

On a Greek Island That Welcomed Migrants, Residents and Refugees Feel Abandoned

[Nicolas Niarchos](#)



Because of overcrowding, many migrants on the Greek island of Samos live in tents outside the official perimeter of a refugee camp near the city of Vathy.

Photograph by Angelos Tzortzinis / dpa / Getty

In December, 2018, a volunteer who teaches photography at a school for refugee children on the Greek island of Samos gave Kodak disposable cameras to her class. She told the students to photograph their daily lives. “When we developed the pictures, we were highly impressed,” Giulia Cicoli, one of the founders of the [school](#), known as Mazí, told me as she showed me a number of the images, which had been given captions by the children who took them. One captured angry men climbing a fence topped with barbed wire and had the caption “There was a protest. All the African guys wanted to be transferred and they burned 2 toilets.” A picture that

showed women waiting in the dark to visit the camp health clinic was presented with the words “I hate this line. The line for the doctor.” It went on, “The last time I had to wait for 14 hours.” To me, the most striking image was one of the simplest: a picture of the interior of one of the trailers that many refugees live in on the island. Wires hung from a dirty and stained ceiling, and a tube light traversed the frame. The young photographer captioned it, “I put this light here to make my container more beautiful.”

Samos is one of five islands that house refugees in the eastern part of Greece. It is known for its wine, its small size, and, now, for chronic overcrowding. This year, the situation has been growing worse as more migrants have arrived by boat from Turkey to join the four thousand refugees who are already here. The island’s thirty-three thousand residents initially aided the migrants themselves, providing them with food and clothing. Four years later, they say that the Greek government has failed to do its part and that both the asylum seekers and the island’s permanent residents are being neglected by politicians in Athens. “The population is slowly becoming a victim, because it has to deal alone with the situation,” Nikitas Kiparissi, a volunteer who teaches art to asylum seekers on Samos, told me.

Greece is still suffering from the effects of a decade-long economic crisis and the resultant austerity program imposed on it by eurozone lenders. When asylum seekers started arriving on the island, in 2015, tourism waned, and politicians argued that the migrant crisis had scared people away. Even though tourists soon returned in even stronger numbers than before, politicians continue to invoke the spectre of another drop.

The fear of migrants, locals told me, is being used as a political weapon in Greece’s legislative elections, which are scheduled for July. The political rhetoric has filtered into all aspects of life on Samos. When I was there, the youth wing of the local Communist Party had hung a banner in the center of the island’s capital, Vathy, which read “Solidarity with the refugees and migrants!” Some upscale restaurants, meanwhile, were refusing service to

people who look like migrants.

Recently, after schools on Samos started staying open later to allow migrant children to attend classes, many local parents kept their children home in protest. The national government, which is controlled by Alexis Tsipras's leftist Syriza party, was quick to criticize the locals for keeping their children out of school. "A small number of parents are trying to cultivate a climate of racism and xenophobia," the education ministry said in a statement.

Samians think this rhetoric from the central government is unfair. Last year, Samos's mayor, Michalis Angelopoulos, called for the Greek government to transfer migrants off the island. "Together, we can and must be able to give a real solution to a problem for which we have no responsibility," he said, "but in an unfair way, we have suffered and continue to suffer from all its consequences."

The Greek government has been given 1.6 billion euros by the E.U. to spend on the migrant crisis since 2015, but the funds don't seem to have filtered through to the migrants. "You look at the conditions . . . and they are abysmal," Bill Frelick, the director of the refugee-rights program at Human Rights Watch, told me. "You can't help but think there is a deliberate strategy of deterrence, to make the conditions as bad as possible despite all the funding they are getting from Europe."

The largest refugee camp on Samos is situated on a disused military base perched in the pine forests above Vathy. Some four thousand people inhabit a space designed to accommodate six hundred and forty-eight. Inside a barbed-wire fence, people inhabit filthy trailers with windows broken by police raids. Outside the camp, in an area known as the Jungle, migrants cluster in the trees in squalid collections of tents, shacks, and tarpaulins tied to branches. "The conditions have always been bad," Bogdan Andrei, who leads the group [Samos Volunteers](#) and has worked on the island since 2016, told me. "But now, since September, they have been the worst in three years, and people still keep on coming." Faced with the threat of growing nationalism in their own countries, politicians from E.U.

member states, who are well aware of the conditions in the camps, have not prioritized finding a solution to resettle refugees quickly and humanely. “It’s a situation of people being stuck here in a power struggle that they can’t see,” Agus Oliveri, a field coördinator with Samos Volunteers, told me.

In the summer of 2015, [I visited the island of Lesbos](#), which had become a sort of twenty-first century Ellis Island as two-thirds of the million or so refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere who arrived in Europe through Greece passed through the island. A veteran aid worker told me that the last time he had seen such chaos was in camps in Zaire in the nineteen-nineties, as that country plunged into civil war.

The camp I saw in Samos was far worse than anything I saw in Lesbos. The Jungle begins a few yards from the camp’s barbed-wire fences. Journalists, including myself, and N.G.O. workers are routinely barred from entering the camp proper, but the area outside is open to anyone. When I approached, I heard a group of migrants praying to Jesus that they would be delivered from the ordeal they were going through. Vermin wandered the camp and burrowed into children’s beds, biting them at night. “In the winter, we have rain. In the summer, we have rats, we have snakes,” Majida Ali, a Palestinian-Syrian refugee who works at the camp’s health clinic, told me. Ali, who has been given temporary residence in Greece, said that the refugees don’t know how long they will remain on Samos. “The fact is,” she said, “no one explains to them why they are waiting or how long they are waiting.”

Charlie Pebou, a twenty-five-year-old Congolese man who had been in the camps for four months, told me that some refugees had grown mentally ill. “Here, I’ve seen people who’ve done seven or eight months, who have gone crazy,” he said. “I’m scared of becoming like them.” Pipina Katsari, the head of the U.N. refugee agency’s local field office, told me that refugees remain on the island, on average, for four months. But she acknowledged that some of the migrants have asylum interviews scheduled as late as 2022. “Of course, living in such a situation even for some days can be very

frustrating,” she said.

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Last month, the frustrations boiled over into protests. On May 25th, approximately a hundred African migrants gathered at the entrance to the camp in the early morning. Local police arrived, wearing riot gear, and waited nearby. Jérôme Fourcade, a French photojournalist who covered the protest, later told me that the demonstrators started to sing and then, just after 7 A.M., began marching toward Vathy. “After about ten or twenty metres,” Fourcade said, one group of police, “who were hiding in a side street, charged the demonstrators.”

In the melee that followed, police beat the refugees and fired tear gas at them. Cell-phone video footage of the aftermath of the protest shows a French-speaking African refugee with thick welts on his back. The police arrested two protesters and detained about ten local N.G.O. workers who had come to see what was happening. “We all just find it very weird, in a sense, that it escalated so much, so quickly, so fast,” one of the N.G.O. workers told me. “It was not necessarily a big or aggressive protest.” (A spokesperson for the Samos police [told Euronews](#) that there had been “tension” when a migrant protest was stopped.)

Fourcade was also detained. “They said I didn’t have the right to take photographs,” he told me. “I spent three hours in the police station.” Police tried to seize his photographs, but Fourcade said that, if he wasn’t officially arrested, he would not show them his pictures. He said that he thought the police had tried to suppress media coverage and overreacted to the protests because of upcoming European and municipal elections. “In January, there were protests, but the police weren’t as violent,” he said, adding that he believed officers were trying to cover up the conditions on the island. Six hundred people were recently transferred from the camp, but it remains severely overcrowded. “Tensions have been on the rise,” the N.G.O. worker told me, predicting more violence. “It is just something that keeps getting consistently and progressively worse.”

Majida Ali, the Palestinian-Syrian refugee, arrived on Samos on a small inflatable boat, in early 2016. She was fingerprinted and logged by the police before being sent to the camp, where guards were sitting at the front gate. “I was in shock for two weeks,” Ali told me. She hardly left her tent. “In Syria, people always have this fear of the army and the military, and when you see military around you at all times it is not easy to deal with.”

The most vulnerable people in the camp are women and children. Twenty-two per cent of the four thousand migrants on Samos are women, but there are only four bathrooms and four showers designated for them in the camp. Women complain of not being able to lock the doors in the bathrooms and fearing sexual harassment or worse. “If you treat people like animals for a very long time, they become animals,” Cicoli, the founder of the Mazí school, said. “They’re going to fight for everything, because there is nothing.”

Last winter was one of the island’s wettest and coldest in recent memory. Storms washed away makeshift dwellings, leaving camp residents cold and exposed. Near one tent, I sat with a group of Congolese men. Hugo Boluwa, a twenty-four-year-old mechanic from Kinshasa, cooked on a small camp stove, mixing chilies and onions with a grayish chicken leg he had received in his rations. “I left the D.R.C. because I was tortured,” he told me. “We

were protesting, asking for a revision of the constitution, they arrested us. There were lots of us. There were people who died. The soldiers raped us.” He fled to Turkey and then to Greece. “I’ve spent ten months here,” Boluwa said. “I’ve been told I’m a vulnerable case. There are people leaving every day, but I’m stuck here. Why?” He told me that he and his friends had to buy the tents that they were sleeping in. I asked him about the sanitation in the camp. “There are no toilets. Look over there,” he replied, pointing to a group of men relieving themselves in full view. He shook his head. “This is a prison, here.”

Human-rights groups argue that holding migrants and refugees in such conditions is a violation of European and Greek laws that mandate adequate living standards for asylum seekers. Cicoli said that she worries how Greece and Europe will be judged in the future for their conduct. “I just hope I am on the right side of history,” Cicoli told me. “When people look back in twenty, thirty years, I hope they say, ‘How could they have treated people this way in Europe?’ ”

Renowned for its wines, Samos was the birthplace of the mathematician Pythagoras and the philosopher Epicurus. Today, vineyards still cover the island’s hilly interior, and hundreds of thousands of tourists from the U.K., Germany, and other European countries flock to its beaches each summer. The island’s economy is heavily dependent on tourism. Because of its proximity to Turkey—the strait between Samos and the Turkish mainland is only about a mile wide in one place—there has long been a marked military presence on the island as well.

When asylum seekers first arrived on Samos, in early 2015, the locals mostly welcomed them, unlike on some nearby islands, where the residents reacted with racism and disdain. “When people started coming in their hundreds and there was no government response, everyone here did everything they could: everyone went to the port, they gave clothes, they cooked food,” Cicoli, the volunteer, told me. “There was a group of Greek women who cooked food for eight months, for eight hundred people, every day, without being paid or anything.”

The migrants expected to stay on Samos only temporarily, before moving on toward destinations in Western Europe. That changed in March, 2016, when the Turkish government signed an agreement with the E.U. to accept back migrants who didn't qualify for asylum. In return, Ankara would be able to relieve the pressure on its own migration system by vetting migrants in Turkey and resettling those who qualified in Europe. The E.U. also agreed to pay Turkey six billion euros for housing the refugees, and Ankara pledged to increase its efforts to prevent refugees from crossing by boat into Samos and other parts of Greece and Europe. In Greece, makeshift camps, dubbed "hot spots" [by the E.U.](#), were created to identify refugees and separate them from other irregular migrants, who would be sent back to Turkey. (The camp on Samos is a hot spot.) But, in 2016, E.U. member states closed their borders. At the same time, the return of migrants to Turkey ground to a halt because of political tensions between Athens and Ankara and the slowness of the E.U.'s asylum system, prolonging the migrants' stay in Samos indefinitely.

Among the pictures in the Mazi exhibition, there is an image of three children dancing on a beach. They are celebrating a friend receiving permission to travel to the Greek mainland. But refugees cannot move on from Greece and into Western Europe, as many of them hope to, unless they attempt an increasingly dangerous illegal crossing of the Balkans. Tensions are rising. In early April, large protests broke out in northern Greece after a false rumor spread on social media that migrants would be able to exit Greece via its northern border. Since late 2017, relocation programs that previously moved some refugees from Greece to other E.U. member states have been halted. More than sixty thousand refugees remain stuck in Greece, hoping for citizenship.

While I was in Samos, a huge blue ferry, with three hundred and fifty other asylum seekers onboard, sailed out of Samos for the mainland. It was a bittersweet moment for the migrants, and for the aid workers who had come to know them. As the refugees prepared to leave, Nicolò Govoni, a co-founder of Mazi, peered through the glass of the ferry terminal, a squat concrete building at the end of the Samos port. There had been rumors

that there was going to be a protest, and police in balaclavas wandered about, watching for any sign of disturbance. The departing migrants' friends from the camp had gathered on a nearby rocky outcrop to wave them off.

Govoni called out to a child in a red sweater and blue Nikes. "Learn English!" Govoni shouted at the glass. "Keep on studying!" In his hand, the child was clutching a diploma given to him by Mazí. Govoni told me that the boy was from Afghanistan and was nine years old. "He came to us and he couldn't even read his own language," Govoni said. Now he was proficient at reading and speaking English. "He improved so much—he came such a long way. It's amazing."

Govoni took out his phone, and showed me a picture of the same boy, lifting his shirt up to reveal two curved scars running across his chest—the result of a beating by police while he was standing in a food line. Migrants often stand in lines for hours to wait for food, and skirmishes sometimes break out. The police then arrive and violence often ensues. "The people need to wait for everything for long periods of time, and this is only normal that they all become frustrated," Katsari, of the U.N. refugee agency, told me. Govoni said, "Every time we bring this up, the authorities say, 'Well, the children are not allowed to be there.' Point is, they go. They are there." He continued, "Five months on, he still has the same scars on the chest. These scars are going to be with him forever."

Nicolas Niarchos has contributed to The New Yorker since 2014 and is currently working on a book about the global cobalt industry.