The spacious sky, warm wind and sunny clouds offer a glorious backdrop to the asphalt area where fifty or more young men leap and run in a football five-a-side, calling out and laughing joyfully at each goal. They might be any group in any playground having a kick about, but these are some of the refugees who go each day to the Day Centre at Secours Catholique in Calais Nord. Around the sides of the area are open rooms with washing machines, and clothes are hung on a hapless tree to dry. Elsewhere are showers and snacks with coffee and sweet mint tea. Inside, there is a room with mattresses where ten or more catch up on sleep, and sockets for phone charging, and plenty of games, ‘Contact Four’, dominoes, chess, jigsaws, and my less popular, scrabble. Most of the refugees now are Sudanese - there is a bitter war going on, remember, and chillingly, I am here straight from demos at DSEI. Beneath my smile I am fuming at the illogicality of it all, selling arms for profits and then punishing the people who are forced to seek safety in the country with the biggest share in arms sales. For the UK is still the place they hope for, even knowing about the new laws here. “I will go by lorry,” smiles Aziz as we sit word-building with Scrabble, “…I have no euros for boat after I come from Darfur, Libya, Italy and into France.” On the other side of the table Anne, a French SC volunteer with the warmest smile, is working on a jigsaw with another group; other refugees drift up, join in briefly, drift away, then up comes Mohil who deftly matches the impossible pieces until suddenly there it is, the cosy picture of a mother horse nestling her foal among glowing yellow flowers and grasses. Everyone cheers and laughs in delight at this accomplished task for the day. Another delightful moment came later when Mohamed quickly understood scrabble, until a random football bombarded, scattering all the letters on the paving. Then it is five o’clock closing, when they all walk the three or more miles back to the Jungle. This is now a collection of temporary tents under motorway bridges, not the rather more organized canvas village that existed until 2016, and liable to be dispersed at any time by the police.

 It is clear too that volunteers at SC are very tired, and at Collective Aid (CA) where I officially volunteer, recent crises of Covid, then loss of funding have set the organization back. However, they now operate a washing and drying service for refugees from a house in Boulevard Lafayette. It was once owned by the local Communist Party and still has a red lavatory seat. When, as pre-arranged, I arrived with bike and paniers, it was closed; two Sudanese men were waiting hopefully outside and had not read the notice on the door apologising for the unexpected closure that afternoon.

 I chat with Mehmet who explains in excellent English that he is an electrician who arrived here ten days ago and hopes to ‘catch a lorry’ to England. He was aware of the new laws but is willing to take the risk.

 Back to the house where I am staying cheaply, thanks to the Anglophile French and Francophile Brits who have a shared determination to counter the hostile environments each side of the channel, and I sit in the small, pretty garden watched by the suspicious cat, listening to the rhythmic call of the pigeons, and I make a start on the pile of sewing that has been waiting at CA. Simple jobs that anyone who can sew on a button could manage, but seemingly beyond the abilities of anyone under forty. It is unfortunate that in the crises, all but two of the trusty sewing machines and their connecting leads were dispersed and the only one I located did not have a corresponding lead. This meant that zip repairs on coats, far more important, could not be done in the five days I was there.

Many of the CA sorters are thoughtful enough to pin a note on the job needed, such as ‘Tear in sleeve’. I reflect - tear as in ‘torn’ or tear as in ‘weeping’? Certainly there were plenty of tears wept at the day Centre this week: one man was extremely anxious for a refugee he had befriended from whom he had received no news.

And trying to advise a shy, bewildered fifteen year old, just arrived from Sudan, his only language Arabic, who hopes to join an uncle in Birmingham. And talking with William, a tall Sudanese who said to me with a big smile and tears in his eyes, “You so remind me of my granny in South Sudan. She has white hair and is short like you. I have a wife and my son and they understand I must go to England and make my name, then, maybe I will go to the USA to make my name, and go home again and support my family.” And - hearing the response from Ahmed after I had offered to take a picture on his phone to send to his mother, “No phone, no papers, all lost at sea.”

 As the sun went down and the gnats began to bite, I went inside and chatted with the other volunteer there who was seething with fury. He had spent his day trying to help a deranged French homeless man who had turned up at the door of his organization but who had told him off for straying off boundary while the response from the local authority had been “he is outside our remit.”

These are familiar scenarios to my experiences in the UK, as well as more examples of man’s inhumanity to man.

Simone Weil in the 1930’s, who as a professor of philosophy and committed Communist, purposefully undertook factory work, questions whether those of us who are used to comforts in life and sign up for painful or menial work, actually contribute to the revolution on behalf of the disadvantaged in society. I can only conclude that one gains insights that strengthen the resolve (though in my case I cannot underestimate the advantage of middle class homes to work from compared to an ice box warehouse).

All around town, Calais was doing what Calais does best, showing off amazing flower displays, white gaura windmills enfolding crimson and purple Asters along the road sides. It was a joy to cycle along the beach, past the newly installed Venice beach (a la Santa Monica) with new skateboard parks and restaurants, as the sun set over Cap Gris Nez - because cycle lanes are everywhere, and clearly marked. And exhibitions everywhere boasting the pride in Patrimony, explanations of the old lighthouse, the importance of the fishing industry, and massive puppets of millers, miners, airmen - Louis Bleriot has special status. This fierce local pride is charming and interesting and an integral foundation of the insular mentality of local government here.

There is no escaping that there have been no satisfactory ways of helping desperate people who are here because of geography – a sea must be crossed. In the eight years I have been coming here I have witnessed a hardening of attitudes on both sides. Maybe it is simply in the tiny tasks - offering a smile, chopping vegetables, washing clothes, mending a zip - that will ultimately bring about a revolution.

And now an appeal - if I can get those heavy coats from Calais to London and back to Calais, and if I can find ten willing people who can replace zips - those waiting coats can become useful once more.

Anne M Jones, September 17 2023.

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