

Volunteering in Ritsona Refugee Camp - Chalkida, Greece

by Jenny Brover

“Sorry I didn’t warn you beforehand,” she said... *“I’ve been here so long, and as messed up as it sounds, after a while you just get used to it...”* I continued to shield my eyes from the scorching sun and dust as I followed Leticia, speechless, my heart quickly sinking, past the rows of makeshift tents of sticks and white tarp; past the kids running wild, their hair caked with dirt, their cute clothes with glittered decals and English expressions covered in the same orange dust; past the women in headscarves hunched over small cooking fires; past men that greet us smiling — their calm, fatigued gait letting on that they’re “used to it”, too.

Leticia has been in Ritsona refugee camp since it was set up three months ago at an ex-military base just over an hour outside of Athens near the seaside town of Chalkida. Like all the quickly and shoddily established Greek refugee camps, Ritsona started out as nothing but a large empty space. Now it is filled with about six-hundred refugees, the majority of them Syrians, including many Syrian Kurds. The resident population is also made up of Afghanis, a small number of Iraqis and Palestinians, and an extended family of Yazidis (a persecuted ethno-religious minority group). Violent clashes, stemming from religious and class prejudices, sometimes occur between the various ethnic groups. Ritsona has the disadvantage of being completely removed from civilization — a three-hour walk along country roads and highways, tucked among the skinny and knotted Mediterranean pines that lend no shade or shelter to those sleeping in tents under an open sky.

When it rains the camp turns to mud, but someone told me it’s better than the heat. Already in early May the heat is unbearable. There are days, ninety-degree hot and sticky days, when the washing water runs out and the military personnel that supply it are nowhere to be found. The drinking water situation is even more dire. Plastic liter water bottles are brought in daily by the military — apart from being a great waste of resources, the supply is never enough. Each resident receives one bottle of water per day. The system for potable well water is being addressed, but is slow and complicated to achieve. Progress has been made with the washing water, held in a single tank on the roof of the washing area. The Red Cross set up six new water tanks on the ground, but after weeks, the military still has yet to fill them. My Palestinian friend is pissed off. He’s a real feisty character with a neatly groomed grey mustache, who had been living several years in Syria before the war forced him to flee. He tells me that if the water doesn’t come back so he can shower, he’s going to jump in those new tanks for a swim. I laugh and shake my head in disgust at the infrastructure of this place. I tell him I’m sorry, I wish I could do something more. I find myself repeating that phrase a lot...

The first time I met him he offered me coffee — a strong mix of cardamom spice and coffee blended together, heated in a tin can over a fire of twigs — and I sat there for two hours in a rickety wooden chair outside his tent while many people passed by to chat. They say he’s kind of a “chief” in the camp, and I can tell right away that he’s a strong-willed person. One time I saw him walking quickly out from the field behind the food warehouse, and asked him what he was up to... *“I was drinking beer,”* he

said. "*Haram!*" I replied, the Arabic word I had just learned for "sin," and we laughed. "*Some people are free and some are not so free,*" he told me... "*I am free.*" It takes a spirit like that to survive the mess that surrounds us.

After giving a quick run down on camp operations, Leticia leaves, and I start my shift in the food distribution warehouse. "*Halib! Halib! Milk! Ma'an! Water! Water! Water!!!*" We pass food and bottles of milk and water through a small window, and I watch as hundreds of people cluster outside. The smallest children push to the front — their families send them to drag back the heavy load to their tent — and they yell relentlessly for milk, their brows furrowed, their mouths gaping desperately for that small luxury. Just their heads are visible above the window while the adults shove and reach around them with arms outstretched, pointing and demanding their rations in Arabic and Farsi. I wipe the oily orange stew, today's lunch, off my hands as it drips through its plastic container, and make a tick on the list, "*Lunch, check!*" We must note when each family has received their rations, so that they don't trick us into getting double. Everyone wants more water. It's hard to ignore the persistent pleas for more. I learn to keep my head down and fill the bags.

By my third day in camp, I'm already recognizing many faces, drinking coffee and tea with refugee families (one of the few customs they have managed to keep intact), and listening to their stories. I had not expected to be so easily welcomed into people's lives, and I am moved by the constant generosity of those I meet. I've made friends with one family and they invite me to a home-cooked meal along with three other volunteers (any food that comes from the outside is either brought in by volunteers or by those willing to walk the three hours to town). I peel back the curtain to step into the pale light of their room, and our vibrant conversation soon erases the dismal reality of the crumbling cement walls and stifling heat. Scanning the room, I notice that the family of five must sleep side-by-side on the ground, as there is only one bed made of piled blankets. We sit cross-legged on the floor, waiting patiently as our lunch of grape leaves, salad and lentils is prepared by the youngest of the four siblings and her mother — a generous and caring woman who copes with the stress of being apart from her husband. He left for Europe first, and waits for them in Germany. Brothers, Ivan and Alan and their sister Gyan are adults close in age. I first met Gyan when she was with a group of girlfriends. They were sitting by the side of the road watching the sun go down, chatting and giggling like crazy. I felt my lips curl into a half-smile as the radiance of that intimate moment of friendship made the grief and hopelessness of our surroundings fade to grey, and I longed to join them. I felt shy approaching them, but it was Gyan who drew me into the circle, asking me question after question. When I met her brother Alan the next day, it was the same warm and easygoing manner, the same engaging knack for conversation. They were teachers back home and now hold daily English classes for other refugees in camp. They were both born with muscular dystrophy, and are in wheelchairs.

Ivan pulls out his laptop to show us his cell phone video of their journey following smugglers across the mountains into Turkey from Iraq, where they were living temporarily after escaping the war in Syria. The crossing took days, and Alan and Gyan were carried on horseback. I look around the room while everyone's eyes are glued to the laptop screen, and I feel deeply that what drives me to volunteer is the

connection forged between people. We come from such vastly different backgrounds and circumstances, yet sharing this moment, in this room, in this camp, the differences dissolve. The more I get to know the residents in Ritsona, the more I feel invested in their lives, and I want to do something, anything, *everything* I can to better their current situation and give them hope for the future. I am here to help, yet I can't shake this feeling of powerlessness that was planted the moment I arrived. It only expands within my chest each day as I witness the everyday obstacles and injustices, manifestations of the much larger, more complex issue that is the refugee crisis — 4.2 million Syrians have been displaced, and there are over 50,000 refugees stranded in Greece.

As volunteers, we strive to make life in camp better, knowing that none of the initiatives can give people back all they have lost — so many have lost family; others, their children; all have lost their homes and their country, not to mention their careers — nor can it change the direness of the situation at Ritsona. One question resounds in my head, *"How can we allow people to live this way?"* We cannot go back to our air conditioned hotel rooms at the end of the day, or return home to our daily lives and neglect what we have witnessed. We cannot neglect it when people must plead for water; when they must sleep on the floor of an overcrowded tent; when human excrement lies scattered on the ground; when medical care is inadequate; when sanitation is an afterthought; when children go years without school and grow up without an education; when ethnic clashes escalate into dangerous riots; when there is no news from the outside about when policy will change; when the asylum process is painfully slow and disorganized; when families remain split apart in separate countries; when life savings have been depleted by smugglers to cross Turkey and the Aegean Sea; and most detrimentally of all, when the border of Greece and Macedonia, the route to a better future in Europe, stays closed and refugees face deportation to Turkey.

Little by little, initiatives have been developed in Ritsona to improve the conditions, make it more inhabitable and restore some sense of "normalcy." Syria is a country where education is highly valued: Many of the adults I met were working professionals, teachers, business owners, architects, doctors, or university students, and almost everyone held a job of some kind in their country. The war in Syria made it so school became impossible. Schools in Syria were forced to close, and many were displaced to other cities or surrounding countries before fleeing to Europe, so even in a safer area it was difficult to provide young children with consistent schooling. As a temporary solution to this problem, there are English and German classes (I set up a beginners' English class for women with another volunteer), a library and an art studio. It feels rewarding to see these ideas come to fruition: young adults bent over notebooks, neatly copying down phrases in German; grown men waving a raised hand in the air to be called on by the teacher; small children bursting out of the art tent with colorful drawings in hand; women bonding and laughing, some nursing, others with children in their lap, as they practice English conversation.

Only... one man stops me short. A large group of independent volunteers have just arrived, singing and playing hand drums with refugee children running and skipping alongside them. Just as I start to feel the excitement and joy of that moment, he tells me, *"They think we want music. We don't need music. We need to leave here."* I think of the words *"Open the borders... We are not animals."* scrawled in thick black marker on one of the tents, and I know he's right.