

"NO ONE SHOULD GO THROUGH THIS ALONE"

AXEL'S JOURNEY WITH THE RAINBOW REFUGEE COMMITTEE

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In Brussels, the Rainbow Refugee Committee has quietly become a lifeline for LGBTQIA+ people seeking international protection. More than an organisation, it is a space built by those who survived and understood, with painful clarity, what was missing. It is also the first LGBTQIA+ refugee-led structure of its kind in Belgium, born from necessity rather than theory, from lived experience rather than institutional planning.

Axel, one of the Committee's most recognisable voices, remembers how everything started. "The RRC was born from a void I felt deeply during my own asylum procedure. Back then, there was no structure able to accompany LGBTQIA+ applicants on the front line. There was no safe place to ask questions, no space to understand how to share a story marked by fear, secrecy, and trauma." That absence, he says, shaped everything that followed. "So we created what we ourselves had needed: a space built by, for, and with people who had survived the same journey."

Very quickly, the project became more than a support hub. It became a community. Weekly groups offered a rare sense of belonging to people who arrived in Belgium completely alone, sometimes deeply distressed, sometimes still hiding essential parts of themselves. "Finding a sense of belonging changes everything," Axel explains. "Most people come to us carrying layers of invisibility. The moment they enter the room and see others like them, something shifts."

But the emotional load was immense. In the Committee's early years, refugees accompanied other refugees through some of the hardest moments of their lives. "It was emotionally overwhelming," Axel says. "Every new

file could reopen our own wounds." This realisation pushed the RRC to restructure without betraying its core values: lived experience would remain central, but trained staff would take over individual socio-legal support.

This evolution came just in time. At the same time, Belgium's reception crisis has left countless asylum seekers—especially single men—without any place in the official system. For LGBTQIA+ people, homelessness is not only exhausting; it is dangerous. They are at immediate risk of harassment, violence, and exploitation. "We see it every day," he says. "People arrive exhausted, terrified, and completely unprotected."

In response to this emergency, the RRC opened the first LGBTQIA+-labelled emergency rooms in Brussels."These rooms literally save lives. Some people hadn't slept safely for months."

Another milestone came when Fedasil, Belgium's federal reception agency, signed an expertise agreement with the Committee. "For a structure led by LGBTQIA+ refugees to receive official federal recognition… it's huge." The agreement formalises three missions: socio-legal support, training for reception teams, and monthly support groups. But beyond the operational framework, it carries symbolic weight. "It recognises that people with lived experience are not only beneficiaries. They are experts. They have legitimate knowledge that institutions need."

Among the Committee's many roles, two stand out. "Socio-legal accompaniment is our heart," Axel says. Preparing beneficiaries for hearings, helping them understand the asylum procedure, restoring their sense of agency—this work is slow, meticulous, and essential. The second pillar is the creation of safe spaces inside reception centres. "Without safe rooms, our beneficiaries are in danger. The model of LGBTQIA+ rooms works; it must now be expanded and made permanent."

Behind Axel's engagement lies an intimate, deeply personal history. "I went through the asylum process myself. I know the fear of not being believed, the stress of the hearings, the loneliness." This is why one sentence has become almost a signature for him: "I've been through this. You are not alone." It is simple, but for many, it changes everything.

Asked what message he would give to LGBTQIA+ people arriving in Belgium today, Axel answers without hesitation: "You are not alone. You've had to hide who you are, to flee, to survive. Here, you have the right to exist fully. And there are people—like us—who understand your journey and are here to support you."

Looking ahead, the RRC sees its mission clearly: securing safe reception, obtaining structural funding, expanding emergency rooms, and strengthening the role of lived-experience expertise in Belgian asylum policy. "The day our work becomes unnecessary will be a beautiful one," Axel reflects. "But we're not there yet."

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