

TESTIMONY III

For Stop Bunkers

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Some informations have been removed in order to provide anonimity to the author. They're marked by a star.

A propos.

Depuis plusieurs mois à Genève, des requérants d'asile s'organisent pour dénoncer les conditions dans lesquelles ils sont accueillis. Que ce soit dans les abris PCi (abris anti-atomique) ou les foyers, la promiscuité engendrée par la surpopulation et le manque d'infrastructures ne peut que leur rappeler les raisons pour lesquelles ils ont fui. La réalité de ce que l'on ose ici appeler accueil ne leur laisse aucune chance de faire leurs propres choix. Nous vivons aussi ici, et trouvons nécessaire de tout faire pour les aider dans leur lutte. Nous, collectif Sans Retour, avons rencontré Stop Bunkers, leur collectif, et avons estimé nécessaire de rendre leur parole audible. Certains ont voulu témoigner de leur parcours.

Lors de ces entretiens, ils ont parlé dans leur langue maternelle ou en anglais et nous avons eu recours à un traducteur. Faire ces interviews, tenter de comprendre

au plus près des mots ce que peut être la réalité de ces personnes, sans interpréter. La voix est passée par plusieurs filtres, ceux de la langue et de ses spécificités déjà, puis ceux qui sont propres aux personnes par lesquelles sont passés les mots. Le discours oral n'est pas le discours écrit, et afin de rendre lisibles ces témoignages une fois la traduction finie, nous avons encore dû passer par une réécriture.

Alors, comment, par le choix des mots rendre sa fluidité au récit dans une autre langue et faire que ce qui nous a semblé être son message puisse être rendu de manière claire et effective ? Nous ne souhaitons pas faire croire que nous pouvons disparaître derrière ces témoignages. S'il peut y avoir une véracité des faits, il serait naïf de penser qu'un quelconque observateur puisse être objectif. Si nous voulons être un soutien à ceux qui s'engagent dans cette lutte, nous avons nos propres convictions et elles apparaissent forcément dans la teinte du texte.

Si nous acceptons que ces pages ne changeront que très peu la réalité, nous refusons qu'elles ne fassent que s'ajouter au tas de marchandises misérabilistes que fournissent la télévision, les journaux. Vendre un témoignage comme celui-ci au profit de quoi que ce soit serait participer à l'existence de ce qui l'a rendu nécessaire.

Ce serait accepter qu'un contrat nous lie à ce qu'il condamne. Ce texte n'est pas là pour être rangé sur une étagère et justifier un quelconque engagement social lors de diners mondains.

Nous ne rêvons pas sur le pouvoir hypothétique des paroles. Mais nous pensons que de les diffuser permet qu'une voix émerge au-dessus du bruit afin qu'elle le dissolve, qu'elle rende inadmissible la réalité. Etre spectateur est un rôle actif, celui du relai de l'information mais aussi le point de départ d'une prise de contrôle de la réalité.

Si le témoignage ne se positionne pas de cette manière là, le diffuser est pour nous une déclaration de guerre à ce qui a créé la nécessité de son existence.

Geneva, 29 April 2015

People who do not live in the bunkers don't know the reality of the people living inside. Even the Asylum Seekers, most of them, do not live in bunkers, so they do not know what life in the bunkers is like. It's really a different life, totally. It has many, many, many side effects. I hope this testimony may help to close the bunkers and to make life better for these people who have no other choices.

I arrived in Geneva on the 5th of December 2014. I'm quite sure about the date, and I'm quite sure about every day which I spent in the bunkers. I was really chocked. I would never have imagined that, one day in my life, I would be treated like this, in a country like this, in a situation of seeking asylum. What is the meaning of asylum? I'm seeking for protection. I'm seeking an honest, democratic, and free life. In my country, I lived with my family in my hometown, with my relationships

and my social networks. It's incomparable with the situation here, where I can't find a family like my family, and I can't find a home anything like my home. This is really something I don't want to think about.

So, I ended up inside a bunker, like if somebody had pushed me in. I had no choice to avoid this. I couldn't live in the streets or go to another country, as this could affect my asylum procedure. I simply had no way to say no. I ended up inside a bunker. I tried really to find myself inside the bunker, but I couldn't find myself until I got out. Up to now, I am not sure I have found myself completely. I still have the same problems about security, dignity and a lot of issues which are not exclusively mine, but which belong to every human being in this world.

According to my experience in the bunker, which is a small experience of about 2 months and 20 days, the first kind of problems I faced was a totally different air. It's not normal air. In my country, we are used to breathing fresh air, and we know how to distinguish polluted air from fresh air. And we know that the most important thing in life is air. If you can't breathe good air, it means that you are going to die. So if you think about dying, this is really a horrible situation!

I didn't try to come to Europe by boat like many others, but I think I had the same feeling as these refugees every night when I tried to get to sleep, and I couldn't, because I found it difficult to breathe. I think it's maybe the same in a boat, going nowhere, not knowing what your real direction is. Maybe you are just going to Europe, but you don't know if you are headed the right way. This really affects their life psychologically. Many, many, many people who live in the bunkers consult the doctors. And their doctors recognize easily from the first interview to the second one, that they lost like 5 kilos. This is really something unfortunate; we didn't come here to make a diet. I remember quite well that when I was in my country I weighed 69 Kg. Unfortunately now I'm 59 kg and this is really horrible according to the medicine. And I'm not sure: is it just from the bad thoughts I have? Is it a psychological effect of the living conditions in the bunker? Is it due to the food, to the weather or to other kinds of treatment or other kinds of torture? I really can't say. I went to see a psychiatrist, I told her a lot of things. All she had to say was: "You know, we can give you medicine." I told her that I didn't want to take medicine because I don't think I have a problem which medicine can help. I have a problem which could be avoided by changing my place and my situation, and this is possible. This is possible!

So nobody, none of the people who are in charge, care about this. This is what we face every day. I hope that this kind of treatment will never become something normal because this is not life. This is not real life! Life should never, ever, be like this. A human being deserves respect, not because of the paper he has, or his nationality, or how he arrived or what he is seeking. A person should be treated as a human being, nothing less.

Politicians here do not know the real situation of the people who come to seek asylum. This is really very, very, very sad and truly disgraceful: to be responsible for something and at the same time, you are not really aware of the reality of the situation that you are going to manage. Unfortunately, politicians here do not know how many languages asylum seekers speak. Unfortunately, they have no idea how much money an asylum seeker spends to reach here. Unfortunately, politicians here do not understand what it was like for the asylum seeker in his own country: how he or she was living there, what was his or her economic situation, what are the real problems he or she faced. When an asylum seeker arrives, the government should be especially concerned about his psychological and physical health. Instead, I felt that the asylum interview was like a criminal investigation.

In the bunkers, there are a lot of different nationalities, languages, behaviors, ages, cultures and all kinds of new situations and habits. The problem is that this is a new community, totally! It's a new isolated community. This community has been created by the authorities. One day, they just decided to put all these people together without paying attention to the consequences for their future in the bunkers and afterwards. This is really something that can never be forgiven or forgotten. During the time of healing, it is easy not to remember the wounds, but it's not easy to forget the psychological torture. Sometimes, I feel that I speak like a psychologist, but I have never studied psychology ! A lot of people could not understand that until they get in a similar situation. I wish no one to face this situation which, unfortunately, some people are still enduring.

The people living inside the bunkers are always nervous and stressed. Some show disrespect to others. They have no other options but to live like this ! They have no other options! If a small thing upsets them, they cannot put up with it. Some take out all their aggressivity and their problems, due to their living conditions, all this heavy load on one guy, a scapegoat. Every day there are misunderstandings which sometimes lead to arguments or turn into fights.

And the misunderstandings also have effects on human psychology.

Another kind of problem is the shortage of toilets and bathrooms. There are just 5 toilets for 70 persons, and there is no privacy at all. If you want to sleep, you have to go to the dormitory, where the bunk beds are stacked 3 levels high. Even if I asked an artist to draw from his imagination some bad sleeping arrangements, he would never imagine people sleeping in 3 levels like these. Maybe if I asked him to draw the hens' poultry, maybe he could. But for humans?! No! Even in the beds, there is no privacy. All the beds are connected, with no partitions between them. Each dormitory can hold 66 people, 33 people on each side, but usually there are about 20 to 25 people. The problem is not just the amount of people. The problem is about breathing. We normally live in good, fresh, natural air. And one day you find yourself breathing some kind of – maybe I can say – “recycled” air, because there is no ventilation at all.

If I have to describe a bunker: when you go underground, you find a parking area and under the parking places, there is storage area for food or I don't know what exactly. After that, you have to turn right and then turn

left, which means that you are going farther down all the time. On the third level, you will find the bunker where people live. There is no fresh air: it has to be brought in from outside. One day, I discovered that the air is brought in by a machine from the garden behind the parking area and the open gate of the conduit which brings the air inside, is right next to the area where dogs shit! I can't find a word adequate to describe this ... dissatisfying is not enough, inhumane is not enough, unfair.... I'll just keep it like this. This is the situation.

In the bunker, there are also a lot of insects of different kinds. Many of the occupants have no idea what kind of insects they are, never having experienced such things before. Sometimes, people wake up and make big noise and unfortunately it's not because of nightmares, but because of small insects biting them. Small insects sometime unseen and sometimes seen. Many people develop rashes that itch. And it's not easy to be checked by the doctor because this happens at night when you go to bed, and signs of the itching disappear quickly. Even if you manage an appointment at the hospital the next day and you explain to the doctor that there are a lot of insects inside the bunkers which bite you and that you can't sleep because of the itching, he will say: “Where is it? Let me see it!” And then say: “You're fine.

I can't see anything." It is easy to make a comparison between asylum seekers who live in the bunkers and others in order to try to help them. If you are truly a honest doctor, you would want to help the migrants, or at least to try to keep them safe, to help them in their past history of problems or disease, not to create new kind of disease. Or, at least, to care about the new problems that they face, new disease which they sometimes take from each other, sometimes from the living situation. Sometimes people have breathing problems or other kinds of illnesses which are easy to transfer to others. Nobody cares about this. Because when they transfer people to the bunker, nobody check them. They are checked by a nurse from Hospice General who just talks with you about any medical problem, writes a report and then gives you an appointment in another month with a doctor. If you are ill, you spend an entire month with your unknown disease in close contact with others. Who will help the others if they are affected by this disease? Who knows that this kind of disease cannot be easily transmitted from one to another by air and by blood interaction? There can be fights and, if we speak about other kind of transaction, there can be sex interaction too.

Concerning sleep, if just one person gets up or goes to bed, it's like this table [the table wobbles]: if I touch this table, everything on the table shakes. So if somebody wants to sleep in one of the beds, all the 33 beds feel the vibrations. Can you imagine that they can sleep during the night? Some guy wants to sleep at 9PM. Another one wants to sleep at 12PM. Someone else wants to sleep at 2AM. Another person wants to sleep at 5AM. Someone wants to get up at 3AM to pee. Someone wants to get up at 2AM. It's like this [he makes the table shake again] all the time. As I said, if you tell your doctor you can't sleep well, he will say: "OK, I can give you some medicine to help you sleep." But that's not normal. I don't think people like this should be taking this kind of medicine. Because medicine should be taken by people who have sleeping problems, psychological problem, or life pressure. People living in bunkers may have similar problems but their cause is different. Their problem is that their bed is shaking. Their problem is that this place is crowded. Their problem is that this place is unhealthy. To solve those problems with just one tablet to help them sleep may lead them not to care about the situation and may stop them from criticizing it. Even without any side effects, this is a very dishonest way of handling an abnormal situation.

Every night, the lights go on and off. In the dormitory, you cannot control the lights. People can turn them on and off at any time. After 10PM or 11PM, the lights in the dormitories are supposed to stay off so people can sleep. The bunker rules say that after 10PM there is to be no noise. But in fact, this rule is not respected: anyone who wants to come in can turn on the light, and then another person will wake up and yell: "Fuck! Turn off those lights!" waking up the whole dormitory. This kind of psychological torture is usually reserved for certain prisons. In our culture, we have a proverb, which says: "It's better to keep the hens awake than to let them sleep." When you turn on the lights for the hens and you feed them, they eat all the time, day or night. They just keep on eating. This is the effect of lights on animals. Of course, it has another kind of effect on human beings. We can easily recognize that we could never live only days or only nights.

There is really no good time to catch some sleep in a bunker. Most people try to sleep after 5AM when some people leave the bunkers. You go all night without sleeping, so you are totally tired. You just lie in your bed. It's actually not lying down, it's crawling into bed. Because, if you want to use your bed you have to crawl: there is not enough room otherwise. There is just half

a meter between beds. Even on the top bed, there is no room to sit up. This means that, in the morning, you can't stretch [he shows a stretch from the top of the body, arms and chest]. Most people in the bunker hurt their head when they get up in the morning. One day, I fell down from the highest bed. I was sleeping up in the third tier bed after having hurt my head many times. I fell because I put my foot on the small ladder between the beds and my foot slipped and I landed with all my weight on my feet and my ankle. It wasn't broken, but the muscles were injured. For a month and a half, I couldn't walk properly or do anything with my feet.

One day, I woke up around 7:30 in the evening. I didn't know how much time I had spent sleeping, maybe five hours, I wasn't sure. But when I got up, I looked at the time on my phone. It was 7:30. I thought: OK, it's time for breakfast. So, I took my cup and went directly to the kitchen to get something to eat. I found people watching the TV. This seemed strange because usually people only want to have breakfast and then they go back to sleep. I didn't see anyone eating breakfast at 7:30. I asked what time it was. They told me: "7:30." I asked: "But in the morning or at night?" Some people were really astonished. One of them tried to joke. He said: "In the morning." I believed him because

I really felt it was morning. The others said: “No, it is evening!” Then, you know, I had to check it out: I had to go out to see if it was morning or evening. I went out and saw that there was no sun - it was totally dark. Over my time in the bunker, I saw a lot of people who had the same problem. This is really another kind of torture when you cannot manage your own times of sleeping. Maybe these are the most important things to sleep well, to eat well, and after that, you can do anything else.

The food is usually prepared by a department of Hospice General in which some asylum seekers work. They prepare pasta, couscous and rice, with a small amount of cooked vegetables and with one piece of meat, chicken or, sometimes, fish. The food is the same day after day. It never changes. They store one delivery of food in a refrigerator for eight days. On the cover of the container, there is a sticker with the expiration date; usually the eighth day after arrival. But there is no date to say which day the food has been produced. There is only the expiration date, and there is no trademark that says it has been cooked by Migros, Coop, or Hospice General.

Once I was really surprised to discover that the stickers with the date had been taken off from all of the food containers. The people were receiving the food without a sticker. I said: “Wait! It’s the food from last night and the expiration date was yesterday.” The taste of the food was already different, as well as the smell. On the eighth and sometimes on the seventh day, you can tell the taste of the food and the smell is altered. We returned it back. And we understood that there was no fresh food to be had, so they simply removed the stickers. We don’t know who took the stickers off, but they did it.

One day after eating, I felt totally ill. I couldn’t walk. I tried to go to the hospital by bus but I couldn’t. I went back to the bunker and I told them I couldn’t do this. I had to call an ambulance. At the hospital, they checked everything. I told them I had food poisoning because I had eaten food that was spoiled. They said: “Ok, maybe you have so on, so on, so on.” And they did many kinds of examinations, a scan, x-rays and so on. After all that, they said I had a problem because I had had surgery. I told them that the operation was over 25 years ago. The kind of pain I had had this day was not in the same place as the operation. I knew this was from the food I had eaten. They didn’t do anything. They kept me 3 days in hospital without any food,

just cleaning my stomach. I lost 5 kilos. I remember I only had a drip, just to keep me alive. The third night at about midnight, they said: "Now, you have to leave." I asked: "Where to?" They said: "We don't know if the bunker is still open. You have to sleep in another place." They gave me an address and a ticket for the taxi. They called a taxi and said: "The taxi will bring you to this address." When I arrived with the taxi, it was raining and I was shaking after 3 days without food, in the hospital. I still didn't know what the problem was. They never told me. I was really astonished: what was wrong with me? Three days in hospital! Three days with examinations and a complete check up and they never told me what was wrong. And after that, they sent me into the street at midnight. I thought that they might want to isolate me. But in that case, they would have taken me with an ambulance, not by taxi. A month after, I received receipt from the hospital about those three days cost which was 4500 CHF approximately!

After 20 minutes, the taxi stopped and the driver said: "This is the place." And guess what the place was? Another bunker! This bunker was for people without papers or a place to sleep. It opens during the winter. I got in at 1AM, and I didn't find any food. I only find a place where I could sleep. I had to leave at 7:30 next

morning. Three days without sleep. Three days without food. It was only the fourth day, that morning, that I ate breakfast. I wanted to take a shower, but they told me there was no time for that: showers were between 7PM and 9PM. I left.

I left nowhere. I didn't know where I was. I had arrived at this place by taxi. I didn't know east from west or which part of the city I was in. I tried to understand where this bunker was. The first road I saw was Rue des Vollandes. To locate it more precisely, I looked for a crossroad. I found another street - Rue du Nant. After that I thought: OK I know how to get back. I walked and found myself by the lake, where I tried to breath. It was very cold. I didn't know what to do or where to go. The first bus which came, I think it was bus A, I took until the last stop. I stayed in the bus until it turned around and went back to the city. Then I found myself in the city. In fact I didn't find myself, I only found my body in the city. The passers-by were looking at me and recognizing that I was sick. I was totally weak.

I couldn't walk much at all. I said to myself: Ok, you don't have any choice, man. You will die because of this cold. You have to go to the main bunker. So I went there. And they just asked me: "How are you?" I said:

“Ok.” They said: “You spent three days in hospital.” I said: “Yes.” They said: “OK.” They let me in. I tried to sleep but it was difficult in these conditions. The next morning people ate breakfast as usual, but I didn’t want to eat, because I knew that this affected me and I was worried about what might come next. I just had some bread and jam. It was Sunday, and all the shops were closed. In the evening, I went back to the other bunker to enjoy another good night of sleep because the place there was quiet; there were only 1 or 2 people in the dormitory. I really needed sleep! I slept until they woke me up and said “Man, it’s 7:30AM. We have to close, and you have to leave.” I have to insist that this kind of trouble has not only happened to me. A lot of people have had the same problems, some maybe worse, some maybe less, or some the same. This is life in the bunker.

When we started to mobilize ourselves, it was really difficult because of the differences between the people, the cultures and the languages. We sometimes needed translation; we needed to increase people’s awareness that their living conditions were really unacceptable. But the question was also: how to change our situation? We wanted to change it by legal means. This meant writing a letter to Hospice General, which is in charge of the housing of asylum seekers.

After that, we had to wait for an answer to our letter. We decided to hold a peaceful demonstration in order to draw the attention of local people in the Geneva community to our living conditions. We thought that we could find good support from the community and maybe from Hospice General, in order to change things. But unfortunately, we didn’t find any kind of support from Hospice General. They simply answered our letter after one month saying: “We don’t have enough places.” But I’m really proud and thankful to the community in Geneva, where we have received a lot of really great support. Local people really understand that living in the bunkers is terrible, even though they haven’t actually been inside a bunker because it’s forbidden for anyone who doesn’t live there to enter.

Even if you are transferred outside the bunker, you are not allowed to go in anymore. Even the entrance, you can’t reach it because there is a camera outside the entrance. They can recognize you and they say: “What do you want? You have to go or we will call the police!” The people of Geneva haven’t seen the situation with their own eyes, but talking with people from the Stop Bunkers movement has helped them to understand really the living conditions of those asylum seekers. And how we should live. And they really mobilized

themselves with us and have given us a lot of support and encouragement. I think without them we couldn't have reached this situation: right now the Stop Bunkers movement is quite well-known by the people of Geneva and by the politicians.

All the people in the bunkers were really dissatisfied and upset about their situation. But most of them didn't know how to change it. Some even did not believe it could change. They said: "You know, they put us here. They never cared about us. Nobody can listen to us. Nobody can help us." But, over time, they have changed their way of thinking: they really believe that the change is possible if we are active. Some of them have started to participate. Those who have not participated are afraid that if they do, it may affect their asylum procedure negatively. Maybe it's due to their political experience in their country, maybe they never tried before to fight like this or did not know a movement like this. Or maybe it's because of the side effects that they face during their journeys or during demonstrations in their countries, maybe they got shocked and they imagined that they might face the same destiny here. Unfortunately they are not aware about the system and about the laws in Switzerland, about the human rights and that the demonstration is one of the rights of any human

being. And you cannot get your rights while sleeping or dreaming. You have to wake up. You have to move and keep on. This is the kind of people we have in our "new community". I don't really blame them, because it's difficult. I'm one of them. They are my colleagues. They are my friends. They are my comrades. We have done a really good job in the movement. I hope that we can keep it up, not to satisfy ourselves but to satisfy the human living condition for asylum seekers and for others. Because you know if you live in a place and your neighbor is not living in a good situation, this may affect you in many different ways, not necessarily directly, but indirectly, you will see side effects. And this will affect the community of Geneva one day. We are seeking good living conditions as well as a peaceful integration for asylum seekers into the community of Geneva.

Asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are human beings like any other humans. Their problem is that they do not have another choice. They are seeking in every way they can to reach dignity, freedom and better life conditions. They want to live in peace. They want to live in a human situation. We are thinking in the long term. Some of these people, of course, will find a better life in the future here. But the side effects of the first hospitality and the first welcoming they received

will never be forgotten. So we are trying to correct this and not to put the whole blame on politics here or on others, as we are part of this. We want to shoulder some responsibility for our situation ourselves. But we have to organize ourselves, to facilitate communication and to find a real good way to end this crisis. And I think it's possible to create good living conditions for asylum seekers. It's not easy, but it's possible!

Cette brochure est le résultat de notre rencontre avec des requérants d'asile mobilisés pour dénoncer leurs conditions d'existence à Genève. Leur lutte, leurs paroles et leurs actions sont relayées sur le blog:

<https://stopbunkers.wordpress.com>