

VOICES  
FROM the  
**JUNGLE**  
Stories From the  
CALAIS REFUGEE CAMP

Africa

MANI

Teza

ERITREA

Haris

ZEEZHAN  
JAVID

Habibi

MAJID

Shakeeb

Riaz

Shakeen

TEDDY

BABAK

SAFIA

ZEEZHAN  
IMAYAT

AIT

ALI  
BAJDAR

Mitkessa

REFUGEES'  
VOICE

MOHAMMED  
AHMED

Muhammad

OMER  
AKA DREAM



# VOICES FROM THE 'JUNGLE'

## Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp

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# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

I

## CHAPTER 1

Home

14

## CHAPTER 2

Journeys

61

## CHAPTER 3

Living in the 'Jungle':

Arriving, exploring and settling in

111

## CHAPTER 4

Living in and leaving the 'Jungle':

Connecting, longing and trying to leave

158

## CHAPTER 5

Life after the 'Jungle'

210

## CONCLUSION

253

## INTRODUCTION

*'Refugees in the Jungle'*  
by Omer AKA Dream (from Sudan):

Blue,  
Like the cloudless sky  
On a sun filled day!  
Soft,  
Like the sleeping child  
In a rocking cradle!  
Voice,  
Like the sounds of grief  
Through her gritted teeth!  
Coffin,  
Like the skeleton carried  
In my darkest deepest sleep!  
Dream,  
Like the birth of my child  
With a new mother tongue!  
Fear,  
Like carrying a heaviness  
Over endless trails of fatigue!  
Hope,  
Like arriving in my home  
Where my tears are my own!

The aim of this book is to bring into public view the personal stories of people who lived as refugees during 2015 and 2016 in the Calais camp on the northern French coast, just 26 miles from the UK: a camp that was often called the 'Jungle'.

There have been refugee camps in and around Calais before, and small camps still exist in the area. However, in the spring of 2015, on a landfill site on the outskirts of Calais granted by the local French authorities, a much larger unofficial camp started to grow. This camp, called the 'Jungle' first in French media, but later by its own inhabitants and by the global media, was characterised by very poor housing, little food, and inadequate water, sanitation and health services. There were no police inside the camp; fights often broke out; smugglers operated; blazes ignited by cooking fires, candles and gas canisters frequently destroyed people's shelters and homes. Residents adopted the name 'Jungle' because, many said, humans could not live in such conditions.

As refugees came to Europe in large numbers from the summer of 2015 onward, the 'Jungle' increased in size, defying even a French government demolition that reduced its area by two-thirds in March 2016. The camp was home to 10,000 inhabitants by the time it was closed by the French government in October 2016, and its inhabitants dispersed to housing and processing centres (*Centres d'Accueil et d'Orientation*, CAOs) all over France.

The 'Jungle' was notorious worldwide for its abject conditions. It was a political embarrassment not only for the French government, but also the British, since most residents wanted to come to the UK and had to be stopped

by fences, and police and military personnel from boarding trucks, trains and boats. Other residents, including hundreds of unaccompanied minors, had legal claims to come to Britain, which were poorly dealt with. The camp was also an emblem of the impact of forced displacement within Europe, and the mostly ineffectual efforts of European countries to address it.

At the same time, through the efforts of residents and volunteers (rather than statutory agencies), the 'Jungle' developed many formal and informal associations that cooked and served food, built shelters, distributed clothes, provided education, gave basic medical care, and facilitated sports, creative writing, art and music. A street of restaurants and shops constructed and run by the residents themselves also was established. Residents and volunteers often remarked on the strong sense of community and mutual help that they experienced, alongside the camp's lack of basic facilities, its violence and alienation.

For the authors of this book, the 'Jungle' was a home, for a short or a longer time. It was, too, just a moment in their life stories, which started with happy childhoods, or childhoods shaped by war; proceeded through educations obtained after great struggle, often in situations of persecution; and continued through forced flight, either through Iran, Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, or through Sudan and the Sahara Desert to Libya and Italy. After the 'Jungle', the authors, too, moved on. Some are now in the UK; some are claiming asylum in France; a few have gone to other European countries. By October 2016, a handful were still living in the camp, or close by, but those authors also had plans to move

elsewhere. The stories the authors have written for this book follow their life paths from their beginnings, into their hopeful futures.

The stories make up a co-authored text. The authors come from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan and Syria. All lived in the 'Jungle' during 2015–16 – for days, weeks, or in some cases, many months. The authors also edited this book in collaboration with a team from the University of East London (UEL).

The book started from discussions with people who were taking a short accredited undergraduate course on 'Life Stories' offered by UEL in the 'Jungle' in 2015 and 2016, as part of a project called 'University for All'. Writing a book was not the aim of the course, but it quickly became clear that course participants wanted the life stories they were telling and writing to reach a wider audience.

The rationale for the course itself was that education at all levels is a human right guaranteed to refugees, that refugees are severely under-represented in higher education, and that many camp residents were deeply committed to education, and were already studying, or were ready to study, at university level.

The course took place in collaboration with a number of supportive educational associations within the camp: l'École Laïque du Chemin des Dunes, Jungle Books Library, l'École des Arts et Métiers, and the Darfuri School. The UEL team asked these organisations to host the course, used their Facebook pages to announce it, and then travelled around the camp before the course sessions, providing information and leaflets and discussing the classes. Course participants



FIGURE I.1

*Directions to L'École Laïque du Chemin des Dunes.  
Photo by Haris (from Pakistan).*

read life stories by people such as Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama and Malala Yousafzai, as well as poetry, and some broader historical, social and philosophical texts. Many also wrote their own full or partial life stories for the course assignment.

At the same time, the UEL team hosted some photo-workshops with photographers and tutors Gideon Mendel and Crispin Hughes. Called 'Displaces', these workshops allowed camp residents to develop their photographic skills, while at the same time presenting their own view of a camp usually seen only through the selective lens of world media. Residents also wrote and told stories about the pictures they had taken, if they wished. Sometimes, this work became part

## VOICES FROM THE JUNGLE



FIGURE I.2

*Outside Jungle Books Library. Photo by Shikeb (from Afghanistan).*

of their Life Stories course assignments,<sup>1</sup> and of this book.

Many participants in the courses and workshops insisted that their life stories needed to be heard by a wider audience. At a time when camp residents and refugees generally were described in popular media as greedy, deceitful and dangerous, they wanted the world to know, instead, the truth about them, and about the obstacles that they had encountered: childhoods in violent places; living as adults amidst war, genocide and persecution; dangerous journeys across mountains, deserts and seas; the arduous, abject conditions

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<sup>1</sup> Webpages describing these projects can be seen on the 'Educating without Borders' website: <https://educatingwithoutborders.wordpress.com/>. See also <https://www.uel.ac.uk/News/2015/12/University-of-East-London-brings-Life-Stories-course-to-Calais-Jungle> (accessed 23 October 2016).

of the 'Jungle' – and for many, after Calais, poverty and discrimination in the countries where they claimed asylum.

Yet people also wanted the world to know about the positive aspects of their lives: their close and loving families; their pleasure in and commitment to education; their beautiful countries; their determination to survive in those countries, on their journeys, in the 'Jungle', and in their new home countries; and their commitment to finding safety, working, and helping others. They wanted their stories to move towards a fair, free and non-violent world, and the happiness that this world would bring.

The stories in the book came into being in a variety of ways. Some were simply written and then edited by the authors. A few were translated. Some were written via phone and social media, and worked on further by the authors once they had been put into file documents by the editors. Some accounts were handwritten, typed and printed out by the editors, and later edited by the authors. Some stories were written down by the editors as the authors talked through them, and then checked in their written and later, printed-out form. Sometimes, authors made notes or diagrams, and worked with the editors to build them into full written accounts. In other cases, authors made taped accounts of their lives, which were fully transcribed by the editors, and checked and edited by the authors.

This range of storytelling paths fitted the diverse and often difficult conditions in which authors created their stories. Circumstances ranged from writing on pleasant, warm days, sitting outside the schools of the 'Jungle', or on cold days, beside wood fires set up within the classrooms; some wrote, once they had left Calais, in the more stable

and better-quality accommodation of the French CAOS or UK hostels for refugees, while others wrote in sodden, freezing tents or rickety wooden shelters, sunk in the mud of the Calais camp, in the winter of 2015–16.<sup>2</sup>

In talking about the process, many authors described their ideal writing situations, invoking quiet rooms, proper tables, cups of coffee. Even when settled in asylum-seeker accommodation, the uncertainties of the legal process often made writing problematic, since every day was shadowed by uncertainty and waiting: for a call from a lawyer or a letter from the government.

The stories in this book are very close to those originally produced by the authors: editing has been minimal. Authors' own editing removed small parts of stories, changed names for anonymising purposes, clarified points and expanded some sections as time passed. UEL editors have made grammatical changes, some word changes to avoid repetition, and some anonymisations. They included everything that the authors wrote, except in the case of some very long accounts written mainly for Chapter 2. UEL editors also asked for clarification on some points, and invited authors to consider updating and enlarging, or adding sections across the whole book if they wanted to. Within the chapters, editors also added short introductions, and contextualisation of the stories, which have been checked and, where necessary, edited by the authors.

Most of the authors discussed, together with UEL editors, whether to structure the book as a set of personal stories or to set up a series of chapters, moving from the beginnings

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<sup>2</sup> For details of the associations and projects working within the camp, see the Calaid-ipedia website: <http://www.calaidipedia.co.uk/>

## INTRODUCTION: REFUGEES IN THE 'JUNGLE'

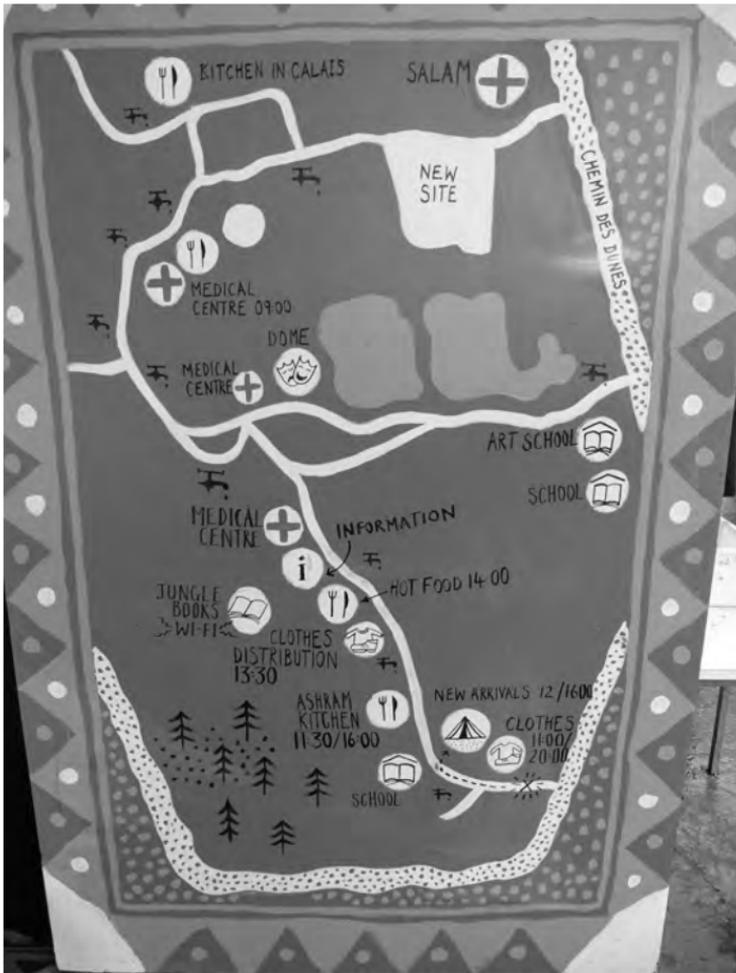


FIGURE 1.3

*Camp map, early 2016. Photo by Babak (from Iran).*

of people's lives and journeys, through the 'Jungle', to their lives after Calais. The chapter structure used here, following people's lives from childhood to the present, and towards

the planned and imagined future, was the result of these discussions. The UEL editorial team, along with some authors, discussed how to divide up the stories between the chapters when the divisions were not obvious. This introduction was itself discussed at length with a number of authors, and though it has been written by the UEL editorial team, it contains many points from those discussions.

Authors were free to create stories of any length, to use any forms that they chose – for example, poetry, prose poems, diary entries, photography and drawings, as well as more conventional written accounts – and to concentrate on any topics they wanted. Some chose not to write about home, or their journey, or their time after leaving the camp, or even the camp itself. Some decided not to write about personal issues; some avoided political discussions. For this reason, the book contains some stories that are much shorter than others; some stories with short or no sections in some chapters; some heavily concentrated in one or more chapters; and some dealing with many different topics, even within the same chapter. The authors' own voices are heard in this variability of structure, as well as in what the authors have to say.

In addition, the authors' changing and restricted circumstances affected the length of their stories, and the topics they wrote about. Some could not or did not want to continue writing when they moved away from the camp, for instance, while some did most of their writing when they left. There were also several authors involved with the book project at the beginning, with whom the UEL editorial team were unable to keep in touch, as well as a small number who were too young to consent to their work's publication, and