

ORANJE, THE COLOR OF HOPE

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Ranim pulls her veil a little closer around her face as she opens the door. Her home is one of over 200 identical trailers spread across a grassy plot formerly known as Pipodorp (English translation is Clowntown), which currently hosts nearly 450 foreign refugees. She agrees to an interview, primarily because she is one of the only people in the center who is conversational in English - she used to be an English teacher in Syria. A few times a week she attends Dutch classes with an elderly volunteer. She seems happy to be sharing her story with us.

When asked about isolation, however, she pauses.

“I wish we were in a city, not a big city like Amsterdam, but a small city would be nice. Still, I am glad to be here—in Syria today, in my hometown, they will throw bombs. Everyone has been told to leave their homes.”

There is something bizarre about discussing Syria in Oranje, a town so small that its beginning and end can be captured in one panoramic photograph. While at first glance it may appear to be an archetypical example of rural life in The Netherlands, this place has a way of mixing tragedy with normalcy, foreign with familiar. As she talks about loss and brutality, a blue curtain with flowers on it blocks out light and a teapot whines on her left.

“I fear for my mother and brother.”

Bombs seem far, far away from Oranje, but to many of the town’s newest residents, bombs and violence are a daily part of the war-torn countries that they will return to if they are not granted asylum in The Netherlands. In this place, this unpopular - and nearly bankrupt - vacation resort that has been rented by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), where refugees undergo the third phase of the Dutch asylum procedure.

Upon arrival in The Netherlands, refugees often have no more than the clothes on their backs. Long before they find shelter in an asylum center (AZC) like Oranje, they have been staying in a central location for two weeks. Here they are interviewed about their reasons to flee their home country, and if these reasons are compelling, they are transferred to an AZC. At the AZC they are given the opportunity to recover from their trip, and find respite from their home situations. During this period, their application for asylum will be started. In The Netherlands, people may apply for asylum up to three times, meaning that they can appeal even after a negative outcome. After three unsuccessful attempts, they are required to leave the country. Ideally, this all happens over the course of several months, but having over 1.000 new files coming in each week delays this procedure.

COA director Yvonne Kroon explains: “The procedure is very complex - decisions cannot be taken by a single person. Often you’ll find that people are sent from pillar to post.”

While refugees wait after their initial interviews, they spend the last part of the procedure in an asylum center like the one in Oranje. In Oranje’s AZC, refugees are kept in a rural area, away from the majority of Dutch society. Despite this, however, many feel welcomed by both the quiet of country life and the people that they meet.

Ranim explains: “The other Arab men and women here are our friends—we share a culture, an immediate understanding. The local people from The Netherlands are also very friendly, constantly saying ‘hello’. We feel welcomed.”

The mayor of Oranje, however, says that the attitudes of the locals have not always been so inviting.

On RTV Drenthe, a regional news station, a local disclosed: “I don’t like that I got to know that the asylum seekers were coming to Oranje on the radio, instead of being informed earlier. And let me be clear. That these centers need to be build, OK, I am at ease with that, but 1400? That is a huge amount, I didn’t know they even had that many houses at the site.”

When people found out that the center was going to be placed in Oranje, they feared crime and violence. The inhabitants were accustomed to leaving their back door open, but some worried that this would be something of the past. This fear was exploited by the media.

Though refugees are coming into European countries like Germany, Sweden, and Norway with frequency, the news climate in The Netherlands remains hostile toward asylum seekers: the media played a big part in stirring up xenophobic sentiments. Newspaper headlines and publically disseminated pamphlets reading:

“Soon we will all be standing in the cold”,

“Not in my back yard”,

“The doors are not open in Oranje”

dominated the popular discourse.

The media spread the idea that sheltering the refugees in Oranje was unacceptable and inhumane. For a great part, the arguments focused on how the center would create an unbalanced population, with asylum seekers outnumbering the native Dutch.

As a result, the Dutch population started to develop biases about the arrival of asylum seekers and began to express their worries for a possible breakdown of their identity - they were afraid that soon they would all be guests in their own town.

Beyond this, some argued that placing asylum seekers in the Dutch province would leave them without possibilities for further personal development - the nearest village with a supermarket is situated at 15 minutes distance by public transport. People argued that asylum seekers would get bored and fall into so-called 'cattle forming', with large groups of people organizing themselves in an entirely segregated manner. Critics predicted that this boredom and pack-mentality would eventually result in criminality and unsafety in the otherwise peaceful, provincial town. Though newsprint is just words on a page, these predictions led to action: when word got out that refugees would be placed in Oranje's former Clowntown, one security company passed around flyers reading 'Are you properly insured?' in the assumption that the influx of asylum seekers would bring violence and crime to the area.

The owner of the local pub, one of the only businesses in Oranje, speaks with resentment about this act: "It's horrible how people pick up on this, they should be so ashamed of themselves."

He furthermore explains his view on the role of media:

"The media was a big part of the reason that the townspeople protested. They called for local politicians to limit the number of refugees in the center."

The effect? Kroon explains that the political situation has led to frustration.

Because 82% of the locals that were questioned by RTV Drenthe feared crime, political parties became divided about their views on the fate of the center. When the COA requested a license from the municipality that would enable them to transform the emergency shelter into an AZC hosting for 800 to 1000 people in Oranje, the local parties reacted in wildly different ways.

The CDA (the Christian Democrats), the ChristenUnie (the Christian Conservatives) and GroenLinks (the Green Party) were in favor of granting the COA a license for 800-1000 people. The PvdA (the Labour Party) was initially more in favor of limiting this number to a total of 600 people. The VVD (the Conservative Liberals) initiated a meeting with the council of citizens, which resulted in an agreement that allowed for Oranje to become an AZC with a cap of 700 people, functioning primarily as a shelter in which families can be reunited.

The architecture of the compound (i.e. being a former family holiday park) suits this purpose perfectly, as it leaves room for each family to have their own separate home. The agreement also states a restriction in the amount of time the AZC is permitted to reside in Oranje: their license will end in three years. There are no elections planned before this date, making it unlikely that a political change of mind will affect the shelter's fate. As such, Kroon deals with the reality that her dreams of a bustling camp will never be realized.

“This camp can house 1400 but local politics has made it so the camp is only allowed to take in 700 people. There are 700 empty beds even though the crime rate remains the same,”

A petition asking the mayor to reduce the number of asylum seekers in Oranje to a maximum of 250 was signed by 400 people, among which were nearly all 140 residents of the town. Eventually a decision was issued by the local government which stated that the COA would be required to limit the number of refugees to 700. They substantiated their claim by hanging banners all over the town with the text: “50 asylum seekers = OK, more...NO!”

After all that effort, however, the only rise in crime or violence that appears to have taken place is an increase in traffic incidents. The pub owner jokingly tells us: “the asylum seekers riding their bikes on the wrong side of the street is an interesting sight. They sometimes cause dangerous traffic situations.”

The occasional bike accident seems a strange justification for refusing to run the center at full capacity. Walking around the three neighborhoods in Oranje's Clown town, vacant houses are everywhere. The silence reminds visitors that this center is only half-full, and the missing people are felt in the absence of heavy laundry lines, in the presence of empty playgrounds.

They are also felt in the coffers of the COA. Inge, a worker at the center, explains the situation.

“The center is only half full, yet we pay the same as we would if every bed was filled. When our lease expires in two years, we will have to leave—Oranje is too expensive to maintain.”

This, Inge thinks, is a shame. Though Oranje is not perfect, Inge believes that it has the potential to serve as a model to other centers. Inge's sentiment supports something which is clear from the moment one steps into the center: despite the emptiness, strange clown paintings, and rural setting, Oranje is a fairly nice place.

Oranje is one of the only asylum centers in The Netherlands without multi-family homes, which makes it possible for entire families to stay together without the intrusion of strangers into their

intimate space. This is especially extra helpful for Arabic women, who may otherwise need to sleep in their hijabs because of the presence of non-related men.

There is a school, Dutch classes are provided by volunteers, and we even pass by a small petting zoo with a couple of chickens, ducks and geese. Bins of footballs and small toys sit around the main office, and a few children ride on the back of bikes greeting those who enter the compound. A bike repair shop and supermarket serve as hubs of activity, and the center is hoping to open more communal spaces for asylum seekers in the coming months. To combat the boredom that comes to the asylum seekers as they undergo their procedures, those who wish to work can contact the main office. Even though the owner of the holiday park has a maintenance service for garden and facilities, some asylum seekers are given the opportunity to work on the compound for a little extra money. Unfortunately only a few are given this chance, and Kroon ambitions to expand this number, as she believes it is beneficial to residents' personal development.

Kroon: "It is rather complicated to match asylum seekers to appropriate work, we have difficulties coupling people to work they like. Six months is also fairly short to educate people." The consequences are that only the lucky few get this possibility, something you actually grant everybody.

"I like it here," Ranim says, "I am happy to be reunited with my family, and I feel cared for. I want to stay, to work, to learn. Then I will be better prepared for when I leave and have my own car and place in this country."

She shops for her family on a budget of 162 euros a week, doable for a family of three, and her child finally has a yard to play in. After years of being afraid, she says that she finally feels safe.

Maybe it is situations like hers that have caused the local residents to change their mind about linking the word 'refugee' with 'criminal'.

"The politicians have decided that we can all go up and barricade the town, but the townspeople have finally realized that this would not help," Kroon explains. "They think to themselves 'maybe this will bring opportunities. It is likely that a lot of them will be good at playing soccer, and maybe I will have a lot of new players for in the local teams.' They begin to realize that this could bring prosperity to the area and that the others are not so different after all."

The owner of the local pub tells us that one of the biggest critics of the emergency shelter has opened a small grocery store where he sells food to the people living in the AZC. Is this a sign of changing

sentiment, or is it mere Dutch salesmanship? It seems another example of Dutch tolerance based on the opportunity to earn a living.

A huge change from their initial reaction, local people in Oranje explain that after seeing people with missing limbs and third degree burns from bomb explosions, they are so happy that the asylum seekers can come to their town. These locals say that they feel proud that their town can, in some small way, serve as a starting point for the process of recovery. Is this change of sentiment, however, too little too late?

Currently, over 1.000 people a week report for asylum in The Netherlands. This number rose quickly due to the increasing civil wars in countries such as Syria and Eritrea. With the COA having difficulties finding enough appropriate housing for these people in the northern part of The Netherlands, the negative impact of limiting Oranje's capacity is arguably immense.

The number of people in need of shelter has been fluctuating immensely over the past few years. In 2013 just over 15.000 beds were occupied nationally, and in 2014, this number increased to a little under 25.000. The COA is in need of flexible solutions like Oranje to be able to adapt to the ever-growing number of asylum seekers entering The Netherlands. Building semi-permanent housing structures that can be torn down is one way to arrange housing quickly, using existing facilities or a holiday park like Oranje is another, arguably more eco-friendly and sustainable, way to deal with this issue.

The park has a lot of positive features to it, as it was intended for the summer recreation of 1400 people. It is an interesting thought that a park filled with people celebrating their holidays in Oranje wasn't viewed in a comparable way as it was when these same people were replaced by 1000 asylum seekers.

Why do some people see putting asylum seekers in Oranje as unacceptable? Is it indeed a relatively peaceful place for refugees to find respite? Does the Dutch identity truly require an all-native population? What are the potential consequences of inviting in an increasingly diverse population? Are local townspeople little more than herd animals guided by the assumptions put forth by the media? Is the media, conversely, right to be suspicious?

These questions should be left for each person to decide individually. To examine biases, to challenge dogma, people who want to judge Oranje honestly should visit and strive to form their own opinions without the influence of the media. Hate it or love it, Oranje and places like it will not be leaving the Netherlands anytime soon. Until we get rid of war, we are obligated to help those who have been

affected by violent regimes, and aid those who come knocking on the door of our nation, hungry for respite and a better future. How we answer that knock will decide the fate of `Oranje`. The fate of the Netherlands.