

solidarnost je naša snaga

Solidary visit to war refugees

August 29th 2016,

On August 29th 2016, we went on a regular tour of the downtown Belgrade parks with our friend Asaad from Syria. Asaad had heard that there was a sizeable group of refugees that slept in an abandoned storage building behind the bus station. We went to the site and saw that there were approximately 15 refugees who were sleeping under a four to five metre awning that stretches across the entire storage facility, approximately 50 metres in total. There were blankets on the concrete, and simply by the number of blankets that lined the ground, we could tell that there were several dozen people who slept there at night. We went around the entirety of the building and saw that the storage units themselves were locked and that no one could enter them. We saw that there was a worker walking through the middle passageway in the building and we asked them whether or not the building was still in use, in the commercial sense of the word. The worker told us that most of the storage units are empty and that they were in the process of emptying one more, otherwise the building itself is set to be demolished in the near future for the *Beograd on the Water* gentrification project. Nearby is a building that has been partially demolished. Among the rubble, there are two functioning faucets with running water, which many of the nearby refugees frequent. One of the faucets has several boards placed around it and is used as a shower.

After seeing all of this, we decided that the next group of refugees and asylum seekers that we would bring food donations and relief to would be those who are taking shelter in the abandoned storage building.

When we arrived the next day, there were again approximately 15 – 20 refugees who were sitting or laying in the awning's shade. We approached the group and distributed biscuits, crackers, and other snacks that we had brought to hand out. The group immediately invited us to sit with them. We sat on the blankets with them, realizing that these blankets were the one thing that made this their home. The group of refugees were so hospitable towards us, that it was as if we were guests in their very own homes. After a few minutes, one of the refugees taking shelter there had approached us, and was directed to what we later found out was an errand to buy juice to offer us. We were offered glass cups, and they drank from paper ones.

From the group of refugees who were sitting with us, we learned that there were approximately 60 people who slept in the abandoned building, under the awning, each night. Most of the refugees were from Afghanistan and a few were from Pakistan. The ages in the group of refugees that we sat with ranged from 27 (the oldest), to 15 (the youngest). They told us that they had been in the abandoned storage building for over two months. Each of them had tried several times to cross the Serbian-Hungarian border – some had attempted three times, some had attempted five times – and that they had been caught and sent back to Serbia each time. They spoke about the violence they experienced at the hands of the Hungarian police and military. Despite the fact that they had not done anything threatening, the police reacted by pepper-spraying the group of asylum seekers as well as unleashing their police dogs on them. A 17-year-old from Afghanistan, who otherwise plans to claim asylum in America, showed us their gaping wounds and scabs on their arms, and the cuts along their face and throat from the police dogs' bites.

Folks from this group of refugees explained that the police frequent this abandoned building at least once a day while making their rounds. Though the police have not yet been violent towards them during their stay in that building, they tell them to leave the storage building and head to Krnjača refugee camp instead. Upon asking them if they know what the current state of the Krnjača camp is, we were informed that each of the group members had already been there, and each of them had returned to downtown Belgrade after a day or so; Krnjača is over-capacity, there is no food other than canned fish or crackers, and there are not enough blankets so nights have become too cold to bear. All of them agreed that finding shelter in the abandoned storage facility was much better than Krnjača and that here, they have everything they need. An important part of their current housing situation is that it allows them to cook their own meals as a group. They cook in a large pot, in which they cook collective meals together.

The majority of the people in this group told us that their goal is to claim asylum in France. They're afraid of what awaits them at the

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Hungarian border, and they shake their heads when asked if they will try to cross that border again. They are now in the process of looking for different routes.

At the end of our time sitting with them, they invited us to share a meal with them the following day and to be their guests for lunch.

As promised, we arrived the second day at 14:00. The day before, we had promised the group that we will bring some vegetables, but their reply was that we were not to bring anything, since we were their guests and they will provide all of the food. Since we did not want to arrive empty-handed and take away from what little food they had, we brought them vegetables and rice. The day before, we had noticed that they were using a stick to stir food with in the pot that they were cooking from, so one of the items that we brought them was a ladle as well as a spatula. They were pleased with these cooking utensils.

One of the folks from Afghanistan is the "main" cook, and prepares all of the meals for the group that takes shelter under the awning, and the others assist the cook. Everyone says that this is the best cook in the group. While a small group of people were preparing the meal, we stayed with the rest of our new friends, passing the time with light conversations, and learning new card games. While we were there, a group of young Afghans had embarked with their backpacks on yet another attempt to cross the border into Hungary. We wished them luck, and as we anxiously watched them leave, all that was going through our minds were thoughts about what maltreatment was waiting for that group at the border.

Our idyllic time with our new friends was cut short and interrupted by police and the commissariat (the latter, we overheard, were doing a head count of refugees taking shelter in the building). There were approximately ten of them. They first observed what was going on from a distance before they decided to approach us all. They began by approaching the cook and telling them to put out the fire that was under the pot because it was a safety hazard. The police then approached us, ignoring the refugees – it seems that this particular time, they had no advice for them to go to Krnjača to seek shelter. The police officers approached us two activists and started interrogating us, asking who we were, what were we doing there, and what organization we were with. We replied that we were citizens who simply wanted to help however we could within our capacity, and that we were visiting and sitting with our friends. The police looked at us with skepticism and didn't seem to believe our answer. They asked for our ID cards, interrogated us about our personal details such as our addresses and where we lived, and then called over the large police truck that was waiting in the distance. They communicated our birth certificate numbers and birth dates with the police station and ran criminal record checks on us. After ten or so minutes of this, after we heard the police station confirm that we have no charges against us and that we have never been convicted of any crimes, and after a few more questions from the police, we were handed back our ID cards and the police had left. We waited a few minutes, and once we were certain that the police were gone, the fire was started up again and the cooking commenced.

Soon after this interaction, the food was ready to be served. Our friends presented us with rice cooked in tomato juice with hot peppers and potatoes. We were each given a piece of a raw onion to eat alongside the rice. The meal was more delicious and delectable than any meal that we could have purchased anywhere in Belgrade. The secret ingredient was solidarity among humans and empathy that we all shared with each other.

After the beautiful meal and some more chatting, we parted with our friends and promised them that we would certainly come back again to visit them.

We asked how to say "thank you" in Pashto, their mother tongue.

The only thing we can say is *manana* to our friends, and *manana* to everyone.

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