

## Tell us your story

By Wim Budding

"Today we begin in earnest the work of making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little better than the one we inhabit today." This is what US president-elect Barack Obama promises to do on his office website change.gov.

Today, the 12 December 2008, at least 80 people from all over Europe are gathered together to discuss the subject of older refugees. They want to improve their position in the countries they currently live in, and to give older refugees an opportunity to express their feelings and needs.

In 'an American moment', the president-elect says: "Your stories and your ideas can help change the future of the country. When we come together around a common purpose, great things are possible"

Maybe Obama can also inspire Europeans, perhaps he can inspire them at this meeting in Amsterdam about the position of older refugees. Because changing the future at the benefit of this group is possible, if we listen to their stories and listen to their ideas.

The project "The Power of Older Refugees" had the intention of making a difference not only by listening to the stories and ideas of older refugees, but also by giving them a stage to act on. And so change is not just the outcome of a process of consideration, but especially the possibility to express yourself, being part of the process of change.

It is as Obama says: "Great things are possible..., if we want to do so."



 Tell us YOUR story.

## Don't let older refugees fall off the European Agenda

By Saskia Moerbeek

### Member of parliament Jean Lambert on EU policy

In preparation for the conference we spoke with Jean Lambert, a British Member of the European Parliament, of the group of the Greens/European Free Alliance. In the EP she is on the committee on Employment and Social Affairs.



*Are older refugees ever mentioned in European politics and what recommendations and proposals should in your opinion be made to strengthen the position of older refugees on a European level?*

"Older refugees are very rarely mentioned. When we do talk about special refugee groups, it is usually about unaccompanied minors. Older refugees usually only come up when they are mentioned in a list of vulnerable groups. Last Thursday (20 November 2008) we organised a short meeting about older migrants, mainly to raise awareness about the existence of this group and to gain some knowledge about their needs. One of the issues addressed, was how older migrants can get access to information, while they have trouble speaking the language of the country they live in. We also discussed whose duty it is to provide accessible information. A second issue that came up, as it usually does, was the need to strengthen the community and voluntary organisations of the people themselves, who do work that governments are not doing. This is part of the general discussion on how to adapt the system to the needs of the people, and not the other way around. Both the issues discussed at the meeting on older migrants, I think apply to older refugees as well.

### Legal Status

When speaking about older migrants and older refugees, I also think a key issue is migration status. There is talk about reviewing the legal status of refugees every five years in some Member States. This is worrying in general, but is most worrying for older people who have no relation to the labour market, who have language barriers, and who are more or less dependent on others. I guess it is even more complicated for older refugees, who mostly have a small personal network and for whom all issues about return are very complicated. I think we should discuss the possibility for older migrants and older refugees to maintain their status. At this moment the 'Long Term Residence Directive' doesn't apply to refugees. I think we should look whether this should be changed, because that would be beneficial to older refugees.

### Family reunification

Another issue is family reunification. Recently we evaluated the Dublin 2 Regulation and one of the questions was whether we should create a broader definition of family. Especially for refugees, it can be important to reunite with other dependents like older relatives, or, in case they are older themselves, children or family members who remained behind or are living elsewhere. Why should older people who've had to flee their country grow old in isolation, without any relatives nearby?"

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*Should we focus only on legal matters or is it also important to draw attention to the vulnerable social position of older refugees and their need to participate in society?*

"I think it is important to also draw attention to their social position, their special needs in the fields of mental health, housing, participation and so on. We cannot let them not fall off the agenda. It is a constant struggle to make sure that the programmes of the EU do not exclude certain groups of people. This means we need to ensure older refugees are mentioned in acts such as the mental health strategy, and that they are included in the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion.

### Give them a voice

There is a European Refugee Advocacy Organisation (ERAD), that is trying to obtain legal status in Belgium to work on a European level. You know how hard this is given bureaucracy in Belgium. But it is important that such a group exists, so they can constantly bring up refugees' issues and work together with refugees' organisations within the Member States. That way they have a voice, and we can find out about the existence of different groups like older refugees.

I also think NGOs like the Anti Poverty Network should be aware of the existence of vulnerable groups like older refugees. To reach this awareness, there needs to be information available on what makes this group different. I intend to meet with the intergroup (all party group) of the European Parliament on family policy to exchange information and to make sure older migrants and older refugees are on their agenda as well.

It is clear currently there is not much known about older refugees, but to ignore their existence would be a mistake."



Theater group LOV project 2004 after the premiere

## "The dancing child in me"

By Nassrin Savalooni

**Nassrin Savalooni (refugee from Iran, now living in Amsterdam) about her experience in the Dutch empowerment project LOV in 2004**

"I was going through one of the most horrible times in my life then. I had RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) a burn-out and had just heard that I had Fibromialgy. Consequently I lost my job. Since my arrival in The Netherlands I had worked very hard to establish a normal life and a career and now everything was lost. I was in pieces, shattered, I did not know myself anymore, the body that once was mine was strange to me.

That independent, courageous spirit who was me, I could not find back. Confused with no energy at all, I felt betrayed by me and by my surroundings. My participation in the BMP project was one of the best things that happened to me in those terrible times. When they

asked me, suddenly I remembered how much I liked acting as a young girl, in fact I used to act in plays at high school in Iran. It was great that we developed the play as we went along together, a joint effort, everybody was more or less involved and contributed as much as they could. It was our input that formed the production at the end.

As we progressed, I realised that something was happening to me which was good, which felt nice. By the time we ended, I felt I had found something of me back.

That something was: the dancing child in me, the analysing adolescent and the woman who travelled in red."

"The story of the refugee is a long story"

# The power of older refugees shown on the Blue Wall in Amsterdam Town Hall

By Sarah Valk

In light of the Conference "the Power of Older Refugees", a special art exhibition was put together. The exhibit, on the Blue Wall in the Town Hall of Amsterdam, showcases the power of older refugees, using art and creative ways of expression. The exhibit consists of two parts: a display of photographs and an art exhibition.

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*I remember a land of milk and honey*

"if my childhood was for sale, i'd buy it..."

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### Photographs

The photo exhibition was compiled by BMP Foundation, and show a series of photographs from the empowerment programmes in Ghent and Amsterdam respectively. In Ghent, a group of older refugees produced the play "I remember a land of milk and honey". The photographs of the final performance were taken by Eduardo Tardaguila. In Amsterdam older refugees performed a play in Loods 6 called "The value of a Stone". The photos of the production were taken by Frans Bouwmeester. The photo's in general are a reflection of the dedication, power and vulnerable side of the people in the play.



*The value of a stone*



### Art by Victor Majdandzic

The art exhibition shows work of Victor Majdandzic (Bosnia, 1931). Viktor came to the Netherlands in 1969, where he started working as an art therapist. This allowed him to paint unconstrained and free. In his work as an art therapist he inspired people to find their way in life as autonomous and free persons. After retiring, Viktor continued to paint, inspired by his journeys to all parts of the world. In his paintings, Viktor Majdandzic tries to achieve a harmonious ensemble of order and chaos.



*No title, 2006, 102x80 cm, acryl on board*

In 2008 he celebrated his 50th anniversary as artist, with exhibitions in Nijmegen, The Hague, Amsterdam, Geneva, Brussels, London. The exhibition in the Town Hall of Viktors work was arranged by AIDA Nederland in assignment of BMP Foundation.

The exhibition "The Power of Older Refugees" will be shown from 11 December 2008 until 5 January 2009.

*"My children are my pride. I want to be near them"*

"Making music is what / now live for"

## Play the music: the EU welcomes elderly refugees!!!

Column by Koen de Mesmaeker

Sorry, to disappoint you, but this title doesn't reflect the European Union's position on elderly refugees. You can check it yourself when googling the words 'elderly refugees' + 'EU' and you will find little ambitions within the EU to develop policies on this issue. Maybe you're more succesful if you google 'Elderly' + 'EU'. And yes something comes out! A green paper launched in 2005 with the very well sounding title: *Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between generations*. And also the communication of the commission of 2006: *The demographic future of Europe: from challenge to opportunity* popped up. But unfortunately, these documents mainly focus on economic issues in

view of the Lisbon strategy and on care for elderly. Nothing about participation or the added value elderly could bring to society. Elderly are a problem that needed to be solved in an ageing EU society. Forget about elderly being a positive element in day to day life. And if this goes for the elderly EU-citizens, elderly refugees shouldn't get any ideas about their position. Having said this we cannot deny that in recent years the EU has funded a number of projects for elderly refugees. Among them some interesting ones like the BMP-project or the ECRE project on elderly refugees. Projects that showed the strength and creativity of elderly refugees and NGO's. But the resources remain little, and civil society doesn't need peanuts but coconuts to take the issue further.

The discussion whether refugee integration in general should be part of the new Integration Fund or be placed under the European Refugee Fund shows it is being considered a hot potato everyone wants to pass on as soon as possible. Maybe the light on this issue should come from the Council of Europe! Already in 2003 the parliamentary assembly adopted a recommendation on elderly migrants rights including economical, social, cultural and other rights and calling to the voluntary sector, community organisations and elderly migrants themselves to take the issue forward.

Koen de Mesmaeker is director of "Onthaal Bureau Kom Pas Gent"

## Babak-o-Doestan: One day Babak Amiri realised he had lost his dreams

By Bam Commijs



Babak-o-Doestan performing (Babak third from the right, playing the guitar)

Luckily the dreams did not flee without leaving clues as to where he could find them again: "Travel to far off places and befriend strangers." With a notebook in his backpack and a guitar hanging from his shoulders he left the Jasmijn flowers blossoming in his grandmothers garden and passed the loud vegetable sellers in the Teheran market squares. One dream he found in the Kurdish mountains he crossed, sleeping in a smuggler's cottage. Another on the lips of a Turkish princess he seduced in the streets of Konya. His companions were beggars, revolutionaries and the old poets that he kept under his pillow, where ever he laid his head to rest. More dreams came back to him in Amsterdam, where he played the Fado with an old Portuguese mariner and got drunk with the locals in the Zeedijk.

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### Babak's style

Sometimes people ask him, who were your teachers? Where did you study your music? To which Babak answers, I was taught by the cobblestone roads of Istanbul and the lone trees standing next to the shore of the Black Sea. Sometimes the people insist, what style is it that you play? Is it Jazz, Pop, Flamenco or traditional Persian music? To this Babak answers, no, my style is that of the wind blowing over the Carpathians, it's the humming of the birds in Gilan, it's the style of a line in a poem by Sepehri or a wild stroke on a canvas by Picasso. If people then tell him his music must be "Fusion" then, played by the refugees of the Netherlands, Babak just shakes his head, retunes his guitar and plays another song. Babak-o-Doestan means "Babak and Friends" in Persian. Today the friends Babak plays music with are Bam Commijns and Minze Koopman, the Dutch Pianist and Percussionist, Sahand Sahebdivani, the Iranian Tar player, Kate Adams, the Australian Cellist and Murat Yatmaz, the Turkish Bass player. They are very happy to share their dreams, in concert and on the new CD they are going to record in the spring.

## fusion

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## "Listening to stories of older refugees... Who are they?"

By Saskia Moerbeek

**We are gathered here to 'celebrate the power of older refugees'. But who ARE these older refugees? What can we say about them?**

### Older refugees: a diverse group

The group of older refugees in Europe is characterised by enormous diversity. There are differences in country of origin, cultural background, and for example the level of education. Older refugees in Europe come from all over the world. Here, when we speak of 'older refugees', we can mean three things. Refugees who came to Europe at a relatively young age and are ageing here now. This number will increase rapidly over the next years; Refugees who had to flee at an older age and have been living in a European country for a shorter period of time, or might even still be in the asylum procedure; Elderly relatives, mostly mothers and/or fathers of refugees who live in Europe, who have been brought to Europe by their children, who would not be able to look after them properly otherwise.

### Old at 45?

There are big differences in the perception when a refugee can be specified as "old". In some countries of origin, someone is considered old at the age of 45. In terms of health and possibilities to participate in society, refugees often feel "older" than other Europeans in the same age group. In terms of spirit and resilience however, they are often younger. The percentage of older refugees (above 45) is estimated at about 15% of the refugee population in each country. It is to be expected that over the next few years this percentage will increase relatively quickly because a large number of refugees is currently in their forties.

### Triple Task

Generally speaking, older refugees face

a triple task when ageing. First, just like anybody else, they have to deal with matters of ageing, such as the loss of physical functions and relatives. Second, older refugees have to find their way in a culturally unfamiliar environment that ascribes different meanings to the concept of old, and in which the elderly are treated differently than they are used to. Third, older refugees have to find a way to come to terms with the often traumatic experiences they endured before and during the flight, and sometimes during the asylum procedure as well - traumas which are often only revealed later in life.

### Spectrum of issues

In addition to this triple task of ageing, there is a series of other issues that older refugees are confronted with, such as for example the relationship with their children, who easily find their way in the new country, or a poor income situation due to incomplete pension build-up.

### Difference between older refugees and older migrants?

What distinguishes older refugees from older migrants is that often the networks of older refugees are not as extensive, which means their support network is more limited. Moreover, the flight itself has a huge impact. Unlike migrants, refugees were forced to leave their countries because of war, violence or political persecution. In practice, it appears that the experiences faced during the flight stay with people for the rest of their lives and are even experienced stronger as one becomes older.

### Power

This conference has shown proof that despite their vulnerable position, older refugees do not want to be seen as pitiful people, but are working to apply their abilities and experiences in their new society. To make a valuable contribution with their power and life experience.

This is who they are. 