

STORIES ON THE MOVE

SOCIAL CAFÉ



CARITAS VALJEVO

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IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS A CRISIS.
THEN, THE CRISIS TURNED INTO NORMALITY,
IN FRONT OF WHICH WE CLOSED OUR EYES.



BALKAN ROUTE

The Balkan Route is a migratory route walked by migrants and asylum seekers on the move towards rights, freedom, and better living conditions in Western and Northern Europe.

When referring to the “Balkan Route”, it is necessary to understand it as a pathway based on a common ground of countries; however, it does not refer to a homogeneous and unique route that all people on the move go through. As a matter of fact, different sub-routes can be differentiated, although Turkey is the starting point of them all. Based on personal experiences that migrants and asylum seekers shared in Bogovadja, three main routes leading them to Serbia could be identified: Turkey - Bulgaria - Serbia; Turkey - Greece - North Macedonia - Serbia; Turkey - Greece - Albania - Kosovo* - Serbia. Leaving behind EU and non-EU transited countries, hopefully, the last game¹ starts, and the final destination gets closer and closer. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, and Romania represent the gate and the last fences of fortified Europe.

Such a route started to be used in 2012; however, the Balkan Route experienced an increase in movements during 2015 and 2016, due to the culmination of armed conflicts in the Middle East - primarily in Syria - and due to widespread violence, poverty, human rights violations, social and political conflicts in the African continent. During that two-year period, more than one million people heading to the EU crossed the Republic of Serbia. Considering the number of migrants reaching Germany by that time, Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to derogate the Dublin Regulation (multilateral international treaty on the right to asylum), establishing a policy of open doors under the motto: “*We can do this*”. Nevertheless, it suddenly turned into “*However, we cannot do this*”, which led many EU countries to border closure and the implementation of more restrictive policies. The fortification of the EU was supposed to lead to the closure of the Balkan Route - only formally - through the signature of the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016² and the increased presence of Frontex³ along all borders in the last years. Substantially, people were still managing to cross like before, if not even more.

Along the Balkan Route unaccompanied minors, men, women, and families face several challenges and dangers. As an effect of lacking legal status and protection, people on the move are dangerously exposed to limited access to basic services, smuggling and/or human trafficking, exploitation, violence, sexual abuse, push-backs, as well as legal and illegal deportations from countries they have already succeeded in entering. Risks and dangers might possibly include death: there is no precise available data, but it is assumed that due to unfortunate circumstances or violence, several hundreds of people - including children - died along the Balkan Route.

The incorporation of convoluted geopolitical dynamics, turbulent global security, multipolarity of the world, increasing poverty, and climate change-based disastrous events will lead to social upheavals that will fundamentally change many regions and countries of origin of refugees and migrants. As an effect, what could be expected is that migrants and refugees will continue to undertake different pathways toward countries that they consider safe and suitable for settling in and establishing one’s life. Thus, it is likely that the Balkan route will continue its independent life and witness historical changes and continuous movements all along also in the short and long run.

¹ *game* is how migrants, along the Balkan Route, call the attempting to cross borders.

² The two countries on March 18, 2016 finalized an agreement to repatriate all people, including asylum seekers, who arrive irregularly on the Aegean islands to Turkey.

³ The European Border and Coast Guard Agency entrusted with the operation of the Schengen Area and European Union external border control and management system.



ASYLUM CENTER BOGOVADJA

By the decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in June 2011, the Bogovdja Asylum Center was opened. The center was located in the village of Bogovadja, 32 km from Valjevo and 11 km from the nearest more heavily populated place. The asylum center was located in the Red Cross facility, and the official capacity was 200 beds. However, depending on the situation on the Balkan Route, the number of migrants accommodated in the center over the years ranged up to 250.

At the beginning of the "crisis", the small local population in Bogovadja did not look kindly on the migrants; protests were organized in 2012, and the closure of the center was demanded. At that moment, the center was overcrowded, and some of the migrants were accommodated in nearby facilities. Unfortunately, a number of people also lived in the forests near the center itself. After the closure of the European Union borders, the situation changed. Families with children were accommodated in the asylum center; the number of beneficiaries was reduced to 150–200, and the attitude of the local community towards migrants and the center itself changed, too.

With the increase in the number of migrants who arrived in Belgrade during 2015, Caritas Valjevo started emergency programs, which at the beginning were mostly aimed at the distribution of food, and hygiene packages, but also at the installation of the first sanitary container in Belgrade equipped with showers. After the closure of the EU borders Caritas Valjevo stopped with emergency programs and established arrangements and tools of psychosocial support and education for migrants. Thanks to the support of foreign donors, in 2016 Caritas Valjevo started its first psychosocial activity in the Asylum Center of Bogovadja.

According to the identified needs and with the aim of starting a mutual intercultural dialogue among migrants, raising the level of tolerance for cultural and national differences, increasing social inclusion and mutual interaction, and strengthening personal capacities through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills the Social Café opened in September 2017.

Throughout the years, the Caritas Valjevo team has been formed of local operators and foreign volunteers. Thanks to the "Cantieri della Solidarietà" program of Caritas Ambrosiana, the IPSIA ACLI organization, and the "Servizio Civile" program implemented by Caritas Italiana, volunteers from Italy were a big support in the implementation of activities in the asylum center. In addition, Caritas Valjevo signed a memorandum of cooperation and student internship program with the University of Padua and had the opportunity to host young volunteers from Caritas Treviso.



SILVIA DE GERONIMO / ITALY

I was there when Caritas Valjevo received permission from the Serbian Government to operate in Bogovadja; I was indeed only waiting for that, in order to start working there, together with the Caritas psycho-social support team. I was a 28-years-old civil service volunteer from Italy who had just graduated in International Cooperation and Development Studies, with a couple of weeks' experience as a factotum in a refugee camp in Lesbos (Greece) and a great drive to mix myself up with people and see what would happen.

Even though I have always been interested in it, I was not particularly skilled in psychology or sociology and I had no previous experience in psycho-social support. Yet I was very excited, curious, and determined to do my best so as to improve whichever situation I might have found and give a positive contribution to all people involved. I opened myself up to everything, and everything flowed through, changing me and getting changed.

Bogovadja felt to me like a place of stagnation, where people were constantly waiting at a gate that never seemed to open up: not today, not today, not today... maybe tomorrow? No, not today. It is very easy to go numb in such a place and to see any glimpse of the future very rapidly fade away. Since we had no control over the gate, this was the only ground where we could move and try to make a difference: teaching languages, talking with the people, gathering their feedback, and cooking up any kind of activities our mind could imagine, to try to involve them and sometimes to even simply get them out of the bed.

To Bogovadja I simply gave the whole of my inexperienced self, seasoned with a burning desire to be of service. What Bogovadja gave to me? The frustration of having the impression of never being enough, of never being able to do enough. The fatigue of walking in the other person's shoes to try to understand him or her better. So many stories I could have never even imagined. Different cultural codes. New capabilities, which only flourished much later in my life. A broadening of my perspective on humanity.

However, the most precious thing Bogovadja gave to me is friendship. There indeed I met Farid, an Iranian guy in his twenties who was able to join that narrow circle of people in my life who make my heart laugh. We have managed to cultivate this friendship over six years, despite the distance and the always difficult and changing conditions, and it still lasts today. We have followed the evolution of our lives in their essential lines, and I have surprisingly managed to keep up with the adventures that took him from Serbia to Germany and the uncertainties that unfortunately still populate his life today. We give each other warm advice. From time to time we exchange recipes and songs. I went to visit him in Germany after five years and it really felt like we saw each other the day before. I got to know his new friends, being part for a few days of his new life as a free man, who earns a living and can go to the pool without someone's permission. It was just great to see him like that, to witness his growth as a valuable man, and to hear from his lips that somehow, I contributed to all of this.



FARID SADEGHI / IRAN

I am Farid from Iran.

I stayed in the camp of Bogovadja, where we were waiting every day for the borders to open, so as to be able to go to countries where we could start a normal life from scratch.

In terms of geographical location, Bogovadja was in the middle of nowhere, with no easy access to the city, so it was a bit boring until Caritas Valjevo came, and life turned. I met Silvia from Italy, she taught me both English and Italian. From that day my life changed and a spark came into my mind that I could also speak languages, learn more and improve. At the peak of despair, hope in my life was formed.

I was waiting for Caritas Valjevo every day so that I could speak and learn, and I had a lot of enthusiasm. They surprised us with new programmes every day, being so interesting that we forgot where we got stuck. I felt they were helping people beyond their duty, having a kind of pure love for people. Caritas Valjevo went beyond its duty without any hesitation. I also had the opportunity to help the Caritas Valjevo team as much as I could and it was a great honour for me to learn and use the experience of such great people. At the top of the Caritas Valjevo pyramid, there was a tall man with an adorable moustache who, contrary to his masculine charm, had a very soft heart.

At one point, Caritas Valjevo thinks tank decided to make a cafe in a corner of the camp, so that people could have a computer and access to the Internet, together with tables where you could sit, have a cup of coffee and talk to Caritas staff, express your problems so that they could try to help out. With the help of Silvia, Dušan, Sanja and all the others, this successful idea was implemented. In this room, where birthday celebrations took place, also a religious ceremony was performed, and I had the opportunity to translate the priest's words.

With the arrival of the summer season, new activities were designed by Caritas Valjevo, so we were able to form a football team, a basketball team, and other sports; A Macedonian man and I taught basketball to children and they were happy no matter what. Sightseeing tours were organised in the beautiful city of Valjevo, and Caritas Valjevo also took us to the beautiful Gradac river, also involving old men and people having difficulties walking from the local community. Also, we organised football tournaments, with prizes for everyone. We also helped out with the sorting of clothes and other items.

I hope that the unconditional love of this group will be somehow recorded in history, all of them played an important role in my life.



FEDERICA BARON CARDIN / ITALY

I woke up every morning with a child's enthusiasm. I waited for the moment the car would enter the camp with joy. Every morning, on the way from Valjevo to Bogovadja, the radio was on, playing Serbian songs that were keeping us company along the way. It was when crossing the camp's gate that our day could start.

The camp of Bogovadja is surrounded by nature, embraced by a few houses only. I have not forgotten the peace and quiet that reigned in it. It was not one of the grey and sad camps made of crumbling barracks. The air you could breathe there could make you feel like being at home. In Bogovadja the sun was always shining, because people were bringing light therein. I arrived in the winter of 2022 and I stayed until when spring blossomed. In those months I saw meadows flourishing and many guys leaving. I got to that camp wishing to welcome the brothers on the move along the Balkan Route, to offer them a shoulder on which they could lay their heads to rest from the fatigue of a journey that never seemed to end. A journey characterized by dangers, humiliations, injustices, and dread. But the more time passed, the more it was me who was feeling welcomed. Guys were opening up for me the doors of their hearts, gifting me with their fondness and warmth. I met a lot of young people, pilgrims/travelers on the way to Europe. They were all on their way, in search of a better life. A life far from war, poverty, and sorrow.

Mornings flew away on the notes of Afghan songs, which from the first hours of sun resounded in the air, announcing the arrival of a new day. They summoned the camp guests, who, sleepy and with a mug in their hands, timidly started to appear at the door of Social Cafe. The Social Café was the buzzing heart of that place: a space of meeting and socialization, a place able to bridge people and carry them to another dimension. A crossroads of cultures, music, and traditions. Inside, over a cup of steaming coffee, we spent the morning together, laughing and playing cards. There was no room for barriers, there was no room for prejudice and borders. The Social Café broke down all forms of inequity and inequality, creating horizons of Peace and Hope. Those four walls, colored by the children's paintings, unconsciously guarded the future of the world: the young adults of tomorrow, those who will shape the world with their young hands. Hanging on the walls of that room I remember a particular writing. It was in black and said: "Hey little fighter, things will be brighter". Day by day I could find out the meaning of those words. I found it out by encountering that Light that illuminated every heart: the hope of those who believe in a better life, of those who dream of a future of peace and love. The hope of those who want to become doctors is to be able to help other people. That light shone every day, painted in the eyes and smiles of the people around me. It was the strength of those who, despite everything, still believed in Life. The strength of those who face a thousand obstacles but never stop believing in miracles.

I loved each of the guys I met. They were my family, my home. Each of them a colour. Each of them is a story of Love. I was always touched when seeing those brothers leaving. Bogovadja was not just a camp, but a community. A small corner of Humanity. So many bonds growing and developing. I saw guys leaving together holding hands, ready for a journey that would take them far. I have met many faces, and heard many stories. Accomplices, we stole from the time that moment of eternity. Today the memory of those moments is the most precious gift I have. I came home with a fire burning inside me: with the dream in my heart to make the world a better place. With two eyes that tell those stories. With a heart full of memories.



SOCIAL CAFE REFUGEES WELCOME

OUR NEY #WE STAND TOGETHER #SPREAD



REFUGEES WELCOME

REFUGEES WELCOME
ITALIANA #CARITAS AMBROSIANA #CARITAS VAL

MOHSEN SAFAR / IRAN

Hello, dear friends. My name is Mohsen, and I was born in Iran. I would like to talk about my memories of Serbia and the camp of Bogovadja.

In 2017, due to the unfavorable conditions in my country, Iran, my family and I had to leave and we reached Serbia with hardships on the way. All of us applied for asylum and then they took us to the camp of Bogovadja, where there were many other families. The first thing that caught my attention was the organizations Caritas Valjevo and IPSIA. Bogovadja was a recreational place for everyone, a resting place for families, a sports hall, a cinema, and playgrounds that this organization prepared for all migrants, from small children to adults.

I myself joined the Ipsia-Caritas Valjevo organization after two weeks and helped them with activities for three years. From the many friends in these organizations, who worked there and provided social assistance to all of us, I learned how to help other migrants, those who no longer had a home and were sheltered there at that time.

Locally, carpentry tools were made and all kinds of handicrafts were made, all the team worked hard to provide social assistance to all migrants. The Ipsia-Caritas Valjevo team and I were active even in the very difficult time of Covid. This team never backed down and continued to work day by day for all migrants with all their hearts. I myself have nearly 1200 photos of all the different groups that provided social assistance and I always thank them.

I thank you that this team taught the biggest lesson of life to all migrants and that was love. As a small member of the Ipsia Caritas Valjevo family, I request you to never, never, never stop your activity! I request you protect this respected team with a dear and kind and caring manager. Never close that place because you are responsible for every refugee to teach us immigrants a lesson in life, a lesson in love. Your team encouraged me.

In those three years, I met many families from all over the world, Asia and Africa, and I still talk to them. I am always very grateful to your esteemed team for making us live all together. I would like to thank my close friends who came from Italy to Serbia in the Bogovadja camp. I request you to continue to do, guide, and encourage the activities of Bogovadja camp for life. Please please please never stop keeping it active!

Thank you to the esteemed team of Ipsia-Caritas Valjevo, which continues to operate. Many thanks to the woman of freedom, the man of patriotism.



SIMONA GUARINI / ITALY

In the common imagination, a refugee camp could look like an immense open space of overcrowded tents in the middle of nowhere, characterised by the deprivation of the most basic sanitary services and the possibility of living a life in dignity and in the full respect of one's rights as human beings first, and migrants and refugees then.

On March 8, 2021, for the first time I set foot in Bogovadja and, in a period of general uncertainty, the only certainty was that Bogovadja was anything but an accumulation of overcrowded tents. A building, rooms, beds, and bathrooms, all surrounded by woods that, timidly, took advantage of the first sunny days to bloom again. Was it the same for Amir, Ziarmal, Ali, Bilal, Nabe and Nasrullah? Were they also there to try to flourish after the efforts of several Games that had brought them from Afghanistan to Serbia, passing through Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece, and Macedonia? Or were they simply waiting, unarmed, for a border crossing to open for them so that they could continue their journey to the land of rights and freedoms that was closing up in itself and making its borders terrain of violence, arbitrary violations of the most basic human rights, opportunities for smugglers and total annihilation of the individual dignity? Probably there is not a univocal answer to these questions, probably each is worth a different answer, a different perception, a different way of living that more or less prolonged period of life in a state of a forced stop. What was immediately clear to me, however, was that the asylum center was a place of contradiction. On the one hand, several NGOs set foot there daily, trying to organise activities that, in one way or another, had to lighten the burden on the shoulders of the minors and make their stay as relaxed and normal as possible; on the other hand, the lack of medical assistance, of hygiene kits, of attention to their education, the violence of security that at night had free ground, the proximity of the borders from which guys returned defeated and humiliated, often visibly worn out by the fatigue of the nights spent in the forests and the blow struck received by the border police. The stories quickly followed one another, and the bitterness grew, but surrender was never an option.

On the terrain of contradictions, I then returned in June 2022 to stay for one year, and again I could see closely that not much had changed. Indeed, there were no longer only unaccompanied minors but also singles and families; no longer only Afghans but also Somalis, Congolese, Burundians, Senegalese, and Eritreans; not only the Bosnian, Croatian, and Romanian borders to be penetrated but also and especially the Hungarian one. However, the lack of full protection of rights as well as sluggish and ineffective medical care was still there, the tensions between people were still there, the stories of violence and danger in crossing the borders that had led them to Serbia were still there, stronger and more painful than ever, waiting to be shared and listened to, in order not to be forgotten.

To the question "What did you give to Bogovadja?" I can only answer: my time, my energies, my ears, and eyes to try to listen and memorize as many faces, voices, stories, and experiences as possible, my emotions and the desire to try to do something that could, even in small part, make that terrain of contradictions a little less contradictory for migrants and refugees of whom I had the opportunity to know the past, part of the present and future dreams and aspirations.

Instead, the question "what did Bogovadja give you?" opens up a wide range of answers. From Bogovadja I take home, well protected in my luggage, the stories of Saki, Ali, Amir, Ziarmal, Abdiraqman, Yusuf, their route from Afghanistan and Somalia to Serbia and the difficulties faced before arriving here; I bring with me the smile of Saleem and his tears every time he listened to the song that reminded him of his mother; I bring with me the overwhelming energy of Kevine, who was catapulted from Burundi to Serbia in the hope of staying and continuing her studies and then, without knowing how or when, she had to face the route to Germany; I take with me Kamran's desire to study, who never went to school in Afghanistan but determined to learn as much as possible because so young but already sadly aware that "Europe is not like Afghanistan, they [other Afghans] must learn to behave differently"; I take with me Orzan, a young Afghan whose personality has been poorly understood and often labelled as violent and insane, but who had with him the invincible weapon of sympathy and sensitivity; I bring with me the colors of the colorful hijabs of Somali women and their shyness; the first uncertain steps of the little Rida and the fears of his mother in being alone in the journey that would have taken her to Norway to reach her husband; the desperation of Duga and his willingness to return to Senegal because "I want my life back!"; the sense of defeat of Chris, Milly, Egide, Claudia, and all Burundians who did not find in Serbia what they expected and had to, unprepared, continue their journey; the bitterness of Sadam after being beaten by security and being kicked out of the camp but, at the same time, the readiness of his friends to find for him a place where to sleep and something to eat; and the disarming sensitivity of Fesal, remained with us until the last day of Bogovadja's life, and his endless thanks for his "sisters". I also carry the bitterness, anger, and sadness that I have often felt while hearing their stories about the past and the uncertainty with which they spoke about the future, aware that probably no place will ever really be home for them; the awareness that being born in the "right part of the world" widely opens the doors to a series of rights that are not such for everyone, and that when such rights do not apply to everyone they must be called privileges.

But also, and above all, I take the moments of sharing coffee, chats, and laughter, all the new connections, the faces of those I have seen for a few days and who have for several long months, as well as the awareness that what is done does not always mean something for the recipient, but that a chat on a bench under the sun can fix many things that are not in the right place for the most varied reasons, that feeling heard is a valid cure for those who are emptied by the fatigues of the route, but also that often people do not want to share, and that it is right so, everything is valid, everything is legitimate.

I take away the awareness that courage travels on two feet and is locked up in a backpack or a plastic bag, and that knowing how to reinvent oneself after being denigrated and annihilated at the borders is a must for survival.



ALESSIA ROSSI / ITALY

My name is Alessia, I am 27 years old and I am part of the group of people who were lucky enough to spend time in the Asylum Centre in Bogovadja, as volunteers for Caritas Valjevo, in Serbia.

When Dušan, our project manager, informed us that the centre would be closed soon, I could not avoid thinking about what Bogovadja meant to me and, to this day (almost three years later), I believe I can say that the experience at the centre has had a strong impact on the way I see the world.

Having studied Human Rights at university, the reality I encountered in July 2020 in Bogovadja was not new to me, at least on paper. The migratory process along the Balkan route was one of the topics studied for several exams and therefore, from a theoretical point of view, I arrived in Serbia very well prepared. My preparation on an emotional level, however, was a different story; and this distinction is perhaps the summary of my experience in Bogovadja, of what I received and, as far as possible, gave to the people I met there.

International policy books and universal rights treaties explained to me that, in the first ten months of 2022, arrivals at the external borders of the European Union were around 275,000. Bogovadja taught me that Malik, in Afghanistan, had a 'Cash for Gold' shop, and that, at the time, he wanted to join his brother in Belgium, with whom he could work to support his wife and daughter in his country.

Books on international politics and universal rights treaties explained to me that those fleeing a country at war have a right to be protected. Bogovadja taught me that Kabir studied for a few months at Mazi, a school for refugee children founded in Greece by the organisation Still I Rise, and that once in France he wanted to enrol at university.

Books on international politics and universal rights treaties explained to me that there is a general principle of international law that prohibits states from rejecting asylum seekers at their borders. Bogovadja taught me that Abdul loved the TV series 'Lucifer', that Alisiena was great at playing Carrom and that Zakir, like me, loved to spend his time with Melù, the little dog that ran around the centre and to whom, together, we gave this name.

Above all, Bogovadja taught me that we all, without exception, look for a place in life where we can feel safe, where we can feel at home; and it is true that the centre, despite its many, inevitable flaws, has represented for many just that, a home, albeit a temporary one.

Travelling I learnt that what makes our life wonderful are not the breathtaking landscapes or souvenirs, but the people met along the way. And Bogovadja was the ultimate expression of this lesson.

International policy books and universal rights treaties do not care about Malik, Kabir, Abdul, Zakir or me. Bogovadja, however, did care about us; and like us, many other people. The affection and attention we gave each other did not change anyone's fate, but it made us feel, for a while, at home.



ANABEL / BURUNDI

Hello, my name is Anabelle and I am from Burundi.

I spent nice moments in the asylum center of Bogovadja, people there were very kind, they welcomed me with open arms, fed me, they made me feel psychologically well through different activities, such as making earrings, bracelets, and necklaces.

And the people working in Social Café have a heart of gold, like Simona, Valeria, Andrea, and Marija: they lent us a helping hand through their work since they organised funny games. Being in this camp taught me many things and helped me to understand how to be a community, it gave me the bravery I needed. I thank them a lot for everything they did for me and my brothers.

God bless them.



GRETA LAZZATI / ITALY

Due to a series of concatenated events, the desire to leave, the need to deepen the drama of the Balkan Route, and some transverse acquaintances, in September 2021 I found myself in Bogovadja.

Out of sight and out of mind, the transit center of Bogovadga is located amidst green in the Serbian village of the same name. In the midst of large trees appears the grey main building and in front of it the entrance to the Social Café.

The first morning we arrived by car together with Miloš and Tea, the operators, and we already found some young people sitting and waiting for us under the gazebos to enter. There were those who were listening to music, those who were playing memory, and those who were finding their home watching videos on computer monitors. All sipping coffee with extra sugar!

Every day at the Social Café I felt mixed emotions: the happiness of meeting different worlds but the sadness of doing it in that way. Every day in the Social Café migrants make people realise the importance of the project, of that place, so small but so important to them.

On the route people are at the mercy of their fate, living by the day and in continuous planning for an uncertain future. They carry within them great suffering that is continually felt even in the rare moments of joy.

It was an opportunity for me to forge friendships as well. To this day I still carry everyone in my heart and with some I exchange messages and video calls.

The best day of all was the day of Bogovadja's got talent. After the initial shyness, everyone wanted to pick up the microphone, dance, sing, do performances, and have fun. Somalis, Afghans, Serbs, Italians, everyone!

By December I had also learned to love the Afghan songs blasted at full volume early in the morning in the social café.

I thank all those who built and believed in such a beautiful project.



ABDI / SOMALIA

When you are a refugee and you enter a new country, the first thing that comes up to your mind is where am I going to sleep, where am I going to get medical help, and where am I going to get psychological support? I asked myself all these questions when I arrived in Serbia. All of a sudden the fear that I could be homeless in Serbia vanished when a Serbian woman told us that there was a refugee camp outside the city.

When I reached the camp I was registered and I was told you can stay here and you can see a doctor if you want. I was really happy to hear that from a camp manager - who was a female - and she also added: we have an NGO called Caritas Valjevo here, you can visit its staff in the Social Café.

The next morning I was lucky to meet the first Italian who could speak some sentences in the Somali language. She was working for Caritas Valjevo and I can still remember her name, Valeria. She also had a co-worker from Italy too, with whom I played a table tennis match and she beat me, just because I was tired!

The Caritas Valjevo team was really amazing. I was seeing them helping also other people in the camp with coffee drinks and books and also playing cards. Without the Bogovadja camp and without Caritas Valjevo team I can't imagine how I could have survived in Serbia.



VALERIA CAPILLUPO / ITALY

If I have to sum up my experience in the asylum center of Bogovadja, I would say that it was a rollercoaster of emotions. In the months I spent in that place I laugh, and cried, I've been amazed, upset, and even angry. Each day spent in that place full of people from different countries was different from the others. Still, there was always one thing that made me feel in the right place: the glance of people who, no matter how long they've been stuck in there, no matter what happened during their journeys or in their lives, was full of kindness and love for us. Maybe it was just because of a cup of hot coffee in the morning or an amazing workshop or it was because we just talked to them by treating them as human beings and not as migrants.

In those months I've tried to learn in different languages the easy question "How are you today?" which at the beginning was a stupid one for me. Then I realized that no one else, maybe for months, asked them such an easy question, or maybe no one did with the real willingness to know how they really felt. Every morning when I asked "*sanga ye*" or "*sidee tahay?*", I already knew that in all languages the answer would be "Good, and you?". But it was after that simple question that I was able to establish a deeper relationship to discover later that the real answer was not always "good".

In that camp in the middle of nowhere in Serbia, different languages, religions, and behaviors lived together as one big family and I felt myself a member of it. Of course, like in every family, there was problems and misunderstanding, and sometimes some things didn't work well, but empathy, respect, and kindness between us were always much more vital.

The closing of the Bogovadja camp was just like the landing of a rollercoaster: a small moment of calm before the final landing where your heart explodes. In the previous months, there were few people in the camp, calm reigned, and the silence was too loud compared to the chatter and shouting in different languages that we were used to hearing. It was when we closed the door of the Social Café for the last time that our hearts explodes, after chatting and dancing to Syrian music for the last time, it was time to leave. It was sad to see their sad faces and unaware of where they would go and who they would be with the next day.

What I have received from the people I have met in Bogovadja is much more than what I tried to give them.

It was an amazing ride on a crazy rollercoaster!



CHIARA PIPINATO / ITALY

When thinking about refugee camps, the most quoted review would probably be “like a prison, where people spend their time waiting”: I’m not saying that this perception is completely false and, to be honest, it can also be really close to reality, sometimes. However, looking into the dynamics of refugee camps, much more can be unveiled: like the big number of organizations active to implement projects in it and the cultural and social values that people are able to concentrate on in a specific location. Caritas Valjevo, through the Social Café project, was one of these actors. This space was launched in 2016 to create a safe area, to interconnect the outside and the inside, thanks to the computers and the local and international people involved in the project. A literal “crush of cultures” happened: people traveling and living in entirely different ways, facing and measuring themselves.

When something is not linear, the invisible becomes visible. Isn’t it true? Besides the many social studies behind this concept (that I invite everyone to read), the purpose of the Social Café was precisely this: making people visible, not to make things “linear”. Making it linear, would have meant solving the unsolvable by potentially hiding or ignoring it. Conversely, by being in front of a cup of tea, talking about light or heavy topics, and playing endless (and when I say endless, I mean it!) card games, the strongest message was delivered: no one is invisible here, not the people on the move, not the volunteers, nor the operators. Let’s just be people, with all different, sometimes privileged, sometimes unprivileged, problems, and play cards (yes, again), cricket, or get a new haircut to follow the latest social media trend.

One day, an unaccompanied minor told me: “You know, there will be people here who, when they arrive in Europe, will search for a place that just looks like their home or like this”. Well, maybe the Social Café was not exactly a home, but in the 7 years of action, it definitely was a place to look forward to taking a break from the pressing world around (and I am talking about literally everyone!).



HAMID NØØRĪ / AFGHANISTAN

Hi, I'm Hamid and I'm from Afghanistan. To get here I went through a difficult fate and crossed difficult borders. When I finally came to Bogovadja, I arrived in a quiet and peaceful place. It was like being at home, there were many Afghan and Pakistani boys, and we all lived like a family, in a friendly and brotherly way. In Bogovadja we had a social worker, Branka, a kind woman whom all the boys loved like a mother because she gave us love and respect. We also had two legal guardians, the one we all called "Big Mum" and Milica, both of whom were kind to us. All the kids respected all the workers in the center. The one thing we were all happy about and waiting endlessly for was the organizations Caritas Valjevo and Grupa484.

So during my time in Bogovadja, I learned many positive things and had many positive experiences. For example, when I was in Afghanistan, I could not speak openly about something in front of so many people, because that required courage. The courage that I did not have. But when I came to the center of Bogovadja, I changed.

When I was in Bogovadja, Caritas used to prepare for us educational workshops, we weekly had cinema and we watched movies, and also twice a week we had entertainment with Caritas staff.

I could talk to people, translate for them, and teach something to my friends in Bogovadja.

In Caritas staff everyone was special to me, I had a nice time with everyone because they were such kind people, everyone taught us educational lessons, and everyone had respect for me.

First, I meet Mrs. Simona, Mrs. Tea, and Mr. Miloš and I had a lovely time with them. Then I met Chiara, she was nice to us and she also taught us educational lessons. After that, I met my "*Friends*", Mr. Andrea and Mrs. Greta: they were a sweet couple and also they taught us many things. After that, I met two nice girls, Mrs. Federica, and Mrs. Letizia. They are also good and we had happy moments with them. I am so happy to see each of them in my life and they are so close to me, all of them belong to Caritas, so I can say Thank you so much to all staff of Caritas and to Bogovadja.



ANDREA FRIGERIO / ITALY

After 15 years of work as an IT technician and many international volunteer experiences between Africa and Latin America, in September 2021 I decided to leave a secure job and an assured salary to get out of my comfort zone to set out with my girlfriend Greta, with our van, along the Balkan route for an indefinite period of time. After visiting Croatia and Bosnia for a few weeks, we arrived in Serbia - in Valjevo - where, thanks to some of Greta's connections with Ipsia and Caritas, we decided to stay for a few months as volunteers inside the asylum center of Bogovadja. To welcome us there is Dusan, Project Manager of Caritas Valjevo, a constant point of reference during our time in Valjevo, who makes us feel immediately at ease and with whom a beautiful friendship is created in no time.

The first days at the Social Café, accompanied by Tea and Miloš, operators of Caritas Valjevo, are the ones in which I try to understand how things work at the camp: in the morning we serve coffee, then socio-educational activities, in the afternoon games and workshops, in the free time many chats with the guys of the camp with whom we slowly create a beautiful relationship of friendship. With a group of Somali guys, we organize an Italian course, with Afghan underage boys games to learn some European geography, with others English lessons; and then Memory and Uno, the Bogovadja's Got Talent, the Taste Of Home in which the boys cook for us a typical dish of their country. So many good activities, so much good time, so many good memories.

Over time, with some of them, a real relationship of friendship and trust is created, in which we talk about future plans and dreams, some tell us about their crazy and dangerous journey that started months earlier from Afghanistan, Somalia, Palestine, and then again the absurdity of the "games," the desperate attempt to cross the border despite the beatings, muggings, and humiliation of the police. The dogs chasing you, the cold and hunger beating after days of walking in the woods, the wet clothes, the long nights spent in the woods or in abandoned houses. I will never forget the faces of those who, after days of trying, returned to the camp dirty, hungry, with eyes full of sadness and anger. The hardest thing for me during that time was to endure the fact that while I after the days at the camp returned to my warm and comfortable apartment, my new friends were forced to the follies of the "game" in the freezing Balkan winter.

Of these months spent as a volunteer at the Social Café in Bogovadja, I will always carry with me the memory of so many wonderful moments experienced with these people who didn't miss the opportunity to thank us for being there with them in the middle of that crazy journey. "Being there" was the most important thing, "to be" with them, to chat even about stupid things, to give them a chance to clear their minds even for a few minutes, to make them feel a little bit less lonely and rejected even if only for a short while. In such a difficult context as the camps along the Balkan Route, the human value of the Social Café cannot be quantified.



MARIJA MATIĆ / SERBIA

My work with refugees and migrants at the Asylum Center in Bogovadja began in November 2022. In that short time, a large number of people passed by. Each of them carried his own, unique story with them, and each of them touched me personally and left a mark. From the initial surprise and cultural shock, we progressed very quickly to smiles, hugs, and friendship.

We learned a lot from each other. Our views on life and understanding of problems were changing. We were taught to understand and respect differences. We learned the fastest of all that a smile is a universal language, a language that everyone understands and everyone needs.

When I know what people are dealing with, what problems they have, how important and big changes they make, and how much courage and daring they need, I personally don't look at life the same anymore. I can freely say that I have taken off my rose-colored glasses and now I perceive the world much differently and more clearly.

If I had to sum up all these months in a few sentences, it would sound like this: different nationalities, different cultures, ways of growing up, and different languages. Tragedies, lived events, travels, hikes, border violence. Leaving your family, culture, language, a part of yourself, and a journey into the unknown and uncertain.

Everything you hear makes you different, more resilient, and more reasonable, but certainly not less sensitive to human suffering and pain. What you strive for is to brighten someone's moment with even one smile and try to make them feel accepted and important, to feel like a human being.

Workshops, conversations, a sea of drunk coffee and shed tears, hugs, smiles, shared moments.

Priceless!



MAHMOUD / SIRIA

Hello, my name is Mahmoud, I am 28. I entered Serbia more than a year ago, and I fell in love with this country.

After I thought of applying for asylum in this country, I went to police station for registration, and then I was transferred to the camp of Bogovadja, where I met friends and got to know many people, such as a group of sisters who worked for Caritas Valjevo and came every day of the week except Saturday and Sunday.

We were waiting for Mondays to come so that we could see the girls for work. We started in the morning with some entertaining activities. We played some complex games - like puzzles - that made us focus on good things and were a good occasion to talk and open up about some topics altogether.

The people who were with us: Simona, a beautiful girl, she is not tall, she is average, I joked with her all the time, she is really wonderful; then there is Valeria, beautiful and nice. Both of them are from Italy, and all the time we learned our respective languages and spent time having fun. We were never bored. And then there is Marija, a Serbian girl who has the most beautiful and charming smile and hypnotic eyes. Then, Andrea, she is quiet, doesn't talk much and she is also beautiful and wonderful even though I didn't spend as much time with her. I always joked with them and relaxed talking with them. They are wonderful because they are not arrogant towards us, they look at us as real friends, and they do not differentiate the way they relate to people based on their origin. How much I loved these girls and how much I communicated with them!

Then we were transferred to a second camp, but before that, on the last day, we held a food party, we cooked Syrian food, we danced all together and we sat and talked and bid farewell to the girls.

I will never forget these happy days in Bogovadja.



MILLY & EGIDE / BURUNDI

MILLY

Firstly, I would like to thank you for the great idea you had, because everywhere we pass, we should learn and give something back.

Bogovadja was my first place where I learned to live with different people from different countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Somalia, etc.) and different ways of life; I learned so many things, especially to be sociable. Even though we were in a closed place, I learned something important: not to be disappointed, I learned to know, to adapt to any challenge and any place because I came to Europe thinking to continue studying and to make my life somehow stable, but I knew there were steps I had to overcome.

And Bogovadja gave me a special gift I won't forget in my life: friends, because, till now, 70% of the friends I have met there. I'm so glad for the way all of you of Cariitas Valjevo showed us your care by talking to us, your encouragement, and making friendships with us. Even now, I'm thinking about how you took care of talking to everyone, and I hope that tomorrow you'll be a light for many people. The world through your humanity Heart, because the Caritas Valjevo team did something extraordinary, and I'm still holding you in my heart, may God grant you the ability to fulfill all of your dreams and be a solution to many people.

I had a lot to say, but let me stop by here.

You are all blessed. Thank you so much.

EGIDE

Bogovadja was a place, to me and many who passed by there, where an asylum seeker could arrive and feel welcomed, valued and respected! The environment was taking into consideration diversity whereby people from different places could connect and share their experiences. People could collect stories, and testimonies over a coffee, Caritas office, play football, basket, ping pong, etc, and feel relaxed. Sports and assistance in Bogovadja through Caritas Valjevo and the whole organizations which worked there gave hope to asylum seekers that there's a second chance at their life regardless of what they went through in their country of origin. The feeling of being heard through counseling by sharing your struggles, worries, or stress could help people especially minors who had suicidal thoughts. Bogovadja opened me an opportunity to know how to live in a diverse community in harmony. It taught me that there's still hope and good people who can value and respect you no matter where you come from which is what I am applying to now.



DUŠAN PERIĆ / SERBIA

After the European Union had closed down while building up the walls, Caritas Valjevo started its activities in the Asylum Center in Bogovadja also thanks to other international organizations. We approached with modest and timid first steps into psychosocial support activities. While new partner organizations were coming, we came up with new ideas that led to the beginning of something which would last for 8 years, consisting of only two words- Social café.

We developed it on our own trying to puzzle out everything- to figure out and understand. We were searching for answers and providing solutions. We had been starting. Terminating. Going on. And then starting again. Through all these years we have been chasing a path that would become our own. And we made it. We created the path that leads to smiles, to hearts, and to people's souls when it is needed the most.

We have been always a meeting point- people that traveled through Serbia forward to a better future with people who held off their future in order to help others. People were leaving. Some to old, and some to new houses and living. But there is one thing on that path that linked us all, the fact that we are all human beings; flesh and blood with the same needs and aspirations. Some people made their wishes come true thanks to the place where they were born, which was probably more illuminated by the Sun compared to others who had a long row to hoe and then beg people for empathy and comprehension.

Our path wouldn't be complete if there were not both known and less-known donors. We owe a debt of gratitude to them because we succeeded in giving a hand to people along the Balkan route. Together, we have been giving support and comforting people. We thank a lot: Caritas Beogradske nadbiskupije, Caritas Serbia, Caritas Italiana, IPSIA ACLI, Caritas Ambrosiana, Caritas Treviso, Caritas Como, Caritas Germany, Caritas Vienna, Caritas Austria, Caritas Spain...We also thank Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia, the Red Cross, Group 484, UNHCR, and IOM. Additionally, we appreciate all the people whose names we do not know and that we never saw, but without whom we could not have managed to be present where we have been: on the field with people.

And the last box has been packed and carried out from our rooms. At first glance, it seems that these rooms and walls are empty, but there will remain the smile, joy, tears, pain, and pleasure of many people who passed through Bogovadja yearning for new life and a better future. Some of them found happiness in Europe. On the other hand, some realised that happiness is in a place full of the blood and tears of their ancestors. Some of them were not given a chance to find happiness in Europe. Unfortunately, alike little Medina, some went straight to death. Furthermore, in these walls will remain the wide smiles of dozens of volunteers from all over the world who put effort into all activities and shared their knowledge and skills selflessly. They made people feel like human beings, respected and equal.

We owe a debt of gratitude to all these people, to the ones who got here because of troubles and misfortune, and to ones who were made come by love for others. May all our experiences, all our photos, all our told and untold stories, all kicked balls, drawn lines and flags remain as a testimony of a difficult time in which we all lived together. Your acts and creations will speak for you for a long time.



TWO DECISIONS

By decision of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, the Asylum Center in Bogovađa stopped working in March 2023.

In 2011 a document published on the Official Gazette decided to establish the centre.
In 2023 a document published on the Official Gazette decided to ceased the centre.

In this way, two papers completed the thirteen years of existence of the Asylum Center in Bogovađa.

Two decisions made a circle: the beggining and the end of the story written by the people in the movement.



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