

## Interview with Bloggers from *The Migrationist*

<http://themigrationist.net>

3. What triggered your commitment to the cause of migrants and refugees?

### About the Blog and Authors

*The Migrationist* is an international, collaborative academic/professional blog designed to promote public discourse informed by academics and professionals who focus on issues surrounding migration and refugees.

**Lali Foster** is the co-founder of the blog and has worked for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Thailand and Myanmar, the Citizenship Foundation, and Minority Rights Group International (UK).

**Alex Johnson** is a sailor, journalist and currently a communications officer. He has lived and worked across Europe and writes on the refugee crisis in Europe and the Mediterranean.

#### 1. When and how did the idea about starting this blog arise?

**Lali:** In September 2012, my co-founder Amy and I were just finishing up our MA Migration Studies at the University of Sussex. We felt really inspired by all the ideas and reactions we had been discussing with our classmates – both in class and at the pub. We wanted to continue this conversation internationally (Amy is from the States and I'm an Aussie in the UK) but couldn't really see an existing online platform for doing this...so we decided to make one ourselves. Our original idea was to promote public discourse on migration informed by academics and professionals who focus on issues surrounding migration, refugees, and human trafficking. Our intent was to bring discussions, like the ones we were having at University, out of academia and into an accessible forum for anyone interested in migration.

#### 2. Alex, how did you become guest contributor at *The Migrationist*?

**Alex:** I was in Athens in January covering the (first) elections of 2015 and saw the sheer amount of refugees begging, sleeping or just bored and hungry on Omonia square. Having lived in Greece, I wanted to write something on the

worsening situation there and *The Migrationist* seemed like the best place.

**Alex:** I don't see a trigger for this 'cause', in fact I see it a less of a cause and more of a subject we must talk about. This 'crisis' isn't going away and we need to shift our collective attitudes. I don't want to stand by and watch the rise in reactionary nationalism threaten the lives of refugees. The parallels between 1930s and 2010s Europe are astounding and I think we should all speak up. Even if it means just getting the message across to a few friends on social media.

#### 4. How would you formulate the objectives of this blog?

**Lali:** For me, our objectives have changed significantly since we started. This is because of our contributors, our audience and, most significantly, the demands of the current international migration context – which is constantly changing. I think our objective is still to promote public discourse on migration, but perhaps our contributors see it as more of a vehicle to influence decision-makers or the media or just get their writing out there. I think we want to continue to be a conduit for all these things. Importantly, *The Migrationist* does not have a specific political agenda: its politics is as varied as its contributors are. But we do (as editors) place great emphasis on evidence-based writing. As Alex points out below, it's a privilege to be able to be part of an open forum like this and we hope to keep that openness as we move forward.

#### 5. What did you expect at the beginning and how would you evaluate the results of the blog or your contributions so far?

**Alex:** It's certainly welcoming to hear people talking about these issues that I hadn't expected to be interested in the first place. And that's really the aim of blogging about refugees. Building awareness and discussion.

**Lali:** The blog has far exceeded our expectations! When we started it, we really thought of migration as a 'niche' issue and our contributors as a group of likeminded colleagues. But since then, the rise of social media and the explosion of interest in migration issues have meant that we've been able to grow our audience, attract more varied contributions and become an influential voice in international migration debates. We're still making out our future direction, but it's been really exciting to see *The Migrationist* grow!

**6. In which ways would you consider blogs a tool of civil resistance, if you understand civil resistance as a form of public action that welcomes participation and is not privileged or exclusionary?**

**Alex:** I would argue that blogging is a privilege to a degree. I'm writing from the comfort of Europe, but bloggers in other parts of the world face torture, prison and death. Look at Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia. It's certainly a greater tool of civil resistance in countries where it encounters greater resistance.

**7. Did the Internet expand the possibilities of these kind of actions and make them more accessible to a greater audience?**

**Alex:** Yes of course. But things also get lost now there's a vast amount of blogs, articles and posts out there. So it depends on the readership.

**Lali:** Absolutely. But we do need to constantly innovate, define and redefine ourselves to meet the demands of our growing audience. It's a pretty demanding job and definitely not the little 'side project' we originally envisaged!

**8. And did social media such as, Twitter, Facebook, etc. link social movements, like the fight against anti-migrant measures, at the national and international level? And do you consider yourself part of a larger movement?**

**Alex:** Absolutely. And all these 'movements' are linked. Anti-poverty, anti-hunger, pro-refugee, anti-war. It's a globalised world and these are the consequences of the same problems; inequality, war, corruption. So it's only appropriate that the counter-movements link up too. But yes on migration, #KeinMenschistillegal, #setherfree, Help for Refugees in Kos, all of these people have been linked up to a wider movement through new technologies and can share experiences.

**9. Concerning the current situation in Calais, what do you think of the French and English reactions?**

**Alex:** Pitiful. The European Commission gave the UK and France EUR 50 million to 'deal' with the situation there and gave Greece nothing. The truth is, it's a very visible problem now, especially for tourists passing through Calais, but the 'Jungle' has been there for years. The British and the French have been playing up to the media with tough talk and handshakes, but both are short-sighted in their approaches. The British could

do far more in the Med and can certainly accommodate more people in the UK. It's far easier for new arrivals to integrate and find work in a new country when there are other members of their communities already settled. The UK has some of the largest populations of Somali, Eritrean, Iraqi, Afghani diaspora in Europe.

**10. Do you see any changes happening regarding the situation in the English detention centres after the protests demanding the closure of Yarl's Wood Immigration Detention Centre?**

**Alex:** I think, or hope rather, that Yarl's Wood and the other detention centres will be closed sooner rather than later. There is public pressure, the #setherfree campaign is both vocal and effective. The government is exacerbating the problem at the moment by denying 'illegals' jobs and housing, but I don't believe the public to be as hate filled as the Daily Mail would have you believe. The problem is, so long as these prisons, and that's what they are, are run for profit there is a strong motive from powerful companies to keep them open.

*Interview by Charline Kopf on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2015*