

Journeys of Hope

Stories of refugees on the road to Europe
Jesuit Refugee Service Europe 2016



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introduction

As from April 2015, the number of refugees and forced migrants making the dangerous voyage to Europe by boat increased. The majority landed in Greece. They were people on the move, hastily travelling through the Balkan countries, mostly aiming to reach Germany or Sweden. Staff of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Europe, together with volunteers and other NGOs, helped the refugees along their journey, for the few hours they stopped at a border, in a shelter, or in a transit camp. Funding agencies offered valuable help to support the services offered.

Now, at JRS, we like to accompany the refugees, to have time for encounter, and more specifically to listen to their voices, their sufferings and their hopes. And to let their voices be heard around us. This is the project we asked Danielle Vella, from JRS International, to implement in late January, February and March 2016.

Danielle travelled to Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Italy, Austria and Germany, to meet refugees on the move and to collect their testimonies. On two journeys, she travelled together with Darrin Zammit Lupi, a photographer from Malta, and on another with Oscar Spooner from JRS Europe.

While Danielle was travelling, we published her weekly articles on our website. In this booklet, we present the eight articles she sent, illustrated by photos taken mostly on these journeys.

Dear reader, please listen to the voices of the refugees, so that you will better understand, with your mind and with your heart, the strong hope of people who have plunged into the unknown, just to seek peace and freedom and to save life.

Jean-Marie Carrière SJ
JRS Europe Regional Director

“ That parents are doing this for their children is beyond doubt; their sacrifices and dreams are for them. ”



© Trudging through Croatia's transit camp in Slavonski Brod.





📍 Safe on the Greek island of Lesbos just after arriving from Turkey by dinghy. ↕

📍 Waiting and worrying at Adasevci “one-stop” centre in Serbia. ➔



“ You hear the words but you cannot believe these things actually happen. ”



background

Impossible journeys

By the time they cross the sea to reach the shores of Europe, to try to get the protection they desperately need, the men, women and children who flee their countries have already suffered many hardships on the way. Afghan families find they are rarely welcome in Iran, and follow unscrupulous smugglers across the mountains to Turkey, travelling in impossible conditions. Syrian families escape from war to Turkey where they work all the hours of the day for a pittance, and soon find it is practically impossible to survive. Somali, Congolese, Eritrean and other refugees from Africa cross the Sahara in trucks, spending long days without eating or drinking, again at the mercy of smugglers; they suffer violent racism and violations of their human rights in Libya, assaulted to the depths of their dignity.

Upon reaching the soil of Europe, all seek to advance as quickly as possible from one country to another, to finally arrive in the place where they hope to find security, rest, freedom and peace. Now that European countries have closed their doors and blocked their roads, refugees are indefinitely stalled at the borders, in camps, and find it much more difficult to claim protection.

When the borders were still open, the refugees faced one obstacle after another to travel within Europe. Unscrupulous carriers ferried them from one point to another, frequently in windowless and practically airless vehicles, charging exorbitant prices. We need only remember the refrigerator truck found in August 2015 on a highway from Budapest to Vienna with 71 bodies inside. Buses full of refugees could be stranded for days when borders suddenly closed for some reason or other, for example when taxi drivers went on strike and blocked trains from leaving.

Apart from the violence of closed borders, we see the violence implicit in arbitrary and confusing controls: some refugees were turned back because they came from the 'wrong' country or listed the 'wrong' country as their intended destination. Others were refused the opportunity to apply for asylum because they could not understand and 'incorrectly' answered the questions in a form they had to fill on arrival.



📍 Killing time at the transit centre in Slavonski Brod, Croatia.

“ When the borders were still open, the refugees faced one obstacle after another to travel within Europe.

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📍 Refugees waiting to disembark from the ferry that brought them from Lesbos to the port of Piraeus near the Greek capital of Athens.



The words of the refugees interviewed show just how much the principle of the right to claim asylum has been damaged. Discriminatory criteria, unfair and unjustified classifications, such as the demonised “economic migrant”, and abuses at the borders manifest a disturbing erosion of access to protection, and the quality of that protection.

Everything shared by the refugees who met Danielle reveals that European attitudes and consequent policies regarding people in need of protection have contributed to the unacceptable destiny of forced travel. These are the policies it has taken so long to define clearly, that have often failed to fulfil solemn commitments that European countries have pledged on asylum.

Something else we realise is that family life is a serious casualty of the entire journey. Countless families are separated, not least because many men or youth go alone along the dangerous route to try to pave the way for their families to follow safely. This tragedy highlights the absolute necessity of organising legal and safe channels to protection, particularly through family reunification. Attention for those who are vulnerable must also be clearly inscribed in our legislation. Then there is the plight of a large number of unaccompanied minors, highlighted in several reports.

And now the agreement between the European Union and Turkey, strongly criticized by many for its failure to respect international obligations and for its suspect assessment of real access to asylum in Turkey, is playing its intended deterrent role: borders are controlled, closed, and people in search of asylum are blocked.

When we begin to listen to refugees, we learn two things. We understand better what it is like to be “on the move”, animated by hope that knows no borders, driven by strong concern for the future of our children. An encounter with the refugees reveals the quality of their humanity. First, we perceive the suffering and difficulties, but then, talking with them, we discover their strong spirit. Secondly, through their experiences, we can see very clearly the serious defects of our policies. Refugees are in an in-between space but this does not mean in any way that they do not have rights, especially to protection, security, freedom and respect of their fundamental human dignity. And another fundamental right, which is crucial: to live their family relationships peacefully and to belong to wider social networks that are sorely lacking for those who have lost everything.

one. A hope that knows no borders

📍 Sheer relief at landing safely on the Greek island of Lesbos.





Greece (Lesbos)

one.

A hope that knows no borders

It is their sheer relief and hope that are most striking... more than their foolhardy courage, the dangers and deprivations of their journey, and their terrible experiences.

It seems to me that as soon as they set foot on the shores of Europe, many refugees feel freedom is finally theirs for the taking: freedom from fear, from repression, war, crushing poverty, and the total lack of prospects brought about by some or all the above. And so they give full rein to a hope that knows no borders, a hope that refuses to recognise ominous moves within the European Union to threaten their access to protection.

“For four years, I’ve been dreaming to get here. Now I feel very calm, good and happy,” said Haysem, who came from Syria with his wife and five little children. “Just now, we were all singing together in our room – me, my wife and my children.”

Ahmed and Asyha escaped ISIS in Raqqa. When I asked how they felt, they looked at one another and exchanged wide smiles. Ahmed said: “Like someone who was dead and has come back to life.”

Haysem, Ahmed and Asyha shared their stories with me in late January on the Greek

island of Lesbos, where they were staying in a family shelter. I met dozens of people from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan who had just reached one or other of the Greek islands from Turkey. They came in a bid to seek asylum and “new life”. They are far from alone in doing so, joining an exodus to Europe that has been going on for years but hit record levels in 2015, when more than one million refugees and forced migrants arrived in Europe. In January this year, nearly 69,000 came to Greece.

Once they land, the refugees move remarkably quickly from one stop to the next – often aided by smugglers – to try to get to their destination of choice. This is usually Germany, for many reasons; the one that stayed with me was “because Angela Merkel is the mother of all Syrians and Iraqis”.

Part of the refugees’ dizzying relief, when they reach European territory, doubtless stems from surviving a potentially lethal journey. No less than 374 refugees died in the Mediterranean in January, most of them trying to reach Greece in overcrowded and flimsy inflatable dinghies. Haysem had two words to describe his journey: “Fear, death.”

Tarek, who fled the Syrian city of Latakia to escape forced recruitment in the army, said: “The smugglers told us only 40 minutes in the sea but we stayed three and half hours. It was very rough and the children, oh, the children, crying and screaming. It was crazy and dangerous.” The day after he arrived to the island of Kos, Tarek was woken up to translate for a man who had just watched his wife and daughter drown.

Qusai, a severely disabled man from Damascus, very nearly didn't make it. His minute size and inability to move unaided meant he was nearly swamped by waves and suffocated. From the moment he was put in the dinghy up to his journey's end at Nera Island, Qusai sustained three fractures to his brittle bones.

The dangers of the journey to seek asylum are not new or surprising. History has shown that the consequences of travelling clandestinely and depending on unscrupulous smugglers can be fatal. But then those who make the unspeakably difficult decision to embark on such a trip feel they have absolutely no choice.

At the Turkish coast, Qusai contemplated the “terrifying” black waters into which the smugglers had just ditched his wheelchair, because he could not afford to pay for its place. He had just paid \$1,000 for himself. He thought: “Maybe I'll make it, maybe not. I don't care, this is my last chance, no way back, no need to be scared, it might be my last day; it might not.”

Ghodrat, a young Hazara man from war-torn Ghazni Province in Afghanistan, arrived to Lesbos with his wife and four-year-old daughter. He had tried to settle in Iran first but



© On the move in Lesbos.





📍 A makeshift camp called Afghan Hill near the village of Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos. ↗

📍 Getting warm after surviving the boat trip from Turkey to Lesbos. →

was deported twice because he had no papers. “Of course I could see that the journey by boat was dangerous. But it was more dangerous to stay back where people take a bomb and kill themselves and others – this happened every day where I lived. War on one side, suicide bombers on the other side, lack of job and hunger on the other, threatened because you are Shia on the other... So I decided to take the journey no matter what, although I knew we may drown.”

Hearing what they fled from, it is no wonder that the people I met showed such grim determination. They were eager to explain, drawing, miming and searching for words on the Internet when language got in the way. Those who came from rebel areas of Syria were petrified of barrel bombs dropped by their own government, “they destroy everything, schools, homes, mosques”. A man said quietly: “When you see children dead, when you try to pull their corpses from the rubble, it’s horrible.”





📍 The makeshift camp of Afghan Hill in Lesbos.

**“ The life I had was so painful,
I have no room to be worried about
anything now. ”**

One widow – she lost her husband to a barrel bomb – eventually managed to leave Aleppo after being sent back twice across the border by Turkey. She left without knowing what had become of her parents and brother, who ‘disappeared’ after the Syrian army arrested them four years earlier. “Our father was 70, walking with a stick – what could he do to anyone?”

Then there were those who managed to escape from territory controlled by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, like four Yezidi sisters, the youngest one crying silently. ISIS fighters killed their mother after the girls fled: “If a woman is young and beautiful they take her. If she is old, they kill her.”

Others recalled how ISIS punished infringements, ranging from smoking to not praying to trying to escape from their territory,

with flogging or forced labour, digging trenches on the frontline. “*Kollox haram!*” (Everything is forbidden!) But the worst nightmare was the beheadings. Ahmed drew a square in my notebook and explained: “There is a square in Raqqa, where ISIS brought people for execution, every two weeks. Then they left the heads there for three days. This used to be a beautiful place, we used to go for ice cream as a family before, but now whoever goes there is dead.” I wished Ahmed good luck as he got up to leave. He picked up the pencil and drew a cross over the square. “Inshallah,” he replied.

My interpreter for Arabic in Lesbos was visibly moved. “You hear the words but you cannot believe these things actually happen,” she said. Too true: much as I try, I cannot even start to imagine or to understand – not even

remotely – what it is like to be threatened by such horrors. Something Ghodrat said keeps coming back: “The life I had was so painful, I have no room to be worried about anything now.” But his dream – and this is true for every refugee I met – is fuelled not only by despair but also by faith: an unshakeable faith in Europe as a mecca of peace, democracy and respect for the human rights “of every person”.

This faith is reinforced by the welcome extended by generous residents and by a UN-coordinated bevy of NGOs on the islands and in Athens. Tarek recalled: “Three Swedish men came to rescue us from the boat. I felt safe then and some day I will help people like they helped us. It was beautiful, especially when we saw them holding the children like they were theirs.”

As the refugees venture further, enthusiasm seems to wane. I met Tarek in Eidomeni, on the border with Macedonia, which was closed because striking Macedonian taxi drivers had blocked the trains. “We didn’t think it would be so difficult, we thought we’d reach Germany in five or six days but we’ve already been in Greece for seven.”

The stark truth is that their quest for asylum is likely to be much harder than most imagine. Although there is plenty of goodwill in Europe, especially among ordinary people and civil society groups eager to extend hospitality, political trends are shifting in the opposite direction. At national and EU levels, policymakers are proposing and sometimes implementing measures to tighten border controls and to make asylum policies more restrictive, even offensive to human dignity.

But negative news does not appear to deter the newly arrived refugees too much. They keep hoping to find at least a safe place, and opportunities to work and to study, and to give their children a happier future – the top priority of every single parent I met. They cling fiercely to hope because they can’t afford to do otherwise. Like millions before them, they have staked everything on their gamble for freedom. And since I met them, all I can think is: how many will find the new life they sacrificed everything for, and what can we do to help them?

two. Breaking family ties

📍 Sticking together at the transit camp in Croatia.





1. Serbia
2. Croatia
3. Greece

2

A map of Europe with a light blue background and white country borders. Three red location pins are placed on the map. Pin 1 is in Serbia, pin 2 is in Croatia, and pin 3 is in Greece. The pins are numbered 1, 2, and 3 respectively.

1

3

two. Breaking family ties

The photo was no bigger than the palm of my hand, the formal portrait of an Afghan family of seven. The distraught father took the photo from his wallet with shaking fingers, and placed it in my hands together with his wife's ID card.

Only the man and one of his sons, aged about eight, made it to Serbia, where I met them at a transit centre on their way further into Europe. The others got lost at a lethal pass of the journey to seek refuge: the Iranian-Turkish border, reputedly dangerous because of the mountainous terrain, the weather and the risk of being intercepted by border guards.

"I was walking with my family and the guards started shooting from both sides. We were stuck. I grabbed my son's hand and ran, and the others went somewhere else to escape. Now I don't know where my family is," the man said.

Did you try to search for them? "I couldn't! If I moved, the guards would shoot. And then we had to keep running: the smuggler had a stick and a knife, he was hitting me, to make sure I don't stop."

He asks helplessly: "Is there anyone who can bring my family back?"

Then his son speaks up, fighting back tears, and gravely names each one of his missing brothers and sisters, counting off his fingers: "Ali, Mohammed, Farzona, Mortaza... four and, with my mother, five."

The forlorn pair has kept travelling with the rest of their group, carrying with them only their shock, sense of loss and fading hope.

Only God knows how many families have faced such a heart-breaking predicament on their desperate journey to find a safer place than that allotted to them by fate. Nowadays, the route that most refugees are taking into Europe – from Greece onwards – is packed with parents, children and grandparents.

That parents are doing this for their children is beyond doubt; their sacrifices and dreams are for them. But refugees must resort to such risky means to travel that their bid to save their family often leads to loss instead, temporarily or – tragically – permanently.

Reza, an Iranian refugee who is a translator on the Greek island of Lesbos, will never forget a woman he tried to help just after she landed. "I saw her stomach swelling fast and shouted that we had to get her to hospital. All the way there, I held her in my arms. She was

begging me, not for herself, but to look after her daughter. The next day, I went to ask her family how she was. She hadn't made it."

So perilous is the journey that many men choose to go alone, to try to pave a safer way for their family to follow – a brave plan that may be foiled by stringent family reunification policies in Europe.

Mohammed comes from Erbin, a besieged zone east of Damascus. First he left for the capital but then quit Syria altogether after army Intelligence came twice to look for his brother. That was the last straw.

"I left my wife and children with my mother. I miss them so much," he says when we meet at the transit centre in Slavonski Brod in Croatia. "Now I heard it will take two years for family to be allowed to come – I can't stay alone for two years." Mohammed can no longer talk now. He blinks away tears, looks away and draws hard on his cigarette.

Nour's husband fled the Syrian city of Aleppo five months ago after receiving a threat, "a paper that was so dangerous". He went to Germany but Nour did not wait to follow him through legal channels. Eight months pregnant, she set off for Greece with her father and brother because, as she keeps saying, "I couldn't stand it alone in Syria anymore". Nour's daughter, aged one year and

a half, clings to her. "My baby needs her father, she is always calling, daddy, daddy. And I miss him so much, so much, I am waiting for the moment to meet him."

Nour left for the journey undeterred by the fear that she may give birth on the road. I meet her in Slavonski Brod. "I am so, so tired," she says. "We have been on the road for 10 days." The worst part was being stuck on the Greek side of the border with Macedonia, due to a strike by Macedonian taxi drivers. At least 80 buses packed with refugees waited at a petrol station for days for the border to open.

"I stayed seven days in the bus, I was so cold, and we had very little food," recalls Nour. I last see her waiting patiently for her relatives in the "tracing corner" of a big tent. Despite her ordeal, Nour smiles often. She says philosophically: "It is difficult everywhere: in Syria and here."

Many young men voluntarily assume the obligation of going ahead to Europe not only for their wives and children but also for their parents and siblings. Amir comes from Ghazni in Afghanistan. "I'm so worried about my family, they are alone and in hiding from the Taliban. My father is 78 and I am the eldest. I must take care of my parents, brothers and sisters. I have come to Europe to save them, do you get this?"



📍 A sister with Caritas hands out hot tea at the transit camp in Croatia.

“ I left my wife and children with my mother in Damascus. I miss them so much. Now I heard it will take two years for family to be allowed to come. ”

📍 At yet another transit centre, this time in Presevo in Serbia.



Amir's father worked as a pharmacist and doctor for the Afghan government for more than 40 years – a crime in the eyes of the Taliban. A year ago, the elderly man received death threats. Amir left shortly afterwards, worked in Iran to raise money for his journey, and then headed for Greece. "I need to build my life in Europe and then bring my family." They are constantly in touch: "Everywhere I have Wi-Fi, I call them, just to say I am here. They are so happy, they cry every time."

There is so much raw pain at leaving loved ones and country behind. Many did try to stick it out back home but then the breaking point came: bombs falling too often and too close; threats intensified or even made good...

"I love my country, but I love my life and my future as well," says Hamid, who was stabbed because he worked as a translator for foreign NGOs in Afghanistan – another "crime".

Many tried to find refuge somewhere not so far from home. Some Afghans went to Iran but found it inhospitable to say the least. Countless Syrians moved from place to place in their war-torn country but "now there are no more solutions for us", says Hassan, a Palestinian from Damascus.

"For five years, we went from one place to another. A month would pass, more fighting, more planes flying low and shooting, so we'd have to move again. We are so tired in Syria now."

For how long can parents like Hassan bear to have their family live amid destruction and death? "I didn't leave Syria before because I couldn't afford to," he continues. "I've been thinking of leaving for three years. I tried and tried but I didn't manage. I begged friends abroad to send me money. It cost us 3,000 euro to come to Greece."

The foremost aim of their journey is humble: to be in a safe and peaceful place. One man, who came from ISIS territory in Syria, said: "What do I hope for? Nothing! Just that one, two, three – he points to himself, his wife and little child – are together and safe, that's all."

As the refugees make their way swiftly from one European country to another, en route to their intended destination, personnel in transit centres try to keep them safe and to help them, especially the families and the vulnerable.

The refugees are full of praise for them. Take Mohammed: "I need to say thank you to

“ I am so, so tired.
We have been on
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days. ”



📍 Preparing for the next stage of the journey
at the transit centre in Presevo, Serbia.





📍 Queuing to get on the train in a transit camp in Macedonia, near the border with Greece.

everyone who works in the centres, they clear after us, they smile, they give food, they are very kind and ready to help.”

Among the refugees too, solidarity is not in short supply. They travel in groups, sometimes made up along the way. They look out, wait and worry for each other. The natural leaders and those who speak English guide the rest.

“I am helping three families and four others I met on the way, all from Afghanistan,”

says Amir. “Everywhere we go, I get tickets, information and food for them, I try to solve any problem they have because they don’t know the language, and it’s so hard.”

The Afghan man and his son who lost their family are being looked after by the group they have travelled with since Iran. Hamid is with this group and he assures me he will help them contact the Red Cross once they reach Croatia. “I am with them, I will do it,” he says. “Whatever I can do, I will do.”

three. Listen to the story behind

📍 Interminable queues: this one at the transit centre in Presevo, Serbia.





- 1. Croatia
- 2. Macedonian-Greek border



three.

Listen to the story behind

“No one even listens to the story behind.” With these words, Iva, a young Croatian woman who works for Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), neatly summed up the most glaring concern in Europe’s so-called refugee crisis.

Since the number of refugees coming to Europe, mostly via Greece, rose sharply last year, there has been a growing trend to stem their onward movement. Countries on the refugee route are using dangerously arbitrary criteria to determine who may and may not cross their borders.

As I travelled the route, I realised that to be allowed to continue their journey into Europe, refugees must come from the ‘right’ country of origin and name the ‘right’ country of destination when questioned at the borders. I did not see any effort to listen to individuals to determine their protection needs.

Since this weekend, border controls have become even more restrictive. Before, Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans were allowed to go through. Now Macedonia is accepting only Syrians and Iraqis with ID cards and passports, and is refusing to let Afghans enter its territory at all. As a result, an estimated 4,000 refugees are now stranded at the Greek-Macedonian

border, while thousands more watch and wait in Athens.

Iva, who has been working with refugees at the Croatian border with Serbia since they started arriving last year, recalls a previous attempt to bar Afghans.

“When the crisis started last year, Afghan people had problems crossing the border. And the explanation was, ‘Afghan people are not here because of the war; the situation is OK, you know, there is no official war there.’”

This week’s sudden decision to deny Afghan refugees is deeply disturbing. I recall strikingly similar remarks passed by two whom I met on the route, which give an indication of what life was like back home. The first came from Ghodrat: “Every night, when we went to sleep, we didn’t hope to wake up alive.” Another young Afghan said: “When we left our homes to go to work, we didn’t hope to come back, because we could easily be killed by a suicide bomber or another attack.”

From Greece to Croatia, I met Afghan refugees who fled extremist persecution. Ghodrat was threatened because he is a Shia Muslim. Ali escaped because he did not want his family to pay the price of his job as

a journalist. Hamid left nearly too late, after he was attacked because he worked as a translator for foreign NGOs: "I was walking to my university class, and a group of men came in front of me and said, 'Translator stop'. They took my notebooks and stabbed me in my neck, chest, arms, all over."

I also listened to people who had recently arrived from Pakistan, Iran and Morocco, and who had urgent protection needs. From Iran I met Reza, a Christian who fled the wrath of the authorities because he ran a home church. For two years, he was regularly called for questioning, a procedure that unfailingly left him physically and mentally bruised. When someone gave his persecutors the evidence they needed against Reza, he left Iran immediately. And I heard the story of a young couple that fled Iran after the husband was sentenced to some 150 lashes, a suspended prison sentence and an exorbitant fine because he served alcohol at their wedding.

The list goes on. When I was interviewing families at a Caritas shelter in Lesbos, a young man approached me and asked if he could tell his story. "I am gay and this is the reason I left Morocco," he said. "People hit me, used bad words and bullied me, this happened so many times." He shows me a scar on one side of his face, and picks up a glass to show me how it was done. Then he lifts his sweater and reveals the scar of a knife wound on his side. He was imprisoned twice under Morocco's anti-gay laws. "I want to go to Germany but I know I won't be able to," he says wistfully.

The young man is probably right. He would almost certainly be summarily dismissed at the border with Macedonia because he comes from the 'wrong' nationality.

“ The lazy ease with which people are labelled as either ‘refugees’ or ‘economic migrants’.” ”



© Waiting for registration at the transit centre in Slavonski Brod, Croatia.



📍 Trying to get information at the transit centre in Macedonia.

What's more, like many North Africans, he risks being immediately classified as an economic migrant. And here is something else I see: the lazy ease with which people are labelled as either "refugees" or "economic migrants", with the latter all but demonized for having the temerity to turn up.

The problem with such facile classifications is that they can be unfair and inaccurate, and deny people the protection they urgently need. Given the lawless, violent, repressive and impoverished state of so many countries, the only way to determine if someone is a refugee is to listen to his story, to understand what led him to flee and what will happen to him if he goes back.

And here I turn again to Iva's clear-sighted words: "Calling people economic migrants and forbidding them to cross borders is just closing your eyes to problems existing for so many years."

Now stationed at Croatia's Slavonski Brod transit centre, Iva has seen enough to convince her that people embark on this journey only because it is the best option they have.

"I really don't think anyone would leave their whole life, their home, friends and memories unless they have to," she says firmly. "We see people aged 80 years and more, people in wheelchairs... yesterday there was a man who had two heart attacks. No one takes such a risky way just to leave home. They want to see if they are lucky enough to get away from a situation of certain death to one where some will survive."

If the refugees are not allowed to move on to a European country where they can feasibly claim asylum, their sacrifices might be in

vain. At all costs, they want to avoid staying in Greece, and so many are forced to resort to smugglers again.

In early February, I took an overnight bus from Athens to the border with Macedonia. The bus stopped at a petrol station in Polykastro, a few kilometres from the border. Some of the passengers alighted and headed for a row of portable toilets at the edge of the bus park. Suddenly, they broke into a run and disappeared into the fields beyond.

On the bus trip, I got to know a man from the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. He could not speak much English, but he shared biscuits and nuts with me, and showed me photos of his children back home. "Beautiful," he said tenderly, his fingers stroking the images on his phone.

I hope that if he was one of those who made a run for it, border guards did not catch him. A report just released by Human Rights Watch claims that some people were badly beaten by guards when they were caught illegally in Macedonian territory and then pushed back to Greece.

You can hardly blame people seeking asylum for trying to leave Greece, which offers very bleak prospects. The country suffers from widely publicised economic woes and crippling unemployment, and is in no position to cater to large numbers of refugees. Applying for asylum is a long and difficult procedure, not easy to access, and conducted mostly via Skype. Those who don't manage to apply could risk detention and deportation. The hardships facing refugees in Greece include destitution, homelessness and xenophobic attacks.

And so the hope to find life, "not a better life, just life", might slowly begin to die.

“ Facile
classifications
can be unfair
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📍 Anxiously awaiting registration at the Slavonski Brod transit centre in Croatia.



📷 At the transit centre of Presevo in Serbia.

The first person I met in Greece came from Pakistan. Faisal was homeless and queuing at Caritas in Athens, his belongings stuffed in a white plastic bag. He told me Greece “has nothing to give” and that he has been “killing time” for eight years. His asylum application was rejected and he was detained twice: “If you don’t have papers, they nail you inside for nothing.” Faisal assured me that all his hope was gone: “I’m dead inside. No fantasies or feelings like a normal person.”

And now my thoughts go to another Pakistani who has only just arrived in Europe to seek protection – Waqar, who fled dire threats because he is a Shia Muslim. His hope was buoyant when I met him at the JRS shelter

in Athens, because he was confident that “European people” would save his family.

He said: “We like to watch National Geographic Channel, you know? And we see how people from the west love animals so much, so why not humans? We are sure Europeans care for the human rights of every person.”

Unfortunately, the decisions being taken by European countries in a bid to handle the refugee crisis appear to cast Waqar’s belief in doubt. Each country is quick to justify its actions, not least by pointing fingers at others, but ultimately there is no justification for the erosion of protection that we are seeing now at the borders.

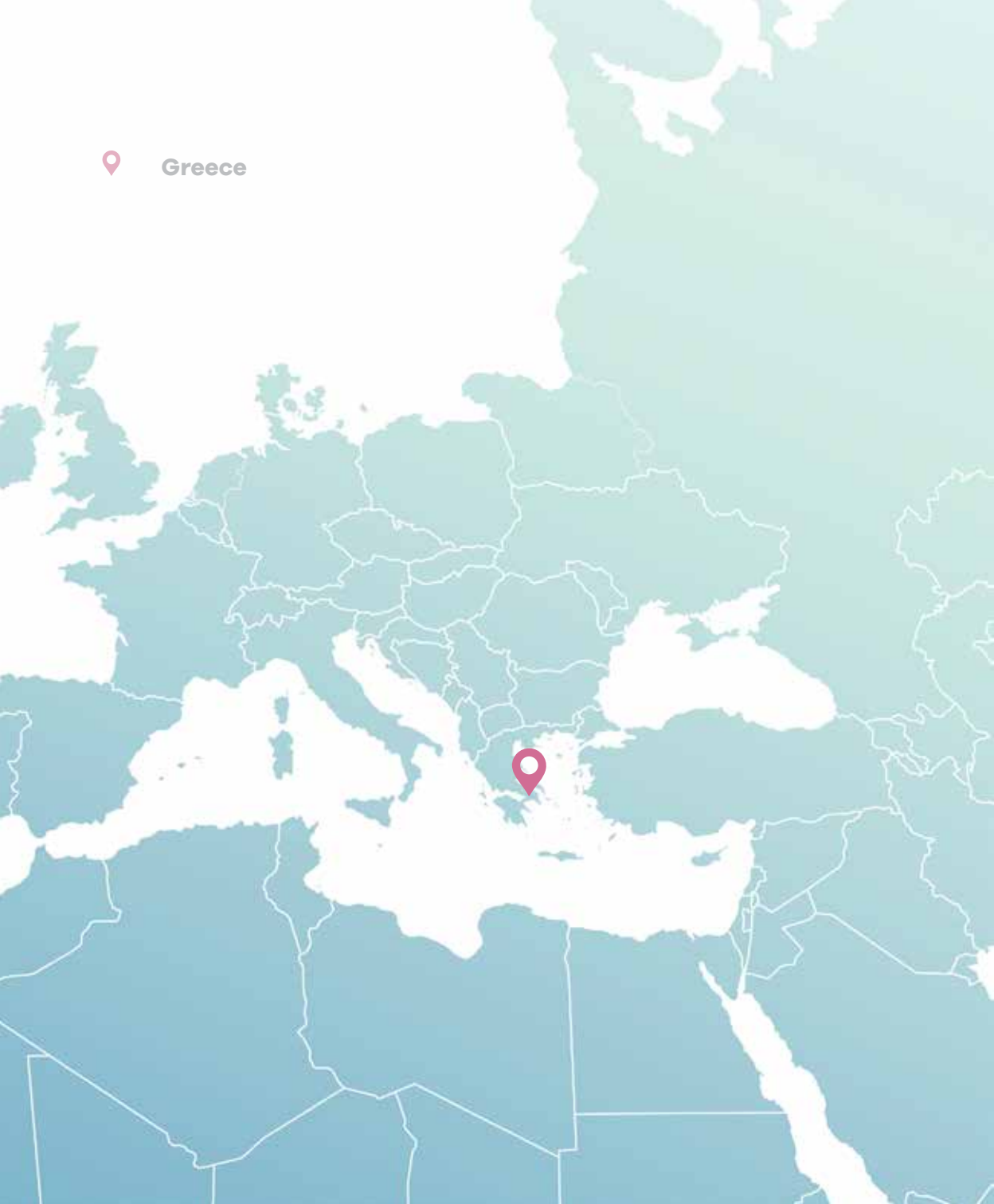
four. My last chance

📍 Qusai at a reception centre in Athens, Greece.





Greece



four.

My last chance

Refugees who face a terrifying journey to seek life over death deserve praise for their courage. This came to me powerfully in recent weeks when I met so many travelling the Balkan route to find asylum in Europe. And especially when I listened to Qusai, who needed an extra dose of courage to make the risky choices he did, despite his unique vulnerability.

I met Qusai in early February. He was sitting at the window of his prefabricated house in a reception centre in Athens, so he could see what was going on outside. I sat with him for two hours and listened to his story, told with such meticulous detail that I barely needed to ask any questions.

The story of Qusai, aged 27, starts in Damascus, a place he would rather not have lived, even before the war. Severely disabled by a condition called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, he always felt his country could not offer him the specialised services and opportunities he needed to live life to the full.

He began: "My life in Syria was difficult before the war and, after the war, it was worse."

Wheelchair-bound, Qusai lived in fear of the bombs, especially when he was home alone

and virtually helpless, unable to move.

The frequent power cuts that became part of life in wartime made Qusai even more miserable. "With the war, there was no electricity for 18 hours at a stretch sometimes. I am always indoors so my life depends on computers and phones for contact with the outside world."

When he did have Internet access, Qusai took to writing against both the Syrian regime and Islamic extremists on Facebook, "I criticized both sides". Soon he was receiving explicitly threatening messages on his Facebook account and through people he knew. Rattled, he deactivated his account and lay low, "I tried to hide myself".

When Qusai decided to leave Syria, he went to ask for a passport. He smiles bitterly as he recalls the "irony" of the answer he got: "I was told I was restricted from travelling outside the country, because I hadn't finished my military papers, so I needed to go to the military. I went from place to place for the medical examination to be exempted. And finally, I got my papers and passport."

Qusai went first to Lebanon with two relatives and from there to Turkey, where his



📍 Volunteers welcome a boat arriving to the island of Lesbos. Qusai was not so lucky. Hours passed before he found help after landing in Nera, another Greek island.

“ I wondered what would happen to me if the boat capsized in the freezing water. ”



sister lives. But soon he was deeply frustrated again: “No study, no work, no healthcare, no possibility to go out – I faced the same problems like in Syria.”

In Turkey, Qusai tried hard to apply for resettlement to a third country through UNHCR. But his efforts proved futile. “I was told I must wait because they were studying my case. And then came the call to tell me they couldn’t do anything for me. I put down the phone and told myself: There is no hope for me anymore. And I started to think about travelling by sea to Greece.”

Clearly Qusai could not travel without someone to look after him every step of the way. Luckily, he met Ahmed. “A friend told me about Ahmed, who came from Damascus, and wanted to travel too. One day, in late October 2015, he called and said, ‘I want to cross the sea tomorrow, do you want to come?’ I was shocked but replied: ‘OK, I am ready.’”

The next day, a determined Qusai met Ahmed at the bus station. His face breaks into a wide smile as he remembers their meeting: “We started to get to know each other on the bus, 16 hours from Istanbul to Izmir.”

Qusai paid \$2000, all he had, for 19-year-old Ahmed and himself, “just to cross the sea”. He explained to me: “I promised myself that I would pay the journey of the person who helped me cross the sea, it would be like returning the favour.”

Together with some 45 people, they were taken to an isolated place on the Turkish coast, and ordered to wait for the ‘boss’. Qusai paints a descriptive portrait of the smuggler: “The boss came in a big four-wheel drive. He was very proud, like he’s from a movie or something. He had a gun at his waist; he wore sunglasses and a leather jacket, and smoked a cigar. All his men had guns.”

Qusai said the ‘boss’ assured the refugees: “We care for your lives so much. This boat is made in Italy, it is a very good one, because I care for you.” And then he ordered that Qusai’s wheelchair be thrown in the sea because Qusai could not pay for its place.

Contemplating the “terrifying” black waves as the dark fell, Qusai’s thoughts were sombre: “I wondered what would happen to me if the boat capsized in the freezing water. I thought, maybe I’ll make it, maybe not. I don’t care, this

“ In Turkey, Qusai tried hard to apply for resettlement to a third country. But his efforts proved futile. ”

is my last chance, no way back, no need to be scared.”

Qusai survived the journey... just. “It was a disaster,” he says grimly. Before they even took off, his left arm was broken when a woman fell against him in the boat. Due to his diminutive size, he was swamped by waves, and could barely breathe in the overcrowded space.

His new friend did his best for Qusai: “Ahmed shouted at the others to be careful and tried to get them out of my way and to create space for me. After one hour, the water was up to my chest. I can’t tell you how cold it was; it went into my bones. Ahmed started to tap my face because I was losing consciousness.”

After three and a half hours, much of which was spent going round in circles, the boat reached the Greek island of Nera and limped to the shore unseen. That was when Qusai’s brittle bones snapped again. “One of the men carrying me over the rocks slipped and I fell, breaking my leg in two places. I screamed very loud. They laid me on the rocks and covered me with life jackets to warm me up.”

The other refugees set off, but Ahmed and Qusai sat on the beach for hours, waiting and hoping to be rescued. Although he was dizzy with pain and cold, Qusai was in high spirits. “We were chatting like normal. ‘Are you OK?’ ‘We did it!’ And we’d start to laugh.”

Eventually a police car appeared. “All I could say was, ‘I want a wheelchair.’” To their immense surprise, the policeman returned shortly afterwards with one. So they left the beach, Ahmed pushing Qusai along.

Qusai breaks off his story to tell me: “You’ll laugh when I tell you where the policeman found the wheelchair.” This he discovered hours later, when he and Ahmed finally caught up with some other refugees near a restaurant, and one of them came to ask for his elderly mother’s wheelchair back. From then until the end of his journey, Qusai was carried around in a plastic chair.

Just when Qusai could take no more, the restaurant owner approached him. “Eleni was her name. She started to ask me questions in English. She saw my clothes wet with seawater and vomit and invited me to her house to take a shower. She gave me new clothes and food.”

Qusai becomes moved as he continues: “Ahmed and I had no money for the ferry to mainland Greece. We needed 50 euro each. Until now, I cannot believe what happened. Eleni gave me 100 euro. I started to cry, I hugged her, and she started to cry too. It was like a miracle. To this day, I am still in touch with her.”

And so they reached Piraeus Port in Athens, Qusai, Ahmed and the plastic chair. And there they found help from another source: Qusai’s online community of friends from around the world, who were anxiously following his journey from Turkey. Some Greek friends asked a doctor to look out for Qusai in Athens. Armed with Qusai’s photo, the doctor did indeed find him and took him to a reception centre, which is run by the Greek authorities and where “the people are wonderful”.

Qusai and Ahmed applied first for asylum in Greece and then for relocation to another European Union country, naming a particular one where Qusai’s uncle lives. The system worked unusually fast. A few weeks after I interviewed him, an overjoyed Qusai told me he had been accepted, and was due to travel to his new home shortly.

It is difficult to know how to end this story, which touches me every time I remember Qusai’s suffering, his courage, his unforgettable personality, and the goodness of Ahmed, Eleni and his online friends. I’ll end with what Qusai expressed as his life vision, which he was prepared to die for and will now hopefully become his reality: “To live peacefully, to continue my studies, to work and to depend on myself. I want to see my future.”

“ To live peacefully, to continue my studies, to work and to depend on myself. I want to see my future. ”



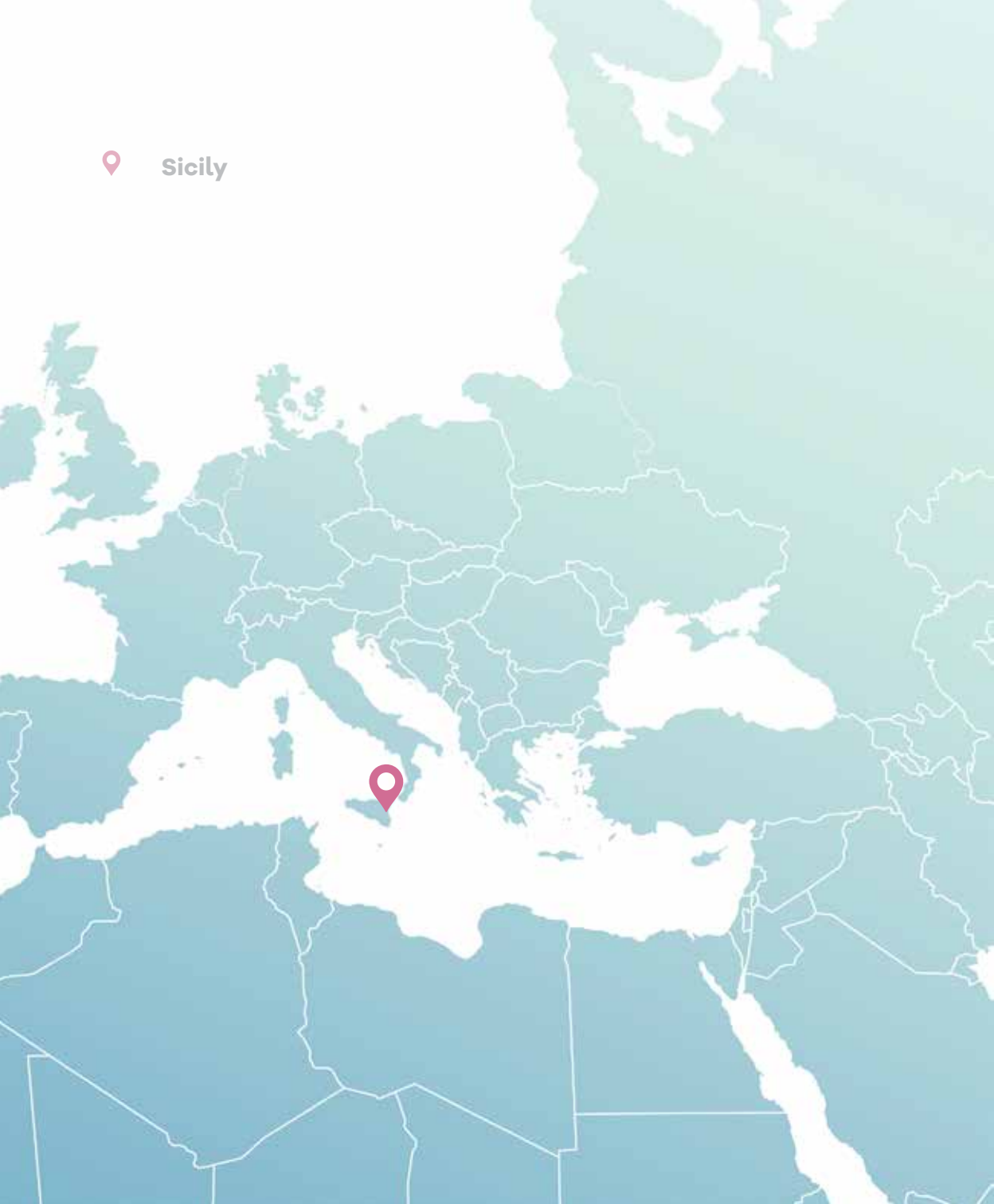
five. The other route: going through hell

📍 Resting on the deck of a Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) ship in Italy, after being rescued at sea.





Sicily



five.

The other route: going through hell

**“I am never going back to Somalia, ever.”
Yasmin’s firm determination not to return to
her home country is more than justified. The
19-year-old girl left to avoid the unwelcome
advances of a member of the Al-Shabaab
terrorist group. Saying no was not an option.
“Someone from Al-Shabab wanted to marry
a friend of mine and her father said ‘no’. Both
father and daughter were killed.”**

Yasmin set off alone on a horribly risky voyage to Europe, which took her across the Sahara desert and Libya, two death traps for refugees. The journey was especially difficult for Yasmin, whose legs had been badly maimed two years earlier, when her home in Mogadishu was caught in crossfire between the army and Al-Shabaab.

Yasmin risked life and limb to reach Italy. And when she did, she was not even given the chance to apply for asylum. She landed in Lampedusa in early 2016, and was asked to fill in a form, which included a list of possible reasons why she had come. Yasmin innocently ticked “work”. Apparently “asylum” was not specifically listed – if indeed Yasmin could have articulated her need for protection so neatly. She was then handed a document

stating that since she did not express the wish to apply for asylum, she had seven days to leave the country.

Yasmin was turned out on the streets of the Italian island of Sicily, alone, with only her expulsion order in her pocket. Days later, Sofia, an older Somali woman, found Yasmin and another 19-year-old compatriot, Amina, at the train station of the city of Catania. They were in tears.

The two girls had been sleeping outside, with no idea what to do or where to go. Although Amina had not been officially told to leave Italy, she had received an indifferent welcome upon arrival. Since she did not expressly apply for asylum, she was dropped by the system, and completely lost. Sofia took Yasmin and Amina to Centro Astalli, as JRS is known across Italy, where they were looked after and immediately given legal aid.

Yasmin is not the only refugee to arrive in Italy, only to be told to leave again almost immediately. The document imposed on her and many others is known as “*respingimento differito*”, which roughly translates into “postponed pushback”. Ultimately it is just another way of making sweeping and arbitrary



📍 Safe after being rescued at sea.

“ The central Mediterranean route is long and dangerous. ”

distinctions at the border between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of protection.

It seems that the decision to push people back – eventually – is based on the form they fill in on arrival, without the necessary information or help to do so. So people who need protection and would certainly apply for it, if they knew how, are summarily dismissed.

I've heard more of the same in recent weeks along the Balkan route that most refugees are now taking into Europe – a route that is becoming more impassable by the day. And now I see that refugees who travel

here via the central Mediterranean route, and who usually end up in Italy, are also facing a measure of resistance.

The central Mediterranean route is long and dangerous, especially for refugees coming from sub-Saharan Africa, who use it most. By early March this year, more than 9,000 had landed in Italy; 97 died in the attempt. 2015 was the deadliest year on record for refugees crossing the Mediterranean, and the large majority of recorded deaths, 2,892, occurred on this route.

📷 Looking for a helping hand: refugees rescued in the Mediterranean Sea.



Yasmin and Amina survived but were completely traumatized by their time in the Sahara desert and in Libya. Yasmin took a year, and Amina took one and a half, to run this gauntlet. Smugglers in the Sahara kept them captive because they wanted money. Yasmin's parents had given her all they had for her journey but the smugglers wanted more. Amina had no money at all so the smugglers regularly inflicted punishment on her. "I cried for 24 hours, every day," she said.

Amina cried when she talked to me too, so much that she could barely get any words out. She muffled her face in the folds of her scarf, every now and then saying something. Unprompted, she showed the scars that riddled her body: this from the beatings, that from the electric shocks, this – a scar on the skin between her thumb and forefinger – with a knife.

And, as she remembered the horrors inflicted upon her, Amina kept saying: "I have no mother and no father, I am alone."

Abandoned as she was, Amina found help from fellow Somali refugees, who paid the smugglers for her trip; each contributed something to ransom her. But in Libya, Amina's calvary continued. She was imprisoned twice, the second time after the boat she took to reach Europe sank. Forty people drowned. The survivors were returned to Libya, detained and brutally beaten for daring to sneak out of the country.

Yasmin was also very badly beaten when she attempted to escape from the place in Libya where she was detained. She spent eight months inside. She was released only when a delegation from some international organisation visited, discovered the bleeding

and faint waif, and managed to take her out.

The details of life in the desert and Libya are all too horribly familiar, I have listened to refugees tell of their agony too many times, starting from the smugglers in the desert who hold the refugees ransom and torture them to squeeze out as much money as they can.

This loathsome practice is repeated across Libya, a frighteningly lawless place where defenceless refugees are singled out for easy extortion and exploitation. Those who are not arrested or abducted at least once are indeed lucky. By whom they are taken is not always clear. As one refugee told me, "How can you say? So many Libyans wear a uniform and carry a gun." Criminal gangs, engaged in human smuggling and trafficking, are one sure culprit. Militia groups are probably another. Meanwhile, the internationally recognized government of Libya, through its department for combating irregular migration, holds thousands of "undocumented foreign nationals" in indefinite detention in at least 15 centres across the country, where they face torture and other ghastly treatment.

Just imagine passing through and managing to get out of this hell, only to be turned away or ignored at the destination that you suffered so much to reach. For Yasmin and Amina, this is nearly the last straw. Since they have been unable to apply formally for asylum, they have not been placed in an official reception centre, where they would be living in relative comfort. At least, they have now found place in an NGO shelter, but this emergency accommodation is far from ideal.

Riccardo Campochiaro, the JRS lawyer in Catania, is pressing to file asylum applications for them as soon as possible, but says it will



📍 On board a rescue ship of the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the sea between Libya and Sicily.

“ I cried for 24 hours,
every day. ”

take at least two months, due to bureaucratic reasons. He explains that the authorities have been persuaded to allow the submission of asylum applications by people who have been served with a “postponed pushback” document.

Meanwhile, Riccardo and other lawyers are doggedly appealing every case in court. He said: “We told the authorities we will appeal every ‘postponed pushback’ here in Catania. We are appealing on the grounds that people were not given any information on arrival about how to apply for asylum or even an explanation about what asylum is. The point is: you came here to seek asylum, why didn’t you do so? There has to be a moment where someone explains to the person what asylum is, and do they want to apply or not?”

The commitment of Riccardo and his colleagues to their refugee clients is admirable. But the procedure takes time, so that many refugees get tired of waiting, and disappear quietly to continue their journey into Europe, without any recognition or support whatsoever.

Yasmin and Amina are waiting patiently. Both keep saying the same thing: in essence, they want a document that gives them protection, not that pushes them back.

“I want to do everything necessary to stay here,” says Amina. “I want a document, I want to work, so I can help my brothers and sisters who are in Somalia. They have no one, we have no mother and no father.”

Hopefully, the two girls will eventually get the protection they long for and so urgently need, and will be able to rebuild their broken lives, bit by bit. God knows they deserve all the help they can get, and not the shabby welcome they received instead.

“ They want a document that gives them protection, not that pushes them back. ”



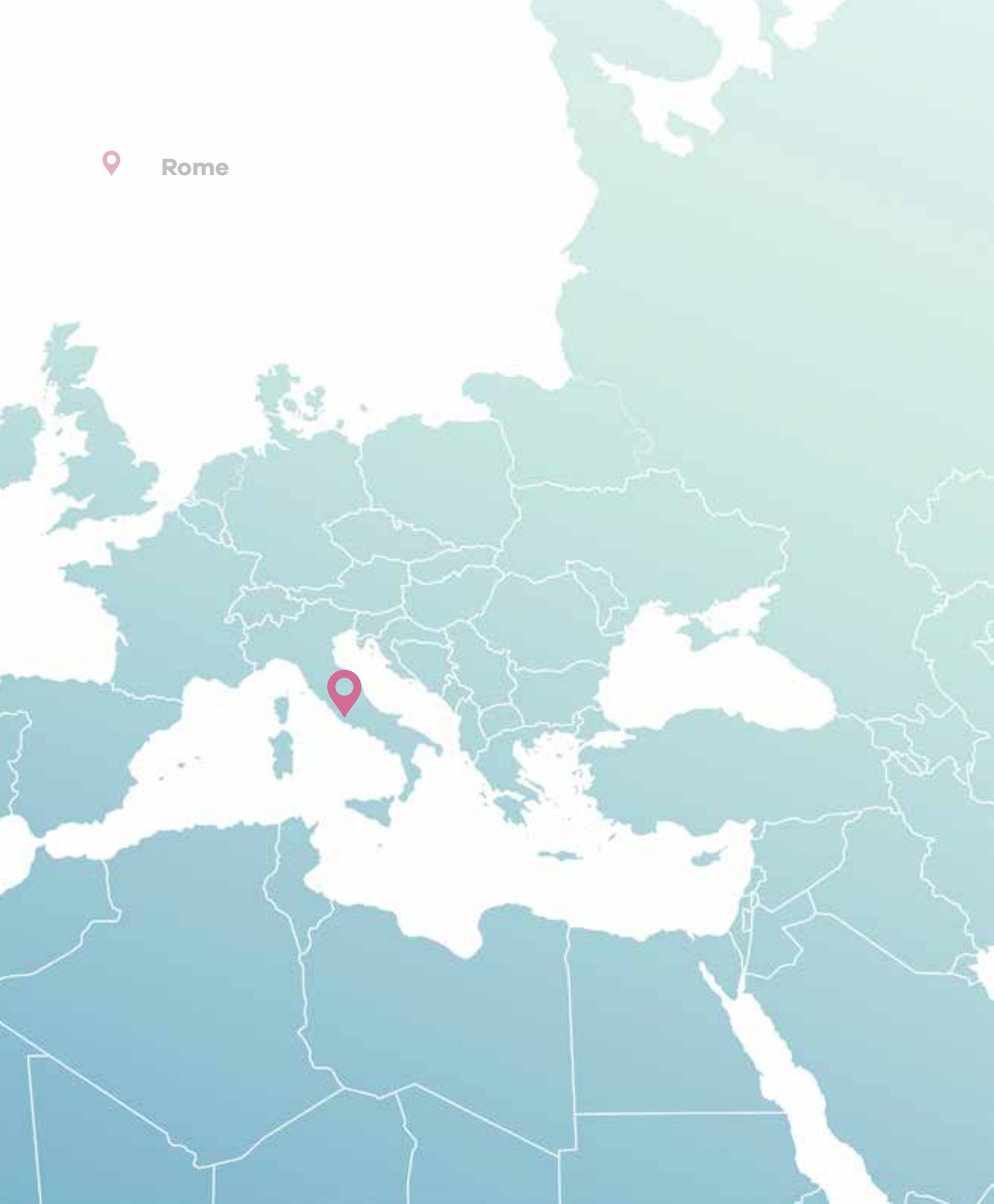
six. If people are crying, no one hears

📍 A camp for displaced people in eastern Congo, where human rights abuses are commonplace.





Rome



six.

If people are crying, no one hears

Rose started playing football when she was seven. "I play very well," she says seriously. "It is my profession. Many teams appreciated me." So much so, a team snapped her up when she was 12. At 14, Rose left her country, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and went to play elsewhere in Africa for a few years, "an international transfer". Soon she had a career to be proud of.

When Rose tells me her story, she is in her mid-thirties and living as a refugee at a shelter run by JRS for women in Rome, a long way away from the training and football grounds that were her life and passion back in Africa. She is very grave, telling her story slowly and deliberately; careful not to omit any detail she believes to be important.

Rose's voice remains level as she tells me how, some 10 years ago, she decided to start playing football for a military team. There is no indication in the telling that this career move would turn out to be a point of no return. But change her life it did, within the space of a few years, when Rose started to realise that "many bad things were happening, which I didn't like".

The "bad things" disturbing Rose were abuses she heard the army was perpetrating

against her – and their – people. "Gradually I changed," she recalls. "We had to do a lot of pro-government propaganda as part of the team. When we had a game, we had to wear Kabila t-shirts. But I didn't want to do propaganda for Kabila."

It was inevitable that Rose's reluctance to promote the Congolese President, Joseph Kabila, would get her into trouble. Although she was compelled to continue playing football for the army, to finish her contract, she defiantly refused to toe the government line.

Instead, she started to call meetings of her team mates, "so that together we could proclaim that we are Congolese and denounce that many of us are being killed every day." And they refused to wear the Kabila t-shirts. "For us, it is finished," they said.

Summoned by the army general who was the president of her team, Rose told him bluntly: "I don't like what the country is doing. There are many who are crying in the provinces and here in Kinshasa."

Things turned nasty when Rose finally tried to leave the team and ignored entreaties to stay on. "The general called five soldiers and told them to break my legs so I won't be able

to play anymore. They beat me and beat me and broke my right leg from the knee down. At night, they threw me in the river, and left me for dead. My body was covered with blood. A papa [older man] found me; people came to help and took me to hospital. I was out of my senses for three days.”

What Rose remembers most is not the torture but the death of her father when he heard the news. “My father was sick and in hospital too. When he heard people saying that I was dying and how badly I was injured, he died the same day.”

To this day, Rose cannot reconcile herself to her father’s sudden death. Throughout our conversation, she keeps referring to him with grief and remorse. “My father used to tell me to leave that team. If I had listened to him, he would be alive now. I feel guilty, I feel he died for me.”

Perhaps it is her self-reproach that prevents Rose from seeing how strong she is. After being tortured, she spent eight months in hospital. She changed hospitals to get away from constant army harassment and,

when this did not work, went to her mother’s birthplace and concentrated on recuperating. “I started to get better, slowly, slowly. In the morning, I ran; in the evening, I did the traditional treatment,” she says.

Rose recovered to the extent that she could start training once more. She decided to play football professionally again. The welfare of her family was foremost in her troubled mind: “I needed to play because from the age of 14, I have always looked after my family financially, and paid for the studies of my siblings.”

But Rose was not left in peace. The general who had ordered soldiers to break her legs now wanted her back on his team. “The problem grew, until three jeeps of soldiers came to stop me from training one day.” Rose bravely confronted the general who actually apologized for what he had done, “he said he had been angry”, and asked Rose to go back for double or triple her pay.

Not only did Rose refuse, she was as determined as ever to “proclaim the rights of our country”. And so she decided, with some other football players, to join one of many

“ In there, if there are people crying, no one hears. The soldiers came at night, opened the doors... and then singled out women to rape them or men to shoot them dead. ”



rallies being organised in Kinshasa on 19 January 2015, to protest attempts by Kabila to stay in power beyond his mandate.

What happened in these protests is well documented by human rights and media organisations. The security forces cracked down on demonstrators and, over several days, the police and Republican Guard soldiers shot dead at least 43 people, wounded dozens, and spirited away five others.

Rose was arrested and thrown into a shipping container – she says people were detained in several containers in the area, a practice the Congolese armed forces have been known to resort to.

Remembering her time – thankfully brief – as one of those detainees, Rose becomes increasingly distressed. She sheds her air of controlled calm and is desperate for me to understand the hidden plight of those in the containers. She draws lots of little boxes on a paper – the containers – and jabs them with her pen.

“In there, if there are people crying, no one hears. The soldiers came at night, opened

the doors to feed whoever was inside, and then singled out women to rape them or men to shoot them dead. They’d lead people away and we’d hear gunshots – boom, boom, boom.”

Rose managed to escape, a sympathetic soldier helped her, but not before she was gang-raped and tortured with acid by five others. Days later, aided and abetted by friends, she left her country and managed to reach Italy safely.

Sitting in Rome just over a year later, Rose looks me straight in the eye: “But don’t you know what is going on in my country? Why don’t you go to see? European countries must come and see what is happening. Who is going to help? Every day, in Congo, there is so much death and so many atrocities. But who can we tell about them?”

What can I tell this incredibly brave woman whose main concern is for her country, and for those she left behind in prison, not for herself? The truth, that I believe that the long-suffering people of DRC are largely doomed to international oblivion?

Weeks after meeting Rose, I cannot shake off her urgent challenge. I remember especially her words: “if there are people crying, no one hears”, because they speak of an ignored suffering that is the fruit of so much injustice and conflict in our world today.

There are too many places where abused omnipotence is still the order of the day, where those in power hold the life of ordinary people in their hands, and can snuff it out whenever they please, no questions asked.

And this is one of the most compelling reasons why hundreds of thousands of people from so many war-torn and oppressive places keep trying to join us in Europe. I’ve lost count of the time I’ve heard refugees say how amazing it is here, because you can actually speak out, and criticize those who hold power, without risking your life.

Rose risked her life more than once to proclaim her people’s rights. Now she is in a

safe place and has received protection. But still Rose remains consumed by her traumatic past and finds it difficult to focus on the present. “My life is destroyed,” she assures me. “I don’t sleep at night, I think and think about so many things. Outwardly I may laugh and joke but inside I am dead. People tell me to pray, so I pray: God, why do you allow these things to happen?”

Although Rose cannot locate any hope in her life right now, I did feel a glimmer when I listened to her, because of her determination to fight against oppression, even at such a terrible cost to herself.

The least we can do, when people like Rose turn up on our doorstep, is to take their side, and to learn from them, by listening to what they are trying so hard to tell us through their heroic choices and desperate appeals. And to do whatever we can so that their sacrifices will not be in vain.

“ People tell me to pray,
so I pray: God, why do
you allow these things to
happen? ”



seven. The people here are kind

📍 Mustafa, right, with volunteer Jürgen at a shelter for refugees in Kirchheim near Munich, Germany.





Germany



seven. The people here are kind

“Don’t be afraid, you’re safe, you’re in Germany.” These were the first words Sara heard when she stumbled out of the truck that had just taken her from Hungary to the promised land. Police caught Sara, her husband Mustafa, and their five-year-old son but were quick to offer reassurance.

Sara says the policeman’s words were “the most comforting sentence I ever heard in my life”. They marked the end of a journey that still comes back to plague her family in their nightmares, several months later.

The warm welcome the young couple received in Germany made the journey worthwhile, from the panic-stricken flight from the Syrian city of Aleppo, to the tough months in Turkey, to the journey across the sea to Greece, to the airless truck that ferried them through Austria.

Today Sara and Mustafa are beginning to feel they have made it. Not only have they been given all-important documents that guarantee asylum, they have been placed in a small shelter in a town outside Munich, called Kirchheim, where committed volunteers look after them. This is one place I visit when I go to Germany to meet refugees there.

“The people here are kind, they try to help us in everything we need. We’re lucky to be here,” says Sara, her face breaking into a smile. “We have a warm flatlet, my son will go to school, and we can start to build our future.”

Hearing about the latest moves by the European Union (EU) to close the doors on refugees coming along the Balkan route to seek protection, just as they did, Sara and Mustafa must feel luckier than ever.

They know just how dreadfully difficult it is for refugees to survive from day to day in Turkey. And yet this is the ‘safe’ destination where the EU now plans – according to a confusing deal just reached between the bloc and Turkey – to send back all those arriving irregularly to the Greek islands, once their asylum claims have been processed by a fast-track procedure.

Mustafa and Sara spent five months in Istanbul and are adamant that it is practically impossible for refugee families to enjoy a decent standard of life there – at least this is what their experience has taught them.

“We stayed with my sister, who lives there. Istanbul is an expensive city, and if there is only one breadwinner in the family, you will



📍 The refugee shelter in Kircheim, near Munich.

“ My husband was working more than Turkish people... for more than 12 hours a day, for 300 euro a month. ”



never survive, to rent a flat, to pay electricity, gas, water, everything,” says Sara. “Mustafa found a job making clothes in a factory. He worked for one month but his boss did not pay him.”

Mustafa chips in here: “My employer told me ‘you don’t have anything, you can’t complain, you don’t have a document, you can’t do anything.’”

Apart from other pressing problems, in fact it is extremely difficult for refugees to work legally in Turkey. Sara is compelling in her determination to make me understand how hard Mustafa worked while in Turkey, and for how little.

“My husband found a job making chandeliers, he was working more than Turkish people. He was perfect in his work, and worked for more than 12 hours a day, for 300 euro a month.”

Thanks to her sister’s generosity, Sara and Mustafa saved every penny of his hard-won earnings, and borrowed some more, so that

they could buy a place on a dinghy to reach Europe. They felt they had no other choice.

Returning home certainly wasn’t an option. Sara shows me a photo on her smartphone, depicting a pile of rubble that was once a block of flats, including theirs. A neighbour sent them the photo a few weeks ago, with the message: “See what has happened to your home.”

Sara and Mustafa left it as late as they could to leave Syria, because although they felt the impact of years of civil war, their primarily Kurdish neighbourhood, Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo, remained relatively safe.

In his work as a taxi driver, Mustafa dodged bullets, witnessed people dying and injured on the streets, and took many to hospital. At home, there was no electricity or water, but they managed somehow.

Until one day in early 2015, when the pre-dawn calm was shattered by “sounds coming from a distance, shouting and explosions”. Soon later, a bomb hit their building.

Sara recalls: “We were on the second and third floors and the fifth was hit. The stones and dust came from everywhere. In the afternoon, a helicopter came, and started firing. This was very real war, the first time I see it with my eyes.”

Sara and her son crammed with other women and children into the van of a neighbour who vowed to try to take them somewhere safe. “Everyone was crying in that van, our hands pressed against our ears.”


Mustafa had to find his own way out of what had become a battlefield overnight. Many daunting checkpoints later, “you don’t even know who is who”, both husband and wife managed to leave Aleppo.

In the village where they found refuge, all they could do was “sit under the trees”, as Sara explained. There was no possibility to work, life was very expensive, and the house of relatives where they sought shelter was already full of others displaced by the war.

So Sara and Mustafa decided to head for Turkey. They crossed the border in an ambulance, posing as patients, and were actually taken to a hospital in the Turkish border town of Kilis.

That border crossing was nothing compared to the second one they attempted to reach Greece from Turkey. After two hours in a truck so crammed, “we could not even breathe”, they reached the coast. The smuggler pooh-poohed their misgivings, prompted by the strong wind and waves, and they stepped into the water at 4am.

“We had to walk in the sea, the water coming up to our chest, to reach the boat. An hour after we started, a man said we must go back, because he could feel air coming from



“ There was
no sleep and
no food. Just
fatigue,
fear. ”



© The transit camp in Croatia.

the dinghy. We didn't want to believe him, but soon afterwards, we felt the air, the boat was sinking, and water came inside. We threw everything we had into the water. I could hear my boy crying, we will die. The driver, a refugee who knew nothing, said, 'We can do nothing except pray to God.' We prayed so much."

They survived by swimming back to Turkey; some were rescued at sea. To their amazement, they were carted off to prison. A day later, they were released, but only after signing a paper pledging to leave Turkey within a week. "We were forced to go back to the sea and to pay again, another smuggler."

Mustafa's brother joined them for the first attempt but could not make the second. He needed a dozen stitches to close a gash on his leg that got caught in the engine propeller when he jumped from the sinking dinghy. He had to return to Syria.

Sara, Mustafa and their son made it the second time. They reached Greece and trudged through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. Awful memories but Sara does remember a ray of light. After running away from smugglers in Serbia, who locked them in a vehicle and forced them to pay for nothing, they wandered to a gas station. "I asked the owner where we can find a car to reach Belgrade. He was very kind. He said, 'do not be afraid, everything will be OK'. He took us for very little money."

Crossing from Serbia to Hungary took eight hours on foot. "My son was crying, he carried his backpack all the way. There was no sleep and no food. Just fatigue, fear. I still have a pain here – she presses her hand against her chest – from the fear inside."

In Hungary they climbed into a windowless and poorly ventilated truck that took them to Germany in five hours. They made this trip in August 2015, the same month 71 Syrian refugees suffocated to death in a refrigerator truck on the Vienna-Hungary highway.

No wonder Sara was elated to hear the German policeman's words when she spilled out of the truck. As the months pass, past horrors are slowly losing their grip, and the family is starting to look ahead to a peaceful future that is now feasibly theirs.

Sara hopes that once he has learned German, Mustafa will be able to find a job "with a just salary", unlike what he had in Turkey. And she wants to put her university degree in English literature to good use. As the conversation turns to favourite English classics, Sara mentions Robinson Crusoe, a novel about a man stranded on a desert island.

"When I read this book, I always ask myself, how could he survive for such a long time on this island? I would go crazy. But if you are alone in a jungle, and have nothing, you are forced to create anything to survive. The book talked about hope, perhaps we can have hope now."

eight. A dangerous game

📍 Playing volleyball outside an asylum centre in Herzogenburg, Austria.





- 1. Austria
- 2. Germany



eight.

A dangerous game

“In Libya, we were on the road to Tripoli in three vehicles, about 120 people in each, most of us Eritreans. We were in the first, ISIS caught the second or third. They let three people go, because they were Muslims, and they ran after our vehicle.”

What happened to the others? Twenty-one-year-old Tigiste shrugged her shoulders. “As if we know!”

Tigiste escaped forced conscription in Eritrea. She met her husband in Sudan; he fled Eritrea after deserting from the army. He had been forcibly recruited as a teenager, literally pulled from his bed one night and carted off to barracks.

The couple came to Europe via the Sahara and Libya, and eventually managed to reach Germany, where I met them in a cosy shelter in a village called Kirchheim outside Munich.

Throughout her journey, Tigiste was aware of the risks involved and calculated the odds – as she saw them – at every perilous step.

“The journey across the sea was bad, but better than the rest, and certainly better than going back to Eritrea. In the sea, if you die, I guess you die in one minute, and it’s over. And if you reach Italy, you reach.”

One definition of luck: success or failure apparently brought by chance rather than through one’s own actions. This is what the journey of millions of refugees depends on. Tigiste’s luck held. But not all who make the gamble for life enjoy the same fortune.

In recent weeks, starting from Greece, I visited countries on the so-called Balkan route that hundreds of thousands of refugees took into Europe this past year. And I went to Italy, the point of arrival of most refugees who come via the central Mediterranean. My last destinations were Austria and Germany.

Many told me they left their country only after narrow escapes from death. Like Omar, who left Damascus after three bombs were dropped on his daughter’s school. The girl was unharmed but Omar didn’t want to push his family’s luck anymore.

Sara, from Aleppo, recalled running from a sudden attack on her neighbourhood: “If you have good fortune, you pass; if you’re not lucky, you die.”

The Russian roulette continues on the route, especially in places that are virtual death traps, like the border between Iran and Turkey; the Sahara and Libya; and the stretch of sea



📍 Learning the language: a Hazara couple from Afghanistan engage in conversation with a volunteer in Vienna, Austria. ↗

📍 Zainuddin from Afghanistan making bread in the asylum centre in Herzogenburg, Austria. →



travelled in overcrowded and often flimsy boats.

Refugees don't make the rules in this life-changing game: it is other, more powerful players who do that, like smugglers, for example, or policymakers. The rules can change suddenly and arbitrarily. This is what thousands of refugees discovered this past month, when they finally managed to travel to Greece, only to find that the Balkan route is now closed.

A young Afghan woman in the Kirchheim shelter told me earnestly: "A lot of refugees are in Greece, I want the border to open. When a person is on the way, they want to reach somewhere. It is a very, very difficult situation. I suffered too, I experienced these things, please open the border."

As for the refugees who come to Greece from now on, they face mass deportation to Turkey, thanks to a controversial and confusing deal reached between the EU and Turkey.

Visiting a language class for refugees in Vienna, I was introduced to a young Hazara couple from Afghanistan. They told me they lived in Turkey for nearly five years. And how was life there? Maryam shook her head. Her husband, Hamid, said: "Turkey did not accept us as refugees. We were always afraid we would be caught and deported."

So they lived in the shadows. Their five-year-old daughter could not go to kindergarten. Hamid worked in a textile factory, earning 450 euro a month for 11 hours of work a day, six days a week. "The money we got for one day was not enough for one day."

Hamid and Maryam kept trying to take a boat to Greece, even after police apprehended

them several times, and after a smuggler disappeared with 4,500 euro of their hard-earned money.

For Hamid, the worst moment came when his wife was about to give birth. "We went to hospital but they didn't accept her because we had no papers. So she had to give birth at home." Maryam will soon bear her second child in Vienna. At least she can rest assured she will give birth in hospital this time.

But the couple's worries are not over. Theirs is now a waiting game because they have not been granted asylum yet. "God knows what life is hiding from us," said Hamid. "We are so worried because no one gives any answers. We've been waiting for seven months. When I asked, I was told, 'you'll get an interview one year from now.'"

A Syrian mother in Austria packed all her nail-biting anxiety into two heartfelt words: "Inshallah interview!"

In a huge shelter in Munich that houses some 850 people, I heard more from Abdullah, a fiercely proud young Afghan. "I've been here for nine months and I don't have an interview date. At least hear me out – I have proof, my body itself is proof." Back in Kabul, five masked men stabbed Abdullah 15 times outside his home, accusing him of not being Muslim, of working for Americans and Germans, and other 'crimes'.

Abdullah did not come via Greece but overland from Turkey to Bulgaria and so on. Since he cannot move swiftly anymore, he was injured again on the border between Bulgaria and Serbia, when Bulgarian police opened fire on refugees who refused to stop.

When I listened to others, I realised that in one thing at least, Abdullah was lucky. He

“ I’ve been here for nine months and I don’t have an interview date. At least hear me out – I have proof, my body itself is proof. ”



wasn't asked to give his fingerprints along the way. So he cannot be traced as per the Dublin Regulation, which stipulates that refugees should file their asylum application in the first EU member state they enter.

Sherzad, Kovan and Peshtiwan, Yazidis aged 19, 20 and 21, travelled the same overland route as Abdullah. The young men each paid between 9,000 and 11,000 euro upfront to smugglers in Iraq who 'organised' their trip to Germany. Travelling separately, all were caught en route, and their fingerprints gave them away.

Says Kovan: "Bulgarian police stopped me at the border with Serbia. For two days I stayed in a camp, where I was beaten and not fed. Then I was taken to prison. I stayed eight days. I was threatened that if I did not give my fingerprints, I would stay a long time."

A few months after reaching Germany, Kovan received one day's notice of his

deportation to Bulgaria. A volunteer at the shelter, where Kovan was staying, advised him to seek church asylum immediately. Much the same happened to the other two.

It was Dieter Müller SJ of JRS Germany who referred the Yazidis to the parish of St Joseph in Tutzing, an affluent town just outside Munich. They will stay on the parish premises until their deportation order expires, up to six months. Dieter says some 600 refugees sought protection in churches across Germany in 2015, invoking the ancient Christian tradition of sanctuary. He disputes the government's disgruntled claim that church asylum is illegal, although he admits it "stretches the law" for a good cause, "to ensure a fair application of the asylum procedure".

And here luck plays a hand again. Timely practical support, like that extended by Dieter and Fr Peter Brummer, parish priest

in Tutzing, can make or break the future of individuals. Happily, there are many Europeans who are eager to lend support in one way or other – the flip side of Europe’s much-publicized reluctance to welcome refugees.

Fr Peter has granted sanctuary to 10 refugees facing deportation over the past year. His first experience of church asylum dates back 20 years, when he welcomed a Kurdish family, whom Germany wanted to deport to Turkey. Fr Peter recalls the state prosecutor invited him for a meeting back then. “He asked me why I was doing this. I opened the Bible and told him to read inside for my answer. We had a very good conversation.”

For Fr Peter and his parish council, “there is no doubt we have to do this”, to welcome and to protect refugees. The encounter impresses him deeply. “You have to meet each other face to face, to hear the story. As we listened, the more we learned, as much as we could understand, the more our conviction grew.”

He adds: “You have to follow your conscience, there are situations when you have to say yes or no; no chance to compromise.”

Fr Peter put into simple and compelling words the conviction in my heart at the end of the road.

Refugees gamble literally everything in a bid to win life. They do so knowing that death is also on the cards. But matters of life and death should not depend on luck alone. Solidarity can do much to even out the odds. There are many stated reasons why we – governments, communities and individuals – are duty-bound to extend solidarity to refugees. I borrow a succinct line from Dostoevsky: “We are responsible to all for all”.





© Playing table football in the common room of the asylum centre in Herzogenburg.





📍 Greeting refugees who have just completed registration in Croatia's transit centre.

“ When a person is on the way, they want to reach somewhere... please open the border. ”



A different perspective Abraham, the migrant

Great traditions, such as the three monotheistic faiths of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, have paid great attention to the life of the exile and the refugee, of the foreigner, so that hospitality to the stranger is a cornerstone practice in these traditions. This is very likely because the humanity of the exile and the refugee manifests specific traits of new and unknown potential.

Abraham, the common ancestor of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, is the archetypal figure of the migrant. First of all, Abraham listened to a voice inside himself – God’s voice – that told him to go out of a place of death and sterility. Abraham departs, and from now on, he is constantly in a state of departure, he lives his life under the sign of departure. Departure is a separation from the land, from family and relatives, from all that is good and happy in daily life, from a shared history. But departure is also an impetus. The moment of departure is a test of character and strength of will; after every obstacle, Abraham has to start again, to get on with his journey. Abraham’s journey is set towards the future: “to the country I will tell you”; Abraham is on the move, without seeing or knowing where he goes. Moreover, on his journey, Abraham will find partners: good and not-so-good companions, those who help reliably and those who are untruthful.

Today’s refugees are easily recognisable in the figure of Abraham. They are people of faith and of hope. Of faith, because they obey an internal voice that pushes them to depart and to seek life over death, because they believe in the promise they heard in this voice. Of hope, because they accepted to plunge into the unknown, going beyond all they can imagine, never ceasing to look for a more hopeful future.

Traits of their humanity might fascinate us, but also invite and encourage us to new capacities whenever we have a chance to meet them, to talk with them, and to share hospitality with them.




Waiting for the next step at the transit centre in Sid, Serbia.

“ Today’s refugees are easily recognisable in the figure of Abraham. They are people of faith and of hope.

”





📍 A light-hearted moment:
playing with bubbles in Presevo
transit centre in Serbia.

The Scripture tells us: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and embraced them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. If indeed they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had enough time to return. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God."

**“ God is not
ashamed of
them, to be
called their
God.**





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We like to watch National Geographic Channel, you know? And we see how people from the west love animals so much, so why not humans? We are sure Europeans care for the human rights of every person.

Journeys of Hope



Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and others who are forcibly displaced.

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