

REFUGE!



Q) Why is this booklet called Refuge?

A) Because every day, more and more people are becoming refugees.

The following quotation, posted by Bishop Mark Eddington, in Letter from Europe/July 26th 2024, on the eve of the Paris Olympics, may come as a surprise to many of you!

“Joining the national teams will be a group of thirty-seven athletes who have Refugee status, competing under the five-ringed flag of the Olympic movement. They will be representing the world’s 117 million forcibly displaced people – what would be the twelfth largest nation by population on the earth, if they were gathered into one country. Another group of athletes, largely from Russia and Belarus, will be competing as individual neutral athletes with no flag. Their nations have been disqualified for breaking the Olympic Truce – an ancient idea brought back by the modern games in 1992 with an idealism worthy of the Beatitudes.”

ST JAMES EPISCOPAL CHURCH FLORENCE
IS CURRENTLY HELPING
REFUGEES, both in SIENA and in FLORENCE

(However, at the same time of year that this booklet started coming together, while Paris was hosting the 2024 Olympic Games, here in Tuscany, our more local events concerned the 80th Anniversary Celebrations of Liberation from World War 2. So, although the little wooden hut on the front cover of this “Refuge” booklet may look very much like the sort of shelter some of our refugees may have encountered on luckier nights of their long trek from the Northwest Frontier with Afghanistan, it was actually General Alexander’s secret headquarters, hidden in woodland near Siena, during the Second World War.)



Siena has been a city of sanctuary since shortly after the founding of Rome, when, according to legend, Senius and Ascanius fled there to avoid death at their uncle's hands. The black and white horses are theirs, and the central point is the Campo, The painting opposite is called "The Heart of Tuscany". "Cor Magis tibi Sena Pandit"

SIENA

Over the past 2 years the Province of Siena has become a sanctuary for what, last summer, was estimated to be around one thousand three hundred refugees.

Nevin Brown, a former Junior Warden at St James, Florence, and Senior Fellow at SIS Siena explains the role now being played by Lavinia Bracci's staff and visiting American university students. At St James Episcopal Church, Florence, through this initial link, we are also doing what we can to help the refugees.

Nevin Brown – Siena Italian Studies

Siena Italian Studies began as a program for American study abroad students in 2004. Its focus was (and is) on improving language acquisition and intercultural education through the use of immersion in Italian language and culture, using an approach of full immersion: culture, content and service. Since its inception, SIS has welcomed many hundreds of North American, and other, students to SIS and it has seen remarkable success in helping the students become reasonably fluent in Italian language and culture.



With the onset of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, early in 2022, Europe, including Italy, began to gird itself for the arrival of many refugees from that war-torn land, And indeed, many Ukrainian refugees did arrive in a number of European nations, including some in Italy. But the scene in Siena was rather different, Siena has experienced an influx of hundreds of refugees/migrants but from a very different direction. Almost all of these new refugees have arrived from northwestern Pakistan. an area affected severely by incursions by the Taliban.

In almost all cases they are young men who were threatened with death by the Taliban and who walked several thousand kilometers across Iran,, Turkey and various Balkan states to reach safety in Italy. A goodly number ended up in Siena, living in parking garages and seeking asylum and assistance.

The community of Siena has responded in a variety of ways to this influx of refugees: assisting with refugee status, housing, food and other provisions for daily living.

SIS (now SIS Intercultural Study Abroad) has responded by creating a program Home4the World, which applies what it has learned through its full immersion approach to helping those migrants/refugees acquire Italian language skills and make the long and often difficult transition to life and work in another culture, in this case Italy.



So far Home4the World has reached a significant number of Pakistani refugees/migrants, helping them in learning Italian language, as well as assisting in everything from getting a “permesso di soggiorno” to acquiring Italian driver licences. SIS have not been the only entity providing assistance to refugees/migrants. A number of other local and national organisations have been deeply involved in the Siena work.



What Home4theWorld brings to the table is expertise in language acquisition and intercultural communication.

Several of the contributions to this volume came from refugees/migrants that have been involved in Home4the World. Their stories are compelling, sometimes difficult to digest, but in the end inspiring in the evidence they provide of the persistence of the human spirit in adversity.



Siena – light at the end of the tunnel.

Farouk, Sharing a Symbol of Hope in Response to Violence

When Farouk learnt that his uncle in Pakistan, who had paid for his education, had been murdered, for helping Farouk to escape from Pakistan, Farouk placed a pile of sweets and biscuits in Piazza Salimbene with a note telling passers-by to take what they wanted, in memory of his uncle and in gratitude to the people of Siena.

We share Farouk's grief, his loss and mourning.

**Although Farouk was enabled to escape
from that place where so many die**

his uncle was killed,

allowing Farouk his chance of a new life.

So Farouk invites you all to share

in this food, honouring his uncle's memory-

for his good uncle has gifted Farouk with a future.

May the good find eternal life.

May Farouk's uncle be at peace.





Maria Makepeace . first visit to meet the Refugees studying at SIS

A couple of months after Farouk's tribute to his Uncle, while I was in Siena during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I visited the Pakistani refugees being aided by Study in Siena. This is my report.

"Yesterday afternoon, I surprised myself, sitting in a classroom at SIS Siena, talking to a group of young men refugees aged between 16 and 25. SIS Siena is a group that Nevin C Brown, former Junior Warden at St James, Florence, and former parishioner of mine as the St Peter's, Siena, Ministry point of contact. Several, the majority, are from the Pashtoon frontier area between Pakistan and Afghanistan. But there was also one lad from Afghanistan, one from central Pakistan and one small, quietly spoken young man from Burkina Fasso, whose first language is French..

One of the more mature Pashtoon lads was an accountant in his homeland. He answers a question that I have not asked, but one that one of the long-time, older, and somewhat prejudiced, foodbank women at St James asked, back in the summer. "Where are their wives? Have they deserted them? Why are they all men?"

"We only marry once, for life. There is no divorce or remarriage. There are many girls of 16-18 who are widows and will now remain so for the rest of their lives." (And, as in Afghanistan, these girls are locked away in a zone where the Taliban holds sway,)

This young Pashtoon man was a qualified accountant in his own land. He, and several others studied in and speak English as their first language after Pashtoon. One lad speaks nine or ten languages. In a sense they are fortunate to have ended up in Siena where the Study in Siena group are caring for them along with visiting students of a similar age from the USA. He has photos on his mobile phone of his travels through Moldavia, Turkey and ex-Yugoslavia; fellow-travellers sleeping rough, out in the middle of nowhere and the treat of eating wild duck on his travels.



A place to shelter?

(Cue my “If Not Now, When” sermon during summer 2003 – and the response of a fellow member of Vestry, Lisa Cocciarelli, whose contribution to Home4theWorld brought me to this Tuesday afternoon meeting at SIS, to hand over the gift to Lavinia.

They all wish to learn, to study, to improve their lot, to work, to find purpose. Our individual responses to the difficulties in our lives shape us all.

I pull out the 4 booklets – 2020-2023 - I have produced during the Covid years, telling of people and places both locally and around the world, and I make my request. This year’s booklet will be different, Perhaps in other languages and characters to the previous ones. Hopefully it will give opportunity to those who have suffered injustice, racism and prejudice to tell their stories and their hopes to overcome their past

Here are stories from some of these remarkable, resilient and hopeful young men who now live in and around Siena.

Murad Khan's story .

I am from the Bajur district of KPK, Pakistan. My education, up to fifth grade was in my home village; but as there was no peace in our area, at that point, my father decided to send me to another city to study. I was a very intelligent, capable student there until I was in seventh grade, when I learnt that my father had been killed, along with seven other people. I returned to my home village, where a policeman took me to the hospital, telling me that I would see my father's dead body. But when I looked there was no body – only pieces. I asked the policeman why my father had been killed. What was his sin? But the policeman informed me that another seven people had been killed at the same time. They had committed no crime; but had been the victims of a suicide bomber. Later I learnt that the suicide bomber had only been a thirteen-year-old boy.

As a result of this incident, I was badly affected, but continued with my studies despite my mental stress, graduating in 2019. So, after 11 years of studies, I returned to my home village, as, even though I felt the situation there had improved, my mom and sister were living alone at home, and I was worried about them.

We had sold most of the few assets we had to pay for our studies, but I sent my sister to study in the city, where it was safer, while I lived with my mom and started a small business, having learnt a good deal from my 11 years of study. Another reason for returning to my home area was in order to do something for my people. Very few of them even know how to read or write, being far away from any opportunity to learn. And because of their ignorance, many had ended up joining the Taliban. So as well as working at my business during the day, I used to teach some kids at home in the evening.

One day a group of agitators visited our mosque, encouraging people to do jihad. I was against their activities from the start, and warned our local villagers, "They are only using you for their own interests! It is not permissible to shed the blood of any human being in any religion".



They responded that jihad is permissible in Islam, and accused me of blasphemy, Then the local villagers began supporting them and turned against me.

A group of around 15 people started beating me up and I was badly injured. One of them bashed the back of my head with an iron rod, causing my head to fall, and my whole body was covered in blood, One was shouting, "Petrol! Bring petrol! Bring petrol!"

They were wanting to burn me alive for heresy!

Meanwhile, a minibus, with a good number of passengers aboard, was passing by on the road. They saved me and took me to a hospital in a different district. During that journey my condition was like that of a bird shot down by hunters. I felt I was dying.

When the people who got me to the hospital learn that I had been wounded as a result of a religious blasphemy issue, they fled from the hospital, leaving me there alone. Two boys had also been injured while attempting to save me. Whoever my fleeing rescuers were, I am alive thanks to them.

Some groups of Taliban had told my fellow villagers that they intended to hand me over for the death penalty. But I had managed to escape in time. After hospital treatment, I spent a week in Karachi, where I learnt that the Taliban had burnt my mobile shop business. So, at the end of 2020, I said goodbye to my country, and after many difficulties arrived in Italy. From Iran to Italy, I suffered indescribable hardship.

To leave one's mother and sibling, and one's country forever, hurts a person very much. And yet, Lavinia, here in Siena, is like a mother to us. I hope she will lead us out of despair. Thank you, Lavy

I love the light. I am not afraid of the dark.



Siena Scenery

Sufian Khalil

"A Lifesaving Asylum Request: The Story of a Social Advocate Threatened by Extremists"

Introduction

In a world where fundamental rights and freedoms are often taken for granted, there are countless individuals whose lives are marked by bravery in the face of severe threats. I was one such individual, and my commitment to social work in Jamrud a small town of Khyber Agency has not only made a profound impact on my community but has also put my life at risk. This article outlines my story and the urgent need for asylum in Italy, where I can find safety of life and continue pursuing my passion for social work.



Background and Social Work in Jamrud

Jamrud, in Pakistan's Khyber Agency, has long been a hub of cultural and political activity. However, it is also a region that has faced significant turmoil and conflict, particularly from extremist groups such as the Taliban. Despite these challenges, I dedicated my life to social work, focusing on issues such as education, thalassemia eradication, polio eradication, women's rights, Transgender rights, and community development.

Since the start of my university days, I began working selflessly to improve access to education for underprivileged children, advocating for women's empowerment, thalassemia awareness, facilitating an activist working for thalassemia eradication, and providing support to marginalized groups of the transgender community. Mechanisms included organizing educational workshops, raising awareness in universities and madrassas, women's rights activism, and facilitating community development programs. My work profile and activities found significant respect and support within the community, but also drew the attention of extremist factions who viewed such initiatives as a threat to their oppressive ideologies.

Threats from the Taliban

In the modern era of social media my social presence and social work gained visibility, it attracted the attention of the Taliban, who are known for their hostility towards progressive social initiatives. The Taliban's response was swift and brutal. Resultantly, I began receiving threatening messages and was subjected to harassment aimed at silencing their advocacy. The threats escalated over time, culminating in direct warnings that their life was in imminent danger if they did not cease their activities, not only me, but because of me, even my family was at stake.

Despite the risks, I remained resolute, doing my job on and off. However, as the threats became increasingly violent and personal, it became clear that my safety was no longer guaranteed. The environment in Jamrud became untenable, and I found myself at a crossroads, facing the grim

reality of either abandoning my life's work or risking my life to continue it.

My Need for Asylum in Italy

Given the escalating threats and the clear and present danger to life, I have sought asylum in Italy. Italy represents not only a place of safety but also an opportunity to continue my mission of social justice in a more secure environment. Italy has a longstanding tradition of protecting human rights and providing refuge to those who face persecution due to their beliefs and actions.

By granting me asylum, Italy would not only ensure my safety, but I will also offer my unique expertise and experience in social work. I bring along a wealth of knowledge and a passion for humanitarian work that could contribute significantly to Italian society. My experiences and insights will also help foster a greater understanding of the challenges faced by individuals from conflict zones and enrich the broader discourse on human rights and social justice.

Conclusion

The detailed description of my story is a testament to the courage and resilience of individuals who stand up for justice and equality in the face of extreme adversity. My work in Jamrud has made a meaningful difference in the lives of many, but it has also placed me in great danger. As Italy the great Nation State considers my asylum application, it is crucial to recognize the profound impact that I have had and the invaluable contributions they could make to Italian society. Granting me asylum is not only a matter of providing safety but also an acknowledgment of unwavering commitment to human rights and social justice. In extending this offer of refuge, Italy would reaffirm its dedication to protecting those who stand against oppression and support the global pursuit of a more just and equitable world.





Bilal's story

In Pakistan I was a student of Computer Science.

In our village, I supported the rights of female children to study, but the terrorists oppose such support. For this reason, the terrorists kidnapped me and kept me in an underground jail for almost a year. They gave me hard punishments and withheld food and water.

Finally I managed to escape. I ran away from them in the dark of night, But they shot at me and injured my foot. Despite being in this this injured condition, I decided to leave, to find a country where I could be safe. On the way, I experienced many difficulties, but finally came to this safe country, Italy.

Bilal has mentioned his very difficult journey to Italy. Our next story tells us more of the hardships endured, and that not all were able to complete their escape to a safe country.



MY's Story

I have come here, to Italy, because of the conditions in my area, I was a small shopkeeper in my area, supporting my family with my shop, Although there are few terrorist groups in my area, there was a group of terrorists who used to come to my shop every month and extort some money from me. Every month they would demand money, threatening that if I did not pay I would have to go with them. For this reason I left my country. (With a group of others)

After leaving our country, we were caught once at the border with Iran. Because of this the Iranian police beat us very hard. At our third attempt we managed to cross the border into Iran.

From there, we finally reached the Turkish border with great difficulty.

When we reached the Turkish border, we had a total of thirteen people gathered out and removed from our group, We travelled for a long time along the Turkish border, It was very cold and there was heavy snow. Two of our group died due to the snow and cold.

We just had to leave them and continue on our way. We had no other choice. We had managed to cross this border with great difficulty.

By then we were going very slowly, It was very difficult in Turkey, so we crossed the border from Turkey into Bulgaria. There was a lot of fear there, and also heavy snow and cold. We could not run there, because once again, there was heavy snow and cold. So the security guards caught us and beat us severely, One of our group was seriously injured by a security guard's dog,

In this way, every border was very difficult for us. At every border on our journey it was difficult,

Border security forces did not see us as human beings and tortured us very badly.

Picture on next page shows a snowy border crossing



Asif Iqbal's Story

This is what Asif told the congregation at St James on Sunday 2nd June, whe he stood up and spoke to them in English.



My name is Asif and I was 25 years old this month. I'm from Kashmir, Pakistan and I've been in Italy for two years. I have one daughter. When my wife was pregnant, I moved from my country to another, in order to help my family and for a better life. But that was not a good situation, so a few months later I went on, to Italy. After I reached Italy, my daughter was born. I was so happy, believing that after a few months I would go back to my family in Pakistan and meet my newborn baby,

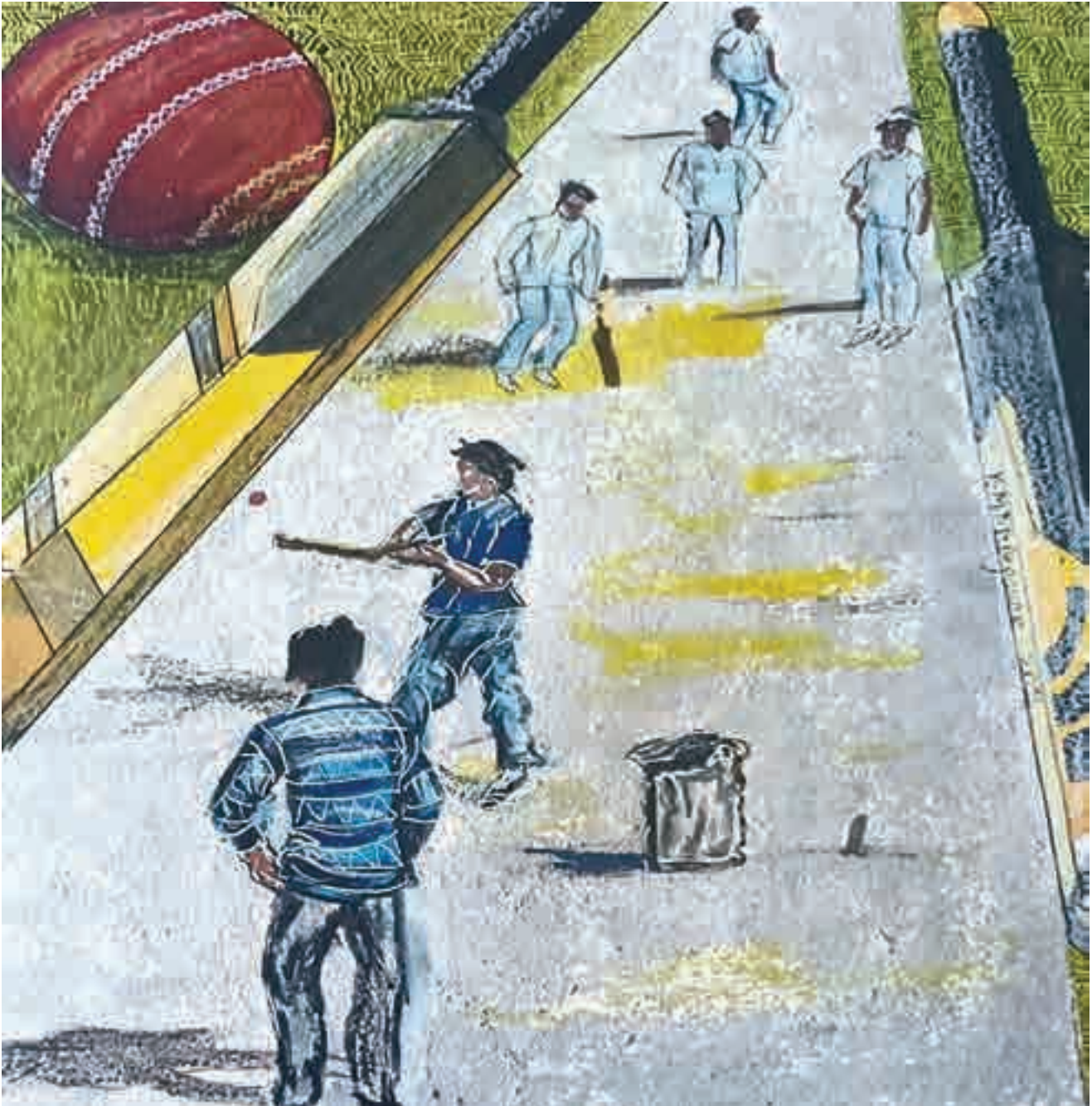


During that waiting time in Italy, I had an appointment, in order to gain my personal, official, legal documents. I explained my situation, and that I had a new daughter, only a few weeks old. But a few days later my request was denied. When I saw this reply, I was literally crying. I was so disappointed that my stress and anxiety caused depression. I started taking medication for this, and after a time decided to go forward and continue my studies at Lavinia's school. Lavinia helped me a lot. She supports me in every situation and I started volunteering to help her, and by volunteering for different organisations in Siena, I have helped with public assistance, pronto soccorso, helping as a translator at hospitals, banks, offices, cricket, etc and welcoming refugees to Italy-



I would like to thank Giovanni Serni, who spends his life helping us refugees with our efforts to adjust to Italy. Really, we all have to help each other, because in this way we can make peace in the world. My mom used to tell me, "Son, if you help others in need, God will give you what help you need." These words kept me strong. I'm still strong and I'll try my best to continue my work for humanity.

I also want to thank Maria Makepeace for her precious efforts and the time she went with me to visit Firenze Tribunale. Now I have the hope that in a few months I'll have an appointment to have documents for my wife and daughter to join me.



We Congratulate Asif on being awarded a place to study Economics at the Università per Stranieri in Siena

Maria Makepeace – A trip to the Tribunale with Asif and Sufian

After Asif talked to the congregation at St James on 10th June, he asked me if I would go to the Tribunale with him. We arranged to go on the 18th July, which turned out to be the hottest day of the year thus far.

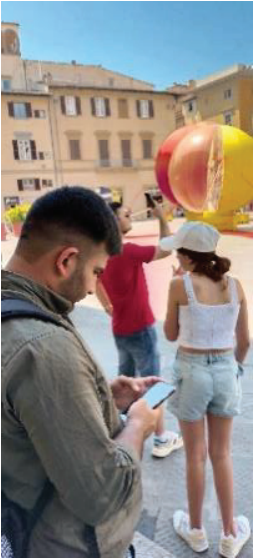
While there are many beautiful buildings in Florence, the Tribunale is not one of them. If you were to stand in front of San Miniato al Monte, looking out on the vast Florentine vista, the Tribunale would be up in the far northwestern suburb of Novoli, looking like a lump of screwed-up rubbish tossed there by a malicious giant.

We had to leave Sufian outside, as he has not yet acquired the correct documents for getting through “passport control”! Even our luggage was scanned. Then we were released into the vast, hollow interior decorated by signs in all arrowed directions while making no sense. I gave up, and WhatsApped Lavinia who helpfully suggested we should go to the bar, as they know everything.



Strengthened by cappuccino, and sent to the right staircase, we journeyed onward and upward to an office on the fifth floor, where they even had the relevant documents for Asif, but he was instructed to return in a few months time, with a legal representative. On our way out, see Asif above, and a random piece of sculpture.

The rest of our adventure involved the Tramvia back to the centre for a trip around some of the monuments. Then, behold, lunch at the only Pakistani restaurant in Florence, (thank you Asif) before the lads headed off to the bus station.



Piazza Duomo, Florence. Asif checks his phone while Sufian takes photos of the strange spheres outside the Duomo. Below – some of the meal at the Pakistani restaurant.



HELPING UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN AT ST JAMES

Library for Ukrainian Children – meeting a need for Refugee Mothers and Children in Florence

By Susann Siebke, with the photo below by Marie Buti



Last Spring my granddaughter invited all of her classmates and their parents to celebrate her seventh birthday. At this party, I met a Ukrainian mother. She summarized for me how all the Ukrainian mothers are now

feeling. They are starting to realize that any return to their homeland or resuming their previous careers may no longer be a possibility.

Although initially many Italian organisations helped them settle when they first arrived and are still providing assistance, these mothers feel invisible as they are not active members of Italian society.

In July several Ukrainian mothers and their children attended the Fourth of July party at St James American Episcopal Church, and during the festivities members of the church were able to meet the mothers and children. *(The photo of two of the little girls enjoying a children's story was taken during this party by one of the members, Marie Buti, and is published here with the permission of their mothers.)*

While the children enjoyed playing in the church garden, the mothers, along with some of the church members, created a list of some of the most immediate needs for both mothers and children.

The Thrift Shop was able to assist and deliver items of clothing and baby care, for which the mothers are truly grateful, as the following thankyou messages show:

“Thank you for your help”

“Everything fits”

“The baby bed is great, sincerely Nadio and Yuri”

“Once again, heartfelt gratitude to you and everyone. Everyone was very kind and interested (at the 4th of July party), Olena.”

Also in July, a friend donated over 300 children's books to St James Children's Library and/or Thrift Shop. As the Children's Library already had more English books than they could display, passed them on to be sold by Thrift Shop. Usually the books would have been sold by the Thrift Shop, in order to make money to buy supplies for the Foodbank

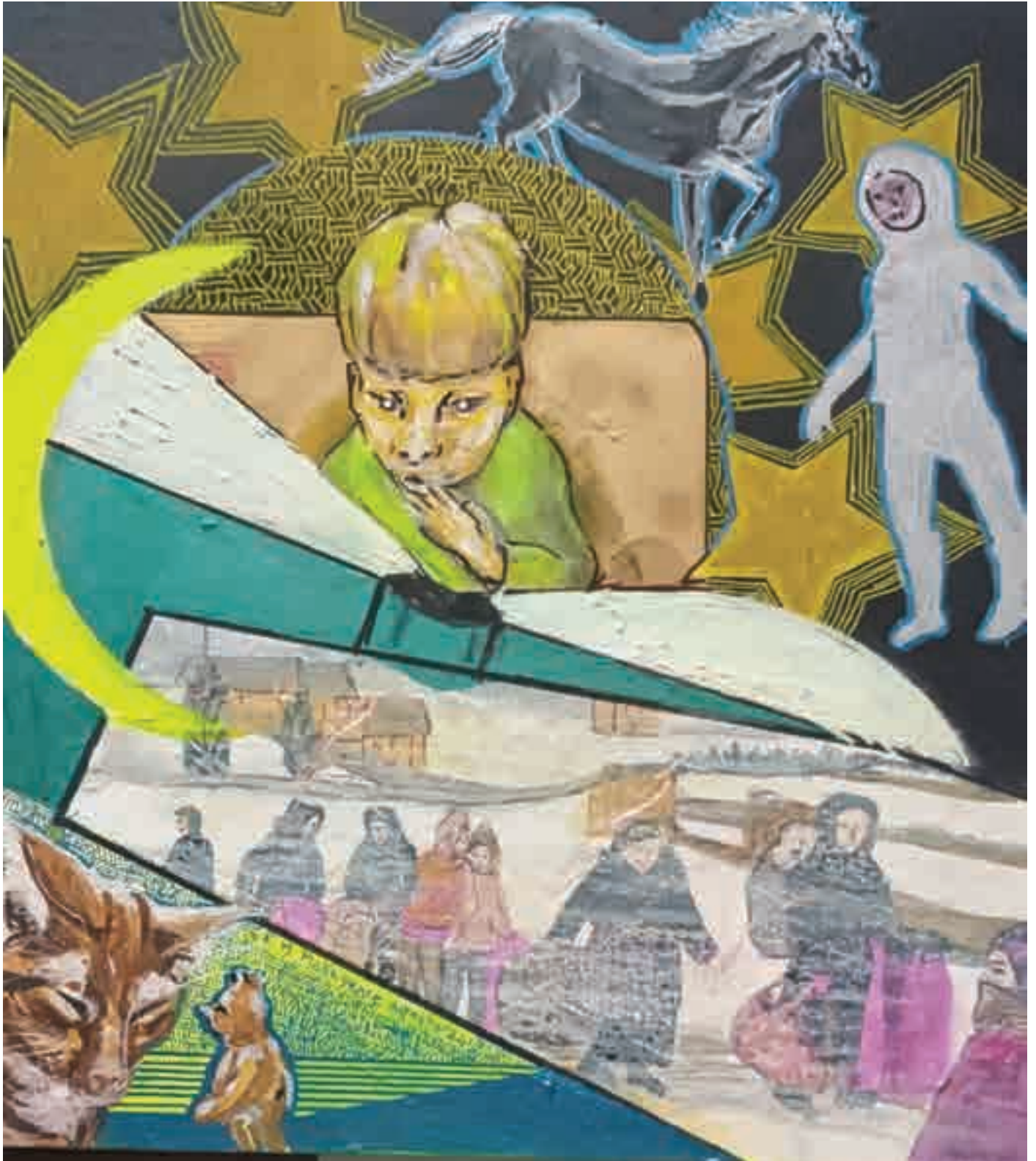
A Ukrainian mother, who is also a librarian, explained that there is a need in the Ukraine for children's books in English. So, in August, around 200 children's books in English were sorted out by volunteers at St James, one Sunday morning.



They were then transported from Florence to the Ukraine, to support schools, still at work in spite of the threat of being bombed. In Ukrainian elementary schools, children are learning English. These teachers are looking very happy with their present. Other books were given to libraries there.



A book is a place to escape from the worries of the world



Thoughts on people I know and “Integration”

Siena is now working on ways to integrate the many Pakistani refugees arrived there over the past couple of years. This is a positive step, in which both communities are involved. The Senese are discovering cricket and Pakistani food. while the young men from Pakistan are discovering the seventeen Contradas and the intricacies of the Italian language. One of them, Asif, is about to encounter the Italian University system.

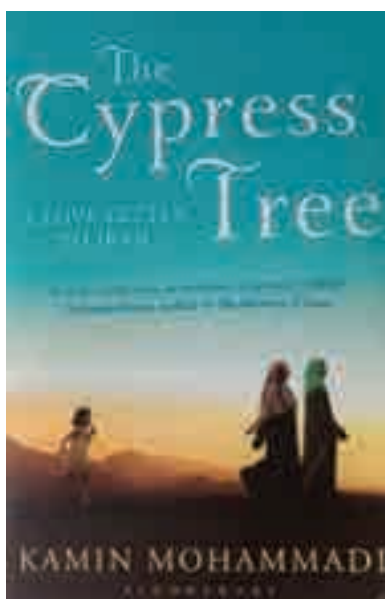


Meanwhile, in Florence, the mothers of the Ukrainian children hoping to use “their” newly fledged library here at St James, as it hopefully gets underway, are beginning to realise, as the Russian war continues, that their stay in Florence may be a longer- term project than they first imagined. Adjustments will be necessary.



Considering this, I began to wonder how well people I know, who have, at some point in their lives been refugees, have fitted in and felt integrated into the communities where they now live. Read about them and decide for yourselves.

Of the former refugees of my acquaintance, Kamin's refugee-dom goes back the longest, She was from Iran. But her parents settled in London while she was still young – the age of some of the Ukrainian girls who may be using the proposed library. My strange meeting with people from the opposite sides of the ex- Yugoslavian conflict goes back to the end of the last century. I encountered Kojoe during my years back in the UK. He was from Ghana and now has a settled home. work and family in the Scottish Borders. Meanwhile, Choice arrived in Florence as a refugee from Nigeria, who had lost all his family. He spent the first few years in Florence working as a pizza delivery boy. While there was a group of multi-national Young People at St Mark's, organised by Jonathan Fink Jenson, from the Netherlands, Choice attended it, along with young Brits and three Kenyan agriculture students, taking a year's course at Florence University. But through changes of personnel and the arrival of Covid, he gradually became more integrated with the young Nigerian community of Florence, finding a wife and a place with them.



Kamin

Kamin is the most famous of the former refugees, as a writer, teacher of creative writing and broadcaster. Her life began in a middle class Iranian environment until Khomeini gained control of Iran. In 1979 her family moved to London. Kamin's childhood memory of her first English Christmas in London, and this painting about that, featured in the Dignity through the Arts exhibition in St James in 2019.



From that point, Kamin grew up in England, integrated into that society. But the adult Kamin married an Italian and spends part of her life in Italy, so her integration is now a three-way existence. She says, “Life lived between two countries is lovely, and it’s a privilege to be able to do so, but it also has its challenges. My latest Substack – “Why my Readers make my World go Round” - is a big tribute to my readers who have supported me as I have negotiated the transition from one country to another. Thank you dear readers of kaminm.substack.com”-

Here are further accounts of some refugees that I have met previously, Certainly, with support from the local community. Kojoe has settled well and has made a good life for himself. Choice is now in his twenties, married and part of the Nigerian community, although, sadly, his pre-Covid links are no longer part of that. The “Strange Meeting” people back in the 90s also seemed settled into post-wartime renewals of themselves-

Choice

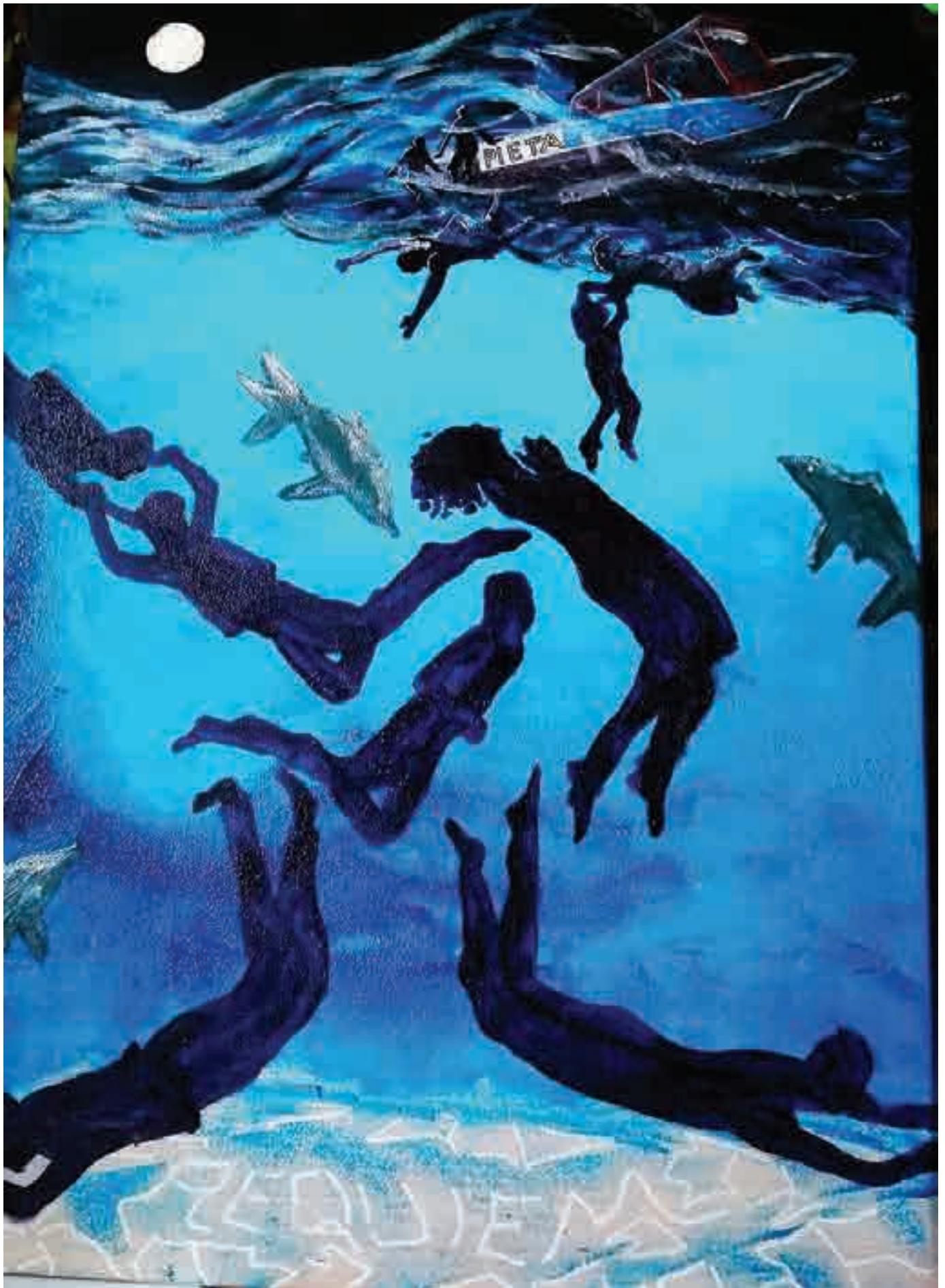
The young lad was safe, he told himself. That terrible boat crossing was over and here he was in this strange land – strange, foreign country – exploring.

It was 2016, and, God be thanked, he was alive. This was Italy, but passing one of the strange, tall buildings he noticed that the information outside was in English – This was an English-speaking church, and the door was open. Thinking of his panicky prayers on that flimsy boat as waves tossed it - up, down, around – and the wind howled- How did God not care that they were perishing? In his mind he had imagined the boat sinking, himself drowning as he drifted to the bottom of the sea. Yet now he was safe.

He chose to go inside the church, both to say thankyou and to ask God’s continued help, God being mightier than Oxfam..

As yet, the church was still empty, except for a woman at a table sorting hymnbooks and pewsheets. She looked up at him, unphased, gave him half a nod, half a smile, and went on sorting, allowing him to find a pew for inconspicuous prayer.

“Thankyou, Lord, for saving me from the battering waves and the howling gale. Your sea was so great, and our boat – from Libya to Lampedusa – so unbearably small. Yet here I am, in Italy. Please keep on helping me.”



The boy was 17, his name was Choice and he was from Nigeria, but it would be another two years before the woman folding pewsheets would hear the rest of his story, at a quiet day for young people in St Peter's Siena. His grandmother, who lived some distance away, only had a short time left and needed someone to go and make her last days comfortable and care for her. Choice volunteered. His parents would rather he worked hard at his studies, but he insisted "I love my grandmother" – and off he went. After his grandmother's death, he set off back home. But "home" was no longer there, Home, and all the family living in it had been destroyed and burnt by maurauding terrorist groups.

Alone in the world Choice headed north, across the desert to Libya, where he was put to work as slave labour in a car-wash, After some hopes of freedom and some disappointments, and with no-one in the world to care if he had something to live for, or just perish, he boarded a boat to who knows what or where. And thank God, he found his way. Yet the endangered or underprivileged members of society, constrained to flee their homes in order to survive, are also deemed to be mere "migrants". "Treated as imposters and yet are true" springs to mind here.



A Nigerian Refugee's Prayer for his Country (Choice's prayer)

I pray for my country, Nigeria.

I pray for peace in every part of the country.

**I pray for the leaders to know the value of human life,
and to know that it is their duty to protect people and property.**

I pray for people fleeing from oppression, violence, fear and loneliness.

I pray for redemption: for saints and sinners,

I pray for justice and mercy.

**I pray for my friends to have a long life, full of joy and good memories,
.and that all their plans for their lives may be achieved.**

I pray for a happy life – to be able to live long

and tell my story to my grandchildren

God will always guard and protect me,

May all this be – that my heart's desires will be granted.

On the next page is the story of Kojoe – from Ghana to Sunderland to becoming a firefighting and fish-filleting family man on the Scottish Borders

My first connection to Kojoe was that when I moved from a flat at St Gabriel's Church, Bishopwearmouth; St Gab's adopted Kojoe, an "Asylum Seeker", and he moved in, inheriting some of my furniture. Some months later, we both became Saturday morning "guerilla gardeners" at St Matthew's, Silksworth, and worked together hacking back branches and weeds in the overgrown graveyard. Kojoe was a very good worker. Still is.

From here, Wendy Roper takes up the story:

As an Asylum Seeker, it took Kojoe 10 years to get status in the UK. 4 years ago his Home Office application for asylum was finally accepted, but he is still under supervision for another ten years, Every two-and-a-half years he has to pay a contribution of £17,050 for accessibility to the NHS. The rules are very strict. Rev'd John McManus (former vicar of St Gabriel's) was instrumental in getting him sorted. It was a very involved process.

Kojoe met and married Joanne, from the Scottish Borders, and lives there now. They have 2 beautiful children. Ellie will be 5 next month and Rowan is nearly 3. Joanne works for Child Protection with Borders Social Services, and is able to do a lot of work from home. Kojoe is very active in the local church. He is now a qualified fireman, having passed all his exams in Edinburgh, but as the fire brigade do not employ full-time staff, he works 3 days a week at the fish factory. For the other 3 days he is available for callout – with his pager switched on.



Rowan's Baptism with Kojoe in Ghanaian national costume made by Kojoe's mother.

A Strange Meeting at Castellina Scalo

Somewhere towards the very end of the last century, I used to catch an early train down to Castellina Scalo (somewhere south of Poggibonsi, if that's any help) to assist an elderly friend in selecting archive material about her aunt, who had been an opera singer. She would collect me from the station, drive me to Fonterutoli, and after a morning's work, feed me at a local restaurant and drop me back at the station so that I could catch the train back to Florence. Usually there was no-one else waiting for the train...Sometimes I sketched while waiting.

Today, however was different...In more ways than one... There were other people waiting, which was surprising. Usually the station was empty. And the sign explained that the train would be delayed.



To one side of the platform there was a young couple with a small child in a pushchair. To the other was a young man in work clothes.

So we chatted – none of us in perfect Italian. The young couple explained that they had been refugees from Kosovo. I was, as ever, half Italian and half English.

And the young workman? Once upon a time he had studied at a Serbian University, and had even, at that time, been one of the students introduced to Slobodan Milosevic. Now, he, too was a refugee from the other side of the same hostilities as the Kosovan couple.

Panic? Hostility? Not at all! We politely chatted about our lives in Tuscany, until our train eventually arrived and bore us to various points north of our strange meeting at Castellina Scalo.

POEMS ABOUT REFUGEES

On Reading refugee “MK”’s testimony

Such things seem more important
than my “bureaucratic crap”.

They’re directing my attention
to a harsher world beyond
to a story, met this morning,
of a young man’s life hopes – felled.

He was “*bird, shot by a hunter*”,
he was “*heretic*”, wild game.

He denounced their oath to murder;
facing *petrol and the flame*.

There were long, hard years of walking
(often shoeless and unfed)

being shunned as merely “migrant”

This town’s where his footsteps led,
for a chance of starting over,

MORE - a chance to HOPE. BECOME.

To “*love the light*” being unafraid,

of facing what’s to come. *I love the light. I am not afraid of the dark.*

A poem written during the “Consultation on Refugee and Migrant Ministry 11-12 October, 2016, at Kardinal Schulte Haus, Koln

The arrow’s-eye envisioning across the dancing dawn

Cloud’s flotsam’s in the turbulence of skies

Our jetsam’s cast in dissonance of waves

So many dreams are drowning, sinking, lost.

Forced from stability. Fleeing. Survive

But born to a life’s-worth of endless rejection

You run to a refuge of strangeness and strangers,

Seek what security dwells in such otherness.

Never a winner, A have-not. Survive.

God in a cross, understanding and bearing,

Remember you once were a lost, “migrant) child.



Journey towards refuge

Nothing but random memories remain,
that terrain's melted into snows and rain.

Home villages and valleys left behind.

That turbulence of tears starts again,
as farewell to a lifetime you once knew.

Now life-force stumbles, buffets, starts anew.

But – where to go from here? What to do?



**We carry our world on our shoulders
and leave no trail
Resin from last-night's tree-root bed
left scents and stains on clothes.
The wind, in seas of larch-heads,
is the music of our tread,
this trudge,
this sore-foot stumbling's
much safer than to stay!**



**Being forced to flee
in order to survive,
exist in tiger-sharp fluidity.
Remain substantial – yet invisibly.**



**Arrive, unwary, at a grey sea's rim,
a place of rocks like teeth
where no hopes spring.
Yet risky seas may be where we begin?
Perhaps a town with arm-wide welcome, though,
May hand us space and hope.
A chance to GROW**

Darfur

Back in November 2006 I was doing a module “Images of Christ in the Arts”, for a formative assignment on a passage from the gospels, towards my Masters in Theology and Ministry. I knew that my techno-savvy classmates would produce power points on parables. Having limited techno skills, I realised that my best hope was to produce a series of illustrated poems based on the Beatitudes and present it as an exhibition cum poetry-reading. The first poem-with- picture was based on Blessed are the poor in spirit. Refugees from Darfur were in the news at the time. Now, eighteen years later, Darfur is under attack with almost a million refugees trapped inside and facing genocide. So the following poem on Darfur refugees THEN remains relevant NOW.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

The colours chime.

Bright-clad in grief

are Darfur refugees -

in similar attire to Mary

in *Nativity*.

Linked through their colour schemes;

beset by fear and poverty

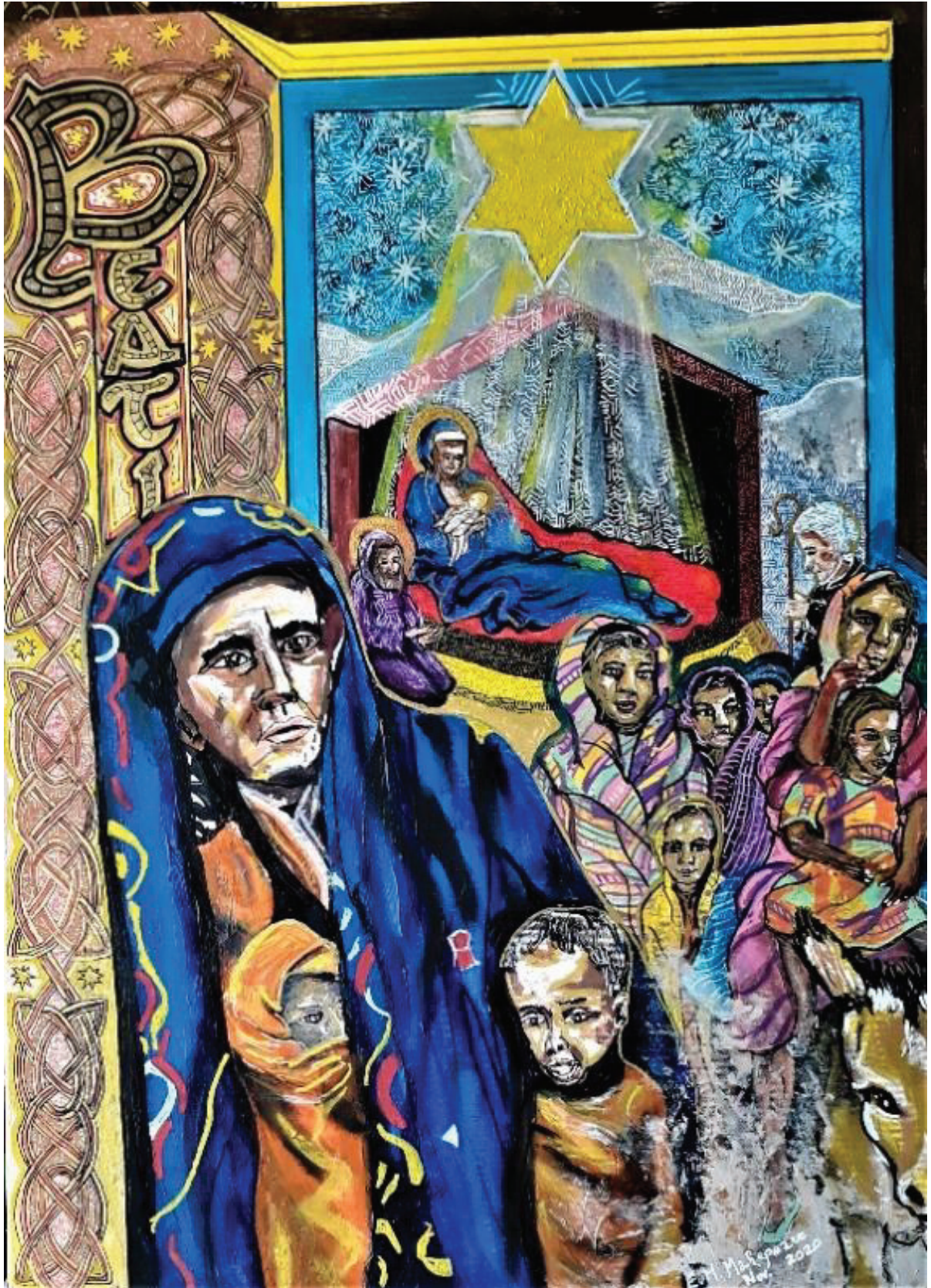
and flight from persecution.

Mary`s child

found no room in this world he`d gifted us.

Except - by breaking into history.

With his subversive kingdom's values
he can set us free;
has room for all.



**HERE IN ITALY,
DIGNITY THROUGH THE ARTS
BEGAN WITH
“A MEDITATION ON
THE LIFE OF ST PATRICK”
BACK IN 2015**



A brief history of St Patrick:

Patrick lived in Romano-Britain, circa 386-462CE. His father may have been the governor of the area around the Solway Firth, where the family Villa was situated.

In his youth, Patrick was kidnapped by pirates and taken to be sold as a slave in Ireland. After 6 years of slavery, tending animals alone in a foreign land, on the edge of the then-known world, Patrick escaped from this experience of human-trafficking and child labour, and made his way back home.

His experiences had changed him. He decided to go to France and study to become a priest – in order, in time, to return to Ireland as a missionary bishop. This form of service would later be interpreted in the Celtic Christian Church as either white or green martyrdom – forms of self-exile – intentionally becoming a refugee from one’s own homeland. There was also a red exile, which involved laying down one’s life for one’s beliefs, (as the refugee MK was prepared to do in his account, by his renunciation of killing.)

Questions from “Meditations on St Patrick’s Day” in 2015, at St Mark’s Church Florence (“Contemporary Worship”)

1 Have you ever been in a situation where you felt trapped and unable to escape? What helped?

2 Does it help anyone (other than politicians) to refer to refugees as “migrants” who should “go back home”?

3 What can we do about modern-day human trafficking, child-labour, forced marriages and other forms of slavery?

4 St Patrick felt a one-ness with the natural world around him. In strange, deserted, hilly country, Patrick must often have felt alone, Yet he was in a “thin” place on the edge or boundary between the present and eternity. Strangely, this strengthened his faith. Many humans seem to find peace through a one-ness with God’s Creation- Which environments give you a sense of peace?

5 Is keeping quiet at injustice an injustice, and is humility now considered a weakness rather than a virtue?

The few gathered together for Contemporary Worship on St Patrick’s Day may have gone off to contemplate these things. As did I. At that time, my thoughts took me in the direction of organising an exhibition about the needy on the streets of Florence.

I eventually rounded up 26 artists: not only from Italy, the US and England but with nationalities also including: Japanese, Chinese, Venezuelan, Indian, Australian, Albanian, Irish/Dutch and Russian. The youngest were from the International School. Others included students and tutors from academies based in the city. Grateful thanks to Mons Timothy Verdon for the use of the gallery beside Museo dell’Opera del Duomo in June 2016.

This turned out to be a popular exhibition. The first photo shows two of the Angel Academy tutors who produced paintings for the exhibition. But this other photo, below, shows over 20 artists plus friends, family, models and musicians produced a fairly big crowd!





Thoughts on St Patrick and Integration

In his youth, the young, patrician boy, Patrick, would have had hopes and dreams for his future, and would have been educated accordingly.

However, those hopes and ambitions were cancelled when the pirates trapped him, threw him onto their ship and hauled him off, across the rough Irish Sea, to Ireland, to be sold as a slave.

He found himself in a place with a different language, culture and social status – probably having to sleep in barns, or out on the fells with the animals.

After several years he was able to escape.

But his time in Ireland, adapting to their language and culture, pulled him in a different direction for his life to the one originally envisaged by his parents and himself.

He went off to France, where he studied Theology for years and became a monk.

Then he returned – not to Roman Britain, but to work alongside the ordinary folk of Ireland, teaching them about God through nature, poetry and prayer.

Patrick was not from Ireland, yet became its patron. Who knows how much good these Pakistani boys in the Siena territory, or the little Ukrainian children in Florence may do for Tuscany in the future as we learn from each other.

THANKSTO THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS



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Marie Buti

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Kamin Mohammadi

Bishop Mark Eddington

Wendy Roper

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I love the light. I am not afraid of the dark