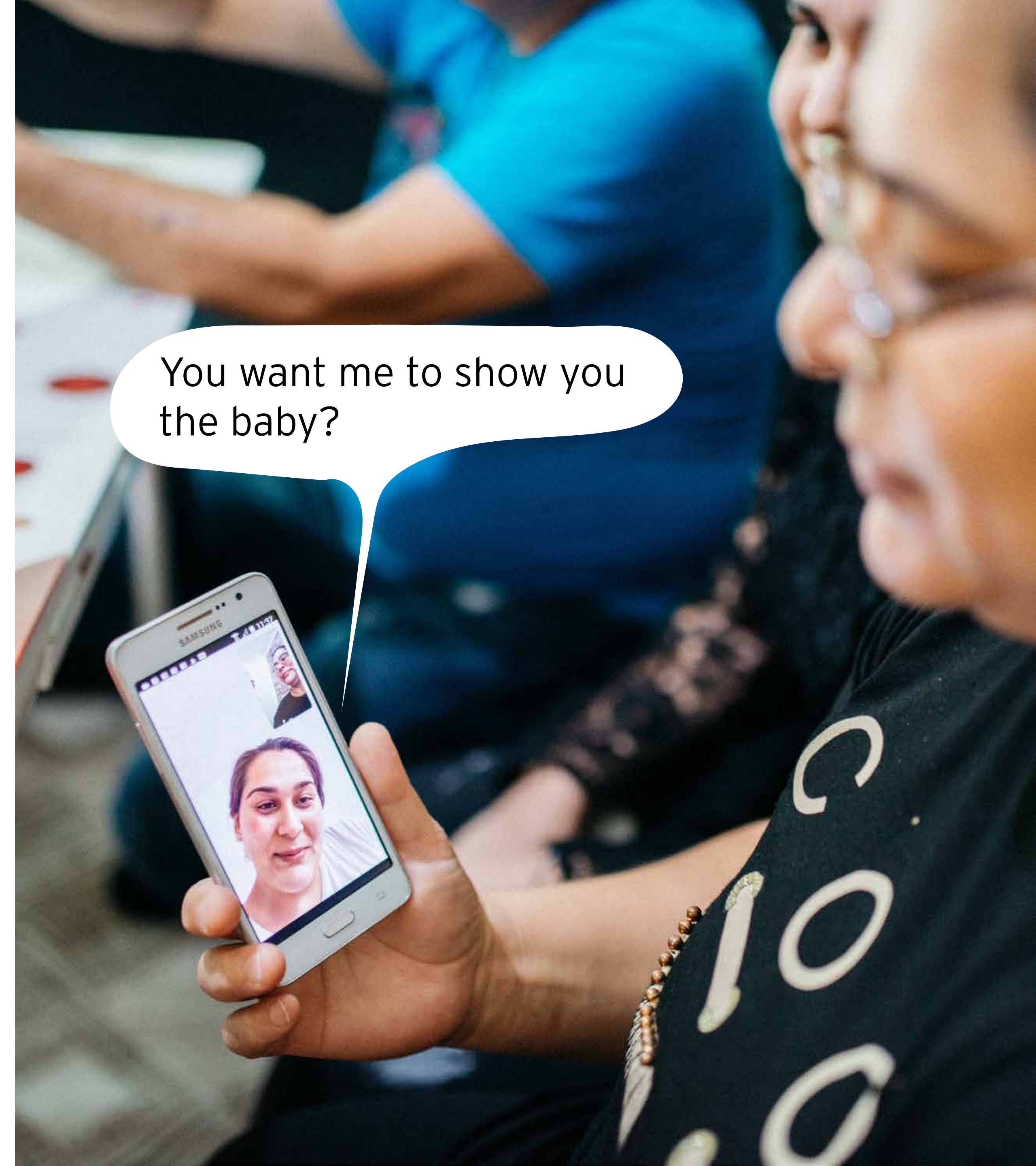
They won't come back. You must prepare yourself.



Dimitar and his wife Fanka have a daughter, Eva, who still lives with them and is enrolled in a hairdressing school. From a first marriage, Dimitar has a daughter in Turkey and another in Germany. Both of them are married. One of them, Vania, calls when we spend some time at Dimitar's house.



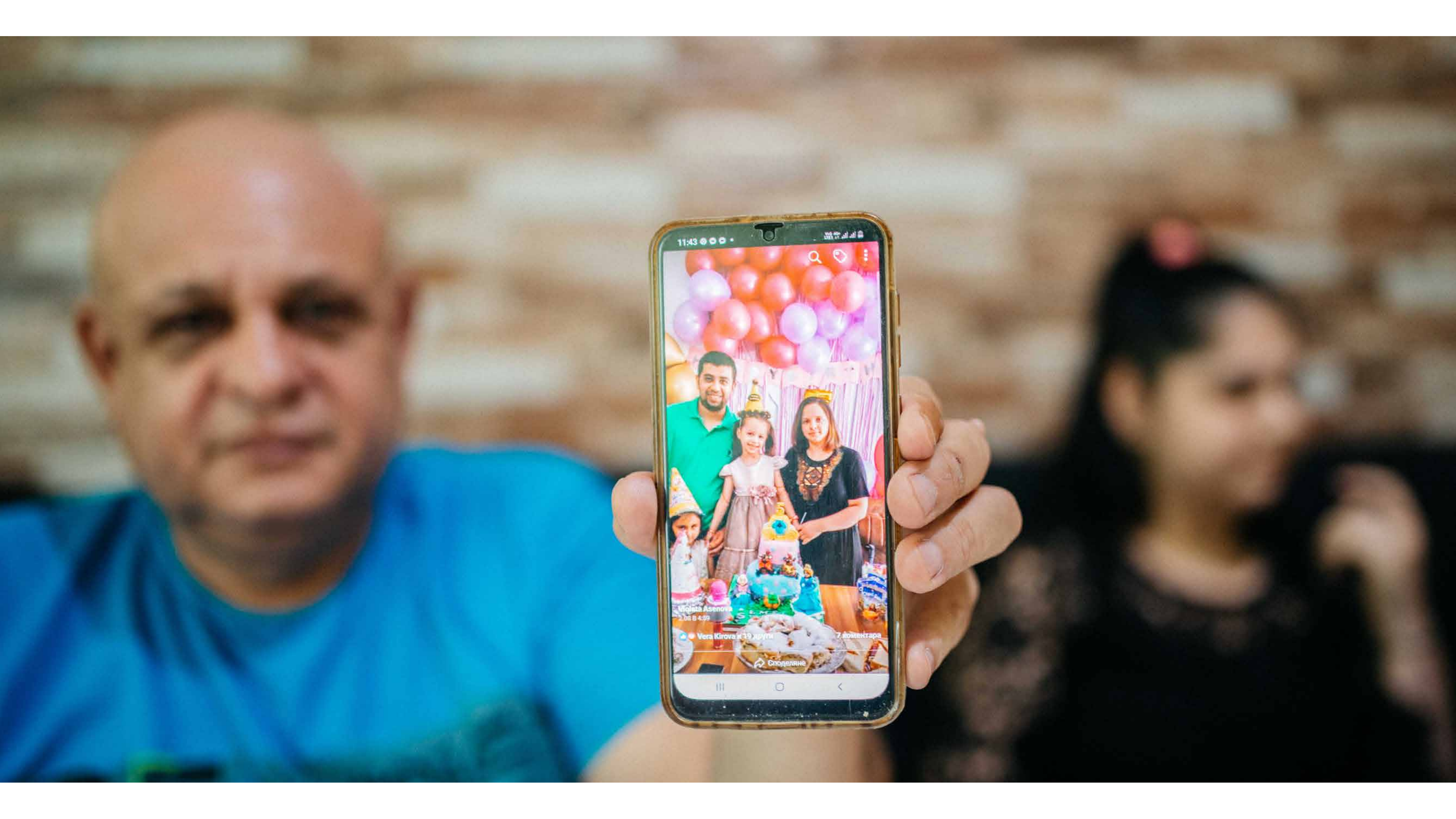
Is everyone okay?



You want me to show you the baby?



Later, as we smoke a cigarette at the foot of the building, Dimitar remains silent. Then he talks about the death of a blind woman in a house fire, which made him decide to help the elders in the neighbourhood. He also talks about a program to help young Roma become leaders or journalists. And he talks again about the possibility of moving to Germany, if he can. He looks at me, smiling slightly, the same as when he talks about the discrimination against the Roma.





МОЛЯ,
ЗАТВАРЯЙТЕ
ВРАТАТА!





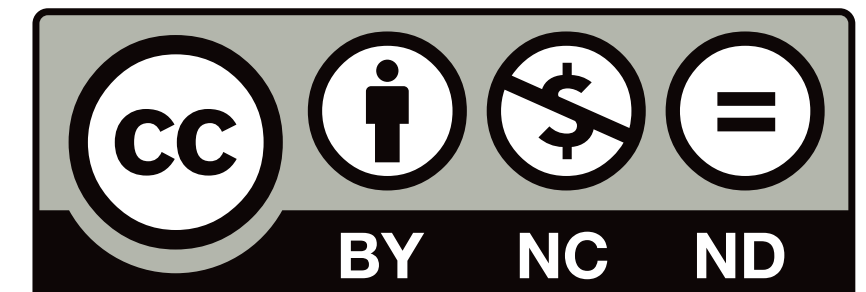
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