

Between the barbed wire

Nuri Kino Kino has made a report that gives the voice to people who usually never have their story told.







UngdomsInitiativet

The Syriac Orthodox youth organization Ungdomsinitiativet-UI- arranged December 1st 2012 a supporting gala for Syrian refugees. On Christmas Day the head of the organization, Ninson Ibrahim, consultant Isa Isa and author, Nuri Kino, went to Lebanon to survey the need of Christian Syrian refugees. Most of them are Assyrians/Syriacs.





TURKEY

ARMENIA

AZERBAIJAN

Caspian Sea

CYPRUS

Nicosia

LEBANON

Beirut

SYRIA

Damascus

ISRAEL

Tel Aviv

Jerusalem

Amman

IRAQ

Baghdad

Mosul

Kirkuk

Tehran

IRAN

JORDAN

Aqaba

Euphrates R.

Shatt al-Arab

Basra

Kuwait City

KUWAIT

Persian Gulf

SAUDI

Dhahran

BAHRAIN

Riyadh

QATAR

Doha

ARABIA

UAE

Red Sea

Mecca

Sanaa

YEMEN

ETHIOPIA

I decide to get things done, sit down by the computer and find tickets. It's not cheap. It's a long flight, fourteen hours to get there and eleven hours to get back home -- at least. I text the other two. What do they think? Are they ready? Why not travel on Christmas Day? While I'm sitting in my kitchen in a tracksuit, they are both in church: Ninson in St. Jacob's Cathedral in Södertälje, where I also should have been, and Isa in St. Kuryakos in Norrköping. Ninson Ibrahim is chairman of Ungdomsinitiativet (UI) and Isa Isa is a consultant for the organization. They check their smartphones even though they are attending mass. They are waiting to hear from me. Two hours later, after eating Christmas lunch and celebrating with their families, they get back to me. 'It's fine with me,' says Isa, 'although a little better foresight for next time, please.' Ninson says, 'Here we go.' The plane departs Stockholm at 00.35.

It's 05.00 when we land in Istanbul. Most places are closed, but there's a small taxi café still open. It turns quiet when Ninson enters. It's an unusual sight; most taxi drivers in Turkey are men. Here they serve fried eggs, and you eat the egg straight from the pan, using the bread as cutlery. Add some Turkish tea, and you feel at home. We have time to visit my relatives in the Bakirköy district, in the European part of the city. Over coffee we learn about Syrian refugees in Istanbul. Most of them are young men, and they live in hotels, waiting to be smuggled. After two hours with my relatives, it's time to fly to Beirut.

'Isa Isa' is written on a small handwritten sign. The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Lebanon has sent a man to fetch us

from the airport. We land in Beirut 14.25. It's Boxing Day, and it's been exactly 25 days since UI arranged a charity event in Södertälje.

WE HAVE BEEN AWAKE one whole day, but the energy is back, and now work starts in earnest. The sun is shining. Our driver is from Homs in Syria and has been living in Lebanon for 22 years. His parents have recently fled their hometown and now live with him. 'They're going to Södertälje where my sister has been living for many years,' the driver says. I ask why they don't stay with him. 'I can't provide for them. They'll have it much better in Sweden, where you get an allowance.'

After ten minutes we drive through a roundabout and the border between the Muslim and Christian part of the city. The car radio emits the voice of Bashar Youhanon, a singer from Qamishly who now lives in Sweden, in neo-aramaic, our native mother tongue

and the mother tongue of Jesus. The driver understands very little of the song. It is a marker of religious and ethnic belonging. It is the same with the decorations. All six headrests have Santa hats resting on them, and for safety, there are two crosses hanging from the rear-view mirror. All this as a reminder to the passengers of the driver's religious and ethnic affiliations. We ask him in Arabic if he is afraid that the war in Syria will spread to Lebanon. 'It's nothing we ordinary people care about, that's up to the politicians to make sure it won't happen. Ordinary people have their hands full with their daily chores.' He thinks the politicians will prevent any war in Lebanon. All Lebanese people, regardless of religious or political views, are tired of war. However, some are afraid that crime in the »

“ It's nothing we ordinary people care about, that's up to the politicians to make sure it won't happen. Ordinary people have their hands full with their daily chores.

country will increase with the number of Syrian refugees.

OUR FIRST STOP IS St Jacob of Sarugi in Mount Lebanon. The sun shines beautifully on the alabaster white facade. This is where his Eminence, Archbishop George Saliba, has his seat. I call him; he is not in. He is with the Home Secretary. An hour later, he receives us with open arms and a wide smile. We barely have time to answer his questions about how our families are doing before the circus begins. A drug-addicted lady comes and demands money from him. He refuses to give her any, says he cannot afford it, that she has to pull herself together, that he must give priority to the refugees and others in greater need. She becomes furious, cursing all of us before leaving. He is about to defend his actions when the phone rings, it is another minister wishing him a Merry Christmas, then another phone call comes in -- and so it goes. People come and go, tell of their troubles and problems and what they need

Assyrian couple. She's from the US, and he's from Lebanon. They wanted to have their ceremony in our church.'

LATE IN THE EVENING, around eight o'clock, we arrive at the monastery. It is located on a hilltop. When we get out of the car, the cold grabs hold of us immediately. It's cold here, unlike Beirut. St. Gabriel, as the monastery is named, has stood there for three years now but is still not completed. Three floors are functional, while the other seven need renovation. Tony Boulos, who is in charge of the monastery, waits by the gate. He is very happy to see us; they need all the help they can get.

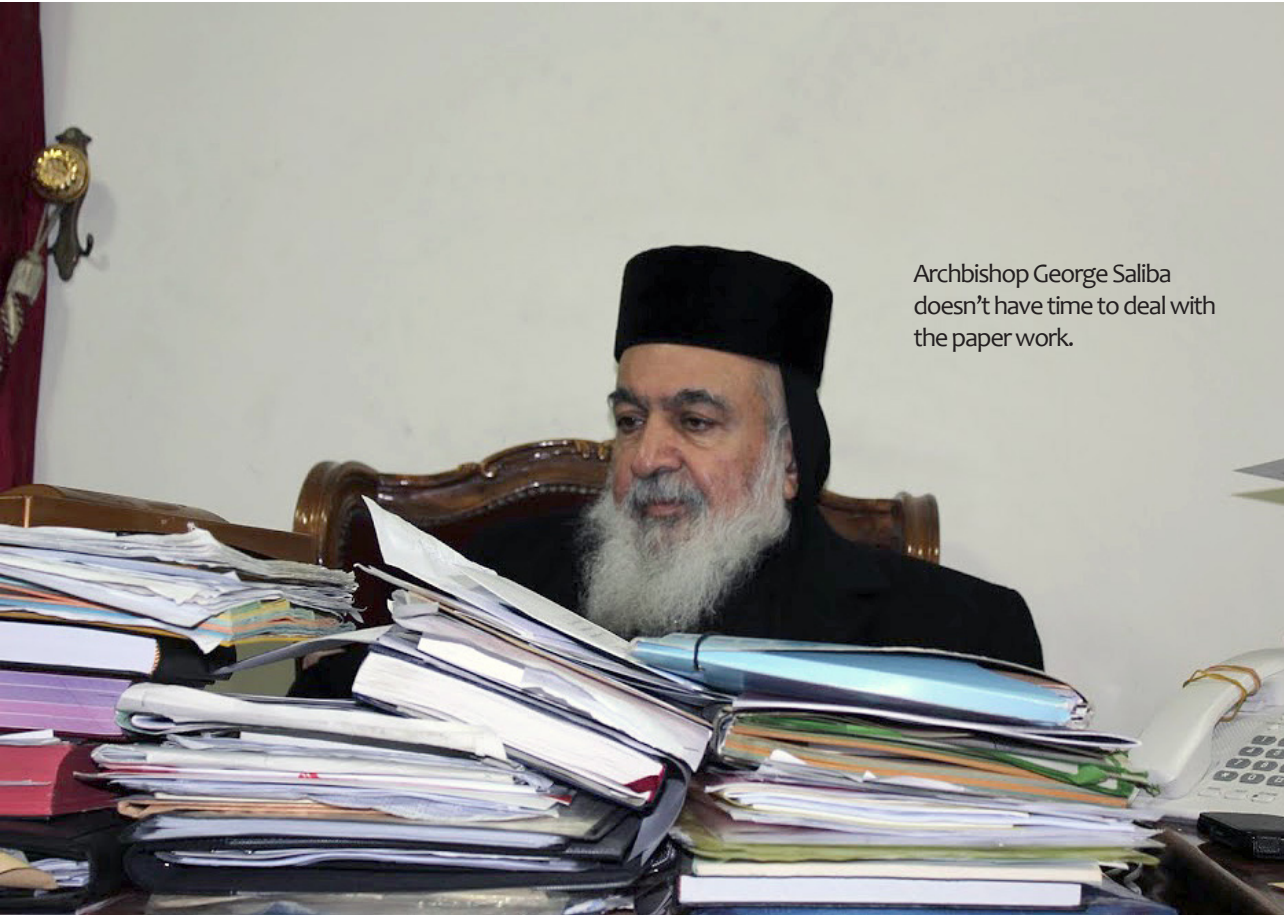
In his office sits several Syrian refugees. Boulos tries to find accommodation for the new arrivals as best he can. They must show a passport, be registered, and sign before they are given the keys to the rooms. Three of the refugees have previously stayed at hotels in Beirut but can no longer afford it after getting caught at the airport with fake passports. 'We paid

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help with. The phone rings nonstop. There is a sentiment among us that we will not be able to get anything done in Lebanon. The Archbishop, at least, will not be able to assist us with his time or knowledge. 'I want to help as many as I can, but it is not sustainable. We have hundreds of Syrian refugees who arrive every week. I don't know what to do...' The Archbishop is unable to finish his sentence as he is interrupted. There is a wedding booked. He is obviously very stressed. He has his usual duties to attend in addition to caring for the arriving refugees. 'I'm sorry, but I have to leave you now. I'm marrying an Eastern

two thousand dollars each in advance; the rest would be paid when we arrived in Sweden,' says one of the refugees. 'But the passports the smugglers gave us were not good. We were stopped at the airport and detained for eight days.'

Boulos ask a young man to accompany us to our rooms. We will spend the night in the monastery. When we leave our luggage we go out to a nearby kitchen for coffee with some young people, including refugees from Syria who are cooking dinner. There are two young women, their younger male cousin and two other young men. They and five other young Syrians



Archbishop George Saliba doesn't have time to deal with the paper work.

usually prepare or cook the food together. They reduce cost and gain companionship during meals. The women, who turn out to be sisters, say they were well off in Qamishly, Syria. One was a hairdresser, the other was a make-up artist. They had no problems with making a living, but their parents, who are in Sweden, thought they should get out of the country while they could. Young unmarried women are directly threatened by kidnappings and rape. One of the women has found a job here in Lebanon, receives \$300 a month, and is very satisfied. A man interrupts us when Ninson and I ask how much they pay the monastery in rent. 'There are a lot of rumours, saying that we are forced to pay hundreds of dollars, or else we'll be thrown out. That's not true. I'm an engineer, but I had to escape Syria in order not to be called into the army and participate in this war. Here in Lebanon I work at a compa-

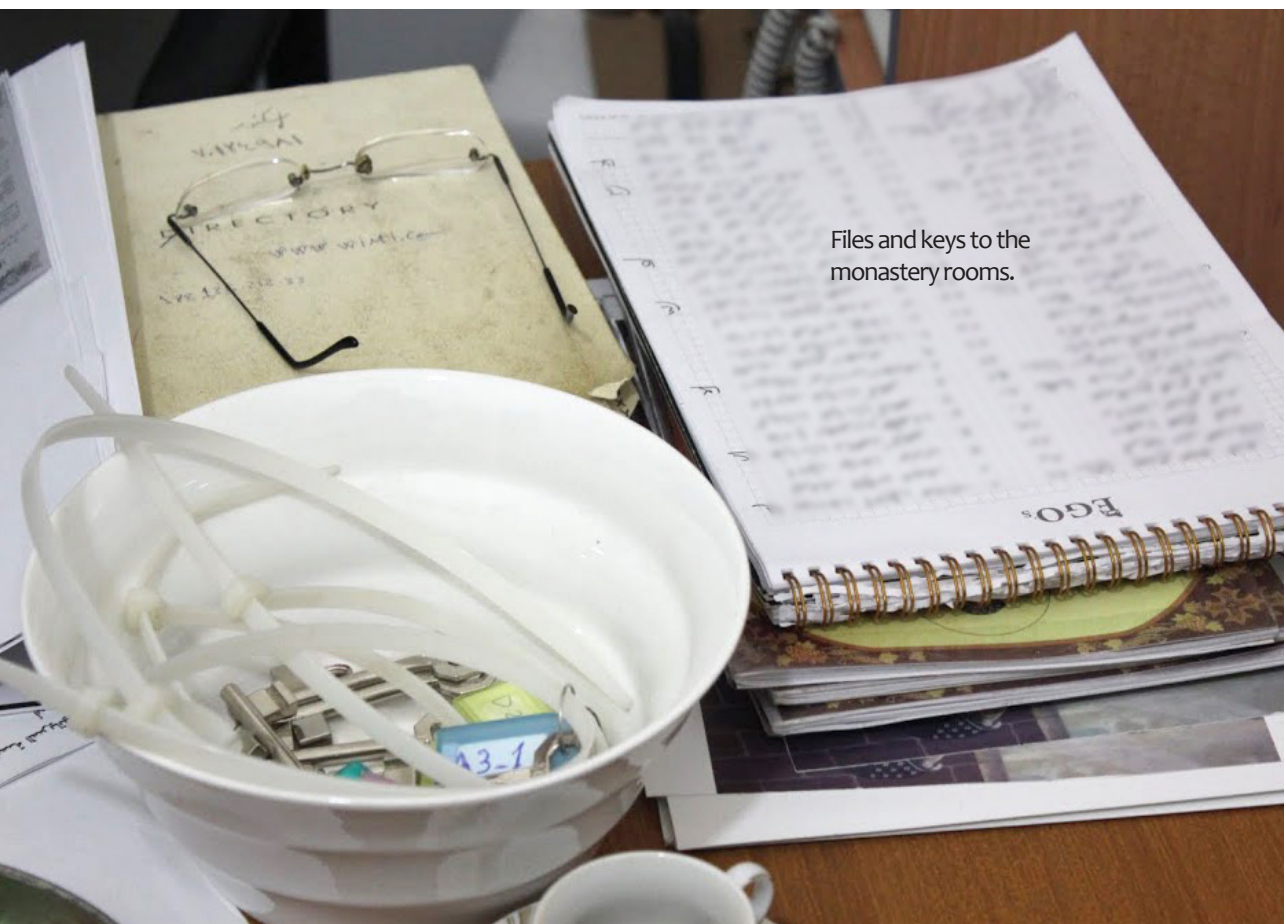
ny that produces aluminum. I've been here for three months without receiving any wages. Anyway, it is better to have a job than to sit in the monastery all day. Since I have no salary and no one is sending me money from Europe, I pay nothing to live in the monastery. It is the person who has money who pays \$100 to \$300 a month.' A child comes in, he is around three, and one of the young men stands up to look at him. The child has a swollen throat, and the young man is close to finishing his medical studies. He had one semester left at the university when he had to escape because of his Christian faith. In the city he comes from religious persecution which is widespread, he claims.

Boulos has sent Jean, a caretaker at the monastery, to ask if we want to have tea with him before he leaves for the day. It is 21.00; it is dark and cold out. Almost all we pass on the way to Boulos' office »

are coughing or sneezing. Boulos receives us, properly dressed in a coat and two scarves. He has a small heater on a little table next to his desk, but it will not help much. The tea and biscuits do. Isa asks about the number of rooms and guests. 'We have seventy-five rooms with two or three beds in each. We have a room with ten beds. Two floors are not complete. Right now there are 108 people from Syria living here. They come from all sorts of places.' Isa asks how long they stay. 'The monastery is a lock; people stay here until they find accommodation and work in Beirut. But it isn't easy. Some have been here for months.' Ninson is curious about the registration. On whose authority is it being undertaken? While Mrs. Boulos, who has joined our company, refills our cups, her husband answers, 'The Social Offices in Lebanon have asked mosques and churches to register refugees in order to have control over how many Syrians there are in the country and what they need help

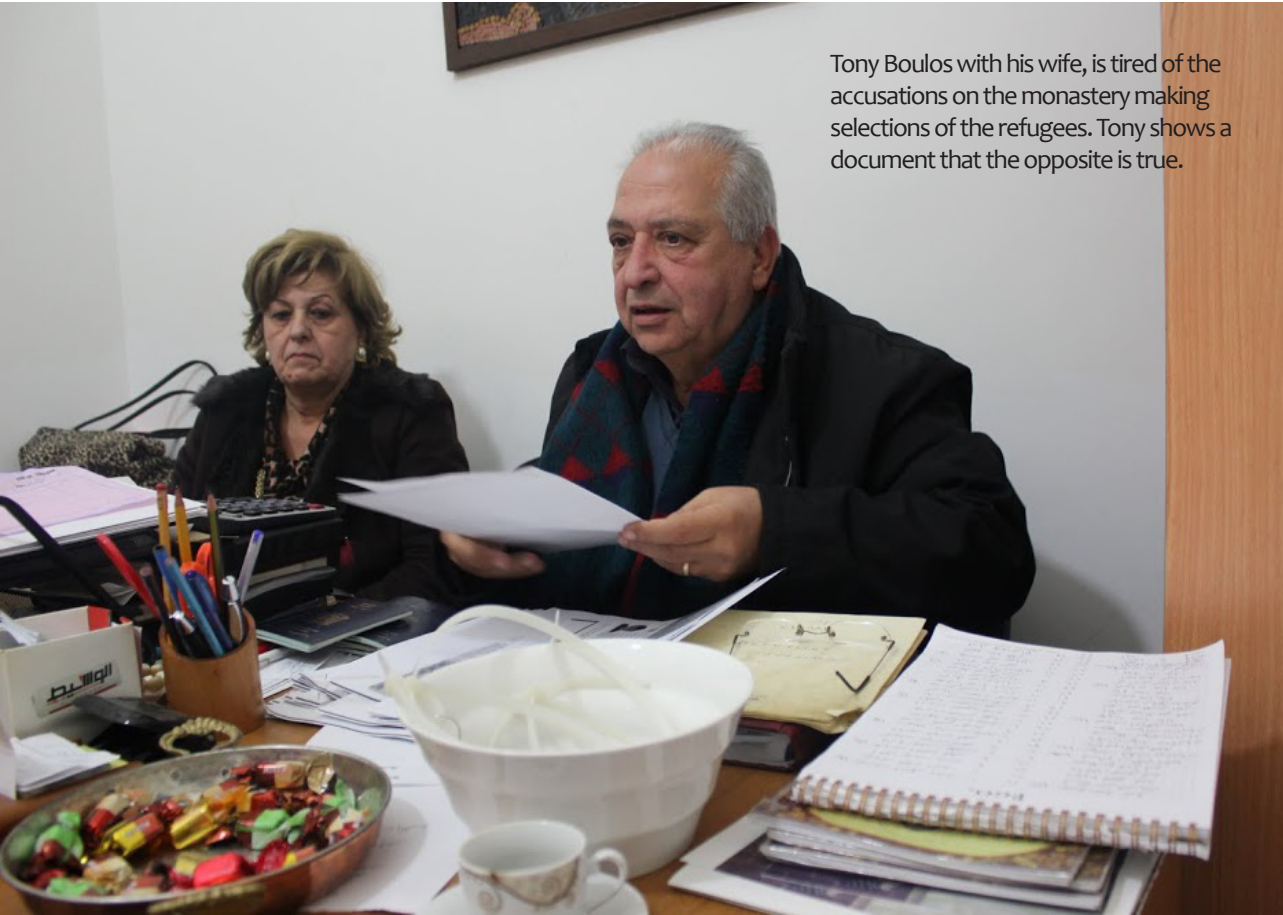
with.'

During the conversation, we are repeatedly interrupted by curious Syrians. Boulos becomes irritated, and so do the church board members. They think the refugees fail to respect the monastery and its rules. The refugees are ungrateful. One of the Syrians is particularly annoying. He refuses to leave the room. He repeatedly interrupts us and rolls his eyes. We later find out that this was his way of trying to ask for help. He has a sick son whom he wants us to try to help. 'Some disappear for one or two weeks, leave all their belongings in the room, and come back as if nothing had happened. Those rooms could have been used by other during that time,' says Boulos. One Syrian says, 'Yes, but those people had been in jail for trying to exit the country with false passports. They just don't leave to go and have fun somewhere else.' I feel that the discussion is getting out of control and change the subject. We talk of Södertälje. Everyone has heard of



Files and keys to the monastery rooms.

Tony Boulos with his wife, is tired of the accusations on the monastery making selections of the refugees. Tony shows a document that the opposite is true.



that city. Most have some connection to it. They have friends or family there, or just know someone who lives there. 'And how do you get there?' I ask. 'There is no one in Södertälje who doesn't know a smuggler or at least can get hold of one quickly.' Now I feel silly. I change subjects again. There is no priest, monk, or nun living in the monastery. The monastery did not get very far before it was turned into a building for refugees.

A LITTLE LATER, A MAN in his twenties is standing outside, waiting for me to come out. 'Hello, good evening,' he says in Swedish. I pause. He is from Botkyrka and is here to find a solution for his mother and three siblings. 'I have to find a way to smuggle them to Sweden, but many of the paths are dangerous. I've heard about two persons I knew from Syria who have disappeared completely. I've been told that one

drowned in a boat between Tunisia and Italy or Spain, and another is supposed to have disappeared between Turkey and Greece.' The man has been in Lebanon for two weeks and met three smugglers and talked with the same number over the phone. He says there are priests and other who also help families who want to make it to Europe; it isn't always about money. Moreover, many relatives of Syrian refugees have to become smugglers. He is considering following his mother and siblings all the way to Sweden. He can't leave them. Isa and Ninson approach us, and the man goes up the stairs to the next floor.

We also go up to our rooms. Outside the rooms we met the sisters and the engineer. They tell us about the smuggling of Syrian refugees to Sweden, that many are involved, that it has become a multimillion dollar industry. One of the sisters has a ticket in her hand. I ask what»

it is. 'A rich man from Sweden sends us money and asks the monastery's managers to distribute food stamps so no one has to go hungry. There are so many good people. We appreciate all the help we get.' It is now too cold to stay outside. We invite them into our rooms to continue the conversation. But it turns out that there is no heat in the rooms. Before we part, the sisters tell us of their dream of having their own hairdressing salon in Södertälje. But most of all, they miss their parents who are already in Södertälje. At the Italian embassy in Beirut, which is also the Swedish embassy, the sisters have been told that there is no need to apply, they will just get rejected. They are over 18 years old and can therefore not count on Sweden to grant them resident permits due to family ties. Three other people they know have been granted visas to Germany. That is the option they are considering now. Once in Germany they can head for Sweden and Södertälje. 'Smuggling is out of the question. We are women, and we've heard of rape and abuse of women during smuggling trips. We dare not.' Two young men stand curiously listening to us. 'We will not leave Lebanon. We want to return home to Syria as soon as things calm down. At the moment, it is too dangerous for us Christians in parts of the country, but as soon as the government gets control of the country again, the situation will get better.' We learn that one can only stay in Lebanon for six months, and then one has to exit the country to renew one's visa.

It's bedtime. I'm exhausted. Ninson washed her hair, and the hairdresser from Qamishly blow-dries it. We walk into the rooms. We are Swedes, we ought to be tough, but we can't stand it. The cold is unbearable. I'm wearing two sweatshirts, a hoodie and my outer jacket when I go to bed. I pull up a quilt and a blanket. It feels like when I did my military service in Boden and was out in the fields and lived in a tent in the woods during the worst winter. Isa can't sleep, it's too cold. He goes out

to the yard with a few men who smoke hookah. I go out. A few hours later, Isa is back; he lies in bed but can't fall asleep. He claims that I snore. I've never done that before, but probably fatigue has changed that.

IN THE MORNING I go to the shower, my toes are numb and the cold floor doesn't make things better. There is no water to speak of, it drips and is cold. Despite the cold, I try to take a shower. A few minutes later the water gets warmer but still it drips. I wet a part of the towel, put some soap on it and wash all over the body. I wipe with the other part. Isa is too stiff to get up. I knock on Ninson's door; she slept as we did with her winter clothing. Lucky for us we had our winter jackets on from Stockholm on our way to "warm" Lebanon. Tony Boulos waits in the yard. We're going to have breakfast -- minakish, a sort of pizza with herbs and cheese. It's very Lebanese. It's a modern café just a few minutes by car from the monastery.

Our phone rings. It's Isa's wife from Norrköping in Sweden. Some distant relatives are at the monastery in Lebanon and need help. During breakfast we debate what things to buy that would be of greatest benefit to the monastery. Ninson proposes heaters and radiators to combat the cold. 'Then you have to buy gas-powered fans because the electricity doesn't cope with that many radiators.' Boulos claims. Ninson also wants to purchase medicine. There is a doctor on site who can distribute the medicine to the refugees. It feels a little bit too much with hot bread and cheese for breakfast, but that is what they serve. When we are done, we head back to the monastery. The phone rings. It's Ninson's mother calling from Södertälje, wanting to know if we can meet her relatives who have fled northern Syria for Lebanon. They need help.

IT IS GETTING HOT in the yard of the monastery, at least in the sun. We stand sur-

rounded by Syrians. Everybody wants to tell their story; everybody wants to know if we can take them with us, or at least help them to a Schengen country. Maybe we can speak to the Swedish embassy? The relatives that Isa's wife had called about meet us. It is a family, three girls all under twelve with their parents. They have waited for smugglers for months now. They have had very little luck with their smugglers, most of which have been unprofessional. 'I want to be smuggled straight to Sweden with a passport or visa. I can't make the trek from country to country with my family.' His wife shakes her head. She also refuses to take the hard road. She would rather wait in Lebanon, but they are running out of money. Isa manages to get them into the monastery for shelter. A middle-aged woman comes to Ninson, showing her arms. They are covered with insect bites. They don't match her elegant exterior. She is beautiful and discreetly covered in makeup, the hair well done, and her clothes signal an interest in fashion. The woman tells about her family, about having to move from flat to flat in Beirut and that in certain flats there were up to nine persons in each room. The bites come from lice from the flats that they have had to live in. The woman has six daughters in Sweden. Her husband tells us the names of the girls and where in Sweden they live. He wants to know if we know them. None of us do. He proudly asks if we know one of his sons-in-law: 'He's Swedish, ethnic Swede!' He continues, 'We're not poor, we didn't run from poverty. We ran from fear. I have to think about my twelve year old daughter. She's easy prey for kidnapers. Three children of our friends were kidnapped. In two cases they paid enormous

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ransoms to get the children back and in one case they paid but got the child back dead.'

His wife wonders if we can take a picture of his leg to show the Swedish Migration Board. Maybe they would give him residence permit in Sweden while he is in Lebanon.

ANOTHER MAN ALSO WANTS to talk about kidnappings. His best friend was kidnapped or arrested by the government. It's been three weeks and he doesn't know if the friend is alive. 'In a war between countries, you know who the enemy is. In Syria, you don't know who is your friend and who is your enemy. The wealthy have

it the worst. Criminals wait in line to kidnap them. The irritating man from the day before shows up, and pulls Ninson to the side. He pleads with us to follow to his room, to meet the sick son. Reluctantly, Ninson and I follow him while Isa figures out

what things to buy that would be of most benefit for the refugees in the monastery.

Elias sounds like a duck. He's fifteen years old and looks like ten. The family fled from Rasel-Eyn, a city that lost its Christian population more-or-less overnight. 'The so-called Free Syrian Army, or rebels, or whatever you choose to call them in the west, emptied the city of its Christians, and soon there won't be a single Christian in the whole country.' Elias father is very angry. His wife interrupts him. After all, we are here to meet Elias. The room is cozy. There is a refrigerator, heater, closet, and much else that indicates the family has been staying in the monastery for some time. The man is a well-known solicitor and had also inherited land and was one of the wealthier persons in his former

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home city. His house was blown to bits. 'The house was just walls, pieces of stone. Many people I knew died...' He goes quiet. His wife wants to offer us tea, coffee, something. We decline. We don't have time. Elias is happy that there is company. He looks at us and smiles. He tries to say something, but we don't understand. His mother and father understand. He wants to tell us about his new toy, a computer game. The father says, 'They came from Libya and other places, some were from Syria. I saw them myself. Islamists. Hateful. Now, Rasel-Eyn is empty. That took a few days to happen. Is this revolution? The wife gathers some papers. Elias is born with a defect in his throat. He has to breathe through a pipe in his throat. In Lebanon, a Swedish doctor said that he would consider the possibility of operating on Elias. But the doctor has disappeared. They are unable to reach him.'

IT'S A SUNNY and beautiful day when we drive from one mountain to another to reach Zahle which is 50 km east of Beirut. To drive constantly on the edge of the road is really a skill and it's a skill to be a passenger. The hunger steals upon us and we wonder if the best thing to do is to eat something before the next meeting. 'There is a truck stop not far from here', George, our Maronite driver tells us. 'Food that costs a hundred dollars in Beirut is here twenty and it tastes much better.' When Ninson walks in it's like a whirlwind in the head of the men. Isa and I look at them and everything is normal again.

George was right, it was a very good meal. The open kitchen provided many excellent grilled dishes. The home distilled Rakin he asks me to taste is as good as the meal. It's a pity we're in a hurry. George is right about the bill too. Four people eat and drink for exactly twenty dollars.

We arrive in Zahle. The city is almost totally Christian. The number of people living there depends who you ask. The first one we ask says there are 500,000, the

second says 100,000 and Wikipedia claims there are 300,000. No matter the number, it's a fantastic, beautiful city. A little bit of New Orleans in USA, a mix of Mardin in Turkey, Amman in Jordan and Marbella in Spain.

We have forgotten to inform them about our visit – Bishop Boulos Safar knows nothing about us visiting him. For a moment we laugh at ourselves and the spontaneity. I ask George to stop the car, wind down the window to ask a man in his thirties where we can find the Syrian Orthodox arch-diocese. He laughs and shows a church twenty meters away. Elie, his name, is Syrian Orthodox and seems very pleased to meet us. He calls the bishop and gives me the phone. The bishop is visiting the Patriarch, who is in the city for dialysis treatment, but he wants to meet us. He'll take the car and will be in Zahle in an hour. Elie invites us to his shop. We sit behind the counter. It's 5PM and it's chilly. He has a small fan that we gather around behind the counter. On a small gas-stove he makes coffee and tea. Elie's mother passes by on her way to a doctor's appointment. She is descending from Mardin in Turkey, which most of the Syriac-orthodox people here seem to do, or more specific from Bnabil, a small village outside of Mardin. Elie claims the Syrian refugees here are roughly one hundred families. Suddenly Elie gets a whim and asks us to go to the peak of one of the mountains where there is a Mother Mary statue at a steeple. People seem to hike up there.

ON OUR WAY TO THE PEAK we are amazed by the wonderful Christmas lights. Trees, poles and facades are beautifully decorated. We have almost arrived to the Mother Mary statue when Elie suggests a visit to another tourist attraction, but we don't have time for that. The bishop is here now. When we arrive in the bishop's residence we meet Lebanon's former minister of culture. He was as curious about us as we were about him. The bishop starts the



Elias, one of the refugees' children in the monastery requires an urgent surgery.

conversation and says that if it was up to him to decide, all the Christians fleeing to Lebanon would get an allowance. The minister says it is not possible because 400,000 Palestinians have been in the country for decades without being granted allowance. 'But if Syrian refugees work here and will not commit crimes no one will disturb them.' Both the bishop and the minister have met Christian Syrian families who fled in panic. 'The circumstances vary with each refugee, but they all fear for Islamists. And all of them are able to testify to reprisals and kidnapping,' the bishop says. A nod of assent from the minister and he adds: 'It's important not to make the same mistake as in Iraq at a possible takeover. You cannot dismantle the army and the infrastructure. Before a democratic election you need stability and that is the only way to prevent a worse situation.' Ninson asks how the refugees in

Zahle are doing. 'Here it is tougher than in Beirut, it's colder and the electricity is very expensive,' the bishop says. 'There are two reasons they have come here, either they are waiting for smugglers or a legal visa to go to west, or they have come to stay until the situation in Syria calms down'.

The minister and his delegation of three men in suits leave in a hurry to their next meeting. It is still Christmas and many more polite visits have to be done.

A nun enters the room bringing tea and water. The bishop tells us he used to be a dentist and the nun a doctor, a general practitioner. We're surprised but don't show it. The doctor stirs the tea for the dentist. In order to focus my mind I ask about the church's role in this and what it can achieve for the refugees. The bishop anxiously answers. 'We haven't got a monastery in Zahle, so in order to control the situation we have asked our priests to visit »

and register them statistically. Some donors from Sweden and the U.S. have sent money that has made it possible to buy for example medicine. We are also a sort of job centre and try to find as many jobs as possible. Many of them have relatives here, others rent apartments. Three families can stay in three rooms for 700 dollars a month. The electricity is approximately 200 dollars a month. That is 900 dollars a month, 300 dollars per family.'

The bishop also mentions the refugees get help from the charity organisation Worldvision, but UI is very welcome to pay 200 dollars per person for the electricity. That would very much help the refugees.

The bishop will have dinner with a wine producer and his family. He calls him and invites us as well, without asking for our response. Fifteen minutes later someone comes to take us to the family. Husband, wife, son and the housekeeper welcome us. We are embarrassed by the generosity.

More than ten different meze dishes are served, fattoush and two other salads for the first course. And after that, ajin or kibbe neje or steak tartare in bulgur as it would be described in Swedish. Much to eat. Much to drink. The meat for the main course melts in the mouth and the deserts grasp us without giving us a chance to retreat.

The son is studying in Germany and gladly speaks both German and English. His mother and father are proud. We stay for two hours. Drowsy from the excellent dinner and all discussions we go back to the hotel. The bishop has booked the Monte Alberto. Elie goes for our luggage, still in his car. We feel guilty for not having spent time with him more, which was the point.

HANNA KHAYAT, THE HOTEL MANAGER of Monte Alberto, meets us. He orders tea for all of us. He was born and raised in Zahle and has a lot of stories about the



The shop owner Elie in Zahle has just poured tea for us and has a lot to tell about his home town which he's very proud of.

city, which he is very proud of. He also knows a lot about the refugees since some of them rent rooms at his hostel. He is very keen on putting things in real context and is interested in discussing political issues. After one hour we hardly can keep our eyes open and have to excuse ourselves and go to our rooms.

It's December 28th, a sunny morning; the view from our hotel is fantastic. The breakfast consists of black and green olives, vegetables, honey and marmalade, all products from Zahle's crops, and cheese from local stock farmers. Khayat orders a taxi for us. From the car I call the Syriac League in Beirut. We intend to visit my friend Habib Afram, who is always informed. During the trip I try to coordinate the delivery of a container from Germany to Beirut. I have promised my friends Abdulmesih Abraham and Aziz Aktas in Augsburg to help out with a receiving committee of ten tons of food and the same weight of clothes. The container will arrive on January 7th in 2013.

At the Syriac League office, an institute for Assyrians/Syriacs/Chaldean-Christians, they are very happy for the container. It can give hope for people, a feeling of not being forgotten. The office is very proper with everything from a library with Assyrian/Syriac books to a mini-museum with findings from Assyrian excavations in Mosul in Iraq. One of the secretaries takes us to Habib Afram, the director. I tell him that I have to go to the bathroom. I'm just about to lock the door when Ninson shouts you have to come out now!' I put up a brave face and run out of the bathroom.

A man in Afram's office is sitting there, crying. His brother has been killed, murdered. An old woman, a teenaged girl and a couple in their thirties enter the room, all dressed in black. It's the murdered man's family. There is disorder in the room when we offer them our chairs. They are all crying and interrupt each other all the time. At last we ask Habib Afram to try to

calm them down to be able to understand what has happened. I ask him to have the widow speak, the others have to wait. She takes a napkin, wipes the tears, takes a gulp of water, breathes and starts: 'I am the mother of, bless his soul.' She is quiet. I ask the others not to interrupt, let her take her time. She continues: 'My son and my husband were both viciously killed, shot in the head by terrorists, Islamists.' I ask her if they had a quarrel with anyone in their hometown Hassake. 'Our only crime is being Christians', she answers.

For a moment I lose my cool head. There's too much of a *déjà vu*. Everything seems to be a replay of interviews with Iraq's Christians. It has started again, I say to myself, and this is just the beginning. Her son and husband were killed right before her eyes.

I TRY TO TALK TO the daughter, the teenage girl but she is quiet. She looks shocked and makes no sign. The other daughter, in her thirties, and her husband are furious. They say that the rest of the world doesn't care about the Christians, they just watch when Syria is emptied of Christians. The murders of her father and brother prove that this will be the future, with tears along her cheeks. I try to ask a few questions but without result. A man also in the office on a visit from the U.S., wants to be involved in the conversation. He puts the words in the mouths of the mourning family, seems to know everything about Syria even though he hasn't been there for many years. Habib Afram and I look at each other and he manages to get the man to understand that we need to listen to eyewitnesses. Arabic press has obviously written about the murders. The victim's names are Abalahad and Yusuf Bashuro.

The family left after giving Afram's secretary their names and phone number; the room is now quiet. The silence is broken by another secretary entering the room with something to eat but we have no appetite at all. Afram forces down the »

meal – says it's among the best kebabs you can get in Beirut. Next moment he starts a monologue about Syria and it's emptying of Christians, and how the Syriac League is trying to get most of the refugees in Lebanon not to leave the country and instead wait until the situation has calmed down, and then return to Syria. 'Of course we don't want to a homogenous Muslim Middle East but when you meet a person like the widow, one cannot do anything but to help her - she is not poor, she doesn't need food or money. She wants to leave the Middle East because she doesn't think things will be better in Syria, just worse. She wants the rest of the family to go to Europe. We will accompany them to the German embassy after the holidays. They'll issue visas for Christians from Syria.'

Afram has started a database of Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon. He sees a need of eyewitness statements in one place. One of his assistants, Jibran Kally, says that Lebanon will not deport any Syrians; they will be able to stay and work but will not get any papers. Kally claims he has contacts at several embassies and is helpful with the refugees who cannot return to Syria for a long time. He is the one who assists the widow we met to get in contact with the German embassy. However he is disappointed with Germany, who splits up the families. If, for instance, parents with two kids apply to go to Germany one parent and one child get visas, the others have to stay in Lebanon. 'This way the Germans try to split up the families in order to get them to return when Syria is back to normal'. Habib Afram is in a hurry to another meeting. Before he leaves he makes a promise to help out with the organisation of the container to Germany.

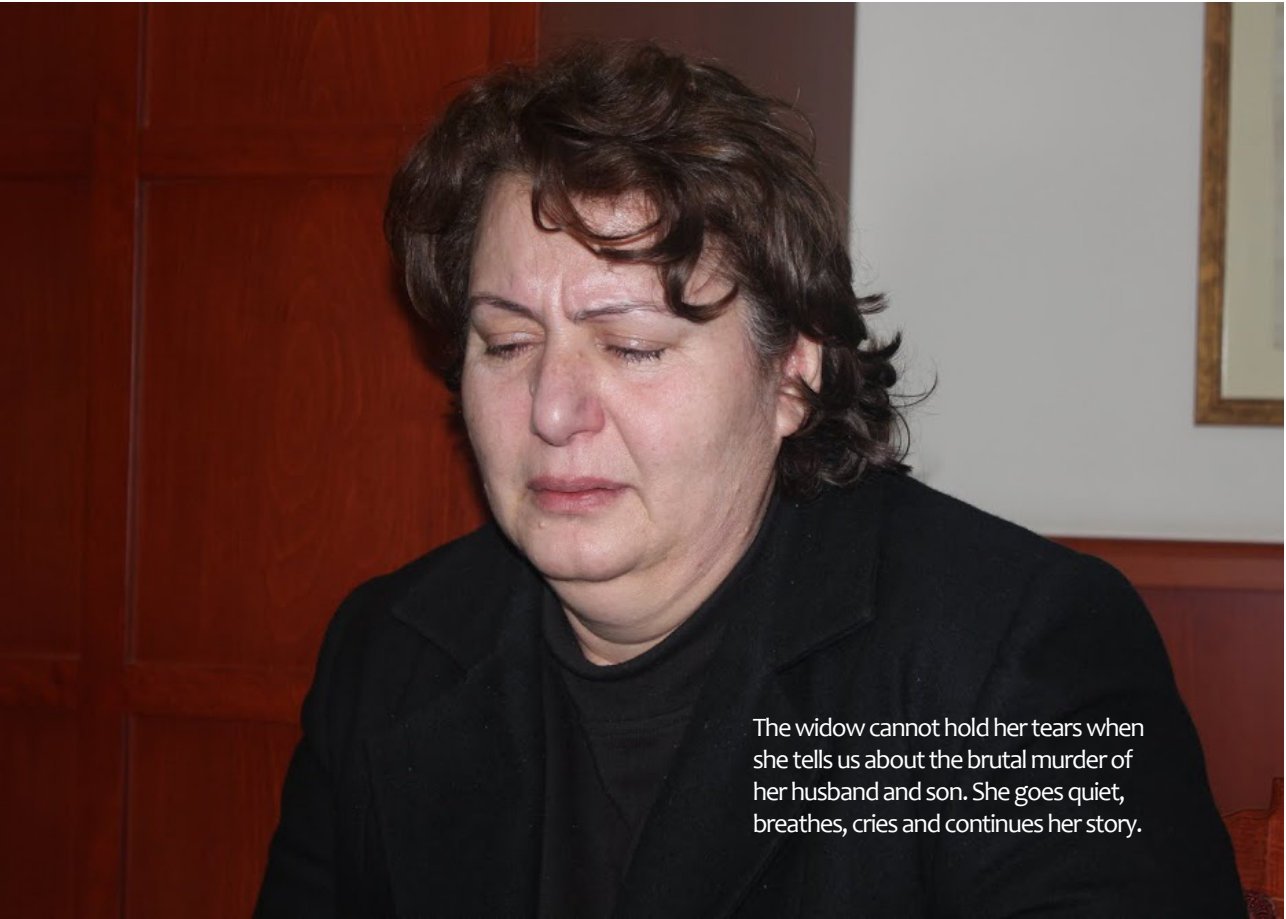
BEFORE WE KNOW IT we sit in Kally's car; his job is to take us to the first stop which is the Assyrian/Syriac association in Beirut. The ground floor is some sort of a café, serving meze and grilled dishes. The

upper floor is the office and a conference room. In the afternoon it's crowded here, according to the two young men serving us coffee. But now, early afternoon, it's still quiet and empty of people. About ten people sit outside at the cafés outdoor seating, all of them men, refugees from Syria. When Kally tells them I'm a journalist they almost attack me. They are upset. Noisy. They want to know why the media are biased in the reports. Three of them sit down and talk to me quietly. They are mad about us not telling the 'truth' about The Free Syrian Army. The Syrians say the regime is accused for perpetration while the negotiation part, according to the three Syrians, robs, kidnaps, rapes and murder get idealized in the western and some Arabic media. They are very upset of the American TV-channel CNN and the Qatar al-Jazeera.

I search the eyes of Ninson and Isa. Ninson is answering an e-mail in the corner. Isa is gone. Was hoping one of them would take a photo. The moment I take out my camera I remember Isa saying I was going to find the place here in Beirut where he was staying during his first years. I have to do it myself.

The three refugees interrupt each other all the time; as soon as one of them starts to talk he is immediately interrupted by another, while the third interrupts both. The feelings run high. Jibran Kally helps me to calm them down. We order tea and coffee along with sweets; we talk for a while about Lebanon before one of them decides to be the first to speak. He's in his thirties and is a refugee from the town Deyr ul-Zor in the northeastern part of Syria. He says the town now is level and the area is taken by The Free Syrian Army.

'It all started a few months before the so called Free Army took over the town, that is before the criminals kidnapped the revolution. At first, a part of our house exploded, we fled to the military and the shelter. It calmed down and we returned to our home. The day after I felt persecuted



The widow cannot hold her tears when she tells us about the brutal murder of her husband and son. She goes quiet, breathes, cries and continues her story.

as if someone was following me. I shook off the fear and told myself I'm of course paranoid.

A few days later five masked men entered my jewellery shop. Three of them were on the lookout outside, and two entered. They pointed their guns at our heads and stole twenty kilograms of gold. It was eight o'clock in the morning and everyone on the street saw what was happening but no one intervened. I reported it but I didn't think it would lead anywhere. We had surveillance cameras, both inside and outside the shop. The authorities also had surveillance on the street and in the parking lot. One of the cars, a Suzuki, used to be parked there – on the dot – from eight in the morning until six in the evening. On this particular day the car disappeared from the parking lot as early as nine in the morning. This caused some suspicions with the police. They went to see him. The

bastard was Christian himself, but he sold me out to the Islamists of the so called free army. They found three kilograms of gold inside of his TV. He informed on two others, two relatives. They were also arrested. But the rest of the gold and the two other robbers, the Islamists who were members of the gang, were nowhere to be seen.”

One of the other refugees can't stop himself from intervening even though we agreed he wouldn't. “In certain parts of Syria a Christian can no longer report injustices or crimes. We are hostages of the growing Islamism while the rest of the world either watches on or turns the other cheek. Just being Christian is enough to be a target.” The other two nod in agreement. The former jewellery shop owner continues. “In June the rebels took over Deyr ul-Zur and we fled in panic. We always believed the regime would protect us but in the end they lost control of the city. Wit- »

hout delay we fled to Hassake. On the 15th of November the city was caught by the same fate as our own hometown. That's when we decided to leave the country by bus." The third man, the one that hasn't interrupted us yet, can't keep silent any longer, "You have to understand that this is deliberate, they want to empty Syria of non-Muslims whilst the West encourages it. It's like the US and other countries have gone blind or even crazy. Do we really want an Islamic state instead of the Assad-regime? Is it any better?"

ISA IS BACK, he has found someone who later will help him locate his childhood home. He grabs hold of a chair and sits down. Before he says anything it's my time to interrupt everyone. I tell them I want to know how the bus journey to Lebanon went. The jewellery shop owner continues his story. My phone rings and I ask him to wait while I answer. It is relatives of mine in Syria, word has reached them that I'm in Lebanon and they are asking me if I can check with smugglers if it is true that you can easily leave the country with the help of a Swedish passport and 7,000 dollars. They don't have electricity, water, bread or jobs. They are siblings, a sister and her younger brother. He is afraid the sister will be kidnapped. He tells me that women in general – particularly Christians – have become easy targets for male criminals. He makes me promise to check with the smugglers and get back to him. The jewellery shop owner has had time to visit the toilet, he sits down again, lights a cigarette and continues. "The bus journey was fairly uneventful but that's because there wasn't any Alawites or soldiers on it. Jesh al'hur, the so called free Syrian army, stopped the bus and searched it, which was very frigh-

tening. They screamed after Alawites, who are people that belong to the same Islamic branch as president Bashar, and soldiers, who belong to his army. If there were any of those on the bus they would've been killed. Luckily, there weren't any of them on our bus. You get a bit extra apprehensive when you have your two small children and your wife on the bus. They could've taken my wife, it has happened on other buses."

One of the others raises his voice to indicate he has something very important to add: "In the bus that I arrived in there was a Ba'athist, which is a person that used to be a member of Bashar's political party. Don't ask me how, but somehow the rebels

that stopped our bus knew about it. They took him out and shot him in the head."

The jewellery shop owner wants to continue his tale. "More than anything I would like to take my family to France,

// In certain parts of Syria a Christian can no longer report injustices or crimes. We are hostages of the growing Islamism while the rest of the world either watches on or turns the other cheek.

I know the language because I studied there for two years. We have to get out soon, the rents in Beirut rise a lot during the summer. We are two families and we pay 233 dollars per month for each family. In the summer this could double."

Isa and Ninson are with us again. After they introduce themselves the jewellery shop owner admits he has been in contact with a consultant, a person that will offer a solution. "He's one of many consultants here in Beirut that will come up with a solution. Either he will arrange a visa from an embassy or he will let us get in touch with the best smugglers where the road isn't too long or too dangerous. If he arranges a visa, which is the easiest thing for us of course, it will cost us 10,000 dollars per person. He has helped other people

we know. We are lucky to have found him; he will arrange a pickup for the visa at an embassy. Nothing is forged. Other consultants will claim the visa is real but lie to you and you will get caught as early as at the airport in Beirut. There are even people with fake business cards claiming to work at a European embassy. When they receive the money they disappear -- at least for a while. When they return they make up some horrible lies about how they got caught and all this other bullshit. If I wasn't married I wouldn't have waited, I would have taken any road, but I can't do that with a wife and kids."

One of the reasons why he'd rather wait than take the long route is because his cousin experienced great difficulty when he left Turkey in a small boat headed for Greece. They were told they were only staying in Athens for no more than a week, but one week turned into two months. In addition, the smugglers only managed to get three out of four people into the country. The fourth, a young man, was arrested and detained on the border of Macedonia.

ANOTHER FOUR REFUGEES join us now, all together there are seven of them. Ninson and Isa are nowhere to be seen again. They are preparing Ungdomsinitiativets charity project.

One of the new arrivals around the table, a Syrian refugee, claims that smuggling to Europe at the beginning of the war cost 7,000 dollars but that the price is now 20,000 dollars. "Yes, but what's the alternative? There is no future for Christians in Syria, at least not in all parts of the country. The only thing we want is protection of our children. We want them to grow up safely, and that will never happen in Syria now, not anymore." One other man says he is going to an African country the next morning, from there the smuggler will bring him to Germany.

Isa and Ninson nod towards me indicating it's time to leave, we have to get

something to eat and keep working with the charity. One of the refugees carefully touches my arm. "I will explain to you in simple terms how the situation is in Syria. Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland, just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could do. The police chief was very clear that they would not act, as they didn't want the tribe to turn against the regime. The police were happy as long as they could keep the tribe on their side, so that the tribe didn't start sympathising with any of the oppositional groups. You might wonder why I'm telling you this; for two reasons: One, as Christians we have no protection, no military of our own, and as you have heard many times today we are very easy targets. Two, the war isn't just about politics. It's about the need for money and power." He turns to Ninson and Isa: "And now we have turned into a piece of trade for cynical smugglers. But I'd rather have that than like my nephew who was kidnapped and disappeared just a few weeks ago." Ninson wants him to elaborate his story. "The first smuggler I met was a Christian, a relative, who had lived in Sweden for many years. He took us to a friend of his in Lebanon. On the door of the office there was an EU-sign. We received business cards that impressed us. A few days later I was 4,000 dollars short but I had a French visa in my passport and a flight ticket to Paris. I would pay the rest, 9,000 dollars, once I had arrived in Sweden. Once I had landed in Paris they were meant to take me to Sodertalje by car. But I got caught at the airport in Beirut. If it hadn't been for the Syrian Catholic patriarch who came to the detention and set us free I might have been there still. He bailed me out as well as four others, and now I'm looking for a lawyer whilst waiting for the trial. The relative from Sweden has disappeared. He even turned off his mobile and changed number. But in all honesty it was also about bad luck, three other people

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Ninson and Isa with Father Emanuel Youkhana who is greeting us in spite of a recently made heart surgery. He and the other priests in his parish are very worried about the future for the Christians in Syria.

who had the same false visa are now in Europe.”

NEXT STOP IS ISA'S childhood home in the borough of Saad al-Bsheriye. The house isn't that easy to find, Isa wanders around the shops until a hairdresser recognises Isa's father's name. Hugs are exchanged. Isa gets so excited he runs up the five floors of stairs to the place where he used to live as a child. Ninson is standing outside the car and talking on the telephone with representatives from UI's board about how the charity funds are best distributed. We have a long evening ahead of us. I fall asleep in the car.

Jibran Kally wakes me up when Isa, slightly emotional, comes back. He was allowed into the apartment, several people even remembered his family. Over and over again he tells us how friendly the people in the apartment were, that the

world is small, it turns out that Tony Boulos sister was one of the neighbours.

Ten minutes later, we're standing outside one of Beirut's most popular fast food restaurants. There are twenty seats inside and twenty seats outside. The queue to the counter is long but the queue to get seated is even longer. I see an empty table and throw my coat on one of the chairs. The kebab is fantastic, as is the falafel and the fried vegetables. But we should have chosen a different restaurant; it took over thirty minutes before our food got served. What we didn't know was that they were also taking telephone orders. Once we were happily fed we could go back to work again.

IN THE EVENING WE MET three priests from the Eastern Assyrian church. One of them, father Emanuel Youkhana, has worked with charity for many years. He actually

lives in Germany and I've met him before at different seminars about the minorities' future in the Middle East. He was very happy to see us. Even though he recently went through surgery he welcomed us in church. He was grateful for being offered a place in the committee that is responsible for the distribution of food, clothes and other necessities arriving from Germany. He introduced us to two other priests that were taking care of the practical things, such as food for their church members that had fled from Syria. He himself still had too much work to do in Iraq – and he had just recently undergone heart surgery.

Outside the church, Ashur Gewargis from the Assyrian Movement Party, was waiting for us. He was also happy to be a part of supplying goods to refugees from Syria. In anticipation of our meeting, he had registered about forty families that were in great need of help. Gewargis is well informed about our people's situation all over the Middle East and we got to share his wide perspective.

Unfortunately we didn't spend much time with him. A very young woman in her twenties as well as her relatives are waiting for us at the Assyrian/Syriac association. When we get there we order tea and cookies; we are tired and need the energy. The woman and her brother are waiting for relatives to send them passports that belong to people looking like them. That way they can leave from Lebanon to Sweden. They want to go to Sodertalje where they have relatives and old neighbours. More than anything they wish they could stay in Lebanon and make a living until the situation in Syria calms down, but they've given up hope about peace in Syria. The brother says "we could always return from Sweden when things have calmed down but there is no chance of a job or a residence permit here." We learn that one can pick up a passport from Europe and receive a fake arrival stamp. Someone else travels in with the passport and pays for a fake arrival stamp in the

passports meant for the refugees you are meant to bring back with you to Europe.

IT'S THE THIRD NIGHT and we really need sleep, or at least some rest. Isa calls the bishop George Saliba. He is bound for travel to St Gabriel's monastery. We decide to travel there as well, and buy everything that needs buying to fix up the monastery. When we arrive it's already nine o'clock in the evening. The bishop arrives minutes after us. People gather around him, he smiles, kisses them on the cheek and forehead. We enter the big hall of the monastery. Many accompany us. A lady sits right next to me and shows me her arms. She has some kind of rash. She tells me it's bedbugs, she and her husband were forced to live in poor apartments before they finally got here. The bishop starts the meeting; he asks Bolous and others in charge of the monastery to sit next to him, as well as Isa, Ninson and me. He wants them to tell us what is needed the most in the monastery. He stops himself and asks a question straight to the refugees. What do they think is most necessary? There are plenty of answers. After taking notes and carefully considering with the people in charge and the refugees we come to a conclusion: six washing-machines, four air-purifiers, fifty heaters with additional gas to last a few months, fifty beds with mattresses, quilts, duvets and bed clothes. Ninson goes to get the doctor, the young man who only had six months left before he was meant to receive his medical license. She wants his help to make a list of all the necessary medication that need to be purchased. Some of the women make a list of appliances, cutlery and other things needed in the kitchen. Elias' father stops us at the door. He asks us if we've heard anything from Sweden about the young doctor. I tell him we have tried to get hold of him without any luck but I promise we will keep looking for him. When we sit down in the car Ninson takes a big breath: "God, what a relief, now we have something to work »

off on what to do with the money from the charity event.”

Outside our hotel, Promenade, stands an artist from Syria. He has something important to tell us and he has been waiting for us. We sit down in the lobby. “Please, I have been told you are taking part in donations to Syria. I am from Qamishli, what we need there is bulletproof vests and weapons to defend ourselves. We are about a hundred young men who are ready to form a security army. We are not going out in war, merely defending our own. We are aware that we can’t protect ourselves against bombs and missiles but we can, if we receive weapons, defend ourselves against the nearby

danger. We can protect Christian families against burglaries, kidnappings, rape and abuse.” When he has left us we are speechless again. What is there to say?

Before we head for bed we gather in my hotel room to plan for the next two days. We hardly get any work done, Isa is chasing mosquitoes, Ninson is emailing and I almost fall asleep. We order sandwiches. Very dry sandwiches it turns out, but we eat them anyway. An hour later the others have left the room and my only company are the mosquitoes that refuse to let me sleep. There’s not much sleep to be had this night.

IT’S NOW SATURDAY, December 29, 2012. Ninson has called Bishop Michael Shemon. She has booked an appointment to see His Holiness Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox church. Jibra Kally tells us it’s a one hour car journey to get there. I close my eyes and fall asleep again -- one hour’s sleep. Perfect.

The car stops and I wake up to see three very beautiful buildings. As we go inside we are met by a smiling nun, and then another one. They show us around whilst we are waiting for the patriarch. Everything is new, the quality is very high and the kitchen appliances hold the same standard as in the best restaurants. “This is the main building. Then there is an orphanage, an elderly home and several more buildings are being built.” The nun is very proud over what Bishop Michael Shemon has accomplished. The buildings are on top of a mountain, surrounded by different trees growing fruit. A monk tells us the patriarch is on his way. We go into a room

furnished with chairs covered in dark red velvet fabric. He is pushed into the room in a wheelchair. Two monks and a young man from Turabdin in Turkey who assists the patriarch, follow us into the room. The patriarch is very weak and they want us to keep it short

-- fifteen minutes. That turns into forty-five minutes. The patriarch is sad, scared and tired and wants to speak about the situation in Syria. He is grateful for the help the refugees receive and he wants it to continue. With his eyes fixed on Ninson he says “A coin from one of you is worth a thousand from a stranger. Ungdomsinitivet and archbishop Abdulahad Shabo have done something very beautiful and sacred. We have to help our refugees no matter where they end up.”

I ask about the future for Christians in Syria. “We don’t want them to leave the country but we can’t tell them not to. The important thing is that they live in peace and that God is with them no matter what they do.” The patriarch also wants to thank the three Syriac Orthodox churches, the Greek Orthodox Church and

“ We don’t want them to leave the country but we can’t tell them not to. The important thing is that they live in peace and that God is with them no matter what they do.



Isa kissing His Holiness Ignatius Zakka Iwas' hand.

the Assyrian organisation that together with Caritas in Germany are responsible for containers that are meant to arrive in Beirut. As if he read my mind he continues, “Of course we don’t want our people to become strangers scattered around the world far away from here. We also don’t want them destroyed by the asylum process or encounter horrible things whilst being smuggled. But the most important thing is that they can live in freedom.” Then he turns to Ninson and Isa again. “We are one body, one soul and your will to help makes me feel joy through all this pain.” He answers in the same manner to all our questions, no political answers, and he always comes back to peace and love. He leaves the room and we wonder if we will ever see him again. He is ill, old and tired. Two days a week he goes through dialysis due to problem with his kidneys.

BISHOP MICHAEL SHEMON TAKES OVER;

we get a thirty minute tour of the elderly home and the orphanage. It has been re-decorated, fabrics in warm colours mixed with modern furniture in Scandinavian style. The elderly are very happy about our visit and we stop to speak to each and every one of them. I am very happy to see the now pensioned bishop Afram Aboude, whom I had a lot of contact with as a teenager when he was our religious leader in Sodertalje. At first he doesn’t recognise me, but when I tell him about my dad the hairdresser and that he has passed away I see a glimmer in his eyes. The bishop tells me he remembers my dad. I can’t help but think the bishop looks so small compared to his glory days in Sodertalje. But then again, he is almost ninety now.

Bishop Michael Shemon is proud, very proud, of his buildings. He is also very thankful to Barnabus Fund, a Christian organisation whose money has been used for some of the buildings. »

When we are about to leave, the two monks and the student who accompanied the patriarch arrive in a classic Mercedes from the late 60's. They ask me if I want to take it for a ride. I sit down in the driver's seat and take it for a spin. How cool are these old steering wheels, an amazing car. We get ourselves a good laugh.

WHEN WE ARRIVE IN Beirut we manage to fit in a visit at Burger King before our next visit with another bishop. Jibrán Kally knows a few immigrants who walk into the hamburger place. I speak with them in our native tongue. One of them, a woman in her thirties, has been granted a visa to Germany, but she can only take one of her three children and her husband hasn't been granted a visa. She asks us what we think. Should she leave or not leave? What are the options? Smugglers?

She decides on not going. "The children are tired of constantly being indoors, we rent an apartment not far from here so I thought I'd let them get some fresh air and see other people, so I took them to this restaurant," she says timidly.

At six o'clock we drive up a hill in central Beirut to St Afram's Syriac Orthodox church. When we enter the room the bishop is sitting on his throne, just like the bishop in Zahle. And of course he has servants looking out for his needs. We are offered sweets and tea. "It is so great with nice visitors from Sweden! You do a very important job." We are more interested in his work. What does he do? "We regularly receive emails from people who want to know why we are not doing anything about Syria being emptied of its Christian minority. Others curse at us. It is difficult times. People leave everything and

// We regularly receive emails from people who want to know why we are not doing anything about Syria being emptied of its Christian minority. Others curse at us. It is difficult times

run away. We can't ask them to stay or to run away, we can only pray for their best. Those that come here to Lebanon have relatives or friends they can stay with whilst they wait for a visa or to be smuggled out. Many have ended up in jail when they've failed to flee the country. We bail them out so they don't have to stay in custody. They're not really criminals: all they want is to escape to freedom and safety."

Once again I ask why the people from Syria don't stay in Lebanon. "We want them to stay here but they need some kind of occupation, a job. I want all the organisations, churches and other institutions

to gather so we can find a solution and cooperate with the Lebanese government. Not only hand them fish, that's a short term solution. We have to give them the fishing rod." So he wants to find work for the immigrants. He gets more

visitors, we stand up to leave. "I hope your help reaches Syria too, we do what we can in the meantime."

KALLY KNOWS A PHARMACIST and drives us to the pharmacy. Ninson wants to buy the medicine that's on the list prepared by her and the doctor in the monastery. We get an impressive big box of medicines for the small price of 285 dollars. The pharmacist adds some extra medicine; he wanted to contribute in some way.

Later that evening Habib Afram insists on taking us to a nicer restaurant. His wife Elsy Abi Assi, a news anchor for al-Jazeera, joins us. We conversed on a number of topics. Everything from international politics, the smuggling of humans, priests and corruption, the future of Christians in the Middle East and north Africa, to gossip about celebrities. This accompanied by

very good sushi. A man approaches Habib Afram, he politely says hello and wants to say thank you for Habib's contribution in a televised debate. Many pieces of raw fish and several types of chocolate dessert later, we are ready for bed.

IT IS THE 30TH of December, Sunday morning and our last day in Lebanon. We are aware that we should visit one of the churches but we don't have time. There is still plenty to do. We have to ask Tony Boulos when the dishwashing machines and all the other things we've ordered will be delivered. We have to bring them the medicine. But before that we have one other person to visit. We have booked an appointment with His Holiness Ignatius Ephrem Josef III, the Syrian Catholic patriarch. He's previously made critical statements towards the EU, which, he believes, should do more to stop the Christians from escaping the Middle East. "There are 300 families that have fled from Syria and we also have the Iraqi Christians who fled a few years ago -- and who still arrive. Most of them live in apartments, we try to help them as best as we can. We do have refugee camps here; there are two or three families living in two or three bedroom apartments. But there's a shortage of apartments. That's why we've rebuilt a school and made it into refugee camp."

The patriarch tells us horrific stories about how some of the people he has met left cities like Aleppo and Homs. The same stories we have heard before -- repeatedly. "There is a great exodus taking place in silence, it has been happening the last few decades and it is intensifying now. We encourage our members to not leave the Middle East but we can't force them to stay." Ninson queries whether the Syrian Catholic church has registered any refugees from Syria. "It's not that simple. Many refuse registration; they want to return to Syria and are just waiting for the situation to calm down. In the beginning it was the upper class that arrived, later the

middle class and now the working class. We help them as humanitarians, we can't do anything politically. We can't even issue a statement; we don't want to hurt those who are left in Syria. What we hope for now is that the war doesn't get any worse. We are trying to make the world understand that no one benefits from that. But the western world does not want to hear us, they only seem interested in throwing off the regime with violence."

When we leave him, Ninson and Isa decide to convert a school to a home for refugees. "We buy beds and other things so they can sleep well, maybe some heaters. Let us call and ask what is most necessary."

AN HOUR LATER we are travelling towards the St Gabriel monastery in Ajaltoun. Kally spots the trucks arriving with the items Tony Boulos ordered, so he follows them. It's a moment of joy. Two trucks have already arrived and many more are coming. Isa and I ask the people working at the monastery as well as the refugees for some help whilst Boulos and Ninson checks off everything that is being unloaded from the trucks. Elias' father approaches us again. Ninson has a positive message for him: "On my way to the monastery I got hold of the doctor who is willing to see me in Sweden and discuss a possible operation." Elias' mother and father get teary-eyed. We do as well. A few hours later Ninson gathers the refugees and monastery workers to a big meeting to talk about the help. We ask them to set up rules. If you use a washing machine it has to be cleaned afterwards, the same with the kitchen appliances and anything else funded by donors in Sweden via UI, so that we keep everything in the best shape possible. There are a lot of emotions. Many approach us to say thank you. There's even more tears when they find out a shipping container with food and clothes is headed to Beirut. Ninson also tells them that the doctor has received a box of medicines »



The help from UI arrives to the monastery in a caravan of small pickups.

they now can ask him for. Isa points to the time; it's a busy schedule and at 1 P.M. we need to leave for our next meeting.

At 2 P.M. we arrive at the shopping mall where Habib Afram and his family are having brunch. From a monastery and refugees to a shopping mall filled with designer shops. From Arabic coffee in small cups to café lattes in big glasses -- this is Lebanon in a nutshell. Ninson hands Afram some money which we have agreed with Bishop Boulos Safar in Zahle should go to rents for twenty families, the most deprived, during the last two months of the winter. Before our last meeting we also have time to go through the list of people who should sit in the committee to organise the handling of the items in the shipping containers arriving from Germany. From Germany word reaches us that it's important that a representative from the Chaldean-catholic church is included in the committee. Afram is well acquainted

with the president of the church in Beirut and tells us that won't be a problem. I call Abdulmesih Abraham to tell him we have one meeting left and it is with the evangelical priest Nebil Mamarbasi.

AT 4 PM WE ARRIVE AT Mamarbasi's office. It's in direct connection with the government building. He is grateful for the offer to sit in the committee, and that Germany has thought about crossing church boundaries. Afram and Mamarbasi both sit in another committee founded by Christians in Lebanon. The former Maronite patriarch, His Holiness Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, is president of that committee. "Our job is to research what every church does and will do for refugees. From our research we will then put together a report that is being handed over to the Lebanese government. We have been here for two years and we are preparing a big event next spring," Afram tells us, and Mamarbasi

nods approvingly. Mamarbasi says that the number of Syrian refugees is officially 170,000 and that it isn't known how many of those are Christians. But then it isn't known how many aren't registered. If every church takes to register members there would be a good overview.

Afram and Mamarbasi tell us that there are twelve major church affiliations in Lebanon, six catholic and six others, such as Orthodox. "Every church also has a volunteer organisation. The Armenians for example have a long history of volunteer work and can share their knowledge," says Mamarbasi. That's why you need to organise the help he says. Everyone can contribute with something. Afram develops that reasoning by saying that the most important thing is a database of information about each and every refugee. "Who is he/she? Where have they fled from? What are their needs? What are their living arrangements in Lebanon? It is much easier to help if we are in the know."

The time is almost 4:40 P.M. We exit the impressive building that Mamarbasi's church takes care of and we are met by the first Islamic call for prayer. We are once again reminded of the complexity of Lebanon. We have only spent our time on the Christian side.

Afram takes us to central Beirut. At restaurant Pauls we eat salad and salmon in order to rush for the next meeting.

AT 6:15 WE MEET archbishop George Saliba, he is very happy today. What we, or more precisely donors in Sweden, have done for the monastery was needed he says. But he is tired. He almost can't handle all the rumours that are being spread about him, at the same time as he is trying to do his best. He is a tired and ill man and all he wants is peace and quiet so he can do his job he says. That glimmer in his eye is still there but after reciting all the negative things he said he is happy again and wants us to tell him about all the meetings



Washing machines, beds, mattresses and other items are delivered to the monastery and we all are helping out to bring it in. Ninson and Isa walk around with Tony Boulos and check all items from the order verifications.

we've had in anticipation of the arrival of the shipping container. When we get up to leave he asks us to sit down again. We get up once again ten minutes later, he tells us to sit down. He just doesn't want us to leave him. There's a call to our Lebanese mobile. Now we have to go, we have several other meetings booked in.

It's now 8 and one of the bishop's assistants, Abgar, is driving us to the hotel. When he has left we sit down in the lobby and phone back to the call we missed. It is the smuggler. We have previously talked to another smuggler on the phone and we don't want to leave Lebanon before we have met any of them, they are an important part of our research. The person who is on the phone to us wants to meet us outside a big grocery store which is thirty minutes car journey from the hotel. I call Shafiq, our Shiite taxi driver that we have used once before during this trip. Shafiq personifies Lebanon. His grandmother was a Christian Maronite, his granddad was a Shiite, and his other grandparents were Druze. On our way to the meeting with the smuggler I try to get information out of him. He prefers to talk about women, beauty and relationships whilst I want to talk about smuggling humans.

AT 9.30 WE STOP at the grocery store as agreed. The smuggler is standing outside waiting for us. He cuts right to the chase, no chitchat. What do we need help with? We ask about whole families, single people, women, men. How do you smuggle them out the best, smoothest and least dangerous way? "If it is a lonely girl and she has relatives in Sweden and there is someone that resembles her and is about the same age and same height, then the best thing to do is for someone to bring the Swedish passport and I will get a stamp that verifies that the owner of this passport has travelled within Lebanon. Then the Syrian refugee girl travels back on the same passport. If there is no access to Swedish passports the immigrants have

to buy domestic visas, that is a Schengen visa which proves they have entry to for example Poland. When they have arrived in Warszawa it's easy for them to access Sweden." There are many ways. The smuggler knows what he's talking about. He also has "colleagues" in Sweden, Syria and other neighbouring countries.

At 10.30 Shafiq takes us to an immigrant family. They are Christians from north Syria. We really want to see how the apartments look. There are four adults and four children there to start with. One of the men has a job. He works sixteen hours a day, six days a week for 650 dollars a month. The rent is 800 dollars. The apartment is 50 square metres. We ask them if they will leave for Europe. The man that works in Beirut says he has been offered a job in Sweden and he's hoping for his work permit to be arranged soon so that him and his family - wife and four children - can travel. The other man says that he and his sister, the other two of the four adults living there, are trying to find reliable smugglers. To go back to Syria is unthinkable, at least in the near future. There are three other adults living in the apartment but they don't want to join us. We learn that two hours in, it's now 12.30 A.M. and we feel bad that three people don't have access to their temporary home because of us. We say our goodbyes.

ON THE 31ST OF DECEMBER, New Years Eve, the plane leaves for Sweden, with a quick stop in Istanbul, where Isa finally gets to cut his hair and have his beard shaved with a shaving-knife. I glance at two other young men and say that they are most definitely refugees. Ninson and Isa laugh at me. They think I've gone a bit crazy, that I see refugees in all people. When we land at Arlanda both those men are ahead of us in the queue. One of them goes straight through the passport control. The other one is stopped. I look knowingly towards Ninson and Isa. When the police arrive something weird happens. The other



I call people smugglers. At last we decide to meet one of them the same evening.

man comes back and asks the passport control staff to open so he can talk to the other man. “Stupid and weird, if he is a smuggler he should know that it is a crime and that he shouldn’t come back. It has to be a relative to the man that the police have been called for, he doesn’t know its illegal and he will get caught for smuggling.” Another man ahead of us in the queue is stopped. He only has an ID with him, he claims to have lost his passport in Greece, or so he tells the passport control staff. She doesn’t believe him; she thinks he has sold his passport. The police take him aside.

ON JANUARY 2, 2013 I start to look for the doctor that will operate on Elias. He is surprised that Elias is in Beirut. When they were in touch previously he was a patient in Aleppo. The doctor said he is willing to help if I can arrange financial donors. An operation in Sweden is too expensive;

it can cost him over a million Swedish kronor, but maybe in Beirut or Amman. We agree that I will check with Stockholm Care, investigate how much it will cost to get Elias here as well as operate and rehabilitate him. I promise that I will chase up on funding. ■


Nuri Kino
JANUARY 11, 2013





Another Refugee

Around thirty Syrian refugees have been arriving in the Swedish town Södertälje every week during this autumn, and nearly all are Christians. The politicians of Södertälje fear the arrival of more of these refugees, perhaps numbering in the thousands. Syrian Christians are attracted to the small municipality thirty kilometres south of Stockholm because they tend to have relatives there, and this allows for a more direct acclimatisation process. Swedish is no longer the lingua franca in Södertälje; Syriac (Assyrian) and Arabic have supplanted it. Everybody speaks of the newly arrived refugees who have been smuggled into the city and how difficult it will be for the municipality of Södertälje to accommodate them. But who are these refugees? And how did they get there? Jacob is a survivor from a refugee boat in which 30 people died.



One late night in October, he is picked up; he is going to Södertälje. His father and uncle have decided this, as a way to save his life. He can no longer attend the university in Syria because the abductions and killings of Christians, and leaving his studies mean joining the military or being punished as a deserter.

TWO MONTHS LATER, I am invited for coffee with my uncle. A distant relative joins us. He is reticent, apparently dispirited, not at all the way I had remembered him from the previous family gatherings. I ask him how he is doing. He looks down at the table and starts to cry. My uncle says that it is likely that Yosef, as the relative is named, has lost a nephew, Jacob. Jacob fled Syria to escape military conscription and participation in the war. He had been on the run for two months before he suddenly disappeared. Yosef relates the story as tears trickle down his cheeks;

“He may have ended up in a container and stopped breathing or drowned in a boat. I haven’t talked to him in a whole week. His parents, who are still in Syria, have likewise heard nothing. He’s gone. I feel guilty. I should have met him when he was in Greece, instead I allowed him to use smugglers.”

Two weeks later, I am again invited to my uncle. He wants to make use of his veranda one last time before the advent of winter. We are a dozen people around the table, and a young man sits a bit farther away from the table, quiet, with shoulders slouching forward. He is looking at the floor.

Yosef smiles and points at the young man, and he says that that is Jacob. He arrived. Yosef is happy. But Jacob is not—he is broken.

During that month I meet Jacob several times. After consulting with a nurse, a doctor, and a psychiatrist, I have decided to write Jacob’s story. Another refugee’s story. Another new inhabitant of Söder-

tälje with traumatic baggage.

“WE HAD JUST FINISHED SCHOOL for the day when some men jumped out of a car and grabbed hold of two of my friends, a girl and a boy. He was forced into a car, while she got away. An older man, a cabdriver, managed to pull her out of the grasp of the men. After robbing and assaulting the boy, who is a Christian like me, they left him lying on the street.”

If you attend university in Syria, you are exempted from military service. Jacob had only been studying economics for a year when yet another friend was abducted and severely assaulted. Jacob’s father did not allow his son to continue his studies. A few months after, the police harshly arrested Jacob—calling him donkey, idiot, and a plethora of other insults—for his failure to joining the military after leaving his studies at the university. Someone had reported him for his absence from the university.

“Two men on a motorcycle asked me about my parents’ house. I asked why they were looking for my parents without revealing my identity. Finally, I said that I was their son and asked what they wanted with my parents. I didn’t know that they were police. My father had many friends, and I thought that these two men might be my father’s friends. I never should have. They grabbed my arms and forced me onto the motorcycle. They told me that I was a deserter, that I should have been in the military, and that they were policemen. We were three on the motorcycle, one police sitting in front of me and one behind me. They escorted me to the local office of the military.

“I was taken to a room where an officer was waiting. I was obviously nervous and held my arms crossed. The officer was furious, screaming that I should show more respect and hold my arms at attention position. He cursed me, that I was an animal, a donkey, a dog, and that he would make sure that the other soldiers would assault

me. I had never before been in such an office. He told me that I would be sent to the army at once. I answered that I was a student, and, as a student, I was exempted from military duty. He said that I was full of shit, that they knew of my absence at the university, and, therefore, I had lost my right to exemption.

“My neighbours had witnessed the police picking me up. They immediately called my father. I had been in the military office for an hour when my father arrived with proof of me being a student. During that hour, I was standing at exactly the same spot. I asked if I could sit down, but the officer yelled at me to shut up and stand still. He used the phone and conducted other errands while I waited—on what I didn’t know.”

Jacob’s father headed straight for a supervising officer, paid a fine of 6775 lire because his son had not fulfilled his military duty. The whole thing was of course a sham, the money went straight into the supervising officer’s pocket. Jacob states:

“A father would do anything for his son. Anything to keep his children out of harm’s way.” Two of Jacob’s friends—of the same age and from the same neighbourhood—had died in the war. Of course, both father and son were terrified. Jacob almost yells when he says that he could never bear arms and definitively not shoot someone. Jacob was supposed to come to Sweden even before the arrest. He had a job at a restaurant waiting for him, and he could come to Sweden on a work permit.

“WE DROVE HOME IN FATHER’S car, and I asked my father what had happened. But he told me not to think of it and not to be afraid. He had worked everything out,

that was the only answer I received. Back home, we were met by a hysterical mother who was crying. She never thought that I would come back. She screamed that I had to leave the country immediately; I was absolutely not to remain in Syria! They couldn’t take me to war. I have three brothers, one who is two years younger than me, one who is four years younger, and a third brother who is still a baby. They were just as afraid and cried. My aunt, my uncle, and my uncle’s wife were also there waiting for us to get home. My uncle told me not to worry, that they would never allow anyone to take me to the military. They would save me whatever the cost.

They would sell their houses, their cars, anything to prevent me ending up in the military. I still feel discomfort and fear when I think of that day.

“A week later, about two in the morning, as I lay in bed and thought of our future, I heard a

knock on the door. I was very scared. I had not left the house since the meeting with the police, and I now feared that they had come for me. When I heard my uncle’s voice, I calmed down.” Jacob goes quiet for a moment, looks up at the ceiling, swallows, looks at me with glossy eyes and continues.

“My mother came to my room, sat on the bed and told me not to leave the country, not to do as my father and uncle had been planning behind my back—leave Syria with the help of smugglers. She hugged me hard and cried. I cried too. My father and uncle came into my room and said they would help me pack. I would leave Syria. I had never been abroad before. My brothers woke up, the smallest one crying uncontrollably. I had been taking care of him in recent months, while my mother

“ He may have ended up in a container and stopped breathing or drowned in a boat. I haven’t talked to him in a whole week. His parents, who are still in Syria, have likewise heard nothing.

worked—she is a teacher. We were all very sad. It was terrible. Mother packed a bag. Just when I was going, she stood in front of me and told me not to do it. She had heard so many horrible stories of others who had been smuggled from Syria, that some had drowned, while others had died in narrow containers. My uncle moved her away.

“MY FATHER AND UNCLE DROVE me to a minivan. There were twenty-four of us, both boys and girls, five in each seat. The driver was alone, no other smugglers. He didn’t know where we were going. He called to get his instructions. We drove to a village where the opposition ruled. All I know is that they were Kurds.

“I knew some of the others in the bus, and it made me feel somewhat safe. Otherwise, I would probably felt very lonely. In the village, a change of drivers took place. Now the sight was on Turkey. We were stopped several times, each time I felt like my heart jumped out of my body; the first time by government forces. One of the soldiers looked into the minivan and asked where we were headed. We replied with what the smuggler had taught us. We said that we were headed to the university. The second time the free Syrian army, the opposition, stopped us, and we used the same reply. In no man’s land, in the small area between Syria and Turkey, I received orders to drive a car. The minivan driver drove a second car. And another boy drove a third car. There were eight of us in my car. All windows were tinted, except for the windshield. Once inside Turkey, we were picked up by a new minivan.”

The Turkish border police near the town of Urfa likewise asked us where we’re headed. We replied that we were on our way to visit a monastery in Turkey, and that we were all Christians.

“The journey from Syria to Turkey had taken seven hours, from three to ten in the morning. In Turkey, we got a new driver who only spoke Turkish. We were told

that we were going to Istanbul, that was all we understood. In one week I would be in Sweden. One week, I could endure that.”

The minivan went straight to Istanbul and took eighteen hours with two stops. The driver asked us for money so he could buy food.

What we were most afraid of was to end up in refugee camps. We had heard horrible stories of what people had to endure and suffer there. We arrived in Istanbul at noon. The entire journey hitherto had taken more than a day. We stopped at a bus station; it had been a legal journey thus far. But we had no other travel documents than our passports, and we were afraid that someone would ask us for our identifications. The first driver had taken them from us. The smugglers ensure payment by seizing the refugee’s documentation. If my father would fail to make the payment, the smugglers would hand my documentation over to the police with the claim that I had fled the country in order not to join the military and defend my country. This would expose my family to great danger. The passports we kept all the way to Istanbul.

“IN ISTANBUL WE MET Syrian smugglers; they told us to take a taxi, four in each taxi, to a cafe, and there were other refugees there—now there were more than thirty of us. We stayed at the café till ten. Another minivan picked us up, and there



we sat all thirty of us, pressed together, without being able to move. The driver asked for our passports. He said that we didn't need them anymore; in fact, he said, it would benefit us to get rid of them. Then he drove to a forest and he asked us to jump out of the minivan. A young boy, about 15 years old, appeared. We followed him for eight hours in the forest until we heard the sound of water. We didn't understand a word of what he said, instead we communicated with gestures. He asked us to use bicycle pumps to inflate three inflatable boats. They would carry us across the strait.

Two of us had been ordered to carry the inflatable boats in sacks as we left the bus. We had wondered what the sacks contained.

There were four women, three children, and approximately twenty men. Three of the women were pregnant. The current was strong, but we managed to paddle across. There were twelve of us in my boat. We were first to arrive on the other side. We didn't know where we were, but according to the young smuggler we had left Turkey behind us and were now in Greece."

WE WALKED FOR an hour and came upon the Greek border police. The women were very tired, and so were we. The majority of us were

// The third time, the police told me to stop trying, that I would never succeed, that they would send me back to Syria if I showed up at the airport again. But the smugglers encouraged me to continue trying.

Christians; five were Muslims. The police took us to what looked like a prison. It was dawn, and we stayed there till five in the afternoon. An interpreter from Lebanon asked us where we had come from and if we were Christians. He asked us to pray, to say Our Father. When he heard me say the whole prayer, he told me not to be afraid, that nothing would happen to us in Greece, but that we had to leave the country within ten days. Here I was, in a country far away from my own and without any form of identification.

From the first Greek town we came to, we travelled to Athens by bus, which we had to pay for ourselves. The police gave

us a note that we were refugees. The bus ride took a day. In Athens we met new smugglers. Unbelievable it may seem, but they knew what bus we would take and what time we would arrive. They were Kurds from Syria. They divided us up, families by

themselves and young men by themselves.

I was taken to a flat with two rooms and a kitchen. Some twenty men were placed there. Three disappeared and three arrived each day. I was there for a month and twenty-six days. There were no mattresses, and we slept on the floor. We showered three times, or about that many times. Each time I tried to sleep, I dreamt of my mother's voice telling me not to escape, not to use smugglers, and I would wake up. It was too crowded on the floor if all were to sleep at the same time, so we took turns sleeping. We were all crowded into one room. The second room was used for gambling machines, probably illegal ones.

Five times with five different passports—Italian, Hungarian, and others—I tried to board a plane to be



smuggled into Sweden or any other country in Europe. I was unlucky. Each time we tested new airlines and new destinations. The third time, the police told me to stop trying, that I would never succeed, that they would send me back to Syria if I showed up at the airport again. But the smugglers encouraged me to continue trying.

“In one of the trips to the airport, the driver of the taxi was speeding. I and my friend were in the back. There was a crash! It was the other driver’s fault. I wasn’t wearing my seatbelt, so I ended up in the front seat. The car was totalled, but we still managed to get to the airport in it. When we arrived at the airport, the plane had already left. We returned to the flat.

FIVE DAYS LATER, we were told that we were going on a boat that would take us to France or Italy. We were never told exactly where. Taxis drove us for an hour till we came to a house. It was a brothel. We stayed there for more than a day.

They had told me that we would be five in the boat. We were seventy. Three small busses picked us up from the brothel. When the smugglers stopped, they poin-

ted to a container and wanted us to climb in. We refused. They showed us their guns and forced us into the containers. It was boiling hot in there. Seventy persons were close to suffocation. A lock was put on the door. We had to do everything in the container, urinate...” He falls silent. “We stayed in the container for three hours or perhaps longer.

When the door finally opened, the seventy of us almost fought each other to get out and breathe the fresh air. Only a few minutes after, we were forced into two minivans. Again we were crammed tight, thirty-five persons in each vehicle. For seven or eight hours, the minivans drove. When we got out of the minivans, it was pitch-black. A smuggler led us through a forest for eight hours. We walked and walked, fell, and hurt ourselves. I bled from cuts on my legs. We received a bottle of water and a chocolate bar, and we lay down to sleep in the dark forest.

I don’t know how I fell asleep or for how long I slept, but it was still dark out when I was awakened and told that the boat had arrived. But the boat was two hours away by foot. When we arrived at the water, it was very shallow; I asked if we really would take a boat from here, but I received no answer. With a small flashlight, the smugglers signalled a sailboat. A reply came from the sailboat.

Three persons pulled the boat to shore. Everyone except me and my four friends boarded.

Then my friends boarded, but I refused. It was a small sailboat, crammed.

A smuggler threatened me with his gun. I had two choices he said, either I



board or...and he pointed his gun at me.”

Jacob shows with his hands how the smuggler cloaks his gun. He pauses, pours more tea, stands up and takes long strides into my uncle’s living room. He wants to show me the size of the boat.

”The boat was ten times three meters, and there were seventy of us under deck. The boat was deep in the water. The smugglers on the boat were Europeans. They closed a metal door, sealing us from the outside. The Arabic-speaking smuggler who had accompanied us said that the boat ride would take four hours, and then we heard how he jumped off.

THE BOAT RIDE TOOK FOUR DAYS.

They gave us water to drink only once a day. We defecated, urinated, and vomited directly onto the floor. Six small windows, one decimetre each, was all the light we had. I was youngest on the boat. There were seven of us from Syria, five Christians and two Kurds, and we kept together; the rest came from other parts of the world. We were afraid. I was wearing a cross, someone saw it and spat at it. Many of the non-Christians attacked us. It was dark and we found it hard to defend ourselves. But there were twenty others who treated us well and stepped in to stop the attacks. I was scratched on my back, there was blood, and I struggled to open one of my eyes, on which I had received a severe blow. We shouted to the smugglers in English that we would die if we didn’t arrive soon, that we would kill each other. One of the smugglers replied that there were only a few more hours left till arrival. We had no idea where we would end up. On the fourth day, I was exhausted. I struggled to lift my arms. I was

” They gave us water to drink only once a day. We defecated, urinated, and vomited directly onto the floor. Six small windows, one decimetre each, was all the light we had. I was youngest on the boat.

more dead than alive. I remember thinking that I no longer cared if the boat arrived or not, I was dead anyway.

SUDDENLY, WE HIT A ROCK or something similar, we thought. The boat stopped. We shouted for the smugglers, but they had taken off. Three of us managed to break the door from the inside. The boat was lurching to the left and the right, and we understood that we had to distribute our weight evenly.

Now we could breathe. We could barely move because of our fatigue. The European smugglers must have left with another boat. Three jumped into the water.

We could see land in the distance, about one kilometre away. They swam towards land. Eventually, once on land, they signalled to us with a flashlight they had taken with them from the boat. The rest of us were terrified, but we jumped into the water. What other

choice did we have? One of my friends experienced cramp, could not swim, and we helped him onto land. Two others, the Kurds from Syria, screamed for help. They could not swim. One of them pleaded and screamed that he was a father, that he had children, that his family was in Switzerland.

I found nuts on land, and I ate them to regain some of my strength. We found some tires on land that could be used to keep the struggling father afloat. It took an hour to tow him from the boat. When I got back onto land I was exhausted.

I asked the muslim if he would have helped me if i had been in the same situation. He said he wouldn’t since I am a Christian. But for the rest of his life he would never forget that I helped him and

from now on he would change. Other people weren't as lucky as he was.

JACOB WANTS TO STOP he does not seem to have the energy to continue his story today. He is going home to take his medicine. His uncle calls the next day to apologise for Jacob, saying that Jacob has to take psychofarmaka to cope with each day. A few days later, we meet at the distinguished Tidermans patisserie in Södertälje Centrum. I buy a saffron bun and gingerbread for Jacob. He seems brighter. He likes the saffron bun, and I buy him another one. He does not appreciate the gingerbread. They taste too strong, he says. He wants to continue his story; he asks where did we stop?

"It was cold and wet. One of us had a lighter; it was wet, but it still worked. It was like a miracle. We had no clothes on except for our underwear, t-shirts and shorts. I also had a plastic bag containing two hundred and fifty euros and a mobile phone, which I had kept hidden in my underwear. We managed to build a fire. Still it was dark and cold. One of us was hit by cramps, and he was unable to move. It took an hour before he could move again.

I don't know if anyone remained in the boat, someone probably remained. Many had been unable to swim, others unconscious, others drowned. It was impossible to help them all, especially the ones who could not swim but had decided to jump into the water.

For a long time, we tried to warm ourselves by sitting on rocks placed around the fire. One survivor said that we should keep on moving, that it was a waste of time just sitting here.

We climbed and descended a small mountain. We never knew when or how

we would fall and hit ourselves. We were constantly worried about each other and ourselves. I cut my foot on a piece of rock, my shoes being worn and torn a long time ago."

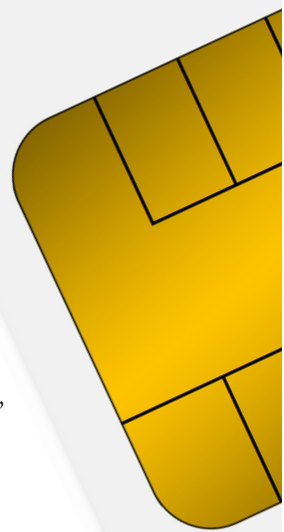
Jacob slowly takes off his shoe to show me the scar on his foot.

"The blood flowed, but we could do nothing but continue. We climbed for two hours. The rocks were sharp, and the sun melted the snow on the mountaintops. Finally we arrived at a road. We didn't know what country we were in or in what part of the world. We walked for two kilometres. A truck was passing by, and when the driver saw the state in which we were in,

he stopped and allowed us to sit on the back of the truck. The truck driver took us to a lonely hotel, far away from other settlements.

// I don't know if anyone remained in the boat, someone probably remained. Many had been unable to swim, others unconscious, others drowned. It was impossible to help them all.

The police came to the hotel, and they drove us to a town where we slept in a gymnasium. There were forty of us from the boat there. I don't know what happened to the other thirty. I fell asleep on the floor and awoke ten hours later. An interpreter was brought, and he asked how many of us were Christians from Syria. We said that there were five of us,



and we were pulled aside. We were given spaghetti; our first meal in a long time, and I vomited. I was taken to a doctor. He gave me a cursory glance and asked for my fingerprints. That was all.

NOT LONG AFTER ARRIVAL, we had to leave the gymnasium. We asked where we should go, but it was up to ourselves. The interpreter was gone. We left the gymnasium. We wanted to find the centre of town. We sat down at a café and had a cup of coffee. We were still dressed in shorts and t-shirts. People stared at us. We boarded a bus with a driver who spoke no English. We tried to explain that we needed to get to a train station. I still had my mobile phone, but the smugglers had taken all of our simcards. The last time I had used it was in Greece, when I spoke to my family. From that time, it had been turned off.”

During that time, Jacob had not been in contact with his family. He did not know what had happened to them in war-torn Syria, and they, likewise, did not know what had happened to him.

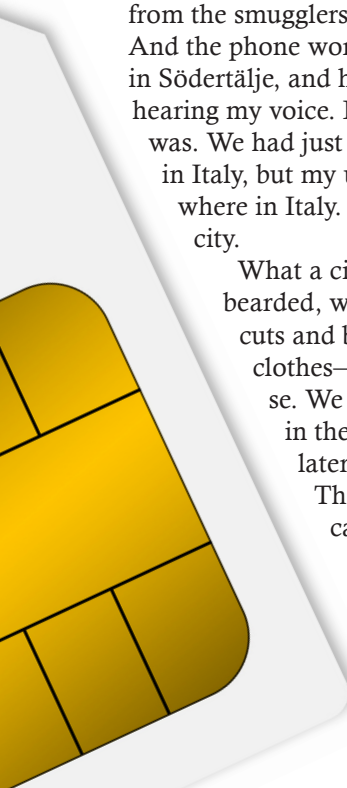
”With the money I had hidden away from the smugglers, I could buy a simcard. And the phone worked! I called my uncle in Södertälje, and he cried out with joy at hearing my voice. He asked me where I was. We had just found out that we were in Italy, but my uncle wanted to know where in Italy. Milan was the closest city.

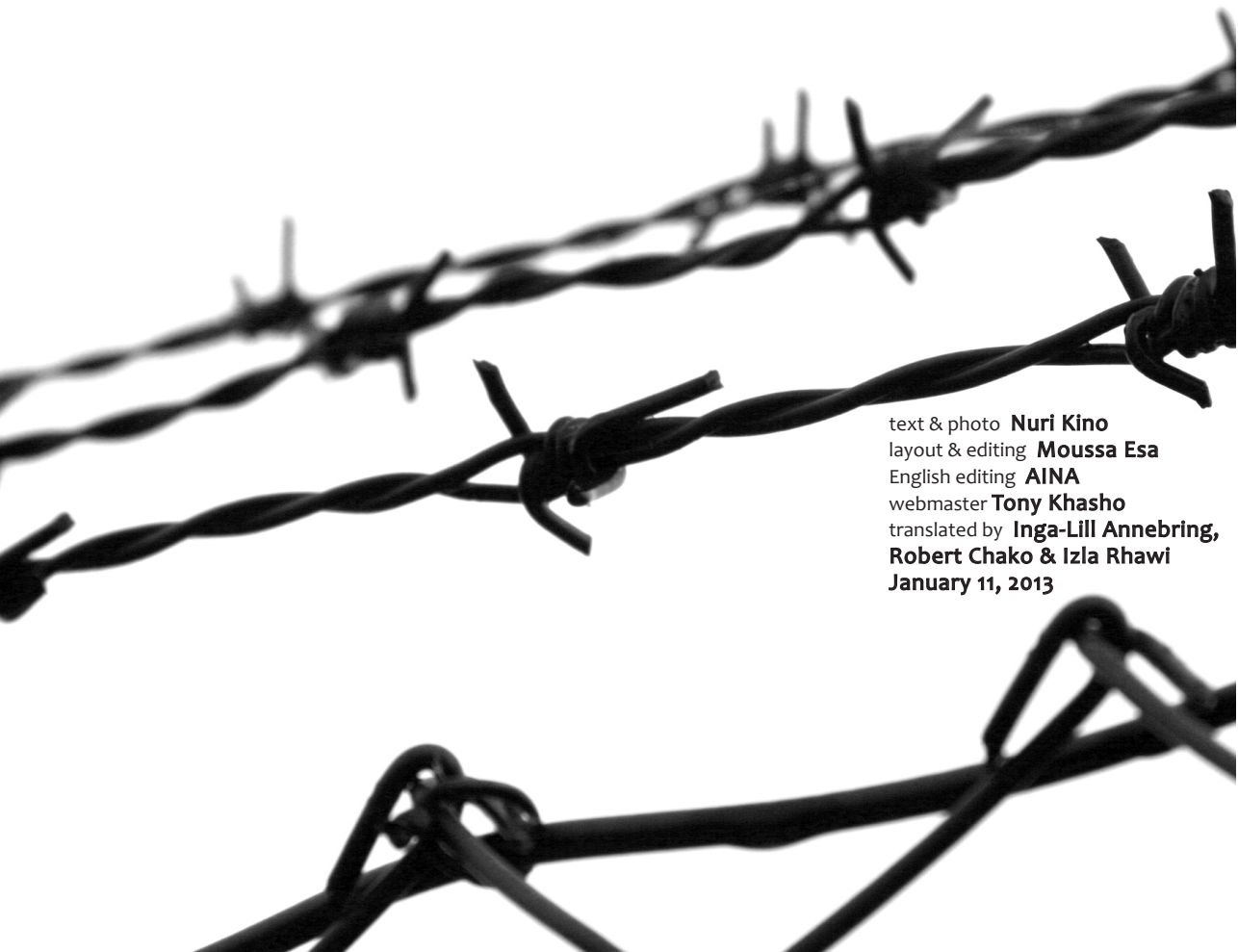
What a city Milan was. I-bearded, with a black eye, with cuts and bruises, with no clean clothes—had landed in paradise. We arrived in Milan seven in the morning, and two days later, I was in Södertälje.

The smugglers could now cash in.”

AT THE LOCAL HEALTH CLINIC IN SÖDERTÄLJE, Jacob was put on a scale, he weighed

59 kilograms. He usually weighs around seventy kilograms. In the journal entries from his visits with the doctor, it is written that Jacob is both physically and mentally exhausted, broken. He can no longer sleep without taking sleeping pills, and he is forced to ingest several different medications to get his intestines to work properly. When Jacob applied for a residence permit in Sweden, he was told that he should be deported to Greece but will not because of humanitarian reasons. Now the Swedish Migration Board wants to deport him to Italy, which according to the Dublin Regulation is the Schengen country, in addition to Greece, where he entered Europe. ■





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