



**“You have to do something”: a visit to the Kempsons in Molyvos**

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## **“You have to do something”: a visit to the Kempsons in Molyvos<sup>1</sup>**

Andrea Beckmann, Amelie Rosa Beckmann-Cooper and J. M. Moore

This year’s European Group conference was held at the University of the Aegean on the Greek island of Lesbos. The island, the third largest of the Greek islands is stunningly beautiful, covering about 600 sq. miles (1,600 km<sup>2</sup>) with approximately 200 miles (320 km) of coastline. This beauty and that of its beaches is deceptive, for it is also an island of despair, pain, death and ongoing state violence. In recent years tens of thousands of refugees have sought to enter Europe by crossing the narrow Mytilini Strait from Turkey in small inflatable boats. Many died on the journey – the exact number may never be known, official estimates put it as hundreds, however, local activists are clear it was thousands – many of their bodies retained by the sea close to the beautiful beaches that continue to cater for tourists. Immediately before the conference we drove across the island to meet Eric and Philippa Kempson to talk about their experiences living on Europe’s border.

Up a narrow track, a short drive from the beach is Eric and Philippa’s place. It is obviously more than a ‘home’; the first thing you see is the well organised stores of many essential items – clothing, toiletries, nappies, clothing for children of different age-groups, shoes, blankets etc. Passing through these you find the gallery where Eric’s impressive and diverse art work is displayed and available to buy, ranging from beautiful carvings in olive wood, some lovely surrealist paintings as well as some more recent paintings of refugees in overcrowded, small boats – in which the beauty of the island is intertwined with the despair descending on it. Eric and Philippa moved here nearly 20 years ago, long before the arrival of refugees, and you can understand why. It is a beautiful spot overlooking the Mytilini Strait with the Turkish coastline clearly in view. They married here, and their daughter lived here for the first 17 years of her life. Eric has his studio here and they sell his works from their gallery. For those of us who have fantasied of ‘getting away from it’, they were living the dream. But then things changed. The civil wars in Syria and Libya; the ongoing fallout of the United States led violent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the continued economic

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution was previously published in the European Group Newsletter October 2017 edition. Available online at:  
<http://www.europeangroup.org/sites/default/files/October%20newsletter%202017.pdf>

underdevelopment and conflict within different African countries; and the persecution of minorities in many countries have combined to generate more and more refugees. At the same time the hardening of European governments refugee policies and consequent increase in border security have effectively closed land routes resulting in the short crossing from Turkey to Lesvos, and in particular its north coast, became an obvious route into Europe for many refugees.

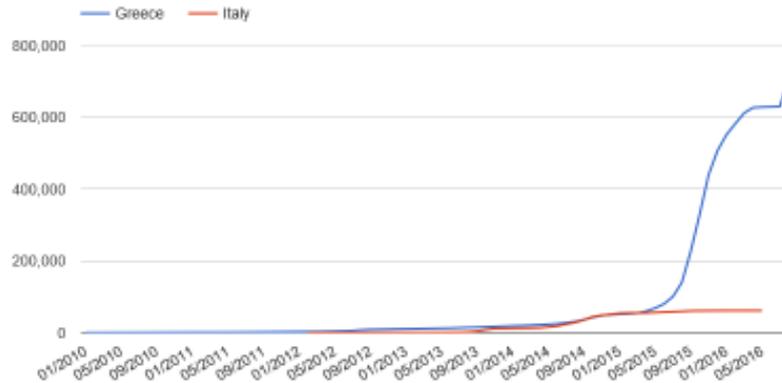
When the European Group last had its conference in Lesvos in 2010 we heard that refugees were already attempting the crossing and that already it was claiming lives. What we could never have imagined was the future scale of refugee migration. As the graph<sup>2</sup> below – of first time asylum applications of Syrians to the European Union – shows, in the Spring of 2015 the level of refugees arriving increased dramatically. Graphs are neat, real life is not. For Eric and Philippa the reality was the unfolding of a humanitarian crisis on their doorstep. They talk about days when thousands of refugees arrived on local beaches, however, others did not make it and it was Eric and Philippa together with their teenage daughter, and other local residents who had to witness death on a daily basis. It was not just passive watching. People in the water needed rescuing, treatment needed to be administered on the beach, many were dead when pulled out of the water, others died on the beaches. Elleni, their daughter, then 16, seeing a boat sink, swam out to save the life of a baby. An experienced swimmer, due to growing up near the beach, she had to then deal with the additional challenge of having to disentangle herself and the baby from the grip of a man who was, like so many refugees, unable to swim and in his panic was pulling her and the baby down into the water. She succeeded in saving the baby but the trauma of this terrible situation has been with her ever since. Elleni is a gifted songwriter, singer and musician and wrote the song called 'Lost Souls' about her and her parents' experiences.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis unfolding on local beaches is almost impossible to imagine. As Eric and Philippa talk, the sheer numbers of bottles of water, items of clothing, and other basic items that were needed is so massive as to be impossible to imagine. But the urgently needed response, they explained, did not come from the Greek state, the United Nations, the European Union or NGOs. Local people realised that waiting for these agencies to act was futile, they had to do something themselves. On a single day, Eric explains, individual activists on the North coast distributed, among other things, nearly 4,000 bottles of water. It was clear that it was local people, supported by

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://syrianrefugees.eu/inflows-recognition/>

volunteers from many countries, who would need to meet the immediate needs of refugees. They rapidly put together a local response, co-ordinating the reception of boats, the distribution of what was immediately needed (including shelter) and transporting of refugees across the Island to the 'official' facilities.



Notes: Cumulative flows over the period 2010–2016, monthly data.  
Source: Italian Ministry of Interior (Italy) and Hellenic Police (Greece).

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Those who have responded to the influx of refugees have faced local hostility. The day before we visited Eric was assaulted by a local man. In particular organised fascists pose a real and continuing threat. Their security

measures around their home are obvious and they have to take great care when visiting Molyvos. Having tyres slashed, being spat on, death and rape threats and a whole range of abuse are directed at the activists working with refugees. Eric and Philippa’s sadness at having to send their (then) 17 year old daughter away from the island for her own safety is evident. Their commitment and activism has also lost them many relationships as family and friends have – rather than celebrating their humanitarian contribution – cut off contact and sought to stigmatise them for getting involved. They also talk about the personal costs incurred by other volunteers. These also include loss of relationships but also damage to mental health from the traumatic sights that can never be unseen. They also talked about one diver who tried to ascertain how many of the dead bodies have not been given up by the sea and that did not get buried in one of the make-shift cemeteries. As the Mytilini Strait has deep trenches of up to 1000m that have retained many dead bodies, the sights that confronted the diver seriously impacted on his mental state and do make us wonder about the real extent of refugee deaths as a result of the dangerous crossings as only those who come to its surface are counted.

As we talk Eric makes clear his primary anger and contempt is not for the fascists but state agencies and the large brand-name NGOs. It is clear that the view of fascists and other local people - that the activists are “encouraging” refugees - is shared by the European Union, Greek Government and other state agencies. Their failure to respond to the 2015 influx when thousands arrived on Lesbos’s beaches every week is a scandal that did not become an even greater tragedy thanks to local people and other volunteers. According to Eric’s experiences the few state or NGO personnel who were there to be seen watched, took pictures and left. It was predominately independent volunteers who organised to meet the immediate needs of the tens of thousands of refugees, firstly on the beach (although this was soon extended to rescue operations at sea) and then by establishing emergency local accommodation and meeting refugees’ immediate needs. Attempts to transport the refugees across the island were obstructed by the local police who set up roadblocks. The refugees were forced to walk for miles even if they had no shoes on their feet. This treatment can only be explained by a political decision that every effort should be made to “deter” refugees by making their journey as difficult as possible. Nothing should be done that could be seen to “encourage” refugees. At the same time (and apparently completely unrelated) western countries continue to both directly bomb and supply arms to participants in the conflicts in the refugees’ countries of origin.

As we talk we are joined by the resident cats and dogs, they all have stories to tell and have ended up getting sanctuary with the Kempsons. Three kittens were fathered by a Syrian cat who arrived on the boats and the other animals have been rescued, some in terrible condition with severe injuries. A kitten called Simon is a new addition, arriving unable to stand he has made remarkable progress and swiftly stole our hearts. As Simon arrived one of the dogs, Whereareyou, left to a new home in Norway. The various dogs and cats share the household values as they care for each other. They could teach our political leaders a thing or ten about humanitarian values. Our conversation about the logistics of adopting animals moved onto the plight of unaccompanied child refugees. Unlike animals there was no possibility of them being adopted and they face indefinite detention on the island. The children are highly vulnerable and despite being in the care of the state many are prostituted (Taylor, 2017) whilst others have organs harvested for transportation (Aslamova, 2016). Thousands of unaccompanied children go missing every year in Europe (Townsend, 2016). Ultimately the EU and European governments are responsible for the fate of these children, but will they be held to account? Eric is clear that it is futile to blame officials on the ground and is determined to identify the senior policy makers responsible for these harms and crimes.

Looking out over the Mytilini Strait on the sunny August day we visited the Turkish border appears close and crossing it safe, indeed our first thought was to wonder if we could swim across. In fact the distance from Turkey is 6.5 kilometers / 4 miles across a sea that can be rough, with strong currents, chilling winds and the journey is made in flimsy craft without appropriate safety equipment. As Eric explained the women and children sit in the middle of the boat with the men on the sides. As the boat crosses it takes on water, this means the children and women are quickly soaked. As a result even a successful crossing often ends with many of the refugees, and in particularly children, arriving suffering from hypothermia. Philippa and Eric have seen children walk out of the boats die of hypothermia 5 to 10 minutes later.

As we talk Philippa's mobile phone regularly beeps – updates from their network, both concerning two refugee boats intercepted by Frontex boats on the other side of the island and information about the activity of the boats of various state actors who patrol the strait. Eric sits facing the water and regularly scans it for activity; this constant alertness has become part of his and Philippa's 'life-world'. When something catches Eric's eye, his binoculars are swiftly deployed and Philippa's phone is her constant companion. When asked what they do with their feelings of anger and sadness about this incredible situation

and their selfless engagement with the fate of so many people's existence, they say that they cannot afford the time for these affects to take a hold as they are always expecting another boat to arrive. What is an idyllic view on the day of our visit, spoiled only by the occasional passing Turkish or Greek coastguard boat, has been the scene of some horrific state crimes. The activists are well organised with a series of observations points along the coast (see below). They are able to monitor a boats progress from the point they set off in Turkey. Sometimes it is a single boat, sometimes a number of boats attempt the crossing simultaneously. Agreements between the EU and Turkey, which include substantial financial benefits to Turkey, means the first hazard the refugees must face is the Turkish coastguard. Arriving refugees have explained that the boats the Turkish authorities ignore and those they target is dependent on the people smugglers having paid the required bribes.



Those boats that are intercepted face being rammed or having their inflatable sides sliced through with knives attached to poles (Kempson, 2017). As the boats sink the Turkish coast guard may rescue the refugees, those saved and returned trigger EU payments, but on occasions the activists on the Greek side have seen the Turkish boats only rescuing women and children and leaving the men to die in the water. There have also been reports of electric cables being flung into the wet boats with horrendous consequences. On some occasions Eric has seen boats make it into Greek water only for the Turkish coast guards to (illegally) pursue and sink them, even whilst Greek and Frontex (The European Union's Border Force) boats have been close by, watching but failing to intervene. Even without these deliberate attempts to sink boats it is not uncommon for boats to sink because they are unseaworthy, overcrowded or overwhelmed by rough sea conditions. The view from the island is both beautiful and the site of state sanctioned violence and killing. The children, women and men risk their lives to flee, and states not only ignore their legal obligations but cynically and deliberately increase those risks.

Before leaving we asked Phillipa and Eric what we and the European Group could do. The main suggestions emerging where:

Before leaving we asked Phillipa and Eric what we and the European Group could do. The main suggestions emerging where:

- **Volunteers**

Volunteers are needed to join the north shore response group in Lesvos as part of the daily boat spotting/day and night watch/coast support team. Volunteers need to be over 21 years old and able to self-fund the trip. This will include car hire as well as transport and accommodation. Volunteers will be fully briefed and inducted.

The watch runs 24 hours a day and shifts are set according to immediate need and changes in situation or weather conditions. Volunteers support each landing by providing blankets/dry clothes/shoes/tea and snacks, and transfer to a transit camp from the shore when needed.

Full details are available here:

<https://www.facebook.com/HopeProjectKempsons/posts/1928703984077391>

- **Donations (financial)**

Financial donations can be made here:

<https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/thehopeproject>

- **Donations (things)**

What is needed changes over time and can be seasonal. However, the following are always needed:

- Socks & Shoes for all (please only good condition or new),
- Men's trousers and t-shirts especially smaller sizes;
- Crocs & flip flops for all during the spring and summer-months
- Smart phones, unlocked, Battery packs, phone chargers
- Solar and wind up torches,
- Sun hats, Sun Block, Moisturizer, Mosquito repellent
- Deodorant, Soap, Shampoo, tooth paste and brushes
- Fleece blankets
- Jackets and coats for the cold autumn and winter months
- Underwear for all (please only new),
- Sanitary/hygiene items
- Towels,
- Baby wipes
- First aid and medical supplies.

Please DO NOT send baby and children's clothes!!

*JUSTICE, POWER & RESISTANCE*

Please contact Philippa for details of where to send donations and for an up to date list of what is required. She can be contacted through: <http://the-kempsons.com/contact.html>

#### **Publicity**

What is happening, every day, on Europe’s borders is largely ignored by mainstream media. Therefore, the easiest thing we can all do is publicise what is happening. Recent elections have shown that social media can act as a counter weight to the misrepresentations and distortions of mainstream media so let’s use it. The Kempsons and projects they are associated with can be followed through these social media:

- <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnPYqWbPI4OOCa7RHfSjhxw>
- Twitter: @EricKempson
- <https://www.facebook.com/HopeProjectKempsons>  
<https://www.facebook.com/philippa.kempson.1>  
<https://www.facebook.com/eric.kempson.7>

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Townsend, M. (2016) '10,000 refugee children are missing, says Europol'  
*The Guardian* Online at:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees> (consulted 8 March 2018)