

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

**Nonfiction**



# SHATTERED LIVES

AROUND THE WORLD, MORE THAN 50 MILLION PEOPLE ARE REFUGEES, CHASED FROM THEIR HOME COUNTRIES BY WAR AND VIOLENCE. THIS IS THE STORY OF ONE OF THEM.

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



MUHAMMAD HAMED/REUTERS (GIRL BEHIND FENCE); TEUN VOETEN/PANOS (KIDS SITTING ON FLOOR); OSMAN ORSAL/REUTERS/CORBIS (BOY BEHIND BARBED WIRE); MURAD SEZER/REUTERS (BOY IN TURTLENECK); TOM PILSTON/PANOS (GIRL BROWN COAT); JUMIT BEKTAS/REUTERS (BOY IN TURTLENECK); AMAL MASRALLAH/EPA/NEWSCOM (BOY'S HOLDING FENCE); ODD ANDERSEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (GIRL WITH GREY SCARF); UMIT BEKTAS/REUTERS (BOY BEHIND BLUE CURTAIN); KHALIL HAMRA/AP PHOTO (GIRLS WITH BALLOON)

## AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

What challenges do refugees face in their host countries?

**D**ania\* and her family huddled in a hole in the ground, terrified, as explosions shattered the world around them. The artillery fire went on and on, each explosion inflicting new devastation. Houses and stores blew up. Cars exploded. Roads turned to rubble.

In Syria, where Dania and her family lived, a brutal civil war had been raging for years. Dania's father had dug the hole to protect the family during attacks. It wasn't until the end of the day, when the shelling finally stopped, that Dania, her parents, and her three younger siblings emerged at last.

Dania could still remember what life had been like before the war, how she had been a regular kid in a regular family. She had lived in a



spacious four-room home with a beautiful garden that bloomed with olive trees, a mulberry tree that Dania dearly loved, and a canopy of grapevines under which it had been the family tradition to sleep on Thursday nights. Dania looked forward to going to school each day and took pride in the gold stars her teacher gave her for completing her homework on time.

But that life was gone.

Warring factions were bombarding her village with missiles and heavy artillery. Her uncle was killed when a missile hit the town's bakery. Her school had closed after a shell exploded next to it, sending students scrambling for cover under their desks.

By the summer of 2013, it was clear that the hole in the backyard would no longer keep the family safe. They faced a devastating choice: stay and risk death or leave everything behind—their home, their friends, their country.

In September, their choice became clear.

They fled.

### A Brutal War

The war in Syria began in 2011, when peaceful protests against President Bashar al-Assad and his oppressive government turned violent and the country erupted into a civil

war. Four major rebel groups, each divided into many subgroups, are now locked in a brutal fight for control of the country. Some groups want freedom. Others, like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are terrorist groups bent on domination and bringing death to their enemies.

The Syrian conflict has claimed at least 200,000 lives and created one of the largest humanitarian crises in nearly two decades. More than 3 million Syrians, half of them children like Dania, have escaped the violence by fleeing to other countries, often with little more than what they can carry in their arms. Most have found a haven in nearby Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, or Turkey.

In the fall of 2013, Dania's family settled in Akkar, a sparsely populated mountainous region in northern Lebanon. They are now refugees, or "displaced persons." They are strangers in a foreign land, struggling to survive, trying to make sense of what has happened to them, and—perhaps most of all—wondering if it will ever be safe to go home.

### On the Front Lines

Throughout history, people have been forced to flee their countries. Some, like Dania, run from war. Others are chased from their homes by disease, natural disasters,



or persecution. But the modern concept of a refugee did not emerge until World War I, which brought devastation on a scale never seen before. By the war's end, millions faced homelessness, starvation, and disease.

But it was World War II, which began 21 years later, that caused the world's refugee population to explode. By the time the war ended in 1945, there were more than 40 million refugees in Europe alone. It was a disaster that no country could resolve on its own. Finally, the international community banded together to create an organization entirely focused on helping refugees. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 to provide food, water, and shelter to those who could not go home.

The UNHCR was meant to exist for just three years—long enough,

it was believed, to help the refugees of World War II get back on their feet. But as the years went on, new crises developed around the globe. It soon became clear that the UNHCR needed to be permanent and that other nongovernmental organizations would need to help too.

Today, thousands of aid workers from UNHCR, Save the Children, UNICEF, and numerous other aid groups dedicate their lives to helping refugees like Dania in some of the most dangerous regions of the world.

### Dire Conditions

Each refugee crisis presents its own unique challenges. In Lebanon, where Dania now



lives, conditions for refugees are particularly dire. It's common to see children with nothing more than a pair of pajamas to wear. There are no formal refugee camps (see sidebar on next page). Instead, hundreds of makeshift settlements have sprung up. Some refugees are renting apartments until their savings run out. Others live in abandoned buildings. One group has even made their home in an old prison, with one

\*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED FOR PRIVACY.

cell per family. Driving through the Lebanese countryside, you might see 20 or 30 tents on the side of the road or in a field. The fact that Syrian refugees are scattered so widely makes it especially difficult for aid workers to distribute desperately needed food, supplies, and medical care.

For the past year, Dania, now 11, and her family have been living in a small garage. They feel lucky to have running water, but they do not have heat—a major hardship, as winter temperatures in Akkar regularly dip below freezing. Dania's father finds jobs where he can, but opportunities for good-paying work are rare. Lebanon already had a high poverty rate; the sudden surge of refugees has put a strain on its resources. (One in four people there are Syrian refugees.) Many Lebanese bitterly resent having to share their country.

There is so much that Dania misses about the life she left behind: her home, her friends, her beloved mulberry tree. But she especially misses her school.

### A Big Challenge

Before the war, 90 percent of Syrian children were enrolled in school. By 2013, it had become too dangerous for most kids, including Dania and her siblings, to attend.

For refugees, getting an education in their host countries can be a big challenge. Schools are often too expensive, crowded, or difficult to reach. Many refugee kids have to work during school hours to

help support their families. School supplies are a problem too. For kids like Dania, everyday items—a pencil, a sheet of paper, a plastic bag, a pair of socks—are precious **commodities**.

Recognizing the importance of education, aid workers have come up with some creative solutions. In Lebanon, for example, Save the

Children is working closely with the government to ensure that as many Syrian children as possible receive an education. "We help enroll them in both formal and non-formal education programs," says Save the Children spokeswoman Francine Uenuma. Many Lebanese public schools now operate in shifts, with a second school day starting when

the normal school day ends. In 2013, nearly 90,000 Syrian children were educated through this system. Another 75,000 participated in informal programs, which provide homework assistance, classes to help kids catch up, and more. The organizations that run such programs often foot the bill for school supplies.

### Back to School

This past fall, Dania heard from a neighbor that a school for refugees was opening in Akkar. It was thrilling news. The school is a one-story building with a small yard and eight classrooms. Two hundred students are enrolled there. In October, Dania became one of them.

Every day, a minibus takes Dania to her new school. It's a 10-minute drive along isolated, mountainous roads—far too dangerous and cold to walk. At school, Dania is learning math, French, Arabic, English, singing, and music. She also gets refreshments: bananas, croissants, and juice. →

## INFORMATIONAL TEXT

# The Zaatari Refugee Camp

120,000 Syrian refugees now call this makeshift city in Jordan home.

**T**hree years ago, this flat, arid piece of land was nothing more than a dusty field. Today, it is the sprawling Zaatari [ZAT-ur-ee] refugee camp, home to about 120,000 Syrian refugees. It's 7 miles from the Syrian border—so close that you can hear the shelling, a reminder of horrors narrowly escaped.

The UNHCR built the camp over a two-week period in July 2012 to help the refugees streaming across the border. It has since become one of the largest camps

in the world. If Zaatari, which is run by the UNHCR in partnership with the government of Jordan, were an official city, it would be the fourth-largest city in Jordan.

For those who live in the camp, housing and electricity are free. Food



A pickup game

KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (SOCCER GAME); KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (ZAAATARI REFUGEE CAMP)



Getting water

KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (GETTING WATER); BENOIT DE FREINE/PHOTO NEWS/CORBIS (SCHOOL)

distribution centers pass out free food, like bread, lentils, and rice. Though water is delivered several times a day, there are still shortages. Residents can bathe and wash their clothes only once every few weeks.

In spite of the challenges, life continues to flourish in Zaatari. Neighborhoods have sprung up. Some streets have lights and paved roads.

Houses have been cobbled together from cinder blocks, tents, and shipping containers. A few streets even have indoor toilets. Medical services are available, and many schools have been built. Along what has become a kind of market street, you can buy homemade baklava or get a haircut.

That's not to say that Zaatari isn't



A makeshift school

a grim place. The living conditions are difficult. Crime and disease are constant concerns. Still, some aid workers see Zaatari as an example of how future refugee camps might be managed. Many camps are little more than giant human holding pens that can feel a lot like prisons. The Zaatari camp, on the other hand, seems almost like a bustling little city, with a vibrant culture and a sense of community.

Historically, refugee camps have been temporary—places to stay for a short time. But the reality is that Syrian refugees in Zaatari may have to call the camp home for many years to come. ●

Since returning to school, Dania has been working hard. Because she'd been out of a classroom for so long, she was placed in second grade. But she doesn't mind. She is in an accelerated learning program to help her catch up.

Schools like Dania's don't provide just education. They give aid workers a way to connect with families and meet individual needs. For Dania's family, Save the Children provided a weather kit to help insulate their garage from the cold and the wind, and a job program to help Dania's dad earn an income. Counseling services are also provided to help traumatized children like Dania cope with their experiences in the war and the bleak realities of life as a refugee.

## Looking Ahead

In June 2014, the UNHCR reported that the number of refugees worldwide had surpassed 50 million, the most since World War II. These men, women, and



Dania attends school in Lebanon.



Francine Uenuma (above) and Marion McKeone (inset) from Save the Children meet with refugees in Lebanon. Francine and Marion are two of many aid workers dedicated to helping displaced children. They also helped report this story.

children are scattered across dozens of countries. Their living conditions vary widely. Some live in well-organized camps that resemble cities. Others barely subsist in informal settlements that can be grim, overcrowded, and crime-ridden. All face a risk of outbreaks of dangerous diseases like influenza, pneumonia, cholera, and dysentery.

It is easy to be **daunted** by the number of refugees. Yet as aid workers know, each refugee is a human being, not a number. And small triumphs are happening every day.

For Dania, being in school again has had a profound impact on her life. She has a safe place to go each day and a sense of normalcy.

The longing for home is always there, of course, even if home is a distant reality; the war in Syria

could continue for years. So for now, life must go on as best it can.

At press time, Dania had recently found out that a missile destroyed her family's house in Syria. Her father promises that he will build a new house one day, and plant a new mulberry tree just for her.

In spite of everything she has been through, Dania holds on to her dreams for the future. She has made a new friend, another Syrian girl, named Nadeen. They sit together each day, studying, reading, and learning.

With pride, Dania says that she intends to become a doctor when she grows up.

"I will wear a nice white outfit and have a stethoscope around my neck," she says. "I won't take any money from the poor and will treat them for free." ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Explain the challenges Dania faces living as a refugee outside her country. How are those challenges being addressed? Respond in a short essay, using text evidence to support your ideas. Send your essay to **DANIA CONTEST**. Five winners will get *The Red Pencil* by Andrea Pinkney. *Scope* will make a donation to Save the Children in the name of all *Scope* readers.



GET THIS  
ACTIVITY  
ONLINE