

Life stories of impoverished people

written down during our visit to Syria in September 2024

Our small group looked up a number of impoverished people in appalling living conditions that lack any degree of human dignity and reduce all common definitions of poverty to absurdity. Quite often, an entire family has to live on a monthly income equivalent to an amount of EUR 20 or less. This provides barely enough food, let alone money for heating oil, medication or repairs of any kind. Many of these families suffer from illnesses and injuries caused by mortar shells, from deprivation, cold, pain and malnutrition.

Aleppo:

Family with Armenian roots: The father of the family works as a guard from 5 a.m. to 4 p.m. He walks to work for one hour. He has to carry along everything that he needs for the day. A one hour's walk back. At 5 p.m. he attends mass; at 6 p.m. he returns home. He earns roughly the equivalent of EUR 13 per month. The whole family has to live on that.

The daughter has to care for her brother (42) who suffers from cancer. She had to stop working elsewhere. He needs medication. After the mother's death, a second brother fell into depressions. They both live here. He developed swellings in his legs and arms and has a hearing defect. He would need a hearing device. He is a war veteran, was in Armenia, was hit by shrapnel, was operated on; there are screws and splints in his body, ... he also needs medication.

An old woman on the ground floor; 4 children; her second daughter (with 2 children) lives here. One son is in the army; one son is employed in a print shop.

One of this woman's daughters has a girl who works for an old woman suffering from anemia. This girl already has worn out cartilage, pain in her knee joints and tendons. On the day of our visit, she tumbled and fell. She has to walk to work for half an hour back and forth. She earns the equivalent of 6-7 EUR per week.

The house was destroyed by a bomb. We can see the damage on the floor. The sons were hit by shrapnel from mortar shells. Electricity and rent for the apartment are no longer affordable.

A family way up in the building on the 5th floor; without electricity. We carefully watch every step walking up the bumpy staircase in the dark.

The father works as a griller in a restaurant. The son (21) works as a metalworker for tools; he would like to work as a hairdresser, but he doesn't have the appropriate tools.

They live in a rental apartment. They cannot afford electricity. A small battery provides some dim light; when the battery needs recharging, they are often in the dark for days.

A woman with 3 children: daughter 13; son 11; another son 21; school fees pose an enormous challenge. The apartment is in a very desolate condition. The wooden frame of the window is crumbling; on the other side, behind a glass door, a whole portion of the outer wall is missing. Materials for repairs are unaffordable. The girl already suffers from rheumatism because the winters are so cold. She stumbled and fell. One eye had to be operated on and laser treatment is still necessary. The son had to quit school in order to work. But soon he will have to join the army. Then he will no longer be able to support the family. Very cramped living space: in the room where we are received, there are two bed benches. For sleeping, these are pulled together in the middle. This fills up the whole room. That's all the space there is. All five of them live and sleep in this tiny space. The monthly rent is 300,000 SYP.

An old Armenian couple; both bedridden, both need walking aids. 2 daughters: one has fled to Armenia so that the sons don't have to join the army. She is suffering from cancer. In Armenia they also live in great poverty. One daughter is living in Sweden. Neither of them can support the parents. A single Turkish woman (a neighbour) takes care of them. She speaks Armenian, so they can communicate. The girl of the Christian volunteer team of Aleppo who visits these impoverished people also speaks Armenian. Three times a week they receive food from the soup kitchen of the Marists, which is supported by ICO (Initiative Christian Orient).

Couple with 5 children: Twins, a girl and a boy (5), a girl (12), a boy (15), a boy (18) and the husband's old father live in this rental apartment (SYP 300,000 a month) which is also way up in the house. These are always the cheapest accommodations. The 18-year-old boy will graduate from high school this year. The 15-year-old boy is already working. The woman only has casual work. She has to treat coal for special purposes. The family used to live in Rakka, under the control of ISIS. They fled from there a year and a half ago. She tells us things that one never hears about in our Western media. We get an idea and some insight into life there among the jihadists of various nationalities.

Refugees near Aleppo

Couple with 3 daughters in one room; one daughter is at school, one will be graduating this year, one is already at university. The husband works as a post office employee and in addition he takes on any casual jobs he gets to somehow feed the family. They had a house near Aleppo which was destroyed. They fled to the house of the man's parents. His parents still live next door. The man has a painful herniated disc and needs injections.

Damascus

Family with 7 children - 4 girls, 3 boys (3-13) in a very damp apartment. When we take a seat on a bed bench, the bench collapses. Everything is very old here; the walls are crumbling. The man collects dry bread and takes it to someone who then processes it. Now he is ill.

Widow with 3 children; two boys one girl. The son is now in military service. The woman looks after two elderly people from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. She needs an hour in each direction, using the collective bus. The husband was seriously ill and died. All his siblings are disabled. The woman suffers from a sore shoulder. We want to pay a therapy for her.

Valley of the Christians

We visit a family: a widow with five daughters. The woman's right hand is bandaged; the two smaller fingers on her left hand are missing.

All five girls have completed their studies, but there are no job offers for them. They are very sad (Günter's report contains a reference to this specific encounter). The trips to the city are expensive.

Maarouneh

Sick, bedridden widow with 4 children, three of whom are disabled. We provide them with wheelchairs, medication, ... it's barely enough to live on. The only non-disabled daughter, also widowed, produces yogurt together with her son. She would need a "Lactoscan" device to measure the fat content for better cheese production, as well as a large fridge.

Woman (70), single, lives in a house that she cannot renovate. It is in a very poor condition. She used to knit and look after an old woman. Now she has no income and no pension.

The house needs renovation; if the kitchen and living space is adjusted for her, the other part could be used for other purposes. In exchange, she would, however, need care until the end of her life.

Latakia

A single, elderly woman in an elegant neighbourhood who has been living here in poverty since 2009. She has a walking aid and can no longer go out on the street. She lived here with her mother, who died in 2017. Neighbors drew attention to her. The young volunteers visit her. She only has very weak light from a battery.

Two women (unmarried sisters) in very elegant rooms. One of them was a teacher and retired after 40 years of teaching. She receives a monthly pension of SYP 290,000. She recently had an operation. Her sister receives a pension of SYP 270,000. A small battery gives light when the electricity is turned off. They offer us some cookies from a very precious box. Fr. Hanna receives a kiss on the forehead out of joy and gratefulness that he is visiting them.

Three sisters, unmarried. A photo depicting father, brother and sister-in-law is hanging on the wall. The brother died. He never had the heart to drive his aunts out of the apartment. They receive a pension of less than 200,000 SYP. When they started working in the tobacco factory, they were able to live well. Now they need medication and support from us to survive. They also receive humanitarian items from us such as walking aids.