Greece:

Volunteers and refugees, Hand in Hand

A report from SulfiCAR Saleh,
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From the Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung and the Schwarzkopf Stiftung.
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On January 18th I took my flight to Athens from where I took the ferry to Mytilini. Mytilini is the capital of Lesvos, one of the many Greek islands. On Lesvos there are 4 refugee camps, from which one is only for minors traveling alone. For a small island like Lesvos that is quite a lot because it is one of the island that is very close to the Turkish mainland. Boats used to arrive almost every day so the number of refugees on that island kept going up. Some refugees stay many month until they get their paperwork done. Only when everything is signed and sealed the refugees can continue their travel to Athens, one of the many stops on their way to countries like Germany or France. I went to Pikpa Solidarity Camp. It is one of the smaller and better organized camps. It has about 100 refugees and approximately 15 volunteers working there, including myself. With that high amount of helping hands, work is being done in a very good way. Food distribution, cloth shop, English lessons, gardening, workshops for children and adults such as theater, painting, choir and many more is working quite well. In opposite to this there are camps, not far from Pikpa, owned by the government and completely funded by the UN that are very miserable, for example Moria. Conditions are so bad that people who are not from the Red Cross or other official organizations can not enter the camp. However, some people keep sneaking in to take pictures and report about the terrible conditions. During my first week at Pikpa, 3 people have died in Moria (3000 residents) due to previously undisclosed reasons. Volunteers from Pikpa and Humanity Crew that work at the hospital have reported that the cold might be the reason for the death. Electric heaters are not allowed nor are heaters allowed that function with gas. The power supply system doesn't handle heaters and other kind of heating is to dangerous. As a result of this many refugees keep them self warm with alcohol and illegal gas heaters. Some refugees that get to leave Moria and move in at Pikpa tell stories that are just
unbelievable. The hygiene is so bad that the current cook at pikpa, who is a refugee from Pakistan and former resident At Moria used to have a bad skin disease. He told us about the lack of treatment. He now is very happy at pikpa and is glad that he can spend his time here, until he gets asylum and continues his travel to Athens like many others.

Introduction

And there I was, sitting in the deafening subway, heading to the city center. I found my way to the hostel without any complications. In situations like that you can tell who is used to the city life. I am from Berlin so I'm used to many things. Subways, many people in a hurry, lots and lots of different languages. While I was waiting to arrive at my station I tried to recognize where people might be originally from. I have a very good sense to tell where someone is from and in Berlin I do have a high rate of accuracy but in Athens everyone looked very mediterran. Greek people look very similar to Lebanese and Turkish people I would say. But these are all superficial things. I decided to not think about that now. I needed to rest and to arrive in Athens before I had to continue my travel to Lesvos. I did spend a few days in Athens just to get a feeling for the country and to have the chance to talk to locals before I go the the refugee camp.

I met a journalist the second day after I arrived and we had a great chat about refugees in Greece. She took me out for coffee and then we started the interview. She was mostly interested in why I am doing this and why I decided to go to Lesvos. I knew she was going to ask me question like that but I decided to not prepare myself for the interview. I wanted to see what comes up to my mind in the second she asked her questions and I was surprised by my answers. Why did I want to go to Lesvos, when there are plenty of refugee camps in Berlin? Or why did I want to help refugees at all? What was my intention and reasons for me going abroad and leaving my lifestyle
behind.
I knew about some options in Berlin to help out by sorting cloth or by working in food
distribution but for a couple of reasons I did not do anything in Berlin. Help was needed
but there were many people who offered their help already and in Berlin there was no
urgent help needed anymore. Everything worked out well enough without me so I didn't
feel a need to do anything. One big thing why I didn't work in a refugee camp in Berlin
was Berlin itself. I was distracted by my life and by my surroundings. I went to school
and after I went to work and those aren't even the things that distracted me but my life
itself was the reason why Berlin without the volunteering seemed more attracting.

I had the chance to meet a few refugees at my school in Berlin and I learned a big
lesson. Help is flexible. It doesn't mean to give out free things to people in need but to
help them help themselves. To make them independent and to involve them in Berlin
and life. So I got the opportunity to help some of the refugees at my school in Berlin to
become part of the society, not by talking to them and by being interested in them
during school, but also by seeing them as humans and by respecting their individual
personalities as a friend and not as a volunteer. By inviting a few Syrian teenagers to
parties and hangouts with my German friends I opened a completely new way for them
to communicate with locals. They now were involved in a normal life where things
happened and enjoyable moments passed without their refugee friends in school or in
camp. They now got to leave their subculture and got the chance to have German
friends.

After graduating from school I continued not doing much involving refugees. My life
continued as normal as it could be. I found a work place at a burger place where I
stayed until today. I had a nice time but I started to feel empty eventually. After a couple
month of vegetating I felt the need of doing something. Something that's not just for me.
I wanted to help refugees but now I looked for a place where help is still very welcome
and needed.
I found out about Lesvos through a friend that has been there before me. She told me about Pikpa, a solidarity camp in Mytilini and by her story's I was convinced that this is the place I want to go to too. With the scholarship from the Schwarzkopf Stiftung and the Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung I had the chance to make it happen very fast. I contacted the Lesvos refugee camp, told them about me and they happily accepted my help. I booked a ticket and from that moment I felt very satisfied. I started to count the days until I could go to Lesvos and finally be productive again. To help where help is still needed in a very urgent way. I now felt like my existence had sense again and I would use my time wisely.

At Lesvos I could show my solidarity and do something meaningful but also I could help without being distracted anymore. I don't know anything in Lesvos except for the refugee camp so there was nothing that could drag my attention away from what I wanted to do. To help.

I wanted to help so bad that when I first arrived to Lesvos I was disappointed but about that you can read later. But to answer the journalist's question why I wanted to help. I wanted to help and therewith understand the topic more. I wanted to get to know these people and understand their stories and that I could only do by being there and by helping. Understanding their stories was very important to me. It would open many doors for me. If I want to call myself an open minded person who is a supporter of refugees, I have to be able to relate to them more. Saying all refugees are welcome just for humanity reasons is already reason enough but I wanted to say all refugees are welcome because I know stories and people's histories that make me really want to have these people at a better place. I wanted to have faces in my mind when I say refugees are welcome not just the will to do something that is right. Of course it was right to want to safe refugees and many people are supporters but for me, actually caring about specific people, would make me be able to go to demonstration in Berlin and scream refugees are welcome here with all my heart because I would be saying
that and at the same time seeing faces of children in my head that have fled the war. I would stop seeing the problem rational but emotional. I would say it and mean it with all my heart

Pikpa

Pikpa Solidarity Camp is a refugee camp on Lesvos, 6km away from the city Mytilini. The camp is run by a Greek NGO (non governmental Organisation) and the work that is being done is only possible due to money and food donations and the help of many volunteers from all over.
During my stay at pikpa I met volunteers from Greece, England, Germany, France, Czech Republic, and Switzerland as well as volunteers from Syria and Lebanon. Pikpa volunteers live in volunteer apartments in Mytilini and drive to the camp by bus. I often hitchhiked just because I liked it. On Lesvos it's a normal thing.
The refugees are not allowed to hitchhike due to insurance reasons so they had to either walk to the city, which takes about an hour, or take the bus which cost many for them because they don't get bus tickets like volunteers.
In my first week I was really shocked because I was getting a lift from another volunteer who had a car and when one refugee asked if he could come with us I said yes. When the driver came, he made the refugee get out of the car so we drove to the city with an empty seat. I felt very uncomfortable but the other volunteer said that's just how it is. I didn't like it because in Greece they don't care about many things, for example is it often the case that 4 people sit in the back and no one has a seat belt on and the driver talks on the phone etc. but they don't let refugees drive with them.
Apart from that, Pikpa has a very humanitarian way of treating the refugees. They live in very expectable tents. Pikpa has also wooden houses for family with children. They have a common kitchen where everyone can cook.
The needed ingredients are distributed by the volunteers that are assigned for the job. Also, a cloth shop is available on the camp side where all the refugees can get cloth for
free. The sorting of the cloth as well as maintaining the cloth shop is also done by the volunteers. English classes, fun activities, kindergarten and children choir and theater which is hold in the city is also done by volunteers. Taking the children with the bus to the city is also a job for volunteers.

Pikpa also has woman time and man time. That means that the woman can have a time for them self, where they can talk, ask questions to female volunteers, do massages and things like that. The man also have a time where they can ask questions about how to be around woman in Europe. It is surprising how different cultural habits are and that's why this time is very important.

Pikpa offers a lot for the residents but sadly some things are very badly needed. Pikpa is a camp for very vulnerable refugees. That means that there are always, besides families with young kids, also people with mental issues. And for those people there is no professional help. During my stay I met one young boy who had the Down Syndrome as well as two young boys who were autistic and uncontrollable to an extent where they had to be locked away in their tents. The families have a very hard time and need professional help but for some reason pikpa can't offer the needed assistance.

Over all is pikpa a very livable place for people that have fled their home country with
the hope of a better life. All people that have the luck and opportunity to move from Moria refugee camp to Pikpa refugee camp feel much much more happy and safe.

Moria refugee camp

Moria is a refugee registration camp funded by the UN. The camp was opened in a old prison and used to hold up to 4500 refugees. Today approximately 3000 people live there. Moria also has a prison for immigrant detainees that are pending their deportation. The people say Moria has a prison within a prison. The camp and the actual prison look very scary with the many high walls, fences and barbed wire. It is strictly forbidden to take pictures of the area which lets someone only guess of how miserable the conditions are. The entry to the camp is only permitted for residents or official staff from the UN, other officials like the Red Cross or the army.

In my last week on the island I wanted to risk it all and try to get inside of the Camp to see myself what is going on inside. Friends have tried to get inside before and they got ther passports and ID cards confiscated but I wanted to try it anyway. I disguised myself as a refugee and tried to look as casual as possible and it worked. I passed the
police officers and then I found myself inside. I walked around, took a few pictures and then I talked to 3 young man and asked them if I can sit with them. We talked for more than half an hour and it was very interesting to hear their stories.

During my first week at pikpa 3 people died due to the cold. Conditions are very bad and the refugees live under terrible conditions. Very bad hygiene in the bathrooms or no possibility to heat up the tents lead to that.

Also, at Moria there is an Youth organisation from America, that is working and doing similar stuff like we do at pikpa (food distribution and cloth distribution) but they have also made it to their duty to bring the Christian religion to the people. I think the way that they are doing it is very bad. They hand out bibles and tell the refugees that their past suffer and that all that they are going through is because they don't believe in the Christian God.

I think using this situation like this is to condemn. I acutely met a group of young people in my age from the organisation without knowing that they are from the Organisation until they told me after a long chat. During the chat for about two hours I more and more felt uncomfortable because they literally tried to talk religion into me basically. They first started, without involving me, with taking about themself and how they found their way to faith which was fine but then suddenly one of the girls asked me what I believe in and so on. I don't agree with this Organisation and the fact that they work at Moria makes Moria a more miserable place.

Some refugees prefer being homeless and decide to leave Moria if they can not live at a camp like pikpa. Those refugees are however still depended on help from volunteers.
The NoBorderKitchen is a organization of young activist that have made it to their duty to provide food for about 400 people every day. The activist are more or less police know for squatting unoccupied buildings to locate their kitchen. Due to many conflicts the NoBordersKitchen (NBK) was finally moved to a place, quite far from the city center, but from now on legally rented.

The new place will be used for cooking and for a few activists to stay the night. Most of the activist don't have much money them self but they told me "we will never stop only if everyone has food, and until then we will cook every day!"

And that is what they are doing, every day! The NBK is providing food for about 400 refugees regardless of their resident status. Many refugees have also denied to stay at Moria. But what most of them have in common, the NBK is providing for them the only meal of the day and that’s why the NBK is so determined to not stop before everyone is independent. The NBK is, like Pikpa, depended on food and money donations. The food is either used to cook big quantities of food that are distributed at known places or they are being distributed as ingredients in boxes for refugees that have squatted places and have the possibility to cook them self.
My job as a helper was to help prepare the food boxes with some other people from the NBK or to be at the squat to fight scabies.

During that time I slept in a squat with a few activist and about 80 refugees. At that squat the refugees cooked them self with food boxes. Most of the time we are together with the Pakistani refugees in their room. They always cooked delicious food on a fire. It was a great time sleeping there and being with them. That experience is very precious to me because I got the chance to get to know some refugees very well and to live like them and therefore to relate to them more.

Volunteers help Volunteers

When many people live together in a small space, diseases can spread very easily. That was the case at one squat of the NoBordersKitchen. Most of the people from the NoBordersKitchen live together with refugees in various squats. Showers are not available nor is it possible to wash cloth properly. 21 people infected themself with scabies and there was no way to get cured without help.

After asking Pikpa for help, medicine was provided. We packed up enough packages for everyone to have clean cloth, from socks through to pants and sweaters etc. Also clean sleeping bags were given to the infected people from the squat.

All the old cloth were taken in trash bags to pikpa to be washed in proper washers. Corporations like that are necessary because the NBK doesn't have the same recourses like Pikpa, as an organized refugee camp.
The Procedure of getting rid of the scabies was in the hands of the NBK. Volunteers were in groups doing different duties. Some had to buy food others had to cook. I was in the “scabies group”. The work with the infected people was harder than expected. To get rid of the scabies we had to clear all the rooms one by one. The language barrier was one of the main problems. Trying to tell the people that everyone that is sleeping in the room (up to 14 people sometimes), even if not everyone had any symptoms, had to do the procedure, because they might have the scabies anyway, was difficult. After making everyone do the procedure other problems occurred. Some people used the medical lotion and didn't put on the new cloth we provided for them or they used the cloth but used the old ones the next day even though the old (infected) cloth was supposed to be locked away in an plastic back until the cloth get washed. Many things like that made it very difficult to complete the treatment. Also the fact that we were very short on resources made us feel hopeless sometimes. It took over a week to treat all the rooms.
Why I was disappointed?

When I first arrived to Pikpa I was a little disappointed. I was expecting miserable conditions and a lot of people that needed my help. But that was not the case. I arrived at a rather beautiful place with only a few tents and many wooden houses, a common kitchen, a church and a little playground for the children.

I was confused because everything seemed to be working so well so I started to wonder what I was supposed to do here. I am fast to judge and I didn't wait longer than a few days to tell myself I am useless here. In my imaginations I saw myself arriving to a place where I would be very much needed. In fact, I was very much needed but it took me a while to realize that.

I didn't see the work that was being done to make that refugee camp a livable place. I only saw the results. Soon I started to see what was going on 'backstage' and it was quite a lot.

The refugees (at pikpa they were called residents) had all terrible stories to tell. Some of them liked to share many many times the same story, some never did, but for me it was the chance to be helpful for the first time. The small things, like listing and showing interest in them as humans was the first step to give them a feeling they didn't have in a long time. Besides that, giving them the chance to take part in life was also a big thing. I invited a lovely family from Eritrea to my apartment in the city for dinner and we had a wonderful time. We cooked together and they brought very delicious corn cake with them. (After that they invited me for a delicious lunch they cooked at their little place at Pikpa, with friends of them from Moria and it was a very interesting experience, first the culture, then the food and the whole atmosphere was just nice.)
Why I started to feel helpful and to be helpful..

Since I speak Arabic, the many residents now had a chance to talk to someone in their mother tongue. They were able to tell me about any discomfort or even about their past. I saw how talking about problems felt like a release. Also the little problems of the day like asking for specific ingredients were now a little easier. A woman with a son with Down Syndrome, without any psychological help, can get very frustrated when she is asking for rice and tomato paste but is not being understood. The many problems in her life make little problems as frustrating as the big ones.

But besides my useful Arabic language skills, I also got to teach some Englisch. Together with an volunteer from Humanity Crew we teached English together. She was doing the class and I took care of a few residents that needed more attention. I gave individualized personal instruction for residents that struggled to learn the English alphabet and so on. That was my first experience as a 'teacher' and it felt quite nice to see progress in students that never had English before. Some students were quite old so I tried my best to avoid a feeling of authority which some older students might would have made feel uncomfortable.

Besides that, I helped in the food and cloth distribution as well as in maintaining some of the buildings. Work was almost everywhere needed. For example, after an earthquake we had the problem that the warm water heater's broke and I got to help with a few things to make it work as fast as possible again.

Overall, I was happy that everything worked well, with me and without me. There was still plenty of things I could help with but Pikpa will continue working without me and that was good. Because if my help was so badly needed that when I leave everything would get out of control I would have never been able to leave again.

I came to the conclusion that it is good that things go on how they are and that people
can come and contribute positively but can also leave again without ruining things therewith.

What I have learned during my stay at Pikpa is that all the effort all the volunteers put in is not to help the refugees have a better future. The future of those people is not in the hands of the volunteers. The refugees that are at Pikpa do all have a pending status, waiting for the paperwork in Athen to get done so they can continue their travel on their way to their new home. For us as volunteers, our mission and goal is to give the fled people a few beautiful days to forget the tragedy that they are in. To make their stay at Pikpa as pleasant as possible. Some families stay for a month but some also stay for a year and after a while it gets very frustrating for them so therefore we try our best to give them a space where they can live and have a good time until they leave again.

How do the refugees feel?

On the 3rd of February I got to go to an demonstration against Moria. The residents and us volunteers made a lot of banners and everyone had flowers and candles to remember the 3 people that have not survived the travel to a better life. All of the residents were very excited to get the chance to express themselves. The banners said things like "Where is the EU when we are suffering" or some, that were more direct said "People die in Moria - act now!"

The demonstration was supposed to start at 5pm but in Greece that means that the first people arrive at half past 5. After a speech from the organizer, we finally started the
demonstration at 6pm. We walked through the main shopping street Ermou. Our final destination was the Parliament of Mytilini. On our way back we wanted to walk to a place where and important politician was giving a speech but the police did not let anyone pass. After all we took a different route and we all separated at the starting point.

I was moved very much by a resident of Moria who came up to me and said that he wants us to go to the place where the famous politician was giving his speech. I told the organizer and he agreed.

The refugee who talked to me was really sad and wanted us to do everything possible to attracted the attention of someone important.

I still remember how he looked at me and said that we please shall go to the building where the politician was giving his speech. He said it and added "I live at Moria".

For me it was hard to see someone living at Moria. Knowing that he probably feels very cold every night. Knowing that he most likely sleeps in a tent that is not warmer than outside of the tent.

It is hard to see people that are suffering everyday and who's travel is still at the beginning of their journey. The people at Pikpa have a lot of luck! They live in big tents, or even in small wooden houses if they have children. They get food and they can cook
them themselves. At Moria they have to stay one hour in line to get one croissant for breakfast. Pikpa has heaters and volunteers who treat the residents with respect and love.

Usually, people that leave Pikpa to Athens call us and tell us how bad they feel at their new place because there are no camps that guarantee such a humane stay. But they have to leave to Athens because that's the next step on their journey.
Danksagung

Abschließen und damit an dieser Stelle möchte ich mich bei der Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung und der Schwarzkopf Stiftung bedanken. Im Namen von mir und Aller die durch euch etwas bewegen konnten.
Ihr habt es mir theoretisch ermöglicht aber in der Praxis habt ihr nicht mir geholfen sondern den 7 kleinen Kindern, die ich jeden Samstag zum Choir gefahren habe. Deren Lächeln habt ihr ermöglicht!

Ich bedanke mich auch für die Unterstützung vor der Reise, für die Kontakte die mir angeboten wurden, ich hatte das Gefühl, dass ich mich im Notfall immer hätte melden können. Danke auch dafür!

Ich hoffe das mein Bericht einen Einblick verschaffen konnte und dass alle Leser nun eine Idee von der wunderschönen Inseln Lesvos haben mit all ihren Camps, Aktivisten, Buchten und Bergen.

Ein Bericht von
Sulficar Saleh

Stipendiat der
Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung und Schwarzkopf Stiftung
addendum:
The three guys I met sitting on a hill after sneaking into Moria. Two young Syrian guys and one Kurdish-Syrian guy (all around twenty years old) from Syria.

After asking for how long they have been in Moria and if they can tell about any changes that have happened they told me a lot more then just for what I asked for. We talked for almost half an hour. A few things they said:
They told me, that they feel like animals inside. That even the animals are more precious than them. All they do is eating and sleeping. They set the alarm at 7am in the morning so they can go and wait one hour in line to get a croissant and an apple for breakfast. Then they go back to their tents. After a while they go back to stay in line to get lunch and then again to eat dinner. After the three meals they go back to bed so they can wake up in the morning again. They said they are always hungry. "What kind of grown man is full after eating one croissant?" one of the guys from Syria said. His day routine is inhumane, waiting for food and sleep, like an animal. A lot of people that live at Moria loose a lot of weight.

He also said that he feels like the responsible people try to keep the people calm like they sedate an lion when he gets aggressive. For example, after the one Syrian guy died, a few weeks ago, about two hundred refugees started demonstrating within the camp because the responsible people tried to camouflage the incident (the Syrian guy was new in the camp, he didn't know people, so when he died no one really took notice). After the demonstration an urgent meeting was held with very high ranked people for example the mayor of Mytilini and the owner of Moria with refugees. The results were that many tents were removed, a lot of families were sent to Athens but many many more stayed in huge collective tents.
They said, this was the first time since they have been here that anything has changed. Some had been there for 11 months already.

Volunteers from Humanity Crew that I know from Pikpa that work at the hospital had to inform the bereaved on their own initiative because the responsible people from the UN tried to have the incident concealed.

The demonstration went by peaceful, however, two of the guys I was talking to had been arrested for taking a picture of an police man. The police man came up to them and took a picture of them. That was basically the warning that he will come for them. They said it's always the same, the police knows that Lesvos is an island and (usually) no one will suddenly disappear.

A few days later when the guys were leaving their tent in the morning the police was waiting in front of their tent. They were secretly put in a car and driven to the prison within Moria. They said everything went by secretly, no one gets informed. Even though the prison is just a few minutes walk they were driven, so nobody will notice, they said. Both were detained for 10 days.

One other guy had been in prison for 4 months because he wanted to get deported. During his first registration at a camp called Samos (different island) he got papers with a wrong name and wrong birthdate. After reporting on that it took them a couple weeks to give him a new identification that was also invalid. The birth date was incorrect again. After a few months of being not dealt with, he eventually got frustrated and decided on his own that he wants to get deported. In order to get deported he had to stay in custody prior to deportation. After one month he was moved to Moria prison where he stayed four more months. Turkey rejected him because the name and birthdate the Moria camp had were incorrect and that wrong person never entered Turkey. After almost half a year in custody they released him and said in order to get deported he has to apply for
asylum again. Almost a half year in prison for nothing. He is now almost 11 Month in Greece.

The Camp Staff doesn't care at all about the refugees. Over all, the refugees can stay wherever they want, in any tent or next to the trash containers. The guys who got his names and information mixed up ended up sleeping with his friends in the tent because he was denied to sleep with the adults in the container (because one ID said he was a minor) and also he was denied to sleep in the container with the minors (because his other ID said he was an adult). So he ended up not being accepted anywhere but somewhere within the camp. I asked, how the responsibilities can contact them if they need them. He said, they would call for their names with a public address system. That's why some refugees decide to live in squats like the Pakistanis I met at the NoBorderKitchen.

The Eritrean family at Pikpa told me that when they used to live at Moria a lot of times they got appointments that are three months away. When they came prepared to the appointment they sometimes seem surprised and reschedule the appointment two month further away. That gets many refugees frustrated.