



SO
CLOSE

Publication
Series

VOL.2

From so far
to so close:
Stories from
the present
and the past

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Enhancing Social Cohesion through Sharing the Cultural Heritage of Forced Migrations



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SO-CLOSE Project



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VOL.2 From so far to so close: Stories from the present
and the past
Dominika Kasproicz and **Karolina Hess** (eds.)

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Storytelling in SO-CLOSE. A Brief Introduction

Karolina Hess

(Villa Decius Association)

Storytelling lies at the very heart of the SO-CLOSE project. It focuses on the telling of tales with different protagonists, from both past and present. To represent the past, the project works with historical institutions and outstanding specialists in this area. And who better to tell the stories of today than refugees themselves? In 2020 the SO-CLOSE Consortium has conducted over 200 interviews with refugees and migrants currently given shelter in Greece, Spain, Italy, and Poland. These stories and narratives relating the experiences of forced migration from both yesterday and today are what the project wishes to show with the help of technology, by developing and creating digital tools that in the long term will help promote social cohesion .

SO-CLOSE storytelling is motivated by the project's technical goal, which is to develop and create a TOOLBOX of three narrative digital platforms along with the Memory Center Platform (MCP), which is designed as a repository for all materials gathered throughout the project. Our tech-partners, La Tempesta, The Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas CERTH and ENGINEERING Ingegneria Informatica, are responsible for this part of the undertaking. We hope to find and reach as many individuals and institutions as we can and encourage them to use our tools to create and compare stories between each other so that they in turn can forge new narratives of their own.

SO-CLOSE is also looking to gather and tell stories as they appear. And that is why so many members of our consortium are cultural institutions, NGO's and universities. They are responsible for finding material not only from the past but also from the present. Together they will provide the content for the Digital Tools, and the fuel for the project's current communication and social media channels. For almost two years now, and for one more to come, the Communication Teams have kept their followers updated on the stories the teams have found, heard, and wish to share. This is why the SO-CLOSE Series , which for the time being comprises SO-CLOSE Storylines and SO-CLOSE Historylines, was conceived in the first place.

SO-CLOSE Storylines was the first series to be launched by the project. The 24 stories were chosen by, and written in collaboration with four cultural institutions – Villa Decius Association, The Exile Memorial Museum Consortium, The Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole, and The Greek Forum of Refugees. Storylines are tales from the present day in Poland, Greece, Italy, and Spain that were shared with us during the first phase of the project in 2020. These stories, inspired by narratives of flight and exile, not only present fresh perspectives on current migrant policy in Europe but also provide very personal insights about the love, fear, prejudice, and cultural bias the heroes of these stories often face in their host countries.

On the other hand, SO-CLOSE Historylines are accounts provided by historians working with the project, primarily via The Exile Memorial Museum Consortium. This series focuses on migration tales from bygone times, and shows how many artists often lived for many years as refugees. These recorded experiences, which in many ways contrast sharply with the Storylines Series, nevertheless share much in common with the latter. They reflect the struggles and decisions that many Europeans know from the stories told to them by the elders in their own families.

Sharing stories and comparing them is a key to mutual understanding.

This publication presents both Storylines and Historylines, describing and illustrating the journeys of 32 different individuals and their families, which although from different times and very distant places remain connected through the struggles that migration involves, and the experience of having to live, out of necessity or coercion, in another country.

SO-CLOSE Storylines

Fighting loneliness

The first protagonist of 2021 is an artist. She speaks seven languages and finds peace in music, painting, and nature. She spent the majority of her life in Pakistan, but she and her family are originally from Afghanistan, a place she has been missing since she was 14.

“Afghanistan is freedom, I love the mountains there, the people are relaxed, and you can have deeper conversations with people [...] I know it’s a country of war and violence, and that life there is hard, but for me, it’s like a Disney movie. I would love to watch it over and over again...”



She can’t visit her beloved country because she’s not entitled to a passport due to her asylum status. After some time spent in a refugee camp in Pakistan, our hero and her family moved to Barcelona. She found a lot of support there from her mother and her teachers at school.

Besides missing Afghanistan her biggest challenge is dealing with loneliness. Painting, music, art, and long walks help her. She is trying to create a routine and stick to it.

“What’s difficult for me sometimes is doing things alone, but I am learning how to do so. [...] I ask myself ‘who are you going to go for a walk with?’ I’m working on ‘it’s all the same, go alone’...”

Our protagonist is learning Catalan and is working at the Red Cross as a volunteer helping migrants. Through this experience, she has learned how important it is to treat refugees as equals – “[...] people feel more motivated and stable if you treat them equally”.

We at the SO-CLOSE Team admire her strength and thank her for the time and the experiences she shares with migrants. We hope she will soon make many friends soon and will one day have the opportunity to visit Afghanistan.

From so far to so close

The weight of prejudice

Our next protagonist described to us the obstacles she faced after moving to Italy. She was not worried at first. She even spoke of herself as being “cocky” back then. She is smart and well educated, with a good university degree. So she did not expect that finding a job and contributing to society would be so difficult. But it has proved otherwise. In the past year, she could not find a job or a place to stay. She faced the weight of prejudice.



“(...) I couldn’t find anything. Each and every place and each door was closed to me just because I’m an immigrant. Just because I’m transsexual, they were like ‘no no no’. I wasn’t expecting Europe to be like that.”

For her, putting prejudice aside is the most important factor that can help people to assimilate into a culture. Everyone should listen to one another and try to shut off the voice in their heads whispering that they know what someone is like before they actually do.

SO-CLOSE speaks and listens to people. Our team is creating digital tools that will facilitate the art of telling stories and understanding each other. We cannot wait to introduce them to you!

As for our protagonist, we hope she meets people who are open to listening, understanding and accepting her – i.e., real friends.

From so far to so close

The language “we” speak

Our protagonist today is a Ukrainian living near Krakow, Poland. He is a car mechanic, who spends his free time taking pictures, making videos, and reading history books.

He left home in 2013, when the war in Donbas (in eastern Ukraine) broke out and moved to Poland a year ago, leaving behind his wife and children. He wishes to bring them here, so that they can have a better life.



Thanks to his employer, a fellow Ukrainian who helped him “like nobody else” after he arrived in Poland, our protagonist never had to live in a refugee centre.

Despite this fact, our hero often feels lonely. He misses not only his family, but also contact with local people. Although he has Ukrainian colleagues, he wishes he knew Poles better. Language seems to be the only obstacle. That’s why he is learning Polish.

We will keep our fingers crossed and wish him the courage to use Polish on every occasion. We also send sincere greetings to our protagonist’s employer who helped him get... From so far to so close.

From so far to so close

Facing the monster

Today, we wish to share with you a story of TWO heroes. Our main protagonist is a female journalist who used to live in Venezuela with her husband, a lawyer, both of whom worked in public administration.

At some point, the corruption and politicization of the system become so widespread that both decided to quit.

She told us:

“I had to ‘cook’ political information (...) I couldn’t stay in a programme and talk about something that I didn’t absolutely agree with. I really had to get away and do something else. We decided to leave Caracas and become entrepreneurs. We set up a small farm project that, at first, did very well”.

But not long afterwards, as the country collapsed completely it became impossible to live off the farm. They embarked on another new project – cheese making – but that soon failed, too. The corruption made it impossible to obtain the ingredients needed to produce our cheese. To keep going they would have no choice but get their hands dirty in a corrupt system.

“(...) you would be forced into doing perverse and (...) very corrupt business with officials or people connected with the government with access to certain products that you didn’t have. (...) We were two people who wanted to make a go of living in this country, but unfortunately in Venezuela, corruption starts at the very top with the president and reaches right down to the thugs in the streets. They’re like the mafia and you are defenceless. You can’t fight it, because you’re up against the whole system.”



The tipping point came one day when they received a call from a prison. Someone threatened the husband that if the couple didn’t collaborate “they” would kidnap his wife.

“We were afraid that one day we would find ourselves having to sell everything to pay the ransom, as had happened to many people. So, I left (...) my life. My dreams, my dogs...”

(...) I always think about my dogs, bringing them all the way here would be pretty difficult.”

They consider the very idea of returning to their home country as being extremely dangerous - “They call it a democracy but in reality, it’s a shameless dictatorship, (...) you express your opinion, and you go to jail”.

Currently, they are living in Italy. She would like to have a job better suited to her skills, but she feels quite good now. She loves the local dialect and local food and is convinced this is something worth promoting.

Being scared in, and of, your own country is a fate no one should have to face. We are happy this couple are safe and together and wish that one day they will have a chance to reunite with their four-legged family.

From so far to so close

One of the first

Our next protagonist is a 28 year old activist and volunteer. He comes from Syria, which he left in 2015 to escape military service. He says that his home country was an incredible, beautiful, and welcoming place, until, that is, war destroyed everything. He wishes his country the best and hopes it will recover.

He managed to get to Spain with the first group of refugees ever to reach Berga. The team waiting for them was trained, but lacked experience, so the arrivals were left to fend for themselves in this new place. Asked about his experiences, he describes the situation of females who made the same journey:

“I think that it is more difficult for unaccompanied women [than men] to undertake this journey. Many people [during the journey] abuse them”



Our protagonist is a very social person. He is in contact with his parents daily, and he takes part in initiatives that bring together people who stand for the same cause.

He has joined parties like Fallas and Patus, as he speaks both Spanish and Catalan. He was employed in the Aquarius team's linguistic department, for which he was awarded a prize by Pedro Sanchez himself for his outstanding work and contribution.

For our protagonist friendship is essential and something he truly appreciates. It helped him a great deal during the early days. The need for social contact was his biggest concern after arriving in Spain. He missed having friends; he found it difficult to integrate on his own. He wishes people were more welcoming and communicative.

“Looking for accommodation was incredibly difficult. If you are a stranger, people look at you differently” [...] The job hunt is also complex. Now, I am looking for a job”

He wants to undergo formal training so that he can work in a reception centre or a social care centre: “I am trying to understand the cultures of the people of the past”.

We wish our protagonist many friends and a job that he will find fulfilling and allow him to achieve his full potential. He has come from so far to so close and we believe he has so much experience and knowledge to share.

From so far to so close

Level down, level up



Today we will tell you a story of a traveller who comes from Africa, which left in search of a new life. What he shared with us was an instructive story of good and evil, as well as of the reality of his homeland.

“Some people think [that refugees] come here [to Europe] only to sell or steal, but there are some who know that in every country there are good people and bad people”.

He told us about his trip from Gambia to Mali and from there to Niger, with a driver who not only gave him a ride but, inexplicably, acted as a “father” figure during the entire trip, protecting him from smugglers and policemen.

They parted ways in Niamey and have never met since. Our protagonist travelled alone to Agadez, a small town - “Up there, you can go outside, because if you do, someone can rob you or kidnap you if you don’t pay. If you refuse - you risk losing your life”.

The next stop was Libya. “In Libya you have to pay to get through, and you have no friends anymore. Anybody can be a danger to you”.

Our protagonist began a new life in Europe and he is safe now. He says there are good and bad people in every country; so refugees shouldn’t be treated as scapegoats.

“I came all this way to change my life, and I do not deserve [to hear] people saying I am disgusting”, nor be insulted.

In the past Europeans experienced just how much strength and courage is needed to leave one’s country and persevere. SO-CLOSE would like to invite citizens of today to reflect on this and be more open. We wish our protagonist all the best.

From so far to so close

Life and theatre

Our protagonist arrived in Greece 13 years ago, when he was 20. It was actually his second attempt to leave his home country of Afghanistan. The first came as a result of the war, of which he still has vivid memories.

He originally travelled with a group of 21 youngsters, aged between 15 and 22. Most of them were minors and had to protect themselves on this dangerous journey. They reached Athens, but at first had no one to help them. Fortunately, they found an organization called the ‘Greek Council of Refugees’ as well as the Catholic charity ‘Caritas’ that offered free food. Soon, they realized they needed to get jobs and a place to stay. They were taken on at a construction site. A few of them rented a place together and helped one another.

Initially he did not have many Greek friends and felt like an outsider, and people refused to talk to him. Nevertheless, he managed to settle in Greece.

He enjoys cinema and theatre and used to belong to an acting group. He was given aid so that he could attend theatre seminars for free. He was surprised that such an opportunity existed in his newly adopted country. It helped that he learnt Greek and English so that he could communicate freely. The theatre stage offered a perfect medium for him to tell



his story. He appeared in a performance of “The Persians” at the Athens Theatre Festival, a play to which he could relate.



He has a dream – he sends a message to the people of Greece in their own language, which he now speaks: “If you love art and theatre, come and see me on stage”.

Most of his friends are Afghans. A few are Greek, one of whom is his flat mate. He says that Greeks understand what being a refugee means, for many of their parents or grandparents had to flee, like himself. So, even though his friends might not have experienced this firsthand, they are aware of what it is like.

Our protagonist has made a new life for himself in Greece and sees this as the best time of his life. It is wonderful that he found a safe haven in art.

From so far to so close

What a woman can do

This is a story of a woman, a fighter, who is very curious about people and their different cultures. That is why, for ten years, she dressed as a man in order to understand her religion better. She’s a discoverer.

She left Afghanistan in 2016, when a Catalan organization heard about her health complications after her house had been bombed. They decided to help her. The moment she reached the Airport del Prat, she felt lost.

“The ONG President who helped me get to Spain is a journalist and he wanted everyone to know my story. He didn’t think about the consequences this might have for me in my native country. He told my story to everyone”



Her situation was very difficult. She entered Catalonia for medical reasons, as a consequence of which the authorities considered her an illegal immigrant, a status she held for three years, until the government regularized her residency.



From the very beginning, it was ordinary people who helped her. “I did not receive a lot of support from the government.” She had problems not only with the language, but also with bureaucracy, loneliness and misunderstandings.

However, she has always been able to gather a lot of friends around her. She says it is in her character. Because she is curious, she is in contact with a great many different people from different communities. Her hosts, who quickly became her Catalan family, supported her and made her feel at home.

Our protagonist is also a learner. Until she was sixteen, she was illiterate. She still finds reading difficult. She has to read a page many times over before she grasps its content. Despite this, she speaks six languages, managed to gain a master’s degree, and nowadays works as a social educator, showing the world that there is nothing that a woman cannot do.

We are amazed by her strength, curiosity, and open-mindedness. We wish her all the best for the future, and hope she becomes such an inspiration for our readers as she is for us. It was her strength that got her from so far to so close.

From so far to so close

In a man's world

Today we would like to tell you the story of another strong woman, a mother and a feminist. Our protagonist was born in the Republic of Ingushetia, neighbouring Chechnya. Women's rights are almost non-existent in this part of the world.

Where she comes from a woman's fate is decided before she is born. Not all women have an opportunity to get an education. Most of them are promised to a man and get married at the age of 15-16. Our protagonist was assigned a future without any rights and without the option of making her own decisions.

"I finished 11th grade, but I didn't have time to sit my exams. I was married when I was 16 years old and they didn't let me take them. My education is only complete up to 9th grade."

She moved to Egypt with her husband and was supposed to cook, clean and take care of their children. After she got divorced, she moved to Poland, where she joined her mother in 2018. Today she's 22, a mother of three children from whom she must live separately. She's an asylum seeker in Poland, and thus not a resident of the country. Because her ex-husband wants to take away her parental rights, she avoids going to court in her home country.



"I therefore decided to run away and not give them any chance to re-register the children. I didn't want to be deprived of my parental rights."

Our protagonist comes from an activist family. Her father, a cultural activist, was killed in 2005. Her family, mostly herself personally, were threatened on many occasions. Once, a man put her up against a wall and shot a gun next to her head, saying he would kill her if her family didn't stop their activism. She has now found her calling in Poland as a feminist, supporting women and fighting for their rights, with her mother by her side.

Her biggest dream was always to get an education and work as a barista. It is not a fancy dream, but for her it is one that is very hard to achieve. She cannot take any courses,



because she never finished school. She finds it very hard to get a job, because there is quite a lot of prejudice against Muslims in Poland. A lot of people see her as a terrorist, without knowing what she has been through.

Today neither employment nor self-fulfilment are her main concerns. Rather it is her children, from whom she is forced to live apart. She does not miss Ingushetia.

“Most Caucasians want to return to their homeland. Nothing connects me in any way with this country. Only my children.

When it comes to nature, we have beautiful mountains, beautiful old buildings. When it comes to the people ... I probably didn't come across any good ones, so I can't say anything good. (...) The most valuable thing I have left in my country is my children.”

Her story is tragic and shows how women's rights remain virtually non-existent in some parts of the world. We are happy she found herself a better place to live and hope that one day she will be reunited with her children, and stay strong, as she always has. We are sure that with her character she will manage to complete her education and get a great job!

From so far to so close

Making a mark



Today's protagonist lives in Greece, loves theatre and stories about past generations. In her free time she enjoys cooking and crafts, especially recycling paper and making it into baskets, plates, and jewellery. She studied to become a teacher but eventually followed a different path.

She married a Kurdish man who had already been living in Greece. Soon after their wedding they set off to Greece via Turkey. She was pregnant at the time and had her first

child soon after arriving in her adopted country. Because she had to look after her baby she had too little time and energy to learn the language.

The biggest hurdle she had to overcome was not knowing Greek. Signing forms and other papers in a new alphabet was a problem. Back then, there were not as many opportunities for refugees as there are today. Happily, she got help from a social worker, who helped her with paperwork issues. And the Greeks who she met embraced her.

“A stranger became a brother and a brother became a stranger”.

This strong woman knew that if her family were to survive and she herself were to be able stand on her own two feet, she needed to learn Greek. She worked as a housekeeper for 2 years, which helped with the language. Her employers were very supportive and understanding. Then she became involved*** in an NGO for 6 years, while also bringing up her kids and attending school at the same time. During this time she also participated in a cultural exchange project that combined theatre and storytelling. Nowadays she works as an interpreter.

It takes a lot of time and effort to adjust to a new culture. As a woman she had to overcome even more cultural differences. Kurdish women are not free to express themselves. So even asking for help was hard for her, let alone expressing an opinion. Nevertheless, she adapted. Reading old stories about what previous generations have gone through helped her understand the host culture, because there are so many things she had in common with the Greeks. She hopes that they in turn can relate to her culture as well.

She believes that about 50% of Greeks understand the plight of refugees but “(...) More need to acknowledge that refugees leave their country for a reason”. Her people have fought very hard as a nation. Thousands of her fellow countrymen and women have been killed trying to achieve change. They have been scattered and are still fighting because this is what they want. Her wish is that no one should ever get killed in the struggle to be recognized.

Her desire is that others will learn something from the plight of the Kurds. Her dream is that one day there will be more freedom, love, light, and, above all else, peace. No hatred, no conflicts, no war.

We share her beautiful dream. We are proud of our protagonist for being such a strong, smart and kind woman. We wish her all the best for the future and hope she will share her vision for the future and her strength with many more people, and show them the way from so far to so close.

From so far to so close

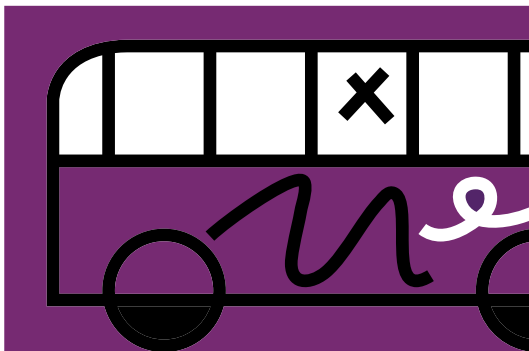


Travel safe

Our protagonist is a storyteller and a survivor. He and his family left a war zone. He was born in Lebanon and grew up in Ma'arrat al-Numa, Syria.

“It was one of the most beautiful countries in the world. This is not just because it was my country but also because you could feel safe there. There was no democracy, but we could still live well”

His journey to Calanya took over two years. He left Syria in 2016 and headed to Antiquia. He travelled in a group of about 50 people, who, after paying their “guides” were left in a border town to fend for themselves. They wanted to travel further by bus, but it was too small to take all of them. The women and children took the first one.



“Afterwards, there were around fifteen of us waiting for another bus that should have taken us to the city. Instead, a gang of mafia types came. They were armed, accused us of killing one of their men, surrounded us and started to beat us. People began shouting and screaming. I managed to escape.”

After he reached the main road, he caught a taxi, hoping to get to the city. Without any warning, the driver started to threaten him.

“I told them that I did not have any money, but they started to hit me. They beat me and looked for money at the same time. I had hidden my money in my socks. I had 2600 euro to get me through the necessary borders and reach Europe. When they found the cash, I was furious and I stood up to fight. Afterwards, they put a jacket over my face, bound my wrists together with a belt, and left me on the street. They took my money, my phone, my shoes, everything. I was left bleeding in the street. I spent two days in the hospital. “

Our protagonist worked in Turkey and later took a boat to Greece. For five months he lived in Thessaloniki, after which he tried to get to Amsterdam, but was stopped on the way, spent a night in jail and was brought before a court with a lawyer and a translator.



“After the trial they let me go. (...) I asked them where I could go, and they told me to start a new life”

And that is what he did. He learned the language and now works for an installation company. He enjoys cinema and the theatre and supports gender equality.

He is known for telling stories about the beauty, history, and culture of his country. He says most of his Catalan friends don't know much about Syria, only that there is a war going on there. People are surprised to learn that there is so much to be discovered there.

He faced many challenges in the new countries he arrived in. The biggest issue was the language barrier and little available support in terms of training and education. Not being able to communicate with anyone shuts down almost all opportunities to find a job, talk to people, find help and make friends. He also finds the prejudice of people towards Muslims and refugees very challenging. He faces these prejudices on a daily basis, at work, on dates, when trying to meet new friends. He thinks all this comes from ignorance about religion and a lack of stories about people who need help or a better future in another country.

We admire our protagonist for his strength, positivity and for his refusal to give up. We hope he will find himself at home after coming from so far to so close.

From so far to so close

From Crimea to Cracow

Our protagonist is a bookworm and a nature lover. She was a teacher of Ukrainian language and literature, who continued to work even after she retired.

She had everything - a happy family, a dream career and a house with a view overlooking the sea and mountains in beautiful Crimea.

All of this disappeared suddenly after Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014. Ukrainian language and literature were no longer welcome, and teachers no longer needed.

“The topic of Crimea's annexation... This topic is very painful... I don't want get back to it. It still hurts a lot. It so happened that I witnessed Russian troops entering at night. That day I was taking the children to Simferopol for the Shevchenko poetry contest. I saw it all with my own eyes. I saw those “green men”. I was very worried. It is something I find very difficult to talk about .”

To stay was not a safe option. Not only our protagonist, but also her family, could have faced persecution, or even prison. She refused to change her beliefs, her language, papers, and submit to Crimea's new rulers. It was impossible to stay.



There were army patrols on the streets, and her family were under constant pressure. She decided to move to Cracow, a city she remembered from her travels. She escaped to Poland with her daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren.

They managed to make a new life for themselves in Cracow. However, because they didn't speak Polish, and their educational qualifications were not recognised in Poland they faced some formidable hurdles upon arrival. Her daughter and son-in-law needed to find employment unrelated to their past careers and education.. It was an enormous change for the family. Our protagonist stayed at home and took care of her grandchildren.

She likes Poland and Poles. People usually react compassionately after hearing she escaped from Crimea.



“Of course, I read about the negative attitude [towards immigrants], but personally, I did not feel it. I want Poles to see us as human beings. I am pleased when Ukrainians and Poles take part in various events together. It is important that Poles see our sincere and open souls. (...) I want there to be mutual understanding between our two peoples.”

Our protagonist had to leave the country she loved so much. We are on the same page as her in hoping that Poles and Ukrainians find mutual understanding and that her family are able to pursue their professional careers and enjoy a brighter future.

From so far to so close



Eager to learn

Our protagonist is a busy bee and a student. He comes from Guinea, where his family still lives. Since he was a kid he has always liked studying and for three years attended state schools in order to learn. But this was not enough for him - there were more than 50 students in a class and the lessons were hard to follow.

“So [...] I said ‘mum I want to go to [...] Mali to study’. She wasn’t very happy, but she knew I would have left anyway, because when I decide to do something, I do it. [...]”

It was a tough decision to make, because he was very young (15) and he had to leave his family behind. But he was keen to get an education.

“Where I found the strength... first of all from my friends, according to the hope of being able to help my mother one day, or from the fact [...] that I could also have the chance to study, (...) never give up”.

So he left, although the price of education in Africa is high and schools are not free: “(...) my family is poor, and if you want to study you have to [...] have some money. There was only my mother, as my father died when I was young”.

He is older now and his journey brought him to Italy where he has found the education system very challenging. He says he had to give 200% at both school and work. He said it was like “gambling” with his job. He noticed a big difference in terms of education.



“(...) the other boys of my age are much more educated than me, they can speak English as well as other languages like Spanish, German, that I don’t know, and also they know how to use a computer really well. They can do a lot of things I certainly don’t know how to.”

Not knowing the language has posed bureaucratic, professional, and social challenges.

“First of all, it wasn’t easy [to meet Italians] because you didn’t speak the language. Most of them don’t even talk to you. They don’t even look at you, and [...] if you can’t even speak the language it’s very difficult to meet other people. [...]”

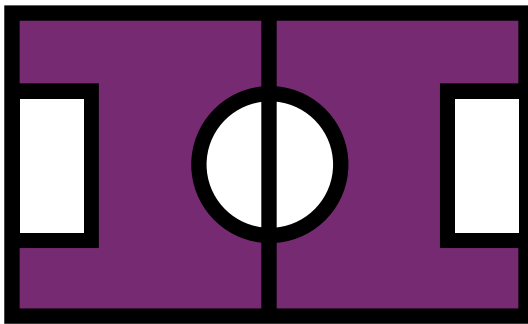
Sometimes he misses his family and Guinea:

“(…) my country is, more than anything else, its people. They are very kind, […] the food, the fruit, […] even the landscapes are.... sometimes when I close my eyes I still remember what it’s like there and I like it a lot, or going to the villages to see the cows or others things I like there. (..) also to see what life is like there, you can go to the big market, hear different languages, see how people communicate with each other... You can’t imagine it, but if you went to see it yourselves you would be a bit surprised. In Guinea we speak several languages. Even if you don’t speak the same one, you can still understand or communicate with each other. I find it such a [surprising] thing”.

He enjoys the opportunities that Italy offers. He has got his driver licence, met new friends and is adapting to the new challenges of going to school there. We are sure he will catch up very quickly and we wish him all the best on his journey!

From so far to so close

Coming out



Our protagonist loves chatting, music, reading, and football. He is Syrian, but he grew up in Lebanon, where he lived with his mother after his parents got divorced.

“I feel Syrian and I am proud of it. Syrian people were treated badly in Lebanon (..) I was seen as just a foreigner. “

Deciding whether to stay in Lebanon, where he was made to suffer, or to go back to Syria where there was a brutal war being waged .

“The war and the dictatorship were too much for me. I couldn’t take it anymore. There was no future. I am a boy of ambition. Where I was living there weren’t any opportunities.

I couldn't stand the violence anymore. I didn't want to witness genocide. I wanted to help people. (...) I wanted to live in peace with Muslims, Christians and Jews. Gays, bisexuals, heterosexuals, transsexuals, men, women... It doesn't make a difference to me" [...] "

Our protagonist was awarded a scholarship to study in Catalonia and reached Spain in 2018. Local organizations helped him a great deal, but he still didn't know enough about the local culture, cuisine, or legal system. He told us how he was often constipated, because he didn't know much about how to cook local food, and how for a long time he did not know he was entitled to social insurance, etc.

"People who reach Europe lack guidance at the beginning. They need more support when they arrive here" [...] "I would love to be invited to someone's home during Christmas. I would like to share this tradition with someone. I don't want to feel alone. I want to learn more, and I want to feel integrated".

Living in Spain has also given him the opportunity to come out. Something he could never imagine in Lebanon or Syria.

"Before coming here, I had kept my sexual orientation hidden my entire life."

But living in a different country and having problems with the language makes starting a new relationship difficult. Our protagonist felt insecure. He didn't know that homosexuality is not a crime in Spain and he did not have to keep his sexual orientation secret. Still, the language barrier makes it difficult to have a more than superficial conversation with another person, and he struggles to express his feelings, beliefs and experiences.

Until now he has been grateful for the hospitality of his adopted country and wants to give back to the community, people and various organizations. He wants to help others.

We are happy that he feels Spain and hope he finds his perfect match soon!

From so far to so close



Blacklisted

The protagonist of our penultimate storyline is a journalist and an adventure seeker from Donetsk, Ukraine. Back home, she was a social activist who promoted Ukrainian culture and language. However, her involvement in pro-Ukrainian projects resulted in her being blacklisted by the Russian army in 2014 after the war broke out. For her, the conflict was a death sentence.



She escaped to Cracow, Poland, with her parents. Here she has got to know a few Polish journalists, but it was mostly her compatriots who helped her assimilate into her new country:

“AT the beginning when I did not know Polish. It turned out to be more difficult than I thought. It was very important for me to find people who I could communicate with in my native language. It was the Ukrainians who helped me adapt.”

Nowadays, she works as a marketing and sales specialist for a smart furniture company. She has visited numerous cities in Poland with her Polish and Ukrainian friends. But it wasn't always easy for her to assimilate. At first, she struggled with the language and prejudices:

“I was looking for an apartment to rent. When a Polish friend helped me, there were no problems. When I could no longer turn to that person for assistance (...) often, the answer was that >>I don't rent to Ukrainians <<. Two or three times my teachers suggested that as a Ukrainian I should be sorry for the bad things that had happened between Ukrainians and Poles. But these events took place 100-200 years before my birth.”

Even though she likes Poland, her heart remains in Donetsk. She hopes to return there one day when the political situation allows. Thinking about how much her country, and the city she grew up in, have been damaged makes her very sad.



As an experienced political activist hiding in a foreign country, she expressed her belief that people don't know enough about each other's cultures and history.

“For me, the most valuable thing is to preserve history and one's identity.”

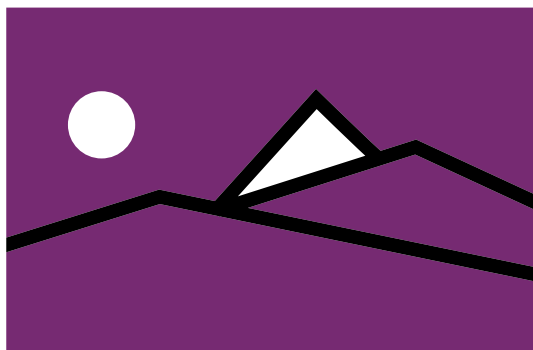
In Poland, Poles and Ukrainians often lead separate lives. They live alongside each other, but do not communicate. There is no integration between the two cultures.

“I think it would be a good idea to do some Ukrainian culinary fairs. (...) show people what Ukrainian borsch looks like. (...)...show them what our dishes are like. Through such everyday things in the home we can promote bigger ideas.”

We wish our protagonist all the best and hope she will be able to return to Donetsk someday soon. We share her opinion that learning about each other is the best way to live together.

From so far to so close

So far and so close



The last protagonist of the SO-CLOSE Storylines series is a music and theatre lover. She was born in Afghanistan, but grew up and studied in Iran. She had to leave the latter because she had no opportunity to work there or obtain a residence permit. After returning to Afghanistan, she quickly realized that this was not a country she could remain in for long. As a woman in Afghanistan, she felt vulnerable and knew that she could never progress, she would have to give up her dreams of studying.

Her journey to Greece was a terrifying experience. She set out together with her husband, but while traveling through the mountains between Iran and Turkey, they became



separated. As a woman, she was constantly afraid of being attacked and raped.

She arrived in Greece in 2019. The hardships of the journey and the five months she spent in a refugee camp left her traumatized. Organizations like DIOTOMA helped her obtain psychological support.

Because she has been in Greece for such a short time, and mostly during the conditions of the pandemic, she has not had an opportunity to learn Greek. This has made it difficult to interact with others. And yet somehow she has managed to cope and change:

“I see a difference in clothing in the first place. I dress differently. But when I look closer I see that while maybe we don’t look alike ... we think alike.”

Her goal in Greece is to learn the language and find a job. She wants to be autonomous and to contribute to society. Sadly, she often struggles with prejudice and misunderstanding. People quickly assume she is a member of the Taliban, without understanding that these are the very people she escaped from. She takes great exception to being referred to as an immigrant or refugee.

“There are many talented people there, but these talents are not recognized.”

In the SO-CLOSE Project we had the opportunity to get to know so many talented people whose stories we wish to share. We hope that our protagonist will soon be reunited with her husband, who we know is also currently living in Athens. To be so far BUT so close at the same time is a plight we do not wish on anyone.

From so far to so close

SO-CLOSE Historylines

Monuments Man

This is the story of Blasi, who was a Spanish Carabineer Lieutenant responsible for moving cultural artifacts located in the villages La Mina Canta (La Vajol), Mas Perxés (Agullana) and Can Descals (Darnius) between the 1st and 9th of February, 1939.

Blasi lived in the Perpignan area of France, where he worked by helping carabineer colleagues and acquaintances interned in concentration camps for Republican refugees on the beaches around the beaches of Roussillon.

He was assigned to La Vajol in 1937, following the construction of the bunker of the Mina Canta, which was used to store and protect the gold and currencies of the Republic if other Republican areas came under threat or were occupied. In La Vajol, Blasi met Pepita Darner Pagès, from Agullana, who would become his wife some years later.

Blasi is known in particular for organising the evacuation to France of artworks, artefacts and the Treasury of the Republic from the various depots located in La Vajol, Agullana and Darnius and also for overseeing the last lorry transports across the border before Franco occupied the L'Empordà region on 9 February 1939.

On the same day that Franco's troops arrived at the French border in Le Perthus, Blasi made the journey from Coll de Lli to Les Illes and into exile.

He returned to Barcelona in the spring of 1942



Portrait of Alexandre Blasi Boher (Alentorn, Lleida, 1910 – Barcelona, 1989) as a Lieutenant Carabineer Military Corps during de Spanish Civil War (1937). Blasi Darner Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close



Enlisted

The story of our protagonist begins in 1938, when Miquel Serra Grabulosa voluntarily enlisted in the Republican army at the age of 17.

He went to the front in 1938, where he became a political commissar. After being wounded in Blanes during the Retreat, he crossed the frontier in an ambulance and ended up in France, where after spending some time in a hospital near Montpellier was transferred to the Saint-Cyprien concentration camp.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the 118th Foreign Workers Company and returned to the front, but in May 1940, he was taken prisoner by the Germans at Braydunnes, near Dunkirk, and sent to Germany and Austria, where he was imprisoned for over a year in Stalag 17-B in Krems (Austria), and later in Mauthausen concentration camp (Konzentrationslager Mauthausen), where he joined a resistance organisation.

He survived until the camp was liberated by Allied troops on 8 May 1945 and he was repatriated to France, where he would meet Lluïsa Miralles - a Republican exile and his future wife.

She, Lluïsa Miralles, was the daughter of the last Republican deputy mayor of Ulldecona Town Council. In April 1938, Lluïsa moved to Barcelona with her family and then to France in 1939, at the age of 10. She suffered hardship in the Argelès-sur-mer concentration camp and later under the German occupation of France.

In 1947, and thus after the Second World War, she met Miquel Serra and together they became involved in clandestine activities that the PSUC undertook in Spain from its base in France.



Photograph of different Catalan and Spanish survivors during the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp in Mauthausen (Austria) on May 5, 1945. Among them are Miquel Serra Miralles Serra Miralles Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).



Photo by various Catalan and Spanish internees in the French concentration camp of Saint-Cyprien (1939) a few months after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Among them are Miquel Serra Miralles Serra Miralles Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close



Watercolor story

The protagonist of our third Historyline is Pere Mañosa, a former Captain of Intendancy of the Republican Army who was also forced into exile. It was he who preserved the drawings made by fellow refugees from the Roussillon concentration camp in 1939.

In 2014, his family donated 109 drawings and watercolours to MUME, alongside 27 documents detailing his journey into exile between 1939 and 1942. He left the concentration camps for refugees to join the GTE (Foreign Workers Group) 405 in Meyssac (Department of la Corrèze) in 1941. Later, he returned to Francoist Spain in the summer of 1942 and was imprisoned in Figueres. He was finally released in December 1943.

The collection, comprising 109 drawings from unknown authors and contained in three notebooks, shows different perspectives of the concentration camps and the lives of refugees.



Portrait of Pere Mañosa Mañosa. Mañosa Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close

The hiking hairdresser & Years Apart



Antoni Fradera with three companions during his exile in France, integrated into a Foreign Workers' Company (December 1939 – June 1940). Fradera Marsal Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

Antoni Fradera Mayolas was born in 1914 in Badalona. Our protagonist was a professional hairdresser and a hiking enthusiast. In 1934 he actively participated in the October Events. He managed to avoid arrest and imprisonment because he was able to hide in the family's country house.

At the start of the Spanish Civil War, he joined the Pyrenees militias of the Mountain Battalion and was stationed in different locations in the Catalan and Aragonese Pyrenees.

During the war, he took part in the famous Battle of Bolsa de Bielsa against Franco's troops. He went into exile after the occupation of Catalonia in February 1939. In France, he was interned in various concentration camps. At the start of the Second World War he joined the Company of Foreign Workers in the Meuse Department, and was stationed along the Maginot Line. Because of his status as civilian member of the French army, in June 1940, he was arrested by the Germans when they invaded France.



Antoni Fradera with other colleagues during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Fradera Marsal Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

He was held as a prisoner of war in Stalag V-D Strasbourg from June to December 1940. He was later deported to the Nazi concentration camps of Mauthausen and, later, Gusen. Fradera survived to see the liberation of the camp in May 1945.

Between 1945 and 1949 he lived in Perpignan and Paris and, with the help of his exiled friends and the American Quakers, he completed a hairdressing course in Paris and slowly recovered from the depression and despondency into which he had fallen.

He went back to Barcelona in 1949, and in 1952 he married Maria Giró Marsal, his fiancée since 1935. He lived the rest of his life in the city, had two daughters and died in November 1974.

Moreover, Antonig Fradera's friendship with his wife's brother, Modest Giró is also worth noting.

They met in the early days, as Fradero got engaged to Maria Giró Marsal in 1935. Three years after returning to Barcelona, in 1952, they finally had the chance to get married.

He became friends with Maria's brother, Modest Giró at around the same time. Indeed, Antoni Fradera and Modest Giró were comrades from their time at the front in the Pyrenees and in exile in France. Nevertheless, Modest Giró's experience was very different, as in 1940 he was able to travel to the USA, Colombia and Venezuela.

He returned to Catalonia in 1949, the same year as Fradera. The friendship of our protagonists lasted for many years.

From so far to so close

Out of Circulation

Our protagonist today is Dolors Cos Roget, born in Figueres in 1904.

Her father, Josep Cos, was a member of the ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya / Republican Left of Catalonia) and, between 1930 and 1939, she worked as a French teacher in Figueres and also as a temporary administrative officer for the Figueres Town Council (1938).

In 1939 she went into exile with her then-elderly parents and a few months after crossing the border they settled in Montauban, where they lived together at various addresses.

She found employment as a teacher for the Tarn-et-Garonne Prefecture in the Pomponne neighbourhood in Montauban (1939), for the Comité National Catholique de Secours aux Réfugiés d'Espagne, as well as in a school run by the American Friends Service Committee - Quakers Américains (Montauban, 1941-1945). She also worked for a time in Toulouse as a stenographer and dactylographer for Compagnie Olivier in 1940.

In 1945, after the death of her parents, she moved to Le Boulou, Roussillon, where she wrote a short story for the weekly *L'Espagne Républicaine*. *Hebdomadaire politique et littéraire*, published in Toulouse. The story, entitled “Hors cours” (Out of Circulation), is based on her experience of exile in Montauban, and was published on Saturday 13 April 1946 thanks to the editor-in-chief of the publication, Antonio Fernández Escobés. You can read her powerful story on our website in English, Catalan and French.

After living for a while in Le Boulou (1945-1946), she moved to Paris in 1948, where she spent the rest of her life until her death in 1992.



Portrait of Lola Cos.
Cos Roget Family Collection.
The Exile Memorial Museum

From so far to so close

Artists in refuge

Marie Ghislaine Tassart, from Lille (France), was the daughter of the Captain of the Garde Mobile and during the Retreat was sent to the south of France and interned in concentration camps for Spanish Republican refugees. Her father established a relationship with various exiles, including Lluís Moreno Pallí, a Catalan teacher and musician, and with a group of refugee artists interned in the camps of Saint-Cyprien and Agde.

The documents in their collection, which include a copy of the school magazine *Canigó*,¹ which can be seen at MUME's "La Diàspora" Hall, and the various programmes of cultural activities and commemorations held in the concentration camps of Saint-Cyprien and Agde, will be published as part of the future SO-CLOSE Tools.



Soiree Musical poster, Saint-Cyprien concentration camp, October, 1939. Tassart Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close

The resistance fighter & The Unbreakable



Portrait of Lefteris Apostolou. UAB Archives

Our protagonist Lefteris Apostolou was born in Athens in 1904 and joined the ranks of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in 1921. He was arrested in 1935 and six years of exile and imprisonment followed. In May 1941 he escaped from the island of Kimolos, where he had been forced to resettle, and in Athens contacted other exiled members of the KKE and set about forming a new resistance group.

At the founding meeting of what would be known as the National Liberation Front (EAM), which became the most important organization of its kind in Greece, Lefteris Apostolou was elected secretary, a position he held until he was arrested once more. This time he was imprisoned in a camp at Akronauplia and after the Italian capitulation, he escaped and joined the General Headquarters of the country's biggest resistance army, ELAS. In 1948, and thus during the

Greek Civil War, he settled in Romania, where he remained as a political refugee until 1959. He died in Athens on 18 November 1981.

His sister Ilektra Apostolou was also an emblematic figure of the Resistance during WWII, a member of the KKE, and a proponent of women's rights. In 1944, she was executed for her underground activities by the collaborationist State Special Security Directorate, which was a section of the Hellenic Gendarmerie. for .

Besides her actions, she is known for the way she responded to the questions she faced from her interrogator:

“Where are you from? I am from Greece. Where do you live? In Greece. What is your name? Greek. Who are your collaborators? They're all Greeks. What is your job? I work for the Greek people”.



Portrait of Ilektra Apostolou.
UAB Archives

From so far to so close

The Artist



Students of the School of Philosophy of the
University of Athens.
UAB Archives

Today we want to share with you the story of Virginia Vasiliou. Our hero was born in Athens. She studied at the School of Philosophy of the University of Athens and during the years of the Occupation she became a member of the EAM, the nation's leading resistance movement.

She drew, painted, tried her hand at sculpture, micro-art, and illustration. After the Liberation, in 1944, she suffered at the hands of the Left-wing state. She was tried by an extraordinary court and was incarcerated at Averoff Prison.

After serving her sentence, instead of being released she was instead deported to the Trikeri women's concentration camp. After her internment there, she worked on church murals and restoring paintings in Greece and in France.

From so far to so close

The furniture maker & The cruise

Our protagonist, Frimari Burguès was a cabinet-maker by profession.

During the Civil War he worked in an aerodrome in Sabadell (SAF 3-16), and in 1938, when it was closed by the Republican authorities he was sent to work at a similar facility in Girona (Celrà).

At the end of the war, he fled to France together with his wife and their daughter Cleopatra, but in La Jonquera they had to separate because the border was closed. Frimari then made the mountain crossing while mother and daughter waited another two days before entering France. Frimari spent more than three months in concentration camps of Argelès and Saint-Cyprien.

After they split up, the mother and daughter were moved to Brittany (Surzur), where they were imprisoned in a castle-prison until, with the help of English Quakers, the family was able to reunite and in May 1939 they boarded the ship “Sinaia” at Sète (Languedoc) and set sail for Mexico.

The Burguès family reached Veracruz on 13th June 1939. A little later, Heidi was born. During their time in Mexico, they kept in contact with other exiles and found a new professional outlet in the food, pharmaceutical, and textile sectors.

Heidi Burguès came back to live in Catalonia in 1983, with her husband and two children. Frimari Burguès and Hortènsia Padrós returned for the first time to Barcelona in 1963 and permanently in 1990. Cleopatra died in Mexico City in 2015 while Heidi is still living in Barcelona today.



Frimari Burguès, Hortènsia Padrós and his daughter, Cleopatra Burguès Padrós.
Burguès Padrós Family Collection.
The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close

The Aviator

At 17, Josep Dorca was a volunteer on the Jarama front in Arganda (Madrid), and later became an aviation pilot.

Our protagonist began his training in the spring of 1938 as a pilot for the Republican Army. His flight log (1938-1939) follows his training at the aerodrome of La Ribera and Los Jerónimos (Murcia) until May 1938, when he was assigned to various aerodromes, such as Alcantarilla, the headquarters of the elementary flight school, La Ribera, Lorca (fighter school) and La Aparecida (Cartagena, Murcia), where he flew more than 200 hours in total.

On March 25, 1939 Dorca travelled by plane from Lorca (Murcia) to Mostaganem (Algeria), and went into exile in North Africa. He was incarcerated first in the civilian prison in Oran and later in the camps of Morand and Suzzoni (Boghari, Algeria), Bou-Arfa (Morocco), and Colomb-Bechar (Algeria).

On his release he began working for the Resistance, performing acts of sabotage and distributing copies of the clandestine press until he was captured by the Nazi collaborationist forces in July 1941. He was set free in July 1943. He settled in Algiers and married a woman with Valencian roots, with whom he had a daughter.

In 1962, after Algeria declared Independence he returned to France and settled in Céret, where he opened a bar and later lived as a pensioner until his death in 2005.

His daughter, Eliane Dorca, donated several of her father's belongings as well as copies of his documents, such as those on display in this showcase.



Portrait of Josep Dorca Darné during his time as aviator of the Army of the Republic. Dorca Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close

A Family Reunion

Today's story is about the plight of the Vázquez Marquínez family, which had links with the Republican Army, in the final days before they crossed the border and took refuge in France. The protagonists of this tale are family members Manuel Vázquez Seco, Felipa Marquínez Gómez, and their children Carlos, Consuelo, Nieves, Alberto, Adolfo and Carmen.

Manuel Vázquez Seco was a member of the PSOE and the UGT trade union. He completed his military service at the San Fernando Naval School (Cádiz) and was later posted to Maó (Menorca). During the Civil War, he fought with the Republican Army, holding the post of Corvette Captain in the Navy Corps, and was also appointed lieutenant general and head of the radiotelegraph corps.

On 4 February 1939 and thus following the Republican defeat, Manuel Vázquez and his family fled for France, leaving Roses for Portvendres. In France they were housed in Vernet-Les Bains and later interned in the concentration camps of Argelès-sur-Mer and Rivesaltes. During the Second World War, Manuel Vázquez was forced to work for the German occupation forces in a camp on Île d'Aurigny, where he had hard labour in a quarry and also put to work on "Atlantic Wall", both on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey as well as in Brest. He escaped from the latter with his son, but they were eventually recaptured by the Germans. Finally, in September 1944, they were liberated by Allied troops.

When at last they were able to leave the camp, Felipa and the rest of her children went to stay at the Château de Gramond. They later settled in Gorp, where the whole family would later reunite at the end of the Second World War.



Portrait of Manuel Vázquez Seco after de Spanish Civil War, during his French exile. Vázquez Marquínez Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

From so far to so close

The Captain & The nurse and the midwife



Portrait of Joan Cabratosa, Pilar Sender and his daughter, Pilar Cabratosa Sender (Girona, 1936). Family Collection. The Exile Memorial Museum (La Jonquera).

The next story we want to tell you is that of Pilar Sender and Joan Cabratosa.

During the Spanish Civil War, he was assigned to Battalion No. 136 of the Motor Transport Company. After the conflict had ended, he and his entire family fled into exile, and he was interned in the Argelès concentration camp.

In September 1939, Joan was reunited with his daughter and wife after he was released from the Argelès camp. Our protagonist crossed the border clandestinely to the family home in Sant Ferriol. He then went to Vierzon (Cher Department) and to Paris, where his wife and daughter also went shortly after. Joan Cabratosa worked as a mechanic for “La Précision Moderne” making munitions and, from 1941, at the airfield of Villacoublay, on the outskirts of Paris.

Sender was a nurse and midwife with Aragonese roots. She married Joan Cabratosa in 1931, following the establishment of the Second Republic, and settled in Girona. Shortly afterwards, Pilar came into the world.

After the war, the whole family went into exile. Pilar and Sender were moved from Portbou to Brittany, and from there to Quiberon-Kerhostin and Belle-île-en-Mer, while Joan was interned in the Argelès concentration camp. In September 1939 they were reunited in Perpignan after Joan was released.

Joan Cabratosa died on 30 December 1941, and thus only a few months after his arrest by the Gestapo on 19 April 1941. His wife and daughter returned to Spain on 12 February 1943 via Irún to find Joan. After settling in Torroella de Montgrí, they learned of Joanna’s death in 1945 through the International Red Cross.

Pilar Cabratosa, a nurse and midwife by profession, now lives in Torroella de Montgrí and is active in various organizations and institutions in the town and region, such as the Red Cross, the Torroella City Council, the political group *Unió de Progrés Municipal* and *El Triangle Blau de Figueres*, an association devoted to the recovery of historical memory.

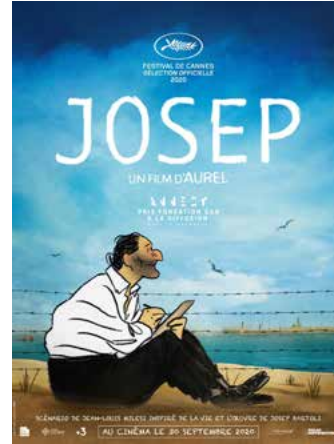
In 2010 Jordi Bellapart made a documentary based on the family’s history entitled “Pilarín, memòries d’un exili.”

From so far to so close

The Draughtsman & The Rules of Abstraction

Today and next week we would like to tell you the story of Josep Bartolí, who was a prestigious draughtsman in the 1930s. He contributed to various Barcelona magazines, including *L'Esquella de la Torratxa*, *La Humanitat* and *L'Opinió*.

During the Civil War, he was one of the founders of the *Sindicat de Dibuxants Professionals (SDP)*, but quickly ended up at the front. He was part of the company that took part in the militarily successful retreat of Republican forces to the French border in 1939. Once on the other side of the border, he spent time as an internee in various concentration camps (Ribesaltes, Sant Cebrià, and Agde), from which he managed to escape. Finally, in 1942 he was able to embark on the ship *Nyassa* and make the journey to Veracruz in Mexico. Thanks to a letter of recommendation from his friend Narcís Molins i Fàbrega, a member of the *POUM* leadership, he was able to join the circle of artists and intellectuals who gathered around Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.



“Josep” film poster (Aurel, 2020).
Les Films d’Ici Méditerranée



“A Baixeras Renom i els seus petits”.
Draw by Josep Bartolí about the french
Concentration Camps (1939-1944).
Abelard Fàbrega Collection.
Empordà Museum (Figueres).

He also made contact with other Catalan artist friends in Mexico, such as Marcel·lí Porta and Francesc Camps-Ribera. At the same time, he dissociated himself from the *PSUC* and move closer to socialist groups critical of Soviet orthodoxy. In 1944 he published drawings in the book *Concentration Camps*, with texts written by Molins and Fàbrega. Many of these sketches were produced during his stay in French internment camps.

In 1946 our hero moved to New York, where over the next twenty plus years he would contribute to *Holiday* – one of the most popular magazines of the time. That same year, he also began a sentimental relationship with Frida Kahlo.

He worked as a set and costume designer in Hollywood and divided his time between Mexico and the United States. After several stays in Europe and after marrying Michelle Stuart in Mexico in 1953, he returned to New York in 1958, where he began to associate with several abstract expression-

ists: William de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Philip Guston. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the 1970s he fell under the spell of abstractionism, although by the end of that decade he had returned to the fold of critical figuration.

His involvement in the émigré press also was very intense, contributing in particular to such socialist newspapers as *Mundo Socialismo y Libertad* (started in 1943) and *Gauche Européenne* (1953-1958), both promoted by Enric Adroher i Gironella; and also *ibérica* (1955-1961), edited by Victòria Kent.

After Franco's death, he returned to Catalonia several times, but, despite his intentions, in the end he was unable to settle there. In 1982 he had his first major exhibition in Terrassa and in 1989 he made an important donation of drawings to Barcelona City Council. However, it was not until after his death, in 2002, that a major retrospective – based on an extraordinary catalogue – was held in the Catalan capital at the instigation of his friend Jaume Canyameres.

From so far to so close

Four letters

Valenti Portet Orriols was born in Roda de Ter. He was a member of the Republican Army and fought on the Madrid front. Once the war was lost, he was one of thousands who had no choice but to join the Retreat. He crossed the border into Bourg-Madame in February 1939.

Once in France, he was interned like thousands of other Republicans in the camps of Barcarès, Saint-Cyprien, and Rivesaltes and was forced to join gangs of foreign prisoners performing hard labour in conditions of semi-slavery. When France fell to the Germans, Orriols was transferred to Bordeaux and compelled to on the submarine base, already under Nazi control.

He lived with fellow Republican Rosa Camps: together they formed their own resistance group and were arrested by the Gestapo in February 1944. Imprisoned in Fort du Ha in Bordeaux, he was sentenced to death and was tortured for the first time.



Photo by various former deportees from the Sachsenhausen camp in Stettin, Poland, recovering after the liberation (1945), including Valenti Portet. Portet Family Particular Archives.



“The fortress is crowded, and with misery to be seen everywhere. There are 8 or 10 people in cells designed for two. The Red Cross intervenes to disinfect and clean us.”, he wrote in a letter to his fiancée.

In May 1944, he was transferred to a camp in Compiègne, a town about 40 kilometers north of Paris. His convoy departed on 21 May with 2,004 people, mostly foreign prisoners, almost half of them dying on the way. The train journey lasted for more than 3 days without the doors ever being opened or water and food being provided to the prisoners. It stopped near Buchenwald, but a lack of space in that camp meant the train had to carry on until it reached Neuengamme, where they arrived on 24 May 1944.

After first being interned in the Neuengamme camp, he was later sent to Sachsenhausen and assigned to the Klinker Kommando. In April 1945, with Soviet troops drawing near, the Nazis decided to evacuate Sachsenhausen. The death march began. The prisoners were forced to walk day and night through forest to an unknown destination. Valentí and a group of Spanish Republicans managed to escape, making their way through the forest until they came across Soviet troops. They were finally free. They all recovered in the barracks at Schwerin (Germany) to which they had been transferred by the liberating troops.

“My satisfaction and joy are that of being able to send these four letters, because for 18 months it had been impossible for me to write anything to you. I had never thought I could write again but thanks to luck and my health today, 14 June, I can contact you once again.”

Our protagonist remained in exile for a further 10 years. He lived in Bordeaux, Paris, and Manheim (Germany). Exhausted from so many years of struggle and exile, although always committed to his ideals, he returned to Catalonia, to his village, Roda de Ter, in 1960. His fiancée, Antonia, had been waiting for him there for 20 years, and he married her the following summer.

From so far to so close

España-México

Today we want to tell you the story of Maria Barroso Camarena, who was one of the 456 children who arrived in Veracruz on 7th June 1937 aboard the ship Mexique .

In 1937, at the height of the Spanish Civil War, thousands of children were evacuated from the country to save them from the bombing raids in rear-guard actions as well as from the atrocities being committed by Franco's troops in the conquered Republican zones.

Along with Russia, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, Mexico was one of the countries that began hosting these child refugees from 1937, providing humanitarian help to the Spanish Republic against the besieging fascist forces.

The 456 children from all over Spain boarded the Mexique in France (Bordeaux) on 27 May and arrived in Veracruz on 7 June 1937, after a brief stopover in Havana (Cuba). From Veracruz they made their way to the Mexican town of Morelia (Michoacán). One of those children was our protagonist.

The children were aged mainly between 5 and 12 and from Republican families, some of them orphans. They came from such cities as Saragossa, Barcelona, Malaga, Madrid, Granada, and Teruel – and a few from Galicia, the Basque Country, Extremadura, Castilla, and Murcia. Mexico offered them a home. Initially, the children were lodged in the “España-México” Industrial School, a former convent, where there were training workshops and other educational activities. Later, different schools and children’s homes were arranged in Morelia, Puebla de Zaragoza, Guadalajara, and Mexico City, and, from 1943, they were allocated to different *casas-hogares* (homes) in Mexico City.



Maria Barroso Camarena in Mexico with her classmates (The Children of Morelia) in Mexico (1937).
Barroso Camarena Family Particular Archives.



Maria Barroso Camarena in Mexico with her classmates (The Children of Morelia) in Mexico (1937).
Barroso Camarena Family Particular Archives.

In 1939, over 20,000 Republican refugees made their way to Mexico from France following the Republicans’ defeat. What should have been a temporary and short-term exile became for many of these children, thanks to the outcome of the Civil War the outbreak of the Second World War and the survival of the dictatorial Franco regime despite the Allies’ victory, a long or even permanent exile. In 1948, the funds set aside by the Spanish Republican government for refugees were exhausted and the children in Morelia had to leave these homes.

The Barroso Camarena family were able to protect their four children thanks to the support offered them by the Mexican government of Cárdenas. María Barroso spent time in Morelia and also at the Trinitarian convent in Puebla de Zaragoza. It appears that the girls who had been cared for in Morelia received special protection in Puebla thanks to long-standing pro-Franco Spanish families for fear they might fall into prostitution and also with the hope of disabusing them of the ideas they had brought with them from Republican Spain and which they believed been reinforced in the schools in Morelia. Therefore, many of them were adopted as maids or sent to convents. Those that went to Guadalajara became integral members of various host families.

María Barroso returned to Spain in 1945, at the age of 22, after spending eight years in Morelia. Some of her siblings stayed in Mexico and did not return to Spain. In 2017, María Barroso's family donated to Museu Memorial de l'Exili – MUME a collection of photograph of her stay in Morelia, some of which you can see below.



Portrait of Maria Barroso Camarena with her classmates (The Children of Morelia) in Mexico (1937).
Barroso Camarena Family Particular Archives.

From so far to so close

The SO-CLOSE Consortium

The SO-CLOSE Consortium are nine institutions located in five countries. They all have one mission. In the current global context of forced migrations, the most important for them is to contribute to social cohesion and fight refugee marginalization or exclusion by facilitating the encounters between similar life stories. These goals can be achieved through the mediation of innovative digital and artistic tools.

The Autonomous University of Barcelona

The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) is one of the major public universities in Spain. It is located in Bellaterra, close to Barcelona city. UAB has over 37,700 students, almost 3,700 researchers and teaching staff, and it hosts more than 6,000 foreign students. In recent years, the UAB has seen recognition for its efforts in promoting quality in teaching, in attracting international talent and in obtaining a growing impact in research, together with a progressive improvement in its classifications in the most prestigious and influential international rankings. UAB coordinates the SO-CLOSE project and leads tasks for setting up the user engagement strategy, identifying focus groups, evaluating the pilots and managing the dissemination, implementation, and evaluation.



Lund University

Lund University was founded in 1666 and is ranked among the world's top 100 universities. The University has 40 000 students and 7 600 staff based in Lund, Helsingborg and Malmö. Lund is the most popular study location in Sweden. The University offers one of the broadest ranges of programmes and courses in Scandinavia, based on cross-disciplinary and cutting-edge research. The University has a distinct international profile, with partner universities in 67 countries.



Villa Decius Association

Villa Decius Association was established in 1995 by well-known representatives of the Polish worlds of science, economy, and culture. Within several years Villa Decius has been defined as a cultural institution of international outreach. The renaissance palace and garden complex of Villa become a base for the Association's activities continuing the idea of a place for the dialogue of cultures and meeting point of people, artists and scientists.



Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole

The Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole, created in 2002, has its registered office and its operating facilities in the Historical Park of Monte Sole, founded in 1989 by a law of the Emilia Romagna Region. Its aim is to promote training and peace education projects, non-violent conflict resolution, respect of human rights, for a peaceful living together among different people and cultures, for a society without xenophobia, racism and any other kind of violence towards human beings and their environment.



Exile Memorial Museum Consortium

The Exile Memorial Museum Consortium is a public body constituted for the establishment and joint management, in the town of La Jonquera, of the Museum under this name, whose object is the exhibition, research, interpretation and dissemination of history and memory related to the Spanish Civil War, republican exile and Franco dictatorship, taking also into account the phenomenon of exile globally in the context of the twentieth century until today.



The Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas

The Centre for Research and Technology-Hellas (CERTH), founded in 2000, is the only research centre in Northern Greece and one of the largest in the country. CERTH has important scientific and technological achievements in many areas including: Energy, Environment, Industry, Mechatronics, Information & Communication, Transportation & Sustainable Mobility, Health, Agro-biotechnology, Smart farming, Safety & Security, as well as several cross-disciplinary scientific areas.



ENGINEERING Ingegneria Informatica S.p.A.

ENGINEERING Ingegneria Informatica S.p.A. is the head company of the ENGINEERING Group. Engineering was founded in 1980, and it is currently the first IT group in Italy, among the top 10 IT groups in Europe, quite 101.000 employees and 650 branch offices in Italy and abroad, with an established presence in Belgium, Norway, Republic of Serbia, Latin America and USA.



La Tempesta

La Tempesta is a professional consulting services and a digital and media production company. It is consulting services that involves strategy, management and digital transformation for public and private organisations.

As a digital and media production company, they specialize in giving cultural heritage (immaterial, historical, artistic, architectural, landscape, documents ...) a digital expression.



The Greek Forum of Refugees

The Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR) is a registered non-profit making Association established in Athens, Greece, in 2012. Its overall aim is to support the unity of the refugee communities based in Greece and at the European level and to foster refugees' inclusion within their host society by encouraging their active participation and need to be recognized as skilled and knowledgeable individuals. GFR is therefore actively engaged in Empowerment, Advocacy, Awareness-raising and Rights protection.



The SO-CLOSE Project uses cultural heritage and innovative tools to improve social cohesion and promote mutual understanding. Smart management, creative ideas, international knowledge and cooperation helps to create tools to bring people and cultures together.


From so far to so close.





SO-CLOSE Project Consortium





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