WORKING CLASS HEROES

A project by
GABRIELE GALIMBERTI
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Do migrants have a past? Do migrants have a future? Or are they forever locked in the images of man on sinking boats, of women, babies in their arms, crawling under barbwire, of families waiting in line, stranded in the shadow of borders we thought had forever vanished?

Gabriele Galimberti has tried to see things differently. He has learned that these men and women actually had a job where they come from and dream of being able to work in Europe. So when he set out to photograph a group of migrants eager to reach Switzerland but blocked in the city of Como, in northern Italy, he decided to show them as they would have liked to be shown. Dembo as a baker, Osman as a bus driver, Noreen as a nurse and Jafar as policeman. These are just some of works they are used to do and skilled in. But Dembo, Osman, Noreen, Jafar and many others are now living in lurid tents, camping out in a small park adjacent to the city’s station in squalid conditions. These photos are their CV’s translated in images. Galimberti has borrowed the language of publicity to show what reportage cannot. These photographs are not real. But they should be.

In order to illustrate the enormous chasm between their present and a possible future Galimberti has also done a series of still lifes of where the migrants actually sleep. It’s in the space between these two worlds that the future of Europe will play out.

Text by Paolo Woods
Dembo “Alex” Sillah, 21, Baker from the Gambia
Bubakar Diallo, 26, Tires Mechanic from Guinea
Gibbi Saine, 19, Tailor from the Ghambia
Noreen George, 42, Surgical Nurse from Pakistan
Essa Bah, 16, and Moussa Saidi, 17, professional Football Players from the Gambia
Cherish, 18, & Blessing John, 24, Hairdressers from Nigeria
Osman Jalloh, 28, Bus Driver from Sierra Leone
Jafar Ali, 27, from Ethiopia & Abdul S., 23, from Eritrea. Police Officers
Michael Nani, 24, Waiter from Nigeria
Aliola Samba, 24, Mechanic from Senegal
Sarish Gill, 32, Cleaning Lady from Pakistan
Alhagie Gaye, 19, Shop Assistant from the Gambia
WHO SLEEPS WHERE
Tent for five adults
Tent for five adults and one child
Bed for two people
Tent for tree adults and one child
Tent for two adults
Tent for tree adults
Double tent for seven adults
Tent for tree adults
**Stories**

**Dembo „Alex“ Sillah, 21, Baker from the Gambia**

“Here I can make it”

When I arrived in Como we were 15 refugees – in the whole town. Today there are around 600. I owe everything I have to the priests and monks who took care of me. I’m still living in their convent. Now I want to give back something. Therefore I work full time as a volunteer at the food station of the Caritas. Also because I can’t stand it, to just sit around. Not being able to work – that’s no life for a man, that’s a shame! And it drives you mad. I see it with other refugees. They’re turning aggressive, violent or depressed and give themselves up eventually.

Like almost every refugee in Como I don’t have a permission to work. Although I would already have a Job. Shortly after my arrival an aid organisation found a short internship at a bakery for me. For six months. I was determined to learn how to bake bread in Europe. It was a great experience! My boss was so happy with my work, that he promised to hire me as soon as I’ve got the papers. I’ve learnt so much from him. The language as well. Besides Italian I speak English, Arab and French. I’ve learnt French in the hotel where I used to work in the Gambia. My father died when I was 13. From there on I had to take care of my mother and my two younger sisters.

I wouldn’t have left my family in the Gambia voluntarily. I had to. Why? One day, when just me and my boss were on the shift in the hotel, the cash box containing all the tips disappeared. My boss accused me. A lie – I’d rather starve than bring shame to my father’s name. If I wouldn’t have fled, they’d locked me up without trial. You’re not worth anything if you’re poor in the Gambia. The system is corrupt, there is no justice, no freedom. Here it’s different. In Europe you can make it on your own if you are diligent and honest. The Europeans are polite and educated. That’s why I love this continent.

I don’t just want to work here to support my family – I want to learn as much as I can. When I’ll have gained enough money and knowledge I am going back to the Gambia. I’m going to open a bakery, create jobs, educate people. And then I want to go into politics. I want my country to become like the countries in Europe. A country where everyone can make it if he’s ready to work for it.

**Bubakar Diallo, 26, Mechanic from Guinea**

“Taking care of my sister”

Before I arrived here I hadn’t known much about Europe. Except that there is work here. Work and peace. In Guinea we lack both of it.

I was ten years old when my father died. They found him shot in the streets. May be it was a robbery, may be the military or the rebels were behind it. Three years later my mother died as well. Since that time I’ve been taking care of my sister who is five years younger than me. She is a tailor but earns hardly anything. After I had lost my job as a mechanic I came here to be able to take better care of her. It didn’t work out.

For six months I’ve been travelling through Italy now. Tomorrow I leave for Ventimiglia. Maybe I’ll manage from there to reach a country where there is work.
Gibbi Saine, 19, Tailor from the Ghambia  
“A gentle work for a gentle boy”

Senegal, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya. That was my route. I left home in August 2015 and arrived in Italy on the 25th of May 2016. I’ve never been to school. I can’t write nor read. But I can draw sewing patterns in many styles. I started tailoring at the age of nine. It is a gentle work for gentle boys. I loved to just sit by myself, work the textiles, feel them, take measurements and create. The reason I had to leave the Ghambia - I’ll never tell. Not even my best friend knows why. I am too ashamed about it. It is my secret, it stays my secret.

Noreen George, 42, Surgical Nurse from Pakistan  
“Helping is my vocation”

It’s been a year and five months since I was able to take care of a patient for the last time. Me of all people! Me who, unlike my siblings, never had the time to founded a family because I was so dedicated to my work. For 15 years straight. To nurse ill people, to help them, that’s my vocation. My passion. It feels like a cruel joke, that I had to flee because of my job. My parents belong to Pakistan’s Catholic minority. To avoid persecution by radical Muslims many of us move exclusively in the Christian neighbourhoods. Most of us leave them barley and only during the day. That’s no option when you work in a hospital. You get used to verbal slander and being spit at. But then suddenly there were the death threats to me and my family. My parents are very sensitive. They decided that I should leave. To flee cost 1000 Euros. My chief physician, a Muslim, offered me help gathering the money. As far as to the Adrian coast I flew by car, then I was put into a ship container with five for four days. When I stumbled out of the container in Milan I had no idea where I was. Again a Muslim Pakistani offered me help. He placed me into the train to Como and paid for the ticket. I’m also very thankful to the priests who took care of me since then. Nevertheless I cried every day. The homesickness has become better over the last months. But the feeling of being useless remains.

Essa Bah, 16, and Moussa Saidi, 17, professional Football Players from the Ghambia  
“We just want to play”

I was a student at the National Football Academy of the Ghambia, Moussa played for the club “Wales” in the C-League. It wasn’t easy to get into the Academy and I miss it very much. But after the death of my father I couldn’t afford to continue my education. Being here is terrible for both of us. We cannot train as often as we should, to be able to compete at a professional level. Twice a week is just not enough. But we don’t have a field, let alone an own ball we could use. We don’t ask for much, we just want to play football. It opens my heart when I play. I don’t worry anymore and all the fear just vanishes.
Blessing John, 24, & Cherish H., 18, Hairdressers from Nigeria
“Rather to drown than to live like that”

I never would have gone with that man if I had known what was awaiting me. He had promised I could work as a hairdresser in Libya. Instead he forced me and my sister into prostitution. After half a year I managed to escape with the help of a client. I had to leave my sister behind. I haven’t heard anything from her since then. I knew I could drown during the crossing of the Middle Sea. Everybody on the boats knows that. But I’d rather would have wanted to drown than to live on like that. I met Cherish on the boat. At the age of 13 she was sold to men by her own aunt. She fled when she was 17. In Como with the priests we are at peace for the first time in a very long time. Here we want to stay.

Osman Jalloh, 28, Bus Driver from Sierra Leone
“Nine years without accident”

I’ve been caught in Chiasso and brought back to Como twice already. Switzerland, Germany, France— I don’t care where exactly. The main thing is that I can work. It’s sad how many people here think that we refugees don’t have any skills. I’m not a loser! I’ve been a bus driver for nine years: without any accident, even though there are hardly any traffic lights in Sierra Leone. I miss driving, but even more I miss my two year old daughter.

Jafar Ali, 27, from Ethiopia  (Abdul S., 23, from Eritrea) Police Officers
“I want to protect the Swiss”

To the tree above my sleeping place at the train station, I pinned a Swiss Flag between the pictures of my family. The first time I’ve heard from Switzerland was during police school over ten years ago. A working democracy and justice system, an exemplary police force. That impressed me. When I had to flee I told to myself, this is the place I want to go. To Switzerland – or Germany or Norway where I have relatives. I’ve become a police officer to serve my people. My people – not the Ethiopian state. Ethnically I belong to the Oromo. For many years my people are fighting for independence from Ethiopia. That is the reason why the regional police and the federal police are in some kind of a Cold War. For ten years I was a member of the regional police. But last year the relations between Ethiopia and the Oromo have worsened radically. They’ve burnt down our University as a punishment, because many students participate in the independence movement. Among them many of my friends and my sister. Four months ago the federal police raided my house and arrested me. My two children and my pregnant wife had to watch everything. When I was released a few days later due to lack of proof, I fled to Europe with my sister and my best friend – both students. By foot we went to Libya, from there on we took the boat. We have been floating on the sea for 15 days. A tiny gulp of water every day is all we received – nothing to eat. We were about 60 people on the boat. Four or five died. One woman was pregnant. It was horrific. I’ve never seen my youngest son Hamdi. But I am glad my wife has stayed at home. The flight is very dangerous for women. They aren’t save here neither. Me and my friend are already watching over five women we didn’t know before we fled. If they let me, I’d also like to protect the Swiss as a police officer. Like they were my own people.
**Michael Nani, 24, Waiter from Nigeria**  
“I’m afraid to return”

Back in Nigeria I was a waiter at Gee’s Lounge in Lagos. A very privileged work place, well paid as well. I got the job threw my uncle who is a well-known business man. What most people including me didn’t know, was that he also occupied himself with some shady business such as drug trafficking and money laundering. He used me for drug deliveries. As soon as I found out what I was delivering, I threw the package away and fled. I knew how dangerous it would be, if I get caught but I didn’t had the courage to stand up to my uncle and confront him. The next three years I lived in different countries threw out Africa; Senegal, Burkina Faso and Libya. But life in Libya isn’t safe for refugees. A lot of us get kidnapped and pressed free or get forced to work in conditions that are close to slavery. So I decided to come over to Europe. I liked my life in Nigeria better than the one I have here, but I’m afraid to return.

**Aliola Samba, 24, Mechanic from Senegal**  
“A girl and a car”

One day I would like to own a BMW. It doesn’t have to be a new model or anything fancy. I just admire the accuracy of the engines. So smooth. Back in Senegal I was a mechanic. I didn’t choose this profession; it was the only job I could get. But I know nothing else and I like working with my hands. Italy is no good if you are looking for work. I plan to go to Spain. A friend of mine is there. He’s working on a boat and he told me that the people are friendlier than in Italy. Maybe I’ll meet a girl there. I would like that. A girl and a car.

**Sarish Gill, 32, Cleaning Lady from Pakistan**  
“We just want to be a family”

We’ve lived in Zurich for three years. This was the best time since we had to flee Pakistan six years ago. In Switzerland we were together, had a little apartment, enough to eat, and my oldest daughter went to kindergarten. She already speaks a lot of Swiss German. We weren’t allowed to work, but my husband helped out Pakistani friends and received gifts for the children in exchange. Four months ago the officers came with the deportation order: back to Italy. I couldn’t stop crying during the whole drive in the police car - up to the boarder. We have lived in Italy for three years before moving to Switzerland. Partly we lived on the streets of Milano when Carol still was a baby. It was dreadful. In Italy I am recognised as refugee. I am allowed to work, but what’s it good for if there aren’t any jobs? If someone in Como needs a Cleaning lady: 0039 328 379 80 53. I am a really hard worker. We just want to be a family. But without a job we can’t afford an apartment. I share a small room with the kids and a foreign woman in the priests’ house. My husband Rizwan hast to sleep in a different place since men and women aren’t allowed in the same building. In Pakistan Rizwan used to work for our Christian church. Therefore he once was beaten so badly by radical Muslims, he needed to go the hospital. Then they attacked our home. We left everything behind and fled. But Jesus watches over us. Everywhere. That gives me strength.
Alhagie Gaye, 19, Shop Assistant from the Gambia
“Don’t come here”

My uncle had a clothes shop in the Gambia. It was an honour for me to work there. Selling beautiful things, advising the ladies – I liked that. But my uncle is old, he had to sell the shop. I couldn’t find another job, that’s why I’m here. My brother wanted to follow me. “Don’t come here,” I told him. Europe is not how we’ve imagined it. I don’t even have a tent to sleep in, let alone a job.

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