

Beloved Syria

Beloved Syria | Considering Syrian Perspectives | Second Edition | 2017



- Fadi's Love for the Oud
- Mustafa Ali – Sculptor
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- Suhail – Aspiring World Cup Referee
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To Our Readers,

Beloved Syria aims to reveal the beauty of Syria: its landscape, culture and traditions, art and music, monuments and relics, and not least the loving faiths practised by its people. Syrians express a great love for their country, a deep affection that indicates their links to the land and its history. Damascus and Aleppo, the two oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, are in Syria.

Since their country connects continents, 'Syrians' have borne occupations and wars for millennia.

Many of us would have distant ancestors that passed through the land we now call Syria.

We hope *Beloved Syria* helps you to feel connected to this ancient land and its resilient people.

Many people have enabled us to bring this magazine together. We thank particularly those who supported our crowd funding campaign.

Your faith in us made this 2nd issue of *Beloved Syria* possible. But our special thanks must go to the Syrians and non-Syrians who responded so positively to our request to present them in the magazine.

You have ensured this issue of *Beloved Syria* is very special indeed.

Most of us on the *Beloved Syria* team were linked by our work or studies at AMES Australia (Flagstaff), a multicultural hub: a meeting place we valued greatly. Now dear readers, we look forward to your feedback.

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Cover Photo: Portrait of Fadi Haddad taken by Jacqueline Mitelman

THROUGH LOVE AND LEARNING, WORKING FOR A UNITED AND PEACEFUL WORLD



*Pigeons near
the Western Temple Gate,
Damascus, 2008*

Mairead Maguire, co-founder of a grassroots peace group in Northern Ireland, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. In an effort to break the siege of Gaza, in 2008, Ms Maguire sailed with an international peace group to Gaza on the SS Dignity. She has since headed peace delegations to Lebanon and Syria. In June 2012, Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire wrote:

People around the world are deeply concerned about the ongoing crisis in Syria.

While we are being presented with some perspective of what is occurring on the ground to the people of Syria, the door seems closed to others. We search for voices we can trust, voices which point to a peaceful, lasting solution to the conflict. We search for truth because it is truth which will set the Syrian people free. Truth is difficult to find, so through the haze of conflicting narratives we must inevitably hear the voices and wisdom of men and women of peace in Syria.

Many may believe that there is a fight going on in Syria for 'democracy' and 'freedom'. We can be seduced into thinking there is a magic wand or instant formula to mix that will create a democratic country, but there are none. If it is a democracy a people want they must strive for it in their own way.

It is said the Greek idea of democracy was that people would be equally valued.

This is something every society has to strive for at every point in its history; it itself is a 'revolutionary' concept and a non-violent revolutionary action. Strive to value everyone equally. It is an idea, a motivation for a better world that doesn't require blood; it requires

the hard work of people and the nurturing of a community spirit; a constant growing of peace and it starts within each human heart.

Who are the voices of peace in regard to the crisis in Syria? Many of them we cannot hear from where we are standing. They are the mothers and father and children who want to leave their homes to walk to market or to school without fear.

They are the people, who have been working hard for Syria, for the idea of Syria as a secular and modern country. There are some Syrian voices that have been heard consistently since the beginning of the crisis.

Many of them are anonymous and they speak to us about injustices and atrocities. Numbers are given and fingers are pointed. The blame may be apportioned correctly or it may not.

Everything is happening too quickly; commentators and politicians are making decisions with haste and looking only in one corner for support for their certainty.

But in the heat of the madness of violent ethnic/political conflict we must listen and ask questions and hear and speak with some uncertainty because it is certainty that can take a people and a country in a rush to war.

Reprinted with permission from Ms Maguire



Michel Pearce and Bruce Petty in Beit Jabri, Damascus, 2009

By Susan Dirgham, July 2017

In 2009, Bruce Petty – a political satirist, cartoonist and filmmaker – included Damascus on his list of cities to visit for a documentary film project, a follow-up to his 2007 film *Global Haywire*, for which Bruce won the AFI Best Documentary Director prize.

I had met Bruce at the Melbourne Writers Festival the year before and when he later informed me that he was off to Syria with his trusty cameraman/filmmaker, Michel Pearce, I put my hand up to be his trusty ‘producer’. He accepted.

This led me back to a city that felt like a second home. I had lived in Damascus for two years, so had wandered its souqs, sat in its cafés, listened to the oud being played in old city restaurants, bought a Bedouin rug, heard the call to prayer and church bells ring, and had warmed to the locals. I proudly presented Damascenes to Bruce and Mike.

As well as introducing Bruce to old friends, former colleagues at the Council introduced me to local intellectuals of note, one of them being the sculptor and non-conformist Mustafa Ali. The theme Bruce chose for his pilot documentary was ‘utopia’. In presenting questions to Mustafa for this magazine, we returned to that theme. (Unfortunately, Bruce’s film project didn’t receive the funding needed to complete it, and his interview with Mustafa is lost in a drawer or box somewhere.)

Remembering Syria and Syrians_ The sculptor Mustafa Ali. By Lara Dumston, 16 February 2014 (Ref: Grantpismo Travels)

Mustafa Ali is hardly the kind of person you expect to see on a Power 100 list. A diminutive, ginger-bearded man with a generous smile and twinkling eyes, Syria’s greatest sculptor is known for his big heart and considerable hospitality, as much as he’s renowned for his bronze sculptures. Arabian Business magazine named him one of the Arab world’s most influential cultural figures — two years running.

The country’s most beloved and most successful artist in Syria and abroad, Mustafa Ali has been a key player in transforming the almost abandoned Jewish Quarter from a dilapidated area devoid of life to a vital and vibrant neighbourhood. The artist has a vision for the whole of the Old City and a plan for how it can be made into a much more habitable place for residents and visitors.



Mustafa Ali, Damascus, 2013

There is a theory that we need a dream or a utopia in our minds for us to act in progressive ways, or in ways that benefit humanity. Would you agree with that?

I still believe in a humanitarian dream, where everybody lives in peace. Mixing my desire with my dream, I made a miniature of an ideal city, where humans live lovingly and in peace. This dream is a necessity for the comfort of the human spirit and for the dissemination of justice and equality.

My “personal” ideal city is all that is left of my big dream. It could be described as “an artistic and intellectual oasis in Damascus”, and my doors are open to all.

I couldn’t build my big dream; thus, I created a miniature.

What is the utopia you have for Syria?

(Historic) Syria is a cradle of civilization and a hub for the creation of humanitarian ideas. Syria is a county that gives, and a country of noble ideas.

Syria is where humanity can dream. Syria now is in dire need to go back to its pure and beautiful thoughts, so people can live in harmony.

What is the utopia you have for the world?

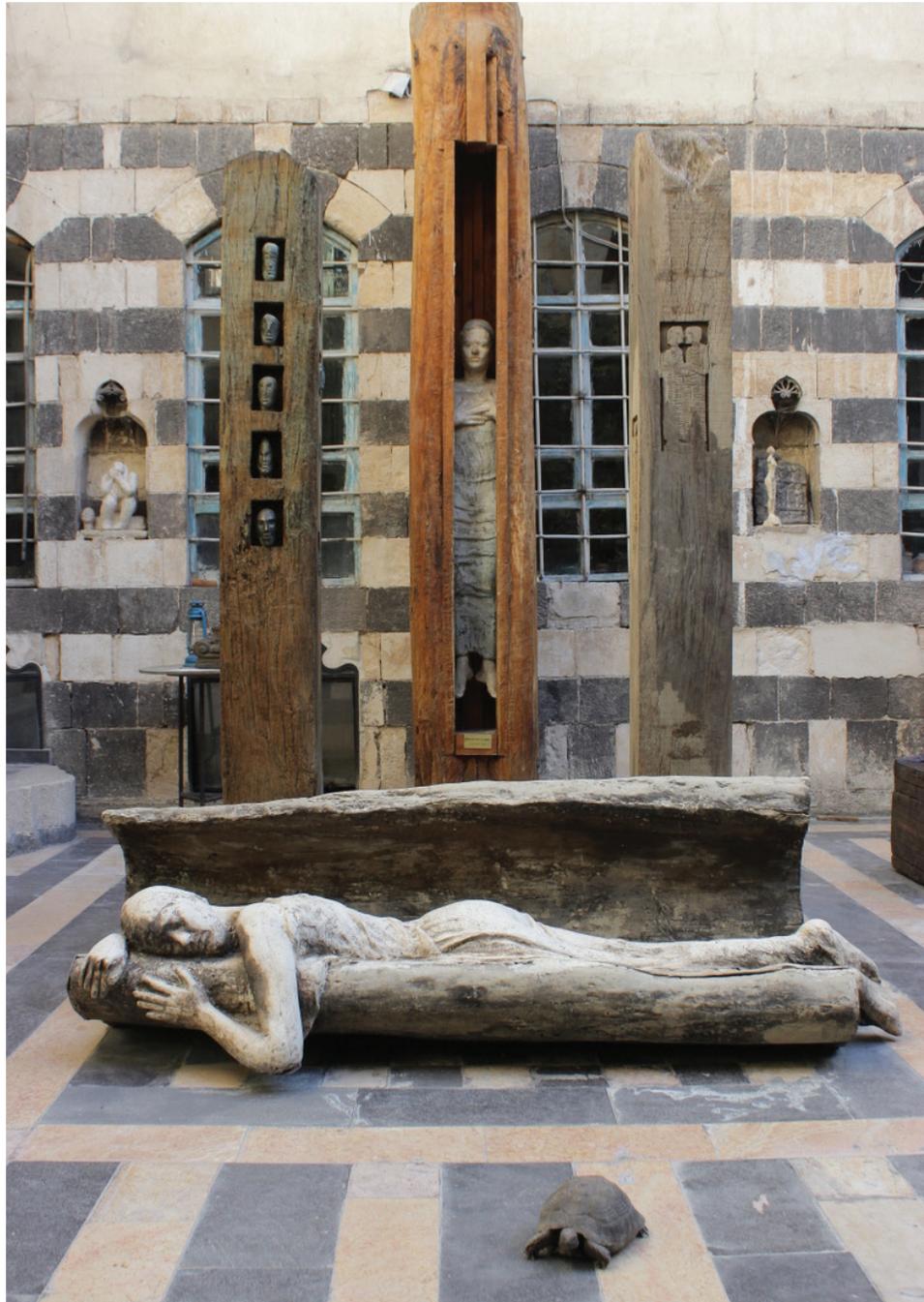
Utopia, the dream: it starts by creating islands and small spaces on earth, for people with humanitarian ways of thinking and with firm convictions. These individuals can present humanity with the possibility

of turning this dream into reality. Through resolve and determination, the dream becomes reality. It is like a drop in a large ocean, but it becomes bigger as it merges with others.

Should people commit themselves to the happiness of the wider world, and if so how can they best do that?

Humanity always brings forth people who are intellectuals, prophets and philosophers, holding noble humanitarian values. These values are the basics required for happiness. This is subject to change and development; thus, it will not be stagnant and bureaucratic or subject to laws that restrict freethinking. Human development and progress always need a new way of thinking.

What is your view of a progressive



Sculptures by Mustafa Ali

person in the context of both the society you live in and the wider world?

Our world has turned into a harsh and complicated one. Human and moral values are declining.

The world needs to look for a new solution for comforting the human soul and for spreading justice and equality. Humanity is in need of reformers and visionaries, so the human spirit can go back to happiness and tranquillity.

What do you hope to express through your art?

Individual justice, self-respect and personal freedom are essential in the lives of people.

Humanity will never collapse as long as there are individuals capable of creating change through art, the intellect and culture.

What I see in art and what I express through art are a mirror reflecting what is happening and what is going to happen. Art is an indicator of the danger that is threatening mankind.

Art is also a way of overcoming formidable obstacles. It is a stand, and an opinion. It is a declaration for humankind to build a better dream and overcome history's harsh stages.

Can you give some information to readers about the art and music scene in Syria over the past 10 years?

The artistic outlook in Syria is experiencing a distinct renaissance in all types of art. When the crisis started in Syria, Syrian art started to receive global attention. Many artistic events reflect what is happening in Syria.

Syrian art was affected by the events and presented its experience to the world, thus the whole world could see through art the horrors and terrors suffered by Syrian people. New young artists emerged from the destruction and from the tragedies faced by Syria.

These artists are delivering their



Sculptures by Mustafa Ali

tragic messages to the world.

What is your philosophy of life?

My philosophy of life is close to chaotic, where fixed ideas become deadlocked, where they are a burden.

Where do you find beauty and love?

I find love and beauty in the works of artists and people of genius. I find them also in the eyes of the people.

Art is a powerful drive for love, beauty and self-discipline.

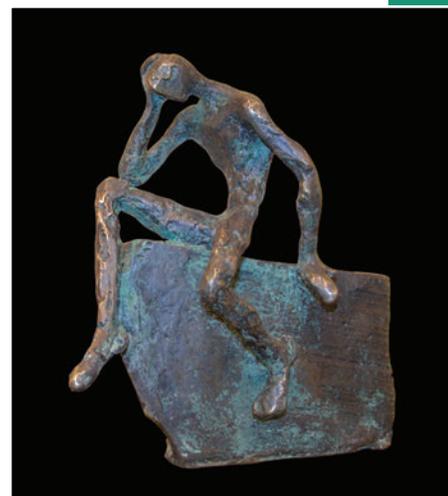
You studied fine art in both Italy and Syria. What traits do artists in Syria share with non-Syrians artists?

There are common features between my study in Syria and my study in Italy. There were the Phoenician in the Levant, and the Etruscan in Italy.

Both of them are references for my artistic soul. I belong to both families on the artistic level; they are the foundation to my growth as an artist.

Do artists everywhere strive to do something similar, and if so, what is that?

Artists worldwide have a common spirit, a distinct attitude and a purely individual style. I see all artists as being linked in their efforts to create beautiful and noble dreams for humanity.



Shaam Film Festival- Media Conference

By Greta Medawar and Carissa Gilham

In May 2017, Shaam Group presented the inaugural Shaam Syrian Film Festival in Melbourne and Sydney, with the objective of providing a platform for Syrian cinema to be screened in Australia. Sponsors of the festival included Melbourne travel agency, CedarJet Travel, and popular Sydney based Knafeh Bakery, who specialise in Jerusalem street food. The official media partner was *El-Telegraph*, Australia's longest running Arabic news publication.

The Festival featured three films, *Mariam*, *The Father*, and *Syrians*, all directed by Basil Alkhatib, a Syrian movie and TV director with a Palestinian heritage, who won the best director award for the movie *Syrians* at the 2016 Alexandria Film Festival in Egypt. He and three of the actresses featured in his movies, Sabah Jazairi, Dima Kandalafi and Maysoun Abou Assad, made the journey from Syria to Australia especially for the festival. *Beloved Syria* editors were invited to a media conference hosted by the Australia Arab Chamber of Commerce and Industry on 4th May after the screening of the three movies in Melbourne.

In a report featuring the director and actresses on ABC TV's *Lateline* (5 May 2017), Kandalafi said, "You want to do something. You want to go on with your career. You want to deliver a message. You want to say, 'I am still here. I'm an actress, I'm a Syrian actress. Hey, look at me. I'm still there. I can do a lot of things, we can do a lot of things. We still live in Syria. There is life.'"

The conference provided an opportunity for the filmmaker and leading ladies of the movies to present their account of how people have responded to the war since the civil conflict began in 2011. Below are responses to questions put forward at the Media Conference, mostly by the *Beloved Syria* team.



At table, from left: Sabah Jazairi, Maysoun Abou Assad, Safi Ayoush (from Shaam Group), Basil Alkhatib, Dima Kandalafi, Melbourne, 4 May 2017

Q: The characters in the films go on a journey through the crisis they face. What personal journeys have you gone on since the war started?

Basil Alkhatib: I believe when a country faces such a war like the war we are facing in Syria, there could be only one aspect of victory and it is when every citizen in this country considers that this war is his personal war. From this point I, as a

film director, consider that I have to participate in this war in my own way with my own weapons, which are the films, the camera, the scripts... etc.

That's why I believe, when everyone of us... I, as a director, Dima, Sabah and Maisoon as film actors, everyone is doing his part, I think this could make a step towards victory against terrorism. Making films in Syria all these years has been extremely dangerous and extremely difficult. When people ask me, "What difficulties do you face?"

I simply answer them, there is no difficulty other than the matter of staying alive. Every day we go to the film location and frankly we do not know if we will go back alive or not.

But we all believe in what we are doing and I think that this is the most important thing in these films, that we believe in ourselves, we believe in our country and we believe that we are human beings and we have the right to tell to the whole world about the suffering of the Syrian people. The three films, in spite of their differences, are talking about the suffering of the Syrian people.

Maysoun Abou Assad: We need to show the world that there is more to Syria than refugees.

These films demonstrate the strength and resilience of the human spirit and the human ability to overcome danger.

We hope it gives the Australian people a chance to learn more about Syrian culture.

Q: Syria and Iraq have gone through a similar crisis, first with the Iraqi war and now the Syrian war. The cinema industry in Iraq collapsed, while in Syria the cinema industry kept going and did not stop a day. So, Mr. Al Khatib, how could you make long feature films in these circumstances, because normally making such films needs a quiet and peaceful environment?

Basil Alkhatib: I always believe that working under pressure gives good results. When you are under pressure, when you are facing danger, I think you can get what you want most of the time.

The film *The Father* is based on a true story that took place in Syria at the beginning of the war. I did a lot of research and I met the people who were under siege in this area. Some of them survived, others have

passed away. The whole script was built upon the testament of what they witnessed. That's why I believe that documentary film is very essential, but I still believe that the feature film at this time and place is much more powerful and has the ability to reach people and affect them.

Q: What is the message you want your films to tell the Australian people and the Syrians who have lived in Australia for a long time?

Dima Kandafaft: This question has two parts. For the first part of the question, which is what is the message we want to deliver for Australians; it is that we want to deliver the message for the whole world, for every culture and for every country.

So it is not something limited by a period of time. And everybody wants to get to know everyone and get to have a good idea of their culture and how they live.

From the TV screen, you do not always get the right idea. So being here, you get to contact the people more. And the movie is always the best way, I think, to show people what kind of a human you are.

And then the second part, actually it was very hard and the four or five days were filled with a lot of emotions, because the Syrian people who have lived here for a long time, they had a really unexpected feeling. They really love and respect Australia and consider it as their home.



Maysoun Abou Assad , Safi Ayoush (from Shaam Group), and Basil Alkhatib

But they still feel nostalgic for their motherland Syria and they still are very connected to it. From the minute they saw us, they showed a lot of lovely emotions so I cried a lot and I am so proud of the Syrians living here who are still connected to their land. And I believe when someone loves and respects his homeland, he respects any country he lives in. So, my message is do not be afraid and you don't have to have fear for Syria because we are there and there are a lot of people in Syria who are working and protecting Syria.

Q: What do you believe can unite Syrians at the moment to regain their country?

Basil Alkhatib: Well it is very complicated. I believe that faith in a good future will save us all.

The situation in Syria might need decades, not years to be resolved, yet we believe that each one of us should do as much as they can, to do what can save us. Honesty and conscience can tell us what we have to do.



Basil Alkhatib and Dima Kandafaft



LENA CHAMAMYAN HAL ASMAR ELLON

Lena Chamamyán, 2014

Lena is an Armenian Syrian singer, composer and musician. Described as a Syrian ambassador spreading the jasmine voice of Damascus, she has performed in Germany, England, Sweden, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Russia, as well as her home country of Syria.

She sings mainly in Arabic and Armenian, but also in Syriac, English, French and Italian.

Lena graduated from Damascus University in 2002 and from the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus as a soprano dramatic singer in 2007.

CD review by Felicity Anne Walter, a member of Melbourne folk band Run Rabbit Run

“I have been utterly won over by the enchanting music of Lena Chamamyán. Hal Asmar Ellon, her first album, has provided the perfect soundtrack for my evening as I have sat on my balcony and watched the dusk sun illuminate the leaves of the gum trees.

It is undoubtedly a very different scene from the Syrian landscapes where the music was made.★★ It is a fitting contrast however, as it is the contrasts in Hal Asmar Ellon that make it great. The songs are a revival of Syrian and Armenian folkloric tunes played with classic and oriental instruments.

The use of jazz re-harmonisations and rhythms creates a textured soundscape which Chamamyán’s pure vocals effortlessly glide over. While I cannot

understand the lyrics as they are not in English, the emotion of the songs is conveyed very clearly through the lamenting vocals. As is written in the CD booklet, ‘music continues to be the global language that is able to comprehend all rituals, backgrounds, and forgotten ideas.’

Chamamyán’s sincere and yearning vocals transport me to a different place, at times melancholy, and at others playful and surprising.

★★Author’s note: Since writing this review I have learned that there are actually a number of gum trees in Syria. That simple misconception reinforced for me how much I have to learn about this beautiful country and the value of publications such as this.”

Shaam (Damascus)

شَام

Translated by Norma Medawar

*She is a pristine girl of a noble origin,
An origin that is as old as time
I uplifted her above all hearts and
My eyes looked up to her, glorifying
the
Creator for His creation
Here is a piece of marble in love
With the aroma of jasmine
Thus, she blossomed with roses and
basil
Musk and ambergris scent wafted in a
green
Monument with a crescent on its top
And she's made more charming by
A call to prayer reciting Allah Akbar
The call for prayer delightfully mixed
With the sounds of the ringing
of bells,
All purifying the soul
Places, full of the scent of incense,
Melt every stony heart
Shaam, you are my girl and
You are my mother
You embraced my youth; will I grow
up within you?
What shall I do to please you?
I sowed the seeds of my youth in your
land
And I was delighted
Is there anyone to cheer or to call
loudly
For the joy of a heart covered by a
wound?
It is my eternal unbroken promise,
That I wish both my grave and
my wedding dress
To be embroidered from your Arabian
jasmine*

فتاة أصيلة
بعمر القدر
سموت بها عن قلوب البشر
وراحت عيوني لمراها تعلقو
أسبّح مبدعها فيما صور
فها قطعة من رخام تعشق
رائحة الياسمين ،
فأزهر جوري وريحان
مسك وعنبر فاح
بصرح تلون أخضر علاه هلال
وزان حلاه أذان باسم الخلاق كبر
زاد دقائق الأجراس عيداً
نداء صلاة بها الروح تطهر
فتعبق بالبحور مطارح
يحن بها كل قلب تحجر
شام أنت فتاتي وأمي
حضنت صباي فهل فيكي أكبر
فما أفعل كي أنال رضاك
وفيك بذرت صباي وأبشر
فهل من يزغرد ويعلي نداء
لفرحة قلب بجرح تخمر
فما أفعل كي أنال رضاك
وفيك بذرت صبايا وأبشر
شام انت فتاتي وأمي
حضنت صبايا فهل فيكي أكبر
هو وعد دهري
فياليت قبري
وفستان عرسي
بفلك يعمر



A stencil by Luke, Aleppo, 2017

REACHING OUT TO THE PEOPLE THROUGH ART

By Maggie Brown, ESL Teacher and Artist, August 2017

For prize-winning stencil artist Luke Cornish, art is a way of reaching out to people. And his journey as an artist is an example of just that. “I used to be known as the stencil artist who was in the Archibald”, he said, “but now I’m known as the stencil artist who went to Syria”.

He is a self-taught artist, and was always drawing as a hobby. ‘It was a creative outlet, for sanity’, he said. Then in his twenties he discovered stencil art and found that with it he could use humour to express his social conscience and connect with people. For two years he worked on the streets. It could take two weeks to make a stencil with many layers, but the finished work could be destroyed in a day or so.

It was frustrating, and it was this ephemeral nature of street art that made him consider giving up his job with a sign company to work full time as an artist.

Within two months he was offered support by Metro Gallery in Armadale, Melbourne.

This gave Luke time to push his medium further, to refine his stencil

techniques by adding more and more layers and details (up to one thousand layers in some works). Before long his more evolved work gained wider recognition, winning the Australian Stencil Prize in 2010, and in 2012 he became the first stencil artist to be selected for the Archibald prize. “At the time recognition was important to me”, he said, “but I wanted to be a conflict artist, to show the human face of conflicts.”

Since being a teenager Luke had been inspired by the powerful images of artist George Gittoes, and later by the paintings of Ben Quilty. Both artists had spent time in war zones, with their work reflecting human responses to conflict, raising people’s awareness of social issues.

This was what Luke wanted to do. He wanted a humanitarian trajectory for his work. His first opportunity came in 2013 when he went to Lebanon, taking photographs that he could later use for stencils, rather than using Internet images. At that time he wanted to get to Syria but didn’t have the right paperwork. “I was very naïve,” he said. A chance came to go to

Syria 18 months later in 2016, when he joined a charity group, taking video footage for SBS.

This visit exposed him to the confronting nature of war, but also the human side of the conflict. He wanted to reach out to the people, photographing the everyday life that still goes on.

But while there he also made stencil art. Before going to Syria he had prepared stencils to make a portrait of the Syrian antiquities scholar of Palmyra, Khaled al-Assad, who was beheaded by ISIS for refusing to reveal the hiding place of ancient Syrian artifacts.

Luke wanted to pay homage to the bravery of Khaled al-Assad, and stenciled his portrait on the door of the 2000 year-old amphitheater in Palmyra, before much of the ancient city was destroyed by ISIS.

Returning to Australia he made preparations to return to Syria.

Following his intuition, he wanted to use his art as a way of healing, as therapy for the children there. “I knew the positive impact art had had on me,” he said, “I wanted to take art to

the people and spend time with the kids, to share art with them.

Art is therapy that can help them heal. I didn't want to change the war, just to share positivity." It was in March this year that he returned again to Syria, visiting Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Ma'aloula, but this time he carried with him simple art supplies, such as spray paint, textas and paper, material for primary-age children to use to make pictures with. "It was very informal. I wanted to empower the kids," he said.

He tried to buy some of their work to exhibit it alongside his own work in an exhibition, *Zero to the Left* shown at Metro Gallery. Talking about his experiences in Syria, Luke remembered a particularly difficult time when he and a companion were arrested and detained in an army base for being too close to a check point.

Later an interpreter was found, and they were eventually released.

But what stays in his mind is not the difficulties or the destruction of the cities, but the kindness, warmth and hospitality of the Syrian people. "Every single person I met there was beautiful," he said. He remembers a small child from Aleppo who gave him a cardboard flower and a kiss.

In Aleppo he stayed in a hotel that was being renovated, still without window glass.

When he signed the guest book as he left, he realised he was the first visitor to stay there since 2010.

It was important for him to go, as "being there was a way to let people know they are not forgotten," he said. "When they see a westerner there, it gives them a sense of past times when they relied on tourism returning.

It helped them feel as if things were normal." For Luke the most difficult part of going to Syria was not moving around or being there in a conflict zone, but actually coming back to Australia, and having to readjust

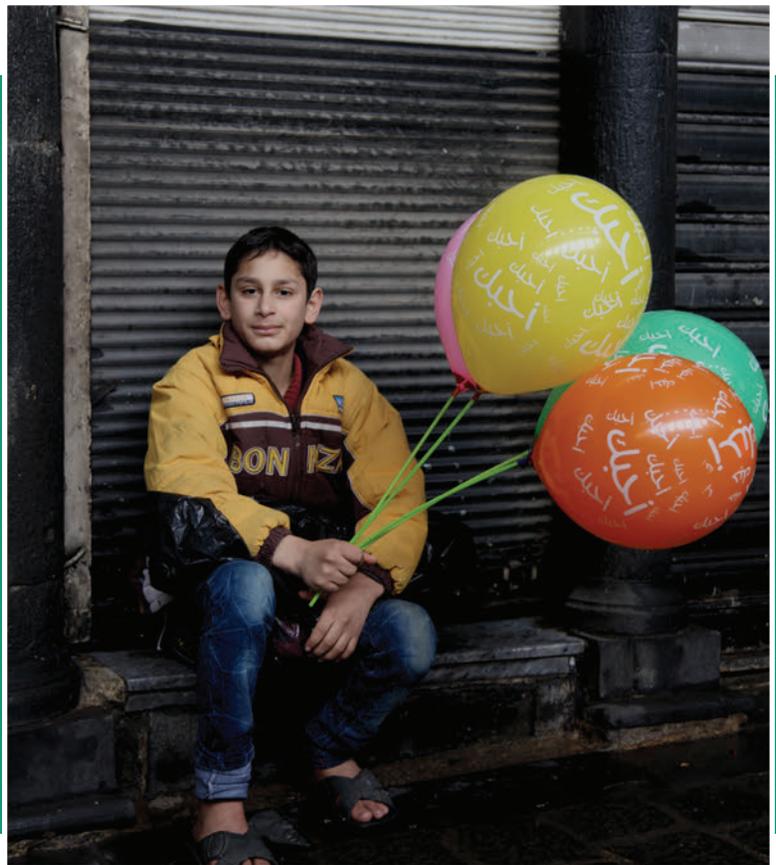


Image taken by Luke Cornish, Damascus, 2017

after two weeks away. "You have to listen to boring shit that people complain about," he said.

He plans to return to Syria later this year with more art supplies, but this time to run stencil workshops and work with older children as well as the young ones.

"If I can get just one kid on to stencils it'll be worth it," he said. "Sharing art is valuable, but sharing an art form is more valuable."

Luke believes that being an artist is a privilege. "Not many people make it," he said, "I can do what I want, and when I want. I could use the privilege to boost my ego or I can use it to help others. And that's what I've been doing all along.

I want to travel the world with art. It's not about me. I try to keep my ego out of it, retain humility. Fame is just a bunch of people you don't know, who think you're something that you're not, it's nothing to aspire to. I'm not religious, I'm not political. Art is a vehicle to spread happiness."



Image taken by Luke Cornish in Syria, 2017



*Fadi, Zeina and family taken
by Jacqueline Mitelman*

FADI'S LOVE FOR THE OUD

By Kirsten Bardwell
and translations by Zeina Haddad

In 2015, Fadi Haddad with his parents, sister and young niece came to Australia as refugees from Syria. They had lived in Hama, near Homs, a city that sits on a rich agricultural plain in central Syria, and is famous for its ancient water wheels. The northern suburbs of Melbourne are a long way from Hama, and while 40-year-old Fadi is settling into his new life - working, attending church, making friends, and welcoming guests - it's evident he misses his old life.

Fadi is yet to find work using his skills as a stonemason. He has photos of beautiful handcrafted ornamental pieces he created, and explains he built Arab-style building profiles.

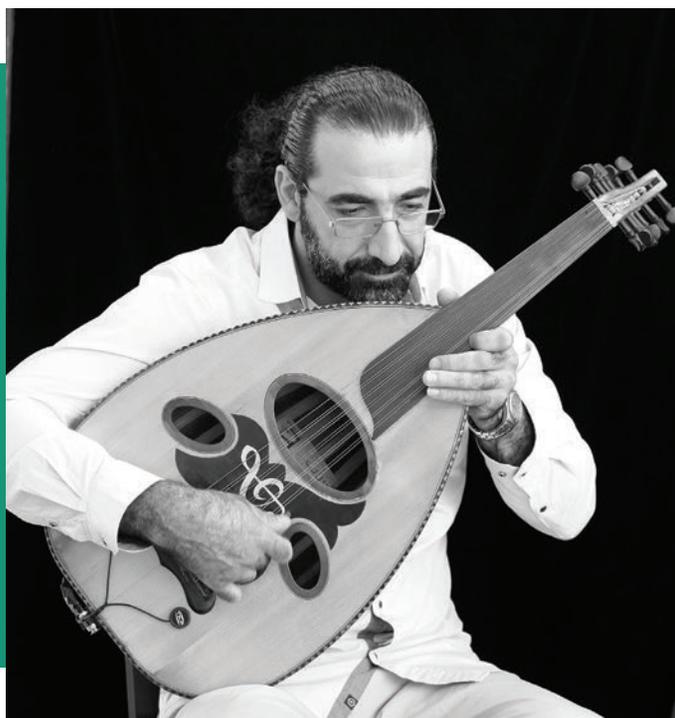
However, what he longs for is the opportunity to express himself through music, which for him means playing the oud. A pear-shaped string instrument similar to a lute with a history dating back to the 11th century, the oud is popular in the Middle East. Fadi fell in love with it as a small boy and as his sister Zeina tells it, at the time the instrument was bigger than he was.

"At a young age - when I was just 5 years old - I started playing on the oud and for as long as I remember, I've had a passion for it.

I used to listen to my uncle play on this sensitive instrument. Its tone touched my heart," said Fadi.

When he was older, in a setting that would be familiar to musicians everywhere, he and his friends would get together and jam on different instruments, and sing.

As well as building a social life around music, he gained a reputation as an oud player and was in demand at weddings and parties.



Although the oud is popular at different events, it does require a special audience. "It is important to have an audience that is respectful and willing to listen carefully to the instrument and to the tarab style of folk songs," said Fadi. While Fadi is

working as a cleaner and is building a new life, he wants to play the oud so he can connect to others spiritually, socially and professionally. He said, "I can't explain its magic or the secret behind it."

DAYS FULL OF MUSIC AND JOY

I came to Australia with my family in March 2015, so I have been here for two years. We are sorry that we had to come here as refugees, but we feel very lucky to be able to come here.

We are really grateful to the people of Australia for accepting us, and for their kindness and generosity. It is beautiful to experience the kindness of people. The big problem for us is that at the moment we feel alone - we miss our cousins and our friends.

But you can't compare the country you come from with a new country. The country of your origin is always in your heart. You can't forget it. The bad memories and the sweet memories will be with you wherever you go. But we hope to build some new sweet memories here in Australia.

Some of the sweetest memories I have of my life in Syria are related to music. My brother Fadi is a singer and I often sing with him. In Syria, friends would often come to visit and we would jam together. It was a very spontaneous thing.

We would go out together without planning anything. Just go out and we would sing in the car, wherever we were. We had some wonderful times together. They were full of joy and music. In some ways it was a simple life and it didn't cost us anything. But I think it will be very hard to find that life here. So of course we miss that.

Zeina Haddad, Melbourne, March 2017

The magic of music



Zeina was interviewed in her home by Emily Walter Founder of BoomShop Drumming and Games

What is it about her that makes her as special as she is?

Zeina explained that Fairuz hits notes and creates a quality of sound that she believes no one in the world can: it's totally enchanting.

"We call her 'the morning coffee' as she helps us start the day bright and full. She is an alarm in the morning."

For decades, it has been a tradition for Syrians to listen to Fairuz in the mornings. Zeina would love to introduce Syrian music to people in Melbourne. It is a little hard, she explained, as there is such a rich variety of people and cultures.

Who will appreciate it? While she knows there are many other Syrian people here, they are all spread across the city, so bringing them together for a musical gathering is not as easy as it was in Syria, and they have different tastes in music, like any community.

She has a dream that a bond can be formed. "We hope to have Indigenous Australian music and Syrian music performed on the stage together.

Because we are living together on this land, we should know the traditions and culture of Aboriginal Australians and at the same time they can know the people living on their land through our music and songs."

Music is a powerful tool through which we can express, share and grow to understand each other's culture and passion. It is a key to the heart, a key to our history and a key to deeper connection in our future.

It's something that can so easily be taken for granted: music. We turn on the radio and there it is. We walk into the supermarket and there it is.

It hovers and prances around our world, sometimes enhancing, sometimes tainting experiences.

For some people, however, it is pure magic. Cultures are crafted with music and it binds especially deeply to the hearts of those that play it and comprehend it.

For Zeina and her brother Fadi, traditional Syrian music is a door to their history, to expressions of love and hate, to joy and pain.

The tone and the word come together to create magic. I recently met up with Zeina in her suburban Melbourne home to chat about her passion for Syrian music and the joy she feels singing alongside her brother when he plays the oud.

Zeina moved to Australia two years ago. A trained civil engineer in Syria, Zeina is now doing a business administration course a few days a week here. Her delightful 5-year-old daughter bounced and sparkled around the room as we spoke.

"In each culture," Zeina said, "there is a special instrument. In ours, it's the oud. If you see my brother playing the oud, you feel (the quality of the

instrument and the music) in each word that he sings... You will feel each word; it touches your heart directly."

Zeina went on to explain that when someone is playing the oud, if you are really ready to listen, you will be more sensitive to the words that are sung.

The audience will feel the message of the song in their hearts. "It's like magic actually", Zeina told me.

"It's all about the word and the tone. When those two things come together, sometimes you feel (tearful) and sometimes you feel (joy)."

Such magic does not discriminate between cultures. Zeina and her brother went to the Arts Centre to hear Archie Roach, an iconic Indigenous songwriter, musician and singer. She told me that although her brother does not speak English very well, Fadi was still really moved by Archie's performance.

At points during the concert, he closed his eyes and was "able to understand the meaning. That's the magic of word and the magic of tone."

I asked Zeina to tell me a little bit about Fairuz, a Lebanese singer who is popular across the breadth of Syria.

Life and Devotion



Interviewed by Lisa Accadia

Bushra in Lorne, Victoria

We recently sat down to interview Bushra, a Syrian who arrived in Australia toward the end of 2016. Bushra spoke generously to us about her life, culture, and faith. What we discovered was a warm-hearted woman whose love for life and good humour was not foreign.

We hope that her approach to life and her story can remind readers that what connects us more than ever is our humanity and our hearts. When she was 12 years old, her father died, and with four younger sisters, Bushra quickly took on extra responsibilities to support her mother and provide for her family. Her first job was as an Arabic teacher and by age 17 she was well known in her community for her determination and skills.

She helped establish a local education organisation, similar to an Australian TAFE, and was a strong advocate for education in her community.

Like most Syrians, her life was busy, and while working and caring for her extended family she also completed a certificate in hairdressing and beauty therapy. Growing up had its challenges, but Bushra describes her struggles as experiences that taught her important lessons: “Pain brings a lot of strength, imagination, and creativity”.

Bushra and her family are practising Muslims, and in addition to working and family responsibilities, Bushra still found time to nurture her faith.

She grew up studying the Koran and enjoyed religious festivals and prayer time. Bushra describes her faith as the thing that gives her strength, and taught her how to work and live respectfully with others. She has a deep love for the Syria she grew up in that did not discriminate against religions, but was open and respectful to all beliefs.

How would you like people to describe you?

A perfect Muslim, which means a good person, a person who is kind and good to everyone.

What does being a devout Muslim mean to you?

For me, it means being disciplined, having good manners and having a commitment to an ethical life and ethical relationships with people, no matter who they are.

Tell us a bit more about how you practice your faith

When I was in Syria I studied Islam at a Mosque. Some of the religious customs I follow include: eating no pork or drinking any alcohol, fasting during Ramadan, wearing a hijab, and practising my daily prayers.

I pray every morning and afternoon. According to my faith Muslims are to pray facing the direction of Mecca. This can be difficult but I have a great app on my phone that acts as a compass to show me which direction to face.

How do you describe Allah (God)?

Ohhh.... Allah is indescribable. But Allah knows everything about me because Allah created me. Allah is perfection in everything. Allah is love. Allah is the world, the universe. Allah is indescribable.

Can people of other religions feel connected to Allah (God)?

Anyone can feel connected to ‘Allah’. Like I said, ‘Allah’ is indescribable. I do not know Allah’s bounds. I believe if someone is not a Muslim they can still have a connection with ‘Allah’. Allah doesn’t speak one ‘language’.

What’s family life like in Syria?

Families in Syria are very close. Families and neighbours are all connected; they are “like one” and spend a lot of time visiting each other. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and children all live together and this is common for all Syrians no matter what religion you are.

Any last thoughts for our readers?

One of the things I loved the most about Syria was that people were all connected. Although we led busy lives everyone still had time for each other and no one was ever too busy. This is something I miss and wish we could see more of in Australia.



Bushra preparing vegetarian stuffed vine leaves

An Artist Finding a Voice in Australia



Features



One must work long and hard to arrive at the truthful. What I want and set as my goal is damned difficult, and yet I don't believe I'm aiming too high. I want to make drawings that move some people ... Whether in figures or in landscapes, I would like to express not something sentimentally melancholic but deep sorrow. In short, I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply, and that man feels subtly.

Vincent Van Gogh, The Hague, 1882

By Maggie Brown ,ESL Teacher and Artist, July 2017

Throughout his life, art has been there, but its importance for Aghyad Al-atassi has changed as his situation has changed. His powerful paintings are testimony to resilience and the power of art to express emotion.

Aghyad's home in St Albans, Melbourne, is like a gallery of his work, with paintings of all kinds hanging on all the walls, in all the rooms. There are small colourful still lifes of everyday objects, landscapes of Syria, imaginative scenes, and portraits of Syrians affected by the war. Even so, Aghyad claims he isn't an artist, only a self-taught art student who is learning.

He's very modest. Aghyad's hometown is Homs, where he worked as a dental technician. As a child his parents recognized his talent for art and encouraged him to paint, but he



Aghyad al-Atassi with Melbourne artist Maggie Brown

lost interest in his teens, studying Mechanical Engineering for three years, before changing to something more creative – graduating as a dental technician. It wasn't until later that he started making art again, following an interest in architecture, and drawing careful intricate mosaic designs, which he manipulated digitally.

Then the conflict started, and at the same time his art changed. He found he needed a more visceral, energetic way of making art, a way that helped him to get rid of the stress and anger he was feeling.

“It was therapy for me”, he said. “It helped release my feelings”.

He started painting again, using acrylic paint and soft pastel to make vigorous marks with a brush and palette knife, painting the destructive forces around him.

Aghyad left Syria with his family and moved to Turkey for 18 months, before arriving in Melbourne two years ago. They rented a house in Sunshine that was attached to a garage, and it was here that Aghyad painted whenever he needed to de-stress and deal with his emotions.

This resulted in 40 canvases painted in a year.

As time has passed, the motivation that compels Aghyad to paint has widened. Apart from its therapeutic role he says, “I want to enjoy painting, to be a well-known artist here. I want to try all styles and subjects, so that I learn as much as possible. I want to talk about our problem. I can help people understand with these pictures.

I don't want to make money. I am a dental technician for that.”

He feels that paintings and images are more effective than words to express emotion, and this is clearly true in his powerful portraits of Syrian refugees. We see groups of people travelling at night, tired streams of people walking, families waiting. The colours are soft and subdued, expressing a deep sadness with the figures surrounded by an agitated sky and landscape.

Most of these works come from images in his memory, but for the

details of faces he refers to photographs found on the Internet. Aghyad takes inspiration from a number of artists, from Modigliani, Munch, Cezanne, but especially Van Gogh who he says is “the best one”.

The paintings he made while living in Turkey show clearly these influences, such as his painting of the citadel in Homs. There are similar clear colours using a brush, but also a palette knife and fingers to make marks.

He doesn't draw first, but begins with the darker areas or shadows, adding more colour later, and then finally using soft pastel. “I don't like following rules” he says, so he is willing to try all ways to learn and to say what he wants.

Aghyad showed me where he paints, in a small spare bedroom, with his easel, an easy chair, his paint tubes, pastels, brushes and knives.

He keeps the blind down and has a strong lamp so the light is constant whenever he works.

Nowadays, the practicalities of life mean that he often has to work at night, as he's busy retraining as a dental technician. “He just goes for it,” his wife Salam says.

I was privileged to see many of Aghyad's paintings. I asked which one was a favourite, and he pointed to one of a huddle of refugees walking, half



visible with their faces covered, in a dusty landscape.

He showed another favourite, one of Williamstown with the view of the distant city across the bay. The choppy sea looks like a barrier with a number of fishing boats offshore, like those used by refugees. The city looks far, unattainable across the sea.

A painting from his imagination is a staircase that leads upwards, or down to an unseen corridor.

I asked Aghyad which way he was going in the painting. “Down,” he said, although what's in the corridor he does not know. But in the future he will continue painting, with an exhibition of his work planned for next year at Yering Station in the Yarra Valley. In the meantime he keeps painting powerful work, expressing his feelings while developing and learning new techniques.



Reflections on Life

Mr Ninos Sawa, 21 years old, currently studying at RMIT, Melbourne, July 2017

Personal Aspiration

To be a lawyer or a journalist

Leaving Behind

It's a sad feeling when you leave your home. I have left my home only physically. My heart and mind are still in Syria.

I miss my college, friends, and the house I grew up in. I hope it hasn't been destroyed or bombed. I don't have any information about it now.

The Refugee Experience

Through the journey as refugees from Lebanon to Australia, we had some problems.

In Lebanon, life was very hard for me. I was working 14 hours a day to exist, leaving my university studies behind me. There was no time for anything and I had no friends there.

I felt isolated, but when I arrived in Australia, everything changed. I was born again. I started going to school to learn English. I made new friends. I have opportunities to do many things in Australia that I was deprived of in Lebanon.

Being a refugee doesn't mean that you must give up on your dreams. The beautiful days will come in succession.

My advice to myself is always work hard to get what you want; never forget the country you grew up in; and always smile and be optimistic.

A Most Beautiful Day

The most beautiful day in my life, a day I will never forget, was about two months ago, when some Syrian actors and a director came to Melbourne to introduce some Syrian films.

At that moment, I smelt the soil of my country. I felt I was in Syria. It was an indescribable moment.



Ninos with classmates at AMES, Flagstaff, 28 June 2017

University Studies

At university, I studied English literature. As well as poetry, drama, translation and language, we studied four books: *Anna of the Five Towns* by Arnold Bennett, *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, and *The Europeans* by Henry James. My favourite author was Arnold Bennett.

Songs And Musics

In general, I adore Assyrian singing. My favourite artist is Sargon Gabriel because all his songs are wonderful.

They have a particular sound and they tend to be about love and romance. His songs can lead me to forget what has happened in my life and to feel that I am drunk on whisky.

Source of Strength

I draw strength from being optimistic and from saying tomorrow will be beautiful and beautiful days will follow. I always smile.

Lessons Learnt

From life, I've learnt to fight for what I want and to never give up. And life is tricky.

Note, when I say 'fight', I don't mean anything physical or violent. I mean 'fight' through working hard to get what I want.

Australia and Syria

Australia and Syria have many things in common. For example, both countries have welcomed refugees and they also respect their people, and there is a feeling of love and respect for others. Other things we have in common include the great cultural and religious diversity and peaceful co-existence that is unparalleled in the world.

Note that when I say Syria is hospitable and good with refugees, I am thinking of how Syria received Iraqi and Lebanese refugees after 2003 and 2006 respectively.

Difference Between Countries

In my opinion, the differences are just in the customs and traditions of each society. In the end, these are superficial things. The people are the same: people in both countries have displayed enormous generosity.

SOCCER IN SYRIA - a love not destroyed by war

“Matt, I have a question!” Determined, forthright, purposeful, insistent, smile pasted – Suhail abruptly raises his finger into the air... unabated, never disheartened, he follows up with another query. This is how I am reminded of my time with Suhail. And, even though I haven’t taught him for a term, he is always consistent when we catch up – question prepared! Suhail is a remarkable person who is earnest, strong-minded and passionate, and pursues his goals, whether in sport (of course, soccer first!) or learning, with the same vigour and perseverance. He is a lovely young man, who will be very successful, not only because he is ambitious and committed, but because he is measured and mindful of his actions and those of the people around him.

Matthew Rodger, ESL Teacher

*Mr Suhail Sawa, Syrian refugee
currently studying at RMIT, Melbourne, July 2017*

Can you explain your love for football (soccer)?

Since childhood, until today, soccer has been my eternal love and inspiration in life. Soccer gives me strength, determination and patience. It’s a miniature model of real life because in soccer, you have to plan very well and carry out your tasks with precision and patience to achieve your goals, which is what actually happens in real life.

I can say that soccer is the first thing I think about when I wake up, and it is the last thing I think about before going to sleep.

I have been playing soccer since I was six years old. The person who made me love this game was David Beckham, the “English legend”. His distinctive touches on the pitch and his distinctive style in shooting free kicks were the reasons for my great regard for him.

What international team do you support?

I started supporting the Spanish national soccer team in 2002. It was the beginning of my love for them, and Raul Gonzalez was the reason for supporting them. I faced many

difficulties as a fan of the Spanish national soccer team. My friends’ ridicule was the hardest thing I ever encountered. I can say I was the only person among all the people I knew in Syria who supported the Spanish national soccer team. The only one!

What is a magic soccer-related moment you have had?

One moment I’ll never forget was when Tunisia kicked the first goal in its game against Spain at the 2006 World Cup. It was just 8 minutes into the game.

I cried. But Spain managed to score three goals in the second half and then my happiness was indescribable.

How passionate are Syrians about soccer?

In my country Syria, soccer is the most popular sport.

Everyone loves soccer – all generations and categories of people. Kids play football in the streets, narrow alleys, schools... Everywhere! They don’t need a grassy pitch to play; all what they need is a ball and a couple of rocks to make the goal, and then the fun begins for them!

Who is attracted to soccer matches in Syria?

Almost every city in Syria has its own soccer club, and the club has its own stadium. The matches are played every Friday (the start of the weekend in Syria). At each game, tens of thousands of fans of all age groups and backgrounds watch the matches. Women have a clear presence in the stands, supporting their team alongside their family or friends.

Compare soccer in Australia with soccer in Syria

In Australia, you may find someone who supports a soccer team from another city. For example, you might find someone from Melbourne who supports a soccer team from Sydney, but that’s something you will never find in Syria. That’s impossible. Everyone supports his city team only! And, if you do find someone who supports another team from another city, that’s what we call “disloyal”!

What is lacking in soccer in Syria is government support. It is virtually non-existent.

I believe the Ministry of Sports in Syria should give more attention to children and young people who play soccer, as Australia does.

Have Syrians maintained their passion for soccer?

In spite of the long years of war and its disastrous consequences in my country, soccer fans have not lost their love and passion for the game.

The fans are still going to stadiums to watch soccer matches in large numbers.

In regard to soccer, what are your dreams and ambitions?

In regards to soccer my dream is to become a professional international referee and lead a World-cup match.

STUDENT, REALIST AND FOOTY TRAGIC



Karla and Jasna at a Melbourne café

No goal is out of reach for Karla. She always says to me, “Everything is exactly as it should be. Not more, not less.”

This statement appears in my mind every time I question things in my life and in the world in general. “Everything is as it should be.”

Karla’s admission to RMIT’s Bachelor of Engineering with recognition of her years of studying the same in Syria is exactly as it should be. Certainly for Karla.

Karla, the world is your oyster!

Love,

Jasna Antunovic, Former Distance

Learning Teacher, AMES, June 2017

An interview with Karla, Interviewer: Susan Dirgham

Q: “Everything is as it should be.” Is that your philosophy of life?

I think so. It gives me strength. I am a very realistic person. I like to (acknowledge) the reality. I don’t like ‘What if? What if not?’ Conditionals. I like (to attend to) the reality, to know what will happen, to organize myself for it and to face it.”

Q: When you say that ‘everything is as it should be’, it might suggest that it takes away the power of people to change situations. So do you still think people have power to change situations, to change the world?

I don’t see it like that. Now is just a time when a lot of possibilities are happening, here in Australia and in Syria. And one person, he or she can’t radically change the situation, and turn it upside down. Everyone can just stay on their way. Nothing will die.

Q: What do you mean ‘nothing will die’?

I mean the good things, (such as) the spirit of the Syrian people.

Q: How do you define the spirit of the Syrian people?

Of course I respect the spirit of all the people in the world, in the Arab world and beyond, but I think

the Syrian people have something special, even with all the corruption and all the war there. I think we have something different.

Q: What do you say to someone who wants to ‘save the world’?

To be honest, I like acts of courage, and inside me I’m a revolutionary, or a rebel. I like to change things for good, but real life is not a fairy tale.

You have to understand the situation and what is your role, and even if you understand all of this, still you can’t do anything. You just support your family, support your friends, try to achieve something and in the future

Karla at Essendon
football club

maybe you can pay back someone.

I think a person should have strength, power, and I think a lot of Syrian people have this and have the logic. Most Syrian people have a very good understanding of what is happening in their country. Speaking of my generation, the generation I have studied with, they are mostly united.

Being Syrian is all that matters. It doesn't matter what their faith is. There is this common understanding about being Syrian.

What can a person like me do? I know my limitations. But I need to extend my limitations, to extend my capabilities. And I have only one way: through knowledge. And so I should have a lot of qualifications.

That will be my first step in building myself. And then I will be a person who can contribute.

Q: What is your experience of being a refugee?

To be honest, I don't feel like being a refugee. We hear a lot of stories about the suffering of refugees in Europe, even in Canada, but here in Australia, I think the government has done a great job.

I'm a person who is realistic, so when I moved from Syria to here, I believed it was the best choice I could make. I couldn't achieve anything there. I was planning to travel before the war. It was my dream to achieve something in my life.

Q: Do you have a loyalty to Syria?

Of course. Until my dying day. But I need power to repay (Syria). ... After some years, I will become an Australian citizen, so I will have responsibilities to this country, too.

I will graduate in Australia; it will help me achieve my dreams, so of course I will have a debt toward this country and for all the people who have helped me. But I will not forget Syria at all. I am first Syrian and then I am Australian.

Q: How do you explain people's love for Syria?

Everyone loves their country...I think we have a spirit.

You know Syria is an ancient inhabited country, and a lot of things have happened on that land. Each generation leaves something there. And that is why we become like this. It is a bit similar to Aboriginal people. Syria has always been a land of conflict. A lot of people have lived and been killed there. A lot of generations have come and built something, and continued to build even when there is war.

We are really ancient. To be honest, I didn't feel this before the war. I have felt it since the war started.

Q: Is your dream to go back to Syria and rebuild Syria?

No, my dream is to help Syria in some way, with my power, my money. I don't know what I will do. When I am a successful professional in my field, I will be able to invest money in rebuilding Syria. I think when I get older, I will have a real voice.

Someone told us we are cowards, that we ran away from Syria when it needed us, I told him, 'Just wait for a couple of years and you will see'. These days, if you have money, you have power, and if you have power you can do whatever you want. And I know I have good intentions. I will always be proud of being Syrian, no matter what.

Q: What would you like Australians to know about Syria?

We are open-minded. We are normal people. My generation is really open to a lot of things, so we can really go along with the lifestyle in Western countries. It was really easy to fit in here.



Q: I understand you're into Australian Rules Football in a serious way. How did that start?

Oh, my gosh, it was amazing. Our neighbour, Leanne, told me, 'You have to have a football team!' Before the football season started (in 2017), she and her husband, Gary, and daughter, Hannah, invited me to the first game of the season.

Karla went on to explain that she sat in the MCG Members Stand with Leanne and family, but before going she watched videos to work out the rules of the game.

Gary gave Karla an Essendon scarf and said, 'You don't have to decide, but just see.' Now, Karla says she feels 'the spirit', and when Essendon plays, she 'goes with it'. Already this season, she's been to six games.

Q: How is your mother's generation of women different from your generation?

We can say that young Syrian women in the 1970s were so traditional, which means they had duties toward the community and toward their family and home. Their choices and their dreams were limited. In general, a woman in the 70s and 80s was (just) expected to be a perfect mother and perfect wife.

Life in Syria was a struggle in that period, and I think that impacted on women's lives and thinking. But we can say that for women born in the



Karla's parents

90s, the economic environment in Syria was good, and this was true until 2010, up to the war.

The 90s generation had the best childhood ever. I have very good memories of my childhood.

In general, girls of my generation still faced some strict limits, but not like those my mum did. So, yes my sisters and I should help our mum, but it is not so necessary.

And with technology, we have more 'space' to do our things, to go out with friends.

I can go out without my sister, without my brother. The community became 'softer'. If you don't clean the house, it is not that big a deal. Of course, to be helpful to your family and society is still seen as a priority. But we can do it in other ways.

I consider my mum's generation like 'soldiers', in that they could handle a lot of pressure, because they were brought up with a lot of pressure. They can face life's challenges.

So in general, we can say that, yes, we have a lot of choices now, yes, we can have dreams, but we can't be like our mothers.

When my sister and I have babies, we will let my mum raise them.

Q: How easy or difficult was it for you and other family members to

settle into Australia and how do you feel now after about 10 months in Australia?

For a number of reasons, we settled in very quickly. Firstly, we have family here, so that was a key factor. Secondly, we are familiar with Western culture, and we like to live it, even in Syria. And my sisters and me speak English, so that was really helpful.

My mum and dad have struggled a little bit because of language, but my parents are survivors, so they don't surrender. They try to develop and do things by themselves.

At the moment, they can't go to the doctor by themselves, but I think they will reach this point soon. But they can go to the Victoria Market by themselves and they can catch public transport by themselves.

You can see that they want to be a part of this society. They don't want to be 'no one'.

Now my dad is working to get his truck driving licence and that is really challenging for him because he needs to memorize things in English.

Everything is because we need to survive. In Syria, my parents didn't think about their future; they just thought about our future.

Now they have a chance to think about themselves. So after my mum

improves her English she wants to do a certificate course.

They are motivated. I am so happy about this. So that is why we adapted really quickly.

And I think we are realistic people. We love Syria, but now we are here, we have to think about our future here.

Nature

Trees are very important in our culture. When my younger brother was born, my dad planted four new trees in the garden to represent my brother, two sisters and me.

Each one is seen to give life and protection. It is a very natural or spiritual thing. Syrian people are linked to the land, to the trees and plants. If some of my mum's plants have a disease, my mum really takes care of them. She speaks to them.

She feels like they have souls; they drink, they breathe.... They are in some ways like her children. If you raise anything, you watch it grow, each step, and you feel like it is something really precious, and God gave it to us to take care of it.

Karla and Hana (her mum)

Tears for the Souq of Damascus

In 1979, Suzanne Packer, a media/education consultant, moved to Lebanon from New Zealand with her two young sons and her husband at the time. Tears for the Souq of Damascus was taken from 'Simply Thinking, Dreaming, and Things', Suzanne's second book of poetry, published in 2016. Suzanne now lives in Melbourne.
 Email contact: Suzanne Packer <suzannemaraea@gmail.com>

*On the road to Damascus
 I dreamed of the Souq
 The delicious biscuit, barazeh
 The overpowering smell of maazoot
 Souq El Hamadeyeh's narrow lanes
 Shoulder rubbing lanes of fabric
 Copperware, clothing, underwear
 The silversmiths, surely do reign
 Traditional foods and modern cuisine
 Great fashion and jewellery
 Syria, home of pure cotton
 High-rise buildings add to the scene
 Mar Yohanna's historical church
 Now a mausoleum
 The ancient culture of bathhouses
 With so many hot pools
 The roadways travelled into Damascus
 Included Lawrence of Arabia
 History that was made in Damascus
 The oldest capital city in the Middle
 East
 The hustle bustle at each roundabout
 The Souq's coffee carts and peddlers
 An adventure to El Souq El
 Hamadeyeh
 One will never forget
 Sadly Damascus, partially razed
 History and antiquities on the ground
 Return to your people, Damascus
 Allow their hearts to pound*



Images of the Souq, under Standard Licence from Shutterstock.com

SEWING FOR SYRIA



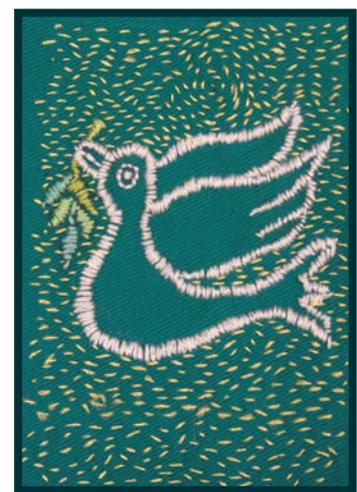
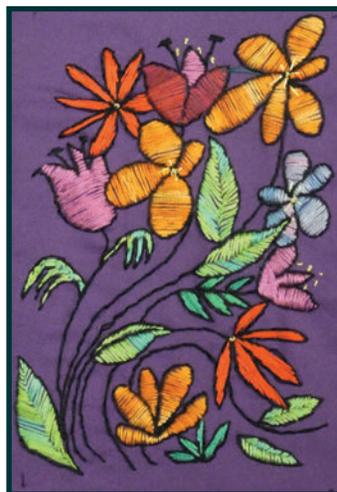
Helen Lawrie is a member of the Romero Community, a group of women and men living in Adelaide and working with homeless, isolated and vulnerable people. She is a musician and an ex-teacher, now devoting much of her spare time to human rights and justice concerns, particularly with reference to Palestine, Syria and Aboriginal Australia.

Helen is not a smart-phone or computer owner, believing in direct action rather than through the use of machinery. She is horrified at the rise of the robot and thinks that using any 'make it easier' electronic device comes at a cost to our humanity. She believes that the ubiquitous presence of technology is interfering with our instincts, our intuition and our ability to interact with each other; no one is 'present' any more – they are living via a screen where the most superficial concerns are peddled at the expense of critical thinking, deep contemplation, developing compassion and understanding of each other and the ability to accept a mystery.

In 2011, there were indications that Syrians, like many peoples in recent decades, were destined to suffer the ravages of war, so I sought a Syrian in regular contact with family members for clarification.

He confirmed that Syrians feared the 'Arab Spring' had opened the door to a nightmarish scenario. Some like-minded friends and I decided to spend time in Adelaide's Rundle Mall every Sunday to encourage passers-by to give thought to events in Syria and to question the version of events presented by our media.

All the Syrians who have stopped to talk to us have thanked us for voicing their concerns and I have become aware of the dignified, educated and sophisticated nature of Syrian people who do not need any outside 'help'



to run their country. Their pride and confidence in each other is obvious they love each other and their country and want what is best, but in their own way. They know about their heritage, their history, their literature and they feel the weight of their place in the world.

They are awake to the forces at play in their homeland and the more I learn, the more I mourn for what has been destroyed there.

I have taken several courses of action in response to this dire situation and one of those is to raise money, little by little, for families suffering within Syria, families struggling with the consequences of sanctions such as ill health, poverty and lack of employment, and those who have lost family members in the war.

These are people trying to cope with an invasion of incredible proportions and ferocity.

Since I was a child I have embroidered as a hobby not so much in traditional styles but rather creating my own patterns, designs and textures using less conventional techniques.

This was a way I could hope to raise money so I began embroidering book covers sewn onto little notebooks to sell. I also make cards by hand, featuring photos of the embroideries and I call myself “Sewing for Syria”.

Fortunately I have wonderful friends who purchase and promote the cards and books because they support the cause and understand what is actually happening in Syria.

They are great people known as “The Romero Community” with whom I’ve been closely involved in community activities since I was at

school, where I was inspired to think critically and act for social justice.

They donate and keep the cause afloat. Every cent goes to Syrian families and there are no costs because the materials are given.

As I sew, my thoughts are with those who suffer – especially in Syria, but elsewhere as well, because there are so many victims of lovelessness in this world. There is some relief to be found in the rhythm of the thread going through the fabric and in the opportunity to create something of beauty as a kind of resistance to the ugliness of injustice.

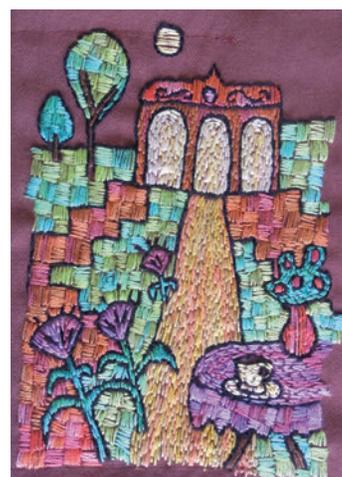
In an increasingly digitized, mechanized world there is health to be found in the hand-made and the home-made.

I sew wherever I am – at home, in rundle Mall, in a café – and people often stop to look and ask me what I’m doing and this is another opportunity for discussion about Syria.

As quite a lot of time is spent making each one I know every little book cover well.

A record is kept of where each one goes when it is sold and I release each one as a gift or a seed on the wind as it makes its way into the world.

It is a small offering but the hope is that when someone receives a card with “Sewing for Syria” on it, this may be an awakening moment – a prod to critical thinking and deeper compassion. I salute the courageous and steadfast people of Syria living through an abomination that has been thrust upon them.





Dr Fiona Hill with some of her extended 'family' in Syria

A RAIN OF LOVE

A Rain of Love was written by Dr Fiona E. Hill (PhD in Anthropology) and published in Bass Coast Post in April 2016. It has been adapted and published in Beloved Syria with permission from Dr Hill. If you wish to assist in any way, contact her via fiona@almanarconsultancy.com.

“If it comes down to me I’ll surround Syria with a belt of silk, cover it with a cloud of safety, and make it shower a rain of love on those hurt and peaceful hearts”

I lived in a Syrian village idyll on the banks of the bounteous Euphrates River on and off for 30 years.

I first lobbied there as a student archaeologist in 1984 and until 2012 I’d visit most years, staying with the Al Sultan household for months at a time, sharing births, deaths, marriages and every conceivable trial and joy in between. That hasn’t stopped. We’re family. Crop farmers, market gardeners, livestock breeders, cheese makers, and fishermen, skilled in adobe, concreting, and painting, my family’s replete with natural leaders.

That meant, despite regular incarceration by over zealous security police, I was free to wander and explore life up and down the river, feast with Sheikhs, talk sheep and market prices with men, natter, dance and do domestic chores with women

and girls, row boats and swim with delighted boys. As a rare literate adult, I’d chaperone women and their anxious husbands or fathers to find clinics, navigate hospitals, hand hold in theatre, interpret medication, and traipse the length and breadth of Aleppo and Damascus seeking correct medicines. There was a lot of grief.

Along with much laughter, it knitted us close together.

They’re grateful I documented a life now lost forever, and I owe them my anthropology PhD. From 2004, when educational opportunities were revolutionised for all Syrians, my Australian family and friends helped provide English and Arabic children’s books to our village primary school, as well as small grants for local female high school students with lots of smarts but little means to pay the Baccalaureate fee. My grand gesture was commissioning ‘The Villa’ to be built amongst olive trees, overlooking limestone cliffs and the beloved river, painted in glorious technicolour

by my adoptive Syrian brother, and adorned with local handicrafts.

Here a growing pool of volunteers were destined to coach high school English language teachers and teach English and French while enjoying rural village life. The conflict ended all of it.

Since 2012 the Free Syria Army (FSA), the Syrian Defence Force, DAESH (ISIS), Jubhat Al Nusra, the Syrian Democratic Front, and the US Alliance have variously abducted, extorted, flogged, tortured, starved, looted, intimidated, and aerial bombed members of my family and our village community. At one point, my adoptive Syrian brother Thamer, as village leader, rescued three visiting Alawi families from inevitable summary murder by smuggling them out to safety. If discovered, he too would have been killed.

When hundreds of refugees from Aleppo countryside took refuge in our school, I crowd-funded to help Thamer provide food, fuel, and

blankets for these strangers. In 2013, DAESH fighters from all around the world – including two Australians – took over the region, and our village, with a relentless barrage of random incarcerations, beatings, beheadings, and terrorising harassment of men, women and children.

My family's village is all Sunni Muslim, but DAESH insisted they prove this by surrendering all boys over 12 to fight with them. In 2015, when DAESH reopened our school to teach only the Qur'an Thamer denounced them as propagandists and refused to send our kids.

Furious, DAESH commanders came to confiscate our homes, land, livestock, and male teenagers. Managing to put them off till the next day, that same wintry November night Thamer and the teenage boys risked their lives to escape into Turkey.

We all prayed DAESH wouldn't throw the women and children out of their homes.

But when they began to confiscate everyone's olive and grain harvests, eat all the livestock, and ban all females from leaving the district, it was time to get them out.

Getting 22 women and children out of the village undetected took several months of nail-biting planning. Once out they walked and slept rough for 5 days, then waited in the hills near the

Turkish border while fierce fighting crashed around them. Apart from the dangers of missiles and gunfire, they risked fighters abducting the older boys. In the last frantic moments of their escape into Turkey with a hero Syrian smuggler whom I hope to meet one day, despite their hunger, cold and fear, my family insisted to stop to gather up a small family huddled terrified under some trees.

That little family stayed with mine for weeks. When I showed them a photo of the kids at Bass Coast Childcare Centre and gave them the money they'd raised, tears pricked everyone's eyes.

Generosity from the other side of the world was bittersweet for people who've always been the generous ones. With Turkey now home to the world's largest refugee population and pledged \$3.26 billion to stem the flow of refugees to Europe, all refugees are at risk of abduction by militant groups, or deportation by Turkey.

So despite the lack of handouts, legal work and education, we've opted for the relative security of tiny rented flats in Gaziantep where one daily chaperoned walk around the block is the only exercise possible. In September I lodged applications for my family to resettle in Australia, with me as their Sponsor, because their rural background and range

of skills make them an easy fit for Gippsland. There are thousands of regional Victorians networking to create support networks in readiness for refugees from war zones. Bass Coast and South East Gippsland Shires have Refugee Welcome policies and Cr Jordan Crugnale and Cr Moyha Davies wrote jointly to Canberra to support the resettlement of my Syrian family in our district.

The Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Task Force for Settlement of Refugees in Regional Victoria say my hole-proof grass-roots support network is an exemplary model. The three men, four women, and nineteen children of my family sit on threadbare scraps of old carpet in sparsely furnished rented rooms, eking out each day with abstemious meals, story telling, and 1000 piece jigsaws of bright yellow wattle, Uluru landscapes, Sydney Harbour, and Philip Island's wildlife. Watching them struggle to piece together the fragments of those beautiful foreign images is like watching them struggle to imagine how the pieces of a brighter future might look.

For these big-hearted victims of so much pain and loss, the many indignities of forced migration cut deep. But a safe and hope-filled future withheld for reasons of security would have to be the final blow.

On 31 July 2017, Dr Hill provided this update to Beloved Syria on her Syrian 'family', who remain refugees in Turkey, denied visas to Australia:

... We are now very distressed to be dealing with the imprisonment – by Turkish police – of my 8-year-old niece for being out in the street running an errand with her 16-year-old cousin who is also imprisoned.

There is no charge but at great expense we have employed a lawyer. Their parents are told they will only get the children back when they all pack up and go back to Syria!! The little girl is detained with many other little girls – one assumes on the same basis. An acquaintance in Turkey has only just managed – after much effort – to file it with the UNHCR and some Turkish NGO's ... My little niece and my nephew have been in prison since the Eid.

Before Beloved Syria went to the printer, Dr Hill provided this update:

My niece was finally released and returned to her family after direct intervention by the UNHCR and a Turkish NGO called ASAM (focused on migrants) as well as a Syrian NGO called UOSSM (provides PsychoSocial Support).

Social workers have been working with our lawyer to lobby for the release of my teenage nephew who remains to this day in prison. The NGO believes he has been wrongly accused by someone in the neighbourhood.

“An Australian in Syria You are welcome”

by Leslie Hemphill



A family outside their home, old city, Damascus

“You are welcome”, or “You are family” were words we heard so often in Syria when we travelled with daughter-in-law Ghada on three visits to stay with her parents and family in Damascus.

Ghada was one of six children raised in a little house – really a two-storey apartment.

It was possible to climb out a window onto a flat rooftop where the washing would be hung and where there would be a good view of all the city’s satellite dishes – everyone seemed to have one. (And they were well into mobile phones.) The house was designed around a fountain in the middle of what they called the “big hall”, though not very big by our standards.

There was always a house full of people – sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles or cousins. As there was a mosque nearby, we would wake up in the mornings to the call to prayer and a muezzin reciting from the Quran.

Lots of people would sit outside their homes of an evening, kids

playing in the streets till late and men with their prayer beads in hand. The men greeting you with a double hug and a kiss – a bit different to the handshake we are used to.

The family would always cross themselves when they walked out the door onto the street or into a car or taxi and when we passed a statue of the Virgin Mary, of which there were many around the city and in the country villages.

Our first trip was in 2005, an experience I’ll never forget.

The traffic on the road from the Damascus airport to the city was a mixture of lorries with all sorts of funny loads; motor bikes, some with mum and dad and a couple of kids on board; three-wheeled motor bikes loaded with goods; and horses and carts with wares to sell. I don’t remember seeing line markings on the road, but there was plenty of honking of horns and weaving in and out.

We eventually reached a big roundabout to enter Bab Touma, part of the old city. So many cars, lots of yellow taxis, lots of honking. Glad I wasn’t driving!

Through the old city wall we drove along ancient cobbled laneways, mostly one way and shared with pedestrians. Ghada’s parents’ place was down a narrow lane. There were lots of steps and buildings overhanging. We stopped to get our luggage out of the van, with everyone behind honking their horns.

But there was no sense of aggressive impatience. Just a message: ‘We are



In the courtyard of an historic Arabic-style house, Damascus

here. Don't be too tardy'. My first experience of Damascus. Eating or feasting was a big part of family life and there didn't seem to be a set time for any meal. Breakfast from mid-morning to midday, depending on who popped in and what was available or what hawkers were selling cheaply. The hawkers called out their wares many times a day; it could be corn or watermelon or another fruit or vegie in season; a milkman with two 20 litre cans of fresh milk strapped to his pushbike and calling out hahlib harlib. We would eat anytime, mid-afternoon or evening, and I'd be thinking that might be all the eats for the day, but there could be another meal if someone was visiting or if we went out to visit another family. We could be eating until 10 or 11 o'clock at night!

They would try and outcook each other trying to impress us and we would come away very full.

They didn't eat out at restaurants unless there was a really special occasion. Corn on the cob was cooked on little gas cookers and sold on the street corners. We quite liked the little pizzas or savoury pastries they baked in the little local shops.

Cash was the way they did business and you'd see them counting their takings,



and I remember at a petrol station the attendant filling the car and having a fistful of notes.

The minibuses were interesting to travel in. You would hop on board and then somewhere along the journey money would start to change hands and eventually the driver would be paid.

The taxis in 2005 could take as many as they liked with the grandkids standing up, but in 2009 everyone had a seat and everyone wore a seat belt.

The bigger buses were decorated up to the hilt, chrome and lights all over. Some of the small Suzuki 1/2ton utes with their side mirrors all scratched from the narrow lanes also carried a fair bit of decoration too. Some of the horses pulling carts loaded

“You are welcome”, or “You are family” were words we heard so often in Syria when we travelled with daughter-in-law Ghada on three visits to stay with her parents and family in Damascus.”

with garlic, watermelons or diesel were done up in fancy harness and colourful feathers.

Shopping was a bit different in Bab Touma and the souks (lots of small shops in alleys that didn't allow cars). In the souq, it was all about haggling over the price and the little shops were stacked to the roof with merchandise and if they didn't have the item they knew someone that did, probably a cousin or some relative.

We went into a shop looking for a tablecloth, explained what we wanted and the shopkeeper took us to back rooms loaded to the ceiling with stuff. One memory of Souk Al Hamidiyeh was of all the fancy lingerie, fancy stuff – so many different styles and colours, but the part that amused me was the women in black, and all you could see were a couple of eyes looking at this fancy underwear. Unreal. Another memory of the souk was buying ice-cream that was topped with pistachios or pine nuts. Ice-cream a bit different to ours, but nice on a hot day.

Also I remember this chap with his dark Turkish cap and red



Laneway, old city, Damascus

To Syria with love

and black striped clothes with a brass fountain on his back selling cups of some tamarin juice, or some other drink to refresh. The Omayyad Mosque is a magnificent building in Damascus inside the walls of the old city. Before entering, we had to take off our shoes and the ladies had to put on a grey dustcoat and hood if they weren't dressed appropriately. I was wondering if our shoes would be there when we came out, but all was good. Not far from Damascus is the Convent of Saydet Seidnaya, built on a rocky hilltop with many churches, halls and prayer rooms filled with many old icons. Our

constructed with large carved stones. Nearby was St George's convent and church belonging to the 1st century AD, one of the oldest in the world. Lots of gold plated icons on the walls. We climbed on our hands and knees through a stone door to a sort of buried old church. We heard the old door going clunk when it was shut. We drove on to Hama to see the big wooden water wheels squeaking away as they have done for hundreds of years, I guess. Once they used to lift water out of the Orontes River for irrigation. While there, we were bought a dessert to try that tasted a bit like ice cream and yogurt mixed

“Baptism is a big event and quite a ceremony in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with priests chanting most of the service, immersing the child three times in a large font of water.”

family spent time with some of the nuns there. It has a good view of the surrounding countryside.

On the stairs up to the convent was a stain that many think looks like the weeping Mother Mary, and people would stop for a prayer and reflection, and some would tie a tissue to the fence. Beyond Seidnaya, the first thing we noticed were the terraces of olive trees cut into the sides of the hills on pretty poor-looking ground, probably hundreds of years work. At Ma'loula, we stopped to visit an ancient church where they recited the Lord's Prayer in the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic, and which local villagers still speak.

From the church, we walked to the town down this high gorge, between two big waves of rock, and on the way saw the Remembrance poppy.

Out of Homs, we visited a massive citadel on top of a hilltop. The Krak des Chevaliers dates back to around 1031. Amazing how it was

together. Not for my taste buds!!

Moving on, we came across a lady making flat unleavened bread in big stone ovens, very popular with the locals with us who enjoyed it without any spread or filling.

The next stop was a resort town for lunch and a swim in the sea, the Mediterranean, I believe. And the beach? Black sand and very stony. We travelled to Latakia for the evening to a restaurant overlooking the white cliffs on the Mediterranean Sea. It was a beautiful sunset that evening and I still remember the fried fish we had.

Some of the family were sucking or smoking the water pipes the waiters, mostly men, attended to.

I tried a nargile, but I didn't like it. Still, it was an evening I will never forget. And to the east of the sea, in the desert, is Palmyra, an historical site about 250 km from Damascus with temples, amphitheatre and tall, tall columns. Some of the columns were carved from stone only found in Egypt, many hundreds of kilometres



Scenes from Damascus, images taken by Susan Dirgham



Leslie Hemphill with his son in a bathhouse, Damascus, 2004

away. I had a camel ride there and saw a track where they race camels.

The town of Palmyra had lots of palms but the surrounding area was treeless desert, as barren as you could get. (On another trip, we went south too, to Bosra, about 140 km from Damascus, to see ancient ruins that rival Palmyra.

Bosra has a large amphitheatre that seats about 10,000 people, an impressive structure carved from hard basil – the only one in the world intact and untouched since the Roman times. They still hold concerts there.)

In our travels, we saw sheep farmers, nomads who wandered around the desert country and followed the crops after they were harvested, their tents blowing in the desert winds. They looked to be just making an existence but some had a satellite dish near their tents. The small flocks were of mostly fat-tail sheep of many colours, sometimes with them was a boy, a donkey and a dog. We travelled to Aleppo by coach. It's about a 300 km journey along a highway that had overhead lighting all the way.

The desert country was very barren and then we came to farmlands. There are a lot of oil seeds grown in Syria. In Aleppo we stayed in this beautiful old hotel built around a fountain and a big courtyard with glass lifts to the second floor. Two tortoises were wandering around the tiled, marble floor. A terrific Western breakfast was served there. Do hope it's still in one piece.

The citadel of Aleppo is one of

the best in the world, sitting on a hill in the old part of the town and we spent many hours exploring its palaces, mosque, baths and many other features from the 4th BC. The Souks of Aleppo are the longest in the world, about 7 kms long selling everything imaginable. But what took my eye was the fat tail sheep hanging, its fatty tail about half the size of the carcass and every bit of offal for sale even the hooves.

Some were buying bits of offal that was minced up and eaten raw in little eateries in the souk. I did eat some raw mince pinched up on some unleavened bread at Paradise, a restaurant near Seidnaya.

We came back to Damascus on the train, the Pullman they called it, about a 4-hour trip. The countryside seen from the train was a bit different to what we saw from the highway.

Lots of stones and rocks have been picked up and put in rows about 100 to 150 metres apart to allow cultivation. We also saw orchards, mostly apricots and some very big silos to store the canola that was exported. Coming into Damascus after dark, the train driver was constantly on the horn as people, including kids, wandered along or beside the tracks.

It was a good trip. We had seen a big statue of the Mother Mary somewhere in the country, and there were lots of statues of Mary in Damascus and many of the towns and cities around Syria. St Ananias Church or crypt is down

some rocky stairs to two dungeon-like rooms with some icons on the walls.

A statue of St Ananias baptizing St Paul is nearby.

Baptism is a big event and quite a ceremony in the Greek Orthodox tradition, with priests chanting most of the service, immersing the child three times in a large font of water.

The anointing with oil, the cutting of locks of hair, and family and friends parade around the font carrying candles. Later they celebrate at a restaurant for hours, a special cake, gold bracelets and chains given as presents and the ladies doing a sort of yodel or sound with their mouths.

We noticed several times parades down the street and it would be a wedding party either before or after the event, yelling, loud music, heaps of flowers and the women making their special sounds. Once, we had a massage at one of the oldest baths in Damascus, the Hammam Al Malek, baths built around 985 AC. We were steamed, rubbed, oiled and massaged. When they started to massage us with what seemed like a kitchen scour, we wondered what had hit us. We were wrapped up in these big Egyptian silk towels and sipped black tea. It was mostly very hot when we were in Syria in July–August with shops opening later in morning and trading late into the evenings, and families out on the streets.

I loved wandering early in the morning up the many narrow laneways barely wide enough for one person I walked freely and felt perfectly safe.

A BOY IN DAMASCUS

By Susan Dirgham

Adapted with permission from *Eureka Street* | 29 April 2006

In 2005, while teaching at the British Council in Damascus, I first noticed Melhim. He was in a sunny corner of the Military Museum in Damascus. His rakish posture caught my attention: he was sitting askew on a child's red plastic chair, one leg dangling over one side, the other stretched out straight.

If he'd been ten years older you might have expected a cigarette in one hand.

Although clearly absorbed in his own thoughts, he had placed in front of his seat some bathroom scales to attract the wandering tourists and a few liras. I loved the look, so I dug in my handbag for my camera, wanting to capture it. But of course it was lost as soon as I gestured that I wished to take his photo. Immediately, he stood to one side of his chair in a military position, stiffly erect, arms at his side, now acting more like the child he was.

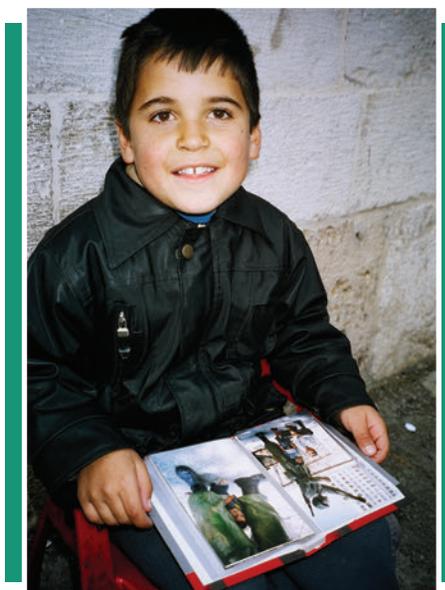
Not totally happy with that shot, I asked him to return to his chair, and I took a photo of him sitting, anything but nonchalant now. He looked intently up into the camera lens at me.

When I returned to give him the photos, Melhim looked at them and exclaimed, 'Oh Melhim. Naughty Melhim. Naughty Melhim.'

Melhim kept his dad company at the museum. His father, who welcomed my husband and me kindly but shyly, worked in the museum next to the hand craft market. He offered water to weary visitors. Being a child who was in the area every day, Melhim was well-known to the artisans and shopkeepers in the market. On one trip to see

him, I had to backtrack as I had walked past him; he had been sitting on a stool with an elderly artisan leaning over him fitting a leather band onto his wrist.

And he must have been a little like a mascot to the soldiers in the museum. It was the young soldiers relaxing near him, rifles casually slung over their shoulders, who had first assured us that Melhim would be there the following Friday, or any other day, if we wanted to see him. At some point Melhim gave up on his little red chair



Melhim

and scales. Without them, he was more likely to wander. On one summer afternoon, I found him sitting alone on the roof of the toilets. From a small courtyard hidden from the view of the family groups sauntering past his little corner, Melhim had climbed a workman's ladder to the roof, to sit and survey the world.

I doubt if he could see much more than the tops of the eucalypts beyond the walls of the museum and the silhouettes of cranes beside the skeleton of an emerging five-star hotel.

In Damascus—in another culture, another workplace and surrounded by an alien language—I worked hard just to be, just to cope. I had a nervous tic in my fingers. I would find myself rubbing my right thumb and my second finger together as I walked home after a long day.

My interaction with people was often studied; I felt stilted. But like Melhim, most Damascenes were so in the moment, I don't think they noticed as long as I maintained their warm eye contact.

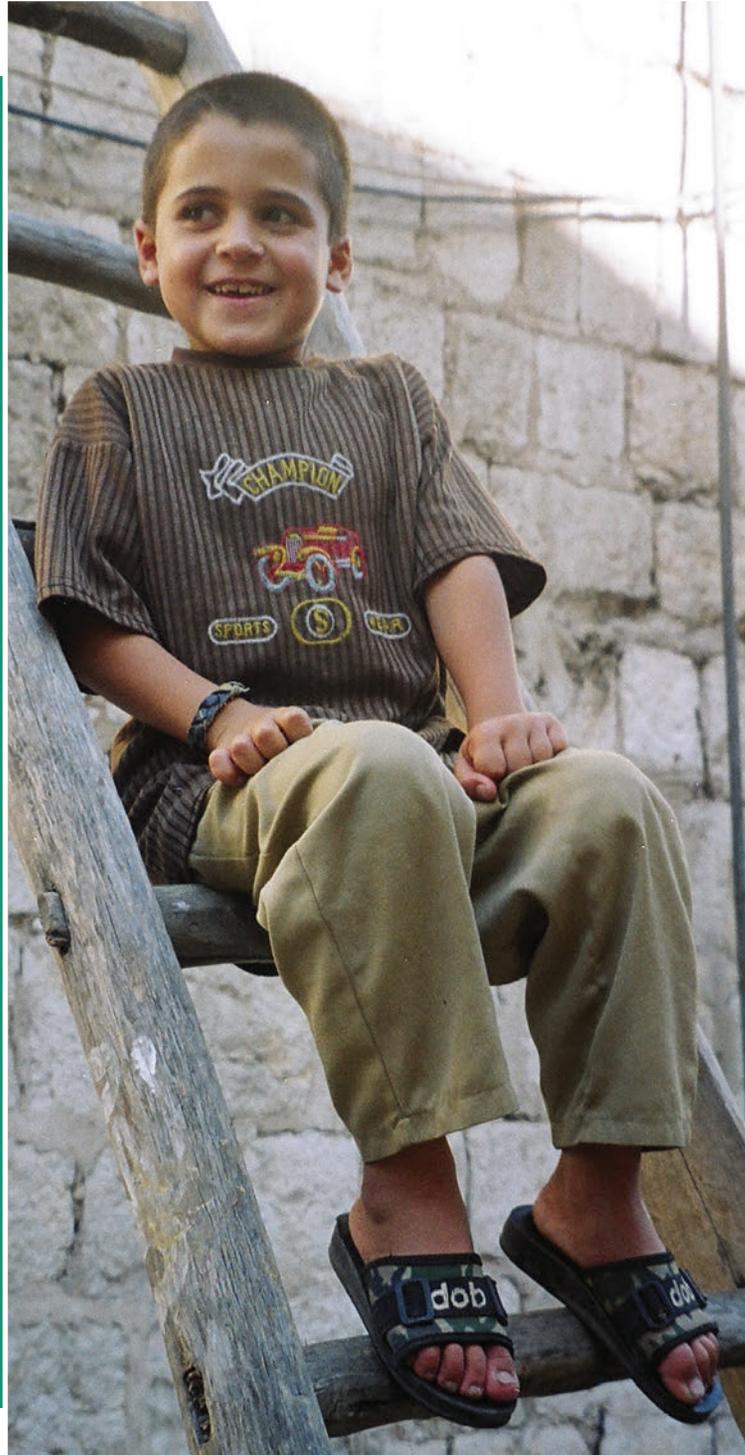
At the end of the summer, Melhim was to return to his village near the Jordanian border to rejoin his mother and two younger brothers, so he could begin school. The day before his departure we came to farewell him, not knowing when we would see him again.

That day he must have put some thought into a backdrop for the photos he knew I would want to take of him. He led us past the local lads, the young soldiers lolling around in the sun, into an area that would normally require a ticket.

As one of their duties was to check for tickets, the soldiers called out something, but Melhim, as if he were their commanding officer, pointed out that we were with him, and walked on, towards an ancient tank and airplane, and a giant green fibreglass statue of a soldier.

As I write this, back in suburban Melbourne, a universe away from Damascus, I look at the photos. One shows Melhim standing on the tank, arms stretched up, palms out, as if he is a general placating an applauding crowd.

The only picture that I didn't take myself is of Melhim still on the tank and of me standing beside it. I'm looking impatiently at the camera behind my sunglasses, while Melhim looks at me,



with one hand resting on my head as if he feels I need a pat, and the other held up high like a policeman at a busy intersection; he seems to be telling the world to stand still for a moment while he cares for me!

Melhim weaves a special thread through my life still. I don't know where he is; I can't imagine the horrors he and his family may have faced in recent years.

To honour him and his compatriots, I hold on to the memory of young Melhim in Damascus.



Aleppo sunrise, taken by Luke Cornish, March 2017

ALEPPO SUNRISE - A NEW DAY

Title: Syrians aren't just rebuilding an ancient mosque in Aleppo – they are rebuilding their community, Caption: by Robert Fisk, Independent, 25th July 2017

Mustafa Kurdi, the reconstruction supervisor of Aleppo's Great Mosque, "We need a soul," he said. "When Aleppo is rebuilt, it will be because of the love of its people. I have seen people in the destroyed streets putting chairs in front of their shops today, even though the shops have been destroyed. They gradually clean everything away. Aleppo will be rebuilt by its people. We need to see Aleppo again – all of it, because otherwise we will go on missing it. A poet once wrote that the 'spirit of eagerness to see' was sufficient for one person in just a glance at a city – but that for those who live there, even if we look constantly at it, it is not enough."

Luke with children in Syria, July 2017



My Student Memories of Syria

By Marisa Della Gatta

Marisa Della Gatta is a PhD Candidate at Macquarie University (Sydney), working on a project about the Syrian Diaspora. She holds a research degree in Languages for International Cooperation (University of Bari, Italy).

My passion for Arabic started in 2006 and culminated in 2008 with my field trip to Syria. My interests include Middle Eastern politics, Syrian studies and the politics of inclusion. As a student of Arabic, Syria was recommended to me as the best destination to learn the language.

The purest and most ancient dialect is spoken there, I was told. I was really determined for Arabic full-immersion in Syria in 2008.

While most of the foreign students used to go to Damascus, I was attracted by Aleppo, the commercial district of the country, where the trading art corresponds to the intactness of traditional values and habits.

After a few years spent on manuals and dictionaries, I believed I was able to speak Arabic. The first thing I remember once arrived in Aleppo is that, despite my confidence, I could not, or, at least, the language I was speaking was not theirs.

Standard Arabic or fusha is not a spoken language; it is the language of the news, the Quran and books in general.

People were looking at me and probably thinking: “does she come from medieval times? Is she coming out from television?” Nowadays, my Syrian friends use fusha in everyday life conversations in a less ingénue and sarcastic way for imitating daesh’s fighters and administrators. They use a grammatically completely incorrect version of Quran-like Arabic.

Going back to my student experience in Syria, away from the routine of Arabic classes at

university, the most I learnt was from the Syrian children in the family who hosted me.

After school, I used to do my homework at home, and they used to help me, making fun of my mistakes and being proud of acting as my teachers. With them, I felt free to speak without worrying about errors, in a more spontaneous way than with my peers.

Social life in Aleppo was rich in friendship opportunities outside classes in a simple but, at the same time, vivacious sense. Vivid in my memories are nights spent as if they were days, just sitting at a café in front of an iced cold fresh juice. Aleppo used to come alive at night time in summer, people enjoying the breeze from the mountains after the intense heat, with all the shops open until late. Obviously, I felt I was an agnabiyyeh, or foreign girl, and I did not pretend to be a local.

In no sense and in no circumstance, Aleppian people made me feel as a stranger, uncomfortable or unsafe as an outsider.

Their warm hospitable nature and their spontaneity mixed with a disposition to welcoming new arrivals, also deriving from the mercantile personality of the city, allowed me to immerse myself in the vibrant culture and the brilliantly sophisticated society.

I realized, it is true that if you want to learn the language, you need to love its background.

After my trip in Syria, I fell in love with Aleppo, with Syria, its people, its humanity and I could finally speak non-standard Arabic from the heart.

ALEPPO – EFFORTS TOWARDS NORMALITY

Article by Nezhat, 47, the wife of a gentleman and mother to three beautiful daughters.

To those who never knew Aleppo, this ancient city, my dears, was the city that never slept. The people of Aleppo were known for loving to work all day and party all night.

The streets were never empty at any hour of the day. Wherever you went, it was always crowded with busy, yet happy faces.

The citizens of Aleppo loved to work (Aleppo was the industrial and commercial centre of Syria), which increased incomes of individuals to the highest levels ever. I am not exaggerating if I say that most of those who worked for the private sector had their own cars. Plus, we were living in a safe and secure situation. Women were able to go out late at night, attending parties and wedding receptions without any fear or problem. After the war came to Aleppo, it went from heaven to hell.

For example, on 23rd November 2012, my kids left for school at 7:30.

A couple of minutes later I heard a very loud explosion; it was so loud that the earth moved beneath my feet. All the doors and windows were opened under the pressure of this explosion and there were fragments all over the place. At first we did not realize what happened.

We heard people screaming and shouting, saying terrorists had blown up the school our kids went to.

I cannot tell you what exactly I felt at that moment. My husband and I immediately ran towards the school. My feet could not lift me to run because of the fear I felt.

When we arrived at the school it was shocking. All the parents were scared for their children. But all the kids were safe, thank God.

Later that day, we heard on the news that two cars had been blown up by three suicide bombers who attacked Saad Allah Al Jabiri Square near our neighbourhood.

Dr Jan Oberg is a peace studies professor at Lund University, Sweden. He has a PhD in sociology, peace and future research.

He and Dr. Christina Spännar are the co-founders of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, known as TFF. Dr Oberg has been the head of TFF's Conflict-Mitigation teams to ex-Yugoslavia, Georgia, Burundi, Iraq, Iran and Syria. In his own words:



“Peace researcher, international mediator, director of the Transnational Foundation in Sweden. And art photographer. I combine peace work, mission experiences and photography. We live in a time when images increasingly shape our perception of the world and, thus, public opinion formation. I’m fascinated with the possibilities that photo stories offer.”

The classroom pictured on the following page is in what was once a factory in Sheikh Najjar, an industrial city just outside Aleppo.

Sheikh Najjar was reportedly one of the largest industrial centres in the Middle East, and it is said to have represented about half of Syria's industrial capacity before the war.

The factory was donated to the Education Department by Aleppo businessman and independent member of the Syrian parliament Mr Fares Al-Shehab.



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Ref: <https://janoberg.exposure.co/school-in-an-aleppo-factory>*



*Voices from
Syria*



By Raneem, female, 33, an interpreter, living in Damascus

Can you tell our readers about your daily life before the war and about your daily life now?

My daily life was not limited to work or study. I used to do amateur theatre acting, and performed in a play in English at the British Council in Damascus. I participated in astronomical activities organized by the Syrian Astronomical Society.

In addition, I loved going to book fairs, where there was a wide variety of books, including the latest works by writers from around the world. I used to attend the Opera House, where singers, musicians, dancers, and artists from various places around the world performed. And I used to go to the circus to watch the spectacular performances of foreign troupes.

Now, I still lead an active life. It might not seem important, but I miss the cosmopolitan lifestyle Syria used to enjoy. I am still going to work. If I have free time, I go to restaurants and the cinema with friends, attend French language classes, go to the gym... However, generally, much of my time after work is dedicated to finding water, heating materials, cooking gas or... or... I allocate hours for commuting to work.

Despite the kinds of daily hardships we face, I feel lucky when I start my day drinking coffee with loved ones. I feel blessed when I wake up and find that there is both running water and electricity.

Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and Christmas are national public holidays in Syria. What joyful memories do you have of these festivals?

I feel I had a rich life when I remember these holidays. They were joyfully welcomed. They were full of love and loud laughter. They meant a lot to the kids; I used to see them walking around with colorful new clothes and gifts. ... in the streets, the sounds of happy Eid wishes came from all directions. I remember how scrumptious the sweets made by my grandmother and aunts were.

I loved how I used to be very busy welcoming cousins, relatives and friends. I miss how easygoing I was, spending long hours with friends during these holidays.



Children in a lane in Damascus, 2004

LETTERS TO OUR CHILDREN

To children who will not remember pre-war Syria

By Raneem

Once upon a time,
 There was a paradise.
 It was on earth.
 It was in Syria.
 It was a haven for great civilizations. It
 was a haven for Mother Nature.
 It was a generous land with generous
 people. It was the incubator of
 remarkable inventions.
 It was the land where life was lived
 richly.
 It was the theatre where love danced
 joyfully.
 It was the place where million-year-

old souls roamed freely.
 It was where forests of pine trees
 spread their morning aroma.
 It was where cyclamen flowers spread
 their colorful beauty, announcing
 spring on the coastal mountains.
 It was the land of olives and flowering
 lemon trees.
 Now,
 Faded, it appears to be.
 We have this brilliant paradise
 engraved in our hearts.
 We have the seeds to create it once
 again.

When we die we will leave them to
 you. They will grow once again when
 it comes time to revive.
 But now, your mission is to take care
 of yourselves and shine brightly.
 You ought to be prepared for you
 have another task.
 It is setting our souls free to roam the
 paradise, joining the million-year-old
 souls

Article by Cosette. Translated by Norma Medawar

I am 36 years old. I live in Damascus (before
 and since the war, I still live in the same place)
 My dream was to live a successful life with my
 family and at work. Now, I just want a safe life.
 Syrians are kind, honest and dignified. Before the
 war, I had my work, my activities with my friends.
 After the war I stopped working for three
 years and I became afraid of leaving my home
 especially with my kids because of the security
 situation.
 I want to tell the world that Syria is a beautiful
 country, it has a bright civilization, and Syrians
 are lovely and peaceful people. They were united
 by their love of each other and for their country,

while now they are united by the rejection of
 surrender.
 When I go to my work in the morning and
 see the streets, like beehives, full of active happy
 students going to their schools despite the bad
 circumstances, I feel happy and hopeful. It was so
 beautiful seeing the streets and houses decorated
 with Christmas lights and people in streets and
 restaurants.
 Syria is not only a country of fighting,
 struggling and terror. It's a country of peace,
 safety, friendship, concerts, parties, gladness,
 comfort, family love, nice customs, and traditions,
 and is the cradle of civilization.

Thank you



“While many parts of the world didn’t recognize women’s right to vote, Queen Zenobia sat on the throne of Palmyra.”

Article by Anwar, a retired teacher. Translated by Norma Medawar

While visiting Abu Dhabi, an official asked me, “How did you see the Emirates?” I said: “It’s beautiful and fabulous, so much money is spent on building these towers and infrastructure. Here everything is beautiful and clean”.

Then he asked me, “Which is more beautiful, the Emirates or Syria?” and I said: “Syria is my country, it’s not fair to compare it to any another country in the world.

In the Emirates, beauty is made by man while the beauty in Syria is made by God, and there is a huge difference between the two creators. I’m saying this despite my big love of the Emirates.”

Man has lived in Syria and has built a great civilization, which includes Palmyra, a city situated in the heart of the desert.

While many parts of the world didn’t recognize women’s right to vote, Queen Zenobia sat on the throne of Palmyra. In that city, all acts of worship and gods known to man coexisted in peace. Many monuments could be found there including the goddess of beauty, fertility, love, fire and even Al-Uzza and Allat.

In Syria there are the four seasons and the geography ranges from coastline, plains, plateaus, mountains and desert. There are streams and rivers flowing ...

A question was asked in the TV programme Who Wants to be Millionaire with George Kerdahi: “Which is the richest country: America, Saudi Arabia or Syria?” The right answer was Syria because of its abundance and diversity.

Article by Muhannad, 25 years old, student in Master program in Cultural Heritage Resource Management at Tourism Faculty, Damascus and Idlib University. Translated by Raneem Abdulazeez.

What dreams or ambitions did you have in the past? And now?

In the past I had an ambition to become a schoolteacher to participate in preparing a Syrian generation that is aware and cultured. However, my ambition has grown now and I want to become a university professor and a professional tour guide.

How do you recognize that someone is Syrian? Are there any common characteristics?

Definitely, Syrians are famous for their good treatment and nice welcome for guests or even for strangers. Syrians are collaborative people; they love others and defend them if they are their friends. They

are characterized as being loyal and generous; they are well-known for their sociability and openness toward other religions and sects.

Can you tell our readers about your daily life before the war and about your daily life now?

Before the war, I was younger and my goal was to be an outstanding student. We lived comfortably. No one can deny that we enjoyed security and stability.

I used to visit my hometown any day, and at any time. Now, I can't do that at all. I have not been there for five years. All I can manage doing now is to go to university and spend good times with my friends.

What has united Syrians, and what can unite them again?

Syrians are united by their love for one home, one land and one country. It is their everlasting love for Syria.

Can you tell readers about something that has touched your heart and given you hope?

There is a new challenge that comes with every new day.

Today is not like yesterday and that is why we always look for the future through the eyes of the new generations who are full of strength, tenderness, and strong will, which will give us more hope to move forward.

Article by Kifah, 44, engineer, from Homs. Translated by Raneem Abdulazeez

What distinguishes Syrians?

Syrians are distinguished by their rich accents. Their clothes tend to be colorful, reflecting the joyful Syrian spirit. They like delicious food and a variety of dishes. They have a sensitive ear for beautiful voices. They are sensitive, humane and always ready to take part in humanitarian efforts and kind deeds.

What would you like the world to know about Syria?

I want the world to know that the country viewed as full of violence and horror is not the real Syria. I want them to know that other countries and their conflicts of interest cause the war in Syria; proxy wars are being carried out on Syrian land.

These countries in conflict exploited Syrian internal conditions to hold talks with companies to make deals related to weapons, gas and oil.

Syrians used to live in peace; they hate wars, killing, destruction and the horrible blood scenes. They are heartbroken now.

Syrians do not deserve to be wounded like this. Throughout their history, Syrians dealt with hardships, difficulties and tribulations, and they always came back to life and restored peace like the phoenix.

Furthermore, I want to tell the world that Syrians are the first people to dance and sing joyfully when they see a rainbow.

Syrians share this joy and beauty with the whole world.

Syrians have souls that are as beautiful as the rainbow.

What gives you hope?

In 2013, after approximately two years of war, I was looking for a job in Lebanon and was staying with my relatives. We lived in one room in a four-room house.

I noticed that there was a family in each room, and by chance, each family was of a different religious background from the other three families. Literally, we were four families from different sects in one house and what really touched me and raised my hopes was that those four families used to exchange meals every day. They knew that there was no sect for these dishes. Their food had only one religion: it was love.

Love united those residents inside one house. This is a simple example of my loving good people.



Family in Damascus, 2008

Article by Joumana, female, 43 years old, journalist, currently living in Damascus. Translated by Norma Medawar

How do you recognize that someone is Syrian? Are there any common characteristics?

Syrians are distinguished for being kind to everyone, even to strangers. For example, a Syrian would rush to give a helping hand to a blind person to cross the street. Another instance, a Syrian would immediately help an old person carrying heavy things into his/her house. A Syrian will stop any man trying to annoy a girl in the street. Syrian people hate injustice and are ready to help others even if they are strangers. Syrians are generous and they love being unique and successful in their work and in anything they do. Wherever they go, they prove that they are cultured and distinguished people.

Can you tell our readers about your daily life before the war and about your daily life now?

Before the war I used to work as a journalist at AL-Watan newspaper. My job was very exciting and interesting. I was able to walk in every street of Damascus safely. Although I had to go to work, I had time to take care of my family and my house. However, the

explosions in Damascus made living there very dangerous. That led me to decide to move to my hometown, where I stayed for a while. Recently, I came back to Damascus and resumed my work at Al Watan newspaper. I thought that the situation would be better than it was when I left; it turned out to be the opposite.

Moreover, the number of crimes has increased; there is no safety and security in my country any more. There is more fear for children's safety. However, I chose to come back and stay in Damascus because of my love for the city and for my work, and because I want my kids to get a better education at a school in Damascus, particularly my daughter, who is in her final year at secondary school.

What would you like the world to know about Syria and its people?

I want the world to know that Syrians are educated people and they love life. Syrians help whoever is in need. Syrians stand by the oppressed. Syrians are patient; they endure hardships; they are creative and talented; and they are loyal people.

What has united Syrians, and what can unite them again?

Syrians are united with their love for their homeland and their love for life. They all seek living in peace and want a safe and secure life, and then they will be able to rebuild their country. Syrians will not let anyone occupy their country; they hate injustice, and slavery. Unfortunately, the war is hindering Syrians' progress toward achieving the development they want for their country. However, Syrians are resisting all types of extermination applied against them in this war.

Can you tell readers about something that has touched your heart and given you hope?

Despite all the sadness and hardships brought to us by this war, I feel that there is still hope whenever I look at a flower; at a tree; at a kid laughing; at my son or at my daughter. I believe we can make life beautiful once again. Everyone must fight in their own special way to defend their country in a war that aims to destroy the people and their history.



Krak des Chevaliers, Syria, Under Standard Licence from Shutterstock.com

Husam, 30 years old, employee at a transport shipping company, from Homs, now living in Damascus. Translated by Norma Medawar.

What dreams or ambitions did you have in the past? And now?

Like most young Syrians, I used to dream of being an active citizen and becoming well-known in my country. My plans were to study, find a job, have a car, travel, enjoy a big bank account, have my own family, and most importantly employ my abilities to serve my country.

Now, most young men and women dream of travelling because of the harsh war conditions. The hard circumstances are suffocating everyone.

Everyone is longing to see Syria as it used to be before the war. It was an example of coexistence, people's love for each other, and a safe and secure country. We are all looking forward to the end of the war, which killed the young men, orphaned the kids and widowed the women.

How do you recognize that someone is Syrian? Are there any common characteristics?

Syrian people are well-known for being hospitable, generous and noble. They are united. They love each other and their neighbors. They are sociable. Syrians love to pamper others. They love going out a lot.

The most important thing for a Syrian is their tummy; satisfying their love for food is essential.

***“Damascus is the city of Jasmine.
Damascus is the city of love.
Damascus is the city of passion.
Damascus is the city of nostalgia.”***

They also love to joke a lot, to a degree that a Syrian can make a joke out of anything. Syrians are productive, independent and resourceful. They work for the common good.

Can you tell readers about your daily life before the war and about your daily life now?

My life was a very nice one before the war. It was full of lovely little things such as the gas cylinder vendor's shouts in the streets. Strangely, these sounds used to make me feel safe.

Another lovely thing was my mother's voice waking me up in the morning to have breakfast before I headed off to university. During university, seeing friends was the priority, not the lectures.

We used to spend our time – after lectures until the afternoon – in cafes laughing and joking, listening to songs and talking. I used to spend evenings with my friends in the neighborhood. When we had to study, we would spend time calling friends and checking what might be expected

in exam questions. It was funny that most of our expected questions were not listed in exams. We used to stay up all night where half the time would be studying and the other half would be spent on the telephone. Those I call the magnificent days. Although we had some hard times back then, the lovely days outnumbered the hard ones. We used to forget any hard day immediately and start over. They were our sweet days, until the day the war hit our life.

My life now is cautious: whenever I go out I need to be careful of everything. It is imposed on me by the current circumstance.

Now, waking up is not the same as it used to be in the past. Nowadays, I wake up terrified by the sounds of shootings and bombings. Although I still follow the habit of having my breakfast and coffee before going out, I am always worried. I always face troubles on my way to work.

Going to work is a tiring task; it means I start my work feeling exhausted by the road trip. I try my best to have positive energy, but in vain, I can't get that positivity. I go back home suffering the same troubles I had earlier on my way to work. After going home I usually eat lunch, go to the gym, then go back home to watch the news.

I try to have fun with friends; however, I already miss a lot of them for many reasons such as travel or death or because they lock themselves in their home.

Trying to sleep is not easy at all, thinking of these events, of when the war is going to end, of when I will go back to a normal life, and when I will see all my loved ones.

Our country is a beautiful one and we should live and stay there. We should prove to the world that we the Syrians have civilization, have faith in our country, and steadfastness despite all that is going on around us.

What would you like the world to know about Syria and its people?

Syria is the country of civilization and dignity. Damascus enchanted the hearts and the minds of everyone who visited it. It is a magical place.

It is said that some prophets are from Damascus, and the other prophets immigrated to it. I am so proud of our country. I hold my head high, proud that I am Syrian.

What has united Syrians and what could unite them again?

Syrians are against any invasion, or any party thinking of destroying the country. It is still standing fast and still strong, and fighting anyone that might think of destroying it, or occupying it.

“God Protects Syria” is a phrase believed and understood only by Syrians. I want to say to the people abroad that Syria is truly protected by God and that there is a divine power in this land.

The Syrian people strove to live, then they fought to stay alive, and they are still ready to strive and fight once again hundreds of times in order to keep this country powerful and protected by its people.

Can you tell readers about something that has touched your heart and given you hope?

The thing that touches my heart and gives me hope is that the country went through a bad time in the past and survived.

I have hope when I watch students heading to their schools, when I see the kids laughing despite the terror of war, seeing the cleaning service employees taking care of the streets, the streets full of cars, employees heading to work, seeing the Syrian people busy and working hard.

All of that gives me hope that life will be back as it used to be. We will live in peace without troubles. Jasmine, no matter how faded it might become, will blossom again.

What would you like to say to the editors of Beloved Syria and its readers in Australia?

Our country deserves to be talked about. Its charm should reach people. Syria and its fascinating people should be known. I hope that the magazine will be successful. I hope it will reach the stage where people will be waiting eagerly for the next issue, wondering what will be talked about.

How do you recognise that someone is Syrian? Are there any common characteristics?

*By Ilyas, male, 48 years old, government employee, Homs.
Translated by Raneem Abdulazeez*

If we want to talk about the accent, Syria has the widest variety of accents when compared to other Arab countries. I believe this is due to the diversity of the geography in Syria. For example, the accent of the people living in Deir Ezzor is very close to the Iraqi accent, while the accent in Daraa governorate is identical to the Jordanian accent.

Another example is the accent spoken on the Syrian coast, which is close to that spoken on the Lebanese coast. Moreover, the accent in the Syrian mountains is close to the accent in the Lebanese mountains. However, the accents of people in the central region cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs are uniquely Syrian.

Psychologically, Syrians are the most patient people and they adapt easily. They are open, adaptable, and they love life and adore civilization. (Distinctive factors related to such things as geography, history and climate) have led naturally to a marvelously diverse culture in Syria. As a result, Muslims are used to hearing the sound of church bells, and Christians are used to hearing the muezzin call to prayer.

Six weeks in Syria



Born and raised in Australia, Leo (Soltan) Alhalabi identifies both as a proud Aussie and a proud Syrian.

On visits to Syria, he has noted the love and support people show each other in moments of celebration and crisis. Most of Leo's extended family still lives in Syria.

Leo is CEO of LGT Tutoring and is a former Victorian, Australian and World ISKA Karate Champion.

After 10 years separation from Syria, late last year, we decided it was time to reconnect. We were all aware of the inherent risk of travelling to Syria, but my grandmother's last wish was to see us. So we went.

We stayed in Jaramana, which could be described as a suburb of Damascus since it is just 20 minutes from the CBD. Tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees moved there after the start of the war in Iraq. Jaramana is currently considered safe despite its having been hit by car bombs and more than 7000 missiles just 3 years ago. Luckily, close calls aside, the family home survived.

Others weren't that lucky. After a few weeks, the excitement of being back in Syria with family members abated.

In Australia, for most of us, life is stable, sheltered and comfortable.

But in Syria, basic necessities have become luxuries. Every moment is

defined by struggle. You realize you have little to no power over your surroundings: life is so unpredictable.

A basic thing such as electricity is unreliable. There were days when it would come on for 15 minutes after being cut for 7 hours.

For one week, the entire city had no water supply. No matter how rich you were, what status or influence you had, you were as thirsty as your neighbour.

The more time I spent in Syria, the more grateful I became for the privileged lives we live in Australia. However, despite the war, there was a lot of 'beauty'.

Families gathered every night so that they would not be alone in the dark. Internet access was scarce, so instead of being glued to our phones and computers we sang; we danced; we told jokes and we laughed.

We had time to give thought to my incredible grandpa who had

passed away, and we cried... Then we remembered his funny moments and laughed, experiencing very human emotions at the highest of levels.

When supplies ran out, I witnessed neighbours help each other, sharing whatever extra they had, knowing that in times like this everyone was vulnerable no matter how well prepared they thought they were.

I met a man who spent a huge part of his savings on 900 litres of diesel so that his family would stay warm in the winter. Thieves stole every last drop before he used any of it.

This was just some of the beauty and calamity I witnessed in my six weeks in Syria.

Damascus: Hidden Treasures of the Old City

By Brigid Keenan, Thames & Hudson

Review by Charles Newton, ESL teacher and artist

My husband, a diplomat, was posted to Syria in 1993, and I went with him. Very soon, like Isabel, the wife of the famous British Consul Richard Burton, a hundred and twenty-odd years before me, I found myself in love with Damascus. (Long after she left Syria, Mrs Burton was often asked if she had liked Damascus, to which her response was: 'Like it! My eyes fill and my heart throbs even at the question ...')

She described an afternoon spent picnicking on Qasyun mountain shortly before she and her husband were obliged to leave the country, as 'my last happy day'. I can pinpoint the moment my passion began – it was the first time I went inside one of the great courtyard houses of the old city. The house was Bait Mujallid and I was completely unprepared for what I was going to see, and utterly overwhelmed by its magnificence. (page 8)

A lady from Damascus told me we each have dual nationality: our birthplace and then Syria. Recent studies of DNA inheritance suggest this is indeed true.

Our ancestors lingered on Syrian soil for extended periods before moving to inhabit the far reaches of the world.

The "oldest inhabited city on earth" has once again become the focus of bitter fighting and the Syrian crisis has awakened our ancestral memory, if not our historical one. Damascus has

fallen so many times, only to rise again bearing its exuberant style proudly.

This book, so lavishly illustrated, is a portrait of the architectural and decorative innovation of old Damascene palaces and of some of the people who inhabited them.

Photographs of courtyards, ceilings, wall paintings, coloured paste work, stonework, windows and doors are grouped in chapters, while the narrative weaves its way through human extravagance and its results.

Notwithstanding the deprecations of time and venality, there is a lot that still sparkles with timeless verity. According to legend, the Prophet Mohammed, who approached Damascus through the mountainous desert, stopped in his tracks when he saw the shimmering white city in the green oasis, saying "man should only enter Paradise once".

It was of course a Christian city at that time, having adapted the Roman temples into churches, leaving little trace of Aramean temples of Biblical ancestry. Within years of the death of Mohammed, the Arabs invaded, and Damascus became the fourth holiest city of Islam.

The Great Mosque of Damascus (or the Umayyad Mosque) was the focus of the new religion. The mosque was built on the site of a temple dating back to the 9th century BC. The Grand Mosque to some extent incorporated temples and a Christian basilica dedicated to John the Baptist.

Ancient walls and columns either within the mosque's structure or in its shadows attest to the extraordinary

history of Damascus. The Umayyad Caliph, Al-Walid (who ruled from 705 until 715), ploughed a fortune into the construction of the Grand Mosque to leave no doubt in the minds of Damascenes about the superiority of Islam with its sumptuous marbles, gold, mosaics inlaid with agate and turquoise. It was said one prayer said there was worth 30,000 said anywhere else. It was to Syrian and Greek craftsmen that Al-Walid turned since they had honed their skills in Byzantine churches.

With the exclusion of the human form in Islamic art, however, they turned their creativity and invention into abstract geometric and serpentine extravagance, engendering visions of Paradise as described in the Arabic nights. And so a culture was constructed about the perfect indescribability of God or Allah, which could be best communicated by dizzying patterns and energetic fruiting vegetation.

The buildings of Damascus have generous proportions of mathematical stability to contain the decoration, bringing man face to face with the perfection of Allah.

The same elements were enthusiastically used in palaces, where their more secular intent was nevertheless infused with the harmony of the mosque.

It is a humbling thought that we all share this instinct for balance within profusion, through our Syrian DNA.



Details of mosaic on the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, Under Standard Licence from Shutterstock.com

DAUGHTER OF DAMASCUS



Courtyard in the Mustafa Ali Gallery, Damascus

By *Siham Tergeman*

Published by Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1994

Book Review by *Lisa Accadia*

reveals a place and time where there was much joy and much to celebrate. In chapters 1 to 5 Siham's memories take us back to her early childhood, with subtle glimpses of what life might have been like for women in particular around that time. She shares her mother's home-cooked recipes, and the delights she felt upon witnessing her first wedding. From chapter 6 onwards we get taken onto a journey through stories she heard or conversations she had, and although the different fables don't always connect, they still give the reader an evocative preview of Syrian culture and history.

Siham also shares with us a deep nostalgia for the old Damascus, the streets and buildings of a city that was yet to be touched by 'modern times'. She has a sacred love for the city of old, and her descriptions of the past spring forth in a delight of poetic pose and romantic reflections. Her stories travel from capturing the essence and beauty of life around her, to also revealing a country that is no stranger to the cries of war.

Woven within Syria's long and rich history is a place familiar with grief and struggle, yet also recognised for its beauty and poetry, and a place that has for so long encompassed and embraced people of many faiths and beliefs.

This memoir is a delight to read and a charming account of Damascus in the 1950s. It will leave you with a deeper insight into the culture of the Damascenes, give you a craving for pistachios and spices, and hopefully entrust you with a greater understanding of what was once a beautiful city full of vibrancy and life.

Damascus in my mind's eye... is an Arabic house with an open courtyard, in its center is a small pool from which 70 brass pipes pour out cool water. A beautiful woman sweeps the courtyard with water, holding in her hand a pail and a straw broom. Her wooden clogs ring on the stone tiles and her narrow gold bracelets jangle at her wrists ...

Her laughter pierces through to the depths of the heart ... her whiteness is the pure white of Arabian jasmine and her eyes the color of honey. She fills her pail from the pool and throws the water on the tiles, sweeping it with her broom. Meanwhile, her friend fills a second pail with water to sprinkle the flowers and water the plants and trees. The smell of eggplant frying in oil fills the house and the houses of neighbours. A clever woman beats kibbi in the stone mortar especially made for kibbi, while her sister-in-law plays on the 'aud' in the cool sitting room, the soft gold bracelets moving gently on her wrist as she picks out the chords with a feather.

Her mother-in-law peels garlic in the shade while the daughter of the mother-in-law pushes at the handle of the pump to fill a large jug of water for washing dishes. The second wife to her mother-in-law climbs a ladder to pick tender grape leaves from the vine in order to make stuffed grape leaves for the next day's meal. A devilish boy pounds on the door, and runs away. (page 32)

Set around the 1950s, and written by a local Damascene, this special glimpse into the streets, sounds, smells, and tastes of Damascus will transport you to a world seen through the eyes of an innocent youth, besotted by her city and its people.

Daughter of Damascus is written almost like a journal of Siham's memories, yet woven together in a book that is hard to put down.

Each chapter gives the reader a different memory, or period of time, a story she heard, or something about Damascus she simply longs to share.

It is clear Siham is sentimental about the Damascus of her childhood, and through her affectionate stories and reflections she gives us an insight into Syrian culture and customs – from weddings, family life, cooking, communal gatherings and more, she

Road To Damascus

By: Elaine Rippey Imady, MSI Press, LLC, 2013, Reviewed by Kirsten Bardwell

When I first met Mohammed, we talked a great deal about Islam and, as a disillusioned Christian, I listened with interest. To tell the truth, at this time in my life, my understanding of Islam was quite superficial. I merely felt that if Islam was Mohammed's religion, it must be good. I had my letter of confirmation in the Palisades Presbyterian Church removed and made the shahada, the profession of faith in Islam, in front of two witnesses. That is all there was to it.

I was now a Muslim. Some time after this, I saw a film about the Middle East at the Organization of Arab Students in New York. In one scene, there was a man in flowing robes praying in the desert while the voice-over – first in Arabic and then in English – recited one of the famous verses from the Qur'an: Qul hua Allahu ahad ... Say, God is One... The voice seemed to speak directly to me, and I was electrified. This was the moment of truth that sealed and affirmed my acceptance of Islam. April came and, with it, my first Ramadan. I told Mohammed that I intended to fast, but the first day he found me in the university cafeteria

drinking coffee. "I thought you were going to fast," he said. "I am – I haven't eaten a thing." "But you're drinking coffee." "You mean you aren't supposed to eat or drink? You didn't tell me that."

The next day I was caught smoking a cigarette, and the third day I was chewing gum, two more things that broke the fast. Finally, I got it sorted out. I remember one afternoon mowing the lawn in Palisades while watching the slow, the very slow progress of the sun across the sky. It wasn't easy, but I kept the fast all that Ramadan without any more mistakes and was thrilled to have shared this special month with Mohammed.

By Elaine Imady, Elaine Imady *A Damascus Life: Walking a Tightrope, How a Multi-cultural Family can Thrive*, Syria Comment, March 4th 2010

Elaine Rippey was a young student at New York University in the late 1950s when she met and fell in love with Mohammed Imady, a scholarship student from Syria. They married soon after and had the first of their three children before moving to Damascus. The memoir covers the period 1960 – 1973 with Imady recounting her life as a young wife and mother in Syria at a time of social, political and economic change.

Imady weaves together her experiences of daily life adapting to a new culture and the changes and opportunities created by her husband's career rise through government ministries.

Evident is Imady's warmth and deep affection for the women in her life; her mother- and sisters-in-law with whom she lived in a multigenerational household, her own mother who visited regularly, and the many foreign wives she gets to know during the period. As a Westerner from a Christian tradition living with practising Muslims, Imady's experiences demonstrate how cohesively Syrian secular society functioned during the period. Drawing on family tales she creates an easy-to-read and understand history of modern Syria.

Imady also brings to life one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

Imady's life is one well lived, her open and adventurous spirit is richly rewarded, for as well as raising three children, she learns Arabic, finishes a university degree, works in various roles and travels the world accompanying her husband as Minister of Economy and Trade (over a 24 year period).

A great read if you are interested in learning more about Syria.



SYRIAN STREET FOOD AND RESTAURANTS IN YEREVAN, ARMENIA

By Marisa Della Gatta

The preservation of Syrian culture in Armenia by Syrian Armenian newcomers has primarily to do with food. In different forms, from the reopening of restaurants once operating in Aleppo (a famous culinary destination in the Middle East) to zaatar or falafel kiosks, and pastry shops, Syrian food was a new thing to local Armenians.

During my research field trip in Yerevan, all Syrian people running this type of business told me that Syrian food was considered very exotic by locals in the very beginning. However, after a while they started to like it, and became regular customers alongside Syrian Armenian aficionados.

The waiters were Armenian in most cases for language convenience (the eastern version of the Armenian language spoken by Syrian Armenians sounds like a different dialect from the western version spoken in Armenia).

The use of spices is absent in Armenian cuisine, mostly characterized by slow-cooked meat including pork (which is uncommon for Armenians in Syria due to halal prescriptions), grilled local river fishes, traditional bread, pickled vegetables, preserves and fresh cheese.

The introduction of zaatar (a green mixture of thyme and seeds powder), manaesh (also known as Lebanese meat pizza in Australia), cardamom in the coffee, sumac for salads (called fattush, made of fried bread, green lettuce and different vegetables), bahar (or so-called seven peppers) has brought a warm wave of colours and smells to the Armenian cold weather. Falafel shops are now as popular as traditional pre-existing kebab (or shawrma) shops in the street food business. Street food shops,

despite the hostile Armenian weather in winter, are very busy all year around (with a peak in summer) and were the first and easiest business for Syrian Armenians to open, after leaving everything behind in Aleppo.

Only a few were able to set up proper restaurants (some of them with functions and Saturday belly dance) and cafés.

Amongst them, there is one that once operated in the area of Aleppo called al-Midan, targeted by constant bombarding. The owner decided to reopen in Yerevan, without changing the menu. They offer kubbet al-labanyeh (lamb meatballs in a yogurt soup) or kubbet al-halabiyya (literarily “Aleppo burghul meatballs”, deep-fried and stuffed with mixed nuts and spices), hummus, garlic sauce, muhammarah (a red capsicum and chilli dip), and mahshi (stuffed vegetables), the Aleppian way.

In a café not far from the city centre, run by a Syrian Armenian who moved years before the conflict, it is possible to enjoy a traditional Syrian breakfast (foul and fatte or fava beans soup and dip, cheese fillo pastry triangles, and olives). Even though the Aleppian food is similar to that of other Middle Eastern cuisines, it maintains a soul of its own.

Apart from the common use of pistachios, typical of the city, recipes are slightly different, with dosages and secret ingredients.

In the transfer from Aleppo to Yerevan, it is possible to taste the bitter-sweet of the experience: joy of survival and deep nostalgia. Most importantly, Syrian food in Armenia is serving as a bridge between cultures, different imports and pasts.



Shahama preparing safihah shamih at home; images by Jacqueline Mitelman

Safihah Shamih (Syrian Pizzas)

Shahama came to Australia from Damascus in 1981. She worked as a chef for nearly 15 years, specialising in Italian food. Now, she runs a business preparing gluten-free foods, particularly pizza bases. This is one of the most popular types of pastries in Damascus and other parts of Syria. It is very easy to prepare and it's delicious!

Meat topping ingredients

- ½ kilo of minced meat
- 4 large onions, grated
- 4 tomatoes, diced
- ½ cup of finely chopped parsley
- ¼ cup of canola oil
- 1 tablespoon of tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1 teaspoon of black pepper
- 1 teaspoon of mixed pepper
- 1 teaspoon of cinnamon

Mix all the ingredients together to be ready to place on prepared dough.

Dough ingredients

- 6 cups of plain flour
- 2 cups of warm water
- 1 cup of canola oil
- 1 cup of warm milk
- 1 teaspoon of salt

How to prepare

Mix flour and salt in bowl.
 Mix warm water, milk, and oil together.
 Add milk mixture slowly into the flour and mix until it becomes soft dough.
 Leave for one hour to rest.
 Once dough is ready, shape it so it is 8 inches in diameter and about 1/3 inch thick.
 Spread each ball into thin circles with a rolling pin.
 Place onto a baking tray.
 Spoon some of the meat filling onto each of the mini dough circles.
 Bake for about 10 – 15 minutes in an oven preheated to 180 degrees.
 You can serve it with yoghurt on the side.

Stuffed Vine Leaves, Under Standard Licence from Shutterstock.com
Karla, Hana and Bushra preparing to serve stuffed vine leaves.



VEGGIE STUFFED VINE LEAVES

Bushra, who arrived in Australia in 2016, passed on this recipe for yalanji to Beloved Syria. Bushra doesn't follow a written recipe, and doesn't use exact measurements. Instead she uses her culinary instincts, her five senses, and her love for food and sharing to bring her creations to life. The below measurements are an estimate of how she prepares this much loved Syrian dish.

Ingredients

- 2 cups of short grain rice
- 2 big tomatoes diced
- Small handful of mint leaves
- A bunch of flat leaf parsley chopped (including stalks)
- 1 large white onion diced
- 1 teaspoon of ground coffee
- Small cup of pomegranate molasses
- 1 teaspoon of red or green chilli
- 2 sweet capsicums diced
- 2 spoons of tomato paste or soy sauce
- Small cup of olive oil
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 6 or 7 cloves of garlic sliced (or all the cloves from one bulb)
- 2 large potatoes sliced thickly

Vine (grape) leaves which can be bought ready to use from the Middle Eastern section of Coles, or pre-prepared from a fresh food market.

To prepare fresh leaves, separate them and add to boiling water for 3-5 minutes. Drain and cool. They are also suitable for freezing.

Method

Start the process the night before.

Wash the rice until the water runs clear. In a large bowl make the filling by combining the mint leaves, parsley, onions, capsicum, coffee, tomatoes, pomegranate molasses, chillies, tomato paste or soy sauce, washed rice, olive oil and salt to taste.

To prepare

Add small amount of filling to vine leaves, place on bottom third of leaf and fold in sides then roll.

Cover bottom of large heavy pot with potato slices.

Place vine leaf rolls in a layer over the potatoes followed by sliced garlic cloves.

Place an oven-proof plate upside down over the rolls. Add water to cover.

Fill a mixing bowl with water and place over the top of the upside down plate to create a tight compact environment for the vine leaves and rice to cook.

Cook for one hour on a low heat. (Before you turn off the heat, check that the yalanji are cooked.)

Serve hot or cold. If the yalanji are a main dish, you may like a side dish of yoghurt with them.

Beloved Syria



*Children from
Yarmouk, Damascus,
at a refugee camp in
Lebanon, 2013*

“There is a great danger when presented daily with the tragic, incomprehensible events in Syria – the appalling destruction thrust upon the Syrian people and their culture – that we become anaesthetised to the suffering. This timely magazine reminds us all that Syria and her people are not just the crumpled buildings and desolation we see nightly on television, but an ancient culture demanding our respect and support through a very dark moment in its history.”

– Bryan Dawe, Writer, comedian and political satirist

“This beautifully presented magazine exudes a sense of calm that’s so welcome. To hear Syrians’ own voices is a balm, bringing back their generosity, vivacity, and focus on humanity ahead of all other things. Their voices are a timely reminder that these conflicts grossly insult and demean us all.”

– Dr Fiona Hill, PhD Anthropology, Honorary Fellow at Deakin University



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