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Not One Fit My Image

The refugee camp in Chios, Greece, looked peaceful. White tents and metal containers stood in neat rows; an occasional line of hand-washed laundry flapped in the breeze. We stood on the drawbridge of a medieval castle, looking into the moat below. Jeanny, our center's manager, announced, "Here is where the Molotov cocktails were thrown onto the refugees last winter."

Her comment served to reinforce my fears of a refugee camp. The stories I heard and images I saw—harsh physical conditions, disagreements between occupants, depressing histories—didn't encourage visits. But already, I met a number of women who lived there—immaculate in their dress, positive in their attitude, well-educated in their conversations. They were not what I expected—the image I carried of refugees was wrong.

Some months before, a friend suggested I volunteer at the refugee camps in Chios. I hesitated. I knew little about the 25 million individuals worldwide fleeing the instability of one country and searching for safety in another. I understood less about individuals from the Middle East whose countries, ethnicities, and religious branches never appeared to line up.

Eventually, I threw out my hesitations, welcomed the opportunity to volunteer, and knew I would learn more only if I pushed myself beyond the simplicity of my life in Wisconsin, USA. The friend recommended I volunteer at the women's center because it effectively and efficiently filled a need for the refugee women.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Greek municipality created two camps (Souda and Vial) on the island of Chios to hold those arriving across the sea from Turkey. A total of 2500 individuals and families—lived in the camps, and, for those considered at risk, if spaces were available, in small apartments. Most individuals who entered Greece were in the asylum-seeking process.

Of that number, forty percent considered Syria home; twenty percent, Afghanistan and Iraq; and the rest, Iran, Congo, Ethiopia, and

Algeria. The vast majority listed Muslim as their religious background and represented many branches of Islam. Although most spoke Arabic, others spoke Farsi, French, German, Kurdish, Dari, Pashto and English.

The two lines of white tents, stamped with UNHCR, lined the base of the moat. They reminded me of the relief tents used in Haiti after the 2010 Earthquake. The material did not breathe; it stayed hot in summer, cold in winter. The refugees occupied the tents for much longer than the short-term relief they were meant for.

Jeanny and I walked to the front end of the camp, the entry where gates and guards and distribution trailers defined its official character. A Greek guard with the muscular build and aviator sunglasses of Arnold Schwarzenegger looked closely at our badges, consulted his mobile, and denied us entry. Jeanny insisted, "The same paperwork provided clearance to me last week!"

He scrolled through a list on his phone and again shook his head. "Check with the people working for the local municipality."

Many Middle Eastern men stood outside the gates, in this area that housed the front desk. They looked like any other group of males, dressed in shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops. Some played soccer. A few sat on white plastic chairs in the shade of tall eucalyptus trees. Others talked in small groups. To the side, at a picnic table in the sun, two orange-vested relief workers attended to a boy's facial cut. They spoke German to one another and English to their patient. The boy's mother, in jeans, a long-sleeved blouse, and a Muslim headscarf (hijab), watched, while a clutch of small children looked on.

While Jeanny talked with two Greek women in charge, I sat on a low wall outside the door and watched the soccer game. One scored; his teammates cheered.

Jeanny and I visited Souda to do outreach for the women's center. This week, a small number of new asylum seekers arrived in Chios. Most female refugees knew about the organization we represented, told by other women at the camp. We did outreach in case they didn't.

On a sunny day, we could look east and see Turkey. Turkish citizens with their identifications in hand, often crossed the seven miles of the Aegean Sea in a fast boat and spent a summer's day visiting a Greek village and eating a grilled fish lunch. They paid \$20 for a round-trip ride. In contrast, refugees paid up to \$1000 each to smugglers to cross that same body of water in the middle of the night.

Initially intent on reaching Europe, these displaced families traveled north through Turkey to Hungary. When Hungary closed its

borders in 2016, the entryway to Europe shifted to the nearest European Union country, Greece. Refugees still traveled to Turkey and then crossed the sea to the Greek islands. If the Turkish police came across a refugee-filled rubber raft, they forced its return to Turkey. If the raft passed the halfway mark, then the refugees entered the European Union, landing on a Greek beach or getting pulled from the water by the Greek Coast Guard. In either case, officials met, registered, and eventually interviewed all.

Authorities deemed a refugee “vulnerable” if old, pregnant, shipwrecked, a single parent, with a serious illness, or a victim of rape or human trafficking. In these cases, the individual remained in Greece. If those in charge determined the refugee was not in danger when in Turkey, he or she was deported back—something the refugees wanted to avoid at all costs. Turkey’s treatment of refugees was brutal. Greek officials offered asylum to refugees who claimed a need for safety from their originating country and could not live, for a specific reason, in Turkey.

Lots of locations in Chios posted flyers describing a shortened version of this complicated and lengthy process in many languages. The papers also listed the date and time those individuals or families held upcoming meetings with officials. All refugees clung to their relationship (past, present, or future) with those lists.

Our second attempt to enter the refugee camp went well. As Jeanny and I passed the entry guard, he said with a sudden upbeat tone, “Come in, you are welcome to visit.”

We walked between rows of temporary structures within the moat. To the left, tents—one after another with no spaces between—sat on a wooden platform above the dirt. A set of tarps protected them from the sun and rain. The white material drooped as the ropes supporting them stretched through the months. To the right, shipping containers, converted into living spaces, offered a hard-shell version of the same camping experience.

As we passed a container, Jeanny said something in Arabic to a woman standing in the doorway and the woman invited us in. We left our shoes outside with many others. Three families lived in the ten by twenty-foot space: six children and six adults. There were no tables, chairs, or beds. Two blankets hung from clotheslines. Now pushed to one end, at night, they provided the only privacy between families.

The two women in their mid-thirties, fully garbed in long dresses with hijabs covering their heads, rushed to find pillows for us to sit on. They joined us on the floor and offered us tea. A cardboard carryout box from the camp distribution center held numerous paper cups, each filled

with black tea. The boy to my left drank his out of one cup, with seven or eight stacked below.

The six children found places on their mothers' laps or nearby to sit and listen to Jeanny, who pointed to the center's flyer and showed them a map to our location. I heard the word "hammam" (Arabic for showers) and "English" (for the classes that the center offered), and saw Jeanny do a little dance with her upper body to indicate the center offered Zumba on Wednesdays.

As she and I left, the husband of one of the women arrived, welcomed us to stay, and thanked us for coming. At the camps, fifty percent were male, thirty percent female, and twenty percent children. The men watched, undoubtedly curious, as we walked past. When we smiled or nodded, they responded in kind and greeted us in English.

The refugee camp of Souda housed a different population than Vial, the camp five miles away. Authorities, acknowledging a fiery Middle-Eastern history, separated the Arabic-speaking individuals and families from the Farsi-speakers. For the most part, Syrians and Iraqis lived in Souda; Afghans and Iranians in Vial.

We continued to the far end of the camp—to an area from which we could see the drawbridge where we stood not long before. At that place, there were more tents, as well as men's and women's toilets and shower rooms—one group painted blue, the other, pink. Jeanny said unprompted, "The toilets are not clean." She didn't need to. They smelled badly from where we stood.

As we began our return to the entry of the camp, she spoke about the center to two women outside their container home. They looked nervous and uncomfortable. Later, Jeanny suggested they thought we were camp administrators wanting information about them.

As Jeanny described the women's center, a young man interrupted her. "He's from Iraq and supported our organization on my earlier visits." He wore sunglasses and a beaded necklace made, I guessed, at a craft program offered by one of the charities. Pushing Jeanny aside verbally, he launched into a sales pitch about our services. The women laughed at his gregariousness and relaxed. They took the flyer about the center.

The length of time each individual or family stayed in the camps differed as each case took a unique form and amount of time to process. Those granted asylum went to the Greek mainland. Details for that status—family reunification, economic hardship, the internal political conflicts of a country—complicated an already confusing process, the details of which appeared to change every six months or so.

Within the moat, the high walls provided a sense of both comfort and claustrophobia. The camp gates established a controlled entrance to visitors, but the UNHCR, needing more space, expanded the camp outside. Those shelters felt exposed.

Passing among those tents, we recognized from the center three women in their mid-30s. One grew up in Spain and spoke Spanish fluently. She returned to Syria as a teen and recently lost her husband in the war. The two others were sisters to each other and a friend to the first woman. They wore black long-sleeved, full-length dresses and headscarves—one maroon, one black, and one hot pink. All used dramatic eye make-up and painted their lips bright red.

The three stood in the entryway of their tent. Different from the white official issue, their green one, like others nearby, looked as if it came from an REI catalogue. The only event that could explain these fashionably well-dressed women at the entrance of a tent might have been a creative photographic shoot for the season's newest fashions—but that couldn't possibly be.

That night, it was said that one group of refugees beat to death a pregnant woman from the other group. Men from one camp marched to the other to seek revenge. Innocents fled both areas, sleeping at friends', in parking lots, alongside the road. The next day, I saw the three women at the center, huddled in a corner, distraught. One cried, the second comforted, and the third showed anger. The bucolic image of the green tent with the three well-dressed women standing at the entrance shattered.

The women's center, not much more than 1000 square feet, operated on a side street near Souda, although it served the populations of both camps. It opened its doors six days a week from 11 to 2 and 4 to 7. The small space limited the number of women who could visit to 15 at a time. Many, many more wanted the opportunity of a quiet, private environment. We encouraged morning visitors not to return on the same day, allowing others to come in the afternoon.

Eleven a.m. at the center, I heard the first knock of the day. Two women stood outside the front door. They practiced their English—"Good morning," "How are you?"—shook my hand and kissed my cheeks twice. At the front desk, I wrote down the phonetic spelling of their names and in what camp they lived.

More women arrived and greeted me in Arabic or Farsi. They too kissed me on the cheeks twice. They removed their shoes, asked if there was room in the schedule for a private shower, and then disappeared to English classes or to make coffee or chai in the kitchen.

One distinctive woman, Uri, came almost every day. A Syrian in her late forties, Uri stood six-feet tall. Large-boned and strong, she wore a black burka, a full-length dress with long sleeves and high neckline. She rarely smiled, but her eyes watched intensely. She spoke no English and did not kiss my cheek.

My job at the center filled simple, cursory functions—welcoming new refugees, ensuring stocks of tea and toilet paper, vacuuming at the end of each day. The staff provided a point of stability for the women. Our role was to reassure, be consistent, and direct the refugees to other non-governmental organizations in the area that offered legal, psychological, and medical help.

The center offered diversions—from yoga to cooking together during Ramadan, to Wednesday evening movies, when younger children were allowed to attend. For the four-week period I volunteered, I taught an advanced English class, encouraging the women to tell or write their stories.

Aalia wrote and then read to our small attentive group, "My boyfriend and I, we attempted the crossing from Turkey to Greece eight times, always stopped by Turkish authorities. On the ninth, when our boat began to sink, I thought we would die." Aalia, a Syrian, described their landing in her new language, "We swam all the way to shore ... we were reborn!"

I looked at the 19-year old in front of me. She was dressed in light pink and white with a matching headscarf. She reinforced her upbeat ending—"My boyfriend and I, we were married the following week."

My own emotions stuck somewhere between horror and happiness. This last news jolted me to hug her, hold her close.

Forozan, a gynecologist from Kabul, also came regularly to the English class. She wished to seek asylum in an English-speaking country so she could utilize her medical expertise as soon as possible. She received a special visa from Greece to work with a non-profit agency serving the refugees as she waited.

At 35, Forozan had dark intense eyes and a serious demeanor. On the weekends, she wore a sleeveless blouse (Muslim women tend to cover their shoulders and upper arms), matching pants, and no chadri over her jet-black hair. When I asked why she did not cover her head, she showed

me photographs of Kabul in 1999. Muslim women wore clothing similar to what we did in the U.S. at that time— sleeveless dresses with hemlines at the knee. The choice of wearing a head covering was often a familial decision. In this case, Forozan made an informed decision based on her individual life and needs. She chose not to.

After the conservatives overthrew the moderate Afghani government, they required women to cover their hair with small veils. When the Taliban arrived, they demanded women wear burkas—clothing that covered all the body, often with a dark net through which to see and breathe. Forozan too wore this clothing at the time.

During the war, she lost her family to suicide bombings. With nothing but sadness and hardship left, she chose to emigrate. She remained a Muslim as she held dear the beauty and peacefulness described in the writings in the Qur'an. "That's what Islam is really about," she said and referred to, "the equality of all individuals and the kindness expected to all people."

As the days passed, I took on tasks outside the English class and front-desk duties. Often, I drove Salma, a refugee from Afghanistan, from her home to the center.

Salma married at age 15 and lived in a small Afghani village with her husband's family. "I cleaned and cooked all meals for him and my 28 in-laws. My mother-in-law would not let me watch television or attend school, but insisted I followed the conservative traditions."

Her husband became a drug user and they moved to the city where she worked in a bank to support her family. "I had an important job," Salma said as she handed me photos of herself taken at her office, showing her full-length Muslim dress and veil. The Taliban did not approve of her employment. Threatened, the family fled first to Iran, then to Turkey. In Greece, Salma filed for divorce—something not allowed in her home country. Her husband's violent response sent her and her children into hiding.

We took her kids to the beach where her sons rushed the waves and her daughter drew in the sand. Her mother called on FaceTime, and as it often happened with many of the women I met, Salma thrust the screen in front of me to show a woman my age just as surprised to see me, as I was her. We had no language in common, except for our concern for her daughter.

I enjoyed these women, the refugees. They appeared positive and happy, though I knew many experienced hell in their past. Perhaps they felt

they cleared the worst part. Now that they were in Greece, maybe they, too, were reborn.

In the women's center, I re-organized a box from storage, putting crochet hooks in one cup, knitting needles in another, and rewinding donated yarn. Uri, the six-foot tall woman in the burka, watched me. She moved nearer to see the tools. She reached over my arm and jostled the cup of crochet hooks. Finding no number six, she asked through Jeanny if I would buy her one. I obliged. She paid me and spent the next few days crocheting a scarf.

Over the days that Uri added to the scarf, I looked over her shoulder as she crocheted. She demonstrated and then helped me hold the tool and give tension to the yarn, bringing the material over from back to front and grabbing it with the hook. I was touched by the whole experience and kissed her hand in appreciation. She blushed. She flustered. She acted much like a young schoolgirl—her eyes got big, her head bobbing with surprise. I regretted making her feel uncomfortable initially, but eventually, we laughed together.

The journeys of these refugees were long and unscripted. Many points along the way offered them sufficient reason for bad memories or fear of the future.

Many Americans and Europeans viewed images of thousands of refugees crossing Hungary's borders, walking through Europe. They wondered why the refugees left their homes and belongings, walked miles, paid thousands of dollars to smugglers, and risked their lives. A friend in Hungary shortsightedly wrote, "They want the German's free money and support—that's all!"

Those weren't the reasons I heard. For the Syrians, escaping war was the primary reason. "They bombarded our house and school." "They wished to conscript my husband to fight." "We couldn't raise our children in Aleppo. It was too dangerous." One female engineer did mention the stipend that the Germans offered, not as an incentive to leave Syria, but an assurance there would be a way to survive until a proper job could be found.

For those not from Syria, reasons for leaving their homeland differed. A man from Africa said he had a traffic accident in his home country. The amount of restitution he would pay was too much for him and he would die in jail. A man from Pakistan had no income in his home

country; he needed work. A young woman from the Republic of the Congo fled from the atrocities she witnessed during the 20-year civil war that left 5.4 million dead.

Consistently, the refugees suffered harrowing experiences with the smugglers who brought them across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece. With 60 people loaded into a single inflatable boat, the smuggler profited well with no guarantees to his passengers for a safe passage. One account described by a refugee was similar to many others:

“We waited in the forest for the night. The smuggler took a few of the men to help inflate the boat. We had to keep the children quiet so that the Turkish gendarmes wouldn’t hear us. Finally, we put on the life vests we bought and went to the beach with what little we owned. When we arrived on the sand, we could see that, though the smugglers, who were armed, promised our group two boats, there was only one. Chaos broke out. Everyone ran to claim a place in the boat and those who hesitated were pushed forward.”

“The smuggler told the women and children to sit in the bottom of the boat on top of the luggage. The men sat around the edges. If someone’s bag was too big, or in someone’s way, or the owner wasn’t watching, it was tossed into the water.”

“The passengers came from many countries. They did not speak the same languages fluently. Many times during our passage, they argued.”

“Sometimes the smuggler did not go and appointed a refugee to drive the boat. In our case, the smuggler went. He shut down the motor five times during our three-hour crossing. I think the motor got too hot and he feared it would stop altogether.”

“Finally, we saw land. It was four in the morning. We were off course. No one met us. When the smuggler dropped us short of the shore, we got wet and cold. We went away in all directions. A woman near me asked if we were in Greece or returned to Turkey. I pointed to a Greek flag in a house window. We made it safely.”

Initially each night, 15 to 20 rafts filled with refugees landed on Chios. The event repeated on other Greek islands. The Greeks remembered their own history when, persecuted by the Armenians, many fled to Syria whose people accepted them with open arms. Now, the situation flipped and the residents of the Greek islands responded. During that first year, there were many stories of Greek fishermen who pulled refugee boats to shore. A local man donated the first shelter for the refugees on Chios. Others provided those first arrivals with food and clothing.

Two years later, the refugees continued to arrive, though it was only a handful each week. The pace slowed to process each case. There

were changes in European temperament, international policy, and UNCHR procedures. A bottleneck developed; fewer refugees moved to Athens in a timely fashion. They remained in Chios, waiting.

As time wore on, the local Greeks' attitude toward the refugees re-adjusted. Some took a nationalistic hardline view and threw Molotov cocktails at the refugees' tents. Others held protests and town hall meetings against the proposed building of a permanent detention camp. And still others blamed the downward turn in island tourism on the refugees.

While many wished the refugee problem would go away, individual Greek kindnesses continued, quietly. The owner of the motel where I stayed gave two-nights at one of his apartments to a refugee family who fled the Vial camp the night violence erupted. He said to me, "You came thousands of miles to help the refugees in my country—it's the least I can do."

As much as local shop owners denied it, they made money from the refugees. The women's center supported local shopkeepers by buying the necessities for its programs—books and pens for the English classes, coca cola and potato chips for movie night. Often, the refugees had family members supporting them and bank accounts to draw from. One evening, I ran into two refugee friends shopping for hats, and then a couple treating their children to ice cream. Another three joined us with a bag of fresh apricots purchased from an outdoor stand.

Many European humanitarian organizations filled in the gaps the Greek municipality could not during the first year the refugees arrived. Charities met the specific needs of male refugees, children, those needing clothing, or schooling. Some agencies received funding from the UNCHR. Others, like the women's center, found its own donors. A website listed all the organizations involved and how individuals could help. Scores of Europeans (and a few Americans), from retirees to college graduates, came to help at the camps. They met at 9 a.m. for morning organizational meetings and after work at the Pizza Palace for beers.

Like any set of volunteers responding to a crisis, their individual reasons for involvement and level of dedication varied. Some did it for political reasons, some for humanitarian. For others, the refugee work offered a first job or a second—a place to get experience on the international development track. Some volunteers developed friendships with the refugees; others drew a professional line they did not cross. Some refugees noted a volunteer's arrogance. Others gave blessings to their volunteer lawyers who helped navigate their asylum interviews.

Holes in the support network to the refugees appeared occasionally. On an 80-degree day, two women stood outside the center, one of them dressed in a full-length wool coat. The sisters lived in one of the camps for a month and went to the distribution centers daily, without finding anything suitably cool or appropriately sized for petite bodies. We talked about their limited clothing options and found some humor in saying, “The spring line of fashion has not yet arrived.”

Charities who provided clothing to female refugees forgot the importance of bras and underwear and did not offer them. The women’s center fixed that problem with a closet full of donated bras. I became accustomed to sizing up a woman’s bust from across the front desk. “You look like a 36B—maybe a C. I’ll get both.”

The fact that violence occurred in the camps wasn’t surprising. It was as if the world heaped all the root causes of disagreement onto the people living in Souda and Vial and expected them to be calm and cheerful. The camps looked like mini United Nations, and, like on the rafts, disagreements ran generations in length.

The camps lacked the stimulus of the workplace, universities, or communities from which the refugees came. UN rules indicated refugees could not be employed. Some found volunteer opportunities to give their lives focus and purpose. But mostly, men, accustomed to providing for their families, felt emasculated. Women, who nurtured their children within a family structure that no longer existed, felt exposed.

Generally, I found each individual I encountered, from Greek Coast Guard member to UNCHR authority and volunteer relief worker, wanted the refugees’ process to be better, to be right. Everyone did his or her best. Everyone tried within this unfortunate set of circumstances.

The individuals and families who lived in the camps were surprised by the poor conditions they found, and appalled by the horribleness of the experiences they endured. But the thing that beat them down was the lack of respect they so often encountered.

Still, they continued to arrive. The camps did not provide easy or simple solutions, but they provided something these people did not have in recent past situations—a timeline in which the furthest point on it was “hope.”

For Mother’s Day, the center’s director assigned me the job of creating a celebration. In preparation, I asked many of the women how they

wished to acknowledge it. Just its mention drew responses of both sadness and joy—some left their mothers behind; others had their children with them. When I asked the women what made a party for them, most answered coca cola and potato chips. In addition, the center gave attendees flowers, an opportunity to write wishes and memories, and a spice cake baked by Salma for the occasion.

The mood felt festive. Women drew patterns on one another with henna. Jeanny downloaded the songs from YouTube of favorite vocal artists and many of the women, including Aalia and Forozan, sang along. Uri sat at the edge and watched. She seemed unusually quiet. I learned the Greeks rejected her family's application for asylum. Three appeals could follow; but if refused, they would be returned to Turkey.

At the celebration, I did my best impersonation of a dancer from the Middle East. I wasn't very good if you compared me to my partner, a middle-aged Syrian woman who wriggled and twirled to this music all her life. The others smiled and nodded and encouraged my hijinks because they knew I was enjoying something they loved and reminded them of home.

The daily life in Chios—the peacefulness of the camps, the similarity of all Middle-Eastern women, even the directness of the asylum process—differed from its reality. Similarly, the images of refugees I was given differed from the women I met.

Here in the center, whatever characteristics might have separated us during our celebration of Mother's Day—ethnicity, culture, religion, skin color or nationality—didn't. Together, we laughed, sang and danced.

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