



SHELTER-AKTUELL

Special Kurdistan Edition

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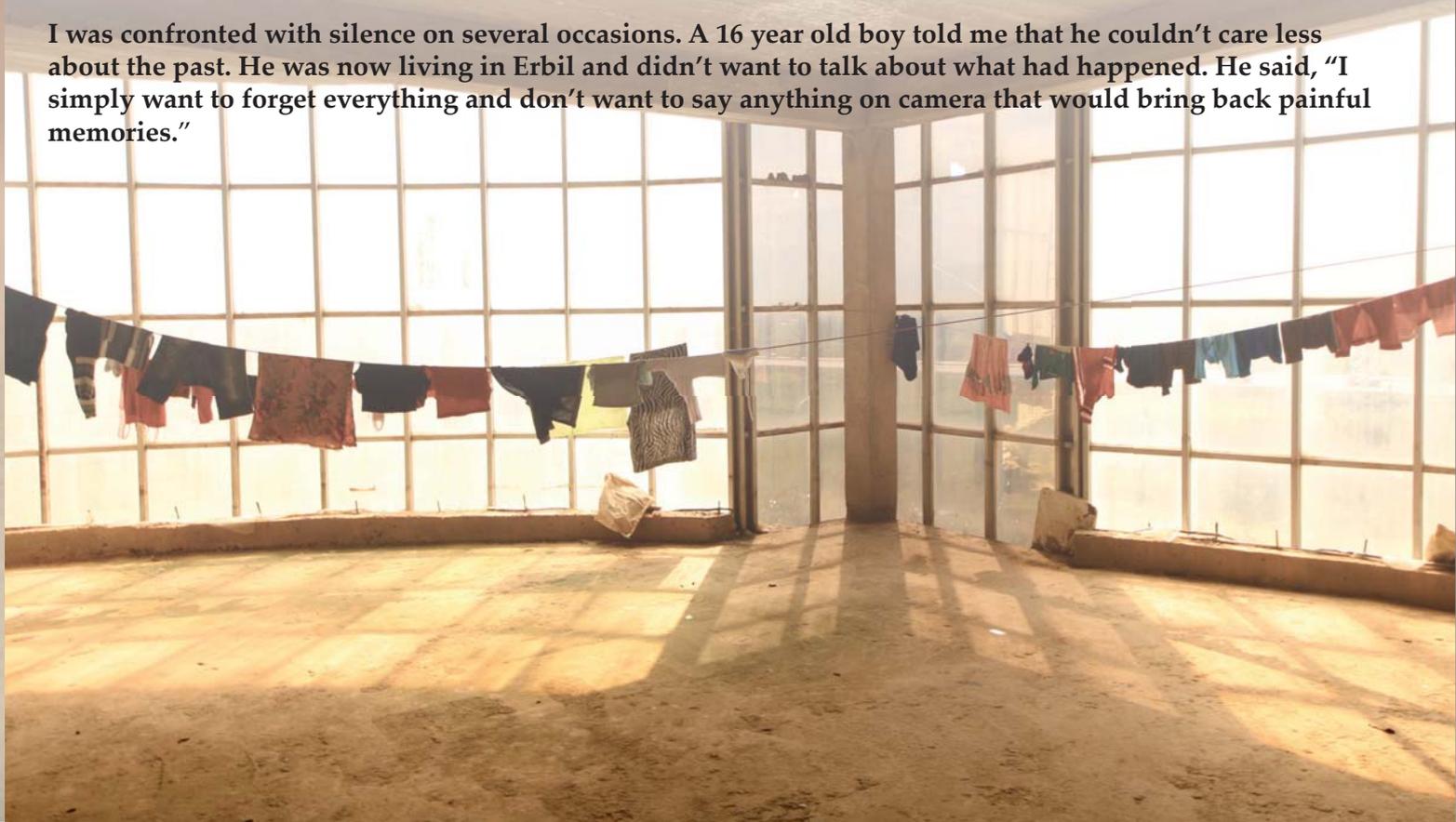
Udo Stolte reports on his recent visit to Iraqi Kurdistan

What they didn't tell me was worse

"Our mother is dead and our father is with the Peshmerga, fighting against the terrorists," replied the young girl when I enquired about her family. Her sister added that only two of their brothers were still with them. The two sisters could hardly hold back their tears as they spoke.

I met these sisters in the Kurdish town of Rania while talking to a number of refugees. It will be hard to ever forget this meeting. It is not so much what they told me but what they didn't speak about that concerned me most. There were matters I could only read between the lines and see in their eyes. They shared about the good life they had enjoyed in Syria; their house, their school and everything they could wish for. As a result of the attack of the Daesh, the local name for the Islamic State terror militias, they had lost everything they possessed. Now they live as best they can with just the basic necessities in a small rented apartment. They looked forlorn and without hope. I could find no words to express what I felt and was on the verge of tears.

I was confronted with silence on several occasions. A 16 year old boy told me that he couldn't care less about the past. He was now living in Erbil and didn't want to talk about what had happened. He said, "I simply want to forget everything and don't want to say anything on camera that would bring back painful memories."



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Hope for Kurdistan



A Kurdish father who had already helped many refugees and heard horrible stories told me about a particular family. The terrorists had driven them from their home and forced them to hand over all their money and valuables. Later, at a checkpoint, the Daesh discovered that they were still wearing articles of jewelry, so took these as well. One of their daughters, however, had a ring that could not be easily removed, so her finger was simply chopped off.

The purpose of my trip

I flew to Kurdistan for a week to personally assess the refugee situation. John Blackstock, a Shelter Now colleague, accompanied me as we travelled throughout the area, at times only 15 minutes drive from the front line. After 2 days in Erbil we travelled by car to Suleymania, Rania, and Dohuk before returning to Erbil. During the trip we had many conversations with refugees – asking them about their experiences and their current needs.

The word refugee cannot be used for all those we met. The term refugee strictly applies to those who have fled one country and crossed an international border to another, for example Syrians fleeing to Iraq. However, Iraqis who flee their homes but remain within the borders of Iraq are known as IDPs (Internally displaced persons). Most of them are Kurds. They are from different religious backgrounds: Muslims, Yezidis, Christians and a few other minority groups.

The Yezidis have been especially badly treated by the ISIS terrorists because they are considered devil worshippers. But many Christians and Muslims have also suffered terribly.

How can we help?

I visited official refugee camps. They are particularly well organized. The large organizations are doing a good job. We don't need to get involved at that level. On the other hand, we came across small unofficial camps, which receive no assistance from organizations, nothing from the UN – either because the refugees are unwilling or unable to move to the larger camps.

One small camp is run by friends of John. They regularly distribute food, spend time with the refugees, play and sing with the children. They are Yezidis. They refuse to go to larger camps because they are afraid of reprisals. Our friends do not have sufficient resources to completely cover their needs. We mostly came across women and children. The men go to the town to find work as day laborers, in order to help provide for their families.

It is already quite warm in this camp and their limited food supplies quickly rot. In summer it gets really



hot. So we decided to purchase refrigerators and fill them with food. We can provide the necessary funding for this and they are responsible for the electricity.

2 000 refugees in Rania

We set off for Dohuk – a six to seven hour journey. On the way we stopped in the town of Rania. Kojin, another old acquaintance of John, was expecting us. He had begun a private initiative and was helping refugees from Syria as well as Iraqi IDPs. All of them had fled from ISIS and found accommodation in private houses, in a school and some in a car repair shop. In total there were 640 affected families – around 2,000 persons.

Dilma and Avin

Kojin escorted us to one of the houses where two young women were staying. One of them did not want to talk to us but the other was willing. Then, as we sat



on the floor in the living room both of them began to answer our questions. They told us that their mother was no longer alive but not what had happened to her. The painful expression on their faces indicated I should not pursue the matter. Their father was with the Peshmerga, fighting the "Daesh". Only two of their



Hope for Kurdistan



brothers were living with them. It was not clear how many brothers and sisters they were now – or used to be.

They told us about the good life they used to have in Syria. Now they have nothing at all except a roof over their heads and something to eat. They are totally dependant and so feel themselves further humiliated. "If only I had a job," said Alvin, who had previously not wanted to talk. "Then we could at least provide for ourselves and everything would be better," she explained. I asked them what they had been doing in their homeland. They replied, "Attending school." John then asked if they were teachers. It turned out they had still been pupils in the 11th and 12th grades respectively. I was shocked. They looked much older than that. Dreadful experiences were engraved in their faces.



A lot of refugees live in unfinished buildings.

of the same age. What a different set of circumstances though! The parents had named her Heavdar, which means 'hope'...

In Dohuk

...we were unable to visit any refugees. There are large official camps but we knew no-one there who had begun a private initiative. The atmosphere was tense and we were controlled everywhere we went. Fighting was taking place only 15 minutes drive away. Lufthansa had cancelled all flights for the month for fear of an attack on the airport. We were obliged to quickly rebook.

Later this year

...I would like to return to Kurdistan to see how our new projects are progressing and to make further plans. Our goal is to bring hope to those in despair. We cannot just remain passive onlookers. We have to act. Those who would like to help are requested to send donations to:

Our account for donations:

Shelter Now Germany e.V.
 Bank: Nord/LB Hannover
 IBAN: DE65 2505 0000 0002 5230 58
 BIC: NOLADE2H

Intended use: Kurdistan



TV-spots for the Peshmerga caused in me...

...a strange feeling of oppression.

Heavdar means hope

To give them hope I told them about our experiences with Afghan refugees in Pakistan who we had taken care of more than 30 years before. In the meantime they have returned to their villages in Afghanistan, rebuilt their houses, found jobs, sent their children to school etc....But I soon realized that my attempts to encourage them were not proving effective. Then I prayed for them.

What can we do for people like these and the many others in Rania? There is little chance of them or their brothers finding work. If even the local inhabitants have difficulty finding employment how will the refugees fare? Several months ago Shelter Now had financially supported the distribution of food. I asked about the quality of the drinking water. Kojin informed us that many were sick and many of the local inhabitants used water filters. Perhaps we could help by purchasing such filters for the refugees.

Another family we visited had a 5 month old baby girl, who reminded me of my own grand-daughter



Even a few goodies are enough to bring..

...a sparkle to the eyes of the children.