

THE CRACK



CARLOS SPOTTORNO & GUILLERMO ABRIL

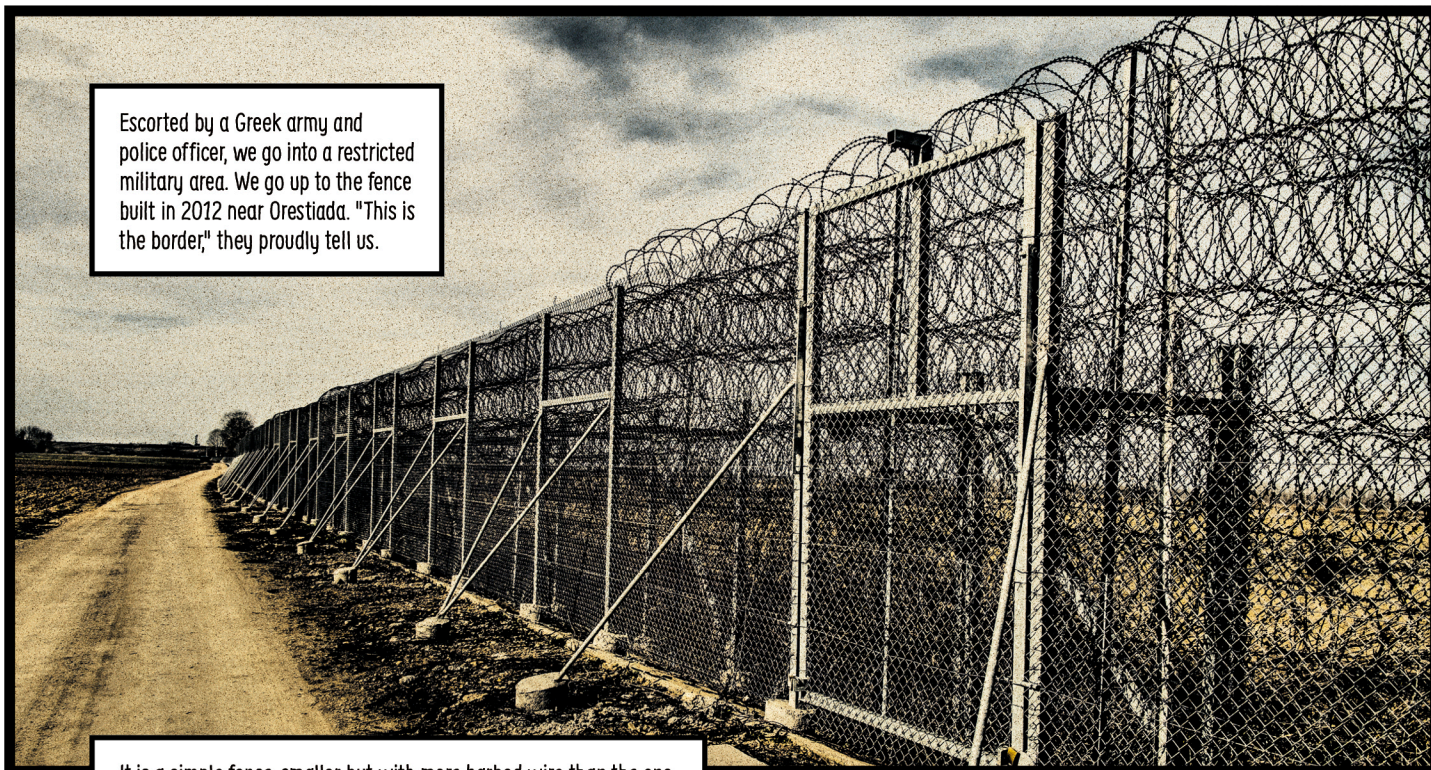


In February 2014 Carlos and I set off to Thrace, a region with an ancient name where the borders of three countries meet: Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. We fly to Istanbul and from there take a bus to Alexandroupoli in Greece. It is the easiest way to then be able to move quickly around the area, given that it isn't easy to bring a Turkish rental car into the EU.

Before crossing into Greece Carlos stealthily sticks his camera out the tinted window just enough. "Click." A furtive photograph of the border crossing. We leave Turkey. Back home.



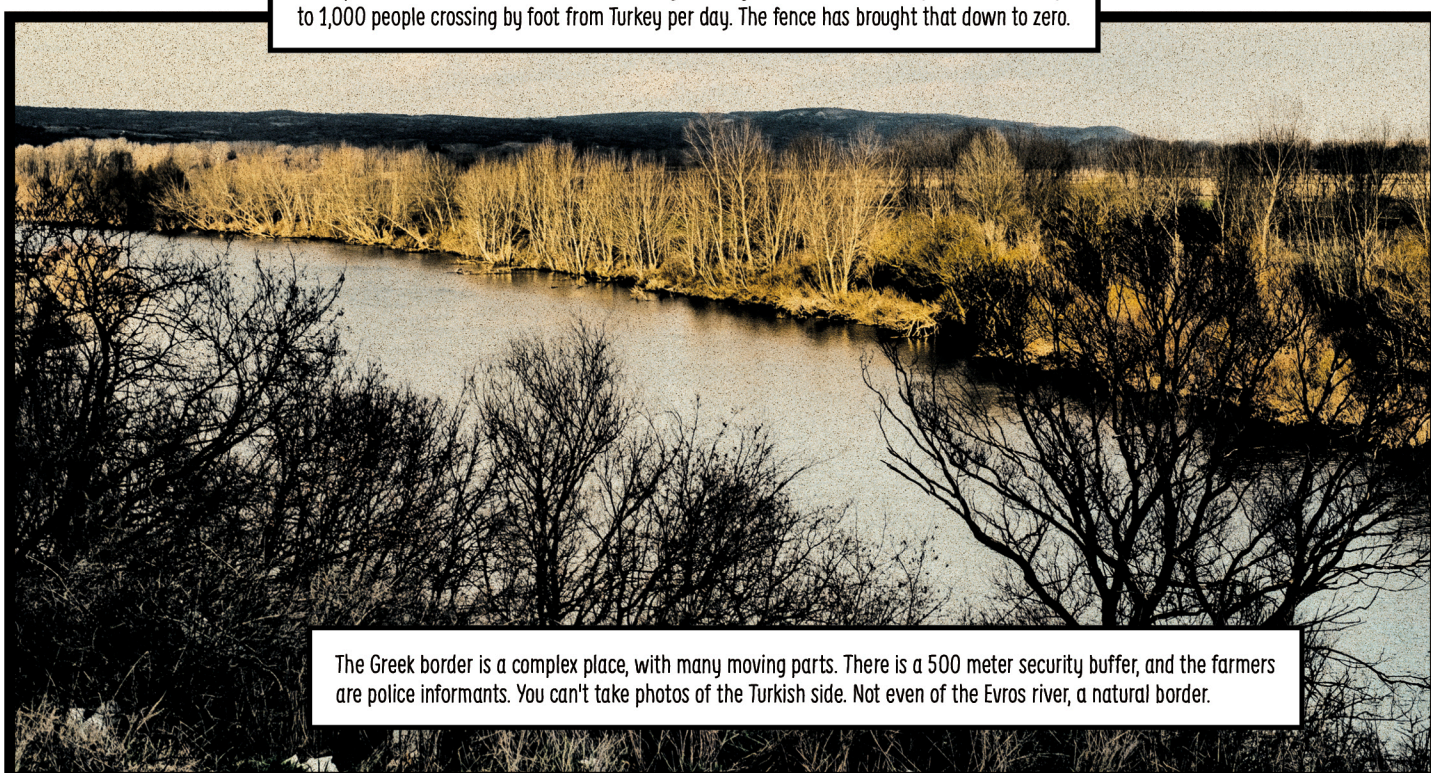
Escorted by a Greek army and police officer, we go into a restricted military area. We go up to the fence built in 2012 near Orestiada. "This is the border," they proudly tell us.



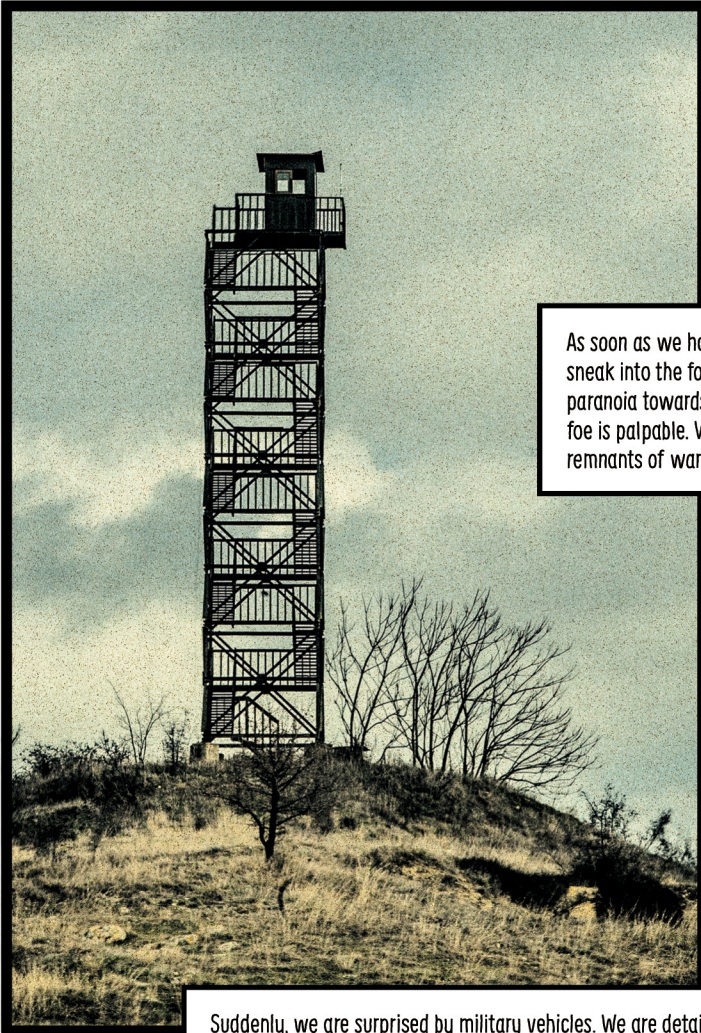
It is a simple fence, smaller but with more barbed wire than the one in Melilla. "There are no known reports of anybody making it over it."



This open tract of land was once the main illegal immigration route into Europe. There were up to 1,000 people crossing by foot from Turkey per day. The fence has brought that down to zero.



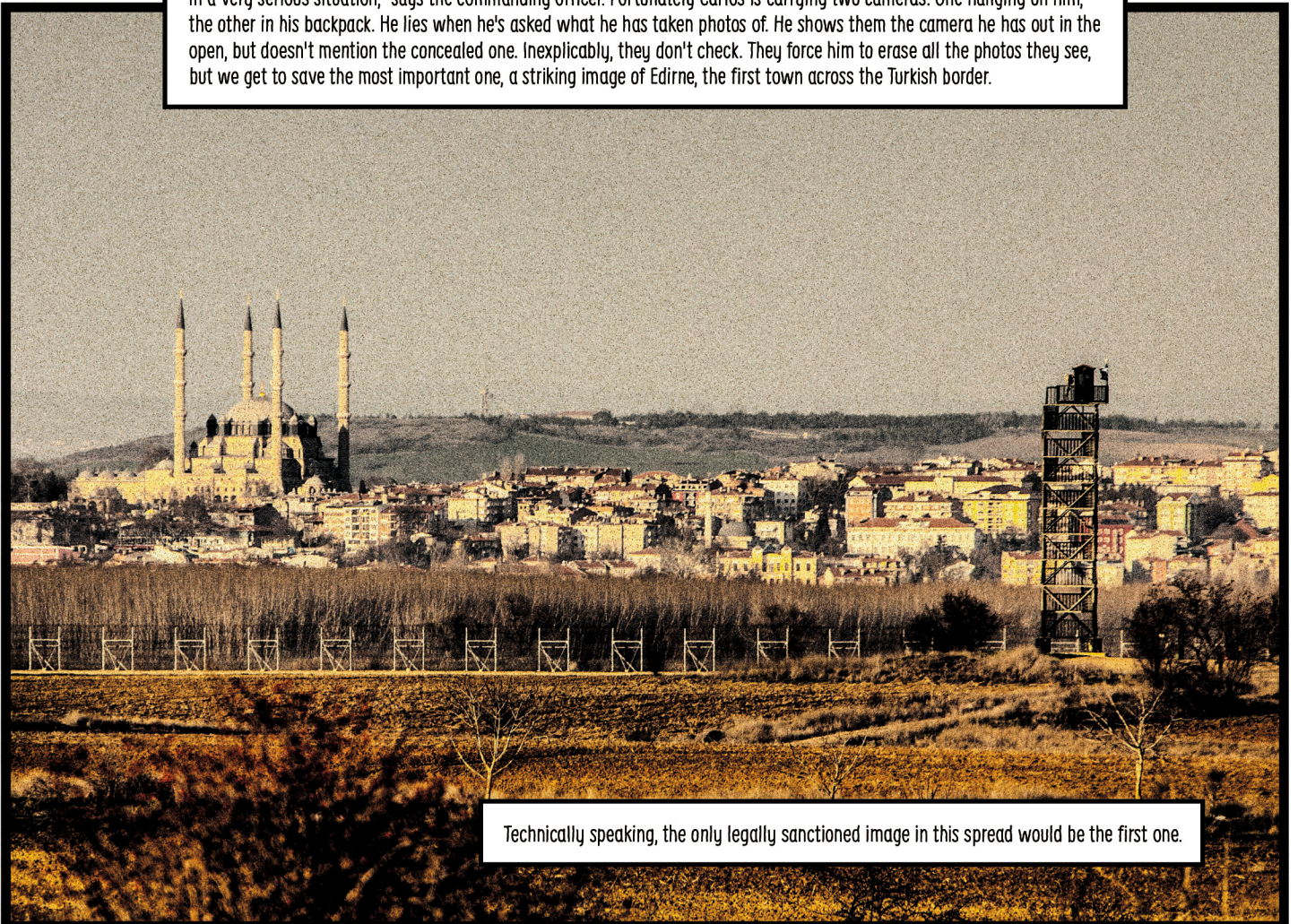
The Greek border is a complex place, with many moving parts. There is a 500 meter security buffer, and the farmers are police informants. You can't take photos of the Turkish side. Not even of the Evros river, a natural border.



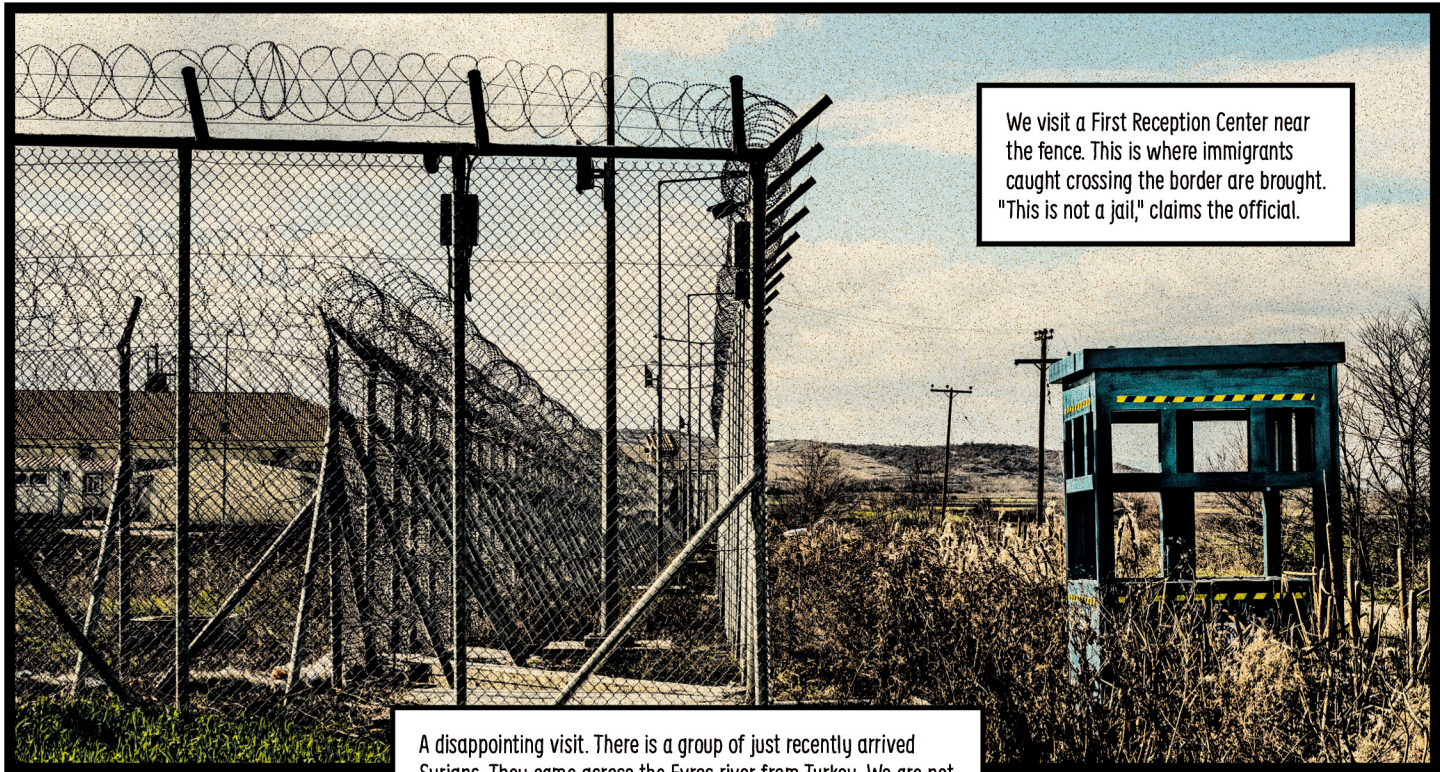
As soon as we have a chance we sneak into the forbidden zone. The paranoia towards the old Muslim foe is palpable. We come across the remnants of wars from a bygone era.



Suddenly, we are surprised by military vehicles. We are detained and interrogated. They threaten with locking us up. "You are in a very serious situation," says the commanding officer. Fortunately Carlos is carrying two cameras. One hanging on him, the other in his backpack. He lies when he's asked what he has taken photos of. He shows them the camera he has out in the open, but doesn't mention the concealed one. Inexplicably, they don't check. They force him to erase all the photos they see, but we get to save the most important one, a striking image of Edirne, the first town across the Turkish border.

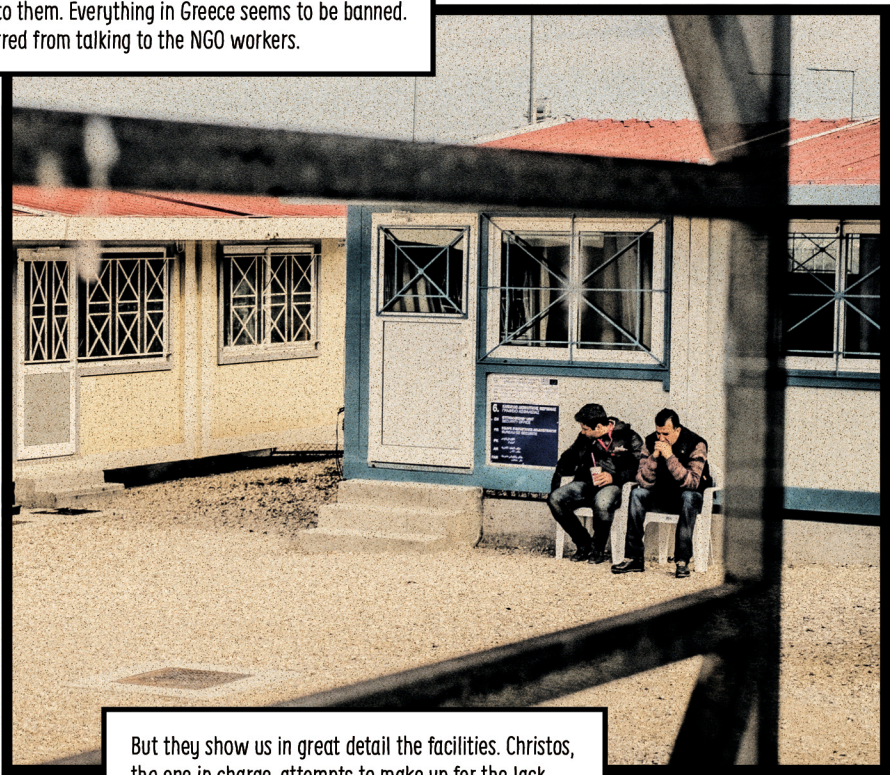


Technically speaking, the only legally sanctioned image in this spread would be the first one.



We visit a First Reception Center near the fence. This is where immigrants caught crossing the border are brought. "This is not a jail," claims the official.

A disappointing visit. There is a group of just recently arrived Syrians. They came across the Evros river from Turkey. We are not allowed to talk to them. Everything in Greece seems to be banned. We are even barred from talking to the NGO workers.



But they show us in great detail the facilities. Christos, the one in charge, attempts to make up for the lack of transparency by telling us the endearing story of a Syrian baby they christened with his own name.



"Don't talk to them." "Don't photograph their faces." We have gone through the official process, and filed dozens of forms with the Greek government to be here. But they remain unyielding.

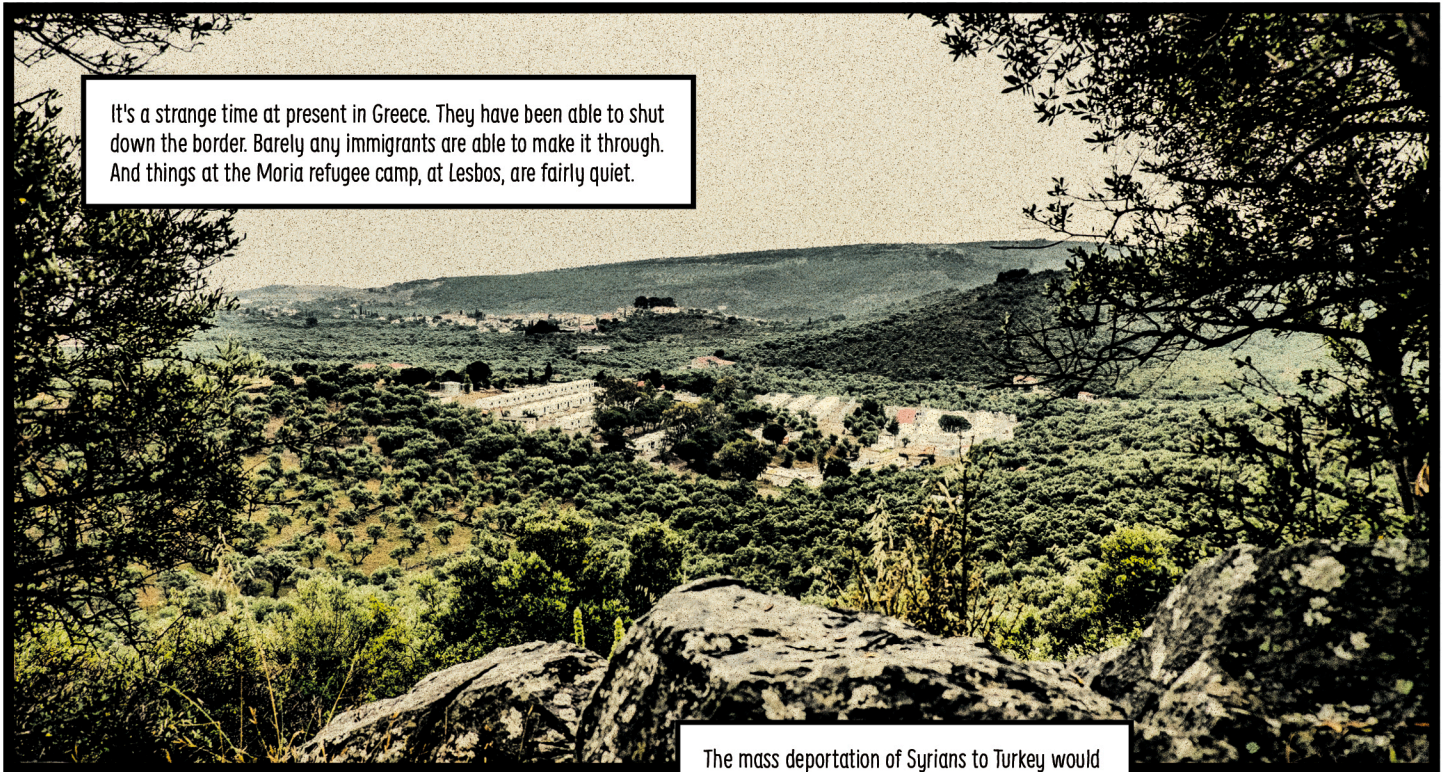


At the Center there are Syrians, Afghans, Eritreans, Algerians... With the exception of the Syrians, they are all transferred after 15 days to a nearby detention center charged with illegal entry. We are not allowed in, but once in the car, as we leave, we find the right angle from which to get a view of the inside.



Christos bids us goodbye with a reflection about the EU: "The southern countries should band together. We suffer under the Troika, while at the same time taking the strain of immigration away from the northern countries."

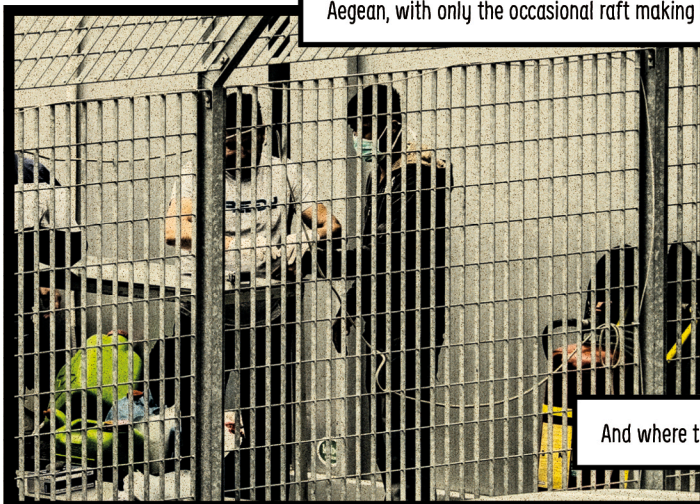
It's a strange time at present in Greece. They have been able to shut down the border. Barely any immigrants are able to make it through. And things at the Moria refugee camp, at Lesbos, are fairly quiet.



The mass deportation of Syrians to Turkey would start two years later in this island. Over a million refugees will have made it to the continent by then. Most of them following this route.



But for the time being it remains a serene place by the Aegean, with only the occasional raft making it to its shores.



And where the authorities can still process the recent arrivals without difficulty.



The civil war in Syria hasn't yet reached its bloodiest stage. And the Islamic State hasn't yet proclaimed its Caliphate.



The Greek coastguard is suspected of having sunken ships full of refugees. They are unequivocal. "You cannot take pictures of the patrol boat, the sailing instruments, or the guards."



"You can take pictures of the sea."

After a couple of hours of much blarneying Carlos is able to get out of them two posed photos, each one under direct supervision of the guards.



Greece having been sealed off, most of the refugees have sought out an alternate route to get into the EU. We head there.

Bulgaria is the poorest country in Europe. They are used to being the emigrants. A Spanish Frontex* guard deployed in the area tells us how it all started a few months ago. "We could see masses of Syrians, an exodus, making it across from Turkey." Nobody saw it coming.



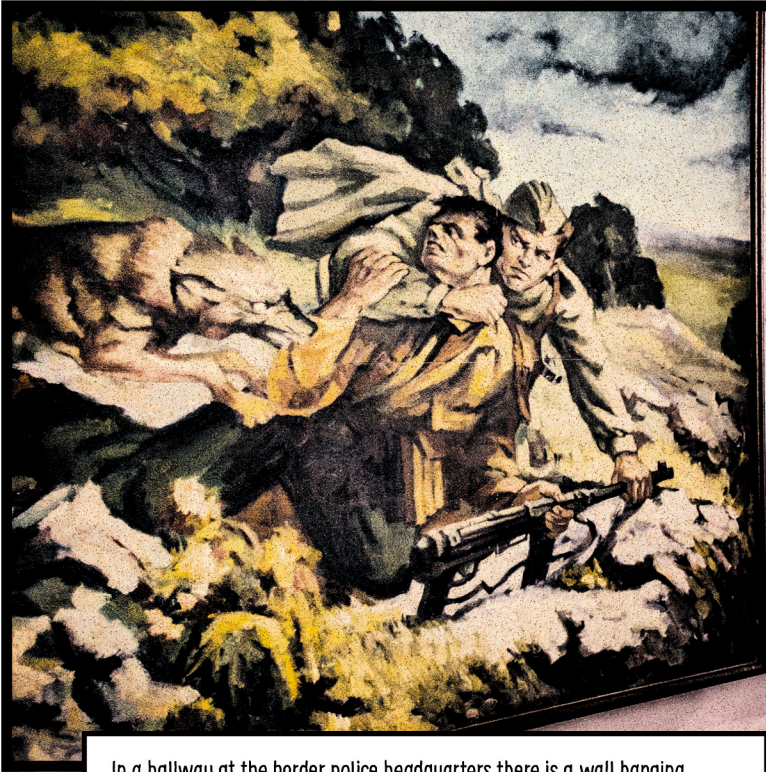
When we cross the border from Greece, the Bulgarian police officers check our passports and smile. "Frontex?" Nobody else comes through here, it seems.



There is no hiding the poverty. All the buildings are falling apart. We drive through potholed roads and reach the base in Elhovo, with a distinctive Soviet feel to it.



* Member of the External Borders Agency (from French: Frontières extérieures)



In a hallway at the border police headquarters there is a wall hanging depicting a still fairly recent past. Maybe a harbinger of things soon to come.



"A couple of years ago there was zero immigration. And now, in just six months we have had an influx of 11,000 people." Most of them Syrians. A contingent of 1,500 police officers has been sent from Sofia to patrol the hills. The EU has paid for this center that monitors 274 kilometers of the Turkish border.

Thermal cameras. Monitors on duty 24/7. A demonstration video.

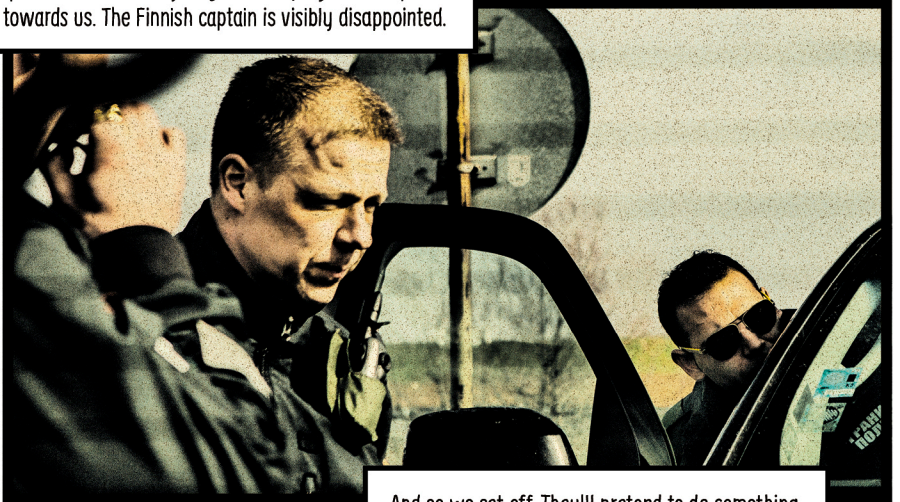


We were instantly reminded of Melilla.

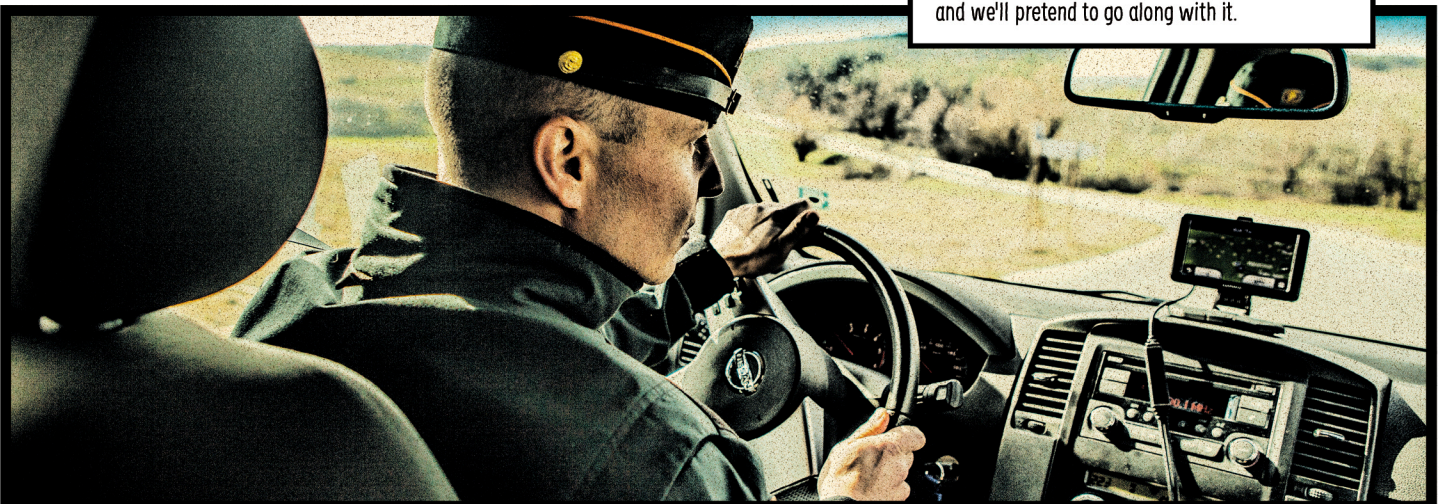
We have arranged a meeting with a Finnish Border Patrol unit. Its mission is to patrol the "green border" along Turkey: the forests. They are very friendly. They are aware of being, in our eyes, the face of Europe.



But we won't go on patrol. The Bulgarian supervisor won't allow it. In exchange they will perform a rescue operation for us. They stage a little play to fulfill proforma their responsibilities towards us. The Finnish captain is visibly disappointed.



And so we set off. They'll pretend to do something, and we'll pretend to go along with it.

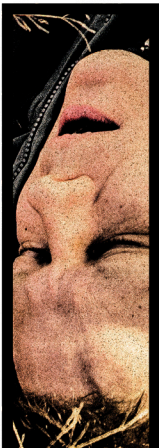




Let the show begin.



They take the dog to pee in the bushes.
We'll have to settle with that for our story.



Both Carlos and I can barely contain our laughter while the friendly
Finish agent pretends to be injured. "It hurts a lot!" A fellow agent
calms him down. "You are safe now, you are now in Europe."

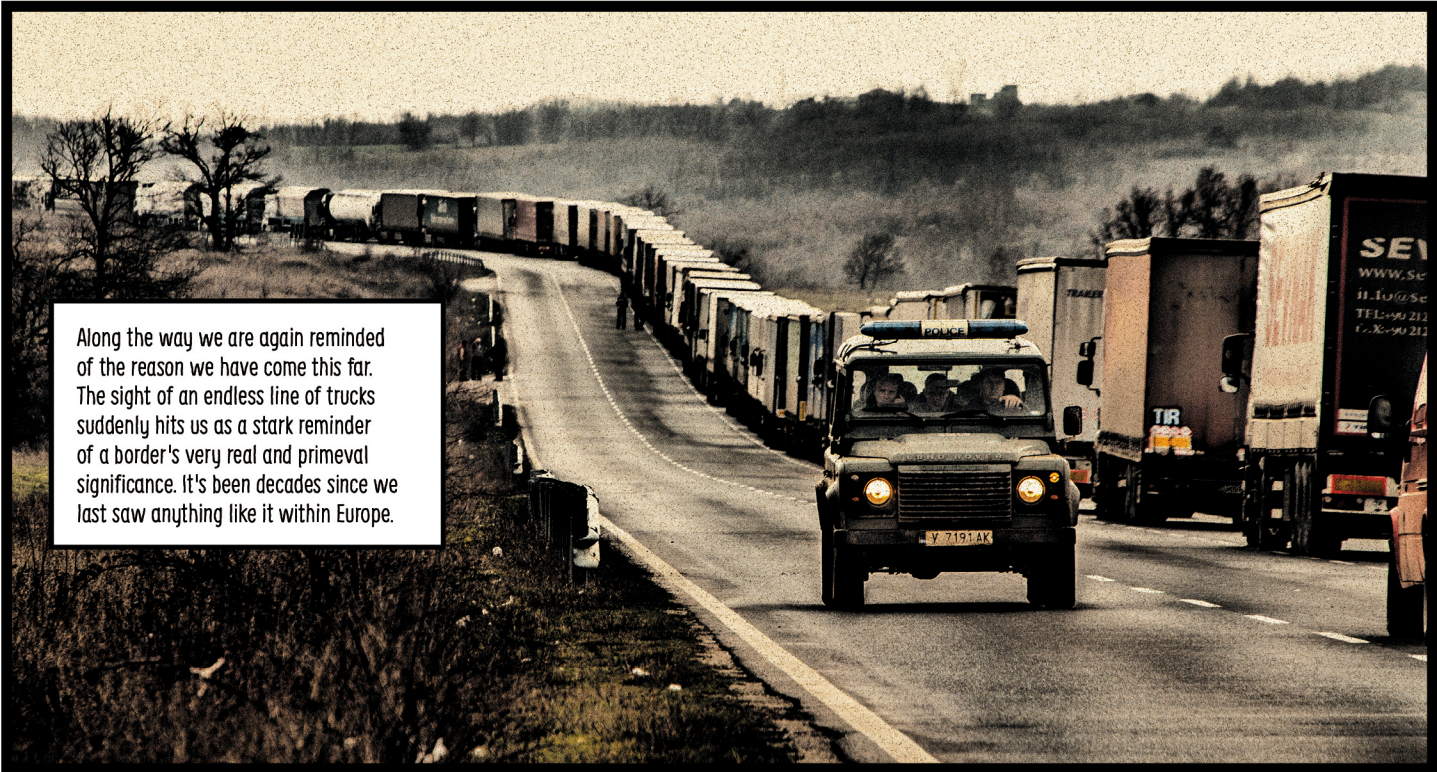




After the show we go to the border crossing with Turkey.



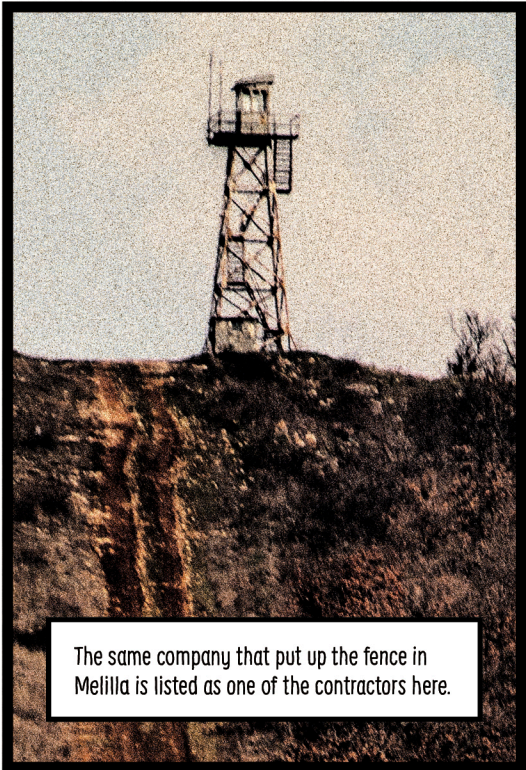
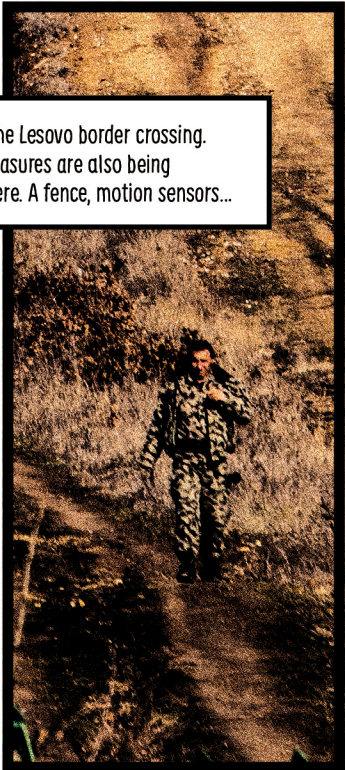
No matter how hard we try, lieutenant Elena Gerdzhikova, our guide, manages to remain uncomfortably cold and distant with us.



Along the way we are again reminded of the reason we have come this far. The sight of an endless line of trucks suddenly hits us as a stark reminder of a border's very real and primeval significance. It's been decades since we last saw anything like it within Europe.



We make it to the Lesovo border crossing. The security measures are also being strengthened here. A fence, motion sensors...



The same company that put up the fence in Melilla is listed as one of the contractors here.



The control systems runs like clockwork. Turkey is a friend, but it hasn't always been that way.



A Bulgarian border agent inspects a truck with a device that doesn't seem to have gotten much prior use. It is paid for by the EU's External Borders Fund. They look for narcotics, cigarettes, weapons... and people.



Refugees have found in this remote corner of Europe a cheap and relatively safe route.



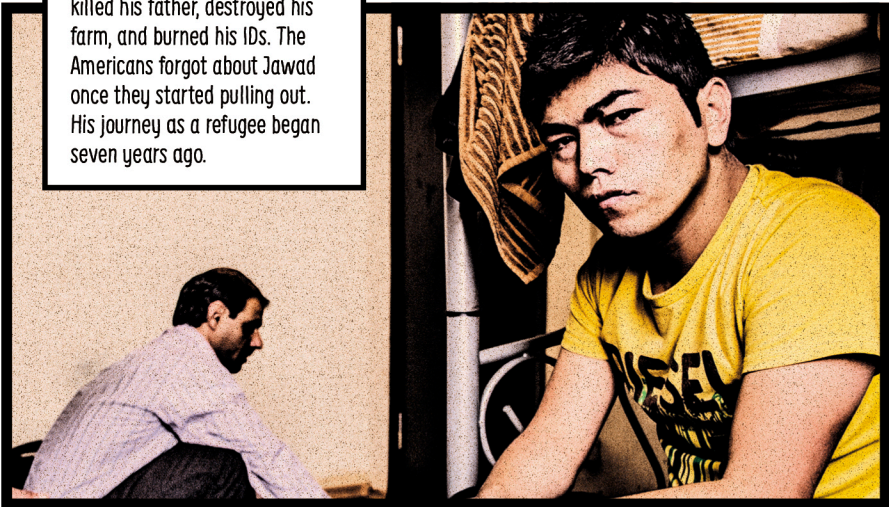
We arrive at Harmanli, a small town near the border. A former military base serves currently as a reception center.

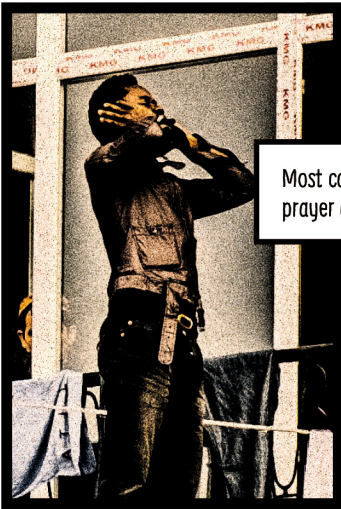


It shelters 900 people. Most are Syrians, but there are many other conflicts around the world from which people are escaping.



Jawad worked as an interpreter for the American troops in Afghanistan. The Taliban killed his father, destroyed his farm, and burned his IDs. The Americans forgot about Jawad once they started pulling out. His journey as a refugee began seven years ago.





Most come from Muslim countries. Many turn back to prayer during their long journey. "Praying comforts us."



It is plain to see that Bulgaria is being overwhelmed.



One of the persons staying at the center, a Kurdish government worker, asks as much in anger as resigned: "Is this really Europe? We were better off in Syria."

The Bulgarian Prime Minister made a visit yesterday. The refugees put their own particular message up for the cameras.





We come upon a football game here as well. It is Syrians against Africans.



There are eight teams in the Harmanli league competing against each other in an endless loop.



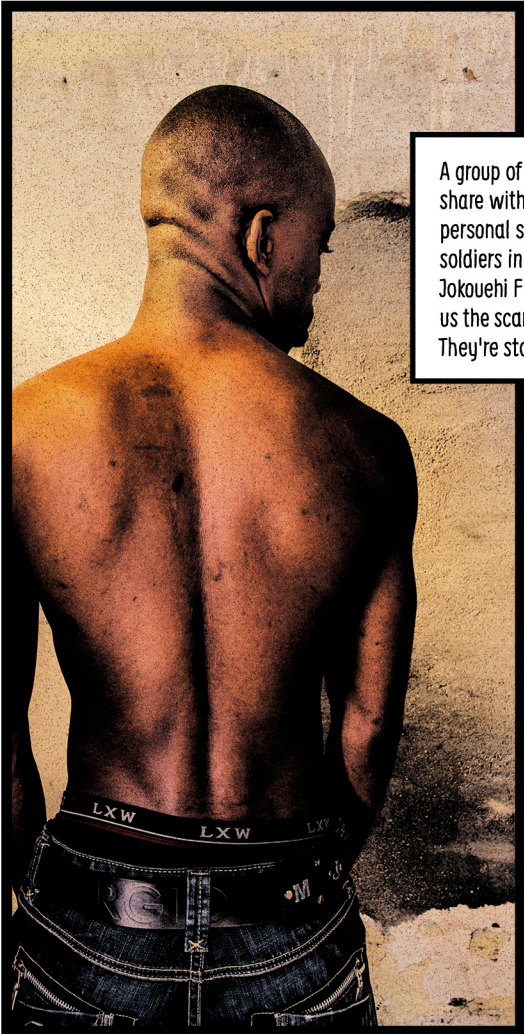
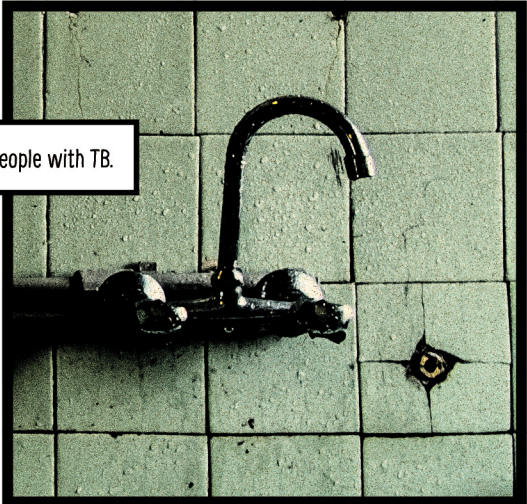
Time goes by very slowly. It is like a circle of hell from which no one can escape.



There is nowhere else to go either. Bulgaria is not a party to the Schengen Treaty. Once you request political asylum you are stuck in this squalid place. The weakness of the treaty will become evident before long.



In the African building there are people with TB.



A group of young men share with us their personal stories as soldiers in Ivory Coast. Jokouehi Frank shows us the scars on his back. They're stab wounds.



And again, a recurring question: "How can we continue on our journey?"



And again, all we can respond is: "We don't know."



Most of the Syrians and Kurds are in a section of the camp with modern and well equipped barracks: bedrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen.




Trades start springing up. Everywhere around normalcy sets in.



The refugees complain that the food provided by the Bulgarian army is disgusting.



To settle the issue, we decide to try the lentils. They're not that bad, although they're not haute-cuisine either. Eggs, biscuits and sodas are sold at the barracks' entrance.



A Kurdish couple does everything in their hands to forget that they are in a refugee camp. With a piece of carpeting and some steel barricades they have managed a miracle: their barrack looks almost like a real home.

It's time for us to go back to Madrid and prepare for our next trip. We still don't suspect how dramatic it will be.