New Nonfiction from Antoinette Constable: “A Hundred Roses for Olga Herzen”

Still Life with Roses of Dijon, 1882,
Ignace-Henri-Jean-Théodore Fantin-Latour (French, 1836–1904)

To some people outside our circle, Charles Rist was seen as a saintly hero. Charles Rist, our grandfather, was a famous economist, and vice-governor at La Banque de France. He was among the first to sign Zola’s “J’Accuse,” in a public letter defending Alfred Dreyfus. It was a courageous act for a man of the establishment. For this gesture, he was condemned by some as a nefarious sinner.

My most vivid memory of my paternal grandfather is that he ran away from the Villa Amiel in Versailles—where he lived with his wife and mother-in-law, Olga Herzen—early on January 1, 1950. The Rist home had been designed and built for Olga Herzen at the time of her marriage.

Grand-Papa’s chauffeur-driven Hotchkiss rushed him to Paris, while at the same time, the Russian Embassy delegation sped away from the capital toward his home, to honor our great-grandmother, the surviving daughter of Alexander Herzen. Her aristocratic father had written eloquently at the turn of the century, being the first to advocate the abolishment of serfdom and the distribution of land to peasants. In exile, he published his famous newspaper *The Bell* outside Russia. His writings had sparked the Russian Revolution. If Karl Marx was the Revolution’s father, Herzen could be credited with being its grandfather.

The Soviets manning the Russian embassy in 1950 demonstrated their undying admiration for Herzen by delivering to Herzen's only surviving child, Olga, the gift of one hundred roses on New Year's Day. She became a hundred years old that year.

Each magnificent rose was an intense, brash red, trumpeting a total allegiance to Stalin. By contrast, the White Russian Community sent Olga a magnificent white azalea that stood at a place of honor in her salon. Delighted to speak Russian that day with native speakers, Olga sat in the sitting room, thanked the men, and nodded during the usual speeches, though she held her brass hearing horn well away from her ear. Then she spoke of her famous father, wished everyone a happy New Year, and told a few jokes. We children had been sent upstairs, but at least one of us managed to creep to the landing, to eavesdrop and peer through the railing.

Olga at a hundred was much prettier, more expressive and shapely than Queen Victoria in her widowhood. Like her, Olga wore black dresses down to her feet and high-laced boots. Her sparse white hair was parted in the middle, pinned over her head in a tiny bun. She had a pronounced Bourbon nose. Her forehead was as wide as Herzen's, above blue eyes clouded by inoperable cataracts.

That day, we heard Olga speak a few sentences in a language we didn't understand, followed by the exuberant laughter of several men. Our grandmother, Olga's daughter, came out of her bedroom several times, wringing her hands, terrified that neighbors might have guessed who was visiting her solidly bourgeois French home, weighed down by the anticipated burden of disposing of a profusion of bloodred roses.

Our urbane, conservative grand-papa felt forced to spend the day at the Banque de France, since he refused any contact with the despised Communists. Grand-Papa had been born old, which meant he was unchanging in our eyes. He was about five feet ten, with a square face and rich gray mustache. The chain and

fob resting on his vest added to his dignity. He wore immaculate, stiff-collared white shirts of fine linen, and three-piece suits made by his tailor, with discreet ties imported from England. A semicircle of gray hair ran from one ear to the other. To us, told biblical stories by our Jewish mother, he was a bald Moses dressed up as a judge.

He came home from Paris that evening well after dark. Before walking in, he checked that no black Volga cars with opaque windows and well-armed drivers had parked by the gate. Once inside his home, as a further precaution, he hid in the darkened hall, to make sure no foreign conversations were taking place in the sitting room. Silence confirmed that the enemy was again ensconced inside its fortified Russian embassy, since no fur-lined overcoats hung on the rack. At last he could take off his coat, hat, and gloves.

Grand-Papa’s birthday, coincidentally, happened to take place on New Year’s Day and was, by necessity, celebrated a few days later with many relatives. He never mentioned the crimson roses flooding his home on his special day. Twelve of the loveliest had found their way into Olga’s room, where he never set foot. The rest were apologetically given away, many to service people, so that within days, all trace of the embarrassing visit had vanished.

Germaine Monod, our grandmother, and her husband, Charles Rist, came to live at the Villa Amiel in Versailles in 1912, when Olga became a widow. It was in Olga’s welcoming home that my grandparents raised their five sons. Perhaps because he looked like a slender, younger version of Alexander Herzen, my father, with his wit and generosity, was Olga’s favorite grandchild.

My two sisters, and myself the middle child, started visiting the Villa Amiel as toddlers. In 1936, when we were in grade school, my older sister and I began to spend weekends and vacations there.

At the Villa Amiel, the day started for me when Rousseli, the spaniel, scratched at my bedroom door. I dressed and hurried to breakfast in the dining room, where my grandmother presided over a solid silver tea tray, teapot, and cream pitcher—gifts from a grateful Alfred Dreyfus and his wife to Grand-Papa on the occasion of his marriage.

Sometimes Olga, our great-grandmother, was talkative. I loved hearing stories about her devoted German governess Malwida, who'd swept her away from the Herzen household when she was twelve to live with her in Italy, or stories about her cruel stepmother, or the man with the strange look in his eyes who'd offered marriage when she was only sixteen, a man named Friedrich Nietzsche.

We children were too young to fully understand, but we'd heard whispers and had guessed there were secrets and scandals in the family. Only as adults, when biographers wrote about Herzen's life, did we learn about our great-great-grandfather's reluctant acceptance, twice, of a ménage a trois, as recently depicted in Tom Stoppard's brilliant play trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*.

It must have been in 1938, when Hitler marched into Austria and extreme persecutions of Jews started in Germany, that the adults began talking about pogroms and held alarming discussions about insufficient war preparations and my mother being Jewish.

"France will fall, that's inevitable, considering…" I imagined a lady looking like our mother falling headfirst down a long flight of stairs. It was terrifying. Better to sneak upstairs and visit Olga in her room.

Having lost most of her sight, Olga managed well by feel. When she pulled out family albums filled with postcards and brown photos, she knew which page showed my father in a sailor suit, or my father and his older brother on wooden bicycles without

pedals; where to turn for the photo Dostoevsky had send of himself to her father, Alexander Herzen, whom he met several times in London.

Constance Garnett, translator of Russian novels, stated in a footnote to *The Brothers Karamazov* that the father in that novel was modeled on Herzen's own father, Ivan Yakovlev.

During my visits, Olga spoke not of our nebulously grim future, as did the family downstairs, but of the past, so vivid to her. Olga had shaken Garibaldi's hand and enjoyed Wagner's operas in his loge at Bayreuth as a friend and guest of Cosima Wagner. She knew Turgenev and had read his letters to her father and to her sister, Tata. She had met Kossuth, the Hungarian writer, and many others. All these people with ringing, mysterious names were fascinating characters in an endless story to me. I never tired of hearing about them.

Near blindness didn't keep Olga from her favorite occupation: attending to her vast correspondence. Over her writing pad she placed a metal frame of horizontal bars enabling her to write line after even line down the page. She wrote in a slanting script in the five languages she spoke equally well: Russian, German, Italian, English, French, and Russian, to send out her own invitations.

Afternoon tea was a grand event, and the best meal of the day at the Villa Amiel. Our grandmother's Russian grandfather Herzen and her mother Olga's home had swarmed with guests. Olga, like her father, would have been ashamed had not two extra place settings been included daily for unexpected, last-minute guests. At tea, the adults talked among themselves and ignored the children. We kicked each other under the table. I took advantage of the situation by eating more than my share of quince paste squares and wolf-teeth anise seed cookies with impunity.

At the time, I had no idea what an illustrious group of people

sat around the table. They'd come in response to invitations, jumping at the chance to talk to Olga, daughter of the famous Alexander Herzen. There was Baron Eugene de Vogue, author of a study of Russian novels, and grandmother's nephew Wilfried De Glehn and his wife, Jane, both artists and friends of Sargent, among others. At age five, in 1936, I posed for Jane. That portrait hangs on my wall.

On our grandmother's side, Germaine née Monod, Philippe Monod was a government minister. His brother was Jacques Lucien Monod, whose DNA studies won him a Nobel Prize. Another cousin, Jacques Louis Monod, became a well-known composer. Trocmé cousins also came to call, as well as Grand-Papa's brother Edouard, a tuberculosis specialist. My father and his brothers were frequent visitors, with wives and children. Scientists, engineers, educators, and politicians were also drawn to the Villa Amiel because of Grand-Papa. The lawyer Alexandre Parodi broke bread with us. It was Parodi, right-hand man to De Gaulle, who, at the end of the war, influenced Von Choltitz's decision not to destroy Paris. Several guests were intimates of Charles Rist, our grandfather. Some guests belonged to both the Olga and the Charles Rist coteries: Marguerite Bonnet, founder of the first *La Maison des Etudiantes* in Paris; my father's friend Jean Milhaud, a nephew of Darius Milhaud; and a promising young novelist, friend of our uncle Noel, who recuperated from TB at my grandparents' house in the Alps. This was Albert Camus.

Often on Saturdays before the war, Grand-Papa whistled for Rousseli, and took us with the retriever for a walk to the nearby woods of Glatigny, where we roamed beneath European oaks, beeches, and leafy ashes. On Sundays, we sometimes took a favorite morning walk on the grounds of the palace, to the delightful *Hameau du Le Petit Trianon*, a protected, idyllic enclave of thatched cottages with a tiny pond, a dairy, a lighthouse, and a mill, set among lilacs, tulips, and forget-me-nots. It had been created for fourteen-year-old Marie-

Antoinette, whom we believed played hide-and-seek around the corner with her ladies in period costumes.

One warm afternoon, shortly before the exodus of May 1940, Grand-Papa, frowning, strode along with us for a change in the geometric gardens of the *Palais de Versailles.* He gave talks to elevate our minds. Yet it seems to me now that as much as he wanted to teach us French history, our grandfather was in serious need of a respite from the worries of the fast-approaching catastrophe. It was years before I understood his talk, and learned that he'd just returned from Washington, where he was received by President Roosevelt before the US entered the war. Charles Rist had gone to Washington to ask the United States and Canada to stop exporting their nickel and molybdenum to Germany, essential to the manufacture of weapons. The meeting was successful.

Rousseli yapped an accompanying chorus as Grand-Papa poked his cane straight ahead of him as in a fencing move. "Louis XIV was a wiser ruler than he's given credit for. Look at his choice of admirable ministers, devoted to king and country, indefatigable." He stopped in his tracks. "You've heard of Colbert and Vauban, haven't you?" We nodded, afraid to interrupt. "Vauban was an exceptional architect responsible for splendid fortifications on France's borders. Remember, to fortify means to make strong, or stronger." After a pause, he added, "As war minister, the king chose Louvois, who introduced the musket, uniforms, regular pay, and the use of barracks for the army. Great innovations. These ministers' work greatly increased the influence and prestige of France. Thanks to them, France was a great nation. France had power."

Grand-Papa poked the ground with the tip of his cane, before leading us back to the Villa Amiel, and repeated with conviction, "France was a great nation. France had power," like a spell that could keep us, and all the beauty around us, forever safe.

Nonfiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: “From Death Threats to a French Dandy, Afghan Contractors Abandoned by the U.S. Struggle to Find Asylum Abroad”

LYON, France—When the Taliban shoved him out of the sedan with the butts of their Kalashnikovs, Medhi could barely walk. For eight hours, they had blindfolded him, kept his hands tied behind his back, and beat his legs with plastic pipes.

“To kill you is our right for two reasons,” he says the Taliban members shouted at him. “One, because you are working for the Americans and therefore against Islam. Second, because you are Hazara and not a pure Muslim.”

The Taliban are Sunni Muslims, mostly Pashtun, who have a history of persecuting the Hazara Shias.

Medhi poses in front of a rosebush at Bagram Air Base. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

This was the third time the Taliban had threatened Medhi for his work as a security guard with the U.S. military on Bagram Air Base. They indicated they wouldn't let him survive a fourth.

After seven hours, the Taliban offered Medhi a deal: "I could live, but it was my responsibility to help them sneak six of them into Bagram so they could plan an attack," Mehdi tells The War Horse. "I had 24 hours to get security uniforms and make up lies to infiltrate them. I had no choice but accept,

and they let me go.”

He never went back to Bagram.

Rather than betray the Americans he worked with, Medhi went straight to the apartment where he lived with his mother and four younger siblings.

“My mother told me that whatever happens, I would be killed,” he says. “I knew that if I carried out the Taliban’s orders, I would be executed. And if I didn’t, I would be executed anyway. My father had disappeared, and I didn’t want my family to be targeted.”

Medhi’s mother called his uncle, who arranged for him to leave Kabul the next day.

It’s possible that Medhi’s decision saved numerous American lives at Bagram.

‘The Rights of Man’

Medhi, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, tells this story from Lyon, France, where he fled—taking a circuitous, potentially deadly route—after leaving Afghanistan. There, his request for asylum has been rejected twice. If it is rejected again, he will have few choices: to try again in another European country with perhaps the same results; stay in France illegally, which means spending his life hiding from authorities; or, if caught, be deported to Afghanistan, where he will most likely be threatened again or even killed by the Taliban.

“France was supposed to be the country of the *droits de l’homme* (rights of man),” Mehdi said.

And America?

After Afghans risked their lives working with the Americans as

interpreters, guides, sources, and guards—sometimes assuming the United States would keep them safe in return for their help—they've instead been denied visas by the thousands. This comes even as the U.S. military members they served with say they worry about the consequences both to the Afghans and to future generations of U.S. service members.

U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Kevin Rincon, left, and Lance Cpl. Zidan Sheabar, both with 2nd Platoon, Company I, Battalion Landing Team 3/8, teach interpreters attached to Company I how to apply a tourniquet at Forward Operating Base Price, Afghanistan, in 2011. Elements of 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to Afghanistan to provide regional security in Helmand province in support of the International Security Assistance Force. Photo by Gunnery Sgt. Bryce Piper, courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

In Afghanistan itself, there is no hope: Tens of thousands of people who worked as Mehdi did to help the United States fear the Taliban will hunt them down the instant American protection leaves.

Rather than face rejection by the United States or likely

death back home, Mehdi pins his hopes on a French dandy named Walid.

A Silk Scarf, Artfully Draped

Walid presides at the center of the table under the intermittent snapping fluorescent ceiling lights of a convenience store. No one ever catches Walid without suede shoes and a silk scarf draped artfully around his shoulders. Like his look, his smell is unmistakable: Dior cologne, cumin, and a lingering scent of the Cuban cigars he smokes with his cognac when the sun goes down.

“My ex-girlfriend is the former Miss Lithuania,” Walid tells us, tossing back his long salt-and-pepper hair with a wave of his impeccably manicured hand.

He flips through his cell phone looking for pictures of the courtship.

Everyone in the Lyon community of Afghan refugee applicants knows that, when all else fails with French immigration, it’s time to call Walid. In addition to providing friendship and food, he runs a free-of-charge service to assist refugees like Medhi navigate the notoriously cumbersome French paperwork.

His work with them is a testament to the reality that Afghans have been fleeing war and violence in their country in waves for almost half a century: first the Soviets, then the Taliban.

Walid smokes a cigar outside his shop. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid, an Afghan refugee himself, comes from a different generation and socioeconomic class. His well-off family escaped to France in the early 1980s as his father, an intellectual and critic of Afghanistan's government, was threatened by the communist regime. They were granted asylum easily.

Walid tells The War Horse Medhi represents the face of many caught up in a sordid phenomenon of the Afghan refugee crisis that will be exposed further as U.S. troops leave: Working alongside Americans provides little guarantee of gaining refugee status. However, it is certain that Afghans who worked in any capacity with the military and have remained in the country confront retaliation from the Taliban.

‘I Was Afraid There, Too’

Mehdi felt a sense of hope—for himself and for his family—when he took the job at Bagram.

At first.

In 2014 when U.S. and NATO forces began to wind down their 11-year-long occupation, Medhi checked entering vehicles for explosive devices. He’d heard about the post while selling produce from a cart in Kabul where he didn’t earn enough to take proper care of his family. The job, obtained through a U.S. contractor called Anham and managed by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, came with a high monthly salary. Medhi says he couldn’t refuse.

“The experience was a good one overall,” Medhi says. “However, I never even thought about living anywhere else than Afghanistan. When I took the job, it was for economic reasons for my family only.”

He would spend three days at Bagram, where he slept, and return to Kabul to see his family for the remainder of the week. He worked with Afghans and men from places like Nepal and China. Even though he was employed there for two years, he had almost no contact with Americans. He didn’t speak English, and the few exchanges he had with the Americans were through his boss, who had a translator.

“I had some problems with my work for Americans,” Medhi says, sheepish about saying it in front of an American.

The first was the payment system. His paycheck was automatically deposited into a bank account, rather than paid in cash, and he had few opportunities to withdraw it. It was dangerous to take out money from banks when he was alone, so he relied on the head of his group at Bagram to take employees to the bank in groups for safety.

Sometimes, “I didn’t trust what Americans were doing,” he says. At Bagram, he was assigned to scan under trucks for bombs as they entered the base. He was also supposed to look inside the vehicles, but only Americans were authorized to unlock and open the doors for the guards during the security checks, Mehdi says. Once or twice a week, when he asked to open the doors, drivers would refuse, he says, telling him they had orders to allow access only to Americans.

“They didn’t let me do my job,” he says.

But something else was at stake. At this point in the interview, Mehdi stops speaking in English and asks Walid to translate his words. Mehdi suspected the trucks he was forbidden access to, which came from various Afghan provinces, carried pillaged items of historical value to his country that would later be sold and exploited in museums around the world, he says through Walid. After the trucks entered the base, helicopters or planes would airlift the cargo containers from those vehicles away from Bagram.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. William J. Butler, commander, 2/503 IN (Airborne), and Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad, commander, 6th Kandak, Afghan National Army, and their staff during an assumption of command ceremony for Lt. Col. Sher Mohammad at Forward Operating Base Joyce, Konar province, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.
No evidence today points to the veracity of this claim, but, as Walid explains, his misgivings are understandable. "No one can forget the Koh-i-Noor diamond," he says.

Even the least educated person in Afghanistan knows about the cultural damage caused by widespread Soviet looting or the theft of the 105-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond that sat on the crown of the Queen Mother, Elizabeth of England. It is now on display in the Tower of London. While Britain's East India Company used underhanded tactics to obtain the gemstone from the 10-year-old Indian Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1849, it once belonged to what used to be part of Afghanistan and the country has made several claims for its return.

After Medhi was kidnapped by the Taliban, he fled in the back of a pickup truck with a group of people who huddled together for warmth. It took him 15 days to cross the southwestern Nimroz Province, known as Afghanistan's "Wild West" due to its reputation as a smuggling hub into Iran.

"I was in Iran one day, and everyone told me I'd be sent back, so I went to Turkey," Mehdi says. "I was afraid there, too."

When he got to Greece, he boarded one of the special trains the European Union provided in 2015-2017 as part of their Emergency Relocation Scheme to transport refugees north into various countries. He got off in Austria, but after two years, immigration services there rejected his asylum request.

"I decided I wanted to become a chef in Austria," Medhi tells The War Horse as he sips tea in the back of a small convenience store with other Afghan refugees. "But France is a good place for that too."

Spending long weekend afternoons over tea with friends is an Afghan custom, but it is also decidedly French, a people who are world-famous for their cafes where, for a $2 coffee, customers can linger at their leisure. Lyon has also been recognized by UNESCO as the world gastronomical capital and is seemingly abound with cooking opportunities. He could fit in here. If France would let him.

Things started out well for him when he got to France. He made friends with other Afghan immigrants and hit a stroke of good luck: He was chosen through a lottery for a place in a temporary residential center for asylum seekers. The French Office of Immigration and Integration also provided him with 210 euros per month for food and other expenses. He was later transferred from Paris to another residential center in Bourg-en-Bresse, a city about 50 miles northeast of Lyon. He shares a room and living space with asylum seekers from around the world. The common language in the centers is English.

“I can talk to Americans now,” he jokes. He has also learned French.

But over the last year, things have gone downhill.

At a slender five-foot-three, and with a soft voice and ready smile, Medhi, who turned 25 this year, doesn’t cut the traditional figure of a security guard assigned to the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan.

In France, officials from l’Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides—the immigration office—don’t believe he worked for the Americans in Afghanistan. At first, they didn’t believe he was Afghan.

“I think nobody believes me because of my size and face,” Medhi says.

And even though he has provided a work contract, identity card, and photos of himself with colleagues at Bagram, his

application for asylum has been denied.

After his second rejection in early spring 2020, the French immigration ordered him out of the country—but then extended his visa because of the Covid-19 crisis. With borders doubly enforced because of the pandemic, Medhi doesn't know which country will let him in next.

His time in France is running out.

But while visiting an Afghan friend in Lyon one weekend in the fall of 2020, he met Walid, who restored in Medhi the most he could ask for: a fragile sense of hope.

'Who Will Work With Us Again?'

American veterans say they thought that hope would come from their own country—in the form of a nation they thought they were helping to rebuild.

"My objective was to go and visit the families of the interpreters I knew and have tea or dinner with them in a stable Afghanistan one day," says Adrian Bonenberger, a decorated combat veteran, of his deployments there. "That's what would happen. But it's not."

Bonenberger, who wrote *Afghan Post*, expresses the disappointment of other members of the military who served in the war. Bonenberger served in Afghanistan for 25 months on two deployments.

"I would have loved to go back as an artist," echoes Colin Halloran, who served with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan 2006 and is now an award-winning poet. "I really believe they were the most soulful, artistic people with a giant sense of hospitality that stems from their faith."

Instead, they both fear those visits will never occur. Worse, their "soulful" friends may not live to witness a time when

such a thing could happen.

“Many of the Afghans who have worked for and supported the American presence in their country over the past two decades face a life-or-death dilemma,” states a recent Costs of War report authored by Noah Coburn of Brown University’s Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs. “Many of these military interpreters and other civilian workers are no longer safe in their own homes, threatened by anti-government fighters and criminal groups.”

But they haven’t found help elsewhere, either.

Medhi came to France after the two rejections in Austria. After the second rejection in France, he decided to contest it, a process Walid is helping him navigate. This will be his last chance.

Walid, who immigrated from Afghanistan to France during the Afghan-Soviet war, helps recent Afghan refugees with their visa applications. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

The Dublin Regulation, a European Union law that determines which member states are responsible for handling asylum seekers under the rules of the Geneva Convention, allows an adult applicant to stay in a country for six months after they submit their legal file. They have the right to appeal a negative decision, which grants them an extended stay. If they are rejected twice, immigration officials ask them to leave the country and the refugee may travel to another European country to reinitiate the process.

But the circumstances of fleeing a country, as many refugees do, can make the process harder, as it has for Mehdi. Politics haven't helped him, either.

"This wasn't only a U.S. war," Halloran says. "There were NATO forces, but it was mostly American. We have a responsibility, and the U.S. needs to step in and help these people get asylum."

Former President Donald Trump placed historically low caps on accepting refugees. By 2020, 15,000 were authorized—down from 110,000 in fiscal year 2017, when former President Barack Obama set the cap. To protest Trump's cap, which became known as the "Muslim ban," Halloran helped organize an event in Washington with other veterans and writers.

"We found refugees from each of the eight countries on the State Department's Muslim ban list and let them tell their stories to highlight the danger they'd faced and to show what extraordinary human beings they were," Halloran tells The War Horse.

President Joe Biden has just raised the limit to 62,500—half of the 125,000-person cap he originally pledged. In February, an executive order from Biden allowed for private sponsorship, the process that allowed some Jews to come to America from Europe during WWII. They're still working out the details for the new order. Congress has allotted more Special Immigrant Visas to be granted to Afghans and Iraqis whose lives were put at risk because of their service with the U.S. military. But the process that's required by law to take no more than nine months is expected to increase to up to four years. Waiting times have been exacerbated because of the Covid pandemic.

In the last three months of 2020 alone, State Department statistics show 1,646 Afghans were denied one of the special visas, and more than 18,000 Afghans await decisions on Special

Immigrant Visas applications, according to The New York Times.

In addition, the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa application for Afghans demands a long list of documents, such as identity papers, a letter of recommendation, and verification from a human resources center.

Those documents are hard, if not impossible, to file while fleeing, as Medhi did, from an imminent death threat. While Medhi had most of these items at the time he left, getting a transatlantic flight from Afghanistan to claim asylum would have been impossible. He didn't have a passport and the ticket cost was exorbitant. But Europe is accessible by land, so that's how he traveled.

And, when Mehdi fled, the special visa didn't cover everyone who worked with Americans.

"Many Afghans were not employed by the U.S. military or affiliated missions but by private contractors or subcontractors who, in most cases, could issue no official promises about opportunities after their service," Bonenberger says.

The latest May 31, 2021, report from the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Processing Center shows that in the 2019 fiscal year, 1,198 Afghan were admitted as refugees. In 2020, it dropped to 604, most likely due to Covid restrictions. As of May 31, the United States has admitted 248 Afghans in fiscal year 2021.

If the United States doesn't take more action to help these threatened Afghans, Halloran says, it could influence the way foreign countries view our future military efforts.

"In the future, who will work with us again?" he says. "Why would anyone want to risk their lives or their family's lives if we don't step in?"

‘I Cook Afghan Food for Them’

While the United States has stemmed the flow of Afghan refugees in the last four years, the number of Afghans filing for asylum to get refugee status in France has increased five-fold in five years. Until May 2021, little protection existed even for Afghans who worked with the French army.

As portrayed in a book and a recent graphic novel, *Traducteurs Afghans. Une Trahison Française*—translation: Afghan translators. French treason—only 250 of the 800 Afghan translators who worked with the French army between 2001 and 2014 as part of NATO forces were granted refugee status through asylum. Those who weren’t were forced to go into hiding with their families as they had a Taliban bounty on their heads. In May 2021, in response to the worsening situation in Afghanistan, the French government announced it was issuing immediate asylum status to an additional 600-plus Afghans who had worked with the French military.

Sher Hasan, a local Afghan worker on Forward Operating Base Fenty, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, uses a saw on concrete blocks during a construction project in 2009. Locals who worked with U.S. troops now fear the Taliban will kill them as Americans withdraw from Afghanistan. Photo by Sgt. Corey Idleburg, courtesy of U.S. Army.

But this won’t help Medhi or thousands of other Afghans

awaiting responses from French immigration. The situation in France has catapulted into a crisis for all Afghan refugee seekers. Homelessness and reports of increased police intervention are on the rise.

Which is why what started out as helping on weekends and evenings a few years ago has become an almost full-time job for Walid—a one-man show that's becoming harder to pull off. He has just passed the test to become an official interpreter for the French court system and is awaiting final certification. This job, in addition to managing the shop, will eat up more of his time.

"I help them with paperwork, but I also cook Afghan food for them," he says as he offers a taste his succulent Kabuli palaw, an Afghan dish made in several steps with lamb or beef, fragrant rice, carrots, almonds, and raisins. "I reassure them. They take a drink or smoke here, and I tell them everything's going to be OK."

At least for a few hours on a winter evening in Lyon, Walid provides a safe place for Medhi and the other Afghan refugees. He's placed a large wool Afghan blanket over the makeshift table set up by the refrigerated section, and the men pull it over their knees and hands for warmth.

'We Go Back to the Roots'

"When age goes up, we go back to the roots," Walid replies when asked why he helps the young Afghan men. He's 47.

He pulls up to his convenience store on most days midmorning in a shiny black Mercedes, which stands out on the narrow one-way street in a mostly pedestrian area in a trendy Lyon historic district. His car, combined with his designer clothing—and the group of haggard young Afghans who congregate around the fruit stand outside the shop from noon to as late as two a.m.—have made him the target of suspicion in the

neighborhood, he says. The gossip heard by The War Horse at neighborhood gatherings over the years includes accusations of being a Mafia boss, money laundering, human trafficking, and keeping an opium den in the basement.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

After the communists in Kabul threatened Walid's father for the first time in 1979, he went to Dubai right away to build a new professional life that would allow him to bring his family from Afghanistan. In 1980, when he returned to Kabul to fetch them, the government put him on home arrest and he faced certain execution.

After Walid's family home was raided, his father fled once more. At the end of that year, Walid's uncle paid someone to smuggle the rest of the family to Pakistan, where they obtained fake passports and flew to Dubai. The Soviet-Afghan war was in its second year and made traveling through rural parts of the country to cross the border perilous. Walid's family had to change cars and buses several times to avoid being caught.

Walid recalls that poor children from the countryside brought his obviously well-off family food and bread as if they were royalty. He also remembers being frightened by bombs and other sounds of fighting as the family made its way across the border, but, Walid admits, "Compared to most, our way of fleeing Afghanistan was luxurious."

Walid's father couldn't have foreseen that the family would land in Lyon in 1985, but at that time, it was easy for Afghans to enter. As Walid jokes, a look at the history of the Silk Road and wine draws the two cities together. In the 17th century, Lyon became one of the global epicenters for silk weaving.

Afghan police recruits man AK-47 assault rifles while providing security in eastern Zhari district, Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2012. Photo by Sgt. Stephen J. Schmitz, courtesy of U.S. Army.

"All fine fabrics traveling from Asia, including from Afghanistan, came through Lyon," he says, pointing to an open window on the second floor of the shop's building through which can be seen an apartment with wood-beamed ceilings. The shop is in one of the old silk-weaving structures, called *les canuts.* The 13-foot-high ceilings created enough space for the large silk looms.

"And the best French wine is Persian," he adds. A fine wine connoisseur, he boasts his wine cellar contains fine French reds, but he upholds the legend that the French Syrah grape originated in Iran, near the Afghan border.

Having been educated in French schools in Kabul, Walid integrated into French public education in Lyon. After university, he opened two computer businesses in Lyon. He met his wife in India, and a few years after their wedding, she

moved to Lyon and the couple had three children.

“I managed big companies and I handled big budgets, but to manage the emotions of three kids who lost their mom was horribly difficult,” he says.

In 2014, at the height of his career, Walid’s wife died at 35 from breast cancer. With three young children and aging parents to take care of, Walid sold the businesses he had acquired in Lithuania, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Manama, Bahrain, to stay in France full time. To earn extra cash and maintain contact with the world outside during his family crisis, he decided to open a small convenience store.

“OK, I’ll sell food, because if there’s an economic crisis or not, whatever happens in the world, people should eat,” he says. “And this is what the Covid crisis has proved to me: to always be in service to the people.”

Atiqualla Rahin, U.S. Marine Chief Warrant Officer Bruce Johnson, and an Afghan contractor walk around the grounds of a new building site for a men's detention facility in Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan, in 2010. Photo by Lt. j.g. Jennifer Franco. Courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps.

Since he speaks French, English, Persian, and Arabic fluently,

he serves as a translator for the nebulous legal terms that obstruct communication. But this task goes beyond word-for-word exchanges. France has a reputation for one of most circuitous bureaucracies in Europe, and translating also means wading through the language of the cumbersome paperwork that accompanies every file.

“For every small thing, you get a paper,” Walid explains. “If I could show you my boxes of letters. For every small thing, you have some letter and most of the time it’s nothing. And so, I read these letters to them and tell them everything’s OK. Most of what I do for them is basic.”

Other tasks are more complicated. He helps place them in residences and he intervenes whenever they have trouble with the police, which is often the result of some cultural or linguistic misunderstanding, he says. Since Medhi’s asylum application had already been rejected by France, Walid is in contact with a lawyer and has served as a liaison between French immigration and private legal counsel. He is also regularly in contact with people he knows in Afghanistan to obtain birth certificates, work contracts, and other documents attesting to the truth of the stories the men tell their asylum caseworkers.

But he recalls the poor children from the countryside who brought his family food while they escaped Afghanistan.

“They had no food, but they still wanted to help me, and now I feel like I’m giving back,” he says. “I was too young to recall much about Afghanistan, but I feel I need to help people who need it. All the kids I help were thrown out at critical times in their lives.”

Even though these asylum requests are processed in the Afghans’ native language, Walid has to do it for most of them because of their low education level. Many who come from the poor and working class have few years of formal education and

struggle to write a one-page letter.

Medhi lived in Afghanistan until he was 20 and spent only two years total in school. Before arriving in France as a young boy, Walid had seven years of elementary school in Afghanistan. “My education in Persian stopped when I was 10 in Afghanistan, but my writing and reading skills are far superior,” Walid explains.

Walid is also inspired by his father, who has helped in raising the three children while organizing local outreach efforts to help educate Afghans from a distance. Walid’s uncle, his father’s brother, is the head of a larger organization with a similar goal based in California called Afghan Education for a Better Tomorrow that gives distance-learning courses to students in Afghanistan.

“Humanity is his religion,” he says of his father.

‘I Fear the Worst for Him’

Just as in the United States, a growing strain of French public far-right sentiment is less favorable to economic migrants than to political ones, which is magnified by a fear of admitting Islamist radicals into the country.

Since Mehdi isn’t an economic refugee, he has a better chance of succeeding than other Afghans Walid advises. Walid refuses to follow through with some asylum cases because the men change their stories too many times. Some lie about their age, and others borrow money from him only to disappear. Others schedule meetings with him and never show up. He had to bail one refugee out of jail.

“One night, I get a call around 7 in the evening,” he says. “One of my guys blocked Bellecour metro station for hours. Police were everywhere.”

After his second rejection, the young man in question tried to

kill himself by throwing himself in front of a Lyon subway. Bystanders banded together and stopped him, but the police detained him, and that has jeopardized his case in ways Walid can’t assist.

“They don’t have the same reality as I do,” Walid says when discussing the gap in education and socioeconomic status with the Afghans. Some of the young men get angry at him if he can’t help them or won’t lend them money. But he cooks Afghan food for them once a week and allows them to gather at his shop to drink, smoke, and reconnect with their country. Sometimes fights break out and he plays an objective referee. For example, an older man who believed communism was beneficial for Afghanistan almost came to blows with a younger Afghan who saw his family’s rural livelihood destroyed by the Soviet-backed government.

“But we are human beings,” Walid concludes. “Right is right. Good is good. I won’t let a difference of education or vision come between us.”

Mehdi, however, is polite, even-tempered, and willing to help in Walid’s shop. His story has been consistent for six months. Walid has never worked harder on a case, he says.

Getting someone to believe that Medhi worked for years on the Bagram base is likely the only way he will be granted asylum by any government in Europe or elsewhere, Walid says. The War Horse has contacted the contractor, Anham, but has received no response.

“He’s like my son, and I fear the worst for him,” Walid says.

‘They Already Have Voices’

Medhi’s story, in many ways, is not only Walid’s story but the story of all the Afghans who have been persecuted due to wars on their soil for more than 40 years.

“Their voices need to be amplified,” Halloran says. “They already have voices that can be heard, but those voices need to be amplified. This is the role that we can play.”

While waiting for a response to his renewed asylum request, Medhi spends time at Walid’s on the weekend doing odd jobs.

“I offer him money for his services, but Medhi always refuses it.”

He continues to learn English and French at the refugee residence in Bourg-en-Bresse near Lyon that houses several families, also waiting for updates to their status. When the weather is nice, they have group cookouts. If he gets his papers, Mehdi says, he might try to become a chef somewhere in Lyon. If not, he is trained not only as a security guard but also as a tile layer—and there is a demand for this skill in the Lyon area.

“I cannot change my life,” Medhi says. “But I can try.”

*

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Reading Camus’ ‘The Plague’ in 2020: A Dispatch from Lyon, France, by Jennifer

Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell

“It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.”

20th-century French writer Albert Camus chose these lines penned by Daniel Defoe as the epigraph for his novel, *The Plague*. It may come as a surprise that they hail from Defoe’s 1719 fictional work *Robinson Crusoe,* about a slave trader who escaped after, in an ironic turn of events, he was taken prisoner and became stranded on a remote island for 28 years. Defoe’s 1722 book, *A Journal of the Plague Year,* which is based on real historical events and a family member’s diary kept during the 1665 Great Plague of London, would seem the more logical choice. Camus studied Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with other pandemic narratives as he conducted research for *The Plague,* but he decided ultimately that his plague story should be introduced by a statement emphasizing imprisonment rather than illness.

Albert Camus

When Camus began writing *The Plague* in 1942, he planned on calling the germinating novel, “The Prisoners.”[1] The Germans had begun their invasion of southern France and the Allies had landed on the coast of North Africa. At the time, Camus was convalescing in southeastern France after another bout of tuberculosis, an illness he had battled since childhood.[2] He was blocked from returning home to Algiers and his wife, Francine. While most consider Camus a French author, he saw himself as Algerian and the forced separation from his terra mater undoubtedly stoked the novel’s dominant themes of isolation, exile, and separation. “The Separated” was also among the working titles.

Original 1947 The Plague edition by Gallimard.
Editions Gallimard

The struggle of individual imprisonment was nothing new to Camus. In 1942, he published his absurdist story *The Stranger,* which chronicles the downfall of Meursault, a man who is convicted and sentenced to death not because he killed an innocent Arab on the beach but for not crying at his own mother's funeral. In that same year, his philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" appeared, which lays out his basic theory of the absurd. Like Sisyphus who continues to push the rock up the mountain despite its inevitable fall, humans will always search for meaning. What counts is not so much the struggle to push the rock up, but the walk back down the mountain while contemplating renewal.

The Plague marks Camus' shift in focus from the individual and the absurd to the collective and what he calls the literature of "revolt." Around the beginning of 1943, he wrote:

I want to use the plague to express the way we have all suffered from suffocation and the atmosphere of threat and exile we've all experienced. At the same time. I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give an image of those who shared the reflection, the silence of moral suffering.[3]

Cover of the French 1947 special edition of The Plague. Cover design by Mario Prassinos.

Editions
Gallimard.

The Plague tells the story of a bubonic plague outbreak that strikes the French-Algerian town of Oran, decimating the population. It begins with sick rats coming out to die in the streets. When the rats disappear, the disease moves on to infect humans. At first, most of the inhabitants, with the exception of the character of Dr. Bernard Rieux, refuse to believe that the disease is dangerous. Rieux works tirelessly not only to save sick victims, but also to mobilize a movement against the plague by calling on others to help in the fight against it. As the city closes its gates, Tarrou, Grand, le Père Paneloux, Rambert, Castel, and Othon are among the characters who risk their lives to care for the victims of the unrelenting epidemic.

In 1943, Camus joined the French Resistance as an editorial writer for one of the most influential underground publications, *Combat,* and became its editor-in-chief at Liberation. He wrote moving articles inciting citizens to resist and then detailed the shock of the painful return of Jews and political prisoners who had been deported to concentration camps. Despite the fact that, in aiming for universality, Camus erased the most explicit references to the Second World War, the French recognized themselves in *The Plague*. As such, in 1947 the book became known as *the* novel about Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, the Resistance, and Liberation.[4] When Camus signed a copy of *The Plague* for his friend and fellow resistor, Madame Jacqueline Bernard, he wrote “To J., survivor of the plague.”[5] She was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1944 and that same year her husband died on the way from Paris to Auschwitz.

Cover of underground French Resistance publication that Camus

edited, Combat.

Almost 75 years later, it could be said that Camus' vision of *The Plague* gaining a more universal significance has found renewed focus with COVID-19. For Camus, the pandemic virus symbolized not just Nazism but was supposed to serve as an allegory for any omnipotent force that imprisons people and inflicts human deaths in arbitrary ways. Since February of 2020, *The Plague* has made the bestseller list in countries such as South Korea, Italy, and France, and, in some places, has sold out on Amazon. When reading it, it's impossible not to wonder how someone writing in 1942 could have foreseen so accurately how things would play out in 2020. The general disbelief and denial of the severity of the virus, the unwillingness of government authorities to enforce prophylactic measures, the hoarding of goods, profiteering, quarantine, lack of medical supplies—these themes play out in *The Plague* as they do today.

Albert Camus

While these comparisons are striking, some of the less-sensational parallels of today's crisis with *The Plague* delve into the heart of the book's deceptively simple message – it is a story about acquiring a sense of love and duty for all humankind that functions outside of personal, moral, religious, or ideological motivation. It's about breaking out of a certain kind of individual imprisonment and isolation to combat a collective imprisonment and isolation.

Le métier d'homme, le devoir d'aimer, and abstraction

Two major terms from Camus' lexicon give shape to this concept: *le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer*. *Le métier d'homme,* loosely translated as "humankind's profession," means that all humans have a job, tailored to each individual, that involves combating misfortune in the world to reduce

suffering. What drives *le métier d'homme* is *le devoir d'aimer*, the "duty of love" not just to one's partner or family but also to humankind. Camus said, "love is the right and duty of each human" and "the only duty" he knows is "that of love."[6] It is only this conception of love and duty without moral or material motivation or compensation that can heal plagues, imagined or real.

At first glance, *Le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer* appear to be simple concepts that any decent human being should be able to enact humbly. However, throughout *The Plague*, Camus demonstrates that this becomes nearly impossible in times of massive catastrophe due to the third major term from Camus' lexicon—*abstraction*. Different abstractions allow the citizens of Oran to avoid confronting the horrible reality of the plague's spread and impact. At its most simple, abstraction means turning the concrete into the immaterial or ideal, and it's the different forms of abstraction that individuals employ—both wittingly and unwittingly—that become obstacles to the city's efforts in countering the plague. As long as they create abstractions, humans cannot love or do their duty in preventing the suffering of humankind.

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The rest of this article will be devoted to dissecting the different ways the characters of *The Plague* generate abstraction while comparing these with a few ways different, real actors in today's world have avoided confronting the most severe impacts of COVID-19. The authors—Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell— both residents of Lyon, France, who can't go further than one kilometer from our homes for more than one hour a day, are seeking to resist the abstraction of this pandemic in textbooks (years from now), or on social media (minutes from now). To that end we have interviewed two real people close to us who have, against the odds, won their own personal battle with abstraction and helped, or rather loved,

humankind during this crisis.[1]

Abstraction and *The Plague*

In 1955, eight years after the publication of *The Plague*, the French journal *L'Express* published an article by Camus entitled "Le métier d'homme" in which he presents his recurring idea of "humankind's profession." He speaks of the human need for meaningful work, without which "life suffocates and dies," a theme he explored in *The Plague* through the actions of Doctor Rieux. In the article, he also addresses humankind's "duty to love" ("devoir d'aimer"), which drives Rieux, and undoubtedly motivates today's health care professionals as they work tirelessly and selflessly to protect lives against the onslaught of an invisible and deadly adversary. As a nurse in Lombardy, Italy, expressed to New York emergency-room doctor Helen Ouyang in early April when the city registered 47,440 cases, the merits of the profession can't be understated. "Please, don't give up," she wrote. "Our jobs are difficult but are the most beautiful ones."[2]

As with this nurse, Dr. Rieux's task – performing his "duty to love" – gives meaning to his existence. However, no lofty aspirations brought him to his calling. By his own admission, he entered his profession "abstractedly," as it was a desirable career "that young men often aspire to." Subsequently, as a young doctor, he was exposed to the hard realities of human suffering and death. The injustices he witnessed outraged him, challenging his capacity to see his patients abstractedly. Indeed, it was his inability "to get used to seeing people die" that spurred him on. But later, faced with plague in Oran, he found a new purpose for the abstraction of reality in allowing him to take on an unprecedented number of critical patients. He observes that "an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities." However, he finally comes to the conclusion that he can never completely let down his guard and

give way to abstraction, as he proclaims, “when abstraction sets to killing you, you’ve got to get busy with it.” For Rieux, fighting his own abstract view of the plague becomes almost as difficult as fighting the plague itself.

Somewhat like Sisyphus, Rieux rarely wins the uphill battle with the plague. While a few make what he views as miraculous recoveries, most succumb to a violent end as the plague attacks in horrific ways. Their buboes ooze, their fevers soar. As the plague continues its rout, a group of men let go of their abstractions and join Rieux in helping the communal effort. The journalist character, Rambert, decides to stop illegally planning his escape from Oran to join his lover in Paris. Since the outbreak, he has tried bribing officials and finally resorted to engaging the services of some shady characters to smuggle him out. For him, the plague was not about the arbitrary deaths of thousands of humans, but about his individual sadness. When he abandons the quest to escape and instead joins the rescue teams, he admits to Rieux “I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody’s business.” Rieux tells Rambert that he didn’t blame him for wanting to pursue happiness with his lover. At this moment, it’s easy to forget that Rieux has been separated from his wife too. “But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself,” Rambert confesses.

Rieux and his friends fight the plague—and their abstractions of it—until cases diminish and an effective serum is found. About a year after the first case appeared, the gates of Oran reopened and the citizens flooded the streets and cafés to celebrate. It is just then that Rieux is shattered by the sickness and death of his friend Tarrou, who has contributed greatly to the efforts. As Tarrou dies, Camus resists imposing an emotional reaction on his readers, yet the impact of the episode on Rieux is clear. Unable to be of any use to his friend, the doctor nonetheless remains steadfastly at his side, recording the details of their interactions during

Tarrou's final hours. The tragedy of this death, all the more poignant for having occurred as the plague was receding from the town, finally forces back the protective shield of abstraction which had permitted Rieux to carry out his duty so assiduously and for so long. It is the first moment since the onset of the epidemic in the town that he puts aside the others who are sick to stay with his friend. And it is the moment where the reader is presented with the real human cost of the ravages of the plague, free from all abstraction.

The next day, when Rieux receives the telegram informing him of his wife's death, it is hard not to wonder how he will carry on. Yet we know he will, as will the suffering. Rieux admits that "He'd been expecting it, but it was hard all the same. And he knew, in saying this, that this suffering was nothing new. For many months, and for the last two days, it was the selfsame suffering going on and on."

Abstraction and COVID-19

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, abstraction has also been an important coping mechanism. For the general public, abstraction comes in the form of harsh realities in hospital wards reduced to news headlines and data points on graphs.. For front line medical professionals, it's the daily struggle to manage the waves of emotion resulting from unprecedented sickness, death, and deprivation of contact with loved ones. Like Rieux, some of those doctors and nurses have found that allowing the mask of abstraction to slip can be desirable in the face of such monumental difficulties. Italian E.R. doctor Andrea Duca said, "I realize now that keeping the emotions outside of me can help to manage the shift and the stress, but I need to be human to keep working."[3]

However, opening the floodgates to those emotional realities can also have devastating consequences. New York E.R. Doctor Laura Breen tragically took her own life following weeks of fighting the virus in others, and had even recovered from it

herself. According to her father's account in *The New York Times*, "She had described to him an onslaught of patients who were dying before they could even be taken out of ambulances." He said, "She tried to do her job, and it killed her."[4]

If ongoing mitigation measures are successful, it's likely that the vast majority of the global population won't contract COVID-19, or even have direct experience of it via immediate family and friends. This means that for most of us our experience will remain an abstraction, limited to what we see and hear on TV, radio, websites and social media in the form of soundbites, statistics, graphs, and their various interpretations through each channel's unique prism. As Camus suggests in *The Plague,* "we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."

Today, the bad dream plays out on screens at home and on mobile phones, adding a further stage of disconnection with reality. Many are looking hopefully towards a better future post-pandemic, in terms of improved health systems, sustained reductions in urban pollution, or more flexibility in remote working for example. The mass-scale abstraction of the pandemic, however, could prove to be a hindrance to such positive outcomes. If COVID-19 doesn't directly touch a person's life, it's easy to ignore its reality, deny its impact and believe that there's nothing that needs fixing.

In *The Plague*, Camus says that discussing humans as being good or bad citizens in times of crisis misses the point. Rather "they are more or less ignorant." He suggests that "the evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding." It follows that to counter ignorance and gain this all-important understanding, people require information. But it needs to be correct information. This is challenging when facts depend on the way they are collected, and truth is subjective depending on the channel through which it is

transmitted. In his story, Camus describes the "epical or prize-speech verbiage" employed by the media beyond the walls of Oran when describing the situation within. This grates on Dr. Rieux because it fails to capture the reality of the "small daily effort" made by so many to sustain the lives of the afflicted.

It's possible to imagine that some Italians reacted in a similar way to the sensationalist reporting in British media in early March when COVID-19 began to exert its deadly grip on Northern Italy.[5] Fast forward to April, when the infectious tide rose to similar levels in the UK, and the tone of reporting in popular newspapers was muted in comparison. At times, it leveraged the distraction of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's own battle with the virus to keep the worst domestic horrors from the front pages.[6] It appears that it's only a sensation when it's happening to someone else.

Meanwhile, one debate currently raging in our communities and news media concerns the medical efficacy of wearing masks to protect ourselves and others from COVID-19. This might be missing the point, however. Camus goes straight to the heart of the matter, recording an exchange in which Tarrou hands a mask to Rambert the journalist, who immediately asks if it is really any use: "Tarrou said no, but it inspired confidence in others." Our leaders frequently speak of community responsibility and the vital role that everyone has to play in mitigating the worst impacts of COVID-19. Staying at home and following social distancing guidelines is vital, but for any who share Camus' view, the action of wearing masks is equally of value. It requires investment in modifying behavior to extend greater respect and understanding to those who share this world, its streets, and places of work and play. How people behave – whether or not they wear a mask, for example – has a very real impact on the level of safety or anxiety felt by others.

In Lyon, a sign reads “Stay home, that’s all.” Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon

In the high-score, high-stakes world of COVID-19 statistics, the relative differences of individual country’s approaches are laid bare. Every commentator has a different take, but it’s hard to claim that a country like South Korea has a lower infection rate because it lacks the freedoms of western liberal democracies. Sweden, for example, has achieved remarkable results. Some observers credit this to the heightened sense of social responsibility that saw Stockholm city centre foot traffic reduced by 70% without any enforced lockdown.[7] As COVID-19 takes its permanent place in the world’s ongoing reality, time will tell whether people are willing to invest in their communities through the wearing of masks and other perhaps inconvenient new behaviours as we seek to, as Camus suggests, “inspire confidence in others.” Such communal social responsibility is the manifestation of Camus’ “duty to love,” and its value should be embraced more than ever in trying times.

For individuals to grasp the importance of behavioral change and their wider social duty, it’s vital to break through abstraction and connect meaningfully with them. It’s here that the power of personal stories is paramount. The story that Camus told in *The Plague* is a fiction, but there are many narratives today that mirror its events, and it is those that must be elevated. By doing so, we can reveal the truth of Camus’ words when he says of the contagion, “it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away.” And we can begin to better understand our shared duty of love.

We have come to know two individuals whose stories are relevant and valuable in the context of Camus’ discussion of abstraction in *The Plague* and our city’s experience with

COVID-19. Yasmina Bouafia and Walid Feda are two French citizens who, against great odds, demonstrate “le métier d’homme” and “le devoir d’aimer.”

Yasmina Bouafia, 6eme Arrondissement, Lyon

“With *The Plague*, Camus has given us the copy that we have cut and pasted into today’s Covid-19 France,” claims Yasmina Bouafia, a 38-year-old French-Algerian woman living in the Charpennes neighborhood in the southeastern city of Lyon. Yasmina’s parents are Algerian, but she and four of her nine siblings were born in France. “It’s hard to find an Algerian of my generation who hasn’t read *The Plague.”*

Yasmina Bouafia serves Algerian mint tea.
Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

The pandemic has shed light on an aspect of Camus that she hadn’t previously grasped in his work. Camus, although he became known as a French writer, had always considered himself Algerian, despite having joined the French Resistance, and eventually settling in France after Algeria won its independence in 1954.. Almost all of his writings spring from his place of birth, and when he was forced to relocate to France after the Algerian War, he chose to live in the south of France because the intensity of the sunlight there most resembled that in Algeria. Yasmina, born in France, to a family steeped in Algerian tradition, has always considered herself French.

It has been from her position as an outsider that she has been able to help women in Algeria improve their health. Two years after giving birth to her twins, she divorced her husband and found herself almost exclusively responsible for raising her five children under the age of 11. Uncertainty and stress about her family’s future caused Yasmina to reach a weight that threatened her well-being. Through a combination of

meditation, nutrition, and exercise, she regained her health, and went on to create a foundation co-sponsored by French and Algerian organizations, to help women in Algeria combat the rise in obesity and its related problems. Gyms, yoga studios, and nutritionists are easy to find in France, but in Algeria, they are rare and inaccessible to most women. Even though she is unable to go to Algeria now, she stays in contact with the women in her program, who have, Yasmina admits, struggled since being confined to their homes due to COVID-19. She tells them they have to hold out at least until September when she will be able to help them again in person.

Reading books like *The Plague* in the time of COVID-19 have allowed us to believe more in fiction than in reality, she says. She's taken to watching the British series, "Black Mirror," and sees parallels in the way technology has taken over during the pandemic. Technology, she intimates, has made an abstraction out of the world and replaced real experience: "There's no more kissing, no more hugging, no more face-to-face meetings." Reality happens through the "black mirror" of our phones and screens.

Yasmina, worried about technology's influence over reality, believes the screens and the media are masking stories many don't want to be told. "I feel like the media is in competition for whoever tells the most sensational story, even if it has to do with pseudoscience." For example, it's rare to hear stated a truth that she believes most politicians don't want to admit: months ago, President Macron's government consistently crushed and criticized the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement that involved working and middle class citizens protesting what they saw as the unfair decline in their standards of living. These people included nurses, farmers, truck drivers, and grocery store employees. They are the same people who, despite the dangers of contracting COVID-19, have been asked by the French government to continue working as they are considered "essential" to the nation. Their weekly

protests throughout France have been forbidden, which probably "suits the government." "The values have reversed," she says.

She cites another underrecognized issue in Algeria. Many people in Algeria work, as she describes, "day to day," meaning they leave for work in the morning in order to make enough money to eat in the evening. With the stay-at-home order, they can't leave their houses. This is especially difficult during Ramadan. In one particularly hard hit commune, Blida, military service members have been delivering meals to struggling families at night to break the fast, a response made possible by donations of food from over 1,000 households.[1]

Algerian Ramadan specialties prepared by Yasmina Bouafia. Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

In France, Yasmina has managed her family's food budget by dipping into her savings. As a single mother of five children, she benefits from a reduced lunch fee at the school cafeteria. Even if her children don't eat much at night, she is reassured that they had at least one good meal with meat and vegetables during the day. With the children at home, her food budget has more than doubled and she worries about providing proper nutrition on a daily basis. In addition, she is limited from buying the necessary quantity of food since it is impossible for her to go out each day with all of her children and she doesn't own a car. In France, it's not permitted to go outside without a government-issued justification citing for example exercise, shopping for necessities, or seeing a doctor. There is also a one-parent-to-child obligation. Each time Yasmina went for a walk with her children, the police stopped her and ordered her home. Her older sister decided to move in with her to help ensure the children's outings could continue.

Instead of taking her sister's help as a cue to let down her

guard, Yasmina decided that the extra pair of hands at home would finally allow her to do what she felt was her “human duty.” While her sister watched her children, Yasmina went to the local chapters of the Salvation Army to prepare meals for the poor and homeless. She wore gloves, a mask, and protective clothing and declined to help distribute due to risk of infection. However, she reported each day to the centers until she severely sprained her ankle, forcing her to walk with crutches and stay home until the injury healed.

The task of fasting has become a greater challenge during Covid-19 due to the fact that Muslim families and friends can’t visit each other during the day. This is especially painful in the early evening as the fasting draws to a close and they prepare to eat for the first time in over twelve hours. Yasmina explains, “In the Maghreb culture, we are used to taking a walk to visit family and friends after eating the evening meal and we talk late into the night. It’s a time to reunite with people. Now I have to eat alone.” Most of Yasmina’s children are too young to fast during the day and her evening Ramadan ritual has felt less celebratory as she eats in isolation.

A few days ago, her children surprised her. As if they had inherited their mother’s selfless, benevolent impulse, they surprised her as she prepared their breakfast – they announced that they had all decided to join her in fasting for the day. And, in spite of a few grumbles, they made it to sundown. Instead of the traditional Ramadan soup, *chorba,* or orange-flower blossom pastries, her youngest begged to go to McDonald’s, which is one of the restaurants that hasn’t stayed open for take-out or delivery. “If McDonald’s were open, I would have definitely taken him,” said Yasmina, still flabbergasted by her children’s resolve.

For Yasmina, Camus’ novel is valuable because it isn’t about Algeria. It’s not about France either. “It’s a novel about humankind.” As she explains, this is what Camus meant by

“métier d’homme.” Yasmina isn’t helping Algerians or French. She’s helping humans.

Walid Feda, 1er arrondissement, Lyon

“The most negative word of 2020 is positive,” pronounced Walid Feda, owner of the Lyon neighborhood convenience store, Panier Sympa (The Friendly Basket).

Walid Feda, owner of Panier Sympa convenience store in Lyon, waits for customers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Since high school, Walid has read *The Plague* several times, reflecting his lifelong interest in major global pandemics in history. Every 100-400 years, he reports, the world faces something like COVID-19, be it Bubonic plague, cholera, or the Spanish flu. Still, he never thought such a thing would affect him at all, either positively or negatively.

In his shop, Walid sells the basics– fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods, sodas, chips, candy, cold beer, bleach, toilet paper. He also sells more high-end goods like expensive champagne, aged cheeses, vintage wines, and cured meats. In normal times, both the bourgeois and working-class flock to Panier Sympa on Sunday afternoons or as the sun goes down, when regular supermarkets are closed. His store is never overcrowded, but there’s always at least one person purchasing something and a few others hanging around the fruit and vegetable stand at the entrance as permanent fixtures. On summer nights, the smell of exotic spices wafts through the neighborhood and we know that Walid is not only cooking things to sell – he is also preparing meals for his friends and neighbors, free of charge.

Walid’s storefront in Lyon. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father civil engineer and well-known intellectual. They were both outspoken community leaders against the regime and, as such, their lives were threatened. When he was 10, Walid and his parents were granted asylum in France and settled in Lyon. Walid was educated in international schools in Lyon and Dubai, and after gaining a degree in computer science in Lyon, he returned to Dubai where he led several technological and commercial enterprises. When he met his wife in India, his business was doing well, and together, they had three children—two boys and a girl, and lived between India and Dubai. When his wife fell ill with breast cancer in December 2007, they made the decision that she should pursue her treatment in Lyon, where cancer treatment facilities were cutting-edge. In 2008-9 the subprime crisis and the Arab Spring hit his businesses hard and they folded in Dubai, Bahrain, and China. With his children, he moved back to Lyon. His wife still sick, he used his remaining money to open the convenience store because, as he told himself, "people always need to eat." The store limped to modest success until 2014 when his wife's cancer returned and she died, leaving Walid alone with his three children. He floundered economically and emotionally. Luckily, his parents agreed to help with the children and he found himself back on his feet again in late 2018.

Things were starting to look up until March of this year when the rapid spread of COVID-19 imposed a lockdown of citizens. Considered by French law as an "essential" business for the health of the nation, Walid has been allowed to remain open. However, he knows that his sales of foodstuffs are anything but essential. "The seniors in our neighborhood see me as security," he says. "They come here once or twice a week to buy a few things but really they come to talk. For some, I bring them their groceries. If I close, I'm scared they will fear the worse and succumb to their isolation. I look after them." Walid explains that he orchestrated placing a local

woman in an assisted-living facility just before the pandemic because no one could take care of her. He calls and checks on her each day to make sure that the new Coronavirus hasn't invaded the facility and that she remains in good health.

Finally, he's remained open not because he offers essential food, but because he offers a service for those who are in danger in falling outside of what the French nation considers legal. For some time, Walid has helped asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants process governmental documents related to obtaining French legal status. Among the bleach bottles and disposable hand wipes stacked in the back of his shop, he's set up a card table and chairs. A pot of hot tea and cups sit among the scattered papers along with a few empty beer cans. Prior to Covid-19, he had cases that helped fill the occasional monotony of afternoons before the shop's business picked up in the evening. Today, however, he has a steady string of customers. The French government has decided to extend visas to all immigrants awaiting decisions regarding their permanent status. While this may appear to be good news, it presents a lot of unknowns—not only on the part of the immigrants, but also on the part of those who are sometimes unaware of the new rules. For example, if a pharmacist is not aware of the visa-extension law, they may not understand that the client still has the right to a lower price for medicine. This gets especially complicated when the immigrant in question doesn't speak French or English.

In the back of his shop, Walid helps two men from Afghanistan with their papers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Nowadays, Walid accompanies these people to pharmacies to argue in their favor, and helps them fill out paperwork that guarantees the extension of their rights on French territory. "They have legal status that not everyone knows about. That's why I have to be there," Walid explains. "My religion is my

humanity. So, no matter where they are from, I help them. It's more important to do something good for humanity."

Walid charges no fee for this service. "It's my heart, my humanity that does this."

Walid has remained open for business and, no doubt, he has helped many, but his business has paid an enormous price. "My debit and credit cards are maxed out," he reports. "My bank has blocked me. I use the cash I make from shop purchases to buy stuff to replenish stock. I let my oldest son work here so he can have some pocket money and feel independent." The French government has promised to help struggling businesses during COVID-19, but only those who were doing well before the crisis will get immediate and substantial aid. Walid was just getting back on his feet after recovering from his wife's death when the pandemic exploded. He fears the worst. With three children who will all encounter the rising costs of French higher education in the next few years, he hopes he and his family will be spared. His oldest son has his eye on an aeronautical engineering school and, besides his work in the shop, fixes smartphones for pocket money.

When we asked Walid if he would respond to a few interview questions, he requested a few days to reflect. After this time, he produced a narrative of eleven handwritten pages. Here is, fittingly, the abstracted version of some of his most pertinent reflections on Camus:

Today, we are living in a historical moment of our lives. In the world, we are observing certain ideological and political discriminations within our own communities and even families. The virus is forcing us to come back to a notion of family again by enclosing parents with their kids. Are we seeing that our relationships have become more virtual, making us express even our gratitude to the ones we love only on screens? When I come home from work, I want nothing more than to hug my kids, but I have to take off my clothes and shower first. My clients

come into the shop – we have always been friendly, shaking hands or giving the French "bise" – a kiss on each cheek. Now, behind masks, we nod heads coldly. But, at the same time, my actions for others come from my solidarity and my responsibility is to my humanity.

The Rats Will Rise Up Again

French writer Roland Barthes took issue with *La Peste* in 1955, claiming that Camus' use of allegory muted rather than exposed the catastrophic reality of the Holocaust.[8] But only reading *The Plague* as an allegorical mirror of the COVID-19 masks its fundamental message about humans helping humans. By not speaking directly about real events, *The Plague* allows for this more universal meaning, which is especially relevant for today's COVID-19 world.

Outside of Lyon, France, quarantined Yellow Vest protestors hang their symbols outside their windows. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

If we believe that *The Plague* can only stand for political totalitarianism or health crises, we will have too quickly dismissed one of the essential functions of the book, which is to provide a blueprint for both identifying and overcoming the kind of abstraction that prevents us from performing our "métier d'homme" and our "devoir d'aimer." With *The Plague,* Camus has created a neutral space from which the rise of catastrophe and collective resistance against it can be staged. Walid and Yasmina are but two of thousands of individuals who have played their part and we can only hope that more faces and names like theirs are revealed as the COVID-19 crisis marches on, and indeed the next one lies in wait. Because Rieux, in the last lines of *The Plague* warns

that these kinds of fights are far from over:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

Notes:

[1] http://www.aps.dz/regions/104503-association-kafil-al-yatime-de-blida-distribution-de-30-000-aides-alimentaires-a-la-fin-du-mois-sacre

[1] http://www.gallimard.fr/Footer/Ressources/Entretiens-et-documents/Histoire-d-un-livre-La-Peste-d-Albert-Camus

[2] For an explanation of the way France had been divided into the northern zone and the southern zone during WWII, see https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/france

[3] Camus, Albert. *Carnets*.1942-1943

[4] Agnès Spiquel, https://www.livreshebdo.fr/article/une-relecture-de-la-peste-par-agnes-spiquel

[5] Jacqueline Bernard. “The Background of *The Plague:* Albert Camus’ Experience in the French Resistance.” Volume 14, 1967

Kentucky Romance Quarterly, Issue 2.

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[6] Albert Camus. *Les carnets.* 1942-1951

[1] For a description of France's restrictions see this article in *The Local*

[2] Read more of Helen Ouyang's harrowing article about her experience in her *The New York Times* article, "I'm an E.R. Doctor in New York. None of Us Will Ever Be the Same."

[3] Quoted in Ouyang's article, listed in footnote 2

[4] See article on Dr. Breen, "Top E.R. Doctor Who Treated Virus Pateints Dies by Suicide" in *The New York Times*

[5] For more on the UK coverage of Italy, see the article published on itv, "Italy's soaring coronavirus death toll and Covid-19 panic buying in the UK dominate Monday's headlines"

[6] For more on the coverage of Johnson's illness see the article "How the newspaper front pages reacted to Boris Johnson in intensive care" published on *Yahoo News.*

[7] For more on Sweden, see "Sweden disputes accusations of lack of coronavirus action" in *The Local.*

[8] Barthes, Roland. "*La Peste*: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude." *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Eric Marty. Vol.1. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1999, p. 540.

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