

Review – My Fourth Time, We Drowned

Written by Lida Naeim-Jäggi

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LIDA NAEIM-JÄGGI, AUG 13 2023

My Fourth Time, We Drowned

By Sally Hayden

Melville House, 2022

At the start of the book, Sally Hayden quotes a Somali refugee: “I was caught by the Libyan coastguard three times—first time from Qarabully, east Tripoli; second time, Zawiya; third time, Zuwara. And my fourth time, we drowned. And the fifth time, I made it to safety”. This quotation, which also partly serves as the title of her first book, already expresses the strong will refugees have to develop in order to realize their dreams. A kind of dream whose momentum cannot be comprehended by those who have grown up in safety and prosperity and never had to fight for it.

Following several years of investigative research, journalist Sally Hayden writes this book to document the far-reaching consequences of European migration policy. Throughout her work, Hayden sheds light on a pivotal turning point, emphasizing the ethical responsibility Europe bore when refugees were tragically subjected to forcible rejection. The result is an exploratory journey into the world of refugees and migrants trying to escape dire conditions in their own countries. Driven by a hope for a decent life, many set out to reach Europe via North Africa. Most of them experience even more inhumane conditions than they had initially sought to flee. Most significantly, they bear witness to one of the worst human rights disasters of our time.

The book opens and ends with an account of Essey from Eritrea, the book’s main protagonist. Essey is described as a teenager whose escape spans several years of evading danger, ultimately finding himself aboard a rubber boat arranged by smugglers. Cramped together with a hundred other refugees on the Mediterranean Sea he heads towards Europe. A helicopter, however, spots them and alerts the EU-funded Libyan Coast Guard. Hayden emphasizes that in doing so, the EU circumvents the most important principle of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (non-refoulement). Essey comments: “It was painful, but even more crushing than this European treachery was the death of a dream. This could have finally been their moment, their chance” (p.15).

“Between 2014 and 2019, more than nineteen thousand men, women, and children had drowned in the Mediterranean. I was reminded once again that the Central Mediterranean route, between Libya and Malta or Italy, was the deadliest migration route in the world” (p.320). These are bare figures. But Hayden opens the reader’s eyes to more than just an overwhelming number of facts in 491 pages. Above all, she describes harrowing scenes with an authenticity that can only be expected from someone who is or was a refugee. At the same time, the severity of the cruelty of the stories intensifies from page to page. As a former refugee who had to experience the worst first-hand, the inconceivable cruelty depicted in the described experiences brought tears to my eyes – more than once. Hayden has spoken with hundreds of refugees and migrants, and each flight has its own story. Yet there are frightening similarities in the kind of cruelty that migrants are subjected to. The fact that it is fellow people who trample human rights in such a way is hard to “*verstehen*” (understand), to use a term of Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee, was one of the most important exponents of the topic of displacement in the 20th century. She was obsessed with *verstehen*—on the one hand the behavior of people and on the other hand the behavior of systems created by people.

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Hayden looks for the context in the systemic aberrations, which are in turn invented, planned, and organized by humans. Responsible for these are, unsurprisingly, criminal organizations, dictators, and corrupt state structures. However, Hayden's thorough research brings to light—in a somewhat surprising manner—the involvement of the EU itself and esteemed organizations such as the UN, including its sub-organizations UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as various NGOs, all of whom are dedicated to the safeguarding of human rights. Regrettably, it becomes evident that they are implicated in human rights violations and bear a degree of responsibility for the tragic loss of life among countless refugees in the Mediterranean.

Hayden generates her own style of narrative art. "Art" because the style is not engineered but testifies to authenticity, this time to the authenticity of her own conviction to give a powerful voice to those whose voice has been forcibly taken away, whether by intimidation, torture, deportation, prison lock-ups, or being left to drown in the Mediterranean on her own doorstep (the EU). "History is written by the victors. Victims who survive often do not have the strength to stand up and rewrite the narrative, or the connections to make sure their voices are counted" (p.394). Hayden's reporting is journalism on a new level. I can only recommend that you, the reader, take the plunge and learn about the deepest abysses of humanity and the systems it has created. With this book, Hayden has managed to give the victims an unmistakable voice.

At some point while reading, one asks oneself: is there any hope? There are only occasional positive indications that refugees and migrants have succeeded in arriving somewhere in Europe. At least Hayden quotes Essey again at the end of the book's final chapter. He made it to Luxembourg: "Before I was living it, now I'm observing" (p.395).

What remains after reading the book? On the one hand, the countless horrific experiences inflicted on migrants by their tormentors leave one with a deep sense of pain. On the other hand, the book's surprising criticism of the EU and international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, and even the Red Cross makes any hope fade. However, there is also a positive aspect to this book. It is the very fact that it could be written and published at all. Despite the highly emotional subject matter, Hayden has managed to maintain—in the sense of Juergen Habermas—*rationality* through the nature of her research and to lend *strength* to her argumentation. She thus challenges the rationality of the actors addressed and triggers *discourse* and (hopefully) a *learning process* (Habermas 1981: 38-39). It is in this sense a proof of democracy's ability to bear criticism. Criticism is crucial to stimulating discourse and enabling Seyla Benhabib's *iterative democratic processes*. "By democratic iterations I mean complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society" (Benhabib 2011: 179). Finally, it is about creating a future where human rights are truly respected in a humane way.

References

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About the author:

Lida Naeim-Jäggi, born in Kabul in 1973, fled Afghanistan due to the Soviet invasion in 1979. After a perilous journey to cross the border into Pakistan and India, she found refuge in Germany, where she completed her high school education. Subsequently, she studied psychology in the Netherlands. In 2008, Lida moved to Switzerland, which felt like home. Her experiences as a former refugee shaped her passion for justice and human rights. She pursued a Master's degree in ethics and philosophy in Ireland and began a PhD at Trinity College Dublin in 2018. Lida's

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research focuses on the refugee crisis, aiming to understand how hosts and newcomers can coexist through mutual respect and a shared sense of belonging.