

Room at the inn? Syrian refugees hope for hospitality

text and images by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue



PERILOUS JOURNEY: Refugees travel in a rubber boat across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos on October 30.

The boat carrying Nabil Minas bounced in the surf off the Greek island of Lesbos as the Syrian refugee waded through the water to set his children on the rocky shore. Then he fell on his face and kissed the ground. A Christian, Minas crossed himself and covered his face with his hands, weeping with joy. Then he stood up and went around hugging everyone, including Lisbeth Svendsen, a Norwegian volunteer who was embracing Minas's wife and daughter. "Thank you," he said over and over.

Littered with piles of discarded life jackets and the black rubber of deflated migrant boats, this Greek shore marks the first major step in the journey of hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants who are seeking safety and opportunity in northern Europe. Although winter is coming, the number of refugees has increased. By next year they will number in the millions.

Most are headed for Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel has opened the doors wide. How long the doors will remain open, however, is a huge question, especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris, which fed the xenophobia of anti-immigrant groups. It's a crisis that challenges assumptions about what union means in the European Union.



A volunteer plays with a two-year-old refugee who's just arrived.

Ordinary Germans seem unfazed by the newcomers, most of whom are Muslim. When I walked with a Syrian refugee family through the southern German town of Messtetten, local residents greeted them warmly. A town of 10,000 people, Messtetten is hosting more than 3,000 refugees in a former army barracks. Rolf Held, the town's United Methodist pastor, says that the 150 local volunteers have made the operation run smoothly. An appeal for warm clothing for the refugees was rescinded when residents overwhelmed organizers with donations.

The relationship works both ways. One woman in Held's congregation lives with multiple sclerosis. She became friends with an Iranian refugee family that volunteered to help her paint her house and clean her garden. Such amicable relations undercut others' racist pandering.

"At the beginning, some neo-Nazis moved into town to convince us that housing the refugees wasn't a good idea. But the people of the town sent them packing," Held said.

Messtetten is an intermediary stop in the asylum process. As refugees eventually move on to permanent resettlement sites, Held and others offer to make contact with people in the new locations to assure that the refugees will be well received.

Even in Hungary, where the conservative government turned water cannons on the refugees and strung razor wire along the border, massive numbers of volunteers provide a counterpoint to official inhospitality.

“I’ve been amazed at the number of volunteers who’ve gone to the borders,” said Roman Catholic bishop András Veres of Szombathely. “Christians in Hungary have been very eager to assist the refugees, providing them with food and shelter. There has been a wave of solidarity to match the wave of refugees.”



with life jackets from tens of thousands of refugees who have passed through the island on their way to western Europe.

Nowhere is that solidarity more visible than on Greek islands like Lesbos, where refugees arrive after paying more than 1,000 euros each to Turkish traffickers for the perilous trip. Greece’s government is incapable of funding ordinary operations, let alone rescuing refugees. When the morgue on Lesbos ran out of room for bodies and the cemetery had no more empty plots, a British woman bought a refrigerated container so that the bodies of drowned refugees could be stored.

For years international aid organizations have been unable to raise the funds to meet the needs of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, which might have kept some of the refugees from crossing the dangerous Aegean into Europe.

Because these groups are overwhelmed by the scale of the current mass migration, the hard work has fallen on other volunteers. On Lesbos, Greek olive farmers waded into the surf to clutch babies thrust into their hands by desperate parents. Lifeguards from Barcelona pull refugees—alive and dead—from the water. Norwegian engineers spend their vacations wrapping space blankets around wet, shivering children and then hug them until they calm down.

On the Greek island of Samos, thousands of refugees have climbed uphill from the rocky shore to seek help in the Zoodochos Pigi monastery, where 15 Orthodox nuns tend a crowd of weary families at their door.



A refugee clutches her baby

after landing on a beach near Molyvos, on Lesbos.

“We give them water and bread, and we call the police to come pick them up,” said Sister Evniki, the monastery’s mother superior. “But sometimes the authorities are overwhelmed and cannot come, so we tell the refugees how to walk to town.”

The refugees have disrupted the tranquil life of the nuns. At times their limited water supply has run out. Trash piles up where the refugees wait, and tourists arriving to visit the picturesque monastery sometimes take one look at the refugees and leave. For a monastery that depends on selling embroidery and painted icons to visitors, that’s a problem.

Yet Sister Evniki says the nuns will continue to respond with compassion. “We believe that in each person we see the face of Jesus Christ, and we have to help

them," she said.