



MY STORY



CENTRE FOR THE
PREVENTION
OF RADICALIZATION
LEADING TO VIOLENCE

info-radical.org

VIOLENT RADICALIZATION: MY STORY

MY STORY is an awareness-raising project developed by the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) to address the phenomenon of violent radicalization.

The CPRLV has supported implementation of this project in order to improve understanding of the process of involvement in – and disengagement from – violent radicalization.

What is the MY STORY project?

The project is based on a series of verbal testimonies about radicalization both from people who have undergone radicalization and from people who have been affected, such as their family or close friends.

Each of the individuals telling their stories does so in their own way – using their own words and by expressing their own feelings, thereby giving us an insider's view of radicalization – in other words, from the viewpoint of radicalized individuals or that of their families and close friends.

OBJECTIVES

- Explain the factors and circumstances that lead to violent radicalization
- Gauge the repercussions of radicalization on the families and close friends of radicalized individuals
- Understand the factors conducive to social reintegration

What particular aspects do the verbal accounts cover?

Several themes about the radicalization process come up time and again in the testimonies:

- Fundamental questionings about society
- Thoughts on how the individual concerned fits into society
- Lack of spaces for self-expression
- The powerful effect of indoctrination

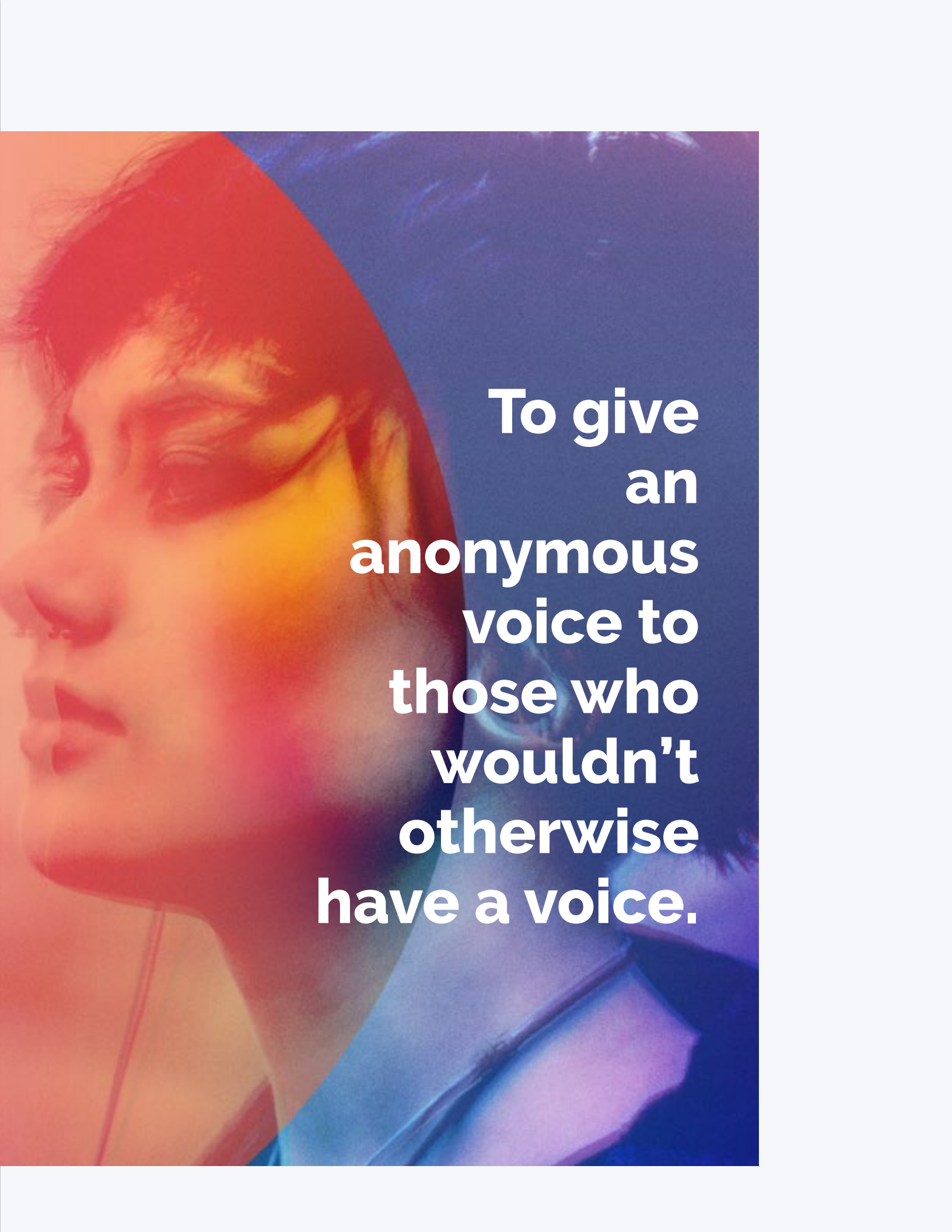
Particularly noteworthy in the social reintegration phase is a common epiphany experienced by all those who described themselves as previously radicalized but who then progressed to more balanced attitudes.

Why speak about one's radicalization experience?

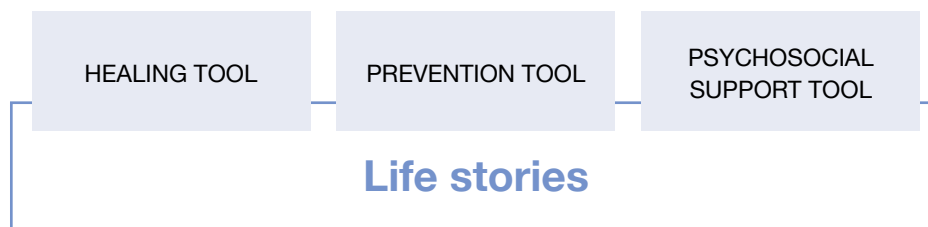
The testimonies were gathered at the behest of the individuals concerned; the CPRLV simply supported their wish to concretely share their experiences.

For some people, this wish to verbalize a difficult (and sometimes painful) life experience constitutes a necessary step in the process of support and social reintegration: for a start, the individuals concerned take ownership of their own stories by sharing them. However, their progress goes beyond only these considerations; in fact, they sincerely hope to help enlighten the general population about the reality of eventually reaffiliating with society.

For those who have decided to share their accounts, it involves learning and drawing strength from their horrendous experiences in order to rebuild their lives, develop resilience and, above all, become truly engaged in Quebec's society.



**To give
an
anonymous
voice to
those who
wouldn't
otherwise
have a voice.**



What can the testimonies be used for?

This series of videos is designed to make the CPRLV's prevention approach¹ publicly available so that as many people as possible can access the lived experiences of radicalized individuals.

The testimonies can be viewed for different purposes:

- As examples to help explain or understand the radicalization process or to identify the vulnerability factors involved;
- In an educational context, to collectively reflect on the phenomenon of violent radicalization and how to confront and prevent it;
- As part of a psychosocial process, to stimulate dialogue and the expression of emotions.

How to prepare?

If the testimonies are presented during workshops or awareness/prevention activities, meticulous preparation is necessary, given the sensitive nature of the subject:

- Review the basics of violent radicalization² in order to be comfortable in dealing with the subject.
- Create a safe space so that participants can freely express themselves.
- Create fixed parameters for the activity by establishing clear objectives.
- Adapt the tone and content of your presentation to the target audience (adults / young adults, radicalized individuals or their families and close associates, etc.).
- As required, consider co-facilitating the session with another resource person (social worker, psychologist, mentor, CPRLV staff member, etc.).

¹ See the free downloads:

- Radicalishow 1. Based on a True Story: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/db5e7d14-6768-45dc-baa2-e654eb66c149>
- Radicalishow 2. A Family Affair: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/697f06cc-97f4-434b-b706-f772daa05c73>

² The CPRLV offers training designed to prevent violent radicalization. Otherwise, the following free downloads are also useful:

- An Information Kit for Social Workers and Counsellors: https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/INFORMATION_KIT_SOCIAL-WORKER_CPRLV.pdf
- EDUCATOR'S GUIDE: "What If I Was Wrong?": <http://etsijavaistort.org/en/educators-guide/>
- Radicalization Leading to Violence in Schools in Quebec: Issues and Perspectives: <https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/rapport-cprlv.pdf>

How to facilitate the session?

Below are a few suggested avenues to explore.

This list is not exhaustive: your experience, the session context and the group dynamics are all factors to consider when deciding what facilitation approach to adopt.

- Do the situations presented in the testimonies and the feelings expressed in them resonate with your reality and concerns?
- How can radicalized individuals benefit from verbally sharing their experience?
- How can their families overcome the absence of a relative due to their leaving for a war zone abroad or their dying there?
- Several of the accounts mention a lack of space for self-expression about identity issues: what strategies can be used to create these spaces and include them in people's living environments?
- If needed, who or what would you turn to (people, resources, organizations) to express your frustrations or to speak about personal or social difficulties?
- The video testimonies underline the importance of families and close friends both in preventing violent radicalization and in the social reintegration of formerly radicalized individuals. Describe how families and friends can contribute in the reintegration phase.
- How do you explain the stigmatization experienced by the families and close friends of radicalized individuals?
- What impact can these accounts have on the prevention of radicalization?
- Have you already directly or indirectly come across someone who was struggling with their multiple identities? For example, a friend, family member etc.? How did they manage to overcome this?

How to end the session?

At the end of the discussion, it is useful to go over the main takeaways:

- Note how the activity was appreciated in general.
- Encourage each participant to verbalize their feelings.
- Review the session's initial objectives and compare them with the various points raised during the discussions.
- Highlight new perspectives opened up by the testimonies.
- Identify the benefits gained by the participants in their understanding of radicalization and radicalized individuals.
- Summarize the activity in terms of the following:
 - The introspective reflections that the stories engendered.
 - The importance of being able to confide in someone trustworthy if one experiences discomfort or social frustrations.
 - The value of using a preventive approach to either pre-empt situations where individuals feel that violent extremism is a valid or desirable option or to make the general population aware of the need to foster and nurture a sense of living together as a harmonious and integrated community.

CONTENT SUMMARIES FOR THE VIDEOS

01 — ANISS

“MAKE MY PARENTS PROUD OF ME”

After successively transitioning from being a “cultural Muslim”, to being a practicing and peaceful Muslim, and then to being a violent radical, Aniss followed the path of an idealist: just as his religious convictions were grappling with the chaos in certain parts of the world (especially Muslim countries), he met several agents of radicalization³ who fueled his resentment and hatred towards non-Muslims. He watched an enormous amount of extremist propaganda videos, which contributed to his indoctrination and convinced him that involvement in violent extremism was the only way of redressing perceived injustices. His arrest was a huge wake-up call that brought him back to reality and made him aware of the damage that his radicalization had inflicted on his family and friends.

02 — JASMINE

“ENGAGING ON THE HOME FRONT”

As a native Quebecer, Jasmine had to grapple with multiple identities in terms of her own perceptions, the social pressures of her environment as well as a troubling underlying question: can one be both a Québécoise AND wear a veil, and vice versa? Having no space to freely express her identity dilemma and without anyone to listen to her concerns, Jasmine, already on a humanitarian streak, was attracted by a vague proposal from agents of radicalization to do supposed humanitarian work in a war zone. With her doubts and uncertainties subsequently allayed and having abandoned her feeling of needing to leave Canada, Jasmine found the right balance in her life and now wants to devote herself to the society in which she was born and in which she now recognizes herself.

03 — INÈS

“A LIFE LESSON AND AN EXPERIENCE OF PERSONAL GROWTH”

Resentment, perceptions, and a feeling of rejection were responsible for Inès' involvement with radicalization. However, her development of radical beliefs was also related to the fact that her wish to express her concerns could not find any outlet, which only aggravated her insecurity and her need for reassurance – a need that she believed could be met by associating with extremist groups.

04 — KAÏS

“LEARNING FROM ONE'S MISFORTUNES”

For anyone who wants to avoid a harmful downward spiral, Kaïs highlights a decisive factor in his disengagement: the essential role of family and friends whose presence, affection and support can be a major resource in preventing someone from becoming radicalized or in facilitating their social reintegration if they become so. In short, an individual's family and friends are both collateral damage of extremism, as well as being part of the solution.

³ See the free download: Strengthening Our Resilience to Agents of Radicalization and Their Rhetoric: <https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/what-is-an-agent-of-radicalization-cprlv.pdf>

The CPRLV remains available to any individual or organization that would like to facilitate activities based on these videos or on the general subject of radicalization. Please contact us for a customized activity.

05 — KENZA

“BENEFITING FROM DIFFERENCES RATHER THAN SUPPRESSING THEM”

One aspect of violent radicalization that has received little media coverage is the lived experience of the families and friends of radicalized individuals. What basically emerges from the account of Kenza, whose sister was radicalized, is the accusatory and stigmatizing attitude that society at large adopted towards her family and friends. Instead of simplistic stereotypes and hasty judgments, Kenza hopes that in such circumstances, people express messages of unity to counter all forms of extremist violence and not resort to hate speech.

06 — MIRA

“MAINTAINING CONTROL OVER ONE’S PERSONAL IDENTITY”

A search for identity was central to Mira’s radicalization process. Faced with multiple identity possibilities, she asked questions that remained unanswered. In her anxiety, she was won over by extremist arguments. Her family ultimately played a key role in her disengagement process. The safe space offered by her parents alleviated her suffering, and she also learned how to open dialogue with her family and friends.

07 — IVANA

“HELP YOURSELF SO AS TO BE ABLE TO HELP OTHERS”

What Ivana takes issue with is not so much the hot-button topics in society, but rather how they are used to stigmatize particular communities. In her case, the linking of wearing a veil with extremism aggravated her perception of the feelings of rejection that society was sending her way. Media emphasis on such issues and a lack of interest in addressing injustices were primary factors in inducing Ivana to stoke her radical ideas. Although she now says that she has moved on beyond all that, she also recognizes that her wounds are very slow to heal. However, instead of crying and feeling sorry for herself, she has decided to make her experience the starting point of an effort to bolster solidarity within her immediate environment.

08 — MARC

“I’M STILL THE SAME PERSON”

For many years, the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 and the resulting stereotypes were all that Marc knew about Muslims. So much so that it made him all the more fearful of them. As often happens, it was a decisive encounter with an exemplary Muslim that changed his mind. During the course of many conversations, this man worked to deconstruct Marc’s negative image of Islam and its adherents. Marc’s growing interest in Islam and extensive reading on the subject led him to convert but given that his friendship with a Muslim had drawn criticism and suspicion from his family and friends, Marc practiced his new religion in secret. His family however, discovered his religious practice and reacted by stigmatizing him, notably by suggesting that he had become a terrorist. Shaken in his beliefs and personality, Marc recognized that he had become potentially vulnerable to agents of radicalization, who might exploit his feelings of rejection by his family. However, it was at this same moment that he came to receive support and guidance from the CPRLV, which has since helped him restore good relations with his family. Marc hopes that people still see him as the same person he always was – and “not a terrorist nor a traitor.”

CONTENT SUMMARIES FOR THE VIDEOS

09 — MAXIME

“REDEMPTION IS POSSIBLE”

Maxime was a lively teenager with a keen mind who early on became concerned about the general state of society. Imbued with the ideals of the Quebec sovereignty movement and frustrated by his peers' lack of interest in this cause, Maxime enthusiastically increased his research on the topic in order to quench his insatiable curiosity. As he continued his path, Maxime found himself at the crossroads of a variety of different forces – the failure of the 1995 referendum and the various theories about the reasons for this failure, the poor company that he kept around him at this time, as well as a toxic reading list. All of these factors were aggravated by his perception that the dream of an independent Quebec was dying. Maxime's acceptance of conspiracy theories gradually took shape and led to a polarized view of society. He felt it necessary to hate others, especially immigrants, Jews, etc. Above all, he began to subscribe to a supremacist ideology that called for the preservation of the cultural and genetic heritage of the white race. His hatred for others subsequently took various forms – racism, Islamophobia, intolerance, and he began directing anger and bitterness towards his family and friends. After he was arrested, convicted, and expelled from school, Maxime was convinced that everything that had befallen him was due to a corrupt society that was conspiring against him. Isolated, shaken and without any support or guidance, he envisaged becoming a martyr by killing people in order to trigger the “revolution” of his darkest fantasies. Fortunately, Maxime did not follow through, but he stresses that he could well have tipped that way. Instead, he eventually stepped back from the brink. He hopes people will learn from his experience that redemption can still occur even when someone is already well down the road of extremism.

10 — JACOB

“IT'S POSSIBLE TO DEBATE IMMIGRATION WITHOUT RESORTING TO SENSATIONALISM”

Jacob is a young man who is fascinated by left-wing ideas and movements (such as socialism, anarchism and the history of the Quebec Patriotes movement). In his search for noble causes such as justice and equality, he became a Socialist and Sovereignist militant. During the course of his story, we learn about how the fine dividing line between social activism and violent radicalization sometimes is. Although he rejected violence as a means of action per se, this rejection did not extend to acts of violence against property, such as vandalism or breaking into businesses accused of being responsible for social inequality.

Jacob campaigned for several of Quebec's political parties and was particularly attracted by the proposed “Quebec Charter of Values” which he saw as an effective way of directly opposing the federal government and “completing the quiet secularization” of Quebec. Disappointed in his fellow left-wing militants' lack of interest in the “Charter,” he found a sympathizer in a friend who was personally opposed to immigration, and who was particularly concerned about Muslim immigration. Jacob's friend was inspired by conservative and ultranationalist political figures, and Jacob watched him gradually walk down the path to violent extremism: he intimidated people and shared hate propaganda on social media, he was violent towards groups on the left, and finally he committed a criminal act against Muslims. Jacob is plagued by regret with respect to his friend, especially since he now believes that he might have been able to do something for him had he been aware of the anguish and torment that he was going through, and that which led him towards extremism. Furthermore, Jacob continues to believe that the topic of immigration, the subject about which they initially bonded, can be discussed frankly, intelligently, and without demonizing others.

11 — LUC

“TWO WRONGS DON’T MAKE A RIGHT”

Raised in a single-parent family, Luc was a shy boy. Although he greatly enjoyed his time in the cadets, his world collapsed when he was 17 – he left school, lost his job and his girlfriend, and was facing increasing tensions within his family. Without any obvious prospects, he began to lead a reclusive, solitary life. The internet remained his only window onto the world. And it was within this limited world that he started to become interested in the violence committed by the Islamic State. Given the thousands of victims created by this terrorist group, Luc couldn’t understand what he perceived as Western government’s inertia and lack of initiative in combating ISIS. Around this time, Luc discovered the existence of Kurdish groups that were fighting ISIS. He became so fascinated by them, by their commitment and by their dedication, that he decided to join their struggle. However, he was never able to act upon this decision – for a start, he didn’t have enough money to go, but most importantly, his mother discovered his secret plan and did everything she could to prevent his departure. After reflecting on this part of his life, Luc came to realize his good fortune in not having been sucked into this downward spiral of violence. In fact, Luc’s case is a good example of a kind of radicalization that the general public is less familiar with but which persuades and seduces people looking for adventure, a quest, or who simply want to give meaning to their lives, but who do not fully understand the risks and the violent reality of their chosen destination.

12 — FARID

“BEING A BETTER VERSION OF MYSELF”

Farid’s search for self began because of the looks people gave him, and the racist jibes he subjected to. During this quest for identity – and just when he was at his most vulnerable, he met an agent of radicalization who exploited and took advantage of Farid’s frustrations by introducing him to a nebulous circle of people who only felt resentment and anger towards society. This community of shared ideas and new associates, which Farid accepted as his new family, gradually took hold over him as he found himself spending his time almost exclusively in their company. He gradually lost the ability to think critically and began to entertain extreme political and religious views. The guidance offered by the CPRLV, and most importantly, his personal desire to be the best person that he could be, helped him to rediscover his peace of mind and his critical judgment. He ultimately disengaged from his former associates to such an extent that he now carefully ponders every decision he makes. This process of disengagement, instruction and education had a synergistically positive effect on him, by both opening him up to others and by allowing him to get to know himself better. Now involved in various community projects, Farid has developed other skills and has expanded his horizon through meeting new people. Furthermore, he is already thinking about the future: for Farid, the most important legacy that he wants to leave for his children will be to help them develop their ability to think critically.



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HELPLINE

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