

Unsettled lives, displaced selves:
An ethnographic study of refugees' subjective
experiences and identity reformulation in a refugee
camp in Greece

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Master thesis submitted to
Department of Social Anthropology

University of Oslo

May 2019

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2019

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Abstract

As it is known, the ongoing war in Syria and the surroundings caused the Middle East's refugee crisis, an issue that became world known around 2015. For that reason, thousands of people had to flee to neighboring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey to search for refuge. However, many saw the necessity to entail longer journeys, for example, into Europe. As a result, many refugees would initially arrive to Greece due to its geographical position. However, because of strict asylum regulations of the European Union and the borders being closed, refugees were no longer able to continue their journeys. This meant that they had to stay in Greece. Thereby, this country has turned into the "front line" of the refugee crisis, where many now dwell all around the country in refugee camps, hotels, or wherever they find a spot to live, getting little aid and living under dreadful conditions.

The following thesis presented is based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork in the largest refugee camps in Athens, from January to June 2018. Throughout my research period, I gained close knowledge of everyday life in this refugee camp by working as a volunteer for one of the NGOs operating there, and learned how desperation, uncertainty, poverty, anxiety, precarity, and hope became part of the refugees' lives.

The focus of this thesis lies on the subjective experiences of young refugees' living in that camp, while looking at how they make sense of their situation, how they (trans)form or reformulate their identities in the process, and how they cope with everyday life.

Key words: Displacement, refugees, refugee camps, identity, coping, liminality, Greece.

Acknowledgments

So many people have been central contributors in the making of this thesis.

The greatest thanks are extended to my main interlocutors, students and other residents I spoke to, for making this research possible. They were always helpful, answered all my inquiries, and made my period in Athens very enjoyable and fun. They also taught me that even life can get quite hard sometimes, giving up is not an option. I am grateful to have met them, and although I do not mention all of them (and have anonymized their names); I wish them all the best of luck wherever they are/go.

Thanks to the NGO I worked with for letting me work there, get into the refugee camp, and conduct my research. Thanks as well, to a good Greek friend of mine, and to the volunteers I met, who also gave me some moral support, and made my fieldwork experience exciting, less hard and lonely.

Thanks to Gjermund for being patience, supportive, and reliable, before and during my fieldwork. I could have not survived it without him.

Thanks to my sister Pamela, who read the drafts and helped me with the language. She was too of great support.

And last but not least, a special thanks to my parents who gave me the tools and values to become the person I am now, but also the support and love to keep going. I could have not finished my education without them.

Oslo, 21/05/2019

Connie Perez Acosta

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“If you are good, people will not call you refugee”

Akam, Kurdish resident from Iran, 21 years old

“All we would like is for us to be treated equally as humans”

Yaran, Kurdish resident from Iraq, 16 years old

Introduction

At around 17:00 pm everybody started gathering in the “big meeting room” which was a long almost empty container where we used to have the kid’s dance lessons. The resident volunteers got there first and started to prepare everything. They brought some tables, some chairs, cakes, cookies and a big speaker for the music.

We were having a “good-bye party” for Hamid since he was finally going to leave for Germany. His father and brother were already there, but the father had now come back to get Hamid and his mother with them. Hamid was going to use his brother’s passport as his own since they really looked alike and since Hamid had had problems with his refugee application and had no papers.

After around 30 minutes of preparation, Hamid arrived, and the party started. Some of the resident volunteers and I started dancing. We started with music in Arabic and then changed to English. There were many people, maybe around 30 or more, both adults and kids, including some that have not even been invited, but Hamid did not care. He was always nice to everyone.

After a while, everyone started dancing too, and it looked like everybody was having a good time. Later, we gathered around the tables in the middle of the room, where the cakes and cookies were, all made by Hamid the day before. People took a lot of pictures and Hamid cut the cake. It resembled more of a birthday party. Two of the resident volunteers started to pass out the cake slices to everyone in the party, while another one, a girl of 16 years old, laughing and saying things in Arabic, took a bottle of coke and shook it as if it was champagne, letting it burst everywhere. Everyone was laughing and celebrating.

Suddenly, Hamid asked me to help him, so we left the party and went to his home. His family had already sold their container, their things and the sewing shop they owned in the camp. I even went shopping with him some days before, so he would have some new clothes in Germany. I knew he was ready to leave.

He asked me about how things worked at an airport, about luggage allowance, and I gave him some tips. He seemed a bit nervous but sure and happy. After that, we went back to the party. Some volunteers were going home so everyone started actually saying goodbye to Hamid. The volunteers hugged him and wished him good luck and some even started crying. It got a bit emotional. Nevertheless, he was so happy that he was finally leaving the camp after 2 years in Greece. At around 19:30 pm the party had ended. The few of us that were still there said goodbye too, wished him all the best, and went home.

The next day, a Sunday, I received a phone call. It was Hamid crying. He had been stopped at the airport and could not leave, although his parents had got on the airplane, as their IDs were real. Hamid was now alone in Greece and had nothing left.

The story presented above sheds light into an ongoing international issue, that is to say, the refugee crisis we all have heard about.

The summer of 2017, I volunteered in a refugee camp in Athens for a month with an NGO. After that, I came to realize that the refugees and I might have some things in common since we were all in a different country than the one we were born into. My identity and the way I define myself changed during the past years since I moved to Norway, and sometimes I still get confused about who I am and to where I belong. Because of this, I started to gain interest in the migration and refugee topics, but also started to think about how the refugees in that camp might be facing a similar situation after leaving their countries, coming to Europe and having to (re)negotiate who they are. As a result, I decided to focus this master dissertation on refugees, and hence present you here an ethnographic study resulting from a 5 months fieldwork in the largest refugee camp in Athens, Greece, conducted from January to June 2018.

During my stay in the camp I could observe how desperation, uncertainty, poverty, anxiety, precarity and at the same time a certain hope for the future, were part of the everyday lives of the refugees in the camp. At the same time, stories of people going to the airport with fake passports to “try their luck” were more than common, especially among young men in the camp. People came and went regularly, that is to say, most of them would just suddenly travel to other countries without telling it to anyone in case they failed, and some would just suddenly arrive at the camp. Moreover, volunteers were too, always coming and going, as they would only come for some days to help.

The people living in the camp, had to get used to all the uncertainty and distress the situation involved, as they were somehow trapped in the camp and trapped in Greece, all while their lives were set to pause, waiting to get the refugee status granted, but also to get reunited with their families.

The research presented here covers thus, only a part of their journeys. A difficult part nonetheless, because they have to wait and live under uncertain and precarious conditions. Here, where the response once was supposed to suit only an emergency phase, and offer refugees a path to autonomy, it has now become a long-term dependency process.

The needs of the refugees have simply been reduced to food and shelter, and it has become assumed that the easiest way to provide such rights is through camps (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 156).

Refugees live therefore in a suspended existence, in institutional precarity where they do not get the possibility to establish and continue with their lives. They are in-between. They do not belong, and thus, they become only numbers in the narratives of politicians, state policies and the media.

“In an era in which refugees have become ‘invisible actors,’ it is crucial to understand them “as a persona, as a person”, preserve their subjectivity and recognize their contribution to host societies” (Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 18). Therefore, in line with Ozkaleli, I also want to show that there are human beings behind these numbers.

Background and theme

People seeking refuge are not fleeing poverty; they are fleeing danger. They face a situation of uncertainty about the conditions in potential destinations and about the future in general.

Destination countries are difficult to access due to border control and for asylum migrants it remains uncertain whether they will be granted a residence permit or not. Therefore, they are often forced to cross borders irregularly and to make use of the services of smugglers (Dekker, Engbersen, Klaver, and Vonk, 2018).

However, and contrary to the common thought that all these people are in Europe, Betts and Collier (2017) in their book, claim that nearly 90% of the world’s refugees still live in developing regions that neighbor conflict and crisis. These countries, (which include, Lebanon, Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan, Jordan, Iran, and more recently, Turkey) have, nevertheless, the least capacity to host refugees yet they bear the greatest responsibility¹. At the same time, over half the world’s refugees, including 75% of Syrians, live in urban areas where assistance is limited and the formal right to work is usually restricted. By moving to cities, most refugees surrender all formal support but also end up locked out of the formal economy. Therefore, too many refugees find themselves without aid and facing destitution. Consequently, an increased number of people are now seeking other options, as risking their lives traveling onwards to another country. The result is what we are seeing in Europe now. Yet it is only 10% that reaches the developed world.

¹ According to a report (from the UNHCR) on global trends from 2017, Turkey hosted the largest number of refugees worldwide, with 3.5 million people, followed by Uganda and Pakistan with 1.4 million people, Lebanon with 998,900 and Iran with 979,400 million people. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/5b27be547.pdf>

Refugees in anthropology: a theoretical context

The twentieth century, as Colson (2003) claims, has been called the century of the refugee because of the increasing salience of research on those forcibly uprooted.

Dryden-Peterson (in Arvanitis, Yelland and Kiprianos, 2019) argues hence, that descriptive pieces within the existing literature about refugees often provide statistics and data about origins and movements, the humanitarian responses to basic needs in situ camps, concerns about psychological well-being and health, and recommendations for asylum policy and education provision for the refugees. The emphasis, she continues, has tended to focus on post-arrival experiences in settlement countries, yet little attention has been placed on the experiences of intermediary countries or first asylum entrance points.

Moreover, as Malkki (1992) shows, refugee studies and postwar literature often portray the refugee as an anomalous person that requires therapeutic interventions and correctives, thus, placing the problem within the bodies and minds of the refugees instead of putting the blame on the political processes that produce these massive displacements.

Refugees seek protection in a new territory, having often no travel documents or proof of identity, and state borders define who belongs in this new territory, or who does not. This way, the refugees dwell in distinct places with limited rights and little comfort, something that leads to feelings of ambiguity and of being out of place (Arvanitis et al., 2019).

In such a manner, many have compared the refugee experience with the liminal phase of “Rites de passage” (transitional rituals), which will be further explored in chapter 4. Van Gennep (1960) describes these rites as having a three-part structure, where the liminal period is a stage of transition. Turner (1970), drawing heavily on Van Gennep, notes that the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, invisible. That is, the status of liminal individuals is socially and structurally ambiguous. They stand at the threshold between what they use to be and what they will become. Yet, liminality is a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point, and as such, it is a temporary state that ends when the person is reincorporated into the social structure.

Refugees, by living a temporary life waiting to get their asylum granted, exist in a limbo, or as Mortland (1987) says, in a state of "in-betweenness," in which any previous status or position they possessed no longer obtains. This way, refugees become "matter out of place", and "the others" in relation to the residents of the communities they arrive to, thus falling apart the already established categories. As we know, the necessity to categorize everything around us, including other people, is imminent in all societies to establish a social order and create a sense of belonging (i.e. an identity). However, categories often serve as well, to create distance and discriminate between "us" and them". Consequently, refugees, who are neither inside nor outside categories, are regarded as anomalies.

Moreover, Ozkaleli in her article (2018) claims that, by definition, the term "refugee" objectifies a human to the law of the land, which a refugee is bound by but not part of. In contrast, the refugee is no longer bound by the law of his/her home country but is forced to remain part of it. The refugee thus finds himself/herself in an abyss between his/her home country and his/her host country in the process of becoming. The refugee label turns, therefore, humans into a one-dimensional person and has a generally accepted definition of forced expulsion that often creates stereotypes and generalizes people into a cluster. Hence, naming individuals as displaced, says Powell (2012, p. 318), marks them as "others", something that discursively binds them with narrative expectations of displacement, where precarity, uncertainty, and inbetweenness become terms attached to these expectations. Thus, marking the displaced as the "other" is a way of categorizing fears, so that the other remains at a distance from ourselves.

Nonetheless, even if a liminal state can be ambiguous, full of constraints and have cultural imperatives, individuals can actually engage with culture productively through the negotiation and development of new status, and the formation of new social relations. They can reflect on cultural meanings, forge new identities, and rethink culture in the realm of the beyond. That is to say, liminality can also provide possibilities for (positive) change (Arvanitis et al. 2019).

Displacement, as shown, entails more than just mobility, but it is still important to have in mind that refugees, as displaced people on the move, are no longer rooted to one place only. In this manner, Burnett (2013) states in her text that refugees are often seen as people who have lost their identity because they no longer have a legal connection anywhere. Hence, as Tuner (2015) argues, by belonging neither here nor there, refugees challenge the assumed link between nation, state and citizen.

However, -and contrary to the functionalist visions of some scholars and as portrayed in Malkki's article (1995, *B*, p. 508), about how culture, identity and nationhood are bounded to one place, and that the displacement across nation-state borders entails a loss of these-, it has been proved, also through my own research, that as refugees move, their culture, identity, traditions, etc, moves with them. Nonetheless, it can be argued that something more like a transformation or reformulation² of refugees' selves occurs in the movement across nation-states, because migration and resettlement, as Oliver- Smith (in Colson, 2003) argues, indeed involves or evokes rapid and radical changes. These transformations occur because people are uprooted from their familiar circumstances and have to adapt to the new situations they are facing, something that is often difficult and painful, and engenders feelings of powerlessness and alienation.

In the same line, Zetter (2007) argues, that refugees are no longer randomly distributed around the world, physically detached from social and economic ties with those who remained behind or endorsed by the dangerous and furtive cross-border movements. Refugees have become a community of people that are frequently in touch with each other across borders, but also with their homelands. Where and what is home, entails not only a physical location, but a process of belonging, in a very different de-territorialized world.

In this manner, Burnett (2013) claims that one could assume that all immigrants have to contend with new living conditions that can affect their identities; however, forced migrants have a far more difficult resettlement experience since the new living conditions may not have been a matter of choice for them. As a result, the resettlement of refugees into new social, cultural, economic and/or political environments can be disruptive to their identity and their sense of belonging in their host country. Thus, as Malkki (1992, p.24) argues, in the absence of territorial-national bases, refugees, through memories and claims invent homes, homelands, and places that they can no longer inhabit. Through my research, I observed that these thoughts gave refugees hope, but also that migration does not automatically entail that a person will forget his/her home country as a part of his/her identity.

Displacement, the long wait, and everything that comes with the refugee experience is an actual disruption to the refugees' lives. In this line, Becker (1997, p. 125) claims that discontinuities in life force individuals to reconstruct their biographies so their existence makes sense in the new reality.

² I will explain this further in chapter 4

Therefore, for the creation of a sense of continuity, the life story must be reconstructed to fit a set of life circumstances different from those originally anticipated.

Above, I have accounted for the theoretical landscape where anthropological studies of refugees are moving in. Having this in mind, I want to investigate how such a contradictory and ambiguous reality the refugees live in, works in the (trans)formation or reformulation of their identity. At the same time, I want to uncover what kind of lives and identities exist inside the camp, especially, since these are being constantly affected by an imposed refugee label, but also by the spatial dimensions of the camp, and the instability that temporality brings about.

Moreover, it is important to remember that even if, as Eastmond (2007) states, there is a tendency to think of refugees as an undifferentiated, essentialized and universal category quite irrespective of the different historical and political conditions of displacement and of the individual differences between people who become refugees, individuals experience this in different ways and find, therefore, different strategies to survive.

But, who is a refugee? The refugee label

Refugees, besides having to confront a forced displacement, they also have to confront the new label of “refugee”, a component that they previously did not have to consider while living in their country of origin. A person who was formerly a citizen of one country becomes then a “refugee” in another, something that can (and often does) have a profound effect on that person’s identity (Burnett, 2013, p. 1).

Labels, Zetter (2007) claims, ascribe simplified meanings and refugees’ experiences get boiled down to a formalized type of experience and unique categories which corresponds to the bureaucratic and political values that create them. In recent times, globalized processes and patterns of forced migration have given rise to an important transformation of the refugee regime and the refugee label; thus, giving it a concrete political definition. This categorizing of refugees is based on instrumental practices that serve the interest of the state. Hence, institutional interests transform a story into a bureaucratic label and ascribe an identity of the “other”.

Nevertheless, in the context of contemporary transnational refugees, the conceptual distinction between migrants and refugees has become highly blurred. Refugees, says Zetter (2007), are no longer contained in the south but arrive at Europe’s borders more and more often. Furthermore, forced migrants are just but one category in the “migration scope” who are moving for different social and economic reasons. This way, the label has become exponentially blurred due to complex social transformations producing more complex forms of persecutions and exile, and globalization, which allows refugees to spread to many other destinations. This, at the same time, has also created a challenge for governments in the north to manage these large-scale migration flows and to distinguish between the different labels migrants claim. Thus, it has been necessary for them to have clear-cut labels and categories and differentiate between the different reasons for migration.

National governments, says Zetter (2007), are now the main power that form and transform the refugee label (and not NGOs as it was in the past)³. State action, this way, mobilizes bureaucratic labeling to legitimize the exclusion and marginalization of refugees. The label has become normalized and institutionalized in policy discourses that also serve bureaucratic purposes.

³ In the past, the concept of labelling focused on how humanitarian agencies formed, reformed and politicized the refugee label. Now, the concept of labelling points to government agency (Zetter, 2007, p. 189).

In fact, everything suggests that rather than becoming separate, humanitarianism and politics are tending to merge — in governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental spheres (Fassin, 2007, p. 509). Hence, the refugees constitute a political form of migration, (in contrast to immigrants who constitute an economic form) in a process that should be apolitical since everyone, in theory, should have the right to claim the refugee status. As such, the refugee label is no longer a right but a prized status and expensive commodity that has to follow immigration procedures and bureaucracies serving state powers and interests (Zetter, 2007).

The terms “Refugee” and “Asylum seeker” are thus now mainstream labels that have been institutionalized in policies and practices of most European countries. However, and although their meaning is not quite the same, I have observed that in everyday speech, people tend to switch between them, or to refer to everyone that is displaced as a refugee, regardless of their actual legal status.

According to Amnesty International (2019): *“An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection; someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Whereas, a refugee, is a person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker”.*

Asylum seekers and thus, refugees, must in addition, comply with many international regulations, which are often not easy to understand, and again places them in a situation of precarity, uncertainty and despair. They have managed to escape war and persecution, but now they have to survive Europe.

One of these regulations is the Dublin Convention. The Dublin Convention of 1990 provided a common asylum policy in Europe; however, in 2003, it was modified with the Dublin Convention II. The conventions specify that the first European country the asylum seeker enters to is the one that has to take care of the asylum process and the asylum application of the seeker. If they move on to another EU country, they should be sent back to their first country where they have applied and they ought to stay during the whole process. When an application is made, the asylum seeker’s

fingerprints are saved in EURODAC, a database from the European Union, which prevents having applications all over Europe (Havlova and Tamchynova, 2016).

In 2013, the European Commission approved adjustments to the Dublin Regulation, creating this way, the Dublin III Regulation, which replaced the previous ones. The Dublin III Regulation was based on the same principles as the other two, in that the first EU country where fingerprints were stored, or an asylum claim was submitted, was the one responsible for a person's asylum claim (Asylum Service. Ministry of Migration Policy, 2014, A).

Nevertheless, it is actually contradictory that asylum seekers are not allowed to enter any country in a legal way, even though they indeed have the right to apply for refuge in one European country. Consequently, they are forced to take dangerous actions such as paying to be smuggled into Europe. The first and most common route for smuggling (after they get out from their countries) is from Turkey to Greece, yet, due to the Dublin Regulations and closed borders asylum seekers cannot continue their journeys, meaning that Greece has become a collection site for many thousands of migrants.

According to the Statistical Data of the Greek Asylum Service in 2018 Lesbos was the region with most asylum applications (17 270), with a total of 66 969 applications in 2018, plus 10 987 until February 2019 registered in all Greece (Asylum Service. Ministry of Migration Policy, 2014, B).

This is a real problem, because Greece has not the capacity and means to provide such help, since they themselves are still recovering from their economic crisis. Hence, the conditions for refugees in Greece are not optimal. Refugees often do not receive the health care they need, they are not always offered financial support, legal assistance in most cases is not available and many live under inhuman conditions. As a result, many decide not to apply in Greece and live illegally until they can be smuggled to another country, meaning that they do not get any help at all. Thus, it can be argued that those living in refugee camps are to some extent more protected and have some more benefits than those living on the streets.

The refugee crisis is therefore, as Havlova and Tamchynova, (2016) argue, also a crisis for the European common asylum policy, as the refugee liability has not been distributed equally within the EU. Moreover, in spite of the efforts to make the common asylum policy more effective, the incompetent asylum system in Greece and the lack of willingness of the EU countries to cooperate

and coordinate their refugee and asylum policies, make the whole asylum process long and tedious, forcing refugees to wait in Greece, sometimes for over 3 years.

Based on the above, the aim of this thesis is, therefore, to show, through ethnographic examples, the implications of becoming a refugee, and everything that comes with it. Hence, my focus group is the refugees living specifically in the refugee camp I was working at.

Thus, as I write about "refugees," I know, I am too, contributing to the same stereotyping/labeling. Therefore, my first step here is to try to avoid the word "refugee" and refer to them as "residents", in the same way that the other NGOs referred to those living in the camp. However, although, the "refugee" label can be useful and effective as a categorizing tool to understand the consequences of this huge crisis (if detached from the negative connotations it carries), it is still important to look beyond it to actually see the human beings behind it, and the resources they can represent.

Consequently, in this master's thesis I would like to go beyond categories and examine the lived experiences, hopes and desires these people have, while also looking at how they find meaning in the absurd reality of living in permanent temporality. Moreover, I want to show how the refugee experience affects them and thus, leads them to negotiate and (trans)form their identities and sense of selves in the camp.

In line with Cohn (2018, p. 335) I argue that we need more studies that examine the immigration experience, from all its different fragments and as part of a journey and movement, particularly, since most anthropological studies of immigration normally aim its focus towards the immigrants' country of origin or their destination, and do not talk much about what happens in the journey in-between.



Picture 1: The refugee camp. "Town square".



Picture 2: The refugee camp and some containers in the back.

Chapter 1. The Method

In anthropology, Malinowski was a pioneer that laid out a modern method for collecting ethnographic data. He encouraged anthropologists to abandon “armchair anthropology” and rather perform a physical study in the field, gathering their own information. Thereafter, anthropologists started to conduct fieldwork, spending time with members of other cultures and societies, observing and interacting with them and using their own senses and tools in the research. This method called “participant observation” became the main method used, although other data-collection methods were and are still used as well. Participant observation is a whole-of-body experience. Its core fundament is that the ethnographer, in order to understand other humans, must do as they do, live with them, eat, work and experience the same daily patterns as the ones (s)he studies. In this manner, the ethnographer becomes both an observer and a participant (Madden 2010). In my research, I too used this approach as my main method. Therefore, I moved to Athens to work in a refugee camp.

In the field

When I was in the field I was, nonetheless, a part-time participant observer, because I could never fully experience what my interlocutors experienced as refugees. Although I was not able to live in the camp, I tried to gain an understanding of their environment, their way of living, viewing the world and their situation as close to their reality as possible.

To gain access to the camp I had to become a volunteer, working from 10.00 to 18.00, six days a week organizing different activities for the refugees of the camp. In this thesis, I call the organization I was involved with “NGO1”. Gaining access was, nonetheless, relatively easy, since I had already volunteered there the year before. Overall, I knew the NGO quite well, as I also had worked at their headquarters earlier. Because of this, I was already acquainted with some people I thought I could refer to in my research, although most of my interlocutors turned out to be people that I had not met before. Moreover, by having been in the camp before, I had already experienced what is like to be there, and, thus, knew exactly how to start, where to go, how to behave, etc. However, this also made me have assumptions that I probably would not have had otherwise, although much of what I experienced was indeed new.

Getting access to the camp and interacting with the residents was also easy because of the physical property of my field. People were already gathered in one place, while my role as volunteer granted me access whether or not the residents wanted to have me there. However, my participation as a researcher demanded much more than just an easy access to the camp. As, Hagen and Skorpen (2016, p. 50) argue, the real access does not come when you are allowed to enter, but when you notice that you as a person are more than just tolerated; you are accepted and maybe also liked, and, thus, have a place. Nonetheless, since the residents were already used to international volunteers, I felt I was accepted quite quickly.

My participation, however, was somehow constrained by my volunteer role and I, for example, had to stay where the activities happened, not being able to wander around the camp as I pleased. Nonetheless, this made it easier for me to get in contact with the “resident volunteers” (residents that were working with us), who, in the end, became my main interlocutors. During the activities, I also had the chance to talk with some other residents, although it was harder to have contact with those who did not attend regularly to the activities.

At the same time, I also tried to find time to socialize with the people outside the activities and therefore I often ate with them at their homes, watched TV with them, played cards, etc.

Additionally, I often met my interlocutors outside the camp to go for a walk, have an ice cream or join them in their daily activities.

Data-Collection

In the first months of the fieldwork, my main method to study how the residents communicated and displayed their identities was to observe how they lived, the interactions they had between themselves and others, but also how they behaved in general. Hence, my main focus was on having informal conversations with people to get to know them better and gain their trust, but also to find potential interlocutors. At the same time, I tried not to appear as a researcher that is hungry for data but instead approach just in a gentle and relaxed manner. It was important that my interlocutors understood that I was not going to dig into their lives, as many may have experienced before in relation to journalists, police interviews or at the asylum service. I never ask them direct sensitive questions as the answers I wished for came to me by their initiative.

According to Malkki (1995, *A*), anthropologists can all too often take a role as a detective and try to discover what is hidden by gathering evidence in a mercilessly penetrating manner. However, what

is sometimes desired is merely an attentive listener. By giving up the scientific detective desire to find out about everything, you can sometimes get access to the information you want from the beginning (Malkki, 1995, *B*, p. 51). I decided to follow this, acting merely as myself and showing myself as harmless, being able to have friendly conversations with the people in the camp.

Moreover, after I had gained closer contact with the residents and potential interlocutors, I began to inform them about what I actually was doing and the more general terms about my project. I tried to make very clear that this was not part of my volunteer role. Explaining anthropology is not an easy task; however, when I said I was doing this for my university, they all seemed to understand. Nevertheless, it was probably not obvious for them that I was a researcher, as I did not write field notes in front of them. I tried it for a week, but I quickly realized that as a volunteer I had almost no time to write and that it could be a bad idea to miss out if I stepped outside to write. Thus, I started to write bullet points in my phone during the day and more proper hand-written field notes after work.

After some months in the field, I started to have more structured conversations with the ones I got to know a bit better, where I asked some open-ended questions. Most of them were already quite willing to tell me all about their stories so I did not need to have a formal questionnaire. Others, however, were a bit more reserved. They seemed willing to be interviewed but I had to ask some more direct questions. For the interviews, I normally took my participants to a closed room to ensure a stress-free environment and on the first ones I held, I wrote everything they said on my notebook. Afterward, I realized that recording the interviews on my phone was more practical, whilst writing notes by hand. Recording the interviews was not something I planned since the beginning, but it worked very well. People did not react negatively to it or to me writing on my notebook, as most of them were already used to being interviewed. Nevertheless, I always made sure to inform them that they were always free to tell whatever they wanted and that everything would be anonymous.

In addition to the observations and verbal data I gathered through moving around in the refugee camp, I captured another type of data using my body as a recording device, as Madden claims (2010), namely sensory impressions such as smells, sounds and the holistic experience of being in the camp. Additionally, I also gathered some extra data like, for example, information about the legal procedures by searching the internet and talking to some workers of the Greek Education Ministry.

Interlocutors

As mentioned, the resident volunteers that worked with us became my main interlocutors because their English level was quite good, but also because I had daily contact with them. At the same time, I had also contact with some other residents and with my English students. Nonetheless, it was sometimes hard to keep track of the residents and establish many long-lasting relationships, as many of them just travelled to other countries, while newer residents arrived at the camp.

All the ones I spoke to were men from either Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, of between 17 and 35 years old, except from two women, one Kurdish, and one Afghan, whom I became quite close with. All of them came from Muslim countries where faith normally played a central role in their daily life. However, although culture, and at times, religion, were reflected in their behavior and ideas; religion was not actually openly practiced. All said, they were Muslims (except those who were Yazidis), yet, most of my interlocutors were non-practicing Muslims, in the sense that they did not comply with all the Quranic rules. They did not pray daily, nor did they go to the mosque. Many even drank alcoholic beverages and/or smoked. This, in a sense, made it also easier for me to get closer with them.

Moreover, people living in the camp, as mentioned before, were not called refugees. Instead, they were called “residents” meaning a person who keeps residency in a given place. The NGOs decided to use this term to avoid differentiation or exclusion, as they also thought that the label was charged negatively. Thus, I think this also gave the residents a sense of belonging and having a home.

Furthermore, because of these three groups of people in the camp, three main languages were spoken. In classical anthropological ethnography, one of the key attributes for conducting fieldwork is to be conversant in the language of the community one studies. Madden (2010, p. 61) as others in anthropology, claim this way, that difficulties with language can severely affect the ethnographer’s attempts to find acceptance and tolerance from their participants, such that the fieldwork is reduced to a period of “standing on the outside and looking”.

Before my fieldwork, I tried to learn some Arabic words. However, after some weeks in the field, I realized, first, that I was not going to be able to learn three languages, and second, that I did not want to narrow my research to include just Arabic-speaking people. Therefore, I decided not to learn any language (except for some words) and rather find interlocutors that could communicate in

English. Additionally, I tried always to “adjust” (simplify) my English level so communication with the residents (whose English was not that good) became easier.

Nevertheless, while I do acknowledge the value of learning the language of your participants, I did not feel as standing outside. Firstly, because we did have a common language to communicate in and secondly because I indeed felt that, even though I did not understand everything they said (when speaking in their own tongue), a sense of resonance was created between the participants and me. Wikan (1992, p. 463) introduces this concept when she first hears it from some scholars in Bali. Resonance, they said, is what fosters empathy or compassion. Without resonance, there can be no understanding, no appreciation. But resonance requires you to apply feeling as well as thought. Indeed, feeling is the mere essential for without feeling, we will remain entangled in illusion. Wikan goes further and explains that resonance demands a willingness to engage with another world, life or idea. An ability to use one’s experience to try to grasp or convey meanings that reside in neither words, facts, nor texts, but are evoked in the meeting of one subject experiencing with another or with a text. In my case, I believe that not knowing the language was both a constraint (in the sense that I could have probably gotten more data or access to more people), but at the same time, it was too an enabler, since it allowed me to concentrate more on observations.

Furthermore, as Hume and Mulcock (2004) argue in their introduction, both researchers and the participants have to repeatedly negotiate their own feelings of trust and fear to maintain their relationship. Therefore, revealing parts of ourselves and our backgrounds often enhances our relationships with others and encourages the sharing of information that interlocutors might otherwise be reluctant to disclose. During my fieldwork, especially in the first months, I tried to be open about myself and I mentioned that I was a migrant too, since I thought this could help me get closer to them. As Jon Telfer says (in Hume and Mulcock, 2004), personal revelation is sometimes an essential step towards achieving a sense of resonance or emphatic understanding in the field.

Nonetheless, the people I got to know in the camp, were always hospitable, who when I visited them in their homes, always received me in the best possible way. They always insisted on inviting me to something, (despite it often consisted only of tea or simple snacks), and on their own initiative they often shared stories they assumed would be of interest to me. Hence, I can say, they became my friends.

Positioning and ethical constraints

Getting access to the camp and to the residents was, as aforementioned, relatively easy; however, I cannot deny the fact that my role as a volunteer influenced my research and data gathering.

Primarily because I had to follow the rules of the NGO I was working with and had to go in and out of the field every day (since I could not live there). This might have held me at a distance with my interlocutors, although, it also helped me not to experience total immersion and to not get “too close”. As Madden (2010) says, the ethnographic manner of being with people is to find a balanced way to get close, but not so close one cannot step back again.

On the other hand, by being a volunteer, residents might have seen me as a figure of “authority”, in the same way they normally saw everyone that worked in the NGOs, especially since many thought we were being paid. This made that some, particularly women, were a bit more reserved when talking, but also that they expected me to fix their problems, for example, to get them diapers for the babies, clothes from the shop, fabrics, toothpaste, etc. However, I am quite sure that the resident volunteers did not feel this way around me, as we were all “at the same level”, and we were all friends.

Furthermore, by being a woman myself, I thought it was going to be easier to get access to the women’s world; however, it did not turn out to be quite like this. The only place I had closer contact with women was at the “mother and baby area” (MB area), where men were not allowed. However, most of the women visiting this place could not speak English very well, although we still managed to interact a little.

Additionally, the fact that I was a migrant too, and a Spanish speaker, was to my surprise, in my favor. Residents seemed to have a general idea that Spanish speaking people were nicer than others, so it became easier for me to have contact with them.

Regarding the ethical implications, one instance where I had to be very thoughtful was when the residents told me their personal stories, since these stories would often contain sensitive information. Most of them were, nevertheless, quite positive in talking with me. However, there were some that did not want to be interviewed since it could be hard (emotionally) to remember everything all over again, so I respected their choice and did not push them. This is why it was also important for me to inform them about my project in advance and get their consent. Moreover, as I had been there earlier, I knew how to handle these situations, so they would not affect me

emotionally. However, I had also to make sure my interlocutors felt secure when telling me the stories or at the interviews. The coordinators were, nonetheless, also concerned about me conducting interviews, as they also wanted to ensure the residents' emotional well-being. Therefore, I tried to have more unstructured informal conversations with the residents, rather than just formal interviews all the time. For the interviews, I normally showed them the questions I wanted to ask them in advance, so they could decide whether to participate or not and went into a private room, so no one would listen.

When it comes to anonymity, Despret (2008) in his research had to break with anonymity as he argues that addressing people namely as "refugees" only reinforce the feelings of "being nobody" and deepens the contrasts between "us" and "them". To some extent, I agree with his claim, however, I decided to keep anonymous all the names of places and people, in order to protect my interlocutors and guarantee confidentiality.

Another issue I (and other volunteers as well) had to be thoughtful about was when we were talking about going back to our home countries. As for most the volunteering period was short, it was quite normal to ask each other when we were leaving. However, we had to be careful when talking about this with the residents, as they were not able to leave the camp yet, and thus, could feel bad about it. Nevertheless, as far as I know, this was never a problem.

We also had to be thoughtful when going out with the residents after working hours or on the weekends. Normally, we had to choose low-cost options, so they would not spend much money. However, they would sometimes be very eager to pay for things like drinks or snacks for me, even though I said I had enough money. It was very hard for them to take no for an answer, and this apparently made them feel good with themselves so I could not do much about it. Howbeit, this never became an issue.

Furthermore, what was most restrictive in my fieldwork was, undoubtedly, the lack of female interlocutors. During fieldwork, I had a hard time getting in touch with more women, mostly because their English was not that good, but also because they were more reserved than men. Often when I told them about my project (if I noticed that their English was a bit better) many refused to participate and said they did not want to talk about or remember their past experiences. As a result, the study I present here is based on men, and gives a somehow incomplete picture of the refugees' experiences. Hence, if the experience in the camp and Greece had also been described from the women's point of view, I am sure this paper might have looked quite different.

Another limitation is the fact that I am covering only a part of the refugees' journeys and not the whole process of what happens before and after living in the camps in Greece. At the same time, topics like the life outside the camp, the life at other locations in Greece, and the relations between international volunteers, workers of the NGOs and the residents, are less touched upon within this research. This, because I do not have enough room to discuss them here. However, I am sure, that a more holistic picture of the refugee experience can be obtained if these issues are to be taken into consideration in further research.

Chapter 2. The Greek context for refugees

Given that many refugees have to travel internationally, they are an international responsibility. This responsibility, with a direct duty to provide haven is shared between the first countries in which refugees arrive and worldwide governments, which collectively have a duty of assistance. However, since the international response has been inadequate, the crisis is still present (Betts and Collier, 2017).

As the refugee crisis started to become a real emergency around 2015, refugees were turning to Lampedusa in Italy, however the journey was too long, and it became too dangerous. Yet, an equivalent European Island (Lesbos) was just a few miles away. Accordingly, many refugees and people-smugglers must have thought that maybe here too, (like before in Italy, and because of the poor conditions of the Greek public sector), it would be easy to evade full enforcement of the Dublin Agreement (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 79).

Consequently, as Papataxiarchis (2016, [A](#)) claimed, in the course of 2015, Skala Sykamnias, a village on the north of Lesbos, turned into the informal gate to Europe due to its geographical location and closeness to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria.

However, after the year of 2015, a few other beaches and villages around Lesbos (often on the side of Turkey) have become the “front line”, where the first encounters between the refugees and those expecting them (usually NGO workers and volunteers) take place. Therefore, Lesbos has also become a symbol of extensive ad hoc support and solidarity with the refugees (Rozakou, 2017, [A](#)).

Nevertheless, the refugees’ goal has never been to stay in Greece but go to other European countries. In order to reach to the rest of the Schengen area, it was necessary to cross the small neighboring non-EU countries, which as Greece, had little to lose from allowing refugees to pass through their territories. However, the neighboring EU countries did have a border force checking the papers of everyone that wanted to enter. Hungary for example, in 2015 decided to build a fence to prevent illegal entry. The refugees turned to Austria, who welcomed the new arrivals knowing that nearly all of them would soon leave to Germany (Betts and Collier, 2017).

Nonetheless, on March 2016 many countries started to close their borders. The Balkan route for example, got closed to refugees and other migrants following official border closures in Macedonia,

Croatia, and Slovenia. According to a report made by the Danish Refugee Council (2016, p. 5) by the end of April 2016, these closures effectively left around 54,000 refugees and migrants, including thousands of Syrians, stranded in Greece. Subsequently, on March 18, 2016, the European Union and Turkey reached an agreement aimed at stopping the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe. The arrangement (in short) was that all new irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving illegally from Turkey to the Greek islands after March 20, 2016, and whose applications for asylum were declared inadmissible, would be returned to Turkey. In exchange, legal refugees would get accepted into the EU. Under the agreement, Turkey was also promised 6 billion € in financial aid, to be used by the Turkish government to finance projects for the refugees in addition to visa-free travel for Turkish citizens in Europe's Schengen zone (European Parliament, 2019).

Furthermore, while Greece has become one of the main transit points for refugees reaching Europe, it may also be among the least economically equipped to deal with this challenge⁴. The Greek government is burdened with harsh austerity measures and the country's economy has shrunk by almost 30% since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, meaning that Greece is still crippled by debt. Additionally, as more people crossed the sea from Turkey to the Greek islands, the more overwhelmed the Greek border force became, and struggles in the asylum system grew bigger. This, besides the already harsh economic situation of the country, has caused delays in the process, as there are too many applications, and few people to handle them, who at the same time work normally under hard conditions, sometimes without salary, since Greece is also still recovering from their own crisis (Refugee Rights Europe, 2016).

Regardless of the situation, refugees still cross the Aegean Sea every day in unsafe rubber vessels, where only the lucky ones reach the shore. They cross the borders with the hope that once they are in Europe things will start to get better. However, this is only but the first part of a long and uncertain journey.

Upon arrival, border crossers go through several bureaucratic procedures, which normally include going to a first reception camp, where many are taken to the police to register before they are officially allowed to travel out of the island. (Rozakou, 2017, B). However, the legal procedures for refugees seeking asylum were actually not very straightforward and easy to understand.

⁴ In Europe.

I, in fact, had a hard time uncovering how the legal system worked as everyone I talked to told me differently. Some had applied for the refugee status and had all the papers they were supposed to have, some had some papers, and some others did not have any paper at all and were living illegally. Likewise, people did not always get the correct or most updated information, something that made it hard for them to know exactly what they needed. Additionally, the procedures had been changing and evolving since 2015, and varied a lot depending on the applicant's nationality, date of arrival, vulnerability, etc.

Despite this, there are some general standard procedures I would like to introduce as starting points in this confusing matter. To understand this issue better, I talked to a Greek lawyer, who told me that as the asylum seekers enter in Greece from the borders, they are usually taken to a First Reception and Identification Centre, where they take their fingerprints to the European Central Database (EURODAC), get their identities and nationalities verified, (as well as their age), and get a medical examination. Here they can also express their will to apply for asylum and get referred to the Asylum Service. Others get caught by the police when they cross and get a note, so they can properly go and register. Afterward, they can apply for asylum in the Greek Asylum Service or at the Regional Asylum Offices (Asylum Service. Ministry of Migration Policy, 2014, C).

According to the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency for refugees and asylum seekers)⁵ and the lawyer I talked to, most of the people that came into Greece before the 20 March 2016 were not pre-registered and had to book a pre-registration appointment at the Asylum Service via Skype. During this skype call, asylum seekers got informed about their full registration date, besides getting their photograph taken. Additionally, they were asked to provide some personal information (e.g. name, surname, etc.) for the Asylum Service to identify them the day they presented themselves in person to fully register or to receive their applicant's card. Some people, nonetheless, were pre-registered during the registration exercise done by the Asylum Service from 8 June - 31 July 2016 and were summoned to a full registration appointment by the Asylum Service itself. After pre-registration, asylum seekers got a pre-registration asylum seeker card, which was a trifold paper card with their personal data and a registration number.

Furthermore, to be eligible for relocation in other countries in Europe, the person must have had entered Greece before the 20 March 2016. Thus, rumors said that in these cases, Afghans and Iraqis

⁵ Retrieved from <https://help.unhcr.org/greece/>

were not eligible for relocation (they could only apply for asylum), while Syrians were normally given priority.

Moreover, if the person arrived after March 20th, 2016, s(he) could express his/her intentions to apply for asylum at the Police and/or Reception and Identification Service authorities.

Their request was then referred to the Regional Asylum Offices or Asylum Units, so they could get an invitation to fully register their application in person. When submitting their application, asylum seekers got their fingerprints and photograph taken. The pre-registration asylum seeker card was replaced with a full registration card, which indicated their case number, and the date of appointment for the examination interview. This card was called, at least by people in the camp, “the Ausweiss” and it was also a trifold paper card with their personal data and picture.

When the decision regarding their application was issued, the Asylum Service contacted them to give them an answer. If the application was granted, they would get a Residence Permit (ID, “pink card”) which stated that they were now legal and protected refugees. They could now get travel documents (a blue passport) from the Greek state in order to travel outside the country, but only for three months. However, if they got rejected, or granted only a subsidiary protection status, they could submit an appeal to the Regional Asylum Offices or the Asylum Unit where they applied first. (Asylum Service. Ministry of Migration Policy, 2014, [C](#)).

In this regard, I remember, that three of my main interlocutors told me they were not getting the Ausweiss, and for instance could not register to live in the camp, get money, etc., because they had not completed their registration on the islands. They did not complete it mostly because upon arrival they did not get all the information they needed, but also because they had been separated from their families. As I heard as well, if a person was declared “vulnerable”, i.e. sick or pregnant, the person was allowed to move to the mainland to get better care. The families of these interlocutors had been able to move to Athens before them, but they had to stay behind. Because of the terrible living conditions on the islands but also because of the waiting being too long, they claimed they had to flee to Athens. This meant that if they wanted to get their application fully registered and thus get the Ausweiss, they had to go back to the islands and fix it.

Moreover, another issue that was problematic was that there were some that did not want to apply for asylum in Greece. In the camp, I met some young men that were in this situation. They were aware of the rules but chose instead to live illegally because they knew that if they applied in Greece, they had to stay there, and they did not want that. These men would rather wait for the right

opportunity to leave the country (normally with a fake passport) and apply there were they wanted to settle (for example in Germany).

Yet another issue that makes the process harder and more complicated to understand is that some of the migrants often were not traditional refugees fleeing war or persecution. Hence, some people I met were simply people who hoped for a better life in Europe and who were willing to face great risks and hardships to get it. They, for example, have had no jobs or education in their hometowns, which meant that they had to go to Europe, find a job and send money to support those back home. However, it was not as easy as it sounds.

Here, I have merely just provided a glimpse into the proceedings and difficulties of the application process. The system already hard to understand for me (a non-asylum-seeker that speaks English) is twice as hard for the asylum seekers to understand (also because most of them do not comprehend English). Moreover, as confirmed by the residents and the lawyer, the procedures are quite long, lasting normally from one and a half year to almost three years, in some cases, as there are too many applications to handle.

Howbeit, there is much more about the legal (asylum) procedures, than the short-summarized version I have presented here, especially because the procedures have been changing a lot since 2015, but also because every person's case is different and unique, and there are mixed migration flows, which means that not everyone is entitled a refugee profile.

Solidarity

Solidarity and humanitarianism might not be in the scope of this research; however, it is still important to make a small mention of these topics in order to have a more holistic picture of the field.

As stated before, Lesbos became also the focal point of reconfigurations of humanitarianism and the emergence of vernacular humanitarianisms. Apart from large-scale, “traditional” humanitarian actors like international organizations, the solidarity movement, grassroots – and quite informal – groups, and independent volunteers are what exemplifies the humanitarian landscape in Greece since 2015. Thus, beyond the magnitude of the phenomenon itself, what was exceptional in this historical moment, was an emergent multifaceted humanitarian landscape (Rozakou, 2017, [A](#)).

However, as Rozakou (2017, A) argues in her research in responses to the “refugee crisis” in Greece, grassroots’ solidarity initiatives were often overtly antagonistic to humanitarian organizations. “Solidarity humanitarianism”, as she calls it, started, therefore, to challenge or transform established schemata of humanitarian action, as solidararians emphasized the disinterestedness of their endeavor and scrutinized the professionalism of humanitarian workers.

Nevertheless, Fassin (2007) argues that politicization of the nongovernmental humanitarian field is what is happening now. Rather than a dissociation, what we are actually seeing, he says, is increasingly a merging of politics and humanitarianism. In a similar line, Agier (in Bendixsen, 2018) argues that NGOs and humanitarian organizations are so linked to governmental functioning of power that the two become contingent upon each other: the control function (including asylum policies and management of refugees) is accompanied by a function of protection. Both the controlling and caring hand frequently claim to pursue humanitarian interventions, yet, volunteering organizations become unwillingly and unwittingly entangled in the politics of control, containment and management, and contribute to politics of control, i.e. by humanizing actions that they morally reject. At the same time, as Rozakou (2017, B, p. 38-39) claims, the registration, identification and documentation practices refugees must comply with are not simply the products and instruments of bureaucratic procedures, but are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves.

In this manner, refugee camps, as Turner (2015, p. 144) states, become a means of maintaining order and removing impurity in society, rendering refugees as invisible. However, refugees become highly visible by being placed in these and by becoming the objects of state-of-the-art humanitarian programs. Hence, Fassin argues (2007, p. 508-511) that the humanitarian politics of life is based on an entrenched standpoint in favor of the “side of the victims.” The world order, it supposes, is made up of the powerful and the weak. Humanitarian action takes place in the space between the two, being deployed among the weak as it denounces the powerful. Thus, it relates to only one part of humanity; the one on the wrong side of life. Therefore, the ontological principle of inequality finds its concrete manifestation in the act of assistance through which individuals identified as victims are established. They are those for whom the gift cannot imply a counter-gift, since it is assumed that they can only receive, becoming this way, the indebted of the world.

Rather than being political subjects, they become objects of humanitarian aid, bodies to be cared for and protected (and without agency). Individuals become constrained to behave as if they were

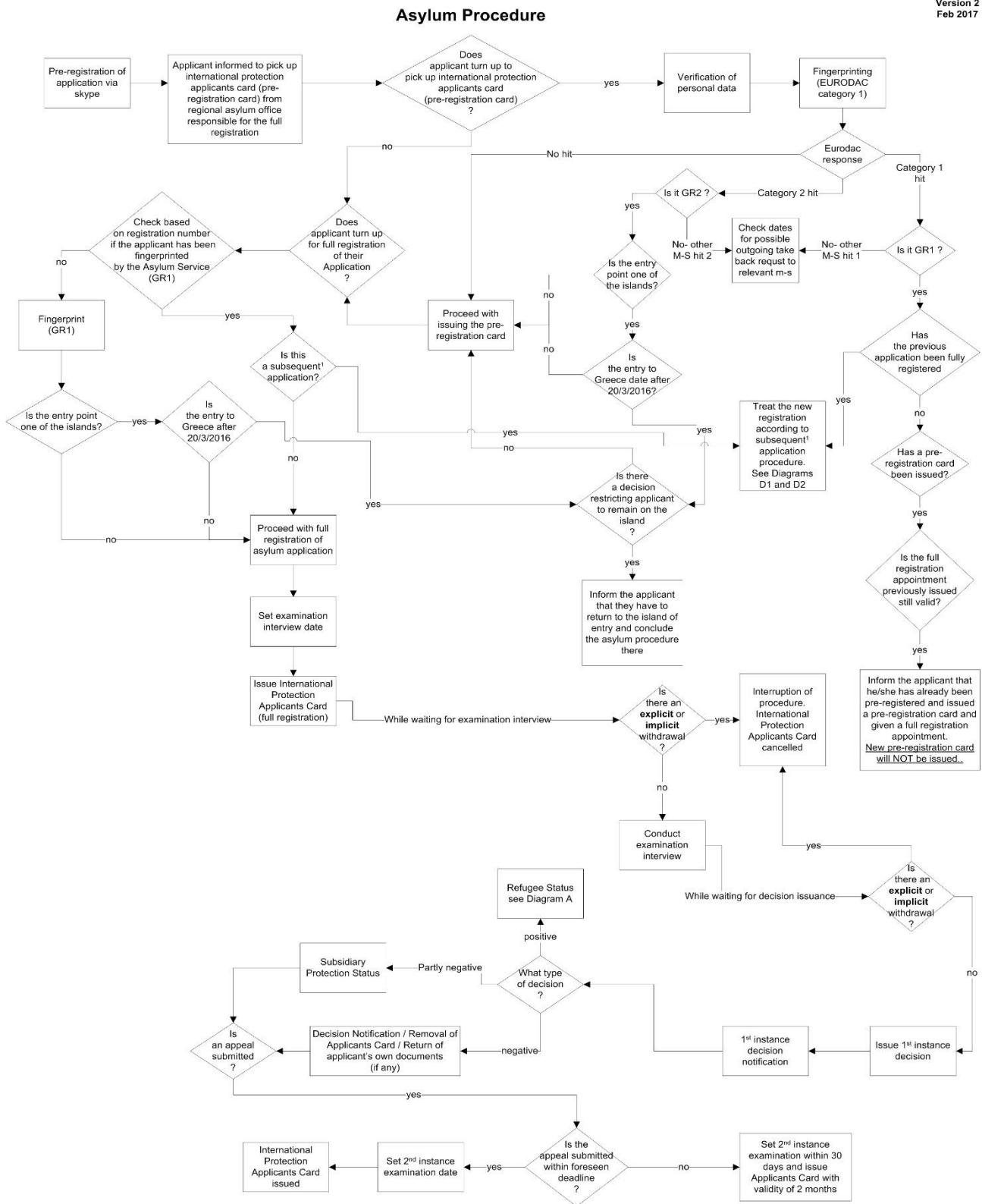
dependent and helpless, which assists the perpetuation of an institution largely composed of workers whose role is to respond to people who have problems and are in need (Hitchcox, in Colson, 2003 p. 10).

In the camp I worked at, (as in most of all refugee settlements) there were also a number of organizations present which provided different sorts of humanitarian aid and other services, for example, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the IRC, Caritas, A drop in the ocean, Save the children, ActionAid, The British Council, Organization Earth, Elix, etc⁶. This meant that the residents met both local and international actors when they entered the refugee camp. Relationships between the residents and the NGO workers/volunteers, were mostly professional as most of the workers of the other NGOs had strict policies that did not allow them to have close contact with the residents. Likewise, the regulations of the NGO1 did not allow volunteers to hang out with the residents outside the camp; however, many did go out for dinner or drinks with some residents, especially with the resident volunteers. Close contact was, thus, easier to sustain for the volunteers of the NGO1 as they were a bit freer inside the camp and could for example visit residents in their homes.

Nonetheless, as Fassin (2007, p.515) writes, the most common distinction all foreign organizations include in its missions (whether involved in aid or development) is between “expatriates” and “nationals.”, and NGO1, as mentioned, was not the exception. Here, the division was between international volunteers and resident volunteers. This distinction, seen as simply an operational matter, involved some differences, especially regarding people’s rights. For example, an international volunteer staying for more than 4 weeks, could apply for some remuneration, while the resident volunteers could not, even if some had actually worked as volunteers for more than 5 months. At the same time, the resident volunteers were more exposed to the violent disturbances that sometimes arose (at night) by the fact that they lived in the camp.

This way, even if the NGO1 (as many other organizations and volunteers) wishes to offer genuine help without expecting something in return, there is undeniably, a power dimension in all this. Moreover, the role of volunteers (and NGO workers), their positionality, and the question of whether they are doing good or doing harm are important aspects of the politics of humanitarianism and solidarity. However, these aspects, remain outside of the scope of my field of research.

⁶ Some other NGOs were working there before but had to shut down their activities due to lack of funds.



Picture 3. Flowchart of the Asylum Procedure in Greece. From the Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Migration Policy

http://asylo.gov.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Asylum-procedure-flowchart_v2_2017_EN.jpg

Chapter 3. The field. The refugee camp

It is nearly 10:00 am. I get off the bus beside the highway almost in the middle of nowhere. I look around and I see something that resembles a port area and the ocean on the other side of the road. I walk down the stairs through the underpass and get to the other side. I walk past some trash containers and then walk towards a high fence with barbed wire and a checkpoint. There is no one there. I keep walking beside the fence and see that the area is indeed really big. It kind of resembles an outdoor prison. There are a lot of white ISO-box (shipping) containers, and all of them have solar panels on the roof. Some containers are bigger than others, yet most of them are the same size. I pace between two fenced areas. One is the laundry; the other one is the gardening area.

I continue towards a big colored wooden building in the middle of the camp called “the community center or the library”. This building has a roofed terrace; a space where some residents usually sit at. There is also a broken and rusted playground right by where you can always see children playing. The swings are missing and the seesaw is broken, but this does not stop the kids.

At 10 am sharp, the coordinators of the NGO I am going to work with arrive and assign us the activities. Some of us stay in the main building, some go the mother and baby container, and some others go to the clothes shop which is beside the camp entrance. Volunteers start opening the activities and residents start to appear too.

The camp is next to the sea and there is always a lot of sun. It feels quite warm and the white dusty cement floor reflects all the light. There is almost no shadow anywhere.

Walking through the camp, you can see that most of the people hang their clothes on the windows, have plants and leave toys and shoes outside the containers. Some of the containers have even been “upgraded” with materials that were once inside them, like bed frames, to have a small terrace or shoe shelves. They try to make it feel like home.

In the camp, there are also small business establishments that the residents have set up. There is a sewing shop, some small grocery stores, a closed space with a pool table, some restaurants, 2 or 3 hair salons, and more recently, they opened too, a café with play stations.

The other NGOs present in the camp, also have their own containers and specified areas, and there is even a gym, a kindergarten and a football field inside.

“SK camp is like a city, you find everything here; however, it is not my home [...] it is boring, I have nothing here”

“SK camp is heaven compared to other camps in Greece”



Picture 4: The indoor gym and some containers in the background

“Refugee camps are an international strategy for dealing with the "fallout," the "refuse" of international crises; as such, they mark physically and symbolically the transition of human beings between societies” (Mortland, 1987, p 375).

Refugee camps, as Turner (2015, p. 140) argues, are created as a response to a state of emergency and are perceived as outstanding and temporary measures taken before normality is restored once again. Camps by definition are temporary; however, the length of this temporary stay is unknown. At the same time, camps are often placed in secluded areas and rarely marked on official maps to prevent the contamination of the country and its citizens by outsiders, though the limits of the camp are often porous, allowing goods, people and ideas to move in and out. Camps are legally under the jurisdiction of the host society but also exempted from it, and the inhabitants are treated as not belonging to the host culture and its society. The refugee camp becomes, as Malkki (1992) argues,

a technology of care and control; a technology of power entailing the management of space and movement for peoples that are “out of place”.

Moreover, most camps, as Betts and Collier (2017) similarly state are premised on a model of segregation; they physically segregate refugees from the citizens of the country allocating them in remote locations. Thus, and so, politicians are under pressure since many host societies perceive the long-term presence of refugees as a source of competition for scarce resources or a threat to their security. As a result, they have to minimize refugee’s participation in the economic and political life of the host state (Betts and Collier, 2017, p.137).

Nonetheless, while it is easy to focus on camps as places of confinement, seclusion and stagnation, Agier (in Turner, 2015) argues that they may equally be places where diverse norms, language and forms of social organization meet at this cosmopolitan crossroads, and where sociality is (re)created, social hierarchies are produced, and politics continue to have significance (Turner, 2015).

Coming back to the topic of Greece, since 2015 many refugee settlements/camps have been and still are being established, (including several refugee-squats, which have emerged predominately in the Athens area). These settlements vary greatly in size, in quality and extent of the services provided, shelter type, living conditions and camp management arrangements. Additionally, there are also a large number of refugees and displaced people who have found themselves homeless on the streets in Athens, which, with any luck maybe can find refuge in a squat or a community center. Moreover, the living conditions and situation of the refugees in the country remain continually in flux, subject to changes both in response to global political events but also local, organizational changes (Refugee Rights Europe, 2016).

In Athens, the SK⁷ refugee camp established in March 2016, is the biggest camp of the capital, located in a port area with the same name. SK is also a small industrial area in the region of Attica in Athens and it is part of the municipality of Haidari. Before the refugee camp got established in this location, taking more than the half part of the port, it was mainly used as a shipyard. In 1957 Hellenic Shipyards SA was established and settled on the beach of SK. The port of SK is now used exclusively by the shipyard and the industries that operate in the area. In recent years their main

⁷ SK: abbreviation of the real name of the camp to preserve anonymity.

objectives have been the shipping orders of the Hellenic Navy and the construction of railway vehicles⁸.

SK was not a first response camp, where they received clothes and basic supplies upon arrival, like those in the islands. The arrangement proclaimed temporary by the Greek government and the UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) with EU funding became actually a waiting area where asylum seekers could patiently wait to get their refugee status granted or to be resettled elsewhere in Europe. However, it has recently become a more permanent settlement due to rejected asylum applications and delays in the bureaucratic system (AthensLive News, 2017).

During my fieldwork, the camp of SK, as a refugee camp, was home to around 2500 people seeking asylum. But before, people were living in the port of Piraeus, in tents, in the streets of Athens, or at some other camp. In SK, the residents were mainly Syrian Arabs, Iraqi Kurds, and Afghans⁹. When I first arrived, the coordinators told me that in total there were 15% from Syria, 30% from Iraq, and 20% from Afghanistan, plus the children¹⁰. Most of the residents living in SK were families with children, but there were also some unaccompanied teenagers and single young men. Most of them had been living there for over a year waiting to get their asylum granted in Greece, and the majority wanted to leave the country and go to Germany, for example, to reunite with other family members.

During my first months at SK, there was no official camp management. Thus, the DRC (The Danish Refugee Council), together with the Greek Navy, acted as overall authorities. However, they actually did not have real decision power. Nevertheless, by the start of May 2018, proper camp management was established, making the camp a more secure place both for the residents and the NGO workers/volunteers.

The camp's location outside the center, and its big size was a quick and adequate solution to the problem of space, when the Greek authorities needed to accommodate refugees on the mainland. However, the camp was a very isolated place, as it was located almost 20 min by bus from the last

⁸ Retrieved from:

https://web.archive.org/web/20120225133638/http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_economyepix_100009_07/05/2006_183075

⁹ After May 2018, there were also some Africans living in the camp, besides the others.

¹⁰ The population of the camp has constantly risen and fallen since 2016. This is the approximate number of residents when I got there. However, by the end of March 2019, there were around 2583 residents.

metro station and there were only three bus lines driving in that direction. In fact, one could never imagine there was a refugee camp there, as one could only see the industrial port and some hotels from the distance.

A “camp”, as Papataxiarchis (2016, *B*, p, 3) argues, comprises a set of structures – a medical room, tents, ISO containers, utensils – cramped into a few hundred square meters, that provide the necessary facilities for cooking, sleeping, storing, providing (medical) care etc. Camps are prone to self-sufficiency; they are inward-looking worlds. As such, SK was not an exception. Fences and barbed wire surrounded the camp, and it sadly resembled a prison camp. SK, like other refugee camps, was bounded, clearly demarcated in space with its own entrance, assembly point, signboards etc. and markers of its separate identity.

The residents in the camp lived, therefore, in white ISO-boxes (shipping) containers, which they called “caravans” and which, in theory, had been assigned upon arrival¹¹. There were around four hundred caravans lined up in rows that lead to a common area with a community center, a playground, and offices for the NGOs. Beside the containers, there was also an indoor exercise facility for men and women, a garden to plant different types of flowers, a soccer field, and a big container for special events and weddings. Additionally, there were several classrooms (empty containers) where the NGOs offered classes, and some restaurants, cafes, shops, and hair salons the residents had set up.

The residential containers had A/C and kitchen facilities and were divided into two parts. One big room, one smaller room, and a bathroom in between. Normally there were two families per container, but if the family was too big, or they had small babies, a family could get one whole container.

Moreover, all of the residents, in theory, should have had a small plastic red card (SK card) that proved that they were registered and accepted in the camp, aside from having their Ausweis that proved they had actually applied for asylum. Yet, since there was no official management, many were living unregistered (1200 people by March 2018 according to coordinators of the NGO1). This meant that it was hard to know if all of them were actually asylum seekers, or not. As far as I

¹¹ Without camp management, a container business developed among the residents. I will explain this further in chapter 4.

know, some people were living in the camp illegally (without any papers), because they did not want to apply for asylum in Greece. Moreover, having the SK card and the Ausweiss would additionally give them access to “pocket money” (around 90€ a month) and not having these papers meant they would not receive the money. Thus, they had to find it by other means.

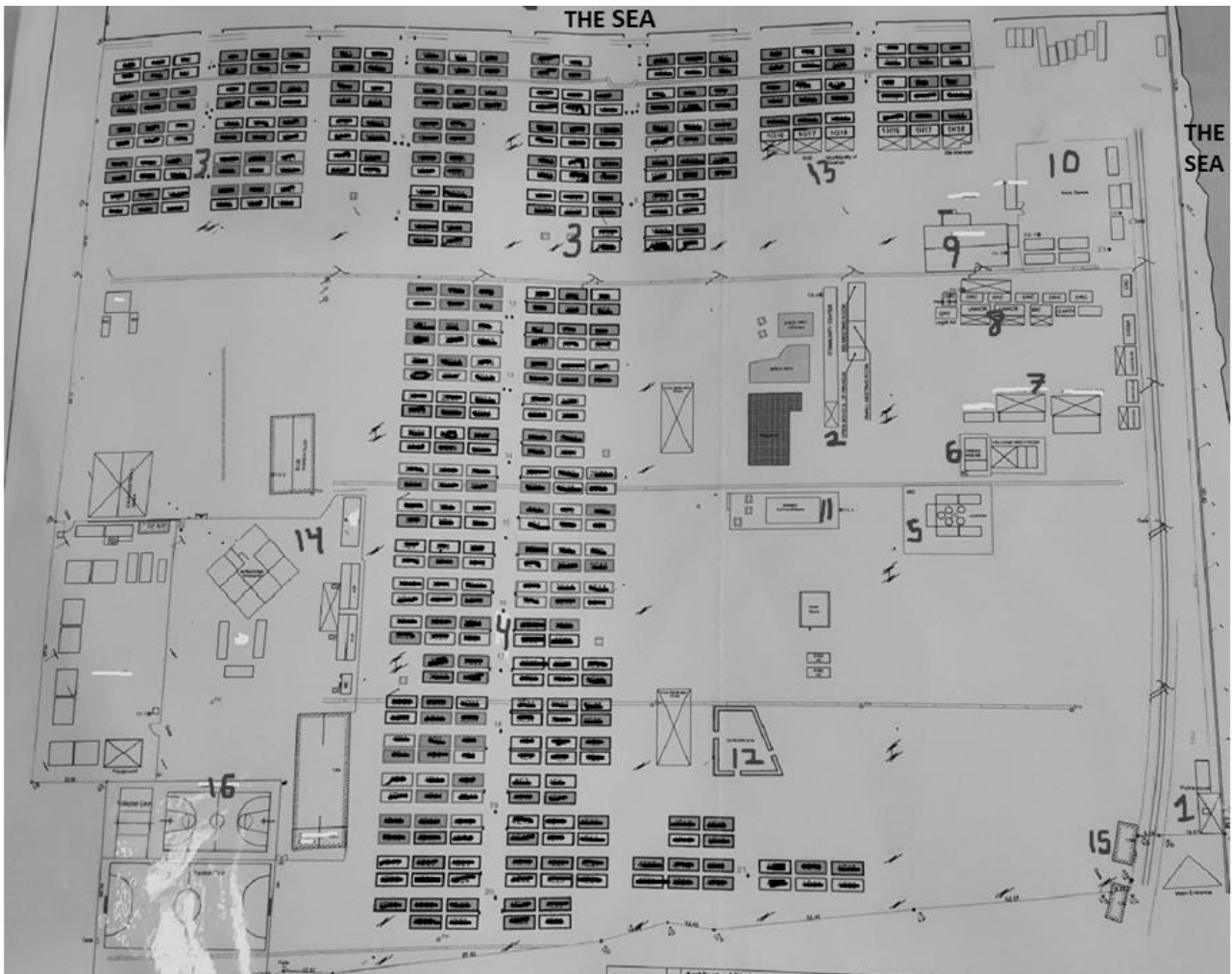
Residents, nevertheless, were allowed to come and go as they pleased, thus they had to carry their refugee identity cards, every time they were out. When there was no official management, everyone was allowed into the camp, however, when the official camp management got established, residents and outsiders were required to have official permission to leave and enter the camp. Additionally, some residents, as mentioned, were even allowed to have small business inside the camp, like mini markets, barbershops, food stands, etc.

Inside the camp, it felt as if someone had taken a Middle Eastern town and put it in the middle of nowhere in Athens since it was like a small community with houses¹², some shops, and restaurants.

The living conditions in the camp were, as described by many refugees and volunteers, “not that bad” (if compared to other camps), considering it had water, light, and other basic services.

Nonetheless, around the end of March 2019, I heard that 100 big tents were set in the area next to the laundry, for the roughly 500 new people that were relocated from the islands to the camp. These people had to share some few festival toilets and showers and got three meals a day since they did not have a kitchen. However, around mid-April 2019, the tents were removed after three of them got burned to a cinder on March 31, 2019, and new containers were brought in to house the newcomers.

¹² I write houses as meaning homes.



Picture 5: Map of the SK camp from 11.08.2017

1. Entrance and checkpoint
2. The community center/library from NGO1
3. Resident's containers
4. More resident's containers
5. The laundry
6. The gardening area
7. Mother and baby space from NGO1
8. DRC and IRC offices/ containers
9. Health care facilities
10. The Navy offices/ containers¹³
11. The indoor gym

¹³ In the end of May 2018, the Navy moved its containers besides the clothes shop.

12. The outdoor gym
13. The containers of the Greek ministry of education and municipality of Haidari
14. The kindergarten
15. The clothes shop from NGO1
16. The football field and more educational containers

The activities

The NGO1 offered some daily activities for the residents. Everyone that worked with this NGO was a volunteer (including the coordinators), who would come for a period to help. Some of the residents also volunteered with us, so they would have something to do during the day, and/or because they wanted to gain some work experience. During my first visit to the camp in 2017, it was not allowed to have residents working with us, as the NGO meant it could cause ethical dilemmas. However, when I got back in 2018 there were many residents already working with the NGO. Having residents as volunteers was actually very helpful. With their language skills, they were a resource in the camp, and they helped to translate conversations and convey important information, for example, between the NGOs and the other residents, or in hospital visits. They also acted often as a mediating part in conflictive situations, apart from being of big help when there were few international volunteers.

The activities were always free of charge and the volunteers had the responsibility of holding them. Most of the volunteers were “internationals”, i.e. from other parts of the world, so the main language spoken during the activities was English. The activities of the NGO1 were held at the Community Center “CC” /Library, which had in total three rooms, and at two other containers, one for the mother and baby space and one for the clothes shop.

The mother and baby (MB) space

The mother and baby space had his own container. Last year it also had a roofed terrace right outside, in the front, where there were tables and chairs that some volunteers had made. However, I heard that everything got stolen to be used as materials to upgrade the caravans.

After this, it became just a long container without any shadow. On the inside, the area was divided in two, one which included the kitchenette area to make coffee and tea, the changing tables, the tubs for baby baths and some space where things were kept to stock and to distribute. The other side was

the “playroom” area for the children, with tables, rugs, and chairs for the mothers to sit. The room was a women-only space and was open from 10:00 to 13:30 and from 15:00 to 17:45. In this area, women could bath their babies and feed them milk. They could also get sanitary towels and baby packs when they got a newborn, besides getting a coffee, a tea, and biscuits, for themselves.

The room, up until approximately May, was dominated by Kurdish women. Syrian and Afghan women would also come, however, less often than the Kurdish did.

The place was used more as a social space, than a baby area, where women could talk freely to each other and feel safe to be themselves. Many would often talk about their families, their situation as refugees, give each other tips, gossip a bit, etc. Sometimes, they would also take their hijabs off, sing, dance, and even cry if they needed too. This was a safe space for them to be women.

The age limit for the children was, in theory, 4 or 5 years old. After this age, they were supposed to go to the kids’ activities. However, there were two girls of 8 and 12 years old that would very often come with their mother, not to mention other children.

This, and the clothes shop were the places where thievery was most common. Women would steal diapers, baby bottles, nail polish, baby oil or soap, etc.

During my second visit to the camp, in December 2018, this area moved to the container next door because it was bigger, and more space was required.

The clothes shop

The shop was a two-floor-building, just beside the camp’s entry. It opened in June 2017 and followed a structured “purchase” system (in an app) and a schedule of appointments. The shop was open from 10:00 to 13:30 and from 15:00 to 18:00. All of the clothes were free, normally donated but sometimes new as well.

It was called “the shop” because NGO1 wanted to give the residents the feeling of actually going shopping; a place where they could choose what they wanted to “buy”. Every item had a “price” and each family got a certain amount of “credits” every 2-3 weeks that they could use to buy things. However, the volunteers often had to be somehow restrictive in the number of items one could buy, this in order to have enough for everybody.

The shop was divided in two. The first floor was the male department and the “check-in” area, where volunteers would check on an iPad or a computer that residents actually had an appointment on that day. On the second floor there was the female department and the “check out” area where volunteers would count every item and subtract it from their credits.

The shop was a place where conflicts would arise very easily, as residents did not respect their appointments and would often come when they pleased. This was also because they knew when volunteers would put out new clothes. Additionally, the residents would often steal clothes and argue when they missed their appointments. This because they had to wait until the next day (or sometimes a couple of days) before they could buy again. Thus, they would also argue because of restrictions in the number of items they were allowed buy (for example, underwear and leggings), and they often complained about the state of the clothes. “This, no good, no good” was an everyday phrase in the shop. Due to this, it was always necessary to have resident volunteers working here so they would be the mediators and translators in the conflicts.

The sewing room

The sewing area was in the second room of the CC. It was open every day, including Saturdays, from 10:00 to 13:30. Here, people (both men and women) could come and borrow the sewing machines, knit and get fabrics and extra material they needed to sew. The main visitors, however, were usually women, and most of them were from Afghanistan, even though women from other nationalities would sometimes come as well.

The distribution of fabric was 3 days a week and it followed a structured schedule of appointments. Without an appointment, one could not get fabrics. Every morning (especially in distribution days), women would queue outside the room at around 10.00 so they would get the best/newest fabrics before anyone else. After the computers were stolen, right before my arrival in January, volunteers had to register everything on a notebook. Normally we would have 10 people scheduled for every distribution day, yet many people would not come on their assigned date or time. Many believed they would get better fabrics if they waited a little since we used to put out “new” fabrics every first day of distribution of every week, while others would just forget about their appointments. Therefore, the fabric distribution could often cause some conflicts, because women often complained about the fabrics, or they wanted to change them, or because they have missed their appointments. This demanded that we always had a resident volunteer present who could translate for the women, also because they usually did not speak enough English. In spite of this, women

seemed to have a good time overall in this activity, fixing or making clothes for their families or for themselves, and also enjoyed being social with each other.

After lunch, this room was reorganized so it could be used for the English lessons from 15:00 to 18:00.

The Kids' activities

These activities were held in the third room of the CC from 10:00 to 12:30, just the before kids had to attend school at 13:00.

These activities included mainly doing crafts, drawing/painting, playing board games, and outdoor activities like football or basketball. Every day volunteers were supposed to plan a different activity for the children, and each volunteer was supposed to be in charge of something. For example, one could be in charge of playing outside, another one of taking care of the smaller kids, and another one of the crafts. This was a tiresome activity as every day we would receive many children from ages between two to approximately 14 years old.

The children, who would already be playing outside unattended, normally arrived by themselves, often with their siblings. You would often see, for example, a 6-year-old carrying a 3-year-old, even if, in theory, these activities were meant for children older than 5 years old. Parents were aware of this and knew that they were not allowed in the room, as this was supposed to be a school-alike arrangement. However, they often joined with their toddlers and left them there, so we would take care of them, especially if they were going out. Otherwise, many parents would just send a bigger sister/brother with the toddler.

Children were normally kind to everyone, yet they often argued, and sometimes even fought among them while playing. Likewise, we also had some “problem” kids who would steal things, fight with others, both physically and verbally, or just run around and destroy things. Children were used to running and shouting a lot, and many were selfish when playing with others. However, most of them got along quite well, despite of not having the same cultural background.

Most of the children could speak, or at least understand, English so communication between them and volunteers was easier. Thus, they were also used to call all volunteers for “my friend” to get their attention and sympathy. Having resident volunteers present was also helpful here because they could explain better the activities to the children.

After the kid's activities were done, the room was used for English lessons from 15:00 to 18:00.

The English lessons

These took place from 15:00 to 16:30 and from 16:30 to 18:00. The lessons were divided into levels and each class had one teacher. Levels one and two were the lowest ones and the most popular ones, so sometimes we needed to have two teachers. Almost none of the volunteers were educated as teachers, but we had a lot of books and resources we could use to help ourselves.

Since there was a lot of people who wanted to learn English, a registration system had to be created. Every Monday and Friday, residents could register for the lessons. They would normally get some questions to assess their knowledge and get assigned to a level.

It is very hard to say how many students there were in each class, as people would come and go as they pleased, so the amount would vary every day. Sometimes I had three students, sometimes I had ten. However, I knew more or less, who my regular students were.

Most of the students were men, as many women had to stay home taking care of the children. Many husbands would also not allow their wives to attend because they would meet other men in the class. In fact, in all my five months there, I only had 4-5 female students and they never attend regularly.

Besides these activities, the NGO1 also held a healthcare awareness program from February to March, taken over from the Red Cross when they left the cap. In this program, one volunteer together with another resident volunteer would hold a short presentation for residents about teeth care and general hygiene. At the end of it, they would give out toothbrushes, toothpaste, and soaps.

Moreover, NGO1 also arranged "outside trips" on Saturdays so people would be entertained and to get to know the public transport system and some of the main tourist attractions. Normally for these two extra activities, volunteers would reach out to the residents from container to container the day before, so people would get the information, otherwise few would actually come and register at the CC.

Other activities included German lessons (if we had enough German-speaking volunteers), movie night for the kids every Wednesday at 18.00, dancing lessons for girls every day at 17.00 and dancing lessons for women on Saturdays.

Nevertheless, I have to mention that on my last visits to the camp, (December 2018, and April 2019) after my fieldwork, some of the activities had changed. The kid's and women's dancing lessons were suspended, as well as the outside trips and the German classes, and, overall, the regulations of most activities had changed too. Changes happened often as new coordinators arrived (every 2-3 months) to work with the NGO1, and as other NGOs left the camp. This I argue, also led to more uncertainty among the residents, as they had to adapt constantly to the new changes and regulations of the activities.



Picture 6: The laundry and the gardening area



Picture 7: The playground area, and containers in the back.



Picture 8: The seaside and some restaurants.

Chapter 4. Living in the camp together

At 10.00 am, the NGO1 starts the activities, yet there are not many residents around. You can see some women standing in line outside the laundry and the sewing room waiting for them to open, and some others speaking with people from the other NGOs.

The camp, however, begins to seem full with life about one hour later. Now you can see more kids playing around and revolving on the floor, and more adults wandering around. Some will go to the doctor, some will just go outside, some will go to fix a problem, and some others will go to the daily activities offered.

So, goes the day. Volunteers stay at the activities and try to create a friendly, cozy and safe environment for the residents. Many of them come to the same activity and meet the same people every day. It has become their routine. Some others stay at the library and read a book or chat with the coordinators or other residents.

Soona, for example, goes every day with her three girls to the MB space. Normally, her mother and sister come too. There they meet some other women and drink tea with lots of sugar. The noise level is quite high as most of them speak and laugh at the same time while the babies crawl around the place, but they love it.

Later at around 13.00, the school buses arrive and park behind the Community center building. They are taking the children to school. While they wait for everyone, children run and play around unsupervised with their schoolbags on their backs. Their parents are not present as they are at the activities or at home.

Then at lunchtime, at around 13.30, the volunteers end the first shift of the day. Soona and other residents often invite me for lunch at their containers, so I end up not going to restaurants that often. The other volunteers normally walk together towards the seaside where most of the restaurant were.

The street besides the sea is more dominated by men, as they often gather here to fish, drink coffee, smoke water pipes, and because they are the ones running the restaurants. Volunteers then choose one restaurant, take a table and go to order food. The options are not that many, but for two euros you can have a falafel sandwich, some hummus or some chicken with rice.

After that, at 15:00, all volunteers go back to the colored wooden building in the middle of the camp. The students are already waiting for us outside the classrooms. The camp feels quieter now that most of the children are gone.

When the lessons are finished at 18.00, volunteers are finally done for the day and can go home. The volunteers then walk to the bus stop beside the highway and meet people, (especially men) from the camp who are also waiting for the bus to go to the city.

Life in the camp

As stated in the introduction, Mortland (1987) together with others, have earlier compared “rites de passage” (especially the liminal phase) with what the refugees experience when they flee their countries. The characteristics of liminality, says Mortland, apply a sense of appropriateness to refugees confined to refugee camps. The loss and confusion experienced by refugees after the separation from their homeland, the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the refugee camps, and the uncertainty of the future create an aura of enigma, anxiety, and timelessness for the refugees, which cannot be overcome as long as they remain in the camps.

The “rites de passage” description introduced by Van Gennep (1960) entails a three-part structure where an individual leaves one group and enters another, involving a significant change of the person’s status or role in society. The phases are: separation, liminality, and incorporation. In the first phase, people withdraw from their current status and prepare to move from one place or status to another. The transition (liminal) phase is the period between states, where one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next. In the third phase, the passage is consummated, and the person assumes his/her new identity and gets re-assimilated into society with a new status. Turner (1970), who draws on Van Gennep, focuses on the liminal phase and notes that liminality represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions, so humans are between and betwixt the social structure and hence the established categories.

Arvanitis et al. (2019, p. 136) in the same line, state too, that border crossing as a life-changing event implies a transitory stage. Mobile people, they argue, enter into unknown spaces and places where temporal and spatial borders (as well as new rules and regulations), exist. These places constitute a “threshold,” a transitory or in-between state or space, and are characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion, and change.

This way, the physical boundaries surrounding refugee camps, says Mortland (1987, p. 380), emphasize that refugees are not what they were, they are not what they will become, and they are not of the surrounding society. They are refugees who have to wait in refugee camps.

Many residents, as aforementioned, had been living in the camp for at least a year, waiting for their refugee status to be granted¹⁴. To make the waiting less difficult, the NGOs working there offered some activities, which were often visited by the residents. The MB space and the sewing room, for example, were very frequented, day after day, even if the activities did not change much. This meant that the days were quite repetitive and followed the structure of the scheduled activities of the NGOs. However, even if this could be quite boring, the routines of daily life, as Becker (1997, p. 151) claims, are crucial in establishing continuity. The repetition of events of everyday life gives structure and logic to people's lives in disruption.

Moreover, Mortland argues that many see the refugees' waiting period as time of opportunity to "transform" them into the beings it is thought they will need to be so they can succeed in their new country of refuge. A "transformed" refugee in the view of most camp authorities will be able to speak good English, be employable, be unwilling to accept welfare and be happy. However, as she observed in her research, I also observed that the refugees did not seem in need of transformation. They wanted English training but did not feel the need of being completely "made over" into new beings (Mortland, 1987, p. 385, 402). This "help", as stated before, undeniably entails a power dimension that establishes control over the refugees in hand of others, (i.e. the NGOs, government and other authorities), and renders the refugees as powerless and without agency, even though NGOs might have a sincere wish to prepare them for their future lives.

In the SK camp, as I mentioned above, the organizations present in the camp were the ones that decided everything. Thus, it cannot be denied that their position gave them a certain power over the refugees. For example, I observed, as Mortland (1987) did too, that those in power distributed everything the refugees used on a daily basis, (from clothes to pots and pans). Additionally, the amount of money the residents would receive, the type of home they would get, who was going to live with whom, which activities would be offered, as well as who could live in the camp or not, etc. was all managed by the organizations. Those in power regulated the structure of the refugees' lives. Hence, sometimes it even felt as if the organizations wanted to impose a western cosmology and values to the residents. However, the residents tried to follow their own lifestyle, values and moral rules in the camp and did not see the necessity to fully adapt to a new western style, first because their contact with the host community was very limited, and second because most of them were going to leave Greece anyway.

¹⁴ Some others had been living and waiting in the camp for almost 3 years. The waiting time varies.

Nonetheless, even though the residents of the camp often complained about many things they did not like, they did not fight against the authorities nor the NGOs, as most meant that (at least the NGOs) were actually helping them.

Furthermore, another factor that regulated the resident's movement in the camp was the weather. If it was cold, windy or rainy, you would definitively see fewer people outside. The same if it was a very hot day because there was almost no shadow anywhere. However, if the weather was nice, many people would be outside. Likewise, Mondays were days where many people were outside their homes, normally attending their appointments with the NGOs. Fridays and Saturdays were very calm and quiet days, as many residents would go outside the camp or just stay home.

Most of the residents, however, did not go outside the camp very often, and if they did, it was mostly to go to "Katehaki" (the asylum service office), to "Omonia" (the capital's multicultural point for commercial and social life, especially for immigrant communities), to the doctor or to buy food. This meant that people did not use a lot of time for leisure activities, because the options available were restricted, or some were afraid of going out, and/or because of economic reasons. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the chances of finding a paid job outside the camp were very low, as this required that refugees had all their papers, (preferably a refugee asylum claim already granted) and an address outside the camp.

Moreover, living in the camp, as many told me, was very boring (in spite of having some activities). Many residents approached the NGO1 to participate in the activities or to become volunteers so they would have something to do, at least during the day. Gulraiz, an Afghan man in his fifties, for example, went every day to his English lessons, and he never missed a class even though his English was not really improving. He stayed at the same level for at least one year, but he enjoyed greatly coming to class every day. Nevertheless, the rest of the residents who did not come to the activities or who were not volunteers had to find other things to do. Young residents, for example, normally tried to find themselves a hobby, such as skating, painting, playing football or doing yoga, whereas women usually took care of the children, made food, cleaned the house etc. and older men spent their time fishing or at the restaurants. Children, nonetheless, had always something to do. In the mornings, the toddlers could go to a kindergarten inside the camp, while the older children could either go to the kid's activities of the NGO1, the Hope School (a school in the camp where

they could learn their mother tongue), or to the music lessons. Moreover, older children were picked up at around 13.00 by buses to attend to local “Greek schools”¹⁵.

Some children, however, were not very eager to attend to school and, therefore, would decide not to go. Teenager residents were also supposed to go to the Greek high school in the mornings, but many did not go to school similarly because they said they could not understand a thing and because the teachers were not nice to them. Besides, many did not see the point in learning Greek since they were going to leave to another country later.

Despite not having much to do, some few residents had a small paid job with the Red Cross (before it withdrew from the camp), and others helped (without salary) other NGOs with translating if their English was good. However, there was no work for everyone. Consequently, those who did not have much to do had to find other ways for making the days pass faster, and some, for example, found refuge in smoking weed, although, I never saw someone doing this during the day.

This, among other things (i.e. prostitution, drug dealing, stealing) happened often, especially in the afternoons, when the NGOs were gone, not only to make time pass faster but also to have an income, as many were not registered and were not receiving money.

“In the day, people restrict themselves because the Navy and the NGOs are watching,” said one of my interlocutors. Thus, people were usually worried and afraid of what could happen at nighttime. At night, I was told, there would often be fights between men, sometimes even with weapons like clubs and knives, but normally it would not result in something big. All of this made people afraid of going out of their containers when it began to get dark, so they normally stayed inside for the rest of the day in the afternoon, especially if they had children.

Having no official camp management meant that people could, so to speak, do as they wanted. Residents felt generally quite insecure as they meant there was no one who could really help if something happened. Additionally, a container business began to take place, making it quite hard to know who actually was living in the camp. The business, as I found out, was that residents were now buying and selling the containers, meaning that whoever wanted could enter and live there, even if the person had not applied for the refugee status. Many, saw this as an unfair business as not everyone had money to buy a container; however, for those selling the containers (i.e. leaving the camp), it was a good income for the journey ahead. Nonetheless, the business stopped around May 2018, when the local police held a big operative. During this, all the illegal residents (those who had

¹⁵ They called it the Greek School because everything was in Greek, but it was a normal school.

not applied and had no papers) were taken out of the camp, while some more were brought from the islands. As a result from this, proper camp management was established.

Life in the camp, as mentioned before, was characterized by the flow of people with different ethnic (and/or religious) backgrounds. Most of the residents did not have much previous experience living with others who were different from them, and because of this some conflicts occurred. For example, a man would fight with another man if he, for instance, was checking his wife out or some other woman in his family, or because a man would claim he belongs to ISIS to terrorize others. These problems, typical for any group of individuals learning to live together for the first time, changed afterward, and fights occurred less frequently as people decided to break down barriers and stereotypes and live peacefully with one another.

Moreover, the contact between people occurred mostly in the public space of the camp, namely at “streets”, shops and at the restaurants; however, I often heard that residents would also visit each other at their containers. Likewise, people had some contact with each other when they visited the activities of the NGO1.

Living all together, seemed this way, to be less conflictive (at least when I was there) than one might imagine, as people did respect each other and they would at least say “hello” or “good day” to others in public (during daytime). At the same time, people in general seemed not to be in a full anxious-survival mode anymore and the children playing around gave the camp a less depressive feeling. This created, therefore, a positive and somehow pleasant vibe that could easily deceive an outsider’s gaze, giving the idea that people actually did not have such a bad time, especially since most of the residents were often laughing and joking, and apparently enjoying themselves. Nonetheless, in a more private sphere, racist and stereotypical phrases about other groups and complaints about the camp sometimes came up during individual conversations with the residents.

Barth (1969), in his article of ethnic groups and boundaries, states that cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence. This way, actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for interaction purposes, thus, they form ethnic groups in this organizational sense. Ethnic groups define themselves in terms of what they are and what they are not: the others. Therefore, ethnicity, being relational, needs some sort of recognition from the others (both those within the group and those outside) for it to succeed.

“Ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behavior, i.e. persisting cultural differences. Yet where persons of different culture interact, one would expect these differences to be reduced, since interaction both requires and generates a congruence of codes and values - in other words, a similarity or community of culture. Thus, the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences” (Barth, 1969, p. 15).

In the spirit of Barth, and by being a migrant myself, I can argue that one's own ethnicity becomes more important when it is seen in contrast to someone else's. It suddenly, becomes more important to find markers of difference, like nationality, culture traits, etc., to define ourselves.

As Eriksen (2010, *B*) has discussed, the metaphor of the “melting pot”, which predicted acculturation and consequently the demise of ethnicity in multicultural societies, has been proved to be wrong. The results have shown that people normally grow strongly self-conscious of their ethnic identity under circumstances of extensive contact with others.

Hence, living all together in the camp did not seem to lead everyone into being more alike and be acculturated into one same culture, even though they did share a common refugee identity and some threats of their cultures were very much alike. On the contrary, it led to a bigger and more visible (self) awareness of the differences between groups, making people more conscious about where they belonged to and where they did not.

Individuals with different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds were, in this manner, learning how to respect and coexist with one another in the camp. Yet, even if at an individual level it was necessary that they would gain a deeper understanding of equality among the different groups, as a whole, they were actually learning to live and interact with one another.¹⁶

My interlocutors were a good example of this because working with NGOS1 forced them to collaborate a lot with us (the international volunteers), with the other resident volunteers and with the rest of the residents. Moreover, every time a new international volunteer arrived, the residents always made sure they knew where they were from; “Kurd from Iraq”, “Palestinian from Syria” or “Arab Syrian”, they would say, and they would not let the volunteers make any mistake.

¹⁶ To preserve anonymity, I mention only that this was retrieved from <https://refugeesofgreece.com/>

At the same time, many residents tried to learn each other's languages so they could communicate easier and most of my interlocutors could actually communicate in one of the languages used in the camp (other than theirs) since they had learned it there.

Shivan, for example, a Kurdish man from Iraq in his thirties, told me that when he arrived at the camp, he could hardly communicate in English. However, he joined the NGO1 English lessons and started to get better very fast. After a while, he also started volunteering with the same NGO. By having daily contact with the other volunteers, his English improved a lot and he likewise learned some Farsi and some Arabic. Shivan was very proud of being Kurdish and always felt a bit nostalgic when talking about his hometown, the food and about his parents whom he missed a lot. I remember one time, Shivan invited the volunteers to his container to eat lunch. He had made Kurdish food and "kibbeh", a fried rice ball with meat inside. When we were eating, Abdi, a Syrian resident volunteer, told us that this was the Kurdish version, because Syrians also had a "kibbeh", but it was different. Shivan agreed. This shows us that even if they were open and wanted to learn about each other's cultures, they still found markers of differentiation.

In this manner, one of the coordinators of the NGO1 told me that she thought people were generally quite separated and that their national-ethnic identity was very important for them, especially for the Kurds and Palestinians. Additionally, she said that since people were in a vulnerable situation, it was somehow normal that they felt a stronger connection with the fellow members of their group. According to her, each nationality had its area in the camp, however, she never showed me this division and I was never able to prove if this was true, first because I did not wander around the camp enough, but also because I could actually see that people with different nationalities were in fact living close to one another.

Nevertheless, people actually felt a stronger connection with members of their own ethnical group and you could see, for example, that Afghans would often stick together (mostly because of the language barriers), this being particularly visible among women in the sewing room. At the same time, few people seemed to have problems with them as they were just regarded as completely different from the Kurds or the Syrians. In fact, I cannot recall hearing any Afghan saying something bad about the other groups in the camp. However, I did hear many Kurdish people (including Shivan) say things like "Arabs are not good" or "they are the ones that cause the fights/problems every time". One of my students even said, "All are liars in the camp. Kurdish

people are simpler. Sometimes they are a bit bad but still better than Arabs and Afghans, because they have a kind heart”.

Similarly, one of my interlocutors, Soona, a Kurdish woman of my age, was very good friends with a Syrian woman. However, Soona often slapped her, called her crazy and said that Arabs were generally a bit crazy. Soona, who we used to call “the queen of the MB space”, would nevertheless meet her friend almost every day at the MB space to talk and laugh together.

Likewise, in another occasion, Soona told me that Afghan women were the ones that would often steal things in the MB room when I discovered that a fancy body crème was missing from the place, although I do not know if this was a fact or just something she believed to be true.

In a similar manner, another resident I talked to told me as well that he did not like Arabs because Saddam Hussein had killed many Kurds in Iraq, including his uncle and his family. Some other family I talked to, told me they were also very careful about Arabs and Yazidis, and they, like many others, would say that Yazidis worshiped the devil. This is why I think many Yazidi people would often hold their religion secret so they would not get bothered.

Moreover, on another occasion, a Palestinian Syrian resident volunteer was designated in the clothes shop at the check-in point. A few days later, another resident volunteer working there, (with whom I had good contact with) came to me and told me that when the Palestinian guy was there, they have had a lot of problems, as the man would give all of the early appointments to the Syrians (since volunteers usually put out new items during the morning), leaving the rest with no possibility to get new items. Having resident volunteers in the activities, despite it being mostly positive, could as well create this kind of “affiliation/loyalty” problems. However, as volunteers, they knew they had to hold themselves impartial and most of them actually managed to do so.

As shown above, many in the camp held strong opinions about each other and even if it was not visible at first instance, people were certainly divided to some degree. For this reason, when the police had the operative in May 2018 and African people, (among more Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans) were brought in from the islands to the SK camp, I thought some fights would arise. However, the African residents were well received, and I never saw nor heard of any fight among them.

Moreover, the other NGOs were correspondingly aware of the divisions in the camp and the DRC, for example, decided to cancel, as a preventive measure, the “Nowruz” (New Year’s)¹⁷ celebrations so nobody would feel left over or favored. Thus, people still celebrated it individually.

Place making

-“In the camp I have almost everything. I tried to make my container the same as my home, but it is impossible....it is a container”-

-“The camp is better than tents outside, but it is very insecure”-

-“Life in Sk is boring but better than outside. Outside maybe someone will kill us”-

-“Sk is not my home, sleeping in caravan, on the floor is boring, but the camp is like a city and you have everything here”-

-“Sk is like jail, my life stopped. Sk is not my home”-

-“In Sk we have to live 8 peoples in one caravan. We do not have a home but they [government] will give us, so I do not mind waiting”-

-“Sk became my home, everything is similar to life before, however people do not have freedom, they are stuck in the camp”-

Cohn (2018), in his article about time- and place making among immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel, claims that immigration is a space in which unique places and times are created. There is no neutral place, he states further, and each place is embedded with history, politics and life stories. During immigration, places keep receiving a renewed meaning. The permanent temporariness that immigrants (and, thus the refugees in this study) experience is a good example of this. Their life changes the moment they begin considering immigrating and when they arrive at the camps, as the waiting turns into years, the places they occupy receive new meaning. The connection between a place and the individual’s cultural identity changes with transnationalism but, as mentioned in the introduction, while refugees move, their culture, identity, traditions, etc., move with them. Where and what is home, argues Zetter (2007), entails not only a physical location but also a process of belonging in a very different de-territorialized world.

¹⁷ A date celebrated mostly by Iranians, Afghans and Kurds.

Refugees, thus, enter a “third space” (i.e. a transitory space) which is full of contradictions and ambiguities, but which also can act as a productive space that creates new possibilities and new forms of cultural meaning and production. The physical separation of people from their homelands reterritorializes their relationships with places that they encounter on their journeys. Mobile or displaced peoples find themselves in new spaces where they want to feel physically present and where they hope to make a livelihood (Arvanitis et al., 2019, p. 135-136).

Moreover, Malkki (1995, *A*), in the same line, explained that even though refugees are out of place, they also remake places and have agency in the creation of new places (as refugee camps). Thus, their experiences can shape, engage and remake places and give them a sense of belonging both in the here and now and in the translocal ancestral home.

This way, place making becomes a task. Something you engage with to give meaning to your new life and so gain a sense of belonging.

A first example of how places get new meaning lies on the way SK camp has evolved. In the beginning, SK was a commercial/industrial port. Later, when the refugee crisis boomed in 2015, the area became a refugee camp, but it only consisted of tents. Nowadays, however, there are containers, both for the residents and for the organizations working there. SK went from being a port to turning into a home (and a sort of community/neighborhood) for some thousands of refugees. Temporary shelters were built as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to provide some semblance of ‘housing’ provision. However, this highlighted a material precarity/temporality that reminded everyone that living there was only temporary, even though, afterward, it became more permanent-like (Mould, 2017).

In the beginning, when there was an official camp management in SK and the containers got set up, each registered family or single person would get a determined space of the containers. These, originally, had one bunk bed in each room, a simple kitchenette area (in each room), and a single shared bathroom in between. However, when the container business started, people could choose to buy “upgraded” containers (if they were able to pay) which had, for example, satellite TV (to watch Arab, Turkish or Kurdish channels), more furniture, etc. This made people feel freer to give a personal touch to their space.

In fact, all of the homes I visited had different arrangements. Hamid’s family, for example, owned the whole container. He had one bedroom with two bunk beds, a living room with two sofas, a shelf, a TV, a center table and a kitchen. On the other hand, in the container of two of my students,

there were eight people, so the place felt more cramped. Here, they had two bunk beds in each room, leaving almost no floor space. At Soona's caravan, who also owned the whole container, there was only one bunk bed in the "bedroom" and the bed on top was full of stuff, so the children had to sleep on thin mattresses in what would function as the living room. Additionally, Soona had a satellite TV where they could watch Kurdish channels. Yet, at Shivan's container, where only two people were living, each person had his own room and his own bed. Shivan had also a small shelf he had made himself for his clothes, a TV with Kurdish channels and even a PlayStation that his brother had sent him. He also had a big flag (of Kurdistan) on the wall, as others used to have it as well.

Moreover, it was common for people to hang their washed clothes on cords between the containers, or on the windows and some even hung some herbs or plants on the windows as well. Likewise, people would often leave stuff outside the containers, like children's toys, bicycles and shoes, even though some said these often got stolen by neighbors. Other residents, at the same time, had upgraded the area outside so they could have some shadow or a small terrace. For this, they would use the bed frames, tables, etc., from their own (or others) containers to obtain building materials. Similarly, each restaurant or shop would have their own style. These establishments were not containers, but were patchwork structures of scrap metal, wood, and white United Nations-issued tarp, meaning that people must have built them themselves from scratch, using the few materials available. In fact, the restaurant I used to visit the most was upgraded three times during my stay.

As mentioned before, being in the camp felt as if you had been transported to a Middle Eastern town. People were always listening to their traditional music, speaking in their languages and eating their typical food, and even some flags and Arabic writings were painted on the containers.

The SK camp, as the camp described in Mould's article (2017), had a material temporality, as everything was temporary, made from functional makeshift materials, adaptable and easily movable; yet, this kept everything and everyone in a state of precarity, of permanent temporariness because (if wanted) it could be easily dismantled and destroyed. The camp was, therefore, a site with material precarity embedded throughout, making it a progressive place that mixed hope and despair, and home-making and un-making.

However, despite this constant reminder of their liminal or precarious status, the temporariness, (which started to become more permanent-like), forced the residents, simultaneously, to create a

sense of belonging in the SK camp. As Lems (in Ozkaleli, 2018, p.322) claims, one cannot reach self-fulfilment if (s)he does not feel a sense of belonging to a community, as creating the feeling of being-part-of is essential for the possibility of emplacement. Hence, these people end up making a home for themselves in SK as they tried to find a new home in Europe.

Furthermore, it is worth to remember, as Eastmond (2007) argues, that while involuntary movement entails change and loss for those displaced, we cannot, a priori, assume what these are, what they mean and how they are best coped with, nor can we assume that their homeland or native village is always the best place to return to. Home and the loss of home may mean different things to individuals from the same country of origin.

Time perceptions

“During times of liminality, people experience time differently than they do in "real" life; life is going on, time is going on, but people are not living as they wish or strive to live.

For liminal persons, time is under others' control [...]. Refugee time is structured and surrounded by regulations, which are strict and strictly enforced so much so that many refugees describe the situation as "prison-like" (Mortland, 1987, p. 396).

Temporariness, as a main attribute of immigration and its accompanying uncertainty, affects people's awareness of time, claims Cohn (2018) in his study which is also very helpful to understand the time warp that the refugees of the SK camp experienced. In the process of immigration, everyday life, he continues, has two time perceptions “being-time” and “meta-time”. The first one is based on daily activities, which include routine tasks such as work, cooking, spending time with neighbors or friends, etc. The second one is based on an aspired future event, in this case, getting out of the camp and traveling somewhere else in Europe. The combination of “being-time” and “meta-time” construct a unique experience of temporality, which means that alongside their everyday life, a hidden waiting takes place (the waiting time to leave the camp). This way, the refugees' timeline is split in two as they live between daily life and the desire to immigrate (Cohn, 2018, p. 346-349).

Turner (2015, p. 142), in the same line argues that refugees in camps find themselves in a paradoxical situation: first, because they cannot settle where they are since they are supposedly “on the move”, and second, because they cannot remain ‘on the move’ as they probably are not going

anywhere, either now or in the near future. Thus, they experience living in a “time pocket” where time slowly stops inside the camp while normal time continues outside it. The present becomes temporary and life is lived only in preparation for another life in the future; a life beyond the camp.

Time perception in SK camp among residents, was, therefore, somehow “different”, especially from the perspective of a westerner outsider. This can be illustrated with the NGO1 forcing upon the refugees a system of scheduled appointments since they meant this made the distribution of some goods easier. For the fabric distribution and the clothes shop, for example, residents had to have an appointment. Yet, it was very difficult for them to stick to their appointments. Hence, they would very often miss them, even if they knew how the system worked and had watches and clocks on their phones. This would normally cause trouble, as residents did not want to wait to get a new appointment. Thus, many would just come a day later and tell us (the volunteers) that they had just forgotten about their appointment, that they were asleep, that they had a lot to do, or some other excuse they would come up with. Although, I am not very sure why they missed their appointments as people quite often mentioned that they were bored in the camp because there was nothing to do.

Nevertheless, the residents were expected to adapt to these schedules, as well as to all the waiting, since everything (such as goods distribution, health care, legal help, and the acquirement of the legal refugee status) entailed waiting. Time in the camp, and its structuring denoted therefore that the organizations possessed the power.

In this manner, because of this temporariness, many residents felt they were living in limbo. The days were mostly the same and the activities were kind of repetitive. They were trapped not only spatially but also trapped in time. As two of my students said, “My life is in pause, I feel like dead, but I am alive”, “In the refugee life, you have to wait a lot, and your life goes on waiting”.

Moreover, all the residents I interviewed mentioned precisely how long they had waited. Everyone mentioned exactly the years and the months they had been there, however, I realized that their time perception was a bit distorted when they told me their stories of how they got to the camp, or about the time they spent in jail, etc. An interlocutor, for example told me: “I had been in the camp since the end of November 2017, and I got a lawyer when I first came. She told me to wait for one month, but I waited for like one and a half months, and after that, she called me, and she said she could not help me. I got then another lawyer and told me to go back to the islands. I told him I could not. Then I waited for like two months and in the end, he told me also that he could not help”. His

calculations were not very accurate. He arrived at the camp in late November and according to him, he had waited for around 3 and a half months, but we were just in January when he told me this story.

Waiting, as Cohn (2018, p. 347) claims, puts everything on hold. Waiting suspends (and changes) all planning for the future and makes the present experience to be future orientated, thus, strengthening the split between being-time and meta-time. The only meaning of daily life in the camp becomes to leave. Any present meaning is nothing but a means of survival and it, too, is affected by thoughts about immigrating.

Social Networks

Uzelac, Meester, Goransson, and Berg (2018) discuss the importance of social capital among refugees in Lebanon. I found resemblances of this within my research as well. In their article, they argue that refugees often use their preexisting social networks to inform their choice of location, thus, choosing to move where they can enjoy of social and economic support. In the same line, Dekker, Engbersen, Klaver, and Vonk (2018), state that uncertainty in asylum migration creates a common need for information that can be used in migration decision-making, both prior to migration and during the journey. In my research, I also found out that most of the people taking the risk of coming to Europe would choose to do so because they have had access to information, a social network, and resources that supported their decision to migrate. Moreover, they said that they had at least one family member, friend or acquaintance, who already had entailed this journey and was living somewhere in Europe; someone who they probably were going to meet after leaving Greece.

Furthermore, Uzelac et al. (2018) claim that refugees who have access to information-sharing and mutual assistance networks may increase their chances of being matched with paid work, identify cost-saving opportunities for important goods and services, and attract support from individuals who can exert influence on their behalf. In Athens, for example, most of the residents I spoke with had not been assigned to a camp and a container when they arrived but had to find by themselves a place to live¹⁸. Most of them normally arrived in Athens with no arranged home and had to either sleep in a park or pay for a hotel, at least until they heard news about a free spot in some camp. This

¹⁸ This happened because there was no camp management in SK, and because of the container business.

meant that they had to know someone that could help them arrange a place to stay and tell them what else they should do. Having a social network while being in the move was therefore very useful to get tips about who could help you, and where you could get help.

At the same time, the journey and everything they experienced during this process, helped their networks grow bigger. For example, being smuggled from their countries into Turkey and then Greece, forced people into getting to know each other, especially because it was more profitable for the smugglers to make the journeys in groups. In addition, I was told that in these journeys many would help each other, give each other tips and some would even become good friends, particularly those traveling alone. Likewise, in the camp, new people would always arrive and during the activities, residents would normally tell and ask each other about their legal procedures, their situations, about the school for the children, the doctor, etc. Hence, no matter in which stage of the journey they were, they were always meeting new people.

Although displacement disturbed the refugees' access to, and the functioning of their old support systems, they had to be able to revive and grow their social networks (Uzelac et al. 2018).

In this regard, an important tool for maintaining these social networks was the smartphone. All of my interlocutors and the residents I spoke to had one. Their phones helped them break out of isolation and hold contact with those that had already settled somewhere else (or were a stage ahead), but also with those back home. Dekker et al. (2018) argue that within migration networks, information coming from governments, NGO's and previous migrants' experiences circulate and is often exchanged through social media. Social media offers this way, a relatively cheap, easily accessible, and media-rich way of long-distance communication.

“The use of a smartphone was essential to (this) refugee to stay in contact with family and friends in Syria, to receive advice from his brother who was already living in Sweden, and to communicate with others whom he met on his journey to Europe while crossing 10 borders. Social media accessed through his smartphone were a crucial source of information in his migration decision-making” (Dekker et al., 2018, p. 1). Likewise, I saw that my interlocutors used their mobile phone for the same purposes.

Furthermore, in the camp, people seemed to be friendly and polite with each other. However, most of my interlocutors told me that they did not have many friends in the camp and that it was not easy to trust people. Shivan, for example, knew almost everyone in the camp; but still had only 2 or 3 close friends who were also Kurds. “I cannot trust anyone. People only uses you. I do not have

friends in the camp, only (X) and (Y)¹⁹. Most of them do not have clean hearts [...] I do not have Arab or Afghan friends. Afghan people is good, but we are not really friends with them,” he said once. Likewise, others said, “All are liars in the camp; I cannot trust anyone, not even my friends”, “I cannot trust anyone, not even my brother... I learned that from life”, “I trust just myself, and I am not going to tell my story to anyone”, “I can just trust the friends whom I cross the borders with, not others”, “I only make friends in the camp to survive. But they are really not my friends”.

As shown, people had different opinions regarding who they could trust; yet, most of them chose not to trust anyone. However, I observed that they often hanged out with people from the camp, as if they really were friends.

At the same time, people were coming and going all the time, and thus, everything changed quickly. Therefore, there was also little opportunity for stable social groups to form. In this manner, many did not want to get very attached to someone that could be gone just like that, so they preferred not to be very social. As one of my students said, “It is hard with people coming and going. I am always with Shivan in my caravan laughing and joking. But not with others”

Moreover, most of my interlocutors told me that they did not have much contact with Greeks or had Greek friends. “I like to be social, but I do not have Greek friends. Greek people...maybe they do not like us” said Shamar, one of my students. Likewise, Ako, a 20 years-old Kurd man, told me that he felt Greek people were always staring at him because he had some marks in his face and because he dressed like a thug. As I will show further, most of my interlocutors, believed Europeans thought negatively about them for being refugees. As such, I think, these ideas made that many residents kept their distance from Greek people and limited the spaces they occupied (for example hanging around mainly in the camp or around Omonia) in order to avoid experiencing hostility. At the same time, several interlocutors said that it was harder to establish any contact with Afghans because according to them, Afghans could not speak English very well. “Afghans are actually not very different from us, but we cannot connect because of the language, so I do not have Afghans friends”, “I have a lot of friends in the camp, but no Afghan friends. Before the camp, I had never had contact with them, and I did not even know they were Muslims too” said some.

Furthermore, bonding with the NGO workers/ international volunteers, as mentioned, was not always easy. However, for the residents, to get to know all these people, (both volunteers and other residents), could, nonetheless, be quite useful because many lived in the same places that the

¹⁹ To preserve anonymity, I do not say their names

remaining residents were planning to move to afterward. Abdi, for example, moved somewhere near Oslo, which is almost the same place I (and other volunteers he met in the camp) live at right now. This gave him the possibility to have a network in Norway before actually moving here.

Communication between the NGOs and the residents was nevertheless, mostly oral. I was told by one worker from an NGO I spoke with that this was because refugees did not have wide access to internet, mail accounts, and/or computers, but also because they were constantly changing their phone numbers. The NGO1, for example, would stick flyers around the camp to inform the residents about the activities. The information would be translated in the three main languages spoken, plus English. However, as I observed, oral communication worked better. The best way to reach everyone in the camp (and make sure people attended) was, therefore, going door by door informing everyone orally about it. Thus, the volunteers did not need to go exactly to every container, as information tended to spread quite fast. The other NGOs often used the camp's speakers to give out important information, since they also meant oral communication worked better.

Women and Men in the camp

Gender, says Eriksen (2010, A, p. 128), can best be studied as a relationship, where men are defined in relation to women and converse. This relationship is created differently in different societies and people usually have specific views on how men and women should behave based on their gender. These ideas, I argue in line with Eriksen and other anthropologists, are socially constructed and are not a direct result of the biological differences between men and women. The particularities of the differences between genders are, therefore, socially and culturally constructed (Eriksen, 2010, A).

Middle Eastern societies have normally a quite marked gender division and quite determined gender roles. The women's place is often at home in what anthropologists call "the private/domestic sphere", while men are often the providers who belong to the "public sphere" (Eriksen, 2010, A, p. 131). This division, as well as the patriarchal family, community and kinship structures, are more of a reflection of Islam rather than of complex products of social, political, and historical processes (Khurshid, 2015).

To me, gender differences were first visible in the camp, as to how women and men had different areas where they would spend their time. Men would often gather at the seaside to fish, or at the

restaurants to talk, eat or drink tea since it was they who used to run the restaurants. When we were there at lunchtime, it was not very common to see a resident woman around. Likewise, it was not very common to see women walking alone around the camp. Women were normally at the MB space, the sewing room, the laundry, at other activities, or simply at home taking care of the children. On the contrary, men were freer both around the camp and outside. Men were normally the ones that went out regularly, either to buy groceries or just to hang out with friends, while women, if they wanted to go out, they had to go accompanied by a male relative.

Married couples seemed to have very clear and defined gender roles. However, I observed, as Hitchcox did in his study of Vietnamese men in the Hong Kong camps (in Colson, 1993, p. 10), that men suffered more from the total loss of their role as decision-makers and providers of the family. They were worse off than the women were because women at least could rely on the familiar occupations of childcare, cleaning the living space and washing, making and mending clothes. Whilst men (being unable to work) had to find other things to do to maintain themselves busy. In the SK camp, most of the activities were aimed at children and women. However, although men could not fully be the providers for their families, they often took charge of the practical issues, like talking with the NGO workers, doctors or lawyers, and arranging accommodation, food, etc. Furthermore, differences between people were particularly visible in the way they dressed, especially among women. Kurdish women would not use a hijab and their clothes would be more “westernized” than the others were. Many would also dye their hair to blonde and the whiter their skin was, the better, (though the skin tone was not that really important in this context). Kurdish women would also use more make-up than others would. Afghan and Arab women would normally use a hijab and often a “typical” dress. They would also generally be shyer than Kurdish women.

In the case of men, it was harder to tell where they come from, as most of them used normal “western-style” clothes, had modern haircuts and a general modern look. Apparently, men took more care of their style than women did. One time, visiting one of my interlocutors in his caravan, a man with his face totally covered in a black charcoal mask opened the door when I knocked. He got a bit shy but told me “it is for the blackheads” and laughed. It was quite funny because, even for me, that was a “girl’s thing”. Furthermore, men were also doing more exercise than women were. They would be the ones that would go to the gym the most, even though the gym was also opened for the women at certain hours.

In addition, the English lessons provided by the NGO1 had more male students than female. During the whole time I was there teaching, I only taught 4 or 5 women and they often would be absent. Someone told me that all of this was because women had the responsibility of the children and/or because their husbands did not want them to be around other men.

Moreover, the social construction of gender was also being reproduced (and transmitted) through the children, yet, this time, influenced by migration, the Greek community, and by the international volunteers in the camp. First, children were going to school outside the camp and were learning “westernized” values and behavior. However, in camp, they followed what they learned at home. Toddlers and small children were usually freer and could do almost whatever they wanted. Slightly bigger children were, nonetheless, aware of the gender differences, and this was especially visible in the kid’s activities when choosing the drawings they wanted to color. Girls would often choose “feminine, girly characters” (like Minnie Mouse, princesses, etc.), while boys would choose “boys’ drawings” (like Spiderman and cars). It was rare to see a boy or a girl choosing something else. At the same time, during the kid’s activities, it was more common to see girls jumping the rope than playing football. Another example of this was the kid’s dance class, which had to be girl-only and had to be held in a closed space, as according to their customs, it was not nice, as a woman, to be seen dancing. Boys tried often to get inside and have a look, but girls shouted at them and threw them away every time they tried to come in. Nonetheless, they would only let an 8-year-old Afghan boy dance with them and accepted Hamid as their dance teacher.

Additionally, two NGOs in the camp, held football practices and music lessons respectively, open for both girls and boys. These were very popular among girls and most parents would not deny them the opportunity to join. Yet, a big concern among mothers was that their sons and daughters would become “European” and lose their religion, culture, and customs. The Arab friend of Soona, for example, said to her once while looking at the jeans of Soona’s oldest daughter, that the jeans were too short (knee length) and that it was “haram” (sin). She then continued and said that once they were in Germany, the girl would get a boyfriend and, thus, become European. Soona just looked at her, laughed and said, “oh no, no”.

Chapter 5. A refugee identity

Maryam was a 23-year-old woman from Afghanistan. She, like many others, had a normal life back home and was happy with it. Maryam came from an upper-middle-class family, studied English literature at the university for four years and was top of her class. When she graduated, she became a teacher and worked for two years in a school that was around 25 km from her town. She had to commute every day by either taxi or bus. After a while, her brother too started as a teacher in another school in the same village. However, the village became fast controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban wanted her brother to join them, but he would not do it. The whole family got threatened and after a few days, the father sold everything (the house, the car, jewelry, etc.), found a smuggler to get them out of that place and send them away so they could be safe. At 06.00 o'clock, the smuggler arrived with a car and drove them to Iran, though, they also had to walk in some parts.

After some days, they arrived somewhere (they were never sure of where they were), and they had to hide in a basement. Then the smuggler took them to Turkey. In Istanbul, they also had to hide in a basement for 10 days, eating just bread. One of the brothers was crying a lot. Everyone was scared. After these 10 days, another car came and took them some place near the beach. There, they had to wait for some hours until finally another man arrived with a small rubber boat at 02.00 and stuffed 60 people in it. Maryam saw this and immediately complained about the boat being too small for everyone, and that they could drown with so many people on board. Others started complaining as well, but the smuggler took out a gun and told them to shut up. Then, he selected a random person of the crowd to drive the boat. The man had never driven a boat before and started to cry but the smuggler with the gun forced him and told him to follow a light. After two hours at sea, a police boat approached them and took them all to the shore. They had arrived at Lesbos in Greece.²⁰

Five months later, they got their first interview at “Moria” camp. The situation there was awful, she said, people were living in tents and she even saw many people die. After 6 months there, and since their mother was sick, they got a container, yet, it did not have electricity. Some time later, the mother and the brother were sent to Athens so they could receive better health care, but Maryam stayed. She was now very afraid and did not feel safe at all. Her mother and brother, nonetheless, had to live in a park or a

²⁰ At this point, her other brother was somewhere else. He had sent his oldest son of ten years alone to Germany so he and his family could get “family reunification”.

church for one month in Athens. Maryam was worried about them and felt she had to be with them, so she escaped from Lesvos and met them in Athens. They were together now, but still, homeless. After a few days, a man they knew talked to another man and arranged for them to buy a caravan in the SK camp for her family. Maryam had now become head of the family, also because she was the only one speaking good English.

“In Europe now all the responsibilities are mine. I have to take responsibility of my brother, my mother and myself. I have to take them outside to the hospital, find them clothes and food and speak with authorities. They do not know the language. Yesterday, for example, I had a big headache, but my brother had an appointment with the doctor. I had a lot of pain, but I had to go with him because there was (and normally there is not) any interpreter. I felt even worse after going with him. [...] I think I am worse than in Afghanistan here. I wanted to have a better life without Talibans, now I feel at risk, I feel I lost everything here, I cannot improve. Sometimes I feel I forgot who I am and my life before, I lost my mind, my body is senseless. Every day here, I think about clothes and food, and about money. I am 41 kg now, I am stressed”.



This story, being just one of the many stories you hear when talking with refugees, shows us some of the difficulties people face in the process of fleeing, but also how identities are transformed. Maryam who came from a wealthy family from Afghanistan and was an independent and hardworking teacher had now become the head of her family, a role that she meant was exhausting for her. She now had to take care of her sick mother and brother and be the translator at all times. Becoming a refugee, as we can see, is not only about moving from one country to another looking for safety, but it also forces individuals to undergo a complicated process of identity reformulation. *“The typical refugee has not only fled her native country and been evicted from her native social architecture, but also her sense of personhood has been displaced. She is faced with the daunting need to relocate self in a new cultural space”* (Ripley Smith, 2012, p. 11).

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, humanitarian policies often render the refugees as just aid-dependent victims. As Agier (in Parekh, 2014) claims, stateless people/refugees are economically outside the common world, since they are not permitted to engage in the global economy except through being passive recipients of, and entirely dependent on, the world’s charity for their minimal biological existence. Likewise, they are socially and politically outside the common world, since they are denied social integration and political rights or agency in the states where they reside.

Being excluded and thus, regarded as a victim or a burden, at the same time, also influences the process of identity reformulation. In this manner, Powell (2012) argues that for many, the paths of displacement are violent journeys, and so, displacement becomes also a jolt to one's sense of self—a jolt to one's identity. However, as displaced bodies move, the identities they inhabit also move with them. This notion of “moving identities”, says Powell, is helpful to understand the complex ways in which identity construction within relocation can occur (and reoccur). Identity construction in this context involves literal starting and ending positions, yet bodies end up inhabiting a figurative “third space” or “hybrid identity” to which the displaced one move because they cannot fully inhabit the ending position.

Therefore, in limbo (just like during the liminal phase in the rituals), people often reflect on their identity. Residents of the camp, however, were in a strange kind of liminality because it was of long duration and it was not clear where, when or how their reincorporation would take place. Therefore, it can be argued that refugees actually go through two liminal stages: one where they become refugees who live long-term in camps and another when they move from camps to new permanent arrangements, as both require adaptation and restructuring of a sense of oneself.

Thus, by being in a liminal position in the camp, the process of fully adapting to the Greek community (learning the language, getting a job, paying taxes, renting a house, going to school, etc.) could not really take place just yet. First, because they did not get the chance and/or the means, and second because most of them only saw Greece as a transitory place on their journeys. Nevertheless, as Mortland (1987) says, refugees will have to adapt to a new community (in this case, Greece first, and then the other country they will establish into later) with new rules, traditions, etc. Hence, they will begin a lifelong process where they will have to confront the differences between their own traditional explanations of life and the world, with those of the new society they have entered.

Yet, as Powell (2012) claims, even if the body has been moved physically, the lived experience of that body remains, meaning that their new identity will not completely overtake the old identity. Displacement becomes a temporal space where identities are in a metonymic relation to one another. Identities are “becoming, rather than being” as they are constructed continuously through time (Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 18).

Abdi, for example, was very much adapted to the western ways of being and his English was outstanding. For him, it was very easy to connect with the international volunteers, as he also liked to talk about western movies and music. However, one time he said “Sometimes I caught myself speaking in English all the time, and I am, no! I am Arab, still Arab”. Therefore, even if he had adapted to the western world, it was still important for him to keep his Arabic identity.

Many of my interlocutors, like Maryam, tried likewise to hold on to their “old” identities by recurring to narratives about what they used to be and about their lives before fleeing.

Stories, says Eastmond (2007), are important sites not only for negotiating what has happened and what this means, but also for seeking ways of going forward. [...] Storytelling in itself, as a way for individuals and communities to remember, bear witness or seek to restore continuity and identity, can be a symbolic resource enlisted to alleviate suffering and change their situation. Thusly, narratives can promote self-healing and regeneration (Becker, 1997, p.129).

People in the camp would often tell you that back in their countries they had been teachers, doctors, engineers, etc., and that they had (big) houses, cars, many friends, etc. Telling stories was, therefore, a way for people to give recognizable form to their chaotic experience.

Lylah, for example, a Kurdish woman of around 30 years old, had two children and was a full-time mother; however, she told me that she missed her early life greatly. “I have been in the camp for 8 months. Life in the camp is difficult. I do not have home, no car. Back in Syria I was a teacher, I had a car, I had a house...I used to go out every day”.

Qarim, Soona’s husband, who also was Kurdish and was around 40 years old, wanted to still be regarded as the head of the family and as the provider, even though he did not have a job. Qarim was the one that administrated the money and went out to buy the food, while Soona stayed home taking care of their three girls or went to the MB area. Qarim did not speak English well and did not want to learn either. He preferred to go outside the camp to have coffee or buy groceries. Qarim and Soona, like other residents, often invited me for lunch or tea at their container, even if they had a hard economic situation. The family was very proud of their traditions and Soona, therefore, liked to prepare Dolma and other traditional Kurdish food. One day, during lunch, I remember that Qarim took out a small box and showed me some pictures he had from when he had visited Amsterdam (alone) in 2009. He was so proud of himself and treasured those pictures together with the flight ticket. Soona as well, often showed me pictures in her phone of their lives back in Kurdistan and talked, quite eagerly and nostalgic about how they used to dress (with shiny and nice dresses, a lot

of make-up, and gold jewelry), and what they used to own (a big house, a car, etc). Pictures were important to keep, as they, together with the narratives, were the only real proof (and reminder) of their early lives.

Moreover, the task of place-making, together with the other few things they did to preserve their culture and identity (such as listening to the music they used to hear, eating what they used to eat, dressing as they used to dress, etc.) also gave them a sense of belonging and continuity. Though, as Malkki (1992) claims, it is clear that the identity of refugees gets shaped in new ways with their “uprootedness”. The memories of their homeland, the experience of being in exile and the unfolding of everyday life affect their self-understanding and identity.

Many residents struggled, therefore, at the same time to fully maintain their old identities, as they could not be who they used to be. In displacement, the country one arrives to is often seen as unfamiliar and as if it was worlds apart from their homelands. Hence, every action that used to be common or routine will require careful examination and consideration. The patterns of behavior that sustained life at home are no longer sufficient (Malkki, 1995, p. 508). In the camp, the lifestyle and the life skills required were different from what the residents were used to. The skills they had before were now somehow useless. However, as Turner claims, in this space where old habits and structures no longer make much sense, new identity positions and possibilities are constantly created (Turner, 2015). This liminal space can provide possibilities for change, becoming also a realm of pure possibility where novel configurations of ideas, relations and new forms of cultural meaning may arise (Arvanitis et al., 2019).

One of my interlocutors is a good example of this. Fazal, a 28-year-old man studied physical education back in Afghanistan. However, as an asylum seeker, he could not find a relevant job to support himself. Fazal, nevertheless, did not give up. He started to learn English in the camp and after a while, he also became a volunteer of the NGO1 to gain some more work experience.

Afterward, he became the team leader of the sewing room and when his English got better, he also became an English teacher for the lowest levels. In my second visit to the camp, Fazal had found a small job outside but was searching for better positions.

Similarly, many knew that it was not yet possible to build on the education and professional skills from their home countries. As Fazal, Layla, Maryam, Shivan (who had started to study computer science), and many others, they had to disengage from their earlier job-related identities and find new things to give their lives meaning, for example, to learn English and/or get new (work)

experience. At the same time, others (especially the younger ones), saw this as an opportunity to finally realize their dreams and become who they always dreamed to be.

Nevertheless, some struggled more in giving or finding new meaning to their identities. They would, therefore, experience a greater mental distress than the others. As Becker (1997, p. 147) argues, to search for and to develop markers of continuity with one's former life may be wrenching tasks that sometimes result in feelings of hopelessness and defeat. Although they did not express uncontrollable anger or frustration, it was evident that under the surface, they were fighting deep anxiety about their situation and about their future. This I could clearly see in their body language, reactions, and facial expressions, but also through how they spoke and what they said. However, even if they tried to be strong, some actually confessed that they often cried at night. Yet, as Shivan once told me, many, including himself, would often put on a "mask" that allowed them to smile and pretend that everything was fine when they were in public. "Every day I smile, but inside I am sad... I do not like to show this to others" he said. In the same way, others expressed, "I feel sad deep inside, so what you see is a fake smile. You must do this to live", "We smile, but these are only masks", "I feel sadder than before, but I try to be happy". One of my students told me as well that back in Aleppo he used to play instruments and sing all the time but that now he was never in the mood and had thus become quieter and shyer. When he was in public, however, I observed that he was always making jokes.

This reminds me about Goffman's dramaturgic metaphor where social interaction and social identities are analyzed by reference to theatrical performances. Goffman (in Lawler, 2008) argued that in life as in theater, there were two interactional regions: a "front stage" and a "backstage". In the front stage, we are aware of our audience and, in a sense, we play for them, while in the backstage, it can be argued, we are truly ourselves; we let go of the mask. Individuals, he said, present an image of themselves to be accepted by others, yet, the others may or may not accept this image. Interactional regions are resources for revealing and concealing particular identities. As such, some aspects of an identity can be "overcommunicated" or "shown off", while others can be "undercommunicated" or "played down", to make it/or not make it, an important aspect of the definition of a situation. Respectively, Goffman further states that we as social actors participate daily in the constitution of such a self, and in the process, we make and remake the social every day through our social interaction (in Lawler, 2008). For residents, nonetheless, this "masking" of their selves was more a defense or coping mechanism so they would not be depressed all the time, rather than just an act to be accepted by others.

As it follows, in this situation of precarity, uncertainty, and despair, where residents cannot be what they used to, it is obvious that new social configurations arise. As Passey (2018) revealed on her research of family separation, I too observed that the roles and responsibilities within a family were changing, especially if the main provider or head of the family was not present, thus, women or older sons had to assume the role of head of the household.

At the same time, the majority of the residents (if not all) had most of their family members spread all over different countries, both in Europe or the Middle East. Hence, many had started their journey alone, or with some other family member. However, no matter the circumstances, the residents had to adapt to these changing situations, and thereby, adapt too to new social roles and statuses. Such is the case of Maryam who had to give up being “the respected and hardworking teacher with the 3-floors house” to become “the skinny Afghan from container IVDII²¹ who always takes care of her sick mother and brother”.

Moreover, for the younger residents, especially those alone, this role-change entailed more of a forced coming of age, since they now had to be independent and responsible for themselves. Mourad, for example, was a 19-year-old man from Syria who was now alone in Greece. He had been living in Turkey with his family but in 2016, his parents were accepted to go to Germany. He was also accepted but had to wait for some paperwork. So, when his parents left, he went alone to a camp called “Souda” in Chios (Greece). The journey to get there was really tough and he even spent some time in prison, where he got beaten by the police. “I had to handle the situation; I had to be a man, not a baby, for my family [...] after sleeping in the street, without money and food, I learned that nothing worse could happen, this is life and I had to accept it. I had to become a man” Similarly, Rashid, a 17-years-old Syrian boy, said, “I had to flee from Syria to help my family. I am the only one that could help but I have not done anything yet. I did not know it was going to be so hard, but I promised them that I was going to help. Deep inside, I am a child, but I had to become something I am not: a man...In front of everyone, I have to be a man, but I would like people to treat me like a child and take care of me”.

Shamar, who was 18 years old, in the same manner, told me, “In Iraq, I went to school, my siblings and parents were working. Now I have to worry more about food and money. My life stopped in the camp because I live without my family and I do not know what will happen. I had to change from being a kid to be an adult”.

²¹ Not her real container number, but just an example.

Likewise, Sina, a Kurdish girl of 18 years old, had to start working with the Red Cross to have an extra income for her family since she was the only one that spoke good English.

Another thing that was common among young residents, especially those unaccompanied, was the fact that they wanted to try new things now that they were in Europe (without their parents). As one older student shared with me “There is no one to guide them, so they do whatever they want, and try new things”. In this manner, another student told me that he started to smoke weed, go to parties and drink alcohol because he was curious. Likewise, Fazal told me that when he came to Europe, he saw that everyone was free, and they were kissing and holding hands in public and that now he thought that was ok.

Married couples, nonetheless, as mentioned in chapter 4, seemed to have clearer roles, particularly if they had small children. Women would take care of the children and the household, while men would be in charge of the practical issues since they could not work.

At the same time, there were some residents (both women and men) that had been left alone in the camp with the children (due to several reasons) and had to adapt to the situation of being alone. Not having all of their family members with them made family structures and roles change.

For example, I remember a man who had a boy of around 2 years old. His wife had left the camp earlier and he was now alone in the camp with the baby. The man often came to the MB area for diapers, even though he knew he could not get inside and could neither leave the baby there.

Likewise, he often showed up at the kid’s activities and asked the volunteers to take care of the baby while he would fix some paperwork.

As aforementioned, transformation and change were indeed part of the refugee experience.

However, even if one's sense of identity dissolves to some extent and brings about disorientation, this can also carry possibilities of new perspectives (Turner, 1970). The residents in the camp had experienced many adversities, both in the past and in the present; however, these difficulties did not only result in their despairing but also carried some positive change. As one resident told me,

“When meeting a non-Muslim country, you have to change and sometimes this change is good”.

Therefore, it is important to remember that not all change is perceived as a loss or defined as problematic by the individuals involved. Neither are all refugees necessarily helpless victims, but they are rather likely to be people with agency and voice (Eastmond, 2007).

Resident volunteers, for example, were the most exposed to the international volunteers and, consequently, to a western mentality or behavior, which inevitably influenced them. However, many residents said that they quite liked meeting so many international volunteers as they could learn about new cultures and places. Most of them also said that learning English was a very positive outcome of being in the camp. Moreover, others expressed that back in their countries they had never had any contact with Afghans or Africans, so this was a good opportunity to learn more about them. By being in contact with different people in the camp they got to learn new languages, got friends (so to speak) all over the world, while they also learned how to adapt to rapid and unforeseen changes, and to become very resilient.

The refugee label

“What’s the meaning of the word “refugee”? Many people think it’s a very ugly word. When someone says, “Are you a refugee?” they assume you are not a student, not a teacher, without a home, without a purpose...it means you are “nothing.” I don’t accept this definition of this word because a lot of people like myself became a refugee, not by choice. To me, a refugee is someone who had been forced to leave his or her home and country due to persecution, war, and violence towards their religion, nationality and/or political opinion...”

– Yaran, from a Facebook post

As mentioned in the introduction, Zetter (2007) claims that labels are the tangible representation of policies and programs, in which labels are not only formed but also transformed by bureaucratic processes, which institutionalize and differentiate categories of eligibility and entitlements. Thus, labels develop their own rationale and legitimacy and become a convenient and accepted shorthand. Labeling, he says, reveals how seemingly essential bureaucratic practices manage the influx of refugees and thus manage an image that in fact produces discriminatory labels designed to mediate the interests of the state to control in-migration.

Ozkaleli (2018), in the same line, argues that the term “refugee” blurs all personal differences and stripes humans of their subjective experiences. It separates them from the place where they originally belonged to and displaces them into an unknown space, a space that already belongs to another. Being a refugee becomes a reflection of their non-being as they are placed into a land where they are considered not to belong and are thrown into it by force. Refugees, by the fact they are being labeled in this manner, are turned into one-dimensional persons.

In addition to this, as Burnett (2013) claims, refugees have further labels attached to them, such as “outsider” and “other”, which often work as a force of exclusion from society. These labels, Zetter (2007, p. 184) claims, are varied in its scope, but singular in its covert intention; that is, to convey an image of marginality, dishonesty, a threat, or someone unwelcomed. These new and often pejorative labels are created and embedded in political discourse, policy, and practice. Previously enjoyed rights are diminished and, above all, restrictionism increasingly criminalizes those claiming refugee status.

In such a way, and as shown in Yaran’s quote, it becomes clear that the general view is that the label “refugee” is negative as it dehumanizes people, sets them at an inferior level, and transforms them into numbers in statistics and politics, something that can affect identity both internally and externally.

Moreover, Jenkins (2008, p. 99) argues that a label alone is not sufficient for an identity to “take”. Just because I call you a deviant, does not mean that you will think of yourself as deviant, or that other people will. What is required is a cumulative labeling process over time, in which the label has consequences for the individual. This will be even more effective if the process is endowed with institutional legitimacy and authority. However, labeling individuals with the same identification does not mean that they will be similarly affected by it. As Burnett (2013) states, even if refugees do not have a choice in having or not having the label imposed upon them, they can decide how they want to perceive, accept and/or use this label. Nevertheless, the opinions and perspectives forced or imposed upon them by society due to their refugee status, might, in fact, affect the refugees’ identity reformation and how they see themselves.

In my research, although most of the residents accepted the label as a right and a legal category, they (and coordinators too) agreed with the notion of the “refugee” label that claims that it actually carries more negative connotations than positive. Most of my interlocutors said they did not like to be called “refugees” and that they did not like the label because of how others perceived them and what others thought about them.

Hence, as Despret (2008) realized in his research, I also understood, that to address people as refugees, an identity in which most could not recognize themselves, only repeated the process of exclusion. To anonymize them by addressing them as “refugees”, Despret said, called for a regime of insults that was all the more violent, because being called or considered a refugee (the undeserving, nobodies, people of the third zone, someone from the other side of the world, just to

cite some of the insults) was experienced by those people as extremely disabling. As such, Shivan, once said “People often generalize and think all refugees are bad just because some few are. The word is negative, and I often get embarrassed and angry when they call me this”. Likewise, another said, “The word refugee is not a nice word. It is only used to make a difference between people”. Nevertheless, some also expressed that they did not care about being labeled. “The word refugee is negative, but I do not care. Just the word is bad because Europeans are afraid of us”, said one. Moreover, Shamar said, “I do not care about the label, because, yes, I am a refugee. The problem is that Europeans think bad about us, they think we will make problems”.

Nevertheless, even if they cared or not, for me it seemed as if most of them did not let this label have a great impact on their identities. At the same time, I observed that they avoided (consciously or not) mentioning that they were refugees as if they did not want their “refugeness” to be the first thing people noticed. As Sen (in Burnett, 2013) claims, because identity is constructed of a plurality of elements, individuals can choose which aspect of their identity to emphasize in different situations.

One day, for example, a new resident volunteer and I were working at the clothes shop of the NGO1. After a bit, the team leader of the shop came. He was an international volunteer from Africa. The new resident volunteer did not know that the team leader was an international volunteer and started asking him where he was living, where he was from, how long he had been in Greece and such questions I noticed refugees used to ask to each other. However, he never asked the team leader directly if he was a refugee, even though he might have implied it.

Another day, when I was walking in a park, I met some of the camp’s residents. They were sitting beside a pond with other volunteers having lunch and talking while Mourad was playing the guitar. I stopped to say hello and stayed for a while to chat a bit. In the meantime, a little boy approached Mourad to see how he played. The mother came quickly behind him and both stayed to hear the music. After a few minutes, right before they were about to leave, the mother told Mourad that he was very good with the guitar and she asked where we all were from. Rashid, who also was there, looked at Mourad and then at the woman. I did not say anything as I wanted to see what they were going to answer. “We are from Syria,” they said. The woman seemed a little bit surprised and asked if they were living in Athens. They said yes and nothing else. The woman smiled, took the kid’s hand and left. I found this episode quite interesting as no one in the group mentioned that they were refugees from the SK camp.

In any case, it is important to remember that identities are fluid, not static and that people can have different identities in different contexts. Thus, identity reformulation, as Mutanen and Penn argue,

(in Burnett, 2013) is based on factors that unify or differentiate an individual from others with the individual being the one actively choosing the way in which (s)he wants to identify him/herself; however, in some cases the choice is not made by the individual but by the society or state in which they live in.

In the eyes of non-refugees, the refugee identity often becomes a very marked/visible one that can even obscure the others and which is usually quite hard to get rid of. First, because they come from countries that are ethnically, racially, and/or culturally different from the host country (Greece), and their “otherness” becomes more noticeable usually because of their color or other physical stigmata, or their language, and secondly, because the papers they get when accepted (residence permit and passport) still declare that they are refugees. At the same time, even after they have been accepted and have all the papers, many do not have enough money to move out of the camp, meaning that they still have to live under precarious conditions. This is also why many decide to leave to other countries where family members can support and help them.

In this manner, it is good to have in mind, as Ozkaleli (2018) says, that labels actually have implications, and as such, they can create stereotypes and generalize people into a cluster. Thus, the depiction of refugees as either victims or “burdens” on host societies is strongly related to a lack of understanding of identity in its complex representations and experiences within a given social structure. [...] If a social structure keeps people detached, discriminated against and excluded, their selves experience displacement too (Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 23).

Consequently, the problem is not the categorizing or labeling per se. The problem lies in what is attached to the word “refugee”. Hence, one must not forget that the refugee label is influential not only for defining and categorizing people but also in the way the label impacts an individual who must carry it (Burnett 2013).

This labeling with the negative connotations it has acquired, reveals a widespread fear from host communities and policymakers that leads to exclusion. Therefore, it might be about time to reconsider and revise this label.

Surviving and coping a refugee life

“When I am really sad, I play football or go skating”

“I do not want a perfect life; I just want a peaceful and a good life”

As showed, a refugee’s identity is influenced from the moment of fleeing their home country until they get granted refuge in a new host country. This is a long process, and refugees have to adapt and re-adapt all the new experiences they encounter.

The residents of the SK camp, despite all the hardships they went through, were very resilient and never gave up the hope of one day having a better life. However, the refugee experience, and the life in the camp, undeniably disrupted any pre-given social order and affected the individuals who went through this in different ways. Yet, as Becker (1997, p. 120) claimed, by understanding this period of disorder and disaffection as temporary and by placing boundaries around it, people (refugees) were able to endure their sense of disruption. The limbo metaphor enabled them to begin the slow and painful process of reestablishing a sense of future and a sense of order. It enabled them to separate the time of limbo from a future time when life would return to normal. As such, this hope for a better future was what made them keep going.

As stated earlier, the residents tried extensively to create a sense of normality in the present by getting married, forming families, celebrating birthdays and (religious) holidays at the camp, etc. Nevertheless, as argued in chapter 4, their present experiences were more future-oriented. Hence, many would also see the present as an opportunity to prepare themselves for the future. As Becker (1997, p 142) argues, it is not possible to move on with life until the future has been reorganized and been given new meaning. In this manner, most of my interlocutors felt that by having a job, their sense of dignity and autonomy could be restored. Consequently, many wanted to prepare themselves by learning English (or other languages) or becoming volunteers to gain experience. However, and as mentioned earlier, getting a paid job in Greece while being an asylum seeker was very hard. Firstly, because they needed to have all their papers in order, or preferably their refugee status granted, but also because they needed an address outside the camp. Yet, even if they already had the refugee passport and ID card, they still needed to have some working experience, some knowledge of the Greek language and money to move out of the camp, resulting in a complex process that led many into traveling to other countries looking for work opportunities.

Moreover, all my interlocutors mentioned that it was better to think about the future and not the past, and many even told me about their plans after the life in the camp. “I have a dream. I will go to the Netherlands and work and see my family”; “I never went to school before, now I will go. I will become a lawyer and will make new things for myself”; “I will go to Switzerland, meet my family and become a psychologist”.

Arvanitis et. al. (2019, p. 142-143) claim, therefore, that the narratives about possible futures are examples of optimistic scenarios of family reunion, new possibilities, and beginnings, as well as more general aspirations about future careers that involve professional activity. In their research, they observed something I also observed in my research, namely that the refugees’ desires to re-establish family bonds and social networks, positiveness, high academic and professional aspirations and a desire for belonging into new and unknown contexts demonstrated their will to overcome liminal restrictions and an ambiguous refugee status. Choice and perseverance, together with talents and skills, were important assets in rebuilding their lives in Europe.

This hope for a better future was what encouraged many of the refugees who came to Europe to come with a lot of energy and will power to create a new life. Like my interlocutors, many were active and social persons that after everything they had been through, wanted to have a good and peaceful life, besides learning new things. However, it was not always easy to keep the motivation up. Many of the residents, as mentioned before, described life in the camp as very boring, especially since they had to wait for everything. Under these conditions, it was, therefore, easy for residents to get frustrated, and slowly lose their dreams and hopes as each day went by.

Simich, Maiter and Ochocka (2009) in their article about immigrant mental wellbeing, state that migration involves altering mental landscapes as well as crossing physical borders, a complex process that creates both opportunities and risks to mental health. With this in mind, I also argue that being on the margins or “on the threshold” of society (i.e. in a liminal position) certainly involves some mental distress. However, some cope and respond better than others to these mental challenges. For example, some residents used drugs to feel better and some mentioned, “I smoke to forget, to be in other mood, to feel better and to not care. You will get weak if you think about your problems every day”, “If someone talks about the problems I get angry but smoking and drinking helps me”, “I am disappointed and feel sad because I cannot continue with my life, so I smoke as a distraction”. Moreover, others, like Maryam, showed some more signs of mental distress and depression. “I think a lot. I have lost my mind. I am always stressed, I cannot see a bright future, and I have forgotten who I am,” she said. Likewise, Ako told me that he had to get used to the idea

that he was no longer the same as he was before. He said he felt handsome before. He had a well-trained body and took great care of his physical appearance, but now, after experiencing torture and other things (he was not specific), he felt ugly because all of the “marks” he has gotten. Because of this, he said, he dressed and acted like a thug. At the same time, he told me that it was hard for him to cry and let his feelings out. Even if he tried, he felt as if he had turned numb. He was no longer able to feel. Some others told me that they had experienced the same after seeing so many bad things in their countries, so this became a protection mechanism to not suffer more.

Signs of mental distress were, nevertheless, more visible in women than in men, and at the MB space, for example, it was common to hear women say “Syria good, here no good”²², or cry because they missed their countries and families. One time, when we were out with the residents on a hiking trip to a hill, a Syrian woman stopped to contemplate the view and she suddenly started to cry. Some volunteers approached her and asked her why she was crying, and she said it was because the view had reminded her of her hometown Damascus which was now destroyed.

The frustration and despair because of the long waiting, along with hope for a better life, made that many, (like Hamid) tried to leave Greece illegally. Furthermore, since everyone knew about a successful smuggling attempt that had ended with asylum, security, and a new life in a better-suited European country, the decision to leave illegally was easier to consider. Thus, by focusing on the future and on the desired scenario, they kept the hope and themselves up.

Most of my interlocutors and students had actually tried several times (often more than 3 times) to escape using a fake passport, and even if they did not succeed to leave, they kept trying.

This was a common thing to do, but not all of them would tell everyone about their plans of leaving. Some would just go and try their luck, thus, “disappearing” from the camp if they had succeeded. This strategy was indeed so common that people knew more or less when to try to get out. For example, one of my students, after being stopped at the airport trying to go to Italy in February, said that it was better to wait until the summer when there were more tourists so the police would not spot him. At the same time, another common praxis, was that one family would send one of their children abroad with another family that already had their passports. The child would use a fake passport to travel and claim to be related to this other family with whom he/she is traveling. Then, when the child arrived at the destination country, his real family could apply for family reunification.

²² Here to refer to the camp/Greece.

Getting a fake passport along with other expenses, like buying a container or buying some other things, required that the residents had some sort of income. Many of them, as I have mentioned before, did receive some money. However, since it was not enough, they had to rely on remittances from family members abroad, ask friends to borrow some money, or had to get it by their own means. This often led people into prostitution or other illegal activities to survive.

As stated above, residents in the camp engaged with different strategies to help themselves cope with their present life, while envisioning and hoping for a bright and peaceful future (mostly outside Greece), together with their families. Some of these strategies, as I mentioned throughout this thesis, included the task of place-making, restoring a sense of normalcy, participating in the activities of the NGO¹, getting a hobby, learning languages and/or becoming a volunteer, etc. In addition, other strategies that can also be seen as defense (survival) mechanisms, were the use of humor and the “masking” of their selves and their feelings. As I observed, many of my interlocutors were often laughing and joking. Pretending that no worries existed, even for a little while, helped them bear with their anxiety and restlessness. Hence, by laughing and joking, they drove out negative thoughts and emotions and distanced themselves from feelings like hopelessness and sorrow. This not only helped them avoid falling into depression but also created sociality among the residents, which at the same time meant support and empowerment.

In such a way, I was often impressed by the resilience and courage of my interlocutors, because even if they were going through a lot of hardships and distress, they did not seem to have lost hope (not yet at least).

Chapter 6. Concluding remarks

“What do you think of me? Do you have a preconceived notion of me because I am a refugee living in a camp? Do you think I am a terrorist just because I am from Iraq and because I look different from you? Everywhere in the world, there are good people and bad people. We are all far from perfect. One of us doesn't define the rest of us. If one refugee is bad, that does not mean all of us are bad. We all live under the same sky but in different countries for different reasons. We all have different dreams and we all seek a happy life with a safe and comfortable home. We all have goals and an idea of what our ideal home would be. There are still a lot of refugees still stuck in Greece, waiting to get out. They dream of a stable home in another country. It doesn't mean that they don't like Greece, or that Greece is a bad place, or that the Greek people treat refugees badly. It's just that most of us came to Europe with a goal, escaping the war seeking a country beyond the entryway of Greece. All we would like is for us to be treated equally as humans. Do you think we are less than you? Have we committed a sin that is unforgivable? Can you not see us as your neighbor, your friend, your fellow countrymen? Are we not humans too? Personally, I really don't care if you are black, white or other. I don't care if you are Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Buddhist or even if you don't have a defined religion. I don't care if your culture is different than mine. In fact, I am more curious and fascinated than anything. But what I do care about is that we all start to see each other as equal. That you see me not as just a refugee. That you don't make any assumptions about me. I am more than a refugee. I am a young boy from a different place just seeking to be treated as equal as I continue to fulfill my dreams and my goals and to seek for a home in this large wonderful world that we all share together”- Yaran from a Facebook post.



Refugees, while being displaced involuntary, flee their homes every day because of conflicts that had made their lives unsafe. Usually, in search of a safe haven, they undertake long and dangerous journeys. (Betts and Collier, 2017). In this thesis, I have focused on the few percentage of people that have made it to Europe, but who are still stuck in the first European country they reach, i.e. Greece.

As I have mentioned, a lot of the literature on refugees focuses often on post-arrival experiences in settlement countries, and thus tend to leave out the experiences of intermediary countries or first asylum entrance points. Hence, in this thesis, my aim was to show how refugees manage to dwell in

a camp, and what they have to go through while they are waiting to continue their journeys. I have, therefore, focused on the residents of the SK camp in Athens, a site that was not a first response camp and where the living conditions were not as bad as in other camps in Greece.

Refugees, as it has been shown, are more than often seen as just outsiders that do not belong, or as Malkki (1992) argues, “matter out of place”, like the people in the rites de passage that need secluding in order to not pollute what she calls “the national order of things”. At the same time, as Turner (2015) argues, popular discourse and humanitarian policies often portray refugees as innocent victims of war, violence and ethnic conflict, appealing to humanitarian compassion and a philanthropic will to help fellow human beings in need.

While this is good at a first glance and refugees are actually provided with shelter, food and health treatment, they are expected to not make any political demands. In order to be worthy of humanitarian assistance, the receiver must be purely human—that is someone without a past, without political will, without agency (Turner, 2015). This way, the refugees’ needs get reduced to consisting only of food and shelter, and the aid they get (which was supposed to be a response to an emergency and something temporary) becomes more permanent-like. Consequently, refugees become an anomaly, a threat to nation states that needs a solution.

In this manner, a first step to contain refugees within the order of nation-states is to constitute the flow of bodies across the borders as a specific problem with a specific name, namely, refugees. Furthermore, refugee camps entail as well another measure to contain the “matter out of place” and re-stabilize the national order of things (Turner 2015, p. 140).

Refugees, as Arvanitis et al. (2019) claim, cross borders to seek asylum and find themselves in new countries that allocate them in a liminal status with ongoing restrictions and ambiguity which characterize their lives. They find themselves in an exilic, liminal third space which disrupts and subverts established entities. Additionally, refugees have to comply with a lot of regulations and procedures in order to be granted a refugee status. These regulations are normally quite complex and hard to understand, and even if some information is available for them, they still struggle to know exactly what to do and where to go, once they arrive, for example, to Greece. Nonetheless, in one way or another, they still manage to apply.

Under these circumstances, refugees feel their lives are on pause as they are trapped, not only spatially but also temporally. Becker (1997, p. 123) asserts that living with this kind of tension (i.e. a limbo-like state) for a long period of time reshapes the way people think about their own lives. In this manner, and as shown throughout this thesis, the refugee experience certainly changed the way in which the refugees I encountered thought about themselves, about others and about the world. The displacement across nation-states undoubtedly entailed a transformation of one's sense of self, yet it did not entail a loss of culture, identity or habits, as it has been suggested by some scholars. Many of my interlocutors tried to maintain some ties with their former lives and held on to their customs and traditions, even if this was not always an easy task. Thus they, at the same time, tried to adapt to the inevitable changes that this experience entailed. They had to negotiate and reshape their identities and find new activities or something that gave their lives meaning. However, even if they tried to adapt and to be strong, the waiting, the alienation, the uncertainty, the precarity and the bad conditions they lived through influenced them in different levels. This, without doubt, caused some mental distress and feelings of anxiety, frustration, and despair among the residents, and led them to feel powerless and subordinate to the authorities and the law.

Nevertheless, as Arvanitis et al. (2019), Turner (1970), and others have claimed, as liminality entails ambiguity, disruption, and displacement, it also entails possibilities. For example, by having so many different people in the camp, the residents were able to meet people from other countries enabling them to learn new things about other cultures, their customs, and languages. Moreover, by considering their time in Greece as something temporary, the residents could regain their right of self-determination and control, which at the end would allow them to maintain hope for a better life in the future.

In respect to all this, the book of Betts and Collier (2017) is a suitable source to wrap up this thesis, as they offer innovative insights that touch upon the current refugee challenge. Betts and Collier illustrate very well what this ongoing global refugee crisis entails, and they suggest that we change the way we think about it and change the policies that the states and governments have been using so far. They, thus, argue that the international response for help, as it has been shown both in the media and the academia, has been inadequate and that the institutions responding to the crisis have remained virtually unchanged from those created in the post-war era. At the same time, the key bystanders (the Gulf States and the OECD countries) have not met their duty of rescue and have not coordinated to achieve burden sharing, while there also has been a failure of international

coordination due to the inadequacies of the global architecture for refugee policy (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 126). This has, therefore, made that the crisis remains present.

Moreover, they claim that the continued humanitarian aid (provided as a substitute for access to jobs, education, and opportunities), together with the refugee camps, (as a silo's default haven), undermine autonomy and dignity. The refugee camps usually isolate their population from wider participation in local, national and global socio-economic life, and all types of activities are led almost entirely by humanitarian agencies. This, in turn, leads to a constant paternalism and custodianship over people's lives that erode human potential by focusing almost exclusively on people's vulnerabilities rather than focusing on rebuilding their capacities (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 136-140). Humanitarianism beyond an emergency phase can be counter-productive. That is why Betts and Collier aim for a development-based approach, which I claim in line with them, can be more useful. Therefore, an environment that nurtures rather than debilitates people's ability to contribute should be created and enabled for when the refugees are in limbo. This should involve every aspect that allows people to thrive and contribute to society (education, the right to work, electricity, transportation, connectivity, access to capital, etc.) rather than merely surviving. Refugees as anyone else are used to earn a living and they do not have to be perceived as an inevitable burden, but can instead help themselves and their communities, if only European policies were designed to enable them to be productive. Hence, if our duty is to restore the life of the displaced to something as close to normality as possible, restoring autonomy should be high on our agenda (Betts and Collier, 2017, p. 130, 143-156).

I am, thus, not claiming that there exists an overall solution to the refugee crisis, although it is clear that the present model is not working. Therefore, I, in the same manner as Betts and Collier, suggest that a model that focuses on autonomy, agency, dignity, and employment, should replace the present one. At the same time, as they believe, safety should be provided closer to their homes, so refugees do not have to be smuggled and be involved in dangerous journeys. There should be an increase of the economic opportunities in safe haven countries and politicians should rethink their refugee policies for the situation to actually start changing (Betts and Collier, 2017).

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