

Translated excerpt

Navid Kermani

Einbruch der Wirklichkeit. Auf dem Flüchtlingstreck durch Europa

Mit Photographien von Moises Saman

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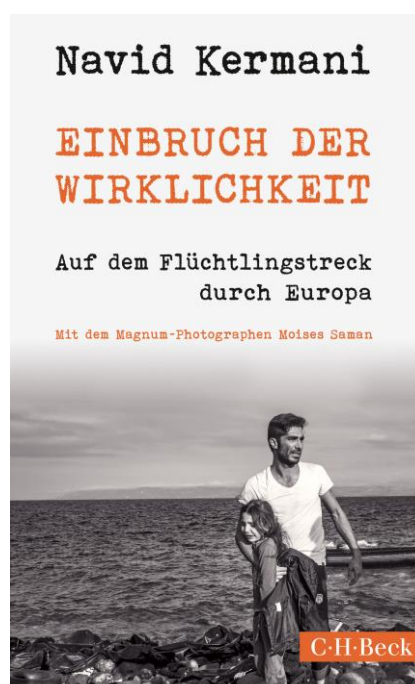
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Breaking Into Reality. On a Refugee Trek through Europe
With photographs by Moises Saman

Translated by David Burnett



Why are all of you coming here?

As I write this, another group of Afghans walks past the hotel, only that this time there's a young, unveiled woman in jeans among them, certainly an urbanite. That's unusual. Almost all of the Afghans I've encountered on the refugee trail through the Balkans to Lesbos come from rural areas, speak no language apart from Dari, and are obviously not the skilled workers and engineers Germany's economy is hoping for.

—Why are all of you coming here? I asked yesterday, picking up the elderly, women and children in my car, nine at a time, ten people crammed into a tiny Jeep. What do you expect to find in Germany?

—Work, they replied, school, some security: there's no future in Afghanistan.

—And why are all of you coming now? I asked again, pointing out that Afghanistan had no future last year either.

—They said on TV that Germany was taking in refugees, I heard as a reason again and again as to why they set out in early September. We also saw pictures of German train stations. Most of them sold their property and made their way to Iran, then on foot through the mountains of Turkey, not spending any money on accommodations or warm meals; they hired a smuggler in Izmir who sometimes took more than the 1,200 euros agreed upon, often realizing once they were on the boat that there were too many people on board, and so they had to jettison all their luggage. Arriving in Lesbos empty-handed or sometimes even penniless, they asked themselves how they would ever get to Germany. *Crap*, I thought, this wasn't what the Germans meant when they talked about welcoming refugees.

—And now?

They needed 65 euros for the ferry to Piraeus, I explained to them, 40 euros for the bus to the Macedonian border, the train through Macedonia was free, 35 euros for the bus through Serbia, then free of charge again on the trains and buses through Croatia, Hungary, Austria, on their way to Germany. Hopefully they would manage at night; aid organizations had set up tents at the borders, though there wasn't always room for everyone. But at least they could count on some food, and even diapers, after Macedonia. And, yes, the borders were open at the moment, but no one knew for how long.

—Just don't tell your relatives to make the same trip, I added each time at the end. Since when do you believe what they say on TV?





The next group is already arriving, the sixth in two hours, forty or fifty refugees again, squeezed together on a rubber raft, this time entire families, even babies. Some refugees are carrying the shiny yellow and silver thermal blankets that crackle in the wind, they must have been soaking wet and were taken care of by volunteer helpers waiting for the rubber rafts on the north coast of Lesbos. I should actually get up and at least drive the elderly, mothers and children up to the bus stop. The young men will walk the fifty kilometers to the port and camp out at the parking lot until they can get a seat on the ferry to Piraeus, provided they have the 65 euros for the ticket.

The European border regime

Hungary had sealed the border to Serbia for refugees, so we drove from Budapest to Šid, on the Serbian border to Croatia. Just as we arrived at the small border crossing, some refugees marooned for days in a cemetery between the two frontier posts were allowed by the Croats to pass through after all. Between and in front of the gravestones we saw their leavings, ordinary camping tents that volunteers provided, diapers, water bottles, Christian missionary brochures in different languages, empty cans, blankets, lots of trash where there were no garbage cans. Just a few kilometers to the west the European border regime began to normalize again. The Croatian police collected the refugees in vans and drove them to a camp close to the town of Opatovac. The refugees didn't seem displeased when they arrived, they seemed relieved to be getting anywhere at all. Even when standing in line for hours in order to register, no one complained. Despite adverse conditions—an improvised camp of military tents much too small for the several thousand refugees arriving here daily, on a windy field with autumn fast approaching—the mood was almost businesslike: a quiet hum, and occasionally even a smile. When need be, the volunteers cheered up the children.

By chance I interviewed the Croatian minister of the interior, Ranko Ostojić, who climbed out of a car in hiking pants, as if he too were about to make the trek to Germany. Three or four Croatian journalists had been informed about the visit, but alas not the world press. I was led to the minister without further ado. The minister assured me that Croatia was treating the refugees humanely, I could follow the whole procedure and see for myself: there were cots, enough food, doctors and even showers. He was particularly proud that no refugee stayed in Croatia for longer than twenty-four hours. If capacities permitted, the refugees were taken immediately after registration to the nearest train station, where they boarded special trains to

Hungary. To Hungary? Yes, to Hungary, another curiosity of present-day Europe. Hungary brags about defending its border to Serbia with fences and barbed wire against the onslaught of refugees yet silently lets the same refugees enter via Croatia, provided they pass straight through to Austria. The Hungarian state even helps them do so, providing free bus service. Of course this makes a mockery of Europe as a mutually supportive community, but those who complain about other countries opening their exit gates to rid themselves of these refugees should perhaps be reminded that Germany itself had balked at a fair distribution of burdens as long as the Greeks and Italians bore the brunt of it. The refugee crisis didn't begin when Germany took note of it.

I asked the Croatian minister of the interior what would happen if Germany closed its borders.

—Impossible, the minister answered.

—What do you mean impossible?

—You can't hold up people who are that desperate. If they don't get through one way, they'll find another. And if you build a wall, they'll sit outside the wall until we can't stand it anymore. Ultimately the only way to hold back refugees is to shoot at them. And no one wants that.

Of course it's a challenge—overwhelming in many instances—for Germany to take in more than a million refugees in a single year. Relief might come easier in wealthy neighborhoods and communities, but in places where unemployment and social conflicts are rampant it is certainly understandable that the task of providing for the destitute and integrating even more foreigners is merely a further source of frustration. But we do need to realize what would happen, or what has happened in some places, if we choose to be tough and isolationist. We would harden our hearts, and the openness proclaimed by Europe as both an aim and a consequence of the Enlightenment would wither. We'd be confronted with abject misery, not only at the gates of Europe but right on the German border, without reaching out to extend a helping hand. To do this we'd have to demonize the foreigner, give him full responsibility for his fate—his culture, his race, his religion—we would have to denigrate him in books, in the media, and on billboards too, always pointing out the bad things about him and turning him into a barbarian just to dissociate ourselves from his suffering. Do we want Europe, or do we not want it?

It is no coincidence that it took the image of a drowning child to raise awareness and elicit a wave of sympathy. Children are immune to the mechanisms of public contempt, since we can't really blame them for their own fate. You'd have to have a hard heart not to have mercy on a child. It would be a form of self-mutilation. Everyone could see on television how visibly awkward the German chancellor felt—physically awkward—when she clumsily caressed a crying Palestinian girl and proceeded to give the rather correct answer that not all refugees could be taken in. How light-hearted by comparison the chancellor looked a few weeks later, snapping a selfie with a group of refugees, how relaxed she seemed in interviews once she was able to follow her heart and declare that Germany was open to refugees. It does good to do good things—for me too by writing this report, a relief even though I continue to live a life of prosperity.

The refugees were released from the prison vans near Opatovac only when the line outside the registration point had gotten a little bit shorter. They often waited half an hour or even a full hour behind bars, and yet they were still better off than if they'd had to stand in the open field in the cool evening air. Only the children found it hard to wait in such a cramped space. The policeman assigned to the van, a roughly fifty-year-old Croat with parted hair, mutely opened the doors, offered a hand to the elderly and children but never so much as cracked a smile. Only once, when a Syrian girl about five years old gently caressed the policeman's blue uniform while being lifted out of the vehicle, when this girl with black, shoulder-length hair and bright, friendly eyes ran the palm of her hand from his shoulder almost down to his belly as if he were some kind of treasure—only then did the policeman cry. The whole thing lasted barely a second, two at the most, and yet I saw it clearly, standing a yard away, the girl's gesture that was just as surprising to me as the tears in the policeman's eyes. The policeman held the girl's arm just a moment longer than usual, and her eyes were beaming with joy. Then he let her down, and the girl skipped after her mother in order to join the line. Wiping the tears from his eyes, the officer realized that I'd been watching. He looked away immediately, as if I'd caught him red-handed.

—You don't need to be ashamed, I would have liked to call out to him.





Today I drove with Moises Saman, the photographer accompanying me on this journey, up a treacherous road to the lighthouse on the northwestern tip of Lesbos, where many boats are also landing but no aid workers are there to greet them. It's a strange, sometimes almost macabre sight when refugees who are just arriving are approached and hugged by long-haired men or scantily-clad women in signal-yellow vests shouting "welcome welcome." If I were an Afghan I might be inclined to turn and run the other way upon encountering such a curious form of hospitality.

No, that's unfair. With the Greek state not lifting a finger—doesn't Greece have a leftist government?—the aid workers are doing a wonderful job on Lesbos, waiting with warm clothing and gold-silver blankets, handing out sandwiches and water, and setting up tents for those who arrive too late to keep going. Doctors have sacrificed their vacation time to tend to the wounded and comfort the trauma victims. It is also moving to see cultures mixing, when aid workers from Israeli and Islamic NGOs sit together in taverns in the evening. What surprises me most, though, is that apart from the few professional aid workers and political activists it is almost entirely young people who are helping these refugees on Lesbos or at the border stations along the way—twenty to twenty-five-year olds, like many of the refugees, hence a generation that many people frequently accuse of being unpolitical and selfish. This crash course in life experience and world politics will obviate any need to preach to them about why Europe needs this. The refugees hopping off every boat bring fears of death and tears of joy, deprivation and gratitude, hurried prayers and probing questions. For the aid workers too it's a borderline experience when they take an infant in their arms and carefully navigate the slippery rocks to get to the nearest beach, all the while trying to soothe it, pressing it to their chest to warm and caress it, until finally the soaking-wet parents are standing beside them, trembling with cold and happiness. Grand emotions inevitably seize you, tears and tenderness, as well as rage at a European asylum policy that inflicts on those seeking shelter this perverse and torturous acceptance ritual, this life-threatening situation. It's just like Eva said, and every aid worker confirms it: these young people committed to helping refugees, who are personally touched and shaken to the core by concrete human encounters, will not so easily forget the hardship outside of Europe.

And yet some individuals, certain political activists in particular, evince a strain of self-righteousness, a paternalism towards these refugees, and an aggressive know-it-all attitude that makes you nostalgic for the good old days of the Salvation Army or the Workers'

Welfare Association. More than once I've asked myself why so many hands are reaching out to these refugees landing on the shores of Europe while aid work in the hinterland, which isn't necessarily accompanied by the flood of grand emotions, elicits so few activists. That it sometimes feels good to do good is evident on the northern shore of Lesbos. And yet it doesn't occur to these tattooed, scantily-clad men and women that their own concept of freedom might differ from that of these Afghans and Syrians whom they embrace with a casual "welcome welcome" regardless of their gender.

On the other hand, of course, the culture shock that many refugees experience upon landing is perhaps a good initiation to the sometimes rather curious freedoms of the West. The reporters, the photographers most of all, who are likewise waiting in droves for refugees to arrive on the northern shore, are not always the epitome of tact either, running into the water with their cameras, trying to be the first to reach the boats and shouting at aid workers to get the hell out of the picture. In the two days since I've been on Lesbos I've seen tussles and sometimes downright brawls between helpers and photographers. I was bawled out by a camera team for blocking the road for three minutes when I stopped to let some drenched women and children into the Jeep. Of course not all photographers are that ruthless, Moises least of all, no matter how single-minded he is. That's why he went to the northwest tip of the island, where he wouldn't be in anyone's way. He can't give in to his natural impulse to immediately extend a helping hand, his task being a very different one. Maybe in politics too it's not always the right thing to follow one's impulse if you really want to help. But oftentimes it is. When, though? Just imagine what would have happened to the thousands of desperate human beings along the Hungarian highway—where would they have slept, who would have taken care of them, what violent means would have been used to hold them back if Germany hadn't opened its borders to them? Like in a game of Chinese whispers, this unexpected gesture has meanwhile morphed into an open invitation, broadcast on faraway Afghan television.

Unfortunately the winds are fierce today and the sea is covered with whitecaps—or should we be relieved that no boats are making the journey today? In vain we look for red dots in the distance, which is how the lifejackets appear to us. On a normal day three to four thousand refugees land on the northern coast, usually within a period of a few hours, up to a hundred rubber rafts on a piece of coastline just a few kilometers long. Not a single pebble is visible on the beach beneath the lighthouse; it's completely covered with lifejackets, inner tubes, and the remains of rubber rafts. Looking down the coast from here, Lesbos is gleaming for kilometers on end from all the red and orange lifejackets. But not everything is left behind.





Wherever a boat lands a pickup truck soon pulls up whose driver hauls away the motor and the plastic floor of the boat. All that remains is the black rubber tubing. The refugees, gathering themselves for departure, are not given rides in the pickups. This may seem pitiless at first, just like us, the ambitious reporters trying to capture the grand emotions or get the best picture, and yet, as each day goes by, it begins to make sense to those on the island who have a job to do. The locals, after all, aren't here for a brief deployment but have to live here permanently, inuring them to the plight of others. I notice it in myself. I can't spend all day driving refugees around either or interpreting for them if I want to get any writing done, and so I usually just drive by without paying much attention to them.

I had a discussion with Moises on the first day, when I suggested we give a lift to some refugees stranded in no man's land, driving them to the harbor, and he insisted that's not why we're here. I agreed and got in the Jeep, burdened with a bad conscience for not giving the refugees a ride, when suddenly the vehicle landed in a ditch. What happened next? The Syrians who had gotten off the boat only half an hour before lifted our Jeep without being asked and set it back down on the road. Luckily there were plenty of able-bodied men among them.