

Of squats and warehouses

02.03.2018, Episode 39

Owen in China

Hello, this is Owen and this is my podcast for Friday 2nd March, 2018. I hope you're all doing well. For the first time in my life I'm in Greece. I've come to volunteer [1] with organisations that are supporting refugees and migrants. I've come to help out but also to get a first-hand [2] impression of the refugee crisis. I flew to Athens a couple of weeks ago and then I travelled north to Thessaloniki, where I am now. I have a friend who was here in the summer of 2016 and he put me in touch with [3] a few organisations that are always looking for volunteers.

Today, I'll be talking about a place I visited in Athens and my time in Thessaloniki.

My cousin was in Athens recently working as a volunteer and she told me about a place in Athens called City Plaza. I only had a few days in Athens, so one of the first things I did was to check out City Plaza. In order to get there, I had to walk through a neighbourhood called Exarchia. I instantly fell in love with Exarchia, which is also called the anarchist neighbourhood, so I ended up dividing my time in Athens between City Plaza and Exarchia. City Plaza used to be a big hotel but it went bankrupt [4] after the financial crisis. The building was empty for six years before activists turned it into a squat for refugees. A squat is basically a building that people live in illegally. There are now roughly 400 refugees living there and half of them are children. There are also a few volunteers living there and one of them was nice enough to show me around [5]. They have 24-hour security at the entrance and you have to show a card to get into the building. There's a kitchen where they prepare three meals a day for everyone who lives there and there are some classrooms where volunteers teach Greek or English. There are also some communal spaces and a cafe where they serve tea and coffee. And there's a small medical centre where local doctors and nurses volunteer. The whole thing is basically run by the people who live there. They have weekly meetings that everyone has to attend [6] where they discuss problems and make decisions. All the adults have to help out at least one day a week in the kitchen or the communal areas. They also get help from outsiders, like myself, who come to volunteer.

I asked them where they get money from and they told me they just rely on [7] donations [8]. They don't accept any money from governments or NGOs [9]. It's all very impressive but the future seems very uncertain. A woman recently inherited [10] the building and she's not very happy that there are 400 refugees squatting in her hotel. She's taken legal action [11] and a court has ruled that the refugees have to leave. A date was set and the refugees were told to leave by then. They didn't and nothing happened. No one knows what's going to happen in the future. They are all still living there for now, though, and making the best of it.

From Athens I caught a night train to Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece. Not far from Thessaloniki on the Macedonian border is a place called Idomeni. You might remember hearing about Idomeni on the news. It's where thousands of refugees and migrants were stranded [12] when they closed the border. The large refugee camp in Idomeni was then closed and the military moved the refugees to a number of smaller camps in northern Greece. The NGO I've been volunteering for sends clothes to refugee camps in northern Greece and cooks meals for homeless refugees and migrants in Thessaloniki. They sort clothes that have been donated in a warehouse [13] just outside the city and then send them on to the refugee camps. They also have a kitchen where they



prepare 80 meals twice a day and they distribute the meals around the city. There are about 20 volunteers working in the warehouse and the kitchen. Some have just come for a weekend, others are here for months. People come from all over the world and they have different reasons for being here. Some just want to help, others, like me, have also come to learn more about the refugee crisis. And then there are those that just happened to find out about the crisis whilst on holiday in Greece and then decided to stay and help. Generally things work quite well because everyone is here to help. But, of course, everyone has their own ideas and opinions and whenever there are lots of people involved, there are bound [14] to be problems. There was a Spanish volunteer who started causing problems before he even arrived in Thessaloniki. He'd been invited to join a WhatsApp group for volunteers but they had to kick him out when he started sending everyone spam messages. Then he arrived in Thessaloniki and started telling everyone that he was very well connected in his hometown and that he would be able to raise a lot of money for the organisation, provided [15] he liked what the organisation was doing. On his second day he came to work late and very hungover [16]. However, that didn't stop him from telling everyone about his big ideas on how to improve the day-to-day business of the warehouse. He wouldn't stop annoying the warehouse manager all day with his ideas and complaints. The warehouse then had to be closed for a couple of days because of a problem with a Dutch volunteer. The Dutch volunteer had been staying in the warehouse, so they had to close the warehouse for a few days in order to get rid of [17] him. When the warehouse opened again, the Spanish volunteer demanded to know why they'd dismissed [18] the Dutch volunteer. They told him it was confidential [19] and that they couldn't tell him. But, of course, he wouldn't accept that. He said he had a right to know. Keep in mind that he'd only come to volunteer for two weeks and this happened on his fifth day. When they refused to give him any information, he started spreading rumours [20] and complaining to everyone about the organisation. Eventually they'd had enough and told him to leave. He refused to leave and told them to call the police. They didn't want to call the police, so instead they closed the warehouse again and made everybody leave. Then there were some other problems within the organisation, so the warehouse remained closed even longer. What a mess! [21]

That's about all from me. Thanks for listening. If you have any comments or questions, please use the box below. You can find all our podcasts on our website podclub.ch or by downloading our app. You can also download our vocabulary trainer and you can follow me on Instagram using the hashtags #PodClubOwen and #oweninchina. Gerry will be back in two weeks and I'll be back on Thursday 29th March because of Easter. Until then, take care. Bye!

Glossar: Owen in China

[1] **to volunteer:** here: work without being paid

[2] **first-hand:** from personal experience

[3] **to put so. in touch with so.:** to help so. communicate with so.

[4] **bankrupt:** unable to pay their debts

[5] **to show so. around:** to give so. a tour

[6] **to attend:** to be present

[7] **to rely on sth:** to need sth. to continue

[8] **donation:** money or goods that you give to an organisation that helps people

[9] **NGO:** non-governmental organisation

[10] **to inherit:** to receive property or money from someone who has died

[11] **to take legal action:** to go to court to have sth. decided by the law

[12] **stranded:** stuck somewhere with no way of going anywhere else

[13] **warehouse:** a big building where things are stored

[14] **bound:** sth. that is bound to happen will almost certainly happen

[15] **provided:** only if

[16] **hungover:** tired and ill in the morning if you drink too much the night before

[17] **to get rid of so.:** to make so. go away because they are not wanted

[18] **to dismiss so.:** here: to force so. to leave their job

[19] **confidential:** intended to be kept secret

[20] **to spread a rumour:** to tell others sth. that is maybe not true

[21] **What a mess!:** used to say that a situation is complicated and difficult