

## **Introduction**

### **Refugees in the 'Jungle'**

#### **Omer AKA Dream (from Sudan)**

Blue,

Like the cloudless sky

On a sun filled day!

Soft,

Like the sleeping child

In a rocking cradle!

Voice,

Like the sounds of grief

Through her gritted teeth!

Coffin,

Like the skeleton carried

In my darkest deepest sleep!

Dream,

Like the birth of my child

With a new mother tongue!

Fear,

Like carrying a heaviness

Over endless trails of fatigue!

Hope,

Like arriving in my home

Where my tears are my own!

The aim of this book is to bring into public view the personal stories of people who lived as refugees, during 2015 and 2016, in the Calais camp on the northern French coast, just 26 miles from the UK, that was often called the 'Jungle'.

There have been refugee camps in and around Calais before, and small camps still exist in the area. However, in the spring of 2015, on a landfill site on the outskirts of Calais granted by the local French authorities, a much larger unofficial camp started to grow. This camp, called the 'Jungle' first in French media, but later by its own inhabitants and by global media, was characterised by very poor housing, little food, and inadequate water, sanitation and health services. There were no police inside the camp; fights often broke out; smugglers operated; blazes frequently started from cooking fires, candles and gas canisters, and destroyed people's shelters and homes. Residents adopted the 'Jungle' name because, many said, humans could not live in such conditions.

As refugees came to Europe in large numbers from the summer of 2015 onward, the 'Jungle' increased in size, defying even a French government demolition that reduced its area by two-thirds in March 2016. The camp was home to 10,000 inhabitants by the time it was closed by

the French government in October 2016, and its inhabitants dispersed to housing and processing centres (Centres D'Accueil) all over France.

The 'Jungle' was notorious worldwide for its abject conditions. It was a political embarrassment for the French but also the British government, since most residents wanted to come to the UK and had to be stopped by fences, police and military from boarding trucks, trains and boats. Other residents, including hundreds of unaccompanied minors, had legal claims to come to Britain, which were poorly dealt with. The camp was also an emblem of the impact of forced displacement within Europe, and the mostly ineffectual efforts of European countries to address it.

At the same time, the 'Jungle' developed, from the efforts of residents and volunteers, rather than statutory agencies, many formal and informal associations that cooked and served food, built shelters, distributed clothes, provided education, gave basic medical care and facilitated sports, creative writing, art, and music. A street of restaurants and shops constructed and run by residents also grew up. Residents and volunteers often remarked on the strong sense of community and mutual help that they experienced, alongside the camp's lack of basic facilities, violence, and alienation.

For the authors of this book, the 'Jungle' was a home, for a short or a longer time. It was, too, just a moment in their life stories, starting with happy childhoods, or childhoods shaped by war; proceeding through educations obtained after great struggle, often in situations of persecution; and continuing through forced flight, either through Iran, Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, or through Sudan and the Sahara Desert, to Libya and Italy. After the 'Jungle', too, the authors moved on. Some are now in the UK; some are claiming asylum in France; a few have gone to other European countries. By October 2016, a handful were still living in the

camp, or close by, but those authors, too, had plans to move elsewhere. The stories the authors have written for this book follow their life stories from their beginnings, into their hopeful futures.

The stories make up a co-authored text. The authors come from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria. All lived in the 'Jungle' during 2015-2016 - for days, weeks, or in some cases, many months. The authors also edited the book, in collaboration with a team from the University of East London.

The book started from discussions with people who were taking a short accredited undergraduate course on 'Life Stories' offered by UEL in the 'Jungle' in 2015 and 2016, as part of a project called 'University for All'. Writing a book was not the aim of the course, but it quickly became clear that course participants wanted the life stories they were telling and writing to reach a wider audience.

The rationale for the course itself was that education at all levels is a human right guaranteed to refugees, that refugees are severely under-represented in higher education, and that many camp residents were deeply committed to education, and were already studying at or were ready to study at university level.

[Figure 0 about here]

The course took place in collaboration with a number of supportive educational associations within the camp: l'École Laïque du Chemin des Dunes, Jungle Books Library, l'École des Arts et Métiers, and the Darfuri School. The UEL team asked these organisations to host the course, used their Facebook pages to announce it, and then travelled around the camp before the course sessions, providing information and fliers and discussing the classes. Course participants read life stories by people such as Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, and Malala

Yousafzai, as well as poetry, and some broader historical, social and philosophical texts.

Many also wrote their own full or partial life stories for the course assignment.

[Figure 1 about here]

At the same time, the UEL team hosted some photo-workshops with photographers and tutors Gideon Mendel and Crispin Hughes. Called 'Displaces', these workshops allowed camp residents to develop their photographic skills, at the same time as presenting their own view of a camp usually seen only through the selective lens of world media. Residents also wrote and told stories about the pictures they had taken, if they wished. Sometimes, this work became part of their Life Stories course assignments<sup>1</sup>, and of this book.

[Figure 2 about here]

Many participants in the courses and workshops insisted that their life stories needed to be heard more broadly.. At a time when camp residents and refugees generally were described in popular media as greedy, deceitful and dangerous, they wanted the world to know, instead, the truth about them, and about the obstacles that they had encountered – childhoods in violent places; living as adults amidst war, genocide and persecution; dangerous journeys across mountains, deserts and seas; the arduous, abject conditions of the 'Jungle' - and for many, after Calais, poverty and discrimination in the countries where they claimed asylum.

Yet people also wanted the world to know about the positive aspects of their lives: their close and loving families; their pleasure in and commitment to education; their beautiful countries; their determination to survive in those countries, on their journeys, in the 'Jungle', and in their new home countries; and their commitment to finding safety, working, and helping

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<sup>1</sup> Webpages describing these projects can be seen on the 'Educating without borders' website:<https://educatingwithoutborders.wordpress.com/> . See also <https://www.uel.ac.uk/News/2015/12/University-of-East-London-brings-Life-Stories-course-to-Calais-Jungle> . Accessed 23.10.16

others. They wanted their stories to move towards a fair, free and non-violent world, and the happiness that this world would bring.

The stories in the book came into being in a variety of ways. Some were simply written and then edited by the authors. A few were translated. Some were written via phone and social media, and worked on further by the authors once they had been put into file documents by the editors. Some accounts were handwritten, typed and printed out by the editors, and later edited by the authors. Some stories were scribed by the editors as the authors talked through them, and then checked in their written and later, printed-out form. Sometimes, authors made notes or diagrams, and worked with the editors to build them into full written accounts. In other cases, authors made taped accounts of their lives, which were fully transcribed by the editors, and checked and edited by the authors.

This range of storytelling paths fitted the diverse and often difficult circumstances in which authors created their stories. Circumstances ranged from writing on pleasant, warm days, sitting outside the schools of the 'Jungle', or on cold days, beside wood fires set up within the classrooms; or writing, once people had left Calais, in the more stable and better quality accommodation of French Centres D'Accueil or UK hostels for refugees; through to writing in sodden, freezing tents or rickety wooden shelters, sunk in the mud of the Calais camp, in the winter of 2015-2016.<sup>2</sup>

[Figure 3 about here]

In talking about the process, many authors described their ideal writing situations, invoking quiet rooms, proper tables, cups of coffee. Even when settled in asylum-seeker accommodation, the uncertainties of the legal process often made writing problematic, since

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<sup>2</sup> For details of the associations and projects working within the camp, see the Calaid-lopedia website: <http://www.calaidipedia.co.uk/>

every day was shadowed by uncertainty and waiting: for a call from a lawyer, or a letter from the government.

The stories in this book are very close to those originally produced by the authors: editing has been minimal. Authors' own editing removed small parts of stories, changed names for anonymization purposes, clarified points, and expanded some sections as time passed. UEL editors have made grammatical changes, some word changes to avoid repetition, and some anonymisations. They included everything that the authors wrote, except in the case of some very long accounts written for Chapter 2; the full versions of these accounts can be read on the Refugee Council Living Refugee Archive website<sup>3</sup>. UEL editors also asked for clarification on some points, and invited authors to consider updating, and enlarging or adding sections across the whole book, if they wanted to. Within the chapters, editors also added short introductions, and contextualisation of the stories, which have been checked and, where necessary, edited by the authors.

Most of the authors discussed, together with UEL editors, whether to structure the book as a set of personal stories, or to set up a series of chapters, moving from the beginnings of people's lives and journeys, through the 'Jungle', to their lives after Calais. The chapter structure used here, following people's lives through from childhood, to the present, and towards the planned and imagined future, was the result of these discussions. The UEL editorial team, along with some authors, discussed how to divide up the stories between the chapters, when the divisions were not obvious. This introduction was, itself, discussed at length with a number of authors, and though it has been written by the UEL editorial team, it contains many points from those discussions.

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<sup>3</sup> Voices from the 'Jungle' Archive available at the Living Refugee Archive <http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/oral-history-testimonies/>

Authors were free to create stories of any length, to use any forms that they chose – for example, poetry, prose poems, diary entries, photography, and drawings, as well as more conventional written accounts – and to concentrate on any topics they wanted. Some chose not to write about home, or their journey, or their time after leaving the camp, or even the camp itself. Some decided not to write about personal issues; some avoided political discussions. For this reason, the book contains some stories that are much shorter than others; some stories with short or no sections in some chapters; some stories heavily concentrated in one or more chapters; and stories dealing with many different topics, even within the same chapter. The authors' own voices are heard in this variability of structure, as well as in what the authors have to say.

In addition, authors' changing and restricted circumstances affected the length of their stories, and the topics they wrote about. Some could not or did not want to continue writing when they moved away from the camp, for instance, while some did most of their writing when they left. There were also several authors involved with the book project at the beginning, with whom the UEL editorial team were unable to keep in touch, as well as a small number who were too young to consent to their work's publication, and who did not want to seek consent from those with current responsibility for looking after them. The UEL team hopes to re-establish contact later and to see if those early authors not included here still want to seek a public audience for their work.

Some authors use their own names for this book project; others have adopted pseudonyms, for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the stories they tell might upset family members or friends, or might put family or friends at risk if they could be connected to the authors. In other cases, the stories contain material that could jeopardise authors' safety, or their asylum claims. The second issue is often at stake where authors describe spending time in a country which might be viewed as safe, and where they did not claim asylum. Under the Dublin III



Treaty agreement and its later updates, refugees must claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. For many authors who have not claimed asylum in France, writing, under their own name, about a stay in Calais of any length, could have been problematic for this reason.

Almost all the authors in this book are, like most of the people living in the camp, men. The UEL team hosted a visual storytelling workshop with some of the women and children in the camp, but women did not attend the potentially mixed-gender Life Stories classes or the photography workshops, and the team was not able to provide women-only classes or workshops, because of lack of resources and access. We did, however, work with one woman who wanted to provide an account of her situation for this book – but there remains another book, perhaps, for women who were residents of the camp to write. As well, the focus on male camp residents' stories was, we felt, important, in a situation where male refugees in Calais, and in Europe generally, were becoming objects of media, political and popular distrust and fear, pictured as benefits cheats, criminals and terrorists.

The authors have not written their complete stories; that would be an impossible goal. These stories are also not the same stories that the authors would have written for a different audience - as a family record, for instance, or as part of a political argument. They are, nevertheless, stories in which authors strive to be honest. There are differences in opinion between the authors, between the editors, and between authors and editors; none of us have tried to edit out such differences. The stories may therefore 'disagree' with each other at times. Such conversations are another way in which the 'voices' of the authors are heard in their stories.

In Calais, 'Jungle' residents regularly made strong demands for their voices to be heard, through processes that they could control. Both authors and editors hope that this book meets that demand, in an accessible but complex and thoughtful way.

**Shikeb (from Afghanistan):** This book should tell the story of the bad things that people have endured, but also of how they are seeking justice, freedom and peace.

[Figure 4 about here]