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Volunteer work among asylum seekers and refugees in Finland from 2015 to 2017

According to the United Nations (UNHCR 2016), record levels of people have been forced from their home countries in recent years. The main refugee source countries have been Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria. Besides Iraq, three of these countries (Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria) are among those from where the largest numbers of asylum seekers come to Finland. In 2015 a record number of asylum seekers came to Finland, when 32,476 people sought asylum. Since 2000, the yearly number of asylum seekers has varied between 1,500 and 6,000.¹ 2015 was so exceptional in terms of the number of refugees that it can be referred to as a shared historical moment widely discussed in public forums. In reality it was not an isolated moment in time experienced by individuals, but an event strongly affected by the exceptional experiences of a diversity of people.

When looking at the entire number of asylum applications in European countries,² it is noticeable that there are many more applications per 100,000 inhabitants in Sweden than in Finland. In Sweden between June 2015 and May 2016 there were 406 applications per 100,000 inhabitants, but in Finland only 154, and this trend has continued.³ In Finland during the second half of 2016 and the first months of 2017, many asylum seekers received decisions on their applications – many applications were rejected,⁴ particularly in the cases of Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers. The Finnish government has tried to make Finland less attractive for asylum seekers to apply for refuge than other EU countries, and has systematically refused to raise the quota of refugees.

The number of volunteers has increased along with the larger numbers of asylum seekers. According to the Finnish Red Cross, 8,000 volunteers were involved in the reception and integration of asylum seekers in 2015-2016. The majority of these were new volunteers.

Our aim was to document the personal experience narratives (Dolby 2008) of a wide range of volunteers in order to understand better the roles, motivations, values, and aspirations behind their actions. Volunteers' stories can also be approached as "oral history in the present tense", referring to Alessandro Portelli's frequently cited definition: "[O]ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (Portelli 1991:50). In the interviews, volunteers reflected on their experiences as active actors in a major historical event of our time.

While reading and analyzing the narratives of the volunteers, we recognized that in all three stages (arrival, waiting period and after the decision) volunteers have a crucial role in building or promoting "contact zones". Mary Louise Pratt (1992:4) defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today". At their best, these contact zones may produce transculturation (Pratt 1992:4) – something that is recognizable from our data: the volunteers reported how they had learnt about the home cultures of the refugees as well as their language.

Furthermore, in earlier studies interpretation and translation have been seen as important factors in the process of building contact zones (de Sousa Santos 2005, 2008; Conway 2011), and this was underlined by our informants as well. As de Sousa Santos (2005:17) defines: "The goal [of translation] is to have host-difference replace fortress-difference. Through translation work, diversity is celebrated, not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism, but rather as a condition of sharing and solidarity."

The aim of this article is to analyze the volunteers' roles, motivations, values and aspirations behind their actions in different stages of the process (the arriving phase, the waiting stage and after the decision). We pay particular attention to whether or how the volunteers see their work as "promoters of contact zones". Volunteering is not easy emotionally. Our aim is also to analyze how the volunteers embody "the politics of compassion" (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016), i.e. different strategies and experiences of demarcations, empathies and anxieties in relation to the difficult and stressful situations they faced and witnessed as volunteers.

The general atmosphere during spring 2017 when the data was gathered needs to be described in order to understand the background and context of our study. From January 2017 to 30th of June, a period of 141 days, there were opposed tent protests in the Railway Square in central Helsinki: a "stop deportations" tent set up by asylum seekers⁵ and their supporters, and a "Finland First" protest by nationalists and their supporters. In addition, forced deportations and detentions of families with small children caused further demonstrations and had been widely covered in the media. The most tragic events were suicides and attempted suicides of asylum seekers. On the other hand, many top politicians (including former Finnish president Tarja Halonen) and leaders of the Finnish Lutheran Church (among them Archbishop Kari Mäkinen) took a stand against forced deportations.

In this article, we first briefly describe our data and methods. Based on the data collected during spring 2017, we formulated three areas of study, focusing on the diversity of volunteer work among refugees during three different phases of asylum seeking. The first section explores volunteerism when refugees arrive. The second section analyses volunteerism when refugees are waiting for decisions. The third section discusses volunteer work after the final decision – mainly focusing on volunteer work with refugees who have acquired a residence permit. In all of these areas, we try to bring out the diversity of actions experienced as well as volunteers' reflections on difficult emotions related to volunteer work.

In Europe-wide terms, the defense and threat rhetoric used in discussing refugees has increased over the past few years.⁶ Slavoj Žižek argues in his book *Against the Double Blackmail. Refugees, Terror and Other Problems with the Neighbours* (2016) that Europe lacks a Europe-wide plan to deal with the refugee crisis, and in his view both left-minded liberals and anti-immigrant populists are wrong. Before final remarks we bring in the voices of volunteers who state what they think should be changed in Finnish politics in order to tackle refugee questions more thoroughly. We conclude by underlining the positive potential of this unique Europe-wide situation, and call for further studies analyzing the benefits of working together and learning from refugees.

DATA AND METHODS

During spring 2017 (from February to April), we, along with 11 Folklore Studies students at the University of Helsinki, conducted 15 interviews (13 single-person interviews and two with a couple) in central and southern Finland (males and females between the ages of 19 and 65 were interviewed). We and the students also made observations (14 at eight different times and places, such as reception centers and language cafes), which were reported and collectively discussed.⁷ During the course, we also watched together Elina Hirvonen's recent documentary film *Boiling Point*⁸, which depicts and gives voice to different groups in today's Finland.

The informants for the pilot study were contacted with an open call from the Refugee Hospitality Club Facebook group. This is an open Facebook group with almost 14,000 members. In January, Sofia Laine posted a call to interview voluntary workers. The response was excellent, receiving more than 30 responses in just one day. We, and our students conducted 15 interviews between January and April: in two interviews, two people (a husband and a wife) were interviewed together. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. All interviews were summarized. The entire data will be archived in The Finnish Literature Society's (SKS's) Archive for further studies.

VOLUNTEERISM AT THE ARRIVAL STAGE

A number of the older volunteers had already been active in volunteer work, such as in sport associations and church activities. Informants' involvement in volunteering with asylum seekers covered a wide range of experience: some of them became involved during



Boiling point, 2017

the fall 2015, others had a background of long-term voluntary work with immigrants and refugees. The political events and atmosphere from fall 2015 until spring 2017 were often referred to or reflected upon during the interviews. The political atmosphere was also frequently the reason that had made people start volunteering. Instead of taking sides in an increasingly polarizing atmosphere, they wanted to be involved and to help arriving asylum seekers:

I started when many asylum seekers started to arrive in 2015. Hate mail on the internet began to grow, and I felt that the government's attitude was negative; at the beginning they were not as negative as they are now. Asylum seekers were received in society, but there were also a lot of negative things going on. I wanted to do something small that would have an opposite effect and to participate in the conversation in this way [e.g. through my own action]. (Female, born 1950, B)

Six of the fifteen interviewed informants started by sorting out clothes for refugees, two sewed play bags for children and two delivered food to police stations. Seven of the fifteen had done volunteer work at the reception centres or had helped the people living there to visit nearby places. Some of the volunteers know Arabic, and expressed how helpful it was in different situations:

I wanted to see how this whole process works. I went to Pasila police station [in Helsinki] together with other volunteers. First the guards did not let us in. It was a rainy autumn day and the volunteers had some food to deliver. Eventually the guards asked them to put the food outside, but the volunteers wanted to get into the police station with the help of an experienced Finnish Red Cross employee as a spokesperson. The guards did not help us in any way. A few hours earlier asylum seekers from the German ferry had arrived at the police station and they were being interviewed at that moment. Women and children were allowed to eat what we volunteers had brought first. There were so many children and families. There was a mother who had three children, one of whom had been sick for three days. She asked

the guards to call the ambulance, but the guards refused because it had been planned for the family to be sent to Jyväskylä that night. The Finnish Red Cross employee was a nurse and she examined the child; she called an ambulance and the family went to hospital. Everyone else was sent to Jyväskylä with the rest of the food. The mother stayed alone with her children at the hospital and at the reception centre in Helsinki. I think this situation was incomprehensible. The attitudes of the guards were peculiar: we were helping them, but we were treated like enemies. This was an important experience for me, because now I have seen how these situations can be. However, Finland has organized itself in comparison with many other countries, such as Hungary. (Female, born 1953)

In this narrative, the way volunteers build “contact zones” is very concrete: they support dialogue between the officials and refugees with special needs. The Finnish Red Cross was mentioned in six interviews. As in the example above, it is evident how the organization’s long history in humanitarian work has been highly important when numbers of people are arriving at the same time and are in a weak condition. Surprisingly, the Finnish Red Cross also received several critical comments from the volunteers. Many of the volunteers had first started their volunteer work in Finnish Red Cross activities concerning refugees, but several of the volunteers had become frustrated, confused or even inhibited about doing volunteer work with them and therefore continued elsewhere:

I was quickly invited to trainings and activities of the Finnish Refugee Council [Suomen Pakolaisapu]. At that time, there was chaos in the Finnish Red Cross (the FRC) with very few replies to requests [from volunteers]. Activities were unorganized when compared to the Finnish Refugee Council. They were working really fast and had young people, the systems were working well and so were the websites. This created a trustworthy impression. The atmosphere was very good. The FRC appeared old-fashioned and unorganized. People did not know what the FRC was doing. International activities seemed to be minimal and people were inexperienced. It was amazing, because both the public and I had the idea picture that the FRC’s work was going smoothly. They have a good reputation in international operations. Managing the events of 2015 appeared to be like from the 70s: the systems were ineffective, the web pages were bad, and the people concerned were very inexperienced. The establishment of the reception centers, on the other hand, was an example of their skill. (Female, born 1953)

Other informants reported that in fall 2015 and at the beginning of 2016 there were obstacles to getting involved as a volunteer. Sometimes, even when they actively tried to be involved in some volunteer activities, there was no reply from the refugee centre or from the organization that acted as a mediator. In these oral histories, volunteers felt that there was a need for volunteers but no access to refugees – even when persons in charge were contacted. Sometimes these confusions were explained by the need for “secrecy.” Already at this stage, there were reflections on how instead of the “helper – person to be helped” dichotomy, activities should be equal, and asylum seekers should have a more active role than “a person in need of help”. Co-working between asylum seekers and volunteers would strengthen the “contact zones” even more. For example, as one of the informants mentioned in the interview, in the reception centers asylum seekers should be allowed to put their own beds together.

VOLUNTEERING DURING THE WAITING STAGE OF THE ASYLUM DECISION

Well, it may vary quite a lot, as I have understood, especially private companies, like Luona⁹, keep asylum seekers under conditions like concentration camps. They can’t have showers or get to see a doctor and don’t get decent food, and so on. I don’t know things more exactly, but I know something because I have colleagues who have visited these places. [...] Well, I have to say that what I have seen there at the reception centre for minors and now here in the group home, is that these things are now better managed. It’s different when there are families in the reception centers who have children who may need to live in strange conditions. But these minors, who came alone, have been taken better care of, at least in terms of what I have seen. And yes, also there the quality of assistants varies a lot, and the kind of legal help they get. (Female, born 1973)

As the female informant above explains, the quality of reception centers varies in Finland. The most vulnerable group is unaccompanied minors. What became evident from the interviews is the enormous need among refugees in the waiting phase to make contacts with local residents and to interact with those who know the place and the culture. Different kinds of “discussion cafés” where local and newcomers can meet seem to be a necessity – functioning as a concrete “contact zone.” Many of the informants had been teaching Finnish to the refugees in the waiting phase. They had also showed the newcomers places nearby. Different kinds of friendship activities have been set up in different cities in Finland. Children were taken to the playgrounds, mothers to the doctors.

Some of the volunteers had worked as hosting families for the minors who had arrived in Finland without their families. For example, one of the volunteers told that two young boys visited their family once a week: after one year of “volunteering” in this activity the volunteering had turned into “friendship, love and the normal life of an extended family. A personal relationship that will last the whole life, in a similar way than with one’s own children and friends.” (Female, born 1969)

Refugee work could be improved in the future by making it clear to the immigrants what to expect from life in Finland. Finnish language teaching should be required and streamlined so that asylum seekers could get to work faster. Finnish language studies should start immediately. Those who get home accommodation get a really wrong picture. Those who do not get home accommodation also get the wrong picture. Now the person who was living with me is without papers here in Finland. They should also be allowed to work even when living in reception centers, and training should be organized more quickly. Those who have been granted a residence permit, have studied 4-6 hours of Finnish a day; it is slow, inefficient, frustrating. And there are studies that show how it is unlikely that they will get jobs. Those who arrived now [2015 or later], I’m sorry for them, because they will not get jobs in Finland. Targeted language teaching that would go with their professional skills would be helpful. They have been trying to open paths for students with higher education, which is a good thing. The most important thing would be to arrange meaningful things [for asylum seekers] to prevent frustration. (Female, born 1950)

Our data clearly show how inclusion into society during the waiting stage is very much in the hands of the volunteers. One volunteer had by herself started writing CVs for people living in the reception center. She wrote 40 CVs and at least one job application for each of them during 2016. Only one of them got a job as a paperboy.

The waiting stage is enormously stressful for asylum seekers. When we asked what was emotionally most stressful in volunteering, informants referred to this phase:

A few depressed self-harming cases have been heavy, such as suicide attempts. They come unexpectedly and show cultural differences; with Finns you recognize depression and withdrawal, but with them you do not always recognize it. (Female, born 1966)

People you have got to know for a year do not get a residence permit and have to return to their home country or find their place here as an undocumented immigrant. (Female, born 1952)

Another stress factor is being taken from one reception center to another. Studies have shown the negative effects that such removals have for asylum seekers and in our data it is evident how the volunteers carry this emotional burden. On the other hand, some of the volunteers actively decided not to carry the emotional loads that asylum seekers bear. They strictly divided their life inside and outside volunteerism. It seems that the more involved the volunteers are and the more intensively they do their volunteer work, the more emotionally and without saving themselves they do their work: "I do not let it get under my skin. I keep a distance when helping as a volunteer." (Female, born 1950)

VOLUNTEERING WITH REFUGEES AFTER POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE RESIDENCE PERMIT

Some of the volunteers had helped to find refugees a place to rent and showed how Finnish apartments operate. After a residence permit has been received, language classes and learning Finnish continues. Here again volunteers do a lot both through organizations and individually. One volunteer had employed people who had residence permits in his construction company. Also some other volunteers have helped out in finding jobs.

Four of the volunteers were involved in "SuomiKamu" ("FinnFriend") activities that currently affect more than 80 Finns and over 70 immigrants, many of them having arrived as a refugee. The main idea in "FinnFriend" activities is to meet regularly (twice a month) and do something together. One of the main aims of these meetings is to talk in Finnish, and there have been activities like cooking, jogging, picking berries and making jigsaw puzzles. Based on the feedback collected (Ruuniemi & Rontu), these groups have been popular among both volunteers and asylum seekers. Many Finnish volunteers reported learning to look at things in a new way and felt they had got to know new cultures. Asylum seekers have been grateful for the opportunity to meet and talk with local Finnish people. It seems that these "contact zones" have many positive functions both to refugees and to volunteers.

Volunteers have also helped actively those asylum seekers who have got negative residence permit decision. In addition to writing appeals to negative decision, during the spring 2017 the "Stop Deportations Finland" network engaged in many demonstrations. The best-known lasted 141 days on the Main Railway Station's Square in downtown Helsinki. Other demonstrations were set up ad hoc at the airport and in the city center

to protest against forced return flights to Afghanistan.¹⁰ Volunteers reflected how they were very sorry about the Railway Station Square protests, where the "Stop Deportation" demonstration was in one corner and the "Finland first / Close the borders" protest was in the other. Some informants reflected how this long-lasting tension as well as the continuation of forced deportations had had a strong effect on the "politics of compassion" of the volunteers, in which strong emotions might even have radicalized their actions:

In Finland, volunteers get tired and partly radicalized around the question of asylum seekers. From my point of view, you can recognize this. There are already some people, who have given their whole life to helping for a long time already, and these people are terribly tired and then they sometimes lack consideration. [...] For example, if you think about the Stop Deportations demonstration and the activists there. There are many who have a relationship with an asylum seeker, and then the volunteerism turns into a question of life and death. You are engaged to somebody who is deported back to Iraq. In my opinion this kind of situations radicalizes a person or burns her out - or both. (Female, born 1973)

DISCUSSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FINNISH SOCIETY; WHAT SHOULD BE CHANGED FROM THE VOLUNTEERS' PERSPECTIVE

I have stopped thinking of Finland as a country with a "rule of law". I have stopped thinking that Finland respects human rights at the national level. All this has stopped, although it may have been there some years ago. The last two years have opened my eyes to these issues. That here the situation is not much better than Eastern Europe, if at all. It is completely unsustainable that civil society is the organization, which conducts constant monitoring and reporting, for this should be the responsibility of the state. At the same time there are those who are already dead who Finland decided to deport. (Female, born 1973)

Many of the interviewed volunteers were very disappointed about the political attitudes and the negative atmosphere about refugees. As the informant above describes, the volunteers felt they knew the situation and even the life history of the asylum seekers better than the officials. How could this knowledge be better used? What would be a sensible way of transmitting this kind of information? Why were decisions made without taking this information into consideration?

One informant criticized the quality of volunteering: "Instead of walking outside together, volunteers should do language teaching, business guidance, etc. [...] Many of the arrivals were entrepreneurs in their home country, why couldn't they be in Finland, too? Volunteering could focus on guiding asylum seekers towards business jobs" (female, born 1969).

Social media and the speedy positive response such media could give was mentioned by the interviewees. On the other hand it was suggested that well-established organizations could organize themselves more effectively. Much more should be done to avoid passivity and anxiety during the waiting period:

Many of the asylum seekers were anxious about their residence permit decisions. I totally understand: I think Finland has done this badly. People can do nothing at the reception centres - nothing but wait. When they started to trust me, they told me that they wait for 10-11 hours each day, surfing with their mobile phone. This leads to the wrong kind of institutionalization. I think that by doing things, energy and thoughts could be channeled elsewhere and that would calm the situation down. If you pack 400-500 young men into the same building and you do not give them anything to do, they will become nervous and restless. Wouldn't it be better to be able to work right away and develop a new life? Some did volunteer work, but they were very carefully selected. Very few got the opportunity. (male, born 1994)



Foto: Charlotte Carlberg Bårg

FINAL REMARKS

The aim of this article was to analyze the experiences of volunteers as active actors in the 2015 “refugee crisis”. We have analyzed volunteers’ roles, motivations, values and aspirations behind their actions at different stages of the asylum process (the arrival phase, the waiting stage and after the decision). In particular, we have paid attention to the “contact zones” the volunteers have promoted. How they build “contact zones” between officials and refugees, and how they supported the co-working of volunteers and refugees already at the arrival stage. It is also evident how all the language-related activities and translation activities are crucial in building “contact zones”. Different kinds of “discussion cafés” where locals and newcomers meet seem to be a necessity. The Stop Deportations protest at the main Railway Station’s square also worked as a “contact zone”, where ordinary Finnish people could express their support and hundreds of researchers, artists and other people signed a petition to stop deportations – all these actions were supported by the volunteers.

The volunteers interviewed had a diversity of strategies and orientations concerning “the politics of compassion” (Kuusisto-Arponen 2016): some of them set clear borders

and restrictions concerning the level of empathy they showed and demonstrated, others reported difficulty in facing asylum seekers’ anxiety and depression.

The so called refugee crisis could be seen as a possibility for Europe to redefine itself (Žižek 2016:10). Discourses against refugees are gaining popularity in Europe, but at the same time thousands of volunteers have expressed their solidarity and shown innovativeness in their community work to support refugees’ new life. Volunteer work by civil society actors should be complementary to state assistance, not as a substitute for state action – as is in fact sometimes the case (Zugasti 2016). Volunteers’ work and knowledge could work as a “contact zone” and inspiration in different policies, in integration and in new kinds of coexistence (ibid.).

There is a major difference between doing something for refugees and doing something with refugees. It would also be crucial to recognize what volunteers can learn from refugees or learn together with refugees. These dynamics are something we wish to explore further in our further research in the near future.

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NOTES

1. <http://intermin.fi/maahanmuutto/turvapaikanhakijat-ja-pakolaiset> (24.8.2017)
2. See asylum seekers in Europe per capita: <https://www.lucify.com/seeking-asylum-in-europe/> The underlying data is from the UNHCR. (24.8.2017)

3. See the chart: http://www.migri.fi/download/64990_Tp-hakijat_2015.pdf?462b37f1d380d488
4. See the chart: http://www.migri.fi/download/65768_Tp-paatokset_2016.pdf?d51346f3d380d488
and: <http://tilastot.migri.fi/#decisions?l=en> (24.8.2017)
5. https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/refugee_assistance_ngo_chief_concerned_about_finlands_deportations/9470370 (24.8.2017)
6. Kari Mäkinen 2.5.2017: <https://www.uusisuomi.fi/kotimaa/219818-arkkipiispa-makinen-turva-paikanhakijoista-maailmanluokan-kysymys-purkautuu>
7. Students who participated in the fieldwork course were: Sini Ahonen, Sami Eerola, Aleksi Elo, Jenni Haapanen, Sara Heikkilä, Rose Heinonen, Viivi Jäkälä, Markus Kantoluoto, Eliisa Leppävuori, Santeri Matikka and Elina Ojanotko. We are thankful to the students and the course assistant Susanna Jurvanen for their work and collaboration.
8. <https://docpoint.info/en/tapahtumat/films/boiling-point/> (19.9.2017)
9. <http://www.migranttales.net/does-luona-treat-asylum-seekers-with-dignity-or-as-livestock/> (27.10.2017)
10. https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/hundreds_protest_afghan_deportations_in_helsinki/9545998 (19.9.2017)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo on page 90 by Daria Nepriakhina