

The New Hu

Below: Zrinka Bralo (left) at the front of the "Refugees Welcome Here" march in Parliament Square. Photo by Peter Marshall via Alamy (London, September 2015).



Bottom right: The Syrian and Iraqi residents of the makeshift camp in Piraeus were transferred to a camp in Trikala in July 2016. Photo by Lara Nettelfield (August 2016). All photos in this article were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

Humanitarians

The Volunteers of the Refugee “Crisis”

BY LARA J. NETTELFIELD

DECEMBER 2015

S arajevo native Zrinka Bralo stood on the shore of Lesbos waiting for a boat filled with refugees to arrive from Turkey. After it landed, she helped the children change into dry clothes, careful to make sure the parents were in sight. That year multiple boats arrived day after day, making dangerous landings. Running motors threatened to maim passengers. Sharp rocks loomed underfoot as they walked to shore. Some Greek villages were welcoming over 5,000 people per day.

I interviewed Zrinka about the three weeks she spent volunteering in Greece during her winter holiday, helping people make it to Europe safely so they

could exercise their right to seek asylum. That December most of the arrivals were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The frenetic day on the shore of Lesbos was like many others Zrinka experienced that month.

“The whole thing is so absurd . . . You spend the morning getting people off the boat; sometimes you watch lifesaving interventions by lifeguards and doctors that are just so emotionally powerful,” she told me.

Zrinka had to make do with whatever provisions were available to the volunteers. If she ran out of socks, she would rip apart a foil emergency blanket to make them.

“So there are people coming off the boat, and they’re in shock, and you’re taking their socks off, and





Left: Refugee Rescue's Mo Chara boat (Skala Skamineas, Lesvos, August 2017).

Below: Volunteer Keegan "Kiki" Nashan (Subotica, Serbia, 2017). Photo by Fareed Cheema courtesy of Keegan Nashan.

you're taking their shoes off, and you're wrapping this sort of golden stuff around their feet, and they're just looking at you, wondering what's going on," she recalled.

Some children still managed to find beauty in the scene.

Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, who set up a temporary studio on the island that year, told Zrinka how children on the boats saw the gold and silver emergency blankets from afar and thought that "we [the volunteers] were angels . . . holding them and waving at them. They could just see the reflection of gold and silver," she remembered.

Zrinka was one of the many volunteers waiting to add a bit of order, and compassion, into the chaos. She and hundreds of thousands of volunteers on Lesvos and across Europe were taking up roles usually assigned to states and international humanitarian organizations.

I wondered why.

Why did people like Zrinka put their lives on hold to help refugees and migrants who traveled along the so-called Balkan route, during a year in which over a million people arrived on European shores?



THE PROJECT

To answer this question, I started a project called The New Humanitarians. For the past four years, I've conducted ethnographic research and oral history interviews with the volunteers, including refugee volunteers, who worked along the Balkan route. This effort seeks to document an underreported aspect of what has become known as the European refugee "crisis"—but has proved to be a crisis of political will.

I wanted to understand who these volunteers were, what they did, how the experience affected them, and what it meant to them.

What is emerging is a social history of the "solidarity movement": a diverse constellation of people, projects, and motivations, working for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. This documentation project is crucial as many of these efforts now exist only in the memories of the volunteers and those they helped. There are no official records of makeshift kitchens, unofficial refugee camps, community centers, and occupied hotels and buildings. There are limited accounts, mostly on blogs and closed social media

groups, of the experiences of people who walk the streets at night from Athens to Bihać to distribute food and blankets to those who have no shelter.

Zrinka's life story helped me place this newest crisis in context. She had been a refugee herself. Over two decades earlier she had left Sarajevo under siege amid a genocidal war to seek refuge in London. Her experience had been very different from that of the refugees she encountered on Lesbos.

She had been a journalist during the war. Her United Nations press credentials enabled her to safely board a Hercules plane that brought humanitarian aid into the city and allowed a small number to escape. The survivors she met on Lesbos had left their war-torn homelands with no option for safe passage, making their way to Europe mostly on foot and by boat. Constant rumors circulated on social media and in the camps about which borders were open and which nationalities would be allowed entry into which country.

"People were taken out of their homes, out of their comfort zones, [in] total uncertainty, in sheer panic because rumors were absolutely out of control," she said.

According to the Pew Research Center, 1.3 million people sought asylum in the European Union in 2015. The UK had only 32,733 asylum applications that year—a consequence of the conservative government's restrictive policies. In her role as head of London-based Migrants Organise, Zrinka lobbied to increase those numbers and provide safe passage for asylum seekers and refugees.

"I went to Lesbos because I was very, very angry and upset," she said. "I was trying to do my best to get the government to increase the number of people who are coming here and to shift the public conversation towards welcome."

ORAL HISTORY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

"Stories, and by that I mean poems, sonatas, plays, soliloquies as well as interviews, have circulated through history since the beginning of time as a way of capturing that which was lost, and then recreated from the dust and muck of history," the oral historian Mary Marshall Clark writes in the book *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

In my project, I wanted to capture the memories of volunteers during the refugee “crisis” to contribute to the historical record. I chose oral history, defined by the Oral History Association as “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events,” because of the field’s commitment to including marginalized voices and to understanding the meaning people ascribe to historical episodes.

“In the aftermath of crisis, the oral historian can do much to help prevent gaps in journalistic coverage of an event from being reflected in the historical record by attending to how the event is being covered in the media and purposefully seeking out interviewees who can offer alternative perspectives,” Mark Cave writes in *Listening on the Edge*.

I, too, was a volunteer along the Balkan route. I started at the height of the crisis, in November 2015. I spent a week in the Slavonski Brod Winter Reception and Transit Center volunteering with a Croatian NGO (*Hrvatska strukovna udruga sudskih tumača* [HSUST], the Croatian Professional Association of Court Interpreters), and living on the floor of a house that a local family generously donated to the volunteer

effort just after the camp opened. As a researcher who has spent more than seven years living in the region, I saw that many friends and colleagues there were quickly mobilizing resources, and I wanted to contribute, if only in a small way.

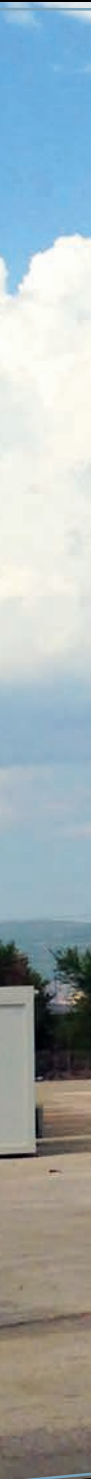
The previous summer, people were forced to walk through the fields of Serbia and Croatia, headed to seek safety in countries like Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Norway.

By November, asylum seekers were allowed to take trains from Serbia that stopped in the Slavonski Brod camp on their way to Slovenia. They were shuttled through ominous gates to register their arrivals and ushered to different gated sections of the camp to await the train. According to *Večernji List Hrvatska*, more than 650,000 refugees traveled through the Slavonski Brod camp until April 2016, when the Balkan route, and the camp, were officially closed.

Volunteers helped people off the train; got them medical assistance, food, clothes, and blankets. They shuttled between the refugees and a storage facility run by the Red Cross on the camp’s grounds. The Moving Europe project later documented human rights violations in the camp.

The city and its residents were no strangers to displacement and its painful effects: during the Bosnian war, a five-kilometer-long line of

People in the camp who had traveled thousands of miles to Greece were often still wet from the sea crossing. Some had all their earthly possessions stolen along the way. Cab drivers swindled them.





Above: Volunteers made a special visit to the camp in Trikala to organize activities for the children (Trikala, August 2016).

refugees once stood on the other side of the border waiting to enter a newly independent Croatia.

Decades later, as the city welcomed newly displaced persons once again, some extraordinary stories were coming out of the city. A volunteer told me that, in January 2016, a refugee notified a translator in the camp that he had just received a text that his relative was on a sinking boat in the Aegean Sea. The translator informed a camp official who was able to notify the Turkish authorities. A rescue operation ensued and the passengers were saved.

There would be many challenges along the Balkan route for all who made it safely to shore. People in the camp who had traveled thousands of miles to Greece were often still wet from the sea crossing. Some had all their earthly possessions stolen along the way. Cab drivers swindled them. Some were driven the wrong way and dumped along the side of the road. Almost everyone had a cough. It was a ubiquitous and dark chorus in the camp's large tents. Everyone needed something. While I was a volunteer, we never had enough men's shoes in size 42.

The volunteers I worked with were a diverse group of people: an architect

from the UK, an Israeli performer, a group of young Germans who drove down together, a handful of Czechs, to name only a few. After Croatia, I continued volunteering with a kitchen in Athens that distributed food in Victoria Square. The kitchen was started by a group of volunteers who came from Iokasti's Kitchen in Samos. Hundreds of people waited in line twice a day. I later joined a kitchen in the makeshift refugee camp in the port of Piraeus organized by the Khora Community Center. The next year, I volunteered for Refugee Rescue, a Belfast-based search and rescue organization on Lesbos. Everywhere I went, I met inspiring people who dedicated months and years of their lives to the cause.

When I started in Croatia, I had no plan to conduct research. Later, I realized that these stories were not being captured and that the media portrayal of the crisis was limited. The stories dedicated to the volunteers failed to capture the extent of their interventions, the different forms solidarity took, and how their politics intersected with state policies. Many researchers are compelled by events to document life histories as it turns out.

Right: Woman in Piraeus refugee camp in Greece (July 2016).





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“Compassion and chance pull oral historians into crisis settings more often than academic agendas,” Mark Cave observes in *Listening on the Edge*.

FROM GREECE TO SERBIA AND THE PUSHBACKS

Keegan “Kiki” Nashan first pitched a tent in the informal camp in the port of Piraeus, moving next to the only family out of hundreds who spoke Spanish, her second language. She stayed to help the families in the sweltering summer heat, rising at dawn and spending her days with the refugees, adapting her schedule to their rhythms. Later in the year, when other volunteers signaled an urgent need for help, she moved to the Serbian-Hungarian border.

There, her friends relayed stories of the illegal and violent pushbacks. In one instance, eight buses filled with refugees headed to a government camp in Preševo, but not everyone made it. They were pushed back over the border into what is now the Republic of North Macedonia. Kiki’s refugee friend was taken into one of the buses. She described the incident, as relayed by her friend, in our interview:

“They woke everybody at, like, five in the morning and they had around

Left: A refugee trying to cross the border in the Republic of North Macedonia says he suffered cigarette burns on his arm at the hands of the same police officer during multiple attempted crossings. Photo by Keegan Nashan (Subotica, Serbia, August 2018).

Right: Volunteer Michael Cecil with his wife (Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, August 2019).



50 police surrounding all the people that were living in the tents, outside the camp [in Horgoš]. They were beating on the tents to force the people to get out. They didn't let anybody collect any of their personal belongings; they didn't tell anybody where they were going.

"... They parked the buses, and one by one they took people off the bus. And they put them into a big military van with no windows. Indiscriminate of nationality, or of official status, or whether somebody had a valid asylum card. There were people that got [pushed back] that had had a place on the list [to cross] to Hungary. People who were unregistered, as well as people who were registered in Serbia but hadn't had their names put on the list yet. So everyone from Afghanistan, Pakistan. . . . there were some guys from Bangladesh. And there was also a guy from Sudan."

There were other harrowing stories. Another refugee friend told her that he encountered the same police officer whenever he entered the Republic of North Macedonia from Greece. Each time, the officer pressed a lit cigarette against his arm. He then robbed him of his possessions, pushed him back over

the border, and forced him to start from scratch. The friend showed Kiki a series of scars in varying stages of healing that marked every failed crossing.

A PERSONAL TOLL

Michael Cecil is a ferryboat captain on Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland, a picturesque place with a population of 150. He navigates one of Europe's most challenging sea routes between the island and Ballycastle on the mainland, a job that made him an ideal candidate for his work on Lesvos. He first went there in 2016 to volunteer for Refugee Rescue, which was forced to suspend operations in August 2020 due to the deteriorating situation on the North Shore of Lesvos. By the time I met him in 2019, he had made eight separate missions there and had also served as a board member—a role that demanded constant meetings to address daily developments.

With no formal training in humanitarian crisis settings, he left strongly affected by what he had seen during the rescue operations. He had to find a way to translate his experiences and the enormity of the situation to his family members and community back home. He told me that the things he witnessed were always on his mind:

"When you come across a boat in the middle of the night that's half on the rocks and half off of them, with 20 or 30 screaming children, and parents that are screaming because their children are screaming. And the chaos of that at night, which is okay at the moment when you're dealing with it, but it has an effect later on, even that same day, but especially weeks and months afterwards."

This was a sentiment shared by almost all of the volunteers I interviewed.

NOT EVERYONE MAKES IT

Many of the volunteers witnessed failed journeys and the false promise of a better life—often symptoms of a broken asylum system desperately in need of reform.

Charlotte Cheeseman, a long-term British volunteer in Greece whom I met while volunteering in Athens, recalled a group of Pakistani miners leaving Better Days for Moria, an unofficial camp where she spent a few months. The miners knew they were about to be deported. As they walked from the camp, a line of volunteers clapped and high-fived them, a gesture of support for their next journey: the return home. "They were singing their miner songs as they were walking out . . . singing and dancing and chanting as they

walked down the road to the official camp. We just all stood at the top of the hill watching. Incredible people. They had so much dignity and strength and courage in the situation.”

Psychologist Alice Miller introduced the idea of the “enlightened witness,” an understanding person who helps a victim “recognize the injustices they suffered” and “through his or her presence gave them a notion of trust.”¹¹ The volunteers have often played this role, and some scholars have argued that oral historians can as well.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS— THE PANDEMIC AND NEW ROUTES

The Balkan route is officially closed, but people are still crossing borders. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 11,971 people had arrived in Greece as of August 31, 2020, almost 40 percent of whom are children. Since the pandemic swept through the region, refugees and asylum seekers have suffered in our time of great immobility.

At the time this issue of *Harriman Magazine* went to print in October 2020, the infamous Moria camp on

Lesvos had recently burned down in a fire that left over 13,000 people homeless. The original camp was a space intended for fewer than 3,000. This tragic event was a predictable consequence of years of EU and Greek policies that purposefully engineered the suffering of refugees there in the vain hopes it would stop people from seeking asylum. People in the camp lived with no electricity, little water, overflowing toilets, and, for most, no shelter. Also, the lockdown in Greek camps extended past the end of August—much longer than it did for the Greek population at large.

In Athens, evictions of refugees in squatted properties have continued unabated since the election of a right-wing government under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis. People reported seeing uniformed police officers under the windows of a squatted building in the Exarcheia neighborhood of the capital shouting, “Prison and the baton are coming for you!” at 2:00 a.m., just hours after the election results were announced in July 2019. People fleeing the Moria camp for the mainland are being taken from Victoria Square to camps far away from the city center. Others sleep on the streets.

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Left: Young children holding a sign at an Athens pro-refugee protest (July 2016).

Farther north along the Balkan route, people are taking the new and more dangerous routes through Albania as identified in Nidžara Ahmetašević's recent report, "Limits to Access to Asylum," for Refugee Rights Europe. The report notes that over 65,000 people have entered the region since 2018. That year, there were more than 1,000 illegal pushbacks that affected over 10,000 people in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, and Romania.

All along the route, the lack of access to adequate housing and medical care threatens the lives of asylum seekers. Meanwhile, states in the region are developing asylum systems in environments in which many policymakers view people fleeing dangerous situations as security threats and not individuals with rights. Also, efforts to criminalize humanitarian assistance under the guise of prosecuting trafficking all along the Balkan route, and in Europe generally, have made it more difficult for volunteers to assist them.

The pandemic has made things even more dire: Foreign volunteers have by and large left their posts along the Balkan route, and there are not enough people on the ground to meet the needs of forced migrants.

The task of supporting people fleeing conflict and persecution shouldn't have fallen to individual citizens to begin with, but they have been an integral lifeline to people on the move. Ultimately, the work the volunteers continue to do for refugees is in support of the right to life.

"They all had a plan for life. That's part of that survivors' resilience which happened to me and many of my fellow Bosnians in London," Zrinka said. ■

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i. Alice Miller, "The Essential Role of an Enlightened Witness in Society," The Parenting Shift, https://theparentingshift.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/enlightened_witness.pdf.

Right: From protest in support of Aleppo (Athens, December 2016).

