

The Facebook friend request that led to three years in jail

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

- Write the names of all the social media sites that you have heard of.
- Which groups do you think are most likely to use each of these social media sites? E.g. *teenagers, millennials, business people ...*

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

acquitted	reticent	cleared	dock	ordeal	saga
notorious	speculatively	wary	sought-after	extradite	incarceration

- famous for something bad _____
- wanted by many people but not easy to find _____
- an extremely unpleasant experience, especially one that lasts for a long time _____
- in the hope of success _____
- a long series of events or a description of them _____
- said not to be guilty of the crime you were accused of _____
- not willing to provide information about something, especially about yourself _____
- careful or nervous about someone or something because you think they might cause a problem

- send someone accused of a crime back to the country where the crime was committed for a trial

- the fact of being locked up in prison _____
- the part of a court of law where the person who is accused of a crime stands or sits

- officially confirmed not to be guilty of something _____

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The wrong man: the Facebook friend request that led to three years in jail

Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe spent three years in an Italian jail but says he does not blame the man for whom he was mistaken

Lorenzo Tondo
9 August, 2019

- 1 Every morning for three years, a prison guard would wake him by calling someone else's name. At every court hearing, a judge would order him to stand and sit back down, using a name that was not his own.
- 2 Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe was the victim of what has become one of Italy's most notorious cases of mistaken identity. Detained in May 2016, he was accused by prosecutors in Palermo of being one of the world's most sought-after human traffickers, Medhanie Yehdego Mered. While the real smuggler lived it up in Africa, Berhe, who had earned his living milking cows and working occasionally as a carpenter, faced up to 14 years in jail.
- 3 His ordeal began when a Facebook friend request he had speculatively sent to Mered's wife, finding her attractive, led investigators to conclude he was the smuggler operating under a new identity.
- 4 "More than once, I contemplated taking my life," Berhe, 32, told the *Guardian*. "When you live through such an injustice and discover you're helpless to do anything about it, you lose the will to live. Try to see it my way: I wasn't arrested; I was kidnapped, and my three years in jail were like an endless nightmare, which all started with a friendship on Facebook."
- 5 The saga ended in July 2019 when a judge in Sicily acquitted Berhe of a charge of human trafficking, confirmed he was a victim of mistaken identity and ordered his immediate release.
- 6 Today, Berhe lives as a free man in a small flat among the alleyways of Palermo's historic centre, having been granted asylum by Italy. His years in jail have made him reticent and wary.
- 7 "Sometimes I'm terrified the police will arrest me and my nightmare will start all over again," he said. "From that hellish day I was arrested, my life will never be the same."
- 8 On the afternoon of 24 May 2016, Berhe, a refugee from Eritrea, was drinking coffee in a bar on the outskirts of Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, when six police officers pulled a hood over his head, took him away and forced him onto a flight to Rome.
- 9 His arrest, after an investigation spanning two continents and five countries, was presented to the media as a triumph for a new anti-trafficking strategy. The suspect was the first human smuggler to be extradited from Africa. But on his arrival in Italy, he had no idea what he was supposed to have done wrong.
- 10 "I thought they wanted to extradite me to Eritrea because I had deserted the military," he said. "During my first interrogation in Rome, they told me I was accused of being Mered, a human trafficker. I thought they were crazy."
- 11 Berhe was eventually transferred to Palermo's Pagliarelli prison to await what would become a long and controversial trial. Two DNA tests, an array of witnesses and reporting by the *Guardian* and *New Yorker*, who spoke to the real smuggler, all pointed to his innocence, but the ordeal continued.
- 12 It transpired that the smuggler had been in jail in the Middle East – most likely the United Arab Emirates – for using a forged passport when Italian prosecutors travelled to Sudan and arrested Berhe in his place. Mered's incarceration meant wiretaps Italian investigators had on his phone had gone quiet, as had his Facebook posts. The investigators assumed Mered had changed his number and social media accounts.
- 13 A few months earlier, Sicilian prosecutors had learned that an Eritrean named Medhanie had become Facebook friends with the trafficker's wife, Lidya Tesfu. They decided this account must be Mered's, based on his and Berhe's shared first name. Britain's National Crime Agency provided the telephone number associated with the account to Sicilian prosecutors, who tracked it to Khartoum and issued an arrest warrant.
- 14 "If I could go back in time, I'd cut off the finger I used to send a friend request to that woman in the autumn of 2015," Berhe said. "How could I have known she was Mered's wife? She just looked nice. That Facebook contact landed me in this absurd situation."
- 15 "If Mered hadn't been arrested in the UAE, the Italians would have likely arrested the real trafficker in Khartoum. And if I hadn't befriended Lidya, by this time, I probably would have reached my family in Europe."
- 16 Tesfu herself gave evidence that Berhe was

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Level 3 • Advanced

not her husband, but the prosecutor Calogero Ferrara dismissed it along with all other suggestions that he had put the wrong man in the dock. At the close of the trial, he demanded a 14-year prison sentence.

- 17 Meanwhile, Mered had been revealed by the *Guardian* and the Swedish broadcaster SVT to have been released from jail in the UAE and to be spending his substantial trafficking earnings in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, where he was a regular in nightclubs.
- 18 “I knew that, while I was locked up, Mered was enjoying his freedom somewhere in Africa,” Berhe said. “But I don’t blame him. It’s not his fault I was arrested in Khartoum, and he didn’t keep me in jail for three years.”
- 19 Berhe was cleared of trafficking but found guilty of the lesser charge of aiding illegal immigration for having helped his cousin reach Libya. Because he had already spent three years in jail,

the judge ordered his immediate release.

- 20 “I still don’t understand why I was found guilty of aiding illegal immigration,” he said. “Migrants don’t take cash during their desert journey because they risk getting robbed. That is why my cousin asked me to forward his money to a man who would help him on his way. This is perfectly normal in Africa, especially among Eritreans, because we have no passport. How else are we supposed to reach Europe?”
- 21 With asylum secured in Italy, Berhe has the rest of his life ahead of him. “People ask me what I’m going to do now that I’m free,” he said. “Well, first I need to realize that my nightmare is over and this freedom is not a dream. And if it is, I beg you: don’t wake me up.”

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3 Comprehension check

Answer these questions with detailed information from the article.

1. Find four crimes mentioned in the article.
2. Which Medhanie was said to have carried out each of these crimes? Did they commit these crimes by their own admission, or were they accused of these crimes by the authorities?
3. Explain what Berhe was accused of, what he was sentenced for and why he is not in prison now.
4. What led investigators to believe that Berhe was the man they were looking for, and how did they find him?
5. Where was Mehred at the time of Berhe’s arrest?
6. What evidence pointed to Berhe not being the sought-after human trafficker?
7. Despite this evidence, what happened to him?

4 Expressions

a. Find the following expressions in the article.

1. a three-word phrase meaning *do enjoyable and exciting things that involve spending a lot of money* (para 2)
2. a five-word phrase used to say that someone is in such a state of despair and unhappiness that they no longer care whether they live or die (para 4)
3. a three-word phrase used before you mention a fact or event that people did not know about (para 12)

b. Use the expressions to talk about the article and also in further sentences about other subjects.

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5 Staying safe on social media

a. Write one word in each gap to complete these rules for staying safe on Facebook.

1. Never share your p_____.
2. Think before you p_____ something.
3. Adjust your p_____ settings, and review them often.
4. Only accept friend requests from people you know p_____.
5. Report things that look s_____.

b. Think of three further rules for staying safe on social media.

6 Discussion

- Which social media sites do you use regularly?
- Would you call yourself an active or a passive member?
- Are there any social media sites that you used to use but no longer do? Give further details.
- How do you respond to unwanted friend requests?
- Have you ever sent a friend request to someone you don't personally know? Give further details.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. notorious
2. sought-after
3. ordeal
4. speculatively
5. saga
6. acquitted
7. reticent
8. wary
9. extradite
10. incarceration
11. dock
12. cleared

3 Comprehension check

1. deserting the military, human trafficking, using a forged passport, aiding illegal immigration
2. Berhe: deserting the military (his own admission); human trafficking, aiding illegal immigration (by the authorities)
Mehred: human trafficking, using a forged passport (by the authorities)
3. He was accused of, and sent to prison for, human trafficking. He was also accused and convicted of aiding illegal immigration, but the time he already spent in prison for a crime he did not commit cancels out the jail time that he would serve for this lesser crime. Therefore he is not in prison at the moment.
4. He sent a Facebook friend request to the wife of the real human trafficker. As the men both had the same first name, investigators believed that they were the same person. The phone used to place the Facebook friend request was traced to Berhe who, at time of his arrest, was in Khartoum in Sudan.
5. He was in jail in the Middle East, probably the United Arab Emirates, for using a forged passport.
6. DNA tests, evidence given by the wife of the real trafficker and reporting by the *Guardian* and *New Yorker* after both publications spoke to Mehred
7. He was convicted and sent to prison for human trafficking.

4 Expressions

1. live it up
2. lose the will to live
3. it transpired that – watch a short video about the uses of this phrase using the link below or type 'transpired' into the search field of macmillandictionary.com.
www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/transpire?q=transpired

5 Staying safe on social media

- a.
1. password
 2. post
 3. privacy
 4. personally
 5. suspicious