

Not refugees. People.

Putting a human face on Syria's refugee crisis.

SYRIANS ARE ALL OVER THE NEWS. AS THEY ESCAPE FROM THE armed conflict in their country, they have become fodder for debate among politicians and commentators around the world: Should we welcome them into Europe? Should we cap the number of refugees coming in? How should we integrate them? We see their faces on TV and in newspapers and magazines, alongside stories full of numbers and figures. They become an abstraction. By leaving their homeland in such large numbers—some five million in six years of civil war—Syrians have caused some to advocate closing their borders, while others have shown empathy and called for a welcoming culture.

Dutch photographer Thijs Heslenfeld follows the news, and when it comes to Syrian refugees, he sees that there's something missing—the notion that refugees are people. They are people with dreams, hopes, fears. People to talk with, not just about.

Together with journalist Rinke Verkerk, Heslenfeld made repeated visits to Lebanon and Jordan over three consecutive years, meeting dozens of Syrian refugees in camps, cities and villages. If there was one thing that united them all, it was their desire to go back home one day. Syrians, as Heslenfeld notes, “talk endlessly about the mountains they love, the river that flows past their home, the bread from the baker in their street and the olives from their own trees. Oh, Syria...”

Their book *Anything Out of Nothing* is a unique collection of photos and stories of the Syrians they met during their travels. Most of them come from a large refugee camp, Al-Za'atari, in Jordan, where Syrians are “basically imprisoned,” says Heslenfeld. “There are armoured army vehicles all around the camp to prevent the refugees from leaving without permission. They're not allowed to work, the children often don't go to school and the future is far from clear.”

Amid the discussion between those who see Syrian refugees as potential terrorists and rapists and those who see them as vulnerable and deserving of charity, Heslenfeld came to a different conclusion. “These are resilient people, with the ability to remain hopeful, even in dire circumstances, and work on something positive.” The book title reflects that spirit. It was a quote from a policeman who noted how fast the camp was changing over time, partly because refugees were so good at recycling materials. “These people,” the policeman said, “can make anything out of nothing.” | MARCO VISSCHER

**THREE BOYS AT AL-ZA'ATARI,
MAFRAQ, JORDAN**

A TOWERING HOMEMADE SWING
IS SCREWED TO A TOILET BLOCK.
SOMEWHERE IN THIS CAMP A FATHER,
BROTHER OR UNCLE TOOK THE
TROUBLE TO WELD TOGETHER A
PLAYGROUND ATTRACTION ON THESE
DISCONSOLATE SAND FLATS.



**GIRL AL ZA'ATARI,
MAFRAQ, JORDAN**

WE MET THIS LOVELY GIRL WHILE SHE WAS HELPING HER FAMILY PREPARE FOOD. THAT FACT FELT LIKE A SIGN OF HOPE. ONLY ONE YEAR EARLIER, WHEN WE WERE VISITING THE CAMP FOR THE FIRST TIME, PEOPLE WERE ALMOST COMPLETELY DEPENDENT ON THE UNHCR FOOD RATIONS.





**AHMED, FROM HAMA,
NOW LIVING AT BEIRUT, LEBANON**

IF YOU MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH AHMED, HE SMILES SHYLY. HE WORKS FROM 7 TO 7 IN A COFFEEHOUSE. "WHEN I GET HOME AFTER A DAY AT WORK, GRANDMA ALWAYS SAYS, 'GOD BE WITH YOU.' THEN SHE WASHES ME. AND SHE PREPARES DINNER FOR ME. AFTER THAT," AHMED SAYS, "I FEEL A LITTLE HAPPIER."

MOHAMMED, WALEH, ISRA, SANA AND ZAHRA, FROM AL-RAGGAH, AT BEKAA VALLEY, LEBANON

"I'M A FATHER," MOHAMMED SAYS. "IF MY CHILD WANTS SOMETHING AND I CAN'T GIVE IT TO HER, THEN IT FEELS AS IF MY HEART BURNS. IF I HAVE NO HOPE, THEN MY CHILDREN HAVE NO HOPE, EITHER. SO IF MY GRANDSON ASKS, 'WHY DON'T WE LIVE IN A HOUSE?' I SAY, 'WE'RE ONLY SPENDING THE SUMMER HERE.' I LIE TO HIM SO THAT HE DOESN'T FEEL SAD."





**ROHA, NOW LIVING AT AL-ZA'ATARI,
MAFRAQ, JORDAN**

I SEE ROHA STANDING AT THE
CROSSROADS. HAIR BLOWING IN THE
WIND. SHY. I SEE A PRETTY GIRL WHO
REALLY WANTS TO BE BEAUTIFUL. ALL SHE
WANTS IS FOR ME TO NOTICE HER TOO.





**SALEH, FROM DARA'A,
NOW LIVING AT AL-ZA'ATARI, MAFRAQ, JORDAN**

"I'M A BIOLOGY TEACHER AND I MISS MY PROFESSION TERRIBLY. GEN TECHNOLOGY IS MY PASSION. BUT I CAN'T PUT THAT TO ANY USE HERE." SALAH HAS BEEN MORE CHEERFUL RECENTLY. HE MANAGED TO GET HOLD OF A COUPLE OF PARAKEETS WITH A CAGE. "HARDLY ANYONE HAS PARAKEETS. BUT AT HOME, IN SYRIA, LOTS OF PEOPLE KEEP BIRDS. THAT'S WHY I'M SO HAPPY WITH THEM. IN A WAY, IT MAKES ME FEEL I'M HOME AGAIN."

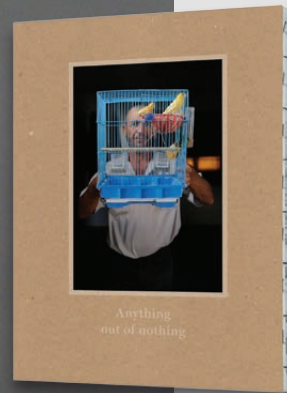


**HASSAN, FROM DARA'A,
NOW LIVING AT UMM EL-JIMAL, JORDAN**

"I USED TO FIND PEACE AMONG THE ANIMALS AND WHEN I TENDED MY OLIVE TREES," HASSAN SAYS. "THAT GAVE ME LIFE AND FREEDOM. I COULD REALLY ENJOY THE AIR OUTDOORS, THE SMELLS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE. NOW, I HAVE PLANTED OLIVE TREES IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE HERE. ONLY A FEW. NOT ENOUGH, BUT THEY HELP."

ANYTHING OUT OF NOTHING IS A beautifully designed book. Each copy is hand-bound. As you pick up a copy, you are meant to experience some confusion. It's designed so that the reader will experience "just a tiny

bit of the confusion that characterizes the life of any human being whose life is completely turned upside down the moment he or she becomes a refugee," as Thijs Heslenfeld explains. You can order the book for €27.50 (\$31) plus shipping at anythingoutofnothing.com. For each book sold, €5 goes to the UNHCR program for aid to Syrian refugees in Jordan.



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