

Notes from the Jungle 6. Feeding 'the' 500 (and why it is never enough)



In late afternoon, you walk again between the camp's central point and its eastern edge.

In the watery early winter sunlight, surrounded by thousands of people whose seemingly hopeless situation – unable to return home and unable even to apply to enter the UK – threatens to overwhelm you, you feel you are being submerged; simultaneously hindered and borne up, as if attempting to walk on a sea-bed.

A man swings by you on crutches, a greater achievement than it first appears given that the path on which you and he are travelling is largely made up of uneven white stones, laid to keep the thoroughfare useable in wet weather, but also presenting a series of gaps, holes and miniature slopes – treacherous potential pitfalls for anyone less than sure-footed.

'Buon pomeriggio!'

It is a long time since someone addressed you in Italian, and here in a refugee camp in Northern France, surrounded by speakers of Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Fur, Somali, and of course English, it comes as some surprise.

A man standing across the path, at the foot of a small verge and a few yards from the corner of a looming white tent, waves you over.

'Buon Pomeriggio,' he repeats. 'Do you understand Italian?'

You explain that you do, but ask him where he is from.

'Egitto,' he smiles.

'Ah, Misr. Sabah al khayr?'

It takes almost no time at all to ascertain that his Italian – and indeed his English – are better than your Arabic, but out of politeness (*on his part*) and a genuine desire to please (*on yours*) you continue to speak in a mix of the three languages.

'You must come inside and eat,' he gestures to the tent. 'It is cold and people must eat hot food to stay warm here.'

You are in two minds. You would like to eat something, but you are unsure of your chances of explaining to an Italian-speaking Egyptian that you are a vegetarian – particularly in the context of a refugee camp where food is already in scarce supply – and you are also aware that you can leave at any time to eat in a café or restaurant, a luxury not available to the 6,000 Jungle residents.

Instead, you ask how he came to be at the Jungle.

'I am an Egyptian,' he said. 'I was talking about politics. We all liked to talk about politics. I was in a café, and I was criticising Sisi*.'

**General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Officially Egypt's President (he was elected with an impossible 96.1 per cent of the vote in 2014, one year after seizing power in a military coup: he outlawed all powerful political opposition and ran against two candidates, both of whom had previously stated they 'supported' Sisi) but in fact its military dictator.*

He shot his way to power in the summer of 2013, ousting the only democratically-elected government in Egyptian history. Sisi killed 1,000 people, maimed 4,000 and imprisoned 18,000. His courts have sentenced his predecessor – deposed by his coup – Mohamed Morsi, to death, along with 720 people sentenced to death for the killing of two police officers, and 489 sentenced to 25 years in prison for the killing of one of the two officers.*

The banned political groups include his predecessors in government - the Muslim Brotherhood – along with many liberal groups, including the youth organisation credited with starting the revolution which removed Egypt's previous military dictator, Hosni Mubarak, from power.

Sisi's greatest contribution to political life in Egypt to date came last month when, having banned all opposition to him, he masterminded a 26 per cent turnout in the national parliamentary elections.

'I didn't say anything bad, just that I did not think he is a good leader or a good man. I was overheard. The police came, and I had to escape through the back of the cafe.

'I ran, and I realised the police would find my home, and they would find me. I had to leave. Sisi is very, very bad, and I cannot be in Egypt anymore. Many people will find they cannot. Some will be too late.'

You walk with him into the tent, where he begins stirring a huge pot of soup.

'It is lucky I like to cook,' he smiles. 'Because people here need to have good, cooked food.'

The noisiest people – by far – in the tent are a group of six teenagers, who are in the process of painting large parts of it orange.

In the time you are there, they manage to draw a large sun, with the words 'We love the sunshine', and spend the rest of the time painting one another, until one girl's face and hair are so covered it is hard to remember what she looked like when you came in.

‘We’re lucky it’s a water-based paint, I suppose,’ shrugs Faith. You don’t say what occurs to you first, that the water here is unlikely to be clean, and may run out. The teenagers are enjoying themselves, and you get the impression she would not let them be here if they did not work hard.

Faith is an English woman who has been at the Jungle four weeks, and runs the tent – a kitchen which provides free meals to refugees and volunteers.

‘It was set up by one individual who had a little money and wanted to help,’ she says. ‘But we also receive donations, so now it almost pays for itself.

‘On the other hand, we can only feed 500 people per day, and there are 6,000 people here. So I suppose it’s nowhere near enough.’

She sighs, and sits down, motioning you to do the same.

‘It’s funny,’ she says. ‘You want to help, to be the person who makes a difference, but you get here and you see the reality, and you just can’t do it alone. We can’t do it alone.’

She gestures, seemingly taking in the tent, but watching her arm movements, and bearing in mind what you have already learned today, she could just as easily be referring to the entire Jungle, and all the people within it.

Faith’s an event cook in the UK.

‘I am used to cooking for hundreds of people,’ she explains. ‘I set up at yoga festivals and so I had this gear,’ she waves at the tent and cooking equipment. ‘Already. It was in storage for the winter and I thought “no. That’s wrong. There are people in Calais who might be able to use that.” And so here I am.’

She smiles, a little wearily.

‘We can only feed 500 people, though,’ she says. ‘I wish we could do more.’

Faith’s ‘team’ is made up of some young volunteers from a variety of European states, as well as residents of the camp, including – this afternoon – the linguistically-talented Egyptian, and two Syrians, who seem to be his ‘assistants’, fetching and carrying tins, water and other ingredients at his request.

She has been here a month, more than long enough to have worked out that one should take any opportunity to use visitors to get messages to the outside world.

‘Look at this,’ she points, to an information board you had not noticed before. You realise why not, as she says: ‘There’s nothing on it. It has information board written on it, but there’s no information.

‘Do you know why that is? Because we have no information. Literally nothing whatsoever to share with people. All they want to know is what they can do to get out of here and start a life again, and all we want is to tell them, but what have we got? Nothing. Nothing at all.

‘I want this board full, but all it has is the words "information board" and no information. It would be funny if it wasn’t so upsetting.

‘People ask me, and each other, “what should we do? Where should we go?” Everybody wants to know what their possibilities are.

'I want to help. I want there to be some hope. An open door, somewhere. But we're as in the dark as everyone else, until we get back home, and then it's too late.

'There's no hope for these people, is there? The government isn't taking any notice now it got its dogs and fences in place, is it? It's hurting us all, just not knowing. All of us. The volunteers as well as the refugees. You can't just sit here and not care. You can't ignore people and what they need. And they need hope. Possibilities. A future.

'We know there are people in the UK that care. We get donations. So why don't we hear from the government? That's what it's there for, isn't it? To respond to things like this?

'There has to be some sense of hope, of possibility that things can change for these people. This isn't a life, what people have here. It's nothing.

'There's so much potential here, in these people. We see them, speak to them every day. There's so much potential to do so many things, but there's no hope, no life. Because the whole place is just being ignored by the government.

'People need hope, to have a life. That's what people need to understand. What politicians need to understand.'

Outside, on the uneven white stones, you pause to take a breath.

The sun is a little lower in the sky, and you turn your back on it once again, to walk towards the east of the Jungle...

** In the event, Mohamed Morsi, the first and only democratically-elected ruler in Egypt's 5,800-year history, died in prison on 17 June 2019. He had been refused diabetic medicine by Sisi's regime, resulting in him being poisoned by the very food he ate.*