Corona on Two Continents: Same and Different

By Russell Frank

Ever since I saw the scar on Morteza's left arm, I've reminded myself that there are far worse things than cabin fever.

Ever since I visited the camp where Morteza's family has lived since 2016, I've remembered not to complain about the places where I have taken shelter during the "shelter in place" phase of the coronavirus pandemic.

Ever since I heard about the disappearance of Morteza's father, nothing happening in my own life has seemed all that dire.

Morteza and his family left Afghanistan to escape the Taliban. Taliban "recruiters" had poured boiling water on Morteza's arm to pressure him into joining them. A Taliban member who happened to be a relative had tried to kidnap and marry Morteza's sister, 12 years old at the time.

The family – father, three children and some other relatives – fled to Iran. For two months they were held captive, threatened, beaten and extorted by traffickers.

Finally they made it to the Turkish coast, where a boat was to take them to the Greek island of Chios. The boat's capacity was 50 people; 90 were allowed on board.

“We were the last family,” Morteza told me. “Last person was my father.” The smugglers told Morteza’s father there was no more room. The family pleaded to be kept together.

Morteza’s father said, “Don’t argue or they’ll kick us all out. You go – wait for me at port. I will come with the next one.”

He wasn’t on the next one, or any after that. They haven’t seen or heard of him since.

At 22, Morteza became head of the family. Now, at 26, he already has some grey flecks in his dark hair.

I met Morteza in Thessaloniki, Greece’s second-largest city, where I had planned to spend the 2019-2020 academic year teaching journalism and interviewing refugees. Throughout the past decade, with the peak year being 2015, people fleeing violence or persecution in the Middle East and Africa had made their way to Greece by land and sea.

Few of these refugees intended to stay in Greece, with its shambles of an economy and dismal job market. They came because Greece was close to Turkey, and they came to Turkey because they could get there by car and bus. The goal was to get to northern Europe, where the jobs were. Greece was only the portal.

But Europe got nervous about large numbers of non-Europeans entering their lands all at once, and right-wing demagogues were quick to demonize. One by one, Greece’s neighbors closed their borders and the refugees got trapped in a country where a quarter of the workforce was unemployed. Camps that were meant to accommodate people for a few weeks became semi-permanent homes.

Morteza's family spent their first year of camp life in a tent. Then they lived in a shipping container without rooms or a bathroom. Now they have sleeping rooms and a common room and a bathroom, but it's still a shipping container and the container is still on a cheerless old military base surrounded by a wire fence.

Everyone in the camp is waiting. Eventually, they hope, they will be granted asylum, get Greek passports and resume their journey to the parts of Europe where they think they'll have a better chance of getting decent jobs.

That kind of hope can be paralyzing: Why do anything to improve your situation in Greece if you're not going to stay? Some guys in Morteza's situation pass the time playing cards. Some can't even summon the energy to do that. They spend their days gazing into the distance as if they're waiting for a bus that's due any minute.

Morteza has taken a different approach. He has learned enough Greek and English to get a job as a translator with an organization that helps asylum seekers with their food, clothing, legal, medical and housing needs. He works from 9 to 5, then goes to school from 6 to 10, studying toward a high school equivalency diploma.

He's found an apartment, and if he can get the landlord to fix the roof so the rain doesn't get in, he was hoping to move his sister and brother into it this spring.

After I interviewed Morteza I asked him if I could "shadow" him for a day to get a feel for the life he is making for himself in Greece. My plan was to meet him at the camp in the morning, ride the bus with him back into the city center and then follow him as he made his round of translating appointments.

That was supposed to happen on Friday, March 20. The night before, we heard that Greece's prime minister was about to announce the cessation of all flights into and out of the country as part of an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. It was time for my wife and me to go home while we still could. I told Morteza we would have to postpone.

Our flight felt like flight, as in fleeing. Fleetingly, I felt like a displaced person or a refugee. Then I reminded myself that I knew real displaced persons and real refugees. Next to them, and the hardships they had endured and continued to endure, I had only been inconvenienced.

I've been in touch with Morteza since we got back to the States. At this writing, there are no COVID-19 cases in the camp. Public health experts fear disaster if the virus comes. Like so much of the world's labor force, Morteza is working from home. He gets out only to go to the supermarket or the pharmacy.

"Same here," I said, only it's not at all the same here. "Here" is a comfy house. "There" is a wire-fenced military base that has been converted into a camp, and a shipping container that has been converted into a house.

Morteza says he's bored at home and that's it's like being imprisoned. I might say the same thing. But it wouldn't mean the same thing.