

Hope and Fear: Refugees on Greece's Samos Island, September 2020

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Roger came by the house yesterday evening. In his early 20s Roger is from Gaza. He's full of energy and ideas and has been like this since he arrived in Samos over a year ago. His days are full of activity mainly with the children in the camp. There he and his friends have what might be called a mass following of young children! They play, sing, draw, party and talk together. In these ways the children learnt about the importance of washing hands and other steps they could take to keep Covid out of their lives. And in all these activities it is the sounds of joy and laughter which dominate.

Roger is Palestinian, and as with most Palestinians humour is a major feature of their survival under (Israeli) occupation. It is no accident that Liverpool, the poorest city in England is also famous for its humour. As with the refugees on Samos humour has long been one of the ways in which the poorest of that city have countered their marginalisation and neglect and asserted their enduring humanity. Humour is a way underdogs have always used to fight back. I would hazard a guess that we could make a very long list of similar places. Authority in whatever form is not good at humour. It cannot control the jokes we make or manage the humour we see in the world around us. It gives us power. Maybe this was what Emma Goldman was getting at when she "If I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution."

In Gaza as in Liverpool and certainly on Samos island humour is in an endless battle with sadness. It is an ongoing daily reality that ebbs and flows. Roger and his friends in the camp know this and see their mission as creating happiness to keep sadness at bay. The struggle between tears and laughter is a central feature of daily refugee life on Samos as it is for many communities denied and deprived of the material and psychological essentials necessary for living.

As Roger told us the rewards of being engaged in the camp can be awesome. He was very excited by the range of talents and interests he keeps discovering - athletes, artists, tattooists, tailors and dressmakers, builders, house painters, teachers, nurses, cooks of all kinds, gardeners, farmers, actors, singers, musicians, dancers and more. So many talents, he said, but never used, mobilised or even recognised by the authorities. So no support. This is where Roger and his friends seek to focus their energies looking to nourish and encourage talent which can then be shared and enjoyed by others.

But that has always been the case on Samos. Without exception, the best aspects of refugee life on Samos have been created by the refugees themselves. The *Open Doors* shop is probably now the outstanding example. That is not to ignore the contributions of some of the NGOs here or the flow of largely young north European volunteers who still come Samos with their big hearts. But always they are a mixed blessing. We are not alone in wondering

why they come here when all of them are from countries which have significant issues with poverty and suffering. “Why don’t they dig where they stand” is a common question. “Why do they take jobs which we can do? Why do they assume that a young white European can work with vulnerable and traumatised children with no preparation or support?” There is a terrible lack of appreciation of the talents and skills of the refugees here, who are too often simply dismissed and ignored as worthless and useless. The only exceptions being those **they** need to act as translators.

This is the back cloth against which refugees in the camp acquired sewing machines to make decent masks. Now on Samos it is mainly the refugees who are masked up, not the locals. (How things have changed since the only masks seen here before, and long before Covid, were worn by the police and border guards as they dealt with new arrivals!)



The upside of this neglect is that the people in the camp whilst lacking so many necessary resources for daily life are left to their own devices. Yella the creative west African artist is left alone to run his art classes in a small square in the centre of Vathi; the same is true for the young Saudi doctor who manages with friends the clinic they have created in the jungle and so it goes from communal kitchens to football competitions. But it could be so much more with a different mind set. So much of what is needed by the refugees – food, safe living places, work that sustains, – are also needed by many of the locals. More so now in the midst of the Covid pandemic that has virtually wiped out tourism on the island this year. Many here do not know how they will survive the winter months now that they have no income from their summer tourist jobs.

Because so many refugees are now confined on Samos for months even years and are also concentrated in Vathi we have seen a slow but deepening of contacts between locals and refugees. There are growing numbers on both sides of this divided population who are recognising that they have much in common and need to work together. The creation of *Just Action* which provides food aid to *both* locals and refugees is probably the clearest example of this shifting dynamic. Roger and his friends, as well as those working in *Open Doors* and *Just Action* are amongst those who are now talking and thinking about how they can join together and help create new bonds of solidarity between the refugees and the locals. Albeit for differing reasons in part, both groups know that they have been abandoned; they get nothing but the barest minimum from the state and they expect nothing. Growing numbers are beginning to realise that together they can do better.

We wait to see what follows if the Athens government actually does achieve its objective of moving all the refugees to the new closed camp on a remote hill top 12 km from Vathi by the end of this year. There are still many local people in Vathy who would like to see the refugees moved out of their city. Years of hostility to the refugees, driven by the Orthodox Church and successive governments with the connivance of much of the mainstream media have left a deep scar which drives this hope that the refugees will be removed from their midst. As I am writing these words, it has been announced that 2 African refugees in the camp have been tested positive for Covid. There are no more details as yet. If true this is a devastating development in that the only 2 cases of the virus so far on Samos were amongst local people who had been visiting in Athens. As everyone knows the camp is a ticking bomb when it comes to health. And the inevitable tighter lock down of the camp which will now be implemented will have dire consequences for the refugees. And, not the least it will give added impetus to the demands to get the refugees out of town.

But what many who are leading this demand, such as the mayor of Vathi seem to ignore is the changing and changed character of the city. Not all the refugees live in the camp. Over recent years there are many hundreds of families and groups renting homes and some neighbourhoods in Vathi are dominated by 'refugee' households. I use ' ' because there are a growing number of those gaining asylum in Greece who are deciding that Samos island is preferable to Athens or Thessaloniki as a place to live and be safe (especially with respect to the children). In other words they are no longer refugees in the formal sense. They will not go to the new camp. They will remain in Vathi and try to make their lives there, at least for some years.

And as is often the case with migrations into new places, we can see an energy and determination to make a life which is in contrast to the islanders who seem more locked into an 'endure' mode. (And the newcomers are invariably much younger than the locals). A clear example of this has been in the creation of a new coffee bar in Vathi this summer by a group of young men from Gaza who have their asylum.



The complete renovation of the shop revealed the range of talents amongst the refugees. Brilliant plastering and decoration, wonderful lighting and all done by themselves. It faces many challenges but it is thriving. Samos town is changing and as more people who came as refugees stay here this will continue.

(Just an aside increasing numbers of the island's new residents are confronting the police who daily harass the refugees back into the camp as evening falls. The police don't discriminate so end up bullying those who have both papers and homes in the town and are under no lock down provisions. Those with children are furious that their children are frightened by shouting police demanding that they leave the beach and get to the camp. The police are now facing a completely new experience on Samos of having to apologise to those they have previously abused with impunity.)

So in the darkness here we do see some light and we do hear laughter. But the dark cloud of Covid is ever present revealing more starkly the as yet unexploded health bomb that is the camp in Vathi. Many on Samos have been shaken by the recent fire in Moria. As the MSF director there observed the bomb of Moria, has exploded. These are tense times on Samos and not helped by the latest hard lock down following the Covid cases recently identified in the camp. There are more than a few refugees who do not believe that Covid has come into the camp especially as there have been hardly any new arrivals for over 6 months now. They believe that it is a lie to justify locking them in the camp. Refugees don't trust the authorities.

As I was writing last night, I had a call not only about the Covid cases in the camp but about a wild fire raging on the hills of Vathi right above the camp. Thankfully strong winds were blowing the fire away from the camp. It is outrageous that neither Moria nor Samos camps have any firefighting capacity or protection. Fire has always been the outstanding threat for years in these camps.

Soon summer will be ending and the rains will come. As every winter the authorities will wring their hands as the bad weather batters at the shelters and tents. Survival will rest as always in the hands of the refugees. And the utterly intolerable situation of thousands of human beings imprisoned on the frontier islands of Greece will continue.

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