

Of refugees and suffering, of Greece and the EU, incongruence and a painting holiday.



**"Unseen people" by Christine Crowley.
Lesvos, July 2015.**

July 2015.

The painting holiday that brought us to Lesvos, Greece, was planned more than a year ago. Christine belongs to a group of Cape Town artists tutored by Anastasia Sarantinou, founder of Blue Planet, a gallery and school in Muizenberg. Artist friends from the UK and Stockholm joined the group on the idyllic island. So did I.

The island is home to Anastasia's extended family who offered us their beach chalets. Tsonia, is a coastal village on the eastern side of the island. In places, it is only five kilometres across the sea to Turkey. Peter, Anastasia's father, explains that his parents came here as refugees from "Asia Minor", today Turkey. In 1923, the treaty of Lausanne determined that 400,000 Greeks had to leave Asia Minor and settle on Aegean islands. This was the result of misguided Greek expansionism when, after WWI, a war against Turkey was continued. To keep foes apart, 150,000 Turks were moved from the Aegean islands and settled in places the Greeks had vacated.

Peter, now in his mid 70's, came to South Africa as a migrant after WWII caused dislocation and poverty in Greece as elsewhere.

I share with you selected and slightly edited observations from my journal entries on our fortnight in Lesvos:

Here in the cradle of intellectual discourse they are relaxed and philosophical when they talk about the future. "We've got sunshine and tomatoes, ..." they say wryly. When we get the bus from Athens airport to Piraeus, the day after the resounding 'oxi' (no) vote, the bus-driver of the X96 beckons us to get on. We want to pay the Euro5 fare but he is not interested. The man next to us helps us, in English: There is a problem. It's not clear whether we are in a Euro or Drachma economy; so, it's free! Even for tourists? Yes.



On the hour long bus journey, the retired engineer, tells us: we know we owe the money and we know equally we should not allow our Government to make scandalous loans ever again, loans that led to the unprecedented economic crises Greece finds itself in. "Don't shoehorn us into behaving and living like the Germans want to live. Our culture and our means to produce are very different. We will pay, but not under their conditions". Peter Sarantinou tells us that most of his family here are disenchanted with the German attitude about the EU's conditions for repayment of Greek loans. We agree wholeheartedly.

We left home nearly 40 hours ago. The last stretch is the ferry from Piraeus to Mytelini. A taxi waits for us at the port, the biggest town on Lesbos. He speaks no English and despite it being 1.30 in the morning, he is helpful and tries to impart information.

We are still within the harbour precinct when he stops and points to a series of small tents and rows of people lying on a ledge. He says: Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia, etc. He keeps repeating in English: "big problem!"

Our attention is diverted to the ruins of ancient buildings – dating from Ottoman, Greek and earlier periods. All that is lit up evokes a relaxed, Mediterranean seaside place we know from postcards. There are also endless empty buildings, seemingly built less than ten years ago. Evidence of a collapsed economy built on IMF, World Bank, Lehman and other megalomaniac loan crimes, that have left a trail of destruction.

Our driver gesticulates for the next dark hour, mostly pointing to the rows of people sleeping next to the roadside, and he repeats the words, Syria, Afghanistan. He points to the lights across the water on our right. Turkey, it seems, can be reached by rowing boat. The Syrians have crossed Turkey at least. The Afghanis have crossed many more countries. He stops his car and punches a number on the screen of his cell phone for us to see: '500', the number of people crossing to this island each night. "Big problem."

For the rest of the journey we see people huddled together, wrapped in blankets, and seeking to sleep. That's not all. We make out rows of people walking single file, heading to the islands capital. The front and the last person hold lanterns, so passing motorists can see them. As we pass villages, there are more people sleeping in bus shelters and shop entrances. Our driver explains: The police have told them: no passport means no bus, no taxi, even if they want to pay. (The majority appear to have passports but to be branded a refugee is an irremovable stamp) Hence, they walk to Mytilini, a journey that can take several days. There they will be 'processed' and taken onward to Athens and then sent to whichever EU country will have them. We feel awkward and uncomfortable to come and have a holiday in a place where there is so much misery.

In two places, we see figures lying across most of the road. This suggests silent anger and wanting to be noticed. Our driver swerves to avoid them and expresses a third English word: "stupid!" - The displaced need help, much more help than they get here and in what lies ahead.

Most are young men, but there are women and children, several toddlers. A few are limping; some seem injured or are crippled. The next morning, after we have reached Tsonia, Peter tells us that these refugees have caused no social problems; no theft, no demonstrations, no rape. These people have money and purchase food from local shops. They are educated, professional and seemingly middle class. A majority are Muslim. There is no communication as locals and the transiting refugee silently pass each other.

From Tsonia you see the Turkish lights at night. Over on the Turkish side are the killing fields of Gallipoli – the shore where Australian and New Zealand fought Turkish soldiers exactly 100 years ago, in what is today viewed as a futile battle. Close to half a million lives were in the battle. Now the forests there shelter 1.4 million refugees from Syria and elsewhere.

A hike to the nearby hamlet of Clio brings suffering and tragedy into focus again. On a stony town square lie ten bodies. Eight men and two women arrived by rubber dingy during the night. They scrambled ashore, found a road, found Clio. They have no luggage. Exhausted, in neat but dirty clothes, they sleep in the town square. They ignore the local bustle and locals seem to ignore their presence.

When Anton and I take another hike along the rocky shoreline we come across scores of life vests, several wrecked inflatable boats, pairs of shoes, rucksacks with neatly packed clothes, packets of cigarettes with Turkish rather than Greek writing on them. Human tragedy is imprinted wherever we walk. We find life vests of babies and children. And shotgun casings! Could there be local vigilantes wanting to deter the refugees from landing? We don't see the refugees but get overwhelmed at the thought we may stumble upon a lifeless body or bodies. Fortunately we are spared such experience.

To avoid being turned away, the boats, at night, head for dark and uninhabited parts. Those who trade in this human cargo leave their charges scrambling through water and rocks. Then they abandon the life vests and hurry to the high ground. We try to imagine what went on in their minds – just hours before we are here. Besides fear and uncertainty, might some have felt victorious at finally having breached bastion Europe's border?



Anchen and Tom in our group have a hire car. On a rough coastal road, they come across scores of people who have just made it across the sea from Turkey, in broad daylight. Anchen and Tom offer them what water they have in the car. Then they see more people. Our friends do several trips buying bottled water and take it to the new arrivals. One man asks if they can take his children to a place – any place with some shade. When Anchen and Tom return that evening they are upset and feel this is not a time and place to have a holiday.

I have occasion to meet someone from Mytilini University. I ask: what of the students? Are they coming to help the refugees in any way? The answer is not affirmative. And the Greek Orthodox Church? No, no help or relief either.

Wherever we go during our two-week holiday, refugees line the roads, seeking lifts. On the road to the ferry to take us back from Mytilini to Athens, more tragedy stares at us. Mytilini has its own statue of liberty, not as large as the American one but big none-the-less. Incongruously, refugees and their tents and washing and fires to make food, surround Liberty.



The purser on the ferry tells us that every night they take 1,500 refugees to Athens. "It's not easy for them and its not easy for us" he says. The back decks are packed. The ablution facilities finally offer the chance of a shower or to wash the few belongings in their backpacks. Others lie, packed in rows, sleeping. Their faces

bear evidence of exposure to the exceptionally hot weather conditions. Their worn shoes are further evidence of what they have already been through.

Throughout these are courteous people and quiet, except for the crying babies and toddlers. Many young men have cell phones and take selfies, presumably to send the folks back home a message that they have made it. Well not quite. Until they are granted residence somewhere, in a mostly hostile Europe they will wait many months yet. Before they get the right to work will take even longer.

The image of beach loungers with bronzed bodies in front of passing refugees sticks in my mind. What incongruity! The unseen thousands are having a raw deal.

I don't only observe suffering refugees. I keep asking: who and what caused this? Don't we ever learn?

Don't George Bush, Tony Blair, the banksters of New York and the rise of religious fundamentalism of all hues, have a lot to answer for? They are not the only culprits, but they stand out as advocates of a one-dimensional ideology that has destabilised the world. Has globalization, the export that first came from the USA, not pitted a poor world against the rich one?

Horst.

What we witnessed in Greece belongs to a global situation with far-reaching consequences. Below are figures that put our minute experience into a wider context. The data is taken from recent UN reports. And, attached is an article, highly recommended, by Carlos Lopez, executive secretary of the UN Commission for refugees that corrects the image of African refugees created by the media and fed on by those who nurture anti-African sentiments.

Globally 59.5 million people, more than the entire population of South Africa (53 Million), were **refugees** or **internally displaced** people by the end of 2014. In 2004, there were a mere 37.5m refugees (and displaced people). Worldwide there are 19.5 million refugees (up from 16.7 million in 2013), with 40 million who are displaced inside their own countries. 1.8 million people were awaiting the outcome of claims for asylum by the end of last year. In 2014 alone 13.9 million people became newly displaced – four times the number of the previous year.

½ of all refugees are under the age of 18 (30 million). In the Middle East and North Africa there are now 13 million children who receive no schooling. Their parents were better off, according to the UN Children's Fund report of 3 September 2015.

1 in 122 humans on earth are now refugees. 2014 represents the biggest leap in refugee numbers in one year. Many, but not the majority have now reached the gates of fortress Europe.

Since 2011 Syria is the biggest driver for displacement. **42,500 people fled their homes in Syria each day in 2014.**

Syria is the world's biggest producer of both internally displaced people (7.6 million), and refugees who fled to other countries numbered 3.88 million at the end of 2014. Imagine: 3.88 million is roughly equivalent to all the people of the greater Cape Town metropolitan area fleeing to Zimbabwe or Namibia. Afghanistan (2.59 million) and Somalia (1.1 million) are the next biggest refugee source countries.

In 2014 only 126,800 refugees were able to return to their home countries -- the lowest number in 31 years.

The USA and Europe, the main sponsors of global economic inequality are the recipients of the fewest refugees. Yet the media create the impression that all refugees are on their way to Europe. This is clearly untrue!

Turkey is now the world's top refugee-hosting nation with 1.59 million Syrian refugees. Pakistan, which had held that position for more than a decade, is second with 1.51 million. The highest numbers of refugees per host population are Lebanon and Jordan, where Palestinians have been accommodated for decades, now joined by fleeing Syrians. (In Lebanon there are 257 refugees for every 1,000 Lebanese). The only European country amongst the top 15 countries that host refugees is Sweden, with 12 refugees per 1000 Swedes.

What about South Africa? Because of our porous border and poor handling of refugee matters by the authorities, figures of refugees vary from several hundred thousand to millions. In reality there are countless numbers of people who live 'under the radar' without official papers. To make a living they must rank as the most exploited in our society. That said, it is instructive to pay a visit to Customs House on the Foreshore in Cape Town. Hundreds of refugees stand in poorly serviced rows every day to have their papers renewed. Friends recently spent 3 days waiting in the rain at Customs House. They got the attention of the officials through a bribe. They are Eritrean refugees and have been in South Africa for 15 years. They were given another 4 years residence without the right to work!

The UN High Commission for Refugees admits that it is no longer coping. In SA, despite our history, do we care about our refugees and migrants? Concerned citizens should make this also their business.



'Winston Churchill responded to the German refugee columns fleeing through the snows of eastern Europe in 1945. These were the civilians of the Third Reich – who had brought Hitler to power, who had rejoiced at Nazi Germany's barbaric genocides and military victories. In a letter Churchill wrote to his wife, Clementine, on his way to the Yalta conference in February of 1945 he wrote, "I am free to confess to you that my heart is saddened by the tales of the masses of German women and children fleeing along the roads everywhere in 40-mile long columns to the West before the advancing armies. I am clearly convinced that they deserve it; but that does not remove it from one's gaze. The misery of the whole world appalls me and I fear increasingly that new struggles may arise out of those we are successfully ending." Churchill would have called his sentiment "magnanimity". It was compassion'. (Extract, edited, from an article by UK journalist, Robert Fisk, in which he shames the UK Prime Minister for his lack of compassion).

Winston Churchill thought that he should confide the compassion he felt, to his wife. Right now the President of Finland has offered to put up refugees in his own home!
