



Katsikas, Ioannina, August 2016

**The day(s) that time stood still: clocks, construction and mental health at Katsikas refugee camp**



At the centre of a refugee camp in the mid-West of Greece, stands a clock. Four-sided, and painted black and white, it was built as a reminder of a massacre, and of a city long missed by the people here.

But it was also built for another reason: the clocks on its four sides are all set to the same time, and a sign attached to the tower reads: '19.03.2016. 23.15. Life stopped when we entered Katsikas camp.'

Five men built the clock, which stands at a crossroads where the camp's makeshift school – also constructed by them – sits on the left. The three other paths lead to the tents which make up Katsikas refugee camp.

Katsikas, close to Ioannina city, hosts some 789 men, women and children – mainly Syrians, with some Iraqis and Kurdish people from the north of both states.

Among them is builder and father of five, Amar Zakeet, the 28-year-old Syrian from the city of Homs, whose idea it was to build the clock.

'It has a dual purpose,' he explains. 'The first is that life stopped, when we came here. For all of us. We survive, but we do not live. There is no work, and when we got here, there was no school for our children. We built one, but it is not a real school. There is no life here. All there is for us to do is eat, sleep, and wait. We might die of boredom.'

‘That is why the clock’s faces are all set at 23:15, and why the sign is there. But I knew I would build this clock as soon as I arrived here with my family.’



In 2011, before the bitter, multi-sided Syrian Civil War broke out, Amar was working on the construction of Homs University. But in the earliest days of that conflict, he was caught up in a massacre in his home city.

‘Protests had started in Daraa early in March, and began in Homs on 20 March,’ he begins. ‘Many people took part to show our anger at the regime of Assad, but we were peaceful. We didn’t hurt anyone or break anything. I took part in the demonstrations, which centred on the city’s central square. On April 18-19 there were around 5,000 of us, and the police and military opened fire. Many people were killed. It was awful to be in the crowd then.’

The killings became known as the ‘massacre of time’ because the square in which they took place contained the black and white clock tower which was Homs’ centrepiece, which inspired the design of the Katsikas clock, and to which the new construction at the camp is a monument.

‘It has been destroyed now,’ Amar explains. ‘But people still go to where it stood and leave flowers there. It is because it is the symbol of a mass grave. The original clock has been ruined, but we will rebuild it, wherever we are, to remember those people. We must never forget them.’



Amar was arrested at the demonstration, and jailed for six months for taking part in it. On his release, he spent the next three years helping to organise revolution against Assad.

‘I was a co-ordinator, and also a communicator,’ he said. ‘I took photos, videos and gave messages between groups. To show them they were not alone.’

He and his family moved between Homs, Yarmouk, Idlib, Damascus and Aleppo. In the last of those, late in 2014, Amar realised he must flee.

‘Da’esh were coming,’ he begins. ‘And Assad. There was a price on my head from Assad, and IS will kill anyone. And there were so many bombs. It was not a safe place for my kids. They were coming to kill me – to kill everyone.’

Amar and his family – his wife and four children (his youngest boy, Ahmed, was just six months old in August 2016 when this interview took place) – went first to Turkey, and by January 2015 were living in Istanbul.

‘It was not a good place to live,’ he said. ‘My children could not go to school without IDs and no Syrians had IDs. I worked in construction but in winter time there was no work, and that is when you need money most for food and shelter. I also knew that Assad might send intelligence people to get me and take me back to Syria. This happened to someone I worked with in Istanbul. So I was always afraid. I worked until I could raise enough money to come to Greece, and I arrived here with my family on 19 March. Ahmed was just one month old.’

‘But here, the life of people is stopped. There is no work. Without work, there is no life. It is like dying, to be here. The people of Homs who died near the clock died in one hour. The people here are dying slowly.’





Amar's situation is not unusual among male refugees in Greece. The enforced lack of activity, added to the recent experience of violence, terror and upheaval most have endured, combine to risk

making existing mental health conditions worse, and in some cases causing conditions to develop in people with no history of mental health concerns.

Across Greece, Doctors of the World is developing and rolling out programmes and projects to help people overcome mental health issues, and to reduce the risks of developing them, by setting up activity programmes for the men, women and children stuck in camps all over the country, who face waits of 12 months or more before they will have any idea when or where they can begin their lives again.

With four other men, Amar has already been busy, building the camp's school, its mosque, an activity tent for women, and a shisha tent.

He said: 'The groups here have helped us. Every time we have wanted to build, someone has helped us to get materials, and Doctors of the World has encouraged us.'

DotW Psychologist Evangelia Papadioti explained: 'They have actually done a great deal for the camp. The school and the other centres they have built are of great benefit to the camp's overall mental wellbeing, by providing structure and some variety to people's daily lives. But there is a great deal of work to do. People here do feel lost, and abandoned, and we are all working to try to help them.'



Amar and his friends' latest creation now stands in Katsikas, a memorial to those who died at Homs, and a reminder to the world of the 'slow death' he fears awaits everyone now at the camp.

