

# MAGAZINE

## Different refugees, different responses

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Commodities such as pencils and pens and paper are scarce and reserved for older school children, so the five year olds learn to write on the sand at Camp Tolumat, Middle East. Photo: United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

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### There was a time when thousands of Europeans were displaced by war. And they found, in supreme irony, safe sanctuary in Syria, Palestine and Iran

It was the pinnacle of World War II. Europeans were fleeing in tens of thousands, from the violence, slaughter and enslavement. People from Eastern Europe were, in particular, badly affected by the bloody conflict. And they headed to West Asia in search of a safe sanctuary. They did find it – Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Iran welcomed them with open arms.

“The friendly Persian people crowded round the buses shouting what must have been words of welcome and pushed gifts of dates, nuts, roasted peas with raisins and juicy pomegranates through the open windows,” recalls Krystyna Skwarko, a Pole who came as a refugee to Iran with her two children at the break of World War II. She wrote a memorable account of it in her book, *The Invited*.

In supreme irony, today, when refugees from West Asia, fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq, reach the borders of Eastern Europe, they are greeted with barbed wire fences and rubber bullets. Xenophobic governments in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have turned their backs on these refugees, also fleeing war and persecution. The Slovakian government has even made a manifestly macabre announcement that it will only take in Christian refugees, and that only in very small numbers. Poland’s right-wing government too has been unwelcoming.

An estimated 100,000 to 300,000 Poles came to Iran when Hitler attacked the country at the beginning of World War II, and Stalin, as part of his non-aggression pact with Hitler, carved out the eastern territories of Poland and occupied them in 1939. He interned hundreds of thousands of Poles in forced labour camps. To escape these harsh conditions – imposed by Hitler’s onslaught and Stalin’s forced slavery – the exodus began. People trekked thousands of miles to reach a safe haven. Once in Iran, the refugees again picked up the strands of their lives. Little Polish settlements thrived near Tehran and many Poles would later fondly recall that crucial sojourn.

As the war progressed, more refugees arrived, from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, and they were housed in camps run by the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA). Many humanitarian organisations joined the effort and subsequently it became a UN-led effort under the aegis of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNNRA).

Earlier this year, the U.S.-based non-profit media organisation Public Radio International, with help from the Social Welfare History Archives of the University of Minnesota, pieced together the notes that had been maintained in these camps.

A fascinating picture emerged. About 40,000 refugees, mostly women and children, were cared for in camps spread across North Africa and Central Asia. The MERRA programme had three camps in Egypt, one in Aleppo, Syria and one in Nuseirat, Palestine. There was even one unofficial camp in Amman, Jordan. In Nuseirat, a refugee who was an artist, pasted many paintings on the walls of a kindergarten inside the camp, making the classrooms “bright and cheerful,” recalls an official.

Well-to-do people in the area donated toys, games, and dolls to the kindergarten, causing a camp official to remark that it “compared favourably with many [schools] in the U.S.” The Moses Wells camp in Egypt was located across 100 acres of desert and the refugees were allowed to spend some time by the Red Sea each day.

And today we have Europe’s response to the ongoing refugee crisis, which has brought it under severe criticism. The humanitarian medical aid organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), deeply disappointed at the European response to the refugee tragedy, decided on June 17, to not accept EU funds any more for the crucial work it does in 69 countries. MSF has termed the response as one of dangerous deterrence, aimed at pushing people and their sufferings away from the shores of Europe.

In the face of an unprecedented humanitarian tragedy in West Asia today, such images from the past haunt us, prompting the world to search its conscience, urging it to adopt a more humane response.

*A. Rangarajan is a freelance writer.*