

## Photographer captures images, stories of Syria's teenage refugees

By Suzanne Pollak  
Senior Writer

Fine arts photographer Elena Dorfman spent six months in 2013 photographing young Syrian refugees for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

“For the most part, it was a real struggle to hear their stories.” The teenagers she photographed and came to know had “very poignant and very powerful stories. It was difficult not to be depressed.”

Dorfman’s photographs are currently on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The small exhibit, “The Lost Generation: Portraits from the Middle East,” is featured in the Wexner Center gallery. It gives viewers a glimpse into the despair of those caught in the four-year-long conflict.

“You always want to help. Always,” said Dorfman, 49, who is Jewish and works in Los Angeles. The young people she photographed are living “in just terrible situations through no fault of their own.”

Dorfman traveled to Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq’s Kurdish region. She met just a small portion of the 4 million Syrians who have left their country, according to the UNHCR, the United Nation’s refugee organization.

Since the crisis began in 2011, more than 200,000 people have been killed.

Dorfman, who has had a 20-year career photographing people for many of the nation’s most widely-circulated magazines, did not plan to photograph and conduct audio interviews of Syrian refugees.

But, unexpectedly, a business contact asked Dorfman if she wanted to join a United Nations-sponsored media team.

“My first thought was, ‘no, that’s not what I do,’” she said. But a couple of days later, she called back and agreed to go. She was given free range, with instructions to create photos that help make the world aware of the suffering of the refugees.

“It was always to raise attention. That was the goal,” she said.

She wandered through several refugee camps before realizing teenagers were the ones who “really fall through the cracks.” They are old enough to have dreamed of their future, and aware enough to realize those dreams may

never come true, she said.

Dorfman previously photographed teenagers in her book on teenagers with cancer.

With the help of an interpreter, Dorfman heard many compelling stories about how these refugees had wanted to attend college and create their own families. Now, they just want to be together with family and friends, eating their favorite foods.

The young adults she spoke with were shell-shocked and often unaware whether their loved ones were alive or dead. Dorfman said that many had witnessed their fathers and brothers shot and their mothers “maimed by barrel bombs.”

They had nothing to do while in exile, nothing to hope for, she said.

Yet, for the short time she spoke with them, they seemed to bask in her attention, she said.

There were many times when she returned to learn more about a particular refugee only to discover the teen was no longer living there and no one knew where he or she had gone.

“It’s a generation that’s kind of lost,” said Dorfman. “They will not go home for a long time.” ■

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Photos by Elena Dorfman

