

Alys Mendus visited LAS for a week during the academic year 2014-2016 to learn about our school and our visiting scholar program. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Hull. Her career includes school visits and longer term stays in China, Nepal, Portugal, Scandinavia, Siberia, Switzerland, and the USA as well as working with children from early years to 18 in a variety of mainstream and alternative approaches.

This fall she joined the charity arm "Emergency Pedagogy" of [Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiner](#) to work with children in the refugee camps on Lesbos. The following are excerpts from her emails.

22nd October 2015 Lesbos, Greece

Hello!

Its hard here but we seem to be getting into a rhythm and today has felt like a more successful day. We went to one camp for Syrian people this morning and there were not enough normal volunteers so we helped coordinate the lines for people waiting to register as well as going up and down the line chatting to children and their parents. Many speak some English and all are so happy to be in Europe and although cold and wet (there was a thunderstorm all day) seem optimistic. Many have been in Turkey en route for weeks or a couple of years. Many wait for many weeks to get the boat from Turkey which costs \$1000 per person, 50 on a raft and lifejackets \$50 more... And 1000s arriving each day...it is big business in smuggling and local Greeks are on the shore to take the boat to bits and sell it. I spoke to two lawyers and many others all en route for Germany and a few Sweden. One or two want to go to England but have heard of the camp in Calais and the difficulties/impossibilities of entering the UK. As one 12 year old boy put it, 'We want to go to Germany because they have humanity for all people.'

The weather today and tomorrow is terrible a real thunderstorm with bouncing off the ground rain. Everyone is soaked. There are some clothes for tiny babies and nappies. And some tarps and plastic bags upside down as a waterproof cover. But most have nothing. There was one family with four children shivering and a child with a broken leg and white toes. We have some dry clothes that we had found discarded on the beach and had washed and dried so we gave them some and Emergency blankets.

Yesterday was a bad day I was exhausted and it is tiring helping as much as you can but also seeing inhumanity. The people take the boat which can be from 1.5-8 hours long and arrive and are hopefully met. Then they have to walk to a camp which can be up over a hill if they arrive in the north and there are buses but not enough. Local taxi drivers are making a lot of money from the refugees but they cannot give them a lift unless they are registered we can as the police are turning a blind eye to NGOs and especially when there are babies and children. Once they arrive at camp it takes a few days. For the families mostly one adult is in the line and the children play nearby but for the single men and there are many they wait in tight queues for days. At the Syrian camp Save the Children are there and they have tents at Moria they wait outside under the olive trees and only have tents if they own them.

There are not enough Greek police or volunteers at Moria camp and no NGO working outside the camp only once inside and there are thousands outside. A few volunteers bring food and water. And for those with money there are Greek vans selling food and charging phones. The line is patrolled by refugee appointed leaders with sticks given by the police and left to it. We went to look at the line yesterday and see if we could help or do anything with the children. It is muddy and so much litter and chaos with fights breaking out. Then we were approached by a mother carrying her daughter who was very thin and looked very sick. One of our group is a doctor. We held up a sheet for some privacy and he spoke to the mother she had not eaten for a month and not drunk anything for two days as she was so weak. She looked anorexic but it could have been much worse she had scars on her belly from a gun wound in the war 4 years ago. We managed to convince the camp that she and her family needed to be registered immediately as another night out waiting could easily kill her.

We were successful and left to go and work with the teenage boys in the camp (prison) for unaccompanied minors. They are separated into Syrian and Afghani. The Syrian seemed more confident and streetwise. I was in the Syrian area. At 3:30pm all the aid agency people go home so it is just the boys and the policeman on guard (they are behind many barbwire fences and a locked gate) so we come to do our work. The first day we were a novelty so they did our movement activities, listened to my story about a man who planted 10 000 acorns in France that grew into a forest with rivers and flowers and people moved to live there, did drawing and laughed cheekily at our singing. Then yesterday we arrived tired from helping

the girl (and two boats in the morning) to commotion. We went inside and to a room where I had a small group drawing and learning some English and me some Arabic words. Outside one of the boys had tried to commit suicide in the fence then another climbed onto the roof and had cut his wrists on the barbed wire and was unconscious. Lukas, one of the men coordinating our group, speaks some Arabic so got a ladder onto the roof to help and other boys got involved too also getting hurt. There was a lot of work for our doctor to do. I was still in the small room keeping going with the boys offering a safe space. Eventually we left. I slept in the bus back, at the dinner table and was pleased to be able to sleep for 8 hours last night.

I think the lack of sleep on the travel, the slight jetlag and everything being in German on top of being in a traumatic situation had exhausted me. Today I was better and we had 30mins back at the hotel after lunch where I had a nap!! Anyway we did wax modelling with the boys this afternoon and they loved it. All the boys plan to go to Germany and they are mostly not really unaccompanied minors but got stuck with bureaucracy as they arrived with cousins or uncles and that is not allowed so family have left and the boys are still in the camp. Many for 15 days already with no information from the police and not very kind treatment as the police are exhausted and don't know what to do. They need a police escort to Athens to meet family or go to foster care. It is a slow process. And the attempts to kill themselves are pleas for help. One boy said it is a way to leave the prison... They all have phones and speak to family daily and keep taking selfies with us all in them. Others are playing games or listening to music on their phones.

We are enjoying the boys company they are funny, cheeky but also some serious moments when in free drawing they don't copy my picture of a mountain, lake and trees but draw tanks and fighting. One boy just drew a face with tears. They are excited about being able to go to school and to learn German and English. It is really like working with teenagers in the UK and as we have an open door children come and go join in what they enjoy and then leave and others just loiter at the edges watching. We send out the ones smoking... Everyday a local man turns up and sells crisps, fizzy drinks, biscuits and cigarettes (!) to the boys who have a lot of Euros. Money does not seem to be a problem. This isn't the poor people starving in Africa in refugee camps of my childhood it is the middle classes of Syria escaping horror, war and doing anything for a future for their families. No one would get on that boat let alone get on that boat with their small children unless they are desperate. There are also Afghanis, Iraqis and a few Iranian people and occasionally from Lebanon and other French speaking places and they find it even harder as the International aid language is English except in my group where es ist Deutsche! The founder of the organisation Bernd Ruf has left now and we have been joined by a Greek teacher so more is being spoken in English as up to now people did translate but only import things so although I missed out on boring or annoying discussions I didn't really know what was going on all the time. Exhausting and a little confusing and maybe good for me to go take a step back and observe before taking a leading role. I am able to do that in my work with the children.

Love Alys

October 30th 2015

Athens, Greece.

Salaam,

As my time is coming to a close here on Lesbos the madness does not cease. The rain continued for three whole days wed night until Sat night with torrential downpours, thunder and lightning and the roads becoming streams which would have been exciting if it wasn't horrendous. The refugees were out in it standing in lines, sheltering in the few UN tents and makeshift tarpaulin shelters. Not enough food, clean water or basic sanitation. For those with money and many seem to have some the local Greek entrepreneurs are there in force selling food, clothes, waterproofs, tents and Vodaphone pimping their sim cards and charging stations. For those with little it is a nightmare. This hell seems to be only bearable for the well off if being now homeless from fleeing your country and taking your whole family on a dangerous sea crossing still counts you as well off...

We have spent most mornings at the Syrian camp Kara tepy which is like heaven compared to Moria it is run by the flamboyant Stravros who keeps telling us "everything is OK! We are all family here..." And the OK is to a point as people do come and they do get registered in at least two/three days and there are many UNHCR tents for those waiting to shelter in. However the rules continually change. This camp is for

Syrians only and then Syrian families but what constitutes a family does that mean with children? One day it was so busy they (whoever that is I am not sure) decided that single men must go the 6km to Moria and then some returned saying that Moria had turned them away. Continual chaos. And the male female divide is challenging as it sometimes forgets the older and infirm men and the feminist in me thinks what about the stronger women etc but it is more heart wrenching to see families split up just to be registered in this lack of system chaos. Our leader now, Lukas, speaks some Arabic and its meant that he has had to coordinate lots of the queueing system when there are quite regularly not enough volunteers... Or have gone home for a well earned rest there just isn't joined up thinking with different people covering 24 hours. As Lukas has been coordinating I have been going around with my phrasebook chatting to some families and entertaining small children with my felted animals I have in my pockets. My big magpie is a favourite as it can stand up and feed from children's up turned hands. It is one of our exhausting tasks as we have little information to share and I constantly in broken Arabic say 'slow' as I point to the queues, 'beautiful' to babies and say 'no rain' today with a smile and act out 'cold night' and check no child is an emergency case. It is a case of continual charades bringing hope, sometimes joy and always frustration to the long long queues. I keep smiling and now I am also not soaked to the skin it seems less like living in a nightmare. I have become numb it seems to some of the hardships and horror as we keep going but by keeping as ever present as I can be with each person I feel that the glimmer of a welcome even if it is only from the volunteers and not the governments who are funding/not funding there flee into Europe there is some hope.

The daily work with the unaccompanied minors at the Moria camp has been for me what has kept this two week intervention together. A daily rhythm for us and the boys. Happy shouts of welcome when we arrive and friendships and understanding growing even with no real common language. It has been interesting to work with the Die Freunde Emergency Pedagogy model beginning and ending with a circle. I have been working in a three and one of my colleagues is a Eurythmist (Steiner movement). And she has led some fun but challenging exercises involving counting and different patterns for our feet and adding balls to pass and throw as well. The group delighted in my difficulties to learn it alongside them! Then often we have moved into something creative which I have been leading for example wet on wet painting where the colours flow into each other and drawing, model making with beeswax. And one day I did felting and we made mobile phone covers which went down really well so they could protect their phones for the onward journey.

A 2015 crisis is directed by phones and iPads and the internet which is of course not surprising. These are majority of 'middle class' Syrians and even if poorer technology now means that everyone can tell loved ones they are 'safe'. The teenagers in Moria speak to their mothers or family they are heading to meet in Germany/Sweden etc and we have followed the journey of some boys that left Moria to Athens on Sunday night. They are now in Austria. They were accompanied to Athens and then set off alone again in a group. Still not sure why keeping them in the Moria camp for two weeks helped? Although we have now learnt in the Afghan side of the camp group of the 19-25 year olds with lost passports said they were 17 to get more assistance and it wasn't until the Doctor inspected their hands that the Greek authority became wise of the ploy but things must be desperate if being incarcerated for two weeks is better than going on alone.

Back to phones in the queues of Cara tepy where can people charge their phones is a main question and groups of people wait around plugs on extension cables running from generators off trailers run by Greeks. I did see a great service run by a charity from Oldham which had a gazebo over a free charging station. Many people had waterproof pockets around their necks on the boat journey where they kept their phones rather than their passports. And then these phones are used to show me photos of families, videos of the boat crossing and most bizarrely yesterday morning for selfies on a selfie-stick. A family with three late teens/early 20s daughters all beautifully made up who I had been chatting to in the queue asking how they managed to have their makeup on and they told me they had stayed in a hotel last night. And although that is forbidden without papers those with money find a way. I am not surprised they did not want to sleep in the tin shed UNHCR tents as I helped clean them on Saturday after the rain and it brought tears to my eyes. Squalor, rubbish, water flowing, pools of urine, nappies, wet clothes and odd shoes. But many have no choice. So many people speak good English and they ask why cannot I not go to England as I speak the language and want to work as a lawyer, teacher, doctor, architect... And what can I say? There are no words except a constant plea that I did not vote for David Cameron.

So back to Moria and the boys. We have had fun and it was a bittersweet day when a large group left on Sunday so happy their journey continued but sad as we do not know what too they have such hopes of school and learning German and the responsibility they hold for getting their safely and then getting their families passage to Germany on a much safer route. A modern day right of passage a journey of growing up far harder and incomprehensible than I can manage. I have spent two weeks in Greece with German speaking team where we had a phrasebook to speak a few works of Arabic and Farsi and I have been

often lost and not sure what is going on. Now to look at these boys many 14/15 fleeing war to new lands and continued lack of comprehension. We have been doing some language lessons in English, German and then the boys teaching us Arabic and some do have good English understanding from watching films and school.

One role I have taken is to be the storyteller. Telling stories with simple cloths and props and then some of my puppets I use for the younger children. It has really surprised me the power of story with these teenage boys. I shared one of my favourite Autumn stories about how the star got into the apple which is full of wonder and magic with a few boys on Saturday and then on Wednesday I told it again as only one remained. He was my Arabic storyteller. I told it and he told his version and another boy was translating me very amusing as all slightly out of time. However it was the story that we made up that had the most impact. I ran a workshop with teachers in Athens for ideas and then after spending time with the group I created a simple story.

Yellow cloth on the floor. A bird is cold and needs to set off for the migration.

It flies over the sea. (Pull back yellow cloth to reveal blue underneath). As it flies it gets caught in strong winds. (Make blowing noises and bird visibly moves sideways). Then the rains start (blue silk wafted over the bird).

He is now tired. Exhausted and unhappy.

A little bird appears and asks where the big bird is going and why he is sad. The big bird replies he is wet and cold and can't find land.

Follow me says the little bird and he leads the big bird down to land (pull away blue cloth to reveal a green cloth)

And the little bird shows the big bird the flowers on the land and a new flies around and they all live happily ever after.

I first told this to our Syrian boys just before 15 left for Athens on Sunday. I was on the floor and about 25 young men mostly 14-18 sat around enrapt! Then I went round giving out nuts and seeds with the bird and they all let the bird peck out their hands. And no it wasn't patronising it was about giving a vision. Nothing was said about the story it stands alone. I also told the story to the Afghan group on Wednesday.

Then we finished the week with a marionette puppet show of a happy no death version of Ali Baba where I told the. Story and my other colleague in the group who was a Kindergarten teacher moved the puppets.

I feel we gave then some magic in the sadness, grief, monotony and madness.

And now I sit at Athens airport feeling teary. I left Lesbos airport as yet another boat of refugees was arriving out the window and I know what they walk into. I just don't know what they have walked away from as I have not lived through war but I hope more aid comes to Lesbos and the rest of their journey through Europe soon as Winter approaches and the rain and the nightmare returns to the camps of Lesbos.

Love

Alys x