

Report about a visit to Syria_May 9-21, 2022

by Sr. Walburga CS

First impressions:

For a long time it had been on my mind to visit Syria one day. I have been working with Fr. Hanna Ghoneim for many years to carry out projects to help poor and impoverished Christians in Syria. I was looking forward to seeing the projects with my own eyes and meeting our partners in Syria in person, thus being able to link personal impressions to the information and photos received so far. On May 9th, for me the first day after a recovery from Covid – thus newly immunized – the three of us set off for Syria as a team from the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft*: Fr. Hanna Ghoneim, Günter Kaltenbrunner (a long-time volunteer engaged in the collection of humanitarian goods) and I (Sr. Walburga Starkl of the community of sisters *Caritas Socialis* and Managing Co-Director of the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft – Hilfe für Syrien*).

The journey first took us from Vienna to Athens: Sun above the clouds. How splendid! The view through my sunglasses revealed a reflection depicting broad rainbow colors spread over the land – in a different direction than how we normally see the rainbow from below. This view triggered a thought in my mind: God is laying His peace on our earth. Couldn't we just grab it?!! We were on our way to a country whose inhabitants are exposed to misery due to long years of war, to massive destruction and displacement. It is always the weakest and the poorest in a society who have to suffer most from the effects of wars and other conflicts. I am sure: God wants peace, justice, and love for all peoples! Therefore: I was ready to be confronted with the poverty that I am now reporting on, but would try at the same time to convey God's love, which in the end is much stronger than all evil. The volunteer helpers of our Foundation are confident that if we open our hearts and lend our hands to Him, God will continue to work miracles today.



In Lebanon, Fr. Hanna's relatives and friends gave us a warm welcome. In the port of Beirut, the devastations caused by the enormous explosion almost two years ago were still clearly visible. We also drove past refugee camps. We experienced that electricity is only available sporadically, for short time spans.

A nephew of Fr. Hanna took us to Damascus to the parish of St. Cyril in the Christian district of Kassaa. Günter and I were allowed to spend the nights there in single rooms and we also had this place for some time in between the various meetings and appointments. P. Hanna stayed with his sister who lives nearby. I am deeply impressed by how cordially and naturally the hospitality is cultivated there despite all the poverty.

Looking back, I would describe my overall impression of people as follows: They have a natural dignity and they pay attention to it. They walk upright, nicely dressed, as best they can. The culture is full of rich ornaments, full of grace and beauty. The country is full of treasures, many of which are now buried in rubble. They are a noble and brave people. Many ethnic groups live in peace with each other. I pray that people's longing and hope for a return to normal life will be fulfilled.

Here are a few flashes of impressions gathered:

In the early morning before 4 a.m., I heard loud male voices singing – presumably from the muezzin of the mosque near the church. Many believers came to the Catholic service in the Byzantine rite in the morning at 7:30 a.m. even on weekdays. I sensed a lot of awe and connectedness in this place.

In the evenings, some priests led us through dark alleys to visit **very poor families**. There was rarely any electricity. The narrow paths were bumpy and dark, and the steep, high steps to the apartments were not lit either. The light sources in the rooms were also very modest. Some families live in one single room. **We listened to their needs:** for a very gifted girl, the death of her father means that the school fees can no longer be paid; a mother whose husband died would love to have a sewing machine to work at home, thus being able to stay with her little children; the son in another family had to give up his studies and work in order to support the family after his father fell ill; another family with five children is unable to afford urgently needed medication. The misery of the people is almost beyond description. Despite everything, people always received us with smiling faces. They were very happy about our visit.



Dark alley in a poor quarter in Damascus

The monthly income of an employee in the Patriarchate is the equivalent of 25 Euros. She loses her apartment because the owner wants to sell it. She finds a new one, but the rent there would cost three times her income. She also has to take care of her children, not to mention the health problems.



Visits to families in Damascus



We visited the **regional bakery in Maaruneh**, funded by the friends and supporters of the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft*. We saw how difficult it is to always secure enough fuel, flour and other ingredients to keep the bakery running. The state has to steadily reduce the flour quotas allotted to the bakeries. There is not enough flour left in the granaries.



On the „roof“ of the regional bakery



In the humanitarian goods storage

In the same building we saw the **storage of the humanitarian goods** that we sent there. The items are sorted and distributed step by step, as they come in. The stable racks that arrived with the latest containers are very helpful for this purpose.

It was a pleasure for us to **meet with Fr. Naem Gharbi of MELCORD** and with **representatives of La Flamme**. With all their energy and

with great commitment they help the poor. They are wonderful local partners for the projects. The same is true for the siblings and friends of Fr. Hanna Ghoneim. They facilitate, plan, mediate and carry out a lot of work on site, adapted to the constantly changing local conditions and specifications. The reconstruction of the country is an objective that is very dear to their hearts.



With the women's group "La Flamme"



With Fr. Naem Gharbi, Manager of MELCORD



With family members of Fr. Hanna

Fr. Hanna participated in a **conference of numerous church representatives and young people**, where the focus was on the future of young people in Syria.

When we drove from Maaruneh to Damascus in the late evening, we saw long queues of buses and cars waiting for hours during the night for the tanker to come and give them a little **petrol** at somehow affordable prices. During our stay, the price of petrol rose by 40% and thus reached our western price level (a liter from the state quota costs an equivalent of about 1 EUR, the price on the black market is 1.80 EUR).

The cars you see on the roads consist of pieces of sheet metal patched together, barely keeping the vehicles running.

We visited **destroyed churches**, including the **church in Harasta**, in Fr. Hanna's former parish. At the time when the Islamists destroyed everything there and desecrated the church (in the summer of 2012), Fr. Hanna was with the newly founded Melkite church in Vienna. People say that it is a miracle that he wasn't kidnapped at that time, because the Islamists had previously dug underground passages in this place without being noticed. The "rebels" were there for 6 years. Someone led us over the rubble to a place where we could look into the destroyed church from the gallery. We found pictures of saints scattered among the rubble, a prayer book, handwritten notes, an image of the Virgin Mary, and we took some of this with us. I felt Fr. Hanna's heart bleed. Not only the church, everything around it is destroyed; nothing but ruins of former buildings can be seen. As we walked around, we saw that wherever a few walls in some corners were still standing, people had sought



Harasta, the former parish of Fr. Hanna



In the former parish church of Fr. Hanna

refuge and set up makeshift homes. This is what we saw everywhere in the devastated areas. The misery in this place cries out to Heaven.

In the city we kept seeing people, especially children, living on the streets. Their eyes are sad and empty. They know nothing but the daily struggle for survival. They walk through the streets with garbage bags and collect various things.

When we asked, we heard that in Damascus alone there are an estimated **50,000 children who live on the streets** and have no home. I sincerely hope that God will hear the prayers and provide help.

What we intend to do:

During our visit to Syria, we wanted not only to face the bitter reality, but also to look at what **steps should be taken next**.

The Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft* is currently focussing on a big and urgent project: **bringing wheat and flour to Syria**, first for our regional bakery and subsequently also for other bakeries that are currently closing down one after the other because they ran out of flour.



We visited the **Nunciature in Damascus**. Since the Nuncio Cardinal Mario Zenari was in Rome, we had a very friendly conversation (in German) with his Secretary, Don Filippo. We handed him our letter to the Nuncio, who had strongly encouraged Fr. Hanna at the mid-March meeting to continue the humanitarian work despite all obstacles.

We visited local bishops and priests, both Catholic and Orthodox, and asked them to appeal to the West for help. We want to convey these voices to the brothers and sisters in Western countries.

By the mediation of **Caritas Internationalis** we hope that Syria will be included in the **World Food Program** and provided with flour and bread. At the moment, we are still waiting for a reply.



We spoke to representatives of the **“Social Fund for Development in Syria”**, which was newly set up in the **Orthodox Patriarchate** and



takes care of the Christian youth in Syria. The Fund establishes small businesses that contribute to the



development of the country. We exchanged many ideas with this group. One of their aims is the establishment of a vocational school. They asked us to provide tools for various professional groups. We are looking forward to a fruitful cooperation in this sector.

During the conversation, we told them about our upcoming projects (social market, soup kitchen, irrigation, etc.). They were enthusiastic and promised to help us with state contacts, since they are well connected to ministries.

At another meeting, the idea of setting up a **media center in Damascus** was discussed. This center would report on and draw attention to our projects and to other projects taken up by the churches. A female and a male journalist want to document our projects for the aid organizations and supporters. For this task they need good technical equipment (camera, video camera, microphones, computer, if possible a car, etc.). They could thus present our projects to local contacts in a professional manner.

Aspiring dentist in front of the future rural practice



Aspiring dentists have to work in a rural area for two years right after their education before they can open a practice in the city. This is to ensure the supply of rural regions with dental services. We have started to set up a **dental practice** suitable for this purpose and we also want to provide the necessary equipment.

We visited the **school for handicapped children**, where we already renovated some parts. Now we want to start the remaining part of the renovation work.



On the roof of the school for handicapped children in Damascus

We spoke to **female students** who complain that they receive little support and that fares are constantly increasing. We would be happy to support them, because these young women can contribute a lot to the development of the country.

Many parish **kindergartens** also need renovation work and new equipment.

An appointment with the Melkite Patriarch Youssef Absi was not possible, but we were able to speak with his Vicar **Bishop Nicolas Antiba** regarding the importance of the Patriarchate to contact the Ministry with regard to the social market and the soup kitchen.



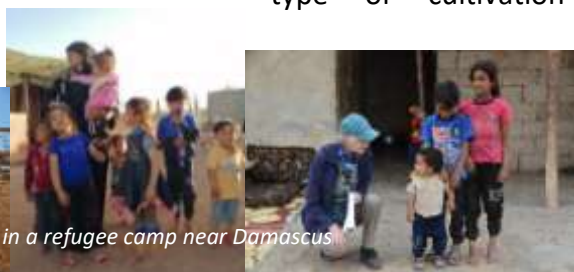
Plot of land for agricultural work

Together with engineers, we looked at a **60,000 m² plot of land** near the airport, which a benefactor from Damascus is making available to us for an **agricultural cultivation project**. A study is currently being conducted as to what type of cultivation

would be most reasonable with due regard to the local climate, the soil conditions, etc. There are four wells on the property. It is mostly fenced. The



Poor families in a refugee camp near Damascus



property is located in a very poor area. We hope to be able to give refugee families the opportunity to take over the management.

We want to enable children in poor parishes to **take part in summer camps** and to experience a joyful time together: to play together, to pray together... (we visited a Melkite center where such camps take place).

We also visited a refugee camp in Daraya near Damascus. The little children were shy and a bit frightened; the bigger ones hoped to get something. The month of May is probably the most pleasant time of the year. Soon it will get very hot, and during the winter months it will turn bitterly cold. Then, living in the tents will be extremely challenging.

For a long time we have intended to build an **irrigation system**, i.e. to install large water tanks on the mountain, from which **entire areas could be transformed into fertile land**.

This list could go on and on.

One thing is certain: Where **seeds of hope and love** are sown, joy and future chances will grow. A droplet on a hot stone can be the start of a rainfall. **God will make all good things grow** and will give His blessings to all those who establish His love here.



View from the mountain down to Maaruneh

Some impressions gathered by Günter Kaltenbrunner:

Already a few years ago I had the opportunity to accompany Fr. Hanna Ghoneim on a trip to Syria. At that time, too, the dire situation of those affected was dramatic and very depressing.

In the meantime, the situation of the people is hardly present in the media any longer. It seems that the Syrian people have been forgotten. But war and an unjust economic embargo are forcing the Syrian people to their knees.

When we were allowed to visit the families and the people, we experienced their hospitality and felt their willingness not to forget the weakest ones, but at the same time we sensed their fading hope regarding an improvement of their situation. In the streets, houses, shelters, barracks, and in people's eyes, you can see the worsening of their plight. It seems as if their distress has covered the land like a layer of dust after a desert storm...



With the „Little Sisters of Jesus“ in Damascus

Despite all this, it was admirable to see how nuns, priests and volunteer helpers try to give these people the feeling of not being alone and forgotten, even if there are hardly any financial means to help. When they have themselves nothing more to give, they still offer an open ear and listen. You can feel and see how their kind

words and their compassionate gestures are just as important for the poorest as the water in the desert.

When we visited the poor families, I noticed how grateful people are that someone from Europe is coming to visit them. The children were particularly happy when I gave them sweets or toys. I believe that we from the Western world can give a lot of hope and joy to the people in Syria by caring for them.



Children happy about any gifts received

We must not forget the Christians in Syria!

Syria, the cradle of Christianity:

When you visit Damascus, you also experience the **ancient Christian heritage**. We visited the **Ananias Chapel**, where Saint Paul was converted, the **Paul Chapel**, the **Umayyad Mosque**, where the tomb of Saint John the Baptist still lies in the middle of the mosque and is venerated by all visitors. We visited **two monasteries in Saydnaya** (30 km northeast of Damascus) which date back to the 6th century and we experienced the lively Christian spirit in many other churches. In Damascus alone there are still many more holy places to visit that bear witness to the origin and treasure of Christianity. However, our time was too short to cover everything.

We must not abandon the Christians there, but want to support them so that they can stay **in Syria, the cradle of Christianity**.



Thanks to the friends and supporters:

We want to extend our and heart-felt thanks to all friends and supporters of the Foundation *Korbgemeinschaft* for their great support. We visited our projects on site and felt the deep gratitude of the people for everything we have been able to accomplish so far. People place great hopes in our continued assistance. If we keep supporting our Christian brothers and sisters, they can make a big difference. Together it is possible to help the people in Syria to stay in their home country. **Yes indeed, it is worth helping the people in Syria right in their home country!**

