



Volunteer stories: 'I will never forget how cold the little boy's body was I carried that day'

From burying the dead in Lesbos to saving desperate refugees from traffickers in Budapest, volunteers share their stories of responding to one of Europe's worst humanitarian crises

Guardian readers as told to Anna Isaac

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Across Europe, volunteers have been moved to act to help refugees seeking safety; from sea rescues, to teaching languages. Here, volunteers share stories from their involvement over the past months, revealing the emotional cost of this vast humanitarian crisis as it has unfolded.

Burying refugees in Lesbos was like an assembly line



Silence of the dead: tombstones on graves of the migrants, who died during the attempt to reach the Island of Lesbos, at a newly built cemetery in Kato Tritos, Greece. Photograph: Alexander Koerner/Getty Images

It was desperately cold when we performed the burial rites of the drowned and deceased refugees on Lesbos. I'd come from Karachi to help give Muslims a proper burial.

There were 80-90 bodies in the morgue and they were slowly released to us as land for the graveyard was arranged. When the white van drove into the graveyard with the bodies inside, the female volunteers were asked to carry the corpses of women and children.

Gender plays a very important role in Islamic burial - which is why women, like me, were needed for women's and children's burial. The men washed the men and vice versa. It was like an assembly line. One by one, the bodies were carried, washed, buried and prayed upon.

I wasn't prepared for the sight of it all. In the van the bodies of adults and little children were stiff. I will never forget how cold the little boy's body was I carried that day, as we prepared to bury him. The loud wailing of his mother broke the silence of the graveyard.

A few days later I went to the 'village of altogether', an abandoned school house surrounded by huts, set up by Canadian and US volunteers for refugees with special needs. I met a woman whose husband and children I'd buried. She hugged me. Her eyes were glazed over as if she was hoping to wake up from this terrible nightmare.

The children in this camp looked happy but the drawings on the wall told a different story. Some drew pictures of houses they had left behind and others of the tragedies they'd experienced, drawing boats and people drowning in the sea.

That night we went to another camp where we met some volunteers from a church. We all held hands under the stars and said a prayer for the refugees, for each other and for humanity.

Farah Haji, 37, from Karachi, Pakistan: volunteer in Lesbos, November 2015

Refugees were being held against their will, not by locks but by men



Refugees at Budapest railway station on 3 September 2015. Large numbers of mostly Syrian refugees were stranded because the Hungarian government had cancelled all international railway services. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

I worked the night shift - as a volunteer offering advice and help - at the central station in Budapest, Hungary. One particular night it was calm, but word had spread among the refugees that a hotel was holding new arrivals against their will.

Traffickers would, for a hefty sum, drive refugees from the Serbian border straight to the hotel. The refugees were told by the traffickers that they were in the country illegally and that being spotted by authorities would mean instant deportation. They were told that the only way to get through Hungary was to stay at this particular hotel for a few days, until a new group of traffickers would transport them to the Austrian border.

Groups of refugees were forced to stay in rooms made to accommodate a tenth of their numbers, not by locks, but by intimidating men working 'in security' at each level of the hotel. They were charged ridiculous prices for these 'services' and could not escape until their bank accounts were drained.

A handful of volunteer coordinators, including myself, decided to drive to the hotel that same night. Accompanied by four police officers we stepped into the hotel.

The security men showed up and walked through the lobby smiling and the police questioned the hotel manager and receptionist. It was obvious what was going on but the police stood powerless; no apparent crime had been committed, and there was no legal support for a search.

As we couldn't get the refugees out we decided to prevent any more from falling into the hands of these traffickers. We stood outside the hotel entrance telling arrivals of the traffickers true intentions. We managed to prevent 72 men, women and children from entering the hotel. We found families hiding in bushes from the fear of being seen by the authorities and deported. Every single person who arrived looked terrified.

We sent the 72 people to the central station in taxis and on a bus. We stood on the bus among the crowd of refugees, smiling as they saw the sunrise and the river Danube.

Kaveh, 27, from Stockholm, Sweden: volunteer in Hungary, September 2015

When an empty boat washed ashore my heart broke



A dinghy at the shores of the northeastern Greek island of Lesbos, across the Aegean sea from Turkey. Photograph: Petros Giannakouris/AP

Early one morning we watched a boat coming in, ready to help the refugees on board. It came ashore, and no one was on it. I knew it hadn't left Turkey empty, and my heart broke.

Most beach patrols started out with a calm and quiet eeriness on Lesbos. Every night I looked across the sea at Turkey and knew that boats full of refugees were pushing off, and that only a quarter would make it across safely. I would spot glimpses of a light or a black spot in the dark grey waters, which meant they were coming and, soon the screams for help would become louder.

When boats arrived it was our job to grab hold of screaming babies and help their mothers and fathers. I helped pregnant women and old people to shore, trying our best to avoid the freezing water.

One night I helped an old woman and a young girl to shore - the woman immediately began to sob as she touched the Greek ground. I hugged her murmuring all of the welcoming phrases I knew. I looked back at the child, she stood wet and cold with an expressionless face. I got her a hot drink and wrapped her in a blanket, and the older woman - I believe it was her grandmother - began to grab my hands kissing them over and over. I knelt beside her, tears on my face. I will never forget her gratitude.

Like so many others, they were excited to have arrived at shore, but didn't understand the cold horrors that awaited them at the refugee camp. It was hard when UN refugee agency buses arrived to take them to the camp. The woman and her granddaughter tried to return the blanket, but I gestured to them that they needed to keep it, because the camps often ran out.

The schedule was difficult as a volunteer, I woke up at 4pm, helped out at the Pipka or Moria camps until 9pm then started night shifts on the beach from midnight that would last to 10am. But every time I walked back to the hotel I found my eyes were drawn to the water, and almost every time I saw a boat coming in. It was hard to sleep at night, the events from my shifts would replay in my mind. The tears, the screams, the gratefulness and the kindness.

I returned home broken, as I thought I would. I feel guilty spending money on eating out, and items I don't need, while people continue to struggle for their lives. I try and educate people and explain what I've seen, which is something that is desperately needed where I'm from.

The refugee crisis sums up the state of the world today I'm hoping to do my part until this struggle is over.

Teela Ruehle, 31, from Michigan, US: volunteer in Lesbos, December 2015

The police were smiling, as though amused by peoples' exhaustion



'A weary family asked the police how much further they had to go - we had already been walking for more than an hour and a half.' Photograph: Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images

Every day four or five trains with about 1,500 refugees on board arrived near Hegyeshalom in Hungary, who all intended to walk to the Austrian border. My friends and I decided to wait for the first train of the day to arrive and then walk with the refugees. We wanted to witness how they were being treated.

Everyone we met was exhausted. There were double amputees in wheelchairs who had lost their legs in the Syrian war and families with young children. Older people leant on the younger ones so they wouldn't collapse on the ground as they made the journey on foot. It was a mess.

The police were driving their cars slowly along the main road, keeping an eye on the crowd of refugees as we walked with them and I could see them smiling as though amused by people's exhaustion. They acted like bullies.

A weary family asked the police how much further they had to go - we had already been walking for more than an hour and a half - and the police lied, they said there were another three miles left to walk. The border was only five minutes away. The parents got really upset because their kids were too tired to walk and they had so many bags to carry so they couldn't pick them up and carry them. I told them not to listen, but word had already spread among the crowd, and people were panicking.

I had seen all these videos of how the Hungarian police were treating refugees badly, so I was prepared to see some horrible things. But when I witnessed a beating in central Budapest it was a shock. Everything happened so quickly, my friends and I were walking along a street when we saw a man being beaten. He was a Syrian refugee. To see the terrified look in the man's eyes was a horrible experience. I have cried many times because of that - how brutal humans can be to each other.

Erik Gerhardtsson, 20, from Stockholm, Sweden: volunteer in Hungary, October 2015

When my class discussed the Cologne attacks I could sense the sadness in the room



Teaching refugees German and English in Dorfen, Germany. Photograph: Clare Janocha

Since Summer 2015 I have been teaching a group of refugees German and English. There are 21 men in my group - 20 young Afghans and one Pakistani man in his 60s. Before I started teaching them, they were forced, to sit around for a month, unable to work due to their pending asylum status and with no opportunities to learn our language.

I've lived in Dorfen, a small town in Bavaria, for 15 years. I'm a primary school teacher and when a family member started helping a group of refugees and asked me to teach them German, I couldn't say no.

I taught in an empty room in a cellar. We had three tables and some chairs - donated from a local convent - and my husband managed to bring an old flipchart home from work. It's not much but it was our classroom.

The class were very excited to start German lessons, but the range of abilities was huge. Some are university educated and others are illiterate, so we had to start by teaching the European alphabet.

We had some tough times. When the sexual assaults in Cologne happened at New Year, the class all felt frustrated and upset that these men could behave like this and make life much harder for refugees like them. I had to warn the class to be wary of their personal safety. It wasn't an easy conversation and I could sense the sadness in the room.

So far the group have been treated well by people in Dorfen and they're keen to build a life and contribute to society, but it's a slow process and the negative headlines are coming thick and fast. One of my neighbours has been helping me with teaching and has become a great friend.

But there are other friends, and even people in my own family who have reacted negatively and I find it difficult not to feel disappointed.

The politics are complicated and I don't have all the answers, but I will never regret getting involved with these refugees. And when my course is finished I will follow their progress. They are just like any class I have ever taught - there's the 16-year-old who, for the first two lessons had tears in his eyes from fear and confusion, there's the graduate who tends to lead and ask questions on behalf of others, a shy one who's now making great progress and, of course, there's the naughty one, who cuts corners and gets away with it by using a cheeky grin.

I will be heartbroken if this group of men don't make it here in Europe.

Clare Janocha, 45, from the UK now resident in Germany: volunteer in Dorfen, September 2015-present

Taxi drivers threatened to rape us for telling refugees about free transport



The long, cold march to Europe: women with children and families reach Miratovac, Serbia. Photograph: Milos Bicanski/Getty Images

Our garage, near Miratovec, a village on the Serbia-Macedonia border, was at the top of a long climb on a country road. We were welcoming refugees who had arrived from Macedonia during the night and had been waiting until sunrise to leave the border camp and walk across the border to Serbia.

By the time refugees reached our aid point, they were often exhausted from walking nearly two miles in the biting cold, mostly uphill and carrying all their belongings. Many were convinced that they would have to walk for over six miles to get to the camp - as this is what they were being told by the local taxi drivers, eager to make money.

We told whoever we could about the free UNHCR buses available just a five minute walk from our garage. But sharing this information routinely made us subject to verbal abuse and threats from the taxi drivers. They told us to shut up about the free transport or we would be beaten or raped but we carried on.

We served hot tea and coffee and shared basic food, water, baby formula, and hygiene products. At one point we gave away dozens of pairs of gloves and hats, which we'd bought in bulk in Belgrade. Some mornings we handed out around 30 litres of hot drinks in small plastic cups - some days it was more than 80 litres.

Many people who passed by didn't want to stop. Others stayed for 15 minutes or half an hour, resting, changing their baby's nappy, waiting for slow-walking family members to join them, and telling us their stories.

The point where I volunteered, and where people, like me, from Poland continue to work, is important. It might be a crumbling garage, but it's also a place where you can be treated like a human being, instead of cargo to be shipped off to the next country.

I'm not trying to overemphasise the role volunteers have on the Balkan route - in the bigger picture it's miniscule, but I believe that for some people we managed to make this journey a little less horrible, a little less hopeless. When I decided to volunteer, I expected it to be difficult. But it's not hard to help people get warm, or to be kind to families or put gloves on kids' hands.

Julia, 27, from Warsaw, Poland: volunteer in Serbia, January 2016

A heavily pregnant woman tried to climb into a lorry every night, desperate for her child to be born in England



Warehouse near Calais refugee camp in France, often referred to as 'jungle'
Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

I started my mornings by walking, in the dark, to a warehouse in Calais, near the infamous 'Jungle' camp, to do a 10 hour shift sorting and distributing clothing donations. In the warehouse next door vast mountains of unneeded items are packed up, some for resale, some for recycling. Rubbish donated because it made people feel better to put it in a charity bag, rather than in the bin: spangled slingback shoes, tents full of holes, wedding garters. Every so often we'd find a gem, like a pair of solid, hiking boots.

One afternoon I was asked to visit a small camp in a field 30 miles from Calais. It was muddy, there's no running water and 90 women slept in a hut smaller than my kitchen.

A woman, who was seven months pregnant with her first child, camped in the same muddy field without water or sanitation. She walked three miles every night - and had done for many weeks - to try and climb aboard a lorry. Her three male relatives accompanied her, but their priority was to get her to London first so that the baby is born in England. She knew British citizenship is no longer to be had this way, but she was desperate.

Calais is now synonymous with every imaginable woe, a place to be pitied and avoided. Burnt out cars are stark reminders of the right-wing Front Nationale group who attack the vehicles of those distributing food and clothing to the refugees.

Every preconception I had about the situation or vague political idea I had about a solution has been blown out of the water. Human beings should not live in such conditions, especially not in wealthy countries. Stigmatising and labelling them is pointless.

Everywhere there was mud, and it was painfully reminiscent of trenches. Clothes never dried, shoes never dried, bedding never dried. Young men in flip flops slip slid about in the wet and cold. What about all those shoes, the triumphant size 42 boots, we distributed? The police took them. Young men in proper shoes can run. They can run away from the police, they can climb fences. They tried, with mind-numbing regularity, to continue their journey to England.

C Palmer, 61, south of England: volunteer in Calais, January 2016

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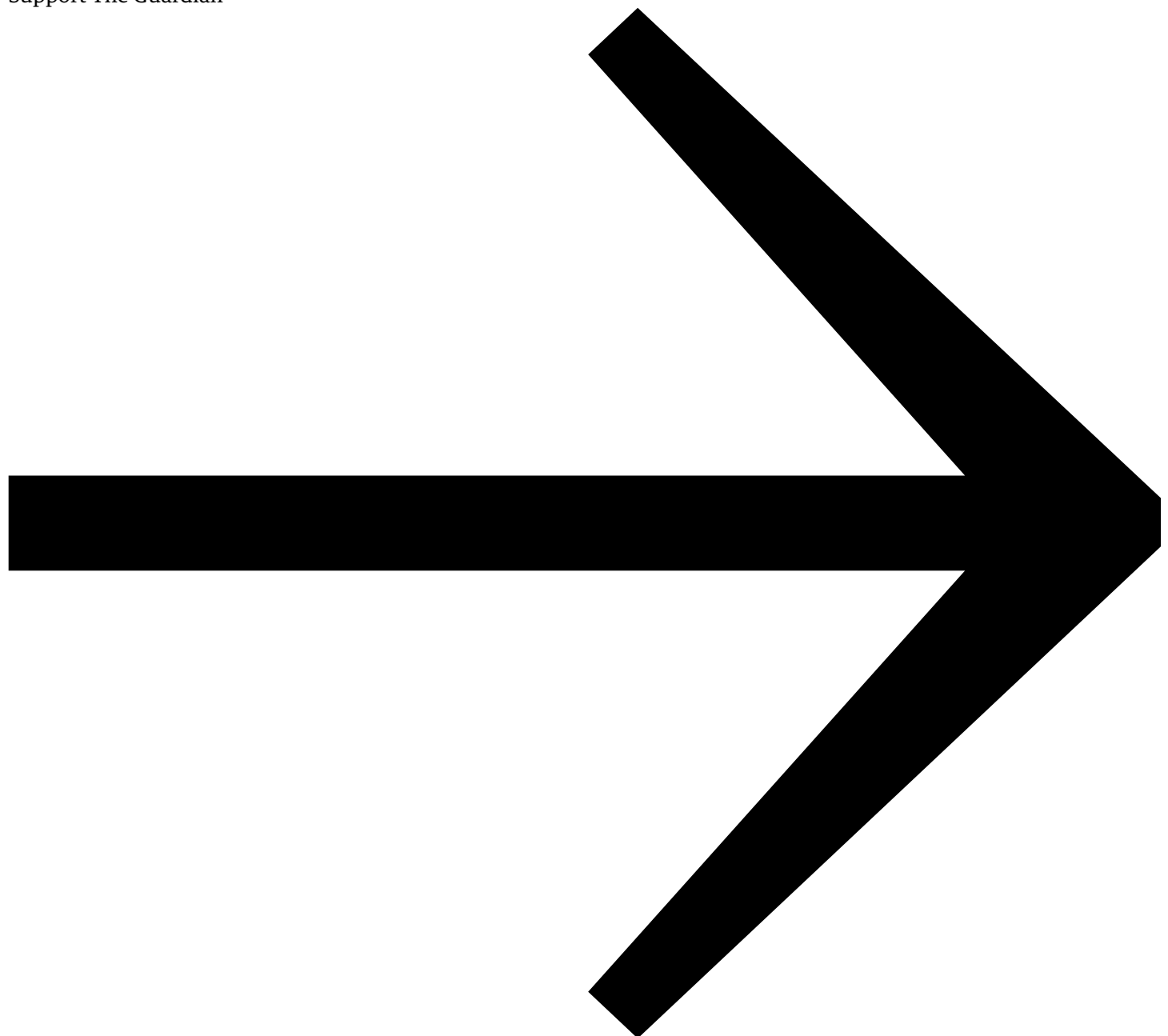
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