



A letter from the Greek refugee camps...

by a permaculturist

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Setting the scene: Background history

It was mid March 2016 when the Greek borders closed for refugees. Until then, refugees from the wars in the Middle East had been crossing through Greece to seek a better and safer life in western Europe. They crossed the 4.1 nautical miles between Turkey and Lesbos (or more, to Chios, or Kos etc.) in rubber dinghies. Most were being given first aid and registered on the islands they landed on, and then made their way through Macedonia towards the north seeking to reach the 'safer' and richer countries of Northern Europe. It was all in the news.

As the borders closed (a decision made by the European Union and foreseen by many, in fact), about 60,000 people were stuck in Greece. Local administration authorities were asked by central government for availability of space to make temporary refugee camps, in order to free the main port of Athens, Pireus, from the thousands of tents which kept accumulating as boat after boat arrived from the islands, as well as the large makeshift camp at Eidomeni, on the Macedonian border.

My family and I moved to the city of Drama (650km north of Athens) just 3 months before the borders closed.

The population of Drama is about 48.000 people, 75% of them third generation refugees from the Black Sea. It is a

small city where people are generally warm and friendly, and news (and gossip) travels fast. Thursday is market day, and most of the city centre is taken up by stalls, and street sellers of anything and everything. It is most people's socializing day. The Orthodox Church plays an important part in the life of the city, and churches are generally packed on Sunday mornings and religious festivals. There are at least 30 traditional dance clubs, around 10 amateur theater groups, and a very lively and active "ecology association".



Camp Drama, March-May 2016

The city council of Drama responded grudgingly (to the central government's dictate to make space for refugees), and under pressure from the pro-refugee opposition party, an old tobacco warehouse 7km out of town was quickly 'repaired', outside toilets and showers were made, camp beds and blankets were brought in by the army.

One Wednesday evening in mid-March, 500 people (around 200 children) were brought in by coaches from the nearby port of Kavala, having made the trip by boat from Lesbos, and thinking that they were somewhere near the border (Drama is, in fact, near the border with Bulgaria, but for safety reasons nobody chooses this route to Europe). In 2-3 days time, many volunteers from the city started to come with clothes, food, and offers of hospitality. A volunteer doctor came after his hospital shift to provide medical assistance. We discovered that a. there were quite a few people speaking English, and b. that there was widespread misinformation as to location, border status, and so on. Most refugees, when asked (in any language) believed that the borders would open "any day now". They were all impatient to move on (Germany, Austria, and Sweden were the destinations of choice for most people). Every day spent at the camp was considered a delay, and

they did not even conceive of considering staying in Greece for any longer.

Short report, July 2016

Most of the 500 people who came here have either been given asylum and relocated, or are being hosted by local families - only about 140 people remain, and they are also waiting for travelling documents (it's a long wait for some) - and now we are expecting another 400-500 people to arrive. Unfortunately the tobacco warehouse/refugee camp is about 8km outside the city (the 'chiefs' of the local authorities are not really very much in favour of the refugees although they make quite a huge political capital out of them!) so it's become a bit of a ghetto... There are 'underwater' invisible tensions between the volunteers / voluntary organisations and the local authorities, with local authorities undermining (subverting, even) the volunteers' social work with the refugees. So gangs of bullies have emerged (you know, the macho mentality!), and there is often violence in the camp, most of it hushed up... This has driven a lot of locals away, in fact. It's sad, but it's what it is and we're working with it.

We established a small vegetable garden in the winter, both as a symbolic act and to see how people would take to it, but a garden requires commitment, and refugees refused to commit to anything that would 'tie' them to this land (most are seeking asylum in northern Europe, thinking their lives would be better there), so they let the children destroy the garden...

Now there is new medical organisation called "team kitrinos" (kitrinos means yellow in Greek - they have yellow van!) who found me and asked me to design a new garden for the camp, which I have done . It's a small affair, and if the refugees that remain take it on board, and ask for more, I have a few more plans up my sleeve (there is a lot of space for food gardens, as well as

plans to engage refugees in the local community if they feel like it - I have proposed a women's crafts cooperative, which is not working out right now partly because the women are secretly bullied by the men in their families and partly because their minds are set on leaving as soon as they can). But I am hopeful that with proper facilitation and encouragement something will work out.

Social emergency plan:

Knowing that the refugees would be spending at least 6-9 months at this camp, and would have to make their needs heard by the Greeks, my first idea was to encourage them to organize into a community, with English-speaking spokespeople. Gauging that there were at least 50+ people speaking English comprehensibly, I devised a plan whereby one English-speaker would represent 10 people and be 'responsible' for them, making sure their voices and needs are heard and taken care of. Thus there would be a council of 50 interpreters (without the need to bring in interpreters from outside, who would only be temporary anyway) who would convene and discuss priorities, and then convey whatever information, needs or special requirements there may be to the authorities. This would engage them in community building, taking responsibility, as well as empowering them by having a reliable 'voice'. The greatest benefit of this would be the seeds of self organization and hopefully the seeds of community (even such a temporary one). Even a sense of purpose, that would ease the sense of shock and possibly keep depression at bay.

I talked about this to various people in authority, and offered to give the proposal in writing, but both the offer and the idea was turned down. I believe it was turned down

because a. people in office are not used to thinking of *people as community*, b. they would not know how to go about doing this, but most importantly c. because I was new to the city and not known to them at all (they could not reference me in any way), and politicians are very careful who they listen to... Thinking back, I could have made more 'noise' rather than go through the official channels.

I found out much later that the authorities had found a Syrian (who had been living in Drama for the last 25 years and works for local TV) to act as interpreter, middleman, etc. He turned out to be exploitative of his own countrypeople, effectively selling them services in exorbitant prices (and culminating in the formation of a gang of bullies, who later caused the Greek volunteers to distance themselves from the camp).

The UNHCR (in charge of all refugee camps most everywhere in the world) whenever present, had their own interpreters but were generally unapproachable unless one was an NGO, or member of the city council. They had their own agenda to meet, which was to help with asylum procedures. The representative for the whole area was a Canadian man who understood very little of local customs and mentality, with all the consequences this had. To be fair to all, everyone did as they knew best in a time of emergency.

Notes, plans, and musings:

The camp is 7km outside the city, in the so-called ‘industrial zone’, an open area devoid of anything but low vegetation. It was formerly used as a tobacco warehouse, because Drama was historically a tobacco producing area for the whole of the 20th century. Right now, around the camp there are marble factories (another major product of the area), a cotton processing plant, and thorny bushes. Almost a wasteland. It is 2km uphill from the main road leading out from Drama towards Bulgaria, in a little frequented area (“out of sight out of mind” as the authorities wished it to be) with no direct public transport.

It is located on the foot of Falakro (‘bald’) mountain (the highest in the region). The mountain is on its north side, and the plain of Drama is to the south. The prevailing winds are southerly, coming fast up towards the mountain. The entrance of the building faces west, towards an large open field often grazed by herds of cows and sheep. The grounds are fenced all around. The entrance to the facility is from a road going along the south side. The toilets, showers, and washing machines are all along the south wall, and you need to go out of the warehouse building to reach them. There is another similarly sized warehouse to the north of the camp, and the space between them is sunny and sheltered. There

are 3-4 small almond trees, and a few wild clumps of fig inside the grounds.

I made a plan for planting robinia and acacia trees (fast growing, easy trees) on the south side of the camp, both for shade and windbreak, and for directing the black and grey waters from the showers and toilets to the trees. Another plan was for a raised vegetable garden in the sheltered space between the two buildings (there are tons of good sized rocks lying around), and an outdoor cooking area, as well as for a recreation/healing garden in the south west corner of the camp (the most often visited area of the whole grounds). Indeed, with time, the area between the two buildings was used for cooking and barbecues by the people (refugees are not allowed to cook for themselves in the camps – but of course they all do!).

Unfortunately, all these plans were considered ‘luxuries’ and viewed suspiciously by the authorities, and they were again dismissed. I believe they hoped they would not have to concern themselves with this place, they “wished it away”, so they were unwilling to spend time or resources on it. Besides, I am not an “official person” with any power, nor could I muster any local support for this “grand plan” as people saw it. Most of the building and infrastructure jobs are now being contracted out to engineering firms which make the lowest bid.

From what was heard, the “International Organisation for Migration” undertook to contract a firm to make the old warehouse into small family apartments for the refugees

who would be unlucky enough to stay on. This was decided by the city council rather than renting apartments in the city (the ruling party are the ultra right-wingers of the city, who view 'muslim foreigners' with suspicion). However, the city has many empty apartments lying empty, and the money invested in the contract firm would have boosted the local economy (it was publicly stated that the engineering firm received 2 million euros for the project – this money would have literally lifted Drama out of its poverty, reduced unemployment, and strengthened community!) It was a matter of *not catching and not storing energy*.



Life in the camp

For the first month or so, the people lived in the manner of open army barracks, with beds arranged in rows, and no privacy. In the evening, after the volunteers left and the huge neon lights went out, men gathered in groups smoking and talking all night. For the young mothers, the children, but especially for the elderly who had respiration problems, this was unbearable.

Having wandered around Drama getting to know my new dwelling place, I discovered disused buildings that had all sorts of old but still usable equipment, and a very useful dumping site full of old furniture. So I proposed to the good man from the city council (who honestly cared and wished to help) to get hold of a van and transport wooden and metal frames, planks, old tables etc for the people to make 'rooms' with. This was duly done, and slowly the families started making little apartments for themselves, using the frames and the thick army blankets they had already been given.

One day, about 2 months from their arrival, a woman in her late twenties, a mother of 5, with who we had often connected and laughed together despite the language barrier, took me to the back end of the building with pride.

She had been a make-up artist and hairdresser in Syria, and she had made a small hairdressing, make up and nail salon out of the metal frames and army blankets. She had found an old mirror and plastic flowers from a nearby dumping site to decorate her salon. It was a tiny piece of normality in her (their) otherwise chaotic circumstances.

I volunteered with various groups (new friends and acquaintances) and started going to the camp either to help with crafts workshops, or simply to socialize. For a while we hosted a Syrian grandmother, who slept at our house because she could not sleep in the camp at night, and went there to socialize and be with her children and grandchildren during the day.

My dance group held two of its meetings at the camp, with live music: we all formed a circle and started to dance, and very soon we were joined by the refugees. It was one of the most moving moments in my life – as the sun was going down we all became one huge circle, dancing the same steps, to a *music that was common to both cultures*. We had decided to bring a lyre and a drum player to play music from the Black Sea – 75% of the inhabitants of Drama came as refugees from the Black Sea in the 1920s, and still preserve the customs (food, music, dancing, language) of their grandparents. As we found out, the Kurds share the same instruments, rhythms, and even dance steps. Music and dancing seems to go to the heart of people, especially a people *deprived of it* due to ISIS...

As time was passing, life in the camp reached a crisis point: without community support, conflicts (class and gender, mostly) escalated into a series of violent episodes. Knives came out, and even the good person from the council who had been helping all along got injured in an effort to separate the two sides. The hospital saw many emergencies during the month of May, and volunteers started to become more scarce. By June, the only Greeks that visited the camp were certain representatives of the UNHCR, the police, and certain people who (it was heard) were acting as police informers so as to prevent any more violent episodes from occurring. Language classes (English, German, and Greek) given by groups of volunteers as well as crafts workshops stopped.

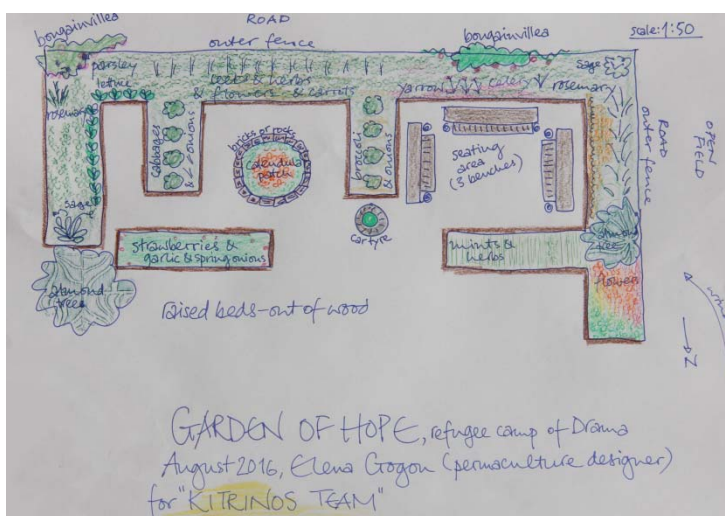
Because of their history, many people in Drama hosted refugees on a temporary or more long-term basis, formed friendships, and are still keeping touch through skype and facebook. At the time of writing (December 2016 – February 2017), more than 350 (out of the 500) refugees from the camp of Drama have been given asylum and relocated to various places around Europe (as they wanted in the first place), and more interviews are underway for the rest.

“Team Kitrinos” (July – December 2016)

Team Kitrinos is a small medical NGO, run by Dr Siyana Mahroof (a London-based GP) in order to be able to get into refugee camps and offer medical care. It has 2-3 people on the payroll (including one Greek coordinator and one Syrian interpreter who came in as a refugee himself with everyone else), and is supported by a few volunteers (doctors and nurses). They contacted me in late summer in order to design **a small garden** at the Drama camp, so that the people would have a little space of beauty and an opportunity to involve themselves with the earth (and possibly eat some fresh produce as well).

The plan was already in sketch form, so I only had to finish it up and present it. It was a raised polyculture garden with pomegranate trees, bougainvilleas, roses, strawberries, herbs and some annual vegetables in between, designed in a way to make room for wooden benches. We raised the beds with wooden planks (we had a lot of discarded cement bricks and rocks lying around in the area, but we were not allowed to use these, because it would be considered ‘building’, which requires special permission etc).

We asked the local administration for soil, manure, and mulch, and were promised it, but it took 3 whole months to



Plan for the first camp garden.

arrive! By which time we had lost the autumn planting season... Nevertheless, once the soil came we gathered seeds and plants and planted the garden (needless to say, we had to buy the manure and transport many sacks of mulch in the family car). The refugees that remained in the camp by that time were very happy for the garden, but naturally a bit wistful about the timing of it. We were especially helped by a woman who was a farmer in Kurdistan, a young man from Palestine, and of course all the children (who were especially excited about the strawberries!). The garden was maintained for a month by 2 men who were gardeners in Aleppo, as well as the Kurdish woman.

At the same time another project was underway. One of the volunteers of 'Kitrinos', a Jamaican muslim woman from



The crafts exhibition in Drama.

London, in an effort to lift the women's spirits and mood, started a **sewing and knitting club**. We went together into town, myself acting as interpreter, and bought needles, thread, wool, beads and materials (which helped a lot to connect the city with the camp, generated business and new friendships), and started sewing and embroidering with the women.

By the end of autumn, 3 sewing machines, wool, knitting and crochet needles had arrived (by car!) from the UK, and the club took off. Women became happier as their creativity

was encouraged, and the atmosphere of the camp became lighter. Some women made their own dresses with material they bought in town, and we managed to salvage materials (fabrics, lace, buttons) from a local clothing factory that was renewing its stock. We had the idea to hold an exhibition / bazaar with all the handicrafts round Christmas. The idea of the exhibition was well accepted by the women, and 'Kitrinos' managed to get some funding from 'Intersos' to buy more wool and produce posters and invitations.



The "Sewing and Knitting Club" in the Drama Camp.

Short report, September 2016

The latest news here, regarding the refugee camps, is that the government has put up job positions in refugee camps (mostly 'general duty' people and some social workers / psychologists / educators), which is a good thing of course, regarding the needs of refugees as well as the rate of unemployment, but the criteria for appointment have only been how long people have been unemployed (rather than interest/previous experience / languages / etc)... Therefore there are people who have landed sensitive job positions who actually really hate foreigners / refugees / immigrants and treat them with disdain (xenophobic neonazis seem to be on the rise here - much like couch grass in a disturbed garden!) A friend of ours has got such a job in the Drama camp, and she comes back home exasperated by her colleagues every day, she told us.

I really believe that we would need social permaculture facilitators from all the ecovillages of the world, and that this would really be the most worthwhile thing to do in the next 10 years (train and facilitate ecovillage formation in refugee camps).

The exhibition, and the temporary closing of the camp

By now, most of the refugees had left for Europe or Athens, and the 120 or so that remained were too depressed and cut off from the city, stranded in the camp with too much time to kill and nothing to do. So the **aim of the exhibition** was to give the women a goal to work for, make the refugees more visible in town, to 'show off' their creativity and skill, to provide more interaction between the citizens of Drama and the inhabitants of the camp, as well as to earn a little pocket money. A space was booked (for free) for 4 days in one of the prestigious literary clubs of Drama, a few days before Christmas, to coincide with Christmas shopping.

It was a time of greater personal involvement in the life of the camp (I, too, had stopped visiting regularly, as work and family demanded more of my time, and also my old friends were already gone to Europe). The sewing and knitting room was made of metal frames and old army blankets, and had a light, a heater, 2 sewing machines and a 'baby pen' in one corner. It was a hub of activity and creativity, and it was locked to protect it from the vandalism of the camp bullies (who were still hanging

around). The key was kept by one of the elders of the camp (a woman, of course) and Team Kitrinós had another key.

Because of my renewed involvement, whenever I went into the camp to visit the elder or the sewing room, I was often asked for coffee or dinner. Inside their makeshift apartments, the women had made havens and homes: army beds became couches and tables, old cooking stoves salvaged and made to work ('illegally', of course!), new heaters and lights were bought. There was finally a new 'normality' in people's everyday lives, as they were waiting for the much dreamed-of interview for relocation or asylum. I had many coffees and home-baked traditional cookies, and nobody ever allowed me to leave the place without at least a bite (of something usually delicious) to eat.

The experience of preparing for the exhibition was a great opportunity for me to spend quality time with the women of the camp and learn from them the lesson of what real resilience means.

To prove the haphazard (and incoherent) planning of the Greek authorities, 3 weeks before the exhibition, it was announced at the camp that the people would be transferred to a hotel in the neighbouring prefecture of Serres (2 hours away, with no direct transport), and *were given a week to pack up their things*. This was because the heating had not yet been installed at the camp, and the winter was coming on colder than expected (in fact, the heating was installed a week after the people left). Nevertheless, with some juggling of cars, people, and

schedules, we did manage to hold the exhibition, and, all things considered, it went very well.

A note here: because of the harshness of this year's winter, the inhabitants of certain refugee camps were taken to hotels (not necessarily in the same area) which were rented (European or NGO money most certainly) for this purpose. This had its advantages and disadvantages: it provided certain hotel owners with an incentive to keep their hotels open and running (many are closing down because of the economic slump), and thus to circulate money and keep jobs running within the community. However, due to the lack of planning, the refugees were taken to places quite far from the communities they were initially close to, and thus lost contact with local people they had already formed friendships/relationships with. From what I hear from our people in Serres, this has made them feel uprooted yet again, and more insecure.

At the time of writing (March 2017) the people are still living in the hotel in Serres, and work is still going on at the old warehouse, for those who will remain in Greece (numbers and cases still unknown).

Teaching herbal medicine in the camps of Epirus

In late August I was invited by “Arsis”, a Greek NGO specializing in psychological and social support (PSS), to do simple herbal medicine workshops in the refugee camps of north western Greece.

Short report, September 2016

A friend who is coordinating the local branch of a Greek NGO invited me to do a theory and practice of herbal medicine/first aid workshop to the refugees in 3 camps in the area of Epirus. There are 5 camps in the area, but there was demand from the 3 of them. I stayed 6 days and went twice to each camp - on the 2nd visit we went out walking to see and identify the helpful herbs, and pick them too (a friend had also donated packets of dried herbs for each camp). On the whole it went really well, in the sense that the people I talked to were really interested and took lots of notes, and asked lots of questions.

Two of the camps I visited were high on the mountains (Konitsa and Tsepelovo camps), housed in old stone buildings (one former orphanage and one former student lodge), without provision for heating as yet, but with a cafeteria-type dining room and gardens all around (unkempt, but promising!). I made sure to talk about the herbs growing abundantly in the back yard and side streets (yarrow, lemon balm, nettles, sage, mints, plantain, calendula, rosehips, etc).

As refugee camps go, they were the best I have ever seen - of course the people are very unhappy, restless, and frustrated, and hardly make it to breakfast each morning... Some of the NGO people were saying that even after 5 months of being there, there are still people they had not seen come out of their rooms. Most have set into a pattern of staying up really late into the night (talking and smoking mostly) and getting up at lunchtime. The children, of course, are everywhere - early risers, eager to play/explore the grounds/go to greek or english or arabic classes. Everybody is in a state of expectancy for their asylum and relocation papers which will take them to Germany! And because this is their goal, and they see nothing else, they live in a fantasy future - i heard from a lot of people (in all the camps) "all this is really interesting and wonderful, and i want to study it in depth, but not now: when i get to Germany, and my mind is at rest i will find a book and a teacher".

This was very sad for me because for some people it was clear that they have little chance of going anywhere, as they are not Syrian (European politicians do not favour Iraqis and Afghans).

The Afghans don't like the Syrians at all, because they get preferential treatment, and they speak badly of them (they don't talk to each other either, even in organised group activities that NGOs provide).

The third camp i visited was in the valley, right by a river, and the people are living in UNHCR tents (there must be about 350-400 people living there). This is going to be a permanent camp, apparently (whenever people leave other people will be moved in) - there is a mosque, a barber, a tea-tent, a "female-friendly space" (no men are allowed, so women can feel safer and take off their scarves etc), a play-and-meeting area for children and teenagers, and an "illegal" (but frequently used) passageway to the river. This is Filippias camp. Quite a lot of tents had little private gardens set up outside, with tomatoes, corn, watermelons, cabbages, parsley and marigolds!

The food (provided by the greek army) is awful and totally

inappropriate, so a lot of people cook on open fires or types of rocket stoves - which is "not allowed" for health and safety reasons (of course! but people have to eat...). And they have a hard time whenever it rains (and it had rained a lot these past couple of weeks) because the wood can't dry.

On the second day at Filippias (after we went walking to the river, and the girls jumped in and had a lot of fun, etc) we were invited for tea. It was a little space between 4 tents, (Afghan women with children but without male family members, gathered together for protection), and one woman was making plum jam in a rocket stove made of a big feta cheese tin and some chicken wire to hold the pot.

In one camp (that I didn't go, and which is up on the mountains) the people are bullied by 2 men, who (it is suspected) are actually smugglers - these men try to bully even the UNHCR staff, and are often out of the camp travelling in and out of Epirus! They terrorise the refugees into not making contact with the NGO staff, so the refugees steadily refuse any camp activities (the NGO my friend works for is working on community building and social support, setting up pre-school activities, self-help stuff etc). We had one such person in the Drama camp, in fact, but I don't know what became of him - he threatened and promised and threatened and promised again and again, and finally someone spoke out about it. But nobody dares actually say that these people are traffickers...

I briefly visited the biggest camp which is just outside the main city (Ioannina), but all I had the chance to see were a few gardens made by the people outside their tents, and grazing cows going in and out of the fence...

I did not take pictures in any of the camps, although my hands were itching to...

There are 5 camps in the region of Epirus, the biggest being Katsikas, near the city of Ioannina, in a former marsh, and the fence is daily trodden by grazing cows, who wander freely (pooing everywhere!). People are in UNHCR tents, and some have made little gardens in front of their tents. Despite the number of NGOs working in this camp, it is very hard to organize the people into a community (maybe “too many cooks spoil the broth”?) so the workshop could not even be proposed at this camp. The conditions are rather dire, and drug & sex peddlers have free access to the camp.

The mountainous camp of Doliana was in a different situation. There, the refugees are bullied by a person (Arabic speaker, most likely Syrian) who by all accounts must be a trafficker, into not forming any kind of relationship with the Greek (or other) NGO workers. It is a small camp, where this man reigns supreme, acting as an interpreter and go-between with the authorities (a lot of power is invested with interpreters in situations like these). Therefore this camp was also out of bounds for “Arsis”.

The first day I had to work with an interpreter who had no idea of the names of the herbs in Arabic, *which was a problem, but the solution came* from the refugees themselves: after looking at, touching, smelling and tasting the herbs, they recognized them (and taught the interpreter a few words as well!). I went to all three camps twice, once for the “theory” and once to take a walk around the camp to teach how to recognize the herbs in the mountain and field.

This was the most fun part. Most of my 'students' were women who really wanted to talk about their health and marital problems with another woman, or wanted to help their families. What they most wanted was to socialize, so after the workshops they made tea for us.

The Konitsa and Tsepelovo camps had great potential for community development because of the rather more comfortable housing conditions (in Konitsa the people were housed in an former children's home complete with common rooms and a large dining hall with tv, extensive grounds with sports fields and gardens, and in Tsepelovo they were housed in a former student hostel with front and back gardens and a dining hall). However, the people largely suffered from depression (alleviated by pills dosed out twice a week by the visiting medical teams), some sleeping in late or never coming out of their rooms for days on end. Inactivity was sinking them deeper into depression, and attempts to alleviate this by gardening or crafts have not been very successful so far. *Gardening and crafts need a resident (or at least regular) enthusiastic facilitator to prompt people out of their apathy and torpor, set goals, and really function as a social worker or work therapist.*

After the nature walk (and the swim in the river) at Filippias, we were invited for tea and biscuits in a woman's tent. In fact, it was a small 'neighbourhood' of tents all taken up by women with mothers and children without husbands – in true survival mode, they had joined together and taken up tents next to each other for protection. They had even

covered up the spaces/corridors in-between, both for shade as well as community (and yet they were unknown to each other before they entered the camp). The woman who invited us was making plum jam in a rocket stove made out of an huge feta cheese can and a piece of the camp fence.

(The news is that some of the inhabitants of the camp at Filippias have been allocated apartments in the city of Ioannina, and just before the heavy snowfall were moved to nearby hotels to escape the cold. Alas, the people living in Moria, Lesbos, were not as fortunate).



The camp in Konitsa, Epirus – an old orphanage with ample grounds.

Thoughts so far:

It seems that Greeks (as a culture perhaps) have an aversion to long-term planning and organizing. And yet, in these uncertain and turbulent times, one needs to plan for shelters and refuges for all sorts of emergencies (especially when your neighbours are effectively at war). 'Overhanging' Greece right now, if one listens to the local media, there is an imminent threat of war within our own shores.

Regarding the present refugee situation, it seems that one needs to make a lot of noise in a lot of high places with a solid and viable plan of action which can easily be made public (pressure by shame!). Or: citizens take it upon themselves to occupy spaces, support refugee families to settle there, and encourage self-organization, as happens in the centre of Athens.

The UNHCR and the other big NGOs handling the crisis are generally skilled in handling crises like this by *segregating* people, using the Roman grid pattern formation (all the refugee camps I have seen, either personally or from photographs are arranged thus). **This is the pattern least conducive to community and solidarity, as it separates people into units**, much like an army (the Romans used it to control large numbers of people so that they would not

become a mob). However, people fleeing war are traumatized and insecure, and have more need of community support and solidarity, so a camp arranged in a network pattern (clusters of tents that connect with paths, much like old-fashioned neighbourhoods) would immediately work in alleviating stress and insecurity. Because conflicts are inevitable in the best of communities but even more so among people suffering from shock and trauma, the primary need is for good social support here.

A serious constraint for those willing and knowledgeable enough to offer help and support in camps, is the fact that one has to belong (or be under the auspices of) an approved NGO. Although this is meant as a protective measure for the vulnerable members of the refugee community, and it might often work like this, there are many cases of mismanagement, exploitation and trafficking within refugee camps (which a sensitive observer can easily pick up).

What I hear from friends who are working or volunteering at refugee camps, is that apart from the actual infrastructure and general amenities, *a serious issue for the refugees is that of contact with both the locals and with the outside world.* Camps are often ghettos. A man working in delivering humanitarian aid said to me recently, that when he gets off his truck and before he gets to the back to open the cover to deliver the goods, people approach him with offers of hot tea and a chat – even though he speaks neither English nor Arabic! Some people have picked up scraps of Greek and try to communicate.

Everybody asks for reliable news, which seems to be hard to come by in some places (in the Drama camp we pressured the municipality to install wi-fi, and the local ecology club donated a tv).

One consideration that is always overlooked in refugee camps, is *the land* itself. No provision is made for its care, let alone its regeneration – refugee camps abound with plastic rubbish and thrown away food (food that is either culturally inappropriate, or gone bad) in aluminum containers. Trees and shrubs are often cut down, and gardens are mostly considered a luxury.

With a little bit of planning a lot of things could be composted, gardens developed (for food, solace, and medicine) and human waste could be directed to feed trees. With a little more planning, one could purify water through plants in tanks, and reuse it for washing or flushing. These basic infrastructures are very easy to set up given enough ‘hands’ (and there is generally no shortage of hands in camps).

With even more planning, tents and industrial ‘containers’ can also be avoided. Strawbales cost much less than UNHCR tents and IKEA-type plasticized houses, and provide more insulation in summer and winter, needing little more time and labour to plaster with mud than it takes to put up a large tent, and people can be housed more comfortably. When no longer needed, strawbale houses can be taken down and composted, or even fed to animals!

So far, apart from the work I have done in person, I have been consulted by NGOs and social workers regarding ways of making gardens in camps and other refugee settlements. I have been unable to travel very far away from Drama, due to work and family, so I have not been present at the implementation of any advice I have given. I have recently been called by a social worker, employed by the state, who is looking after 50 refugee families who have been given asylum status and a home in central Greece: she is thinking of setting up a community garden for them and has been inspired by her readings in permaculture. I suggested she involve the locals, and secure the land for at least 2 years, and promised to travel south when the conditions permit.

Permaculture design and planning would really go a long way to making humanly habitable refugee camps, even if only for very temporary residence. Indeed refugees are a mobile population, seeking asylum both in the legal and in the literary sense. Fleeing war and distress which shake up and shatter communities (and identities), they need *the power of community and solidarity*. In the camps residence is considered temporary, but in practice people might spend anything from a few weeks to a few months to even years. Judging by the amenities created by the refugees themselves within their camps (hairdressing salon, cooking facilities, and so on) it is obvious that what people seek is a sense of *'everyday normality'*. This needs to be reflected in the infrastructures which receive them as much as in the people employed or volunteering to look after them.

It would be very helpful if the designers and administrators of refugee camps had some training in Permaculture. This would work both ways: protecting the land and natural resources and looking after the welfare of the people at the same time.

One of my dreams is an organization which would make community gardens in refugee camps, train refugees to be permaculture gardeners to maintain them, and be able to leave a master community-builder at each camp, to tend the garden and the people.

When refugee camps become new thriving villages committed to caring for the land and for each other, we shall learn peace.



Poster for the exhibition.



The “Sewing and Knitting Club” in the Drama Refugee Camp is a project which aims to re-skill and reawaken old skills, but also to enhance the psychology and wellbeing of the women residents. It was inspired and facilitated by Shakira Rowe, a volunteer with “Team Kitrinós Medical Care”. For the little time that they have been among us, the refugees of Drama have shared their stories their hopes their gentleness, and their valuable skills with us. Trapped in a country in between the horror of the war they left behind and the promise of a new life (living a life in parentheses, that is) the women of the refugee camp take up sewing and knitting. Using needle hook and thread they fill their endless hours and days with creativity, meaning, and Art. Working with colours and with their hands, they reclaim their lives and self-worth.

This exhibition aims to make the women of the refugee community visible to the citizens of Drama, to show and share their talents and skills with the wider community. It is also a way to support the women in this very difficult and uncertain situation they are currently in. After all, a society matures through solidarity, and always has a lot to learn by opening its heart to “the stranger”.

Special thanks to Intersos for funding the project, to the Drama Club of Arts and Letters for letting us use their space for the exhibition and for co-organising it, to the donors of materials both in London and in Drama for their generosity and support, to the shopkeepers of Drama for their kindness and willingness to help, and to all the volunteers who supported the women in the camp.

September 2017:

Since this document takes some time to be published, I shall add some more observations and thoughts, regarding the situation of refugees and the refugee camp in Drama.

From December 2016 to April 2017, the refugees were moved to a mountain hotel in the nearby prefecture of Serres, in order to escape the extreme weather of Drama. The management of the camp had already been assigned to the IOM, and the medical care to MDM. In the meantime, the premises of the camp were being transformed into 'modern' habitable apartments with kitchens and communal wash areas inside the building (the initial ones had been outside). Indeed, the building now is unrecognizable if you go inside. The people of Drama were expecting their friends and 'protegees' to be back, come spring, but no. After Serres, the small community of refugees were moved to a seaside camp some 45km away from Drama, by the sea, to another camp. Some of us kept some contact (through facebook and a few visits), but it was not easy to have regular contact – internet was bad, the cost of petrol has risen, etc. And by now, the whole community has been relocated to their places of choice (mostly Germany).

In the camp of Drama there was, if you remember, a garden. Built by volunteers, paid for by Team Kitrinos, and looked after by many: the refugees kept it until December, the municipal workers of the site and the author kept it going until about early April. With heavy mulching and manure it survived the harsh winter (2 weeks of unmelting snow and minus 10C for most of January), and the strawberries and herbs had started to flower by late March. By early April the pomegranates the privets and the bougainvilleas had leaves to show, and some of the dormant seeds had sprouted. It survived the harsh winter, but it did not survive the IOM. A few days before the new lot of refugees came in it was demolished – supposedly to make space for a small power station for the needs of the camp! The camp manager (who is paid by the IOM), of course, is only accountable to his superiors (and indirectly to the ministry of Interior) and to nobody else, and will not condescend to talk to a middle-aged female with no official authority. The municipal workers who looked after the building are now employed by the IOM, and asked to keep a low profile and ‘quiet’ about the camp. Even when an independent official (who I do not want to name here, he gave me this information in confidence) visited the camp in August, the camp manager was very vague and inconclusive about everything, adding to the general feeling of lack of transparency. However, our dance group did once manage to obtain permission to have our folk dance ‘lesson’ inside the premises, to the delight of the community living there. We are trying to find a suitable

evening of the week to have our dance class at the camp, in order to make a connection with the people, and re-start from there.

The long and short of it is that since a private NGO has been assigned the role of camp management in Greece, there is very little civil society can do unless it be a registered (and approved!) charity or NGO – something that in Greece is very costly to set up in the first place! Non-formal groups, as well as the communities who live around the camps are generally left in the dark about the communities living inside, despite the fact that “camps are free places” (as the authorities say). This cannot come to any good, I feel. The communities are being kept well apart, and the concerned citizen has to make a huge effort to make real human contact with the refugee community living on the outskirts (as most camps are) of his/her city or village. I see a real need for community building and bridging, even if it only for a short period of time, until refugees are relocated (which – for some – will not be in the foreseeable future).

I have so far approached 2 NGOs (and been approached by another one) to teach permaculture in refugee camps, but so far have not had any replies. I believe, however, that it is mostly camp managers and camp workers who primarily need this training – and only secondarily the refugee community, at least regarding Greek camps.



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