

PHOTO ESSAY

Signs of life

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In 2015, more than eight hundred and fifty thousand refugees and migrants entered Europe through Greece. Most landed at the island of Lesbos, in the Aegean Sea off the western coast of Turkey. Over the last two years, I have been documenting the plight of these people on the move, stranded at borders, waiting in camps.



Those who made the crossing were guided to shore by locals on Lesbos, who provided them with food and shelter. I went as a photojournalist, but what I saw there changed me. I put the camera down and, with volunteers from around the world, spent the days collecting discarded lifejackets and the nights helping new arrivals.



Hundreds of thousands of lifejackets and inflatable boats accumulated at Lesbos within a few months. As I stood on the shore among the debris of lost shoes, clothes and passports, I realised each life jacket meant a person had passed through here, each was a story of a crossing.



The Balkan route was the most common path people took into Europe: crossing Greece's border with Macedonia and heading north and west. But it was a fraught journey. I lost one of my contacts, a young man from Afghanistan, after he attempted the trek. He didn't return messages; his Facebook went silent.



European countries began closing their borders, and eventually made a 'people-swap' deal with Turkey in March 2016. Barbed wire went up, soldiers pointed guns and the Balkan route closed. More than ten thousand people were stranded at the Greek town of Idomeni, near the border with Macedonia.



Around fifty thousand people face an uncertain fate in Greece after the EU-Turkey deal. The winter of 2016-17 was harsh. At the Softex camp in my hometown of Thessaloniki, I ran a photography workshop for the refugees with my friend and fellow photographer, Lois Simac. Other volunteers taught at a makeshift school.



More than three thousand seven hundred people were reported drowned or missing in 2015 after attempting to cross the Mediterranean and Aegean. On Lesbos, residents buried the dead in their local cemetery until it ran out of space.



During the last two years, I have witnessed many examples of compassion. Here, an elderly woman from Idomeni gives onions from her garden to a woman from Syria. I am proud of how Greek people have responded to the crisis.

Tasos Markou has been a professional photographer since 2004, and currently works as a freelancer for a number of international publications. He is also a convener of Crossroads, a volunteer-run photography workshop that provides artistic outlet, fosters integration and empowers the voiceless among locals and the refugee community in northern Greece.