

The Kindness of Strangers



For many remote parts of the Swiss Alpine region, the yellow postbuses are the only connection to the wider transport network

Despite political wrangling, refugees continue to arrive in Greece following perilous sea crossings. With little official help, it's often left to local volunteers to help pull them ashore. **Jane Labous** reports from the complicated heart of the migrant crisis

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JANE LABOUS

When Greek farmer Panagiotis Konstantaras first went out on his fishing boat to rescue refugees, he mostly picked up dead bodies; women, children and tiny babies who'd been trapped in cabins when the boats went down. 'Once,' he remembers, 'in September 2015, they called us for a capsized boat. We pick up a three month-old baby girl, dead. That was the worst.'

This sunny Wednesday morning, Konstantaras is diving for an abandoned refugee boat sunk in Mytilini harbour. A burly, bear-like 32-year-old Greek, he exudes a quiet fire beneath a thick black beard glistening with sea water. He gives the impression of being the kind of man you know you could rely on in a crisis. He makes a living tending olive groves and apple trees, chickens and vegetables on various plots across this sun-swept Aegean island, but his passion is volunteering for Lesvos' Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT). 'Every day the same!' he chuckles. 'I wake up, I go to my farm, my work, and if my phone rings, I leave my job and become a volunteer. A lot of times, I stop my work, and help.'

THE HUMAN ANGLE

A volunteer organisation, HRT had been the island's main emergency response outfit for years, pulling people off the mountains in the winter; providing first aid at football matches; retrieving fishermen whose engines cut out. Then, during the spring and summer of 2015, refugees and migrants began crossing the sea from Turkey in their thousands; islanders recount with wonder that on some single days that year, 3,000 people arrived.

Of course, the refugees who made it were the lucky ones - many thousands more drowned or otherwise perished on the journey, either from carbon monoxide

poisoning or in the panicked crush. As far as Konstantaras and the other HRT rescuers were concerned, they couldn't stand by and do nothing, so they headed out and picked up bodies – and survivors. 'We used our own RIBs or plastic boats,' says Konstantaras. 'I remember a rainy day, we went to search in normal clothes, but we couldn't operate because we had no protection.'

Konstantaras is the human side of a humanitarian and political tragedy that's been unfolding here on Lesvos for almost two years. The island is both blessed and, one might argue, cursed by its accidental geography, positioned just five kilometres at its narrowest point across the sea from the Turkish coast. The sparkling, seemingly benign stretch of Aegean ocean known as the Eastern Mediterranean route is treacherous to cross, says Konstantaras. 'It's ten miles, maybe five miles at the nearest point, but it's open sea, the weather is very bad, it's very dangerous, the current is very strong.'

Konstantaras looks beyond the danger though. 'It's a human life,' he says. 'When I see a person who has problems, in a difficult situation, I must help. I don't care if they're Christian, I don't care if they're Muslim, I don't care who they are. They're a human life. So, I help.'

NO OPTION

Smugglers have reaped the rewards of this perceived passageway to Europe, herding terrified, desperate people across the Turkish border from Syria, driving them to the coasts, charging for tickets and fake lifejackets that, in some cases, are filled with straw.

In 2016, 173,450 people entered Greece via sea, according to the UN, travelling on leaking, wooden boats and old rubber RIBs with defective engines, boats designed to carry ten people carrying a hundred, where the slightest movement capsizes the vessel and its passengers into the freezing sea. They are Syrians and Iraqis, Africans and Afghans, mainly; men, women and children fleeing conflict, the war in Syria or the Taliban, or young men from West Africa simply seeking a better life, washing up scared and soaked and desperate on the rocky shores of Lesvos.

'I prayed to God,' says Wessam in broken English, a 31-year-old Syrian shopkeeper who paid €1,200 to a smuggler to cross from Turkey in March 2016 on a small rubber dinghy. 'It was all I could do. There were 26 people; children, women, men. All of them scared, all of them clutched hands and prayed.'

Back in Syria, Wessam owned two fashion boutiques. He stares, unblinking, when asked how he felt when he left his home town of Salamia: 'I was absolutely so sad. I miss my country. If I can go to my country now, I will go back. But there is war, as you know. I have nothing now. For that, I come here.'

Mehdi, a 21-year-old Hazara Afghan fleeing persecution, crossed too, in a small wooden boat with cracks in the floor. 'Children and women were in the middle, and the single guys, the men, on the side of the boat. It was a dangerous place, not safe, and on that night the waves were so bad. They were praying, crying and screaming. All the children in the boat started vomiting.'

By the time Wessam and Mehdi arrived in Lesvos in March 2016, European countries had already reached an agreement with Ankara on migration. Labelled 'a



disaster' by Amnesty International, the deal means other newly-arrived migrants and refugees – those who don't apply for asylum or whose applications are refused – are deported straight back to Turkey on government ships. Meanwhile the migration route across the western Balkans is shut; Europe closed its borders when the deal was reached.

Now – as Wessam laments, 11 months and 15 days later – refugees like him are stuck on Lesvos with thousands of others, living in tents in the overcrowded Moria and Kara Tape camps, wondering where and when their journeys will end. 'If I knew the borders would close, I wouldn't have come,' admits Wessam, who along with Mehdi is being helped with food, clothing and employment by the humanitarian organisation, United Rescue Aid. 'I would like to go back to Syria, but I can't.'

SUPPORT LINES

Yet even as Europe's governments reject the migrants and refugees, Lesvos islanders extend their arms. For all

A Lesvos beach surrounded by barbed wire to keep out refugees, is now deserted by tourists

these months, alongside other aid organisations such as United Rescue Aid, Refugee Rescue and Help Refugees, the HRT are still pulling people out of the water, a constant presence amid the swarms of international NGO staff who come and go, waxing and waning with the rise and fall in refugee numbers and press visits.

Meanwhile, other Greeks hand out warm blankets, dry clothes, hygiene packs and hot drinks. Such a show of basic humanity is all the more surprising because Lesvos' community of olive oil farmers and fisherman, hotel owners and restaurateurs who rely on the tourist trade to make a living, are in the middle of a crippling economic crisis of their own.

With holidaymakers staying away, the situation is dire according to Periklis Antoniou of the Lesvos Hoteliers Association: 'The tourists... they don't like to come here, thanks to the pictures they see in their countries with a lot of refugees, a lot of immigrants, the streets, the port, the airport, full of them. The cruises and charters have gone. Some hotels have lost 90 per cent of their business!'

Against all odds, sheer humanity prevails here, perhaps the only glimmer of hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. 'I like giving to people,' shrugs HRT leader Antigoni Piperaki, who's just had a baby and has stepped back, for now, from on-water duties. Her husband and HRT chief lifeboat helm Vasilis Asmanis has similarly humanitarian reasons for volunteering. 'I recovered a dead infant from a capsized boat. My child was the same age.'

Joby Fox, co-founder of Refugee Rescue, agrees. 'As a human being, I've held out a hand to another and helped them for a moment. That's what life is about, instead of political posturing. It's about action, lateral thinking, being human and looking after other people.'

The Greeks even have a word for it, adds Alex Green of Help Refugees: '*Philoxenia* means "love of strangers" in Greek. The people of Lesvos have shown that the bond of our common humanity still has the power to motivate great acts of generosity, bravery and love.'

'You have to do something!' exclaims 24-year-old Naomi Krauz, an oceanography student who joined the Hellenic Rescue Team in 2015. 'The refugees are people. You see them arriving in wet clothes, dirty, without the things they need to survive. You can't just pretend that nothing's happened.' Krauz volunteered because she saw a refugee mother who'd given birth at sea. 'The mother had a one-day-old baby. I imagined her giving birth on the boat, with the wind, the cold. The baby was so tiny! When I caught it in my arms and carried it onto the beach, all I could imagine were the rocks, because if I slipped, the baby would fall in the water. I wanted to do something about it, to help, in any way I could.'

This, Krauz believes, drives the HRT team, and all the other rescuers and islanders who help. Here on Lesvos, refugees and migrants aren't faceless numbers on the news, but people – humans – too. 'All the members of the HRT are volunteers, because everybody has experienced something deep, something heart-touching, something mind-turning,' Krauz reflects.

HIGH ALERT

As the crisis rolls on, Lesvos adapts to its new reality. The beaches are cleared of debris, the refugees and migrants swept away to the camps in the mountains. On the surface, life goes on as normal. But people continue to arrive. Between January and March this year, 29,758 refugees and migrants entered Europe by sea, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. One in four are children. Some 4,900 people have arrived in Greece since the beginning of 2017, says UNHCR, and 306 people arrived weekly on the Greek islands between 27 February and 5 March. Now spring is here, stories of stricken boats crammed with people hit the headlines almost daily.

'The EU throwing money at Turkey or closing borders isn't going to stop people fleeing war and persecution,' says Jude Bennet, co-founder of Refugee Rescue – another search-and-rescue organisation currently operating in Lesvos that has rescued 4,890 people since January 2016. 'It is a basic human right to seek refuge. Refugee Rescue endeavours to protect and not let these people down. We never thought we'd be needed this long, but it's apparent now that we'll be needed for a long time. As we've seen, things will shift, but the need to



For the last half a year, the HRT has been receiving training and equipment from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution

protect refugees' lives at sea will not change unless governments change how they work together.'

So, Lesvos' rescue teams remain on high alert. In the last six months, the HRT has been trained and equipped by the British Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), and now there are over 40 local volunteers on the roster, all ready to respond 24/7, within 30 minutes, to emergency call-outs from the Greek coastguard. They use two reconditioned Atlantic 75 lifeboats gifted by the RNLI, boats that have already saved many lives in the UK. A container on Mytilini marina contains state-of-the-art dry suits neatly hung on coat-hangers; helmets; lifejackets, a place to change and plan for missions. And there is British life-saving expert, Alex Evans, who has spent six months living on Lesvos, mentoring the volunteers in everything from CPR to how to helm a boat.

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'The Greek HRT team is now the first responder for the Greek coastguard,' says Evans, who emphasises that for the British charity, it has always been about helping a sister life-saving organisation - not about going in themselves. 'It was vital to train local volunteers, to ensure we built a capable, credible, sustainable life-saving team in Greece. Our key sign of success is being able to step back and have a fully functional lifeboat service that can sustain itself and support the local community, whatever the future throws at it.'

This is critical as the bruised Aegean island settles back to a precarious sort of calm, ever more fragile as Turkey's president Erdogan scraps with Europe over the migrant deal. If Turkey's border reopens and people are no longer threatened with forced deportation, thousands more refugees and migrants will once again head to Lesvos. And while Europe may be recanting on its long-held promises of human rights for all, the Greek islanders will continue to open their hearts.

'We are not worried about more refugees coming on boats,' says a confident Konstantaras. 'After six months, we're professionals. We've grown up 100 per cent. Now the HRT branch of Lesvos has a [lot of] experience of what to do in any kind of weather and sea conditions, in any situation. We will be saving many lives.'

When the crisis ends, when these lost humans have found their futures, when the wars stop and the boats cease coming and all that's left of the mountain camps is the olive groves whispering in the breeze, the HRT, Refugee Rescue and their counterparts will still be saving lives. 'The fact that we live here and people know us is very important,' says Krauz. 'Not just because the coastguard calls us first, but also the locals. They know we're here, and we'll continue to be here.'

