Going to the Source: Vassar’s Rich History of Refugee Assistance

As Vassar students and faculty grapple with the question of how best to show solidarity with refugees across the ocean, History majors are looking for inspiration closer to home. Deep in the archives of the Miscellany News and in our library’s Special Collections is a long history of Vassar College’s involvement in improving the lives of refugees around the world.

On March 5, 1915, M. P. Whitney (most likely Marion P. Whitney, Professor of German), published a plea in the Miscellany entitled, “Knitting for War Babies.” Since “[m]any of us have knitted for ourselves and others, and we know that much can be accomplished in the hours given over to social intercourse and pleasant chatting with friends, she asked “[w]hy not use such leisure moments to help these poor children?” Similar appeals appeared throughout the war and beyond, as evidenced in the “Knitting Committee’s” appeal on May 24, 1919, which referenced that spring’s effort to knit pounds of wool to support the Serbian Aid Fund, as well as their plan to work on more over the summer.

Vassar’s commitment to refugees again emerged in 1922, following the Turkish occupation of Smyrna following the end of the Greco-Turkish War. The October 14th, cover of the Miscellany News read “Vassar to Harbor Smyrna Refugees.” Although it was “not yet fully decided when they will come,” the article stated that “three students from the ruined college of Smyrna” would receive free tuition from the college and a community drive would be undertaken to pay their board and expenses. Notably, the History Department’s own Professor (and later, Dean) C. Mildred Thompson helped facilitate this effort.

By far the most extensively documented of Vassar’s involvement in support of refugees was during the late 1930s and 1940s with the efforts of the “Committee of Refugee Scholars.” The efforts of this group, which also included Dean Thompson, are recorded in the papers of President Henry Noble MacCracken in Vassar’s Special Collections. The central aim of the committee was to bring refugee scholars to Vassar as visitors who could present on their academic interests and contribute to the intellectual community. MacCracken and the Committee received many requests and recommendations, and although they were unable to host every scholar in need, there was
a steady flow of refugee academics on campus, beginning with “Dr. Moritz Geiger and his wife, who came to the college in 1933-34.” (Coincidentally, Geiger’s wife, Elizabeth Geiger, also had her PhD and presented at Vassar as well, though her academic contributions were unacknowledged in an article in the *Poughkeepsie Sun Courier* in April of 1940.)

One moving example of a refugee’s experience visiting Vassar during this time is the case of Dr. Alice Solomon, who visited campus in March of 1939 at the recommendation of German Professor Lilian Stroebe. In her request to MacCracken, Stroebe notes that “Doctor Alice Solomon, a refugee who is now living in New York...is one of the leading women in Germany...[and] is considered nationally and internationally an expert on the questions of welfare work, sociology, and national economy.” She adds that, “as a women’s college it seems to be very fitting that we should extend our hospitality to women of other countries.”

This appeal to the nature of Vassar as an institution apparently had the desired effect, and Dr. Solomon delivered a series of lectures to students. The personal importance of this experiences is reflected in a letter she wrote to “My very dear Miss Haight” following her time at Vassar in which she wrote an “expression of her gratitude”:

> These have indeed been happy days, happier than anything the world had in store for me, or seemed to have in store for me, since I was uprooted from my native land. It was a wonderful privilege to belong to Vassar for a little while and to take part in all that is bright and beautiful and to feel the spirit of goodness and human brotherhood which pervades the place.

It is the hope of current student organizers that we can share this same feeling, which many of us experience daily on Vassar’s campus, with those currently in need of refuge.

- Hannah Reynolds ‘16