

Mr. Giles Duley's paper, published in March 2019, raises questions about the factors that force people to become refugees, and the responsibility of the individual, the state and international bodies such as the United Nations, to respond. The reader can consider the lessons the world might take from the history of the responses to the plight of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust.

On Refugees

by Mr. Giles Duley, photographer and writer

For more than a decade I have been documenting the long-term impact of conflicts globally as part of a project called Legacy of War. Working on the Syrian refugee crisis though, was different and changed both the way I work and my understanding of legacy. My involvement with those whose stories I was telling meant I saw how their lives, hopes and dreams changed over the years.

The people whose stories I began to tell with my camera have become my friends. I've watched their children grow, and I have seen how their hopes of returning home have faded. Over time I have seen conversations change, practicalities take precedence over matters of the heart. I have seen a country and those who lived there, dispersed across the globe.

I am not an academic, a researcher or an expert. My trade is in photographs- documenting, recording stories. My job is simply to witness and share the stories entrusted to me.

Aya.

Lebanon 2014 – France 2016

In 2014 I travelled to Lebanon with the NGO Humanity and Inclusion, to document some of Syria's most vulnerable refugees: the sick, the elderly, single parent families and those living with disabilities - people like Aya.

In my work I don't like to portray people as victims -as victims of circumstance maybe - but not as victims in their own right. When I met Aya, it seemed this would be impossible. When I first met Aya, she was living her family in an informal settlement a few miles south of Tripoli, Lebanon. She was sitting alone on a concrete floor in a dark, damp makeshift tent. Aya has spina bifida, which means that she is paralysed from the waist down. The curvature in her spine makes it hard for her to sit upright unaided. At the time she was just four years old. When I saw her sitting there I thought that I could not take her photograph because she seemed so vulnerable. I put my camera away and said to the team I would rather just spend the day as a visitor, a guest.

Not for the first time in my life was I to be proven completely wrong. Aya was not a victim. In fact, Aya turned out to be the feistiest four-year-old I have ever met. She did not just rule her family, but pretty much the whole settlement. When her sister Iman walked in, Aya looked at her and said, "Hey donkey, pick me up." Which Iman did. And as we walked around the camp Aya would bark instructions to everyone, with the command, "Hey Donkey, do this, do that..." She has an incredible spirit and over the coming days I grew to deeply admire the young girl's incredible resilience.



Aya being pushed around in her wheelchair by her brothers, screaming “Faster! Faster!”-Lebanon 2016. Photo Credit: Giles Duley/UNHCR

As I spent the coming days chatting with the family and cooking together (something I love to do when building relationships), her mother, Sihan, told me about Aya’s relationship with her sister Iman. The two were inseparable. When their house in Idlib had been bombed, it was Iman, only ten years old herself, who had held Aya in the basement where they sheltered themselves for three days. With no food or water, she never let her sister go. Then on the perilous journey from Syria to Lebanon which had taken them several weeks, it was Iman who had carried Aya the whole way.

Over the coming weeks I revisited the family and witnessed the strength of their love and unity, getting to know them as friends. Aya’s father, Ayman, was so desperate he was seriously considering sending the children to live with others. Hearing a father talk of splitting his family to save them, or at least save the children, is something I will never forget.

And their situation was dire. Living in a makeshift tent by a cement factory, the children were often sick. With Ayman unable to work, the family was sinking further into debt. Aya was not getting the medical support she desperately needed, and the other children were not attending school. It seemed they had no future.

For the family, their greatest concern was whether Aya would even survive the winter. On my last day there, as the family attempted to ‘winter-proof’ their tent with materials supplied by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Sihan was in tears telling me that she doubted Aya with her medical condition, could survive these hardships. Aya though had other thoughts – she interrupted her mother to exclaim with typical defiance, “Aya doesn’t die!”

In the end I did take a photograph of Aya. It was of her playing hopscotch with her sister Iman. She's laughing, and, in that moment, I hopefully captured a small reflection of her character.

As the months and years passed I often thought of Aya and her family. When UNHCR commissioned me to document the refugee crisis, I knew as part of that project I would have the opportunity to return to Lebanon and revisit Aya along with the other families I had documented. In February of 2016, I returned.

Aya and her family had moved out of the tent at this point and thanks to assistance, were now living in a rented room on the outskirts of Tripoli. It wasn't much, but at least it provided the family proper shelter and the children seemed much healthier.

Aya was her normal feisty self and had grown up so much. Her new hobby was painting her nails and trying new hairstyles. I photographed her being pushed around in her wheelchair by her brothers, screaming "Faster! Faster!" I have some understanding of the pain that she is in each day and her struggles with disability. Yet, I never heard her complain or stop smiling. I rarely use the word, but she really is an inspiration.

However, life was hard. The support the family received barely covered rent and food. Whilst the kids could attend school, often they missed classes because the family didn't have enough for the bus fare. Ayman still wasn't allowed to work. Much of the days were spent sitting around the house, with little for the children to do. The family, like most refugees, was stuck in limbo.

Whilst some things in the family's life had improved, what had changed most was their hope for the future. When I first met Aya's family, they talked of returning to Syria as soon as possible. Now, after over five years of war, they were starting to question if they could ever return. And if they did return, what would be left? The schools, hospitals and businesses lie in ruins; their own house destroyed. What future would they have? With the prospects of a return to Syria dwindling and life in Lebanon impossible, their hope now was for resettlement. "I never wanted to go to Europe, I never wanted to be so far from Syria," explained Ayman, "but if this gives my children a chance of a future, then I will go." More than that, resettlement in Europe could be Aya's only hope. UNHCR recommended that they be resettled in France, but months had passed and still they had had no news. They were losing hope.

Around the same time, I received news that Aya and her family were to be resettled in France. I was over the moon; the family was to get a chance at rebuilding their shattered life. Things happened fast. They were told they'd be leaving Lebanon for France in less than two weeks. Sihan, Aya's mother, fretted about what they should take. They were allowed one suitcase per person and into each she packed blankets (for she had been told it was cold) and bags of dried thyme, cumin and Arabic coffee (she wanted to carry a taste of home).

When they boarded the plane in Beirut the family was terrified, except for Aya. None of them had flown before. However, Aya fastened her seat belt, smiled and said, "Let's go!"

A few days later I was able to visit them in their new home in Laval which was just a one-hour drive from Paris. Their flat was located on a new block on the edge of a small town. It was quiet, with gardens and parks where the children could play.

Sitting there eating dinner with the family, I realized that despite knowing them for more than two years, it was the first time I had seen Aya's parents smile. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from them.

As I was leaving, Sihan, with tears in her eyes, told me about the first night they had slept in their new flat. Aya often struggled to sleep, but this night, as she put Aya to bed, Sihan was able to whisper to her, "It's ok, this is your home now."

Nesrin and Heshyar Northern Iraq and Germany 2016

I was in Northern Iraq documenting the lives of Syrian Kurds - refugees who had fled there in 2012 to escape the brutal civil war. Among them were many female-led households. In 2015, when ISIS was closing in on the refugee camps, some families had been split. Not wanting to risk the lives of their children and wives, some men had taken the boats from Turkey to Greece alone in the belief that once they reached Germany, their families would be able to join them safely and legally under family reunification schemes.

They were to discover though that things were not as simple. Complex paperwork, the need for documents long lost and an overloaded system in Germany and the European Union to deal with Turkey, meant that families soon realised that it could be years before they were reunited.

One such family was led by Nesrin, a powerhouse of a woman whom I met in Domiz Refugee Camp near Dohuk in Northern Iraq. She is a poet, a journalist, and activist who runs a dance troupe in the camp and organises arts shows. She never stops. In her own words, "You have to keep yourself busy here, especially as a woman. I never imagined I'd live in a tent, but we are here, and you have to try and do your best. You adapt, but it's not a home."

In 2015 with their situation growing increasingly desperate, her husband, Heshyar, had travelled to Europe in the hope of finding a new life for his family. But things had not worked out. Now Heshyar was in Germany while Nesrin was trapped in Iraq with three children, the youngest, Shavgar, just four years old. With no breadwinner or man in the household, they were incredibly vulnerable.

When I visited them in the camp, I found a place full of love and strength. As we sat on the floor, eating Mujadara (a traditional Syrian dish of lentils, onion and rice), Nesrin read me her poetry or showed me videos of her dance group. The whole time, her son, Shavgar, marched up and down dressed as a Premerger fighter, singing traditional Kurdish songs.



Efstratia and Irini walk along the beach to visit a transit camp where they welcome refugees- Lesvos 2015. *Photo Credit: Giles Duley/UNHCR*

The hardest thing for Nesrin was missing her daughter, Lilas. Terrified of what ISIS might do to her, Lilas had begged to go with her father to Europe. Finally, Nesrin had relented. It was a decision she now regretted. “It was a really big mistake, my biggest mistake,” reflected Nesrin “My daughter is at an age when she needs a mother next to her. She doesn’t need protection, she needs guidance and only a mother can do that. The family was split for a dream that no longer exists. You eat together, you lie together, you breathe together, then you are split and it’s as if part of your body has gone.”

For the family their one respite and connection came through their mobile phones. Each day they would spend hours on Skype, trying to keep family life as normal as possible. Shavgar especially liked these calls with his father. He would perform dances or songs, then have a tantrum – telling his father off for leaving him behind – then soon forgive him, kissing the phone.

One day, during such an exchange, I was introduced to Heshyar over the phone. He looked at me with a quizzical glance, and then asked me how his family was; if I could make sure they were safe and had all they needed. He worried that his wife hid from him how bad things were.

On my last visit to Nesrin and Shavgar in the camp, I made a promise to visit Heshyar and Lilas in Germany. I promised to make at least that small connection.

Over the coming weeks I travelled non-stop with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, finishing up the stories I had been following and trying to bring the project to a conclusion. I had been on the road for seven months. I had missed Christmas, New Year, my family and friends. I was tired, but grateful that unlike those whose lives I had shared these past months, I

had a home to which I could return. As the last days of the project ticked by, I remembered my promise to Nesrin and Heshyar and made my way to Germany.

There were several 'split' families whom I had said I would go and see. On the last day of my visit, which was also the last day of my project, I caught a train to Lampertheim, Germany, where Heshyar and Lilas live. They share a small house with twenty other refugees. Heshyar and Lilas have a small room, with few possessions, save for a large donated teddy bear and photographs of the family on the walls.

Heshyar had prepared a feast: vine leaves, courgettes, peppers and potatoes all stuffed with rice, chicken, lentils, soup. I was so humbled, knowing how little they had to share, but as with all the families I have come to know, generosity is the norm. Later I learnt from Lilas that her father had been up most of the night preparing the meal. It was, he said, a thank you for coming to visit and for caring about their story.

We sat and chatted over food, discussing Heshyar's family and his dreams to reunite them as well as the challenges to that dream. He said that at times he felt hopeless, but he had to keep going for the sake of his daughter. Then Heshyar spoke of the day they had crossed the Aegean from Turkey to Greece. "When we reached the boat," he recalled, "Lilas was terrified. The smugglers were getting us on board and so I blindfolded her and tied her to me. I just wanted her to feel safe as we crossed."

Efstratia and Irini Lesvos 2015

In October and November 2015, I was based on the island of Lesvos documenting the daily tragedy of boats crammed with refugees making their journey from Turkey. In that maelstrom of human misery, it was hard for many of us to find purpose or reason in our work. Each day we were powerless as women, children, men drowned in the sea before us. Often you could hear their screams. In more than a decade of documenting man's inhumanity, I had never witnessed such scenes.

It was hard to find hope. Yet one day I did, through two old Greek women, Efstratia and Irini. Every day I would watch them walk along the beach from Skala Sikamineasi to visit a small transit camp, where each day, they welcomed refugees, especially the children, whom they hugged and gave comfort.



Nesrin and her children in the Domiz Refugee Camp in Northern Iraq
Skype with their father and sister who fled to Germany - Iraq 2016 *Photo Credit: Giles Duley/UNHCR*

Skala Sikamineas is no stranger to refugees. In the 1920s many had fled Turkey to Greece. Eighty percent of the village's inhabitants are direct descendants of refugees themselves, including the parents of Efstratia and Irini. "When we see these children, we see our mothers," they explained to me. "They were the same ages when they arrived here, with nothing. That is why they are in our hearts."

I witnessed scenes like that across Europe. People of all ages and backgrounds came out to support, clothe, and feed the refugees as they made their way through Europe. I never thought I would witness such scenes, but I did. Efstratia and Irini, and others like them, had found their empathy through not forgetting their family's struggle as refugees, decades earlier. I do the work that I do to make sure we never forget, so that through memory we find our empathy.

Discussion Questions

1. In the stories relayed by Mr. Duley, what role did the United Nations play through the UNHCR in helping and supporting refugees?
2. Mr. Duley discusses the experiences of refugees. What do these stories reveal about the factors that force people to become refugees? What other factors might lead to people becoming internally displaced or refugees?

3. Instead of telling the story of thousands of refugees, Mr. Duley chooses to focus on the story of three families. What impact does his choice of telling a few stories have in helping us understand the plight of refugees?
4. Mr. Duley reflects on the role that memory might play in encouraging empathy. How might the history of the Holocaust help to encourage a more empathic response towards refugees?
5. Mr. Duley writes about the responses of individuals such as Efstratia and Irini, and others like them, to the plight of the refugees arriving on Lesbos. What responsibility, if any, do countries have to help refugees? During the Holocaust, what responsibility, if any did the international community have to help Jews in Nazi Germany?

Mr. Giles Duley is an award-winning photographer, writer and storyteller. For the past decade his work has focused on the long-term impact of conflict, the Legacy of War project. In 2011, Mr. Duley lost both legs and his left arm after stepping on an Improvised Explosive Device in Afghanistan while photographing those caught up in the conflict. In 2017 he set up a charity called Legacy of War Foundation that helps communities rebuild after war. In 2016 Duley documented the refugee crisis across the Middle East and Europe for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Created in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UNHCR continues to protect and assist refugees around the world. Mr. Duley is the recipient of numerous awards including the May Chidiac Award for Bravery in Journalism, the Association for International Broadcasting Founders Award for Outstanding Achievement and the Amnesty International Media Award.

The discussion papers series provides a forum for individual scholars on the Holocaust and the averting of genocide to raise issues for debate and further study. These writers, representing a variety of cultures and backgrounds, have been asked to draft papers based on their own perspective and particular experiences.

The views expressed by the individual scholars do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.