



Benedictine Abbey
Burg Dinklage



AT HOME?

Life with refugees
at Dinklage Abbey

ABTEI ST. SCHOLASTICA DINKLAGE

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with Refugees?

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**Why are we
Standing Together
with Refugees?**



Foreword

Then and Now

The painting on wood shows people fleeing. The vibrant colours and the abundance of gold cannot hide the fact that, once again, as written in the Gospel of Matthew (2:13–23), a father, mother with their new-born child had to flee a ruler and his cruelties. This threat is experienced throughout human history and is repeated again and again, forcing people to flee for their lives.

We Benedictine Sisters at Burg Dinklage follow the words of St. Benedict: “Honour all people” (RB 4:8). We also take notice when he adds, “Never do to another what you do not want done to yourself” (RB 4:9). This maxim has been with us since the early days of our founding monastery in Alexanderdorf. Here in Dinklage, too, it is both a challenge and a mission for us.

“Honour all people” therefore applies not only to our communal life with all the different personalities, educational backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses, or in short: everything about ourselves and one another that remains foreign to us. It applies – without any doubt – to all people

who encounter us with their need. That includes those who come to us from foreign countries to find a home – even if only temporarily. It applies in particular to those who come to us on their arduous and traumatising refugee routes. Some of our own sisters experienced what it means to flee during the war years of the last century. They share with many others of their generation and worldwide the fate of having been “stateless.”

Finding refuge is also one of the essential aspects that shaped our community when they had to leave East Germany for political reasons in the post-war years. Many of the stories in this booklet offer examples of how providing support and an environment of acceptance and protection can help make it possible for people to hope and trust again. May you receive a large share of the courage that shines through on the following pages.

Abbess Franziska Lukas

Home – Where are You?

We are only Guests on this Earth

I didn't reflect on the question of "home" for the first two decades of my life. My home in a "normal" Catholic family and "normal" middle-class village in western Münsterland was a matter of course. The daily 20-kilometer commute to school was already a milieu-expanding experience, as were the first Portuguese guest worker family in the neighbourhood and the Turkish Muslim in my school class. The Dutch border, only five kilometres from my parents' house, offered exciting insights into a foreign country when people crossed over to go to the seaside or to smuggle cigarettes.

I took my first step away from my comfort zone during my studies in the nearest university town, which I liked, but where I never really felt at home. My next move – to my first real job – was more of the same. When I moved again, I did so with the intention of finally putting down roots. The city offered freedom, challenges and opportunities for development. My new professional and personal relationships were fulfilling. And yet I will never forget walking down the path from the office to my

apartment as the questions "Why are you here?" and "Where do you belong?" became more and more pressing.

These questions led me to keep searching. Finally, in 1994, I made a fresh start in the monastery. After 30 years in Dinklage, I know that yes, I belong here, this is my place, this is my earthly home – but the longing for home remains unfulfilled.

Ten years ago I wrote ¹:

"...To make a long story short: my home is ,in heaven' (Phil. 3:20)! That sounds mysterious and it is. I believe that there is someone who has gone before me to ,prepare a place' (John 14:2) and who is lovingly waiting for me there. A Psalm that we pray regularly says, ,God will take me home' (Ps 27:10 translation Martin Buber). That is my motto in life. ... And when I see the many people who are on the run somewhere on this earth today, I pray that we will move closer together and take them in; and that people with and without a homeland, will continue to migrate together to the eternal homeland in spite of the various difficulties this involves."

So now, in the year 2024, I am sitting on a spring-like Saturday morning in my office at Burg Dinklage, listening to the birds chirping, enjoying the peace and quiet around me. I know what a privilege it is to be able to reflect on the meaning of "home". Ernst Bloch's quote is on my mind: "Home is where no one has ever been."

Sr. Ulrike Soegtrop

¹ Oldenburgische Volkszeitung (Hrsg.) Heimat.Los, Vechta 2014.





My Mother was a Refugee

A story that turned out well

When I was a child, we used to receive gingerbread at Christmas from my mother's relatives in Austria. Gingerbread was at that time unknown in England. But my family was a bit different from the other families. I usually found this to be rather good, not only because there were special treats for Christmas, but also because interesting people often visited us. We had an open house for people with broken stories, who laughed and played very happily with us children.

Ali was a former prisoner of war from Poland and now worked at the fishing harbor in my hometown. I loved the way he would sing 'Hoppla hoppla Reiter' with me on his knee. His dark, warm voice with the strange 'rrrs' awoke warm feelings in me. Many young women from abroad who wanted to take the opportunity to train as nurses in northern England came in and out of our house. They sang marvelous, German polyphonic songs for us and I experienced them as a lively extension of our family.

Of course, I did not realize that I had been born one year after the end of a major

world war and that the people around us had been exposed to anti-German propaganda for years. The fact that I did not grow up bilingual spared me many tensions. I fully identified with England and the English, despite being proud of our international relationships. Only later did I recognize the problems that can arise experiencing oneself as a foreigner.

I am grateful for my father's Christian attitude and how it radiated warmth: 'Then you should be happy and rejoice in every good thing that the Lord your God has given to you and your family; everyone, you and the Levites and the strangers in your midst, all shall rejoice.' (Deut 12:7)

Sr. Monica Lewis

Home is there, ...

... *where you don't Live*

My father is a native of the Sudetenland. His home is in the district of Karlsbad in Egerland. He and his family are among the 11.9 million people who left their ancestral homeland and had to start over elsewhere as a direct result of the Second World War. Being a displaced person has been part of his identity for as long as I can remember. His commitment to his heritage was always present in our family, for example, through his attendance at meetings for the Sudeten Germans. He also maintained a list and thus the contacts of the inhabitants of the village where he came from, and who now live scattered all over Germany (East and West).

No matter where we went in the Federal Republic of Germany, there was always the possibility that a fellow countryman or woman lived nearby. When you visited them, you were always welcome, your fellow countrymen immediately fell back into their native dialect, and in the conversations, this strangely beautiful mixture of reminiscing about the past and sharing what is occupying you here and now relaxed. In short, you immersed

yourself in the "homeland" for a certain time without being there and – something that I also clearly remember – without becoming overly nostalgic. With the end of a visit, you could go back to your normal life.

The older I get, the more I realize what a rupture the loss of home represents to many people's biographies: There is no guarantee that they will adjust. And for those who do, it is impossible to calculate how much time it will take. And how much patience. Starting in 1946, my father and his family (5 people) spent ten years in two rooms on a farm. They all shared a single toilet that was located on the other side of the yard. While the children and young people were able to take advantage of the opportunities that were available to all their peers during the years of reconstruction in the 1950s, my grandparents and others in their generation had a much more difficult time.

For example, my grandfather, who was a prisoner of war, never had the chance to go back to his homeland after the war. He

had been a farmer and after he became a war invalid he never really found work. The opportunity to rebuild that arose with the development of new neighbourhoods with small houses, disparagingly called "Kopftuchsiedlungen" (headscarf settlements) by some locals were of inestimable value. What helped the new arrivals was not so much sympathy – that was not necessarily to be expected in the Federal Republic, where everyone was affected by the war and its consequences – but mutual respect. Respect for those who came and respect for those who were already there, where one had now arrived.

Patience and respect – for me, these are two key words that could suit us well today; words that would help develop something positive for both the newcomers and those who were already here.

And home? For me, home is where you don't live. Home is connected to a place, a region, a landscape, a language, a dialect, a shared destiny – but home is not connected to the place where I actually live. So for me, the city and the region where I grew up are home, but so is the country where I was able to spend two years studying. It does me good to go back from time to time. If I meet people from

there, if I hear the language or a familiar accent or if a landscape reminds me of it, my heart opens. But where I live, here in Dinklage, is not "home" for me. Here I am *at home*.

Sr. Scholastika Häring



The Initial Decision

Housing Shortage – The immigration wave of 2015

“Go forth unto the ends of the earth!” This appeal from Pope Francis during the year 2015 was impossible to ignore. But what did it mean for us as Benedictine nuns, who are not social workers and whose way of life focuses on the care of the place? We are ‘Lovers of the Place’, as a Trappist once put it. But there were the streams of refugees and the courageous ‘We got this’ from the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. What was our part in this? In our search for how to help, we decided to invite our mayor to the monastery and hear from him what was needed: furniture, clothing, German lessons...? We called him up and he happily agreed to come together with the person responsible for refugee work in our community.

They shared their information with passion and commitment, and the resulting discussion made it immediately clear to us: what is needed is space! We couldn’t ignore it. And the urgency was so convincing that we promised to discuss what we could offer and get back to them the next morning.

No sooner said than done. We sat down in groups to consider the questions we had to think about: Where can we free up space? How can we reorganize ourselves for these visitors who were certain to stay for more than just a few weeks? What does it mean in terms of restrictions for our guests? What is needed: a kitchen, sanitary facilities, enough beds, a laundry room, etc.?

In spite of all the questions, one thing was clear: we agreed that our hospitality, a central element of our Benedictine way of life, was being called upon and that we should take this opportunity to try out a new form of it. The next morning, we called the mayor who came again, this time with the head of the social services office, to discuss our specific proposals.

We said that we would be able to provide space for 20 adults if they were ok with using bunk beds. We quickly agreed that we would rent the rooms to the city for an initial period of one year. We took care of the necessary construction work, such as

creating a separate entrance and setting up emergency exits and internet connections. The city took responsibility for furnishing the space with beds, washing machines, kitchen utensils and dishes. We also contacted the office of our auxiliary bishop in Vechta. The staff there provided us with helpful support.

The good cooperation at all levels made it possible for the first guests to move in just a few weeks later. They were a colourful mix: partial families with children, men and women of all ages, Arabs and Kurds from Syria and Iraq. Of course, tensions arose, but the social workers did their work with dedication. After a year, all the initial residents had already moved to other accommodations and new residents had arrived.

I was pleased to read a report in our local newspaper that recounted our mayor’s work when he was retiring from office in 2021. There he mentioned that the year 2015 had been a very special year for him: “During the refugee crisis, the citizens of Dinklage stuck together and showed solidarity. Everyone did their part to help the refugees. It was truly a highlight for me to experience this.”

Our community was richly blessed with substantial space. This allowed the “wave of refugees” to become real people to us. They became guests with their needs and their cultural distinctions. A new form of hospitality has emerged.

“Go forth unto the ends of the earth!” – Yes. But in this case, the people from the ends of the earth came to us.

Sr. Johanna Wiese





First Encounters – Strangers become Neighbours

From Darkness into Light

The First Christmas

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That first Christmas after the “Welcome Culture” had begun, we invited our refugee guests to coffee. By that time, some faces had become familiar, but this was our first formal get together and everyone was nervous. When the time arrived, everyone gathered in our quad. And I mean everyone. The invitation had gone out to the twenty people living in our guesthouse but at least 35 people had shown up. It seems they were as curious about us as we were about them.

A signal was given and everyone filed into the church where our guests sat respectfully through our prayers. Then it was time for coffee, cake and conversation.

All the tables with women and children were full by the time I arrived so I had to join a group of young men. I had no idea what to say to them in any language, so sat there awkwardly.

A sister came around and gave them some postcards of Dinklage, “You can send them to your family” she suggested and then walked away. As I tried to explain what

she had said, the absurdity of the proposal sunk in. “Do you even have a postal system?” I asked apologetically. One of them took a picture of the postcard. “WhatsApp” he smiled, and he sent the picture to his mom in Iraq. I wondered where she was and how it must be for her.

Later in the afternoon, a burly man stood up and led everyone in a rousing song. Only one of ours sisters understood any Arabic but someone explained that it was about peace and freedom. They sang their hearts out and we clapped along. Then it was our turn. One of the sisters passed out sheets of music: “Tochter Zion” in four-part harmony. The young men at my table looked at me expectantly as the sister gave us our tones. Two of them tried clapping but realized that it wasn’t going to work.

The one who had shown me the pictures looked intently at me as I sang. He tried to catch clues from my eyes and did his best to mouth the words by following my lead. He had no better idea about what was coming out of my mouth than I did about what they had been singing but we trus-



ted enough to try, and both our songs were about peace and freedom. We had that in common.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

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Muban & Sr. Mirjam

A German–Syrian Friendship

I still remember October 21, 2015, when we were waiting for our refugee guests. Only a small group of us were at home, most of the sisters from the community were still on vacation. I felt a little queasy. Who would come? What would they bring?

I was glad to have a rudimentary knowledge of Arabic and to have gained experiences from encounters with people from the Middle East during my three-year stay in Israel. But I also knew that I first needed direct contact to really open up and overcome a certain fear. And there he was, standing in front of me, a little shy but with a warm smile on his face, saying, “HELLO!”

That was the beginning of a friendship that continues to this day. Muban had fled from Syria. His law studies and all his plans for the future had already been derailed by the civil war, and he knew it would only be a matter of time before he would be drafted as a soldier.

His family sent him on the “path of survival”, which eventually led him to Dinklage. His smile and openness conquered not only

my heart, but also that of many people in Dinklage, whom he met on his regular walks in the forest surrounding our monastery. Muban willingly made contact and found a piece of home, especially with an older couple. Through them he had access to new German and occasionally also Low German vocabulary, which he expanded day by day.

He wanted to stay in Germany and wanted to prepare for his future here. With a small apartment, a residence permit and the first certificate from a German course in hand, he went looking for work. Three years of kitchen work at a highway service area and a part-time job at the supermarket checkout were the result.

Meanwhile, he often visited me in the monastery shop and presented me with papers from a German bureaucracy that I hardly understood as a native speaker.

Muban was not afraid to visit offices and departments and ask for help. He wanted to understand, act responsibly and become independent. After passing the B2 German exam, he decided to do an apprenticeship in retail. We wrote the applications together, shook our heads at the obstacles and

resentment that arose and then finally accepted the rejections as a sign from God. Perhaps he should look into a social profession after all?

I thought it might be good for him to get a taste of the hospital environment and organised an internship for him at a nearby hospital. Muban caught fire. For a year he worked as a nursing assistant before he had the courage and the language skills to start training to become a nurse. After three years, he successfully completed the training and now works with heart and soul at the local hospital.

I look back with gratitude and awe on the path that Muban has taken so far, and I hope that he will increasingly find his place in our society.

For his own good and for ours!

Sr. Mirjam Grote

Teaching from the Heart

German Course at the Abbey

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When Merkel's great wave of refugees rolled towards Germany at the end of 2015, I began doing pioneer work as a German teacher at Dinklage Abbey – initially on behalf of the Lohne adult education institution Ludgerus-Werk. Since the education centre did not have space for yet another class, the Benedictine nuns of the Abbey of St. Scholastica in Dinklage spontaneously offered a room on their premises. As a newcomer from the Protestant Ammerland region – so somehow with a “migration background” myself – I didn't even know that there was a monastery in the area! I only knew of such things from Bavaria.

When I introduced myself to the sisters, whose abbey is a medieval moated castle in the middle of the forest, I was more than welcome. They acknowledged with a laugh their permanent “shortage of men”! Wonderful, this humour! That was the beginning of my “nun friendships”, which I wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

The lessons took place in a room on the monastery grounds and the students were

seated in everything from camping chairs to cardinals' thrones. On the first day, I was told to expect about 15 people in the very first German course. But soon the bicycles were ringing from all directions – and that although the refugees on site had already taken a seat in the small room.

26 people, mainly from Syria and Iraq, had to be accommodated under one roof. 26 individual fates who, despite everything, had not lost their cheerfulness. 26 people who were bursting with curiosity and impatience, just as the small room was bursting with people.

I vividly remember one particular incident during the first week: A supersonic jet flew over the monastery and caused a mighty bang in the air, which in itself would not have been noteworthy. However, almost all of the refugees immediately sat under the tables to instinctively protect themselves from what they supposed were “air raids”.

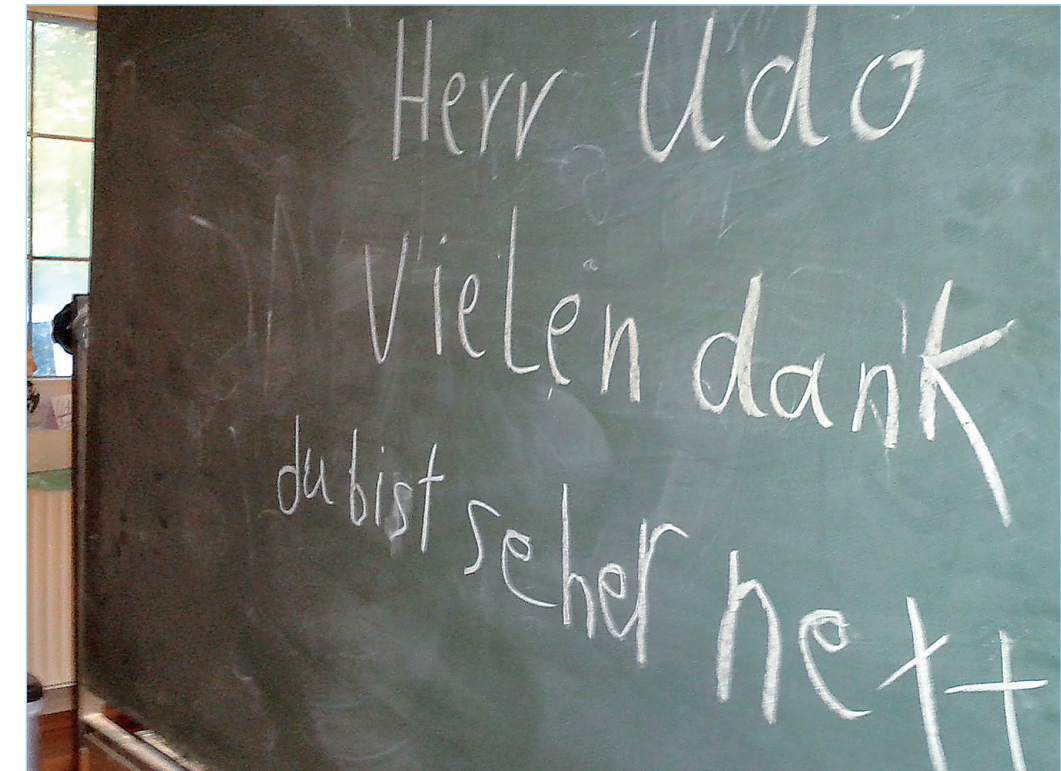
In this course, we were not nuns, teachers and students; we were just people wit-

hout facades. The grammar to be learned is important in German courses, but not decisive when it comes to actual integration. If the teaching is not at eye level and consciously at the heart level, there will be no real integration – no mutual respect.

Hardly any university can teach this lesson – a lesson that goes beyond the scientific- pedagogical intellect to a lived, open heart.

Udo Brückmann

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The Mother and the Child

A Christmas Story

By the time a year had passed, none of the original crew was living in the guesthouse anymore. However, that year had given us enough time to get to know one another. A few months after moving in, one of the young men had asked me whether I had family in Germany or not. When I said no, he said that he would like to be my brother. From that point on, I had an Ezidi brother and, with him, a whole network of Ezidis. When December rolled around again, he invited me to celebrate their feast with them.

That was the context in which I learned that Ezidis fast for three days in mid-December; at that point of the year, when the days are at their shortest. I have come to think of it as them showing solidarity with the sun; holding out when everything is dark until the point when the daylight starts to grow again.

On the day of the festival, I went to the refugee home where he lived and found the coffee table festively decorated with fruits, chocolate, sunflower seeds and much more. There was hardly any room left for

the indispensable tea, which was soon served. My Ezidi brother had raved about the fact that there would also be baklava at the festival, a puff pastry filled with walnuts, almonds or pistachios. And indeed, a woman with a wide smile came in soon with an even wider tray of baklava. My Ezidi brother introduced her to me: "This is Nadia; she helped me."

He continued: "Nadia is very strong, do you know that?" I was not sure how to answer. When I thought about it, I realized that anyone who had managed to make the journey she had made from Iraq to Germany must be strong – and also very lucky. "You know that her son is two years old?" he said as a question. That seemed about right. "She had him on Mount Shingal when ISIS attacked us."

I knew the story in a general sense. When ISIS attacked Mount Shingal, the people in the villages on the north side of the 100 km mountain range were able to flee to Syria or Iraqi Kurdistan. But tens of thousands of Ezidis from the south were stuck between areas already taken by ISIS and their holy



Ikonenwerkstatt Burg Dinklage / Sr. Anje Eichhorn

Mount Shingal. They went up to the mountain where they stayed for a week in the searing August heat. Hundreds of people died of thirst and starvation before a corridor opened up. And up there on the mountain, Nadia started feeling the pain of life. She found a bit of shade in a hillside cave where Jopo was born. I still do not understand how they managed to survive.

It remains a miracle that mother and child survived.

A few weeks later, Nadia's husband and my Ezidi brother came for a visit. It was snowing and there was no way that we could take a walk like we usually did so I showed them some of our icons instead. When we came to the Christmas icon, my heart skipped a beat. There they were as they always had been; Mary and Jesus in the cave on the mountain, him in swaddling clothes that look like grave clothes. "This is Jesus and Mary" I pointed. No one said anything for a minute. It must have been because we all saw it. "Yes" I said, knowing that my theology might be shaky but that I was still speaking the truth: "Just like Nadia and Jopo."

Sr. Makrina Finlay



The Cross

Mirror of Life

In those first months after he arrived in Germany, my Ezidis brother often came to our church to pray. He would take off his shoes in spite of the cobblestones. I told him that he did not have to, but he would never enter an Ezidi holy place wearing shoes and did not want to treat our space any differently.

As he learned more German, I was able to explain more to him. I showed him the stones we had all around our church; one from Rome, another from Jerusalem, another from Taizé; tangible pieces of places that are important to us and that we want to be part of our church.

He and I counted the stones in the altar – twelve for the twelve tribes of Israel or maybe for the apostles; twelve because it is a holy number. We looked at the stones set into the floor: “The sisters laid them all themselves,” I told him. We looked at the tabernacle and the organ; inspected the old oak beams. I told him what it all meant



to me; what it had come to mean to me in my years praying here.

When we got to the cross in front of the altar, we both stopped and looked up. This time, I did not know what to say.

“I can tell you what this means to me,” I told him, “I can tell you about the cross and the waiting and the resurrection.”

But who was I to speak of any of this? Two years prior, thousands of Ezidis had been senselessly murdered and enslaved – people he knew and loved. Ezidis – his people – had been the victim of the genocide.

“I can tell you what I have come to know,” I told him “But you probably know more about the cross than I do.”

Sr. Makrina Finlay

Prayer without Words

A Stone from Shingal in our Church

In the summer of 2016, a friend of a friend came to visit me in Dinklage. He had recently been in Shingal, since he worked with an organization that freed Ezidi women who had been enslaved by ISIS. He not only shared with me about the situation on the ground, he brought me a stone from Shingal. My Ezidi brother was with me and when he saw the stone, he took it in his hands, kissed it and held it reverently against his heart. So much had been destroyed but here was a little piece of home.

I asked him if he wanted to keep it – it was more his than mine – but he said that I should put it in the church. That is where it belonged. When I thought about it, I knew he was right.

Our church has stones from many places that are important to us; Rome, Israel, Taizé; also a piece of the Berlin Wall. I searched for a place and found a niche near our tabernacle. I set it in there gently, just far enough back so that it was not visible to the eye.

Especially in those early years when Shingal was still under ISIS control, Ezidis would come to our monastery and ask to see the rock. They would take it in their hands and kiss it. They never spoke a word, but I knew that they were praying.

For the past seven years, I have prayed with it, too. I rarely have words – who could? But I take it from its niche and pray until the cool, smooth stone warms up in my hands.

Sr. Makrina Finlay



Holy Innocents

The First Guests in Church Asylum

I have never liked the feast of the Holy Innocents so I was glad that evening prayers, with its painful readings about the infanticide that Herod committed when looking for the baby Jesus, was behind us for another year. I wanted to think of something else before going to bed. A friend had sent me an article which I hoped would do the trick. It was entitled “Cup of Suffering, Chalice of Salvation: Refugees, Lampedusa, and the Eucharist” and was a reflection on the mass that Pope Francis celebrated on the island of Lampedusa on July 13, 2013.

It considered especially the chalice he used, which was made from the driftwood of a refugee shipwreck. The phrase the author used: “a theology of nobodies” rang in my ears. The idea was that, in Christ, there is no such thing as a nobody. If the driftwood of a refugee shipwreck can be transformed into something sacred; no – if it is and always was something sacred – what does that say about the people, the refugees in that shipwreck?

I was thinking about this and the tragic “feast” we were celebrating when my pho-

ne started to ring. I saw that it was one of my Ezidi friends and decided to answer it. It was unusual for him to call at that time in the evening.

He was clearly upset and got right to the point, saying that his cousins were in great danger. They had fled Iraq just like him but on their way to Germany, they had been stopped and forced to give their fingerprints in Rumania and were in danger of being deported there. “Even Iraq would be better” he said. “At least they know people, know the language in Iraq. They have nothing, no one in Rumania.” I must have stuttered at first. I did not know what to say. I had a vague idea of what he was talking about. A friend of mine had recently begun supporting people with these so-called “Dublin Cases”, but I had never been confronted with a case myself.

I looked back at the article I had been reading. The message seemed so clear. “So these are your nobodies” I thought with a smirk. This was an invitation to welcome Christ. But were they OUR nobodies? Would the rest of the community, who had



not just had this experience, see this as an invitation from God as well?

It was not up to me to decide so I went to share with the abbess about the call I had just received. She told me that we had received and turned down several other requests. But now? We were both aware that the space we had designated for refugees in

2015/2016 was empty. The “Welcome Culture” had worn thin but the need for this sort of hospitality had not. She did not say no. A few weeks later when the community was presented with the idea, they, too, were open. A new chapter of church asylum at Burg Dinklage was about to begin.

Sr. Makrina Finlay



**Change of direction –
Church asylum 2018 – 2024**

” Politically persecuted people enjoy the right to asylum.

Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany of 1949, Art. 16a

” No one may be removed, expelled or extradited to a State where there is a serious risk that he or she would be subjected to the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Art. 19,2



A Matter of Conscience

What is Church Asylum?

“Church asylum” is a matter of conscience. Refugees turn to monasteries or parishes in the face of imminent deportation by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and ask those in charge there for help and protection.

The case might involve someone who is threatened with deportation to their country of origin. But since the Dublin III Regulation of 2013, it is usually about deportation to the European Union country where the refugee was first registered, often against their own will. In the event that the person continues on to Germany, the first European Union country to which they were admitted is still responsible for processing the asylum application. Therefore, BAMF orders the deportation without closely examining the individual fate. Exceptions are only made if the state recognizes that the first country of asylum has demonstrably violated human fundamental rights. At times, deportation to Greece, Hungary and Bulgaria have been temporarily suspended.

So much for the formal starting point,

which may sound logical in itself. The difficulties that arises out of this legal situation only become apparent when individual refugees tell their stories. Then it becomes clear that simply because something is beyond dispute legally does not necessarily make it legitimate.¹

„Reports from refugees themselves, as well as from aid organizations, show that the conditions for asylum seekers in some member states are highly precarious and a return could result in the person being forced to live in homelessness or subjected to abuse by the authorities.

Furthermore, whether or not someone will be given asylum varies greatly within the EU: Asylum seekers who have good chances of being granted protection in one member state have to expect rejection in another. In some states, access to a fair asylum procedure is not even possible.“²

When those threatened with deportation turn to Christian institutions for church asylum, the church authorities are obliged to check whether, according to the “ultima ratio principle”, this is truly the last

option, i.e. whether deportation would likely lead to a threat to life or to physical or mental health and whether all other possibilities have been exhausted.³

If someone being taken into church asylum, BAMF is immediately informed of the person's whereabouts. The church then submits a hardship case file that explains why, from the perspective of a Christian decision of conscience, deportation is irresponsible. This report also serves as a request to BAMF to review the case.

Since a subdivision of BAMF itself reviews these hardship case files about deportation notices that they, themselves, had previously issued, it is not surprising that the recognition of the hardship case files tends towards zero. This is the context where church asylum can be a saving instance. If the refugee can remain under the church's protective mantle until the end of a six-month transfer period, that refugee can then apply for asylum in Germany. This is the primary concern and goal of the majority of church asylum cases.

The current practice of Church asylum stands in a long tradition. Places of worship, temples and churches offered a protected space for the persecuted for many centuries; violating it was considered sacrilegious.⁴

In the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere, church asylum is based on God's commandment to his people Israel, which is developed in several biblical texts; for example, in Lev 19:33f:

“If a stranger lives in your land, you shall not oppress him. The stranger who resides with you shall be like a native to you and you shall love him as yourself; for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

Remember! Strangers shall be like natives to you!

The commandment to care for strangers cannot be set out more clearly.

The early Christian community made this commandment its own. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40 and 45 are expanded: “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

In the early days, Christians also experienced first-hand what it means to be “foreign”. As persecuted and displaced persons during the first centuries after Christ, and later on their missionary journeys, Christians were dependent on the hospitality and protection of the locals they met.

In 380 AD, the Roman Empire declared Christianity the state religion. The practice of church asylum was an expression of the autonomy given to the church by the state to act on certain matters of conscience.⁵

Since the Council of Orange (441 AD) at the latest, the church has officially mandated that bishops grant ecclesiastical protection. This was recognized by the Christian emperors of the Roman Empire. The later developments of church asylum in the Middle Ages and into the modern era are linked to the historical power relationship between church and state on the one hand and the development of civil human right laws on the other. The practice of church asylum up to the end of the Middle Ages is considered to have had a major social impact in that it challenged laws and society to be more humane.

As the modern constitutional state developed and increasingly adopted a protective function, church asylum lost its significance and necessity. With the Declaration of Universal Human Rights on 10.12.1948, asylum was recognized internationally as a human right. It was subsequently incorporated into many national constitutions, including the German Fundamental Rights in the German code of law in 1949. Two years later, in 1951, the signatory states to the Geneva Convention on Refugees – in-

cluding the Federal Republic of Germany – committed themselves to granting asylum and complying with a so-called minimum standard of protection.

The Catholic Church has continued to assert a right of immunity on church-owned⁶ premises to the present day. When canon law was revised in the Codex Juris Canonici (CIC) in 1983 the explicit right to asylum was waived. What remained, however, were a special status of “holy places” (can. 1213), the duty of the laity to “promote social justice” (can. 222 § 2) and the mandate to pastors to aid those “exiled from their homeland” (can. 529 § 1).

In 1983, the very year that the right of asylum was removed from the CIC, the practice of church asylum was revived in Berlin. This was inspired by the ecumenical sanctuary movement in the United States and ultimately triggered by the suicide of 23-year-old Cemal Kemal Altun, who was facing deportation to Turkey.⁷ The following years, refugees found shelter in parishes or monasteries. Sometimes it took several years to help them avoid imminent deportation to their country of origin.

Church asylum was usually respected by the authorities. Nevertheless, many communities were deterred by the unforeseeable duration and the personal and financial

burden and responsibility. The number of cases nationwide was usually in the double digits.

This changed dramatically as a result of the “asylum compromise” adopted by the German Bundestag in 1993.

As a result, the first paragraph in the German Constitution Art. 16a “Politically Persecuted People Enjoy the Right of Asylum” experienced a far-reaching restriction.⁸ It

was made much more difficult for asylum seekers to legally enter Germany and apply for asylum there. People who had fled war and terror via the most dangerous routes imaginable became ,illegal immigrants‘.

The churches cannot remain silent about this! Bishop Christian Stäblein sums up the protest central to church asylum: “It is about re-examining the right to humanity and solidarity.”⁹

Church asylum at Dinklage Abbey

We Benedictine nuns at Dinklage Abbey cannot remain silent either! And so from February 2018 to mid-2024, more than 150 refugees, mainly from Iraq and Syria, found refuge with us and protection from their deportation. This represents only about 10% of the requests we received. The length of stay was between a few days and 15 months. The following stories bear witness to what lies behind these numbers in terms of encounters, experiences, emotions and destinies; the stories are a combination of past experiences and future hopes.

Sr. Ulrike Soegtrop



¹ Susanne Traulsen, Kirchenasyl, Münster 2023 S. 9
² <https://www.jrs-germany.org/was-wir-tun/was-ist-kirchenasyl> (30.05.2024)
³ <https://www.betriebsrat.de/betriebsratslexikon/br/ultima-ratio-prinzip> (23.06.24)
⁴ <https://www.jrs-germany.org/was-wir-tun/was-ist-kirchenasyl> (30.05.2024)
⁵ Klaus Barwig, Dieter R. Bauer (Hrsg.) Asylum in the Holy Place, S. 51f
⁶ „The churches also enjoy the right of asylum. The right of asylum has the consequence that offenders who have fled to the church are usually not allowed to be taken out without the consent of the Ordinary or at least the rector of the church or parish priest. An exception is only permissible in an urgent emergency.“ CIC 1917.
⁷ [https://www.proasyl.de/news/cemal-kemal-altun-aus-](https://www.proasyl.de/news/cemal-kemal-altun-aus-der-tuerkei-geflohen-in-deutschland-in-den-tod-getrieben/)

[der-tuerkei-geflohen-in-deutschland-in-den-tod-getrieben/](https://www.proasyl.de/news/cemal-kemal-altun-aus-der-tuerkei-geflohen-in-deutschland-in-den-tod-getrieben/) (12.06.2024)
⁸ „Paragraph 1 cannot be invoked by anyone entering the country from a member state of the European Communities or from another third country in which the application of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms applies. The states outside the European Communities to which the conditions of the first sentence apply shall be determined by a law requiring the consent of the Bundesrat. In the cases of the first sentence, measures terminating residence may be executed independently of any legal remedy against them.“
⁹ <https://www.evangelische-zeitung.de/berliner-bischof-staeblein-verteidigt-individuelles-asylrecht> (12.06.2024)

The Final Decision

Our Yes to Church Asylum

Time and again, the request for church asylum was made to individual sisters, and thus to our community. It was clear to me as abbess: If we want to take this daring step, it is important that

the community is involved in the decision-making process. My own thoughts and emotions were subject to fluctuations. A few decades ago, we as a community had decided to provide similar help.

The consequences of this decision were manifold. In reflection and exchange, it became clear to me that the world had changed in many ways since then. The current situation had to be examined, evaluated and responded to in accordance with the plight of the current refugees.

“Informed prayer – prayerful action”, the motto of the Ecumenical World Day of Prayer of Women came to mind when the next specific request for church asylum was brought to us. It seemed to me that it was time for our community to make a fundamental decision, which is a decision of conscience for each individual.¹ It quickly became apparent that the community was also already sensitized to this topic.

To inform and prepare ourselves we invited Dr. Julia Lis (Institute for Theology and Politics (ITP), Münster) and Benedikt Kern (Ecumenical Network for Church asylum in the Church in North Rhine-Westphalia). They gave us expert advice by explaining the framework for the application of church asylum negotiated between the state and the churches in 2015. These official conditions gave us a clear view of the agreements, the procedure to be followed and also the

limits of church asylum, which made us aware of the seriousness of the decision.

We discussed our questions and fears, courage and hopes, pros and cons, and we took them into our prayers. The decision grew and matured. We accepted the challenge of taking people in special emergency situations into church asylum and giving them a new chance to live.

Abbess Franziska Lukas

¹ On the topic of conscientious objection, see: 3.4. 5. Conscience and the legal system, series of theses by the Chamber for Public Responsibility of the EKD, 1997, EKD-Text No. 61, theses 19, 26, 29,



Do You Play Soccer?

The First Asylum Guests

42

After considering the question for several weeks, the community agreed to take these first Ezidis into church asylum. We knew that they came from Shingal, were related to people we knew and that they were to be deported to Rumania. That was about it. We thought that we were dealing with a young couple, Renad und Renas. However, when I got in touch with their lawyer, it turned out that the two in question were brother and sister and that they had come with their cousin, who also needed church asylum. By then the decision was made, so we just took all three of them.

We arranged to meet them halfway so Sr. Ulrike and I set off early in the morning to begin this new chapter. When we arrived at the meeting point, our three charges were standing in the parking lot looking a bit lost. The worry and fear of what was to come was written all over their faces.

The three of them climbed in the back of the car and sat there without saying a word. We stopped for gas and indicated that they should pick out something to eat. Eventually the men grabbed a drink but

the woman could not be persuaded. This time I stood with them in the parking lot as we waited for Sr. Ulrike to fill the tank. I was uncomfortable with the silence so tried out the few Kurmanji phrases I knew. “This is grass”. They looked surprised. “Do you play soccer?” The men nodded. “I am not good at soccer.” That finally got them to crack a smile.

When we got home, my Ezidi brother was waiting for us. They were relieved to have a translator and to see that they were moving in to clean, comfortable rooms. A new phase had begun.

The cousin took me on as his student and, with the help of a children’s book, taught me enough Kurmanji for me to start holding basic conversations. We went grocery shopping every week, always including a stop at the Asian market, where we bought the staples and spices that they were used to. Renas figured out how to bake naan in our oven and made the first of many failed attempts to teach me how to stretch out the dough. The men decided that I should learn how to play “Krokan” – a version

of Rummy that is popular throughout the Middle East. Renad would sit with me for hours, teaching me strategies and allowing me to figure out my hand so that I could win occasionally. We put puzzles together and took walks in the woods. We organized a German course for them and they helped out in our garden.

It was only when their asylum cases were initially rejected in the summer of 2018 that they started telling me their stories: How they fled to Mount Shingal but had to leave their grandmother in the foothills. How Renad and his cousins searched for water, dividing into two groups so that not all of them would get killed. Renas and the other women in their family asked the men to kill them if ISIS came: they knew that ISIS would just shoot the men but that their fate, as women, would be far worse than death. I had no words. I still don’t.

When it became clear that they could no longer be deported to Romania, we celebrated – and then wept tears of farewell. They had made it to Germany and we had helped them through this first step but they still had a long way to go.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

43





A Rich Harvest

Said's Story

As a monastery, we have large grounds where our asylum guests are able to work off their energy. This is an advantage over most places of church asylum, where usually only one or two rooms are available.

Because I do not speak the mother tongue of our guests, we unfortunately have to make do with communicating in bits of English and German, supported by gestulating with hands and feet! So of course, it is very helpful to be able to walk around the grounds. Sometimes the objects that we see provide surprisingly rich material for an exchange.

Once I was pleasantly surprised when I was on a walk with Said and he made it clear to me that his knowledge of gardening far surpassed mine. I realized that he grew up in a family, where they grew fruit and vegetables, especially grapes, eggplants and tomatoes in large quantities for sale. I was even more fascinated when I learnt that Said's father had also molded bricks from clay. He dried them in the sun and then used them without binding agents to build his house. Said comes from Iraq. Just a few

hundred kilometers to the south from there lies Mesopotamia, the landscape where cultivation began three thousand years ago and where building with clay bricks was the norm. In a desert region between the Euphrates and the Tigris a system of canalization ensured that sufficient water was available for all vegetation, making life possible for a large population.

Today in Shingal, Said's homeland a little further north, the available water similarly needs to be distributed in an imaginative and intelligent way. I realized how continuity in the way of life over thousands of years has created a balance that promotes life. Closeness to nature, great attention to the needs of the landscape and the plants, even a particular reverence for life, make this balance possible. I learnt with admiration how important it is to protect this balance.

While we were still walking, Said collected potatoes that we had overlooked during the harvest. He lovingly took them all into the kitchen, cleaned them and prepared them for lunch.

Sr. Monica Lewis

Our Daily Naan

A Story about Baking

46

From manna in the desert to the feeding of the 5000, to the last supper and even the Eucharist, Christianity presents bread as the basis of life and a connection to God. However, “Give us this day our daily bread” took on a new meaning for me when we started offering church asylum.

Ezidis make several different kinds of bread – a thin flat bread that is used to line and cover plates of food on special feast days, a fried bread and a crepes-like pancake made when family members visit a holy site. But for Ezidis, “daily bread” is a hearty naan. Most families make it at least

every other day and, although the task generally falls to women, both boys and girls learn to do it. Most people from Shingal can stretch dough into round circles at lightning speed by slapping it between their hands, a skill that I have tried and failed to learn more times than I can count.

For Ezidis, naan is present at every meal. It is not set into a religious space and it is not sacramentalized or set apart. That does not keep it from being holy, though. Every time Ezidis make naan, they give two pieces to someone else– a neighbor, a poor person. If need be, they give it to an animal.

Not sharing it with someone or something is unthinkable: they understand that the act of giving some blesses the whole.

No Ezidi would ever cut naan with a knife; they tear it and share it with one another. They also don’t throw away stale bread as if it is trash. In this case, too, you can give it to animals, they need daily sustenance, too, but you cannot forget that bread is life. This reality hit home one day when the Ezidis living with us were baking naan. One of the men was assisting with the baking and his friend jokingly pulled his chair out from under him. The baker lost his balance and landed on his back. I stood there in shock. Before the joker could apologize, the baker jumped up, threw a ball of dough on the ground and huffed out of the room.

As an outside observer, I was convinced that the person who had pulled the chair was the one at fault. Throwing a ball of dough on the floor seemed like a childish thing to do but, in my mind, was harmless. To my surprise, no one else in the room thought this. They, too, were scandalized.





zed, but their reason was different. Finally one of the women uttered in disbelief: “He threw bread dough on the floor.” The others all nodded, recognizing the sacrilege that had been committed.

Eventually they worked through it. Apologies were said and the man was even allowed to assist with making naan again. But the experience opened my eyes to what they already knew. In the very act of making naan, they are participating in giving life. And it made me wonder: how often do I fail to see this obvious truth that what I am doing in my daily life is either supporting or deterring life? It is easy to act like there is a divide, but no. Manna, communion, daily bread: the line between the sacred and profane is gloriously blurred.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

Heavy Baggage

The Story of a Trauma

It was 4 August 2020 and news had just come of a huge explosion in the port of Beirut that had destroyed an enormous area of buildings. The young man in front of me sat petrified on the edge of his chair and could not utter a word. Only after a while did he begin to speak, and little by little, I realized what was going on inside him.

When he was 13 years old, he had experienced a similarly huge explosion in his town, aimed at driving him and his people out of their homeland. That experience had come back to him, and with it the trauma of that situation. ‘We were sitting in front of the house. It was a beautiful day and we were expecting visitors. Suddenly there was an enormous explosion, the windows shook and some of them shattered. My father, who was sitting close to the door, was thrown violently against it. The door shattered and collapsed. The rest of us fell to the ground and had to watch as the walls groaned and big cracks appeared. The explosion was several streets away from us, so we did not see the worst of it. Our aunt was at the market. She was

killed. A neighbor was so shocked that she couldn’t speak for a whole year afterwards.’

I listened spellbound. That day I experienced our guest from Iraq from a side that I had not seen before. Through his consternation, I realized how much hardship and suffering characterized his soul. Now he told me in broken sentences more about the context of hatred and rejection his people were subject to and about the harassment he had experienced as a young man in the everyday life of northern Iraq. I began to understand better the lethargy we experienced in him and to sense more the heavy emotional baggage that he carried deep in his heart. No wonder his head was not clear enough to learn German and get involved in the new customs and language of the new country. I was grateful for this insight, this small chance of getting an inkling of it all.

Sr. Monica Lewis

Twirl me

Dance of Life

After two and a half years of offering church asylum to Ezidis, we received a request from a blind man from Syria, an Arab Muslim who had converted to Christianity. I was unsure about introducing someone from a different culture into the house, but it was a Ezidi, Fahed, who insisted that we take him in.

Ahmed arrived a few days later. He spoke perfect English and was doing a master's at a German university. Within an hour, he had figured out the layout of the house and could go everywhere without the help of his cane. This man was sharp.

From his interactions with us sisters, it was clear that he felt more at home with people his parents' age than with his own peers. He went to bed early and listened to American praise and worship songs rather than Arabic pop music. I wondered how he was going to integrate into our house full of young Ezidis.

We agreed from the outset that Ahmed could eat his own food and do things in his own rhythm but I had to tell him that we

were not going to implement the "10pm lights out rule" that he wanted. He was going to have to live with some noise.

A few weeks after Ahmed arrived in church asylum, he shared with me that Fahed had been bullying him. I knew well enough that it had been intended as a joke – ultimately as an attempt to welcome him as part of the gang. But Ahmed could not see the fun in it and I grimaced as he started sharing with me how he had been bullied as a child. A lumbering, blind boy, big for his age, more like the grown-ups than the other kids. There was no way for him to separate those earlier experiences from what was happening here.

"I will live next to him" was his concession, "but I will NEVER trust him." That was as much as he could give. It was the exact thing that I had heard Ezidis say about their Muslim neighbors at home in Iraq. They, too, had been hurt.

"You should know," I said, as I got up to leave, "that Fahed is the one who fought for us to take you in. You don't have to like



him, but you should know that." Ahmed did not know what to say.

I don't think they ever talked about it but over the next few months, the dynamic slowly changed. Fahed still joked, but did so more tenderly. Ahmed still acted like he was 30 years older than he was but also broke out his set of dominoes and some playing cards for the blind. Fahed joined the game, sometimes teaming up with Ahmed.

On New Year's Eve, we all went outside to watch the fireworks. This time, it was Ahmed who brought a speaker and started playing Arabic pop music. He lifted his hands in the air and danced with abandon. "Twirl me, Fahed! Twirl me!" he commanded his former foe. Fahed took his hand and twirled him with care.

After the fireworks were over, we returned upstairs. Ahmed collapsed into a chair, exhausted from all the twirling. He was in the same place as he had been, when we had told me that Fahed had bullied him. But this time, it was different. "I love you, Fahed," Ahmed said as he held out his hand. Fahed took it between his own and his face broke into a soft smile as he replied: "I love you, too, brother."

A promising start for a new year.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

Hiding Place

You are My Refuge

I had become accustomed to living with Ezidis, so Ahmed's unusual mixture of Arab customs and Evangelical Christianity sometimes came as a surprise. Although he generally preferred Western music, he held true to Arab rhythms when singing them. He danced blindly to his own drummer, to a beat that none of us could hear.

One day when I went past his door, I heard that he was listening to "Hiding Place". I knew this song from my youth in California and started to sway without even thinking about it. It is catchy, schmaltzy: a far cry from the Gregorian chant that I chose in its place or the Arab and Kurdish music that I normally heard coming from behind these walls.

I associated it with a time when I was only vaguely aware of the injustices in the world; a time when I had little interest in what happened outside of my little Christian bubble and I wondered why on earth he would be listening to it. When I asked him, he recalled:

"I was detained in Spain for three days. They took my phone and my watch so I had no idea what time it was. Being blind, I did not know who was in the room with me, if they were going to hurt me, if they were going to take me somewhere else. Whenever I got scared, I sang this song."

I was floored. I thought about Paul and Silas in the New Testament singing in the prison and then thought about the words of this song, perhaps for the first time in my life:

*You are my hiding place.
You always fill my heart
With songs of deliverance
Whenever I am afraid,
I will trust in you.
Let the weak say „I am strong
in the strength of the Lord.“*



All of a sudden it was neither emotional or schmaltzy. I looked at this blind man and realized that he had just helped me to see.

On his final day in church asylum, Ahmed presented us with a painting that he had commissioned. He loved Psalm 94:1: "He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler."

"I am one of these chicks," he explained. "Thank you for protecting me under your wings."

Sr. Makrina Finlay

Is Life Possible without Friends?

The Story of Qasim

Qasim (born in 1996) was the only one of his family, parents and siblings, still living in Iraq. Everyone else was in Germany. He hesitated for a long time, despite the miserable conditions in the refugee camp (a sea of tents), before deciding to leave the familiar environment and to go into the unknown in order to be reunited with his family and finally have a 'home' again. Eventually he knew he must do it.

I tried very hard to understand his story and his motives. It fell to me to write the hardship dossier that we had to submit to BAMF – a condition expected for church asylum – and it was important for me to understand the people behind the facts.

Originally, Qasim had travelled with a visa to Poland in December 2019. From Poland, he travelled on to join his family in Germany. Here he submitted an application for asylum. But due to the so called Dublin III procedure, he had to return to the country where he first set foot on European soil: Poland.¹ He swallowed hard, but tried to make the best of it. There he received a temporary residence permit. He told me

in detail how he had repeatedly been to the authorities there to submit an application for an extension. The authorities accepted the application but he never received an answer, so his permit eventually expired. As he had no permission to attend a language or integration course, it was impossible for him to find a job. The non-renewed identity card made it impossible for him to rent a place to live. As a result, he had to make do with the simplest emergency accommodation. When I heard his story, I admired his sincere willingness to build a new life in Poland. He would have done it had he only been given the necessary initial help (language, identity card, work, etc.) despite the fact that, as a Ezidi, this was extremely difficult psychologically: Ezidi identity strongly depends on sharing daily life with family and ethnic group. Qasim respected the laws that gave him such a hard life.

However, with the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, a new difficulty turned up. As well as the many refugees from Ukraine, who needed a place to stay in Poland, pressure came from a circle of



Arabs who crossed Qasim's path. They tried to recruit him for good money to fight as a mercenary in Ukraine against the Russians. He could not protect himself from these Arabs as his lack of an official status meant that he was in a very precarious situation. The increasing pressure and the hopelessness of his prospects prompted him to travel once more to Germany. But here the Dublin procedure applied again.

His is a typical situation of a refugee with family in Germany: all of them want nothing more than to be reunited. Because the majority are automatically registered in another European country, which they first pass through, these laws mean that they have no prospect of staying in Germany and being reunited with their families. Again and again, they get sent back to the country where they were first registered in Europe.

We saw the threat of this merry-go-round and asked ourselves what was to become of Qasim? His parents and siblings have a residence permit and are well integrated in Germany. Qasim is intelligent and very willing to learn something and make a contribution to society. At his age, it would be important to start further education soon so that he could still catch up despite the years he has missed. In view of shortage of skilled labor, his presence in Germany could be a benefit for everyone! All of these reasons combined to help us see that it was time for us to step in. We took him into church asylum, which gave him the opportunity to apply for asylum in Germany.

Sr. Monica Lewis

¹ Dublin Procedure Declaration on page 35

„God doesn't want me to learn German"

German Course with Udo

In 2020, a classroom was set up especially for me as a teacher and for the students who were coming. It had a huge whiteboard and an integrated "exercise room" complete with a massive weight machine. The small groups were a deliberate choice. True to the motto of Saint Benedict of Nursia, "Idleness is the enemy of the soul", this arrangement enabled a person to train both body and mind at the same time!

This group was comprised mainly of Ezidis from northern Iraq who had found refuge in the monastery. This religious minority was and is persecuted mercilessly in their homeland, furthering the genocide that began in 2014. In coming to understand their situation better, I saw photos of unfathomable cruelty and human brutalization; of mass execution and displacement. It brought home to me the reality that such horrors also exist in this and other places in this world, other places of dehumanization. I went home crying after class more than once, with pictures and stories as biographical shreds whirling around in my head for a long time. Since then it has become clear to me: Anyone who sells

weapons internationally or supports the sale of such weapons might have a golden nose but does not have a golden heart or perhaps no heart at all. Nevertheless, the Ezidis' unbroken joy for life in that "learn -and-exercise-room" often provided cheerfulness. One of the participants was an infant who screamed and laughed as she crawled on the classroom table to other members of the class!

Whether the person was a doctor or illiterate, everyone sat around the same table. This situation generally led them to help one another. Nevertheless, there were also some curious exceptions. For instance, one of my students earnestly tried to convince me: "God doesn't want me to learn German." Another was convinced that all the money in Germany was printed just for him. A nice idea, but one that forgets the basic principle of the market economy: taking responsibility for your own life.

The requirements and learning processes have become more complex over the years. So have, the expectations on both sides. A "turbo prosperity" for all is just as impos-

sible as a rapid, competent integration into the German labour market with its social systems.

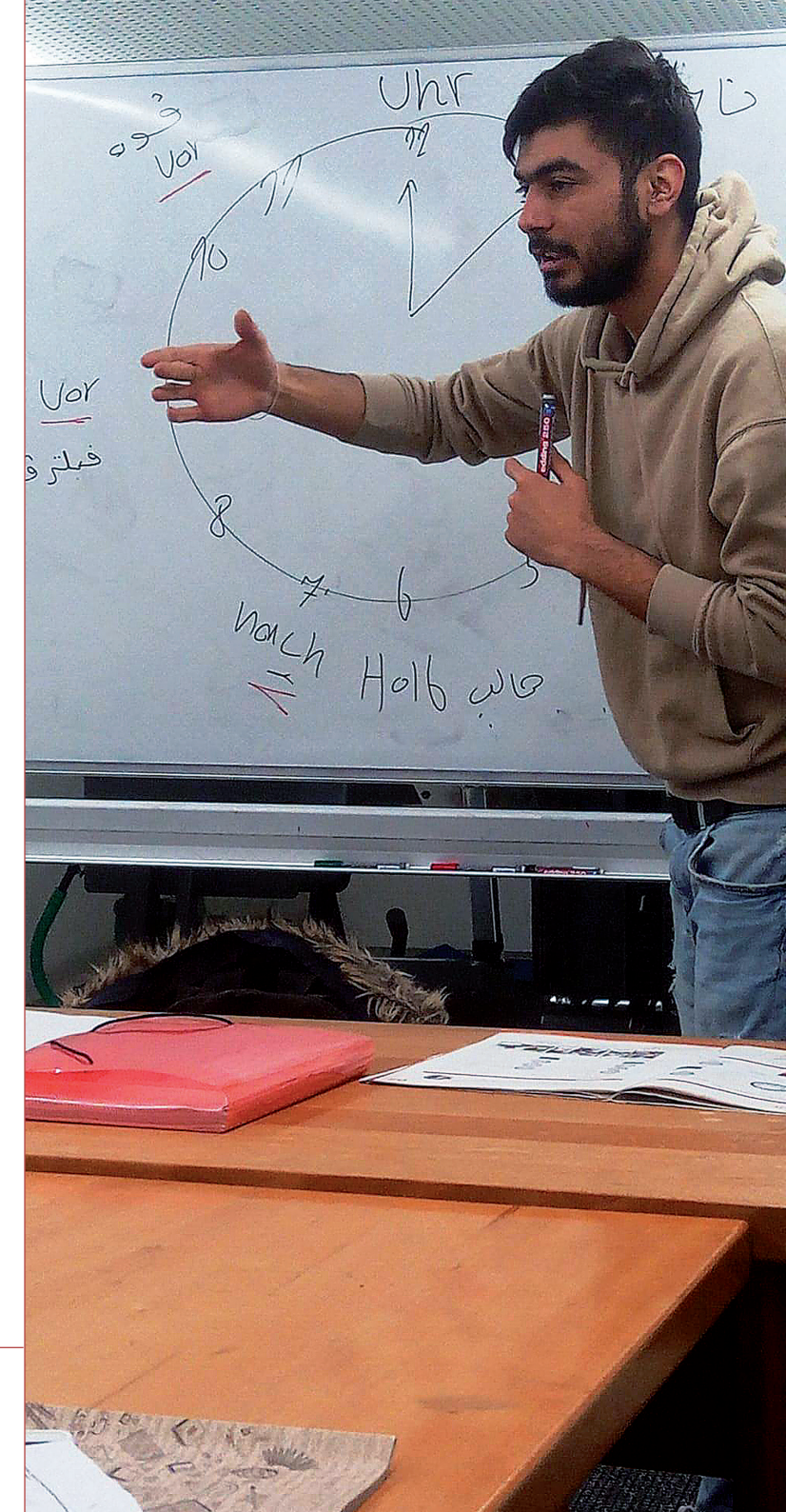
In my opinion, we need to redefine our coexistence in the major areas of economic and social life. We must also not forget that further streams of refugees have been added: from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon and Africa. Cause and effect should never be confused! As long as military and war spending worldwide continues to increase, and the mental enslavement of perpetrators and victims alike is increasing, there will be no solution in sight.

„I always thought that everyone was against war, until I found out that there are some who are in favour of it. Especially those who don't have to go there."

From Erich Maria Remarque

„All Quiet on the Western Front"

Udo Brückmann



The Whole World in Your Hands

A Parable

When our guesthouse was renovated in 2022, church asylum also had to move to new quarters for a few months. That meant packing everything and taking down the 2000 piece puzzle of the world that we had completed four years prior.

As I went to leave, I collected the few remaining items: the big cross from the upstairs room, a key for our new quarters and this puzzle of the world that was falling apart in my hands. None of it was heavy but the combination was incredibly awkward. On the way to the new building, where I planned to try out the new key, I felt a corner of the puzzle break off. I trudged forward anyway, knowing that it would only be worse if I turned back.

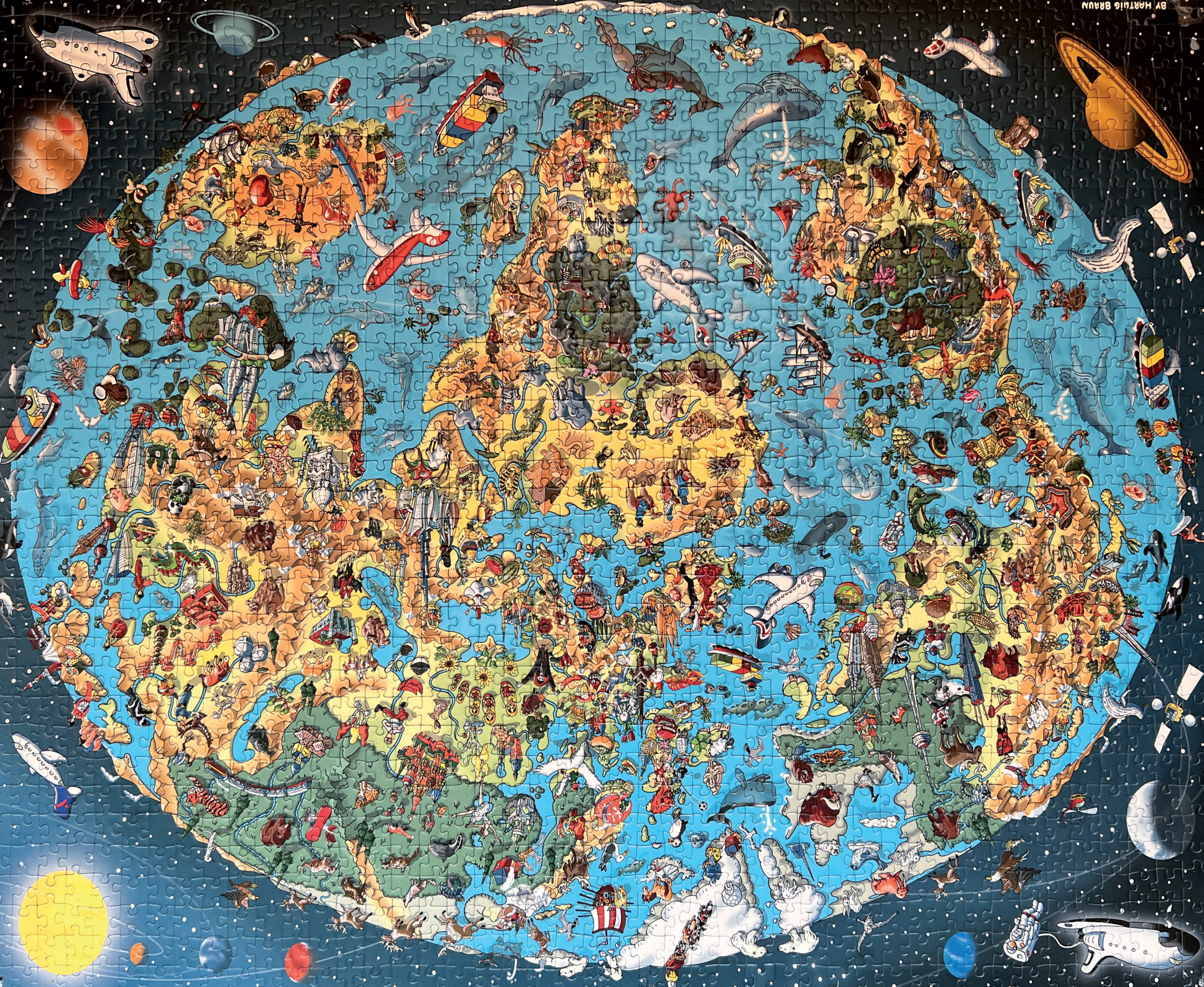
When I got there, I pushed the key into the lock and as I twisted my arm, Jesus fell off his cross. I had to drop the world onto the doormat so as to save Jesus from the fall and, by that stage, several more pieces had come loose. I just stood there jamming the key into the door, juggling the crucified Lord, his cross and my cell phone and, all the while, tried not to stomp all over the fragile world that was lying on the doormat.

Eventually I just left the world outside, went inside with Jesus (now back on his cross) and asked if someone could help me. One of the young women in church asylum volunteered. When she came outside, she nearly stepped on Europe. We both gasped. Then she picked up one side of the puzzle and we watched as part of the ocean started sliding away. I picked up the other half to stop the slide but by then she understood the game. She took it from me with a smile, saying that she could carry the whole thing.

And so we walked back to the monastery; me with Jesus and his cross and her with the world, gingerly folded up on the sides so that the pieces that had fallen off would not get lost. On the way we looked for – and found – the one piece that broken off earlier. She picked it up reverently, set it with the others and with a contented smile that spread from her face to mine, we took it home to the monastery.

Sr. Makrina Finlay





You asked me for a poem but I will give you a puzzle.
It's all I've got.
It's a picture of the whole world, that we put together at the beginning.
All the continents and their landmarks, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal.
Lions leaping across Africa.
It was hard to piece the seas together, all that blue.
But we finished it on Pentecost, the holy day of fire.
She couldn't bear to break it into fragments.
So she nailed it to the wall.
I was not there or I would have stopped her.
But when I found it upside down; North at the bottom and south at the top.
Lions doing back flips and the Eiffel Tower on its head.
I shook my head then nodded and squeezed her hand,
which had found its way into mine.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

We celebrate

Passover – Good Friday – New Year

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During 2021 and 2022, an anthropologist named Ruth who researches Ezidi customs often stayed with us. She is Jewish and during one of her visits, we realized that Ezidis, Jews and Christians would all be marking our major feasts within a few days of each other. She promised to return during holy week so that we could celebrate together.

It happened that the first day of Passover was on Good Friday. The Ezidis baked Ruth some naan without yeast and she came loaded with groceries for the seder meal. Before that, though, we all attended the Good Friday Service in our church with the solemn story of Christ's passion: betrayal, denial, senseless violence. I did not know how they would respond but two of the Ezidis stayed behind to pray.

Before the sun set, Abbess Franziska, Sr. Monica and I went to the church asylum quarters. We all gathered around the table with our wine, the candlesticks and the all-important seder plate. My thoughts turned to our church: the crucifix was still up on our altar. This "good" Friday was not yet

over, but now we were also remembering the night when the angel of death came. We worked through the story and the meal in a mixture of Hebrew, English, German, Kurmanji and Arabic.

At one point during the seder meal, participants remember the ten plagues. Ruth told us to dip a finger into our wine and put a drop onto our plates as she went through each of the ten plagues. Water into blood – a drop of wine – frogs – a drop of wine – gnats – a drop of wine. Afterwards, she told us that we could name various plagues or trials that we are currently facing. At first, we sat there silently but then the plagues came flooding in: the Corona pandemic, the genocide by ISIS, being detained in Latvia, Rumania, Bulgaria; friends and family members being murdered, enslaved, ill, missing. Our plates were red by the end of it but everything was out in the open. She then told us to drink the rest of our wine – everything that was left was "joyous wine". We drank it down.

Early on Easter morning, long before the sun rose, everyone gathered in our cour-

tyard. We lit a new fire and spread light from candle to candle. By the end of the service, the sun had risen: a reminder of a new day.

That following Wednesday, we joined the Ezidis in celebrating the creation of the earth; also the dawning of a new day. We dyed eggs and cracked them against each other, ate treats and remembered God's creative power. We also talked about Shingal and the ongoing genocide against Ezidis. Was Good Friday really over? Had the angel of death come and had he passed over their house? I thought about the "dancing Jesus" statue that we have in our church: he has a crown of thorns like a perpetual Man of Sorrows but also the wounds of the risen Lord, held out forever in a gesture of peace. Both at the same time.

Sr. Makrina Finlay



When the Soul is in Tears

Shirin and the Pain



The first attempt at pulling out her wisdom teeth with local anesthesia had not gone well, so we agreed with the doctors that she should receive a general anesthesia. I went with her to the appointment and sat in the waiting room.

I thought about her as I waited: She had already been through so much.

Many of her relatives had been killed or enslaved by ISIS. Twelve were still missing: cousins and nieces. She once told me that she hoped they were dead. That would be more merciful than the alternative. Two of her brothers had gone to Germany years ago and her parents and younger siblings had joined them through family reunification. She was twenty by then, and no longer considered to be immediate family” according to German law. So she stayed behind in a camp with her sister, brother in law and their three sons.

When the opportunity arose, she left Iraq via Belarus and Lithuania. She happened to tell the right combination of truths and half-truths that allowed her to leave

the camp in Lithuania within months of arriving there. It was not until she got to Germany that her family broke the news to her that her brother-in-law had died of Corona Virus, leaving her sister a widow and the three sons fatherless. “I just wanted to go back to Iraq and be with them... to help them somehow,” she told me.

She showed me a video where friends and family walked around her brother-in-law’s mattress as an act of mourning. I noticed that they were in a shabby tent. Shirin’s sister beat her chest until the singers stopped her. She and other women had cut their hair off as a sign of mourning. I looked over at Shirin, touched her hair, which was shorter than that of most Ezidis. She nodded to indicate that she, too, had cut off her hair. I saw a tear well up in her eye.

A couple months after she came into church asylum, I received an Email from the relevant immigration authority asking to meet so that we could discuss her deportation. We tried to shield her from the worst of it and even brought her into

the very heart of the monastery enclosure, but the fear was there. How could it be otherwise?

After several nerve-racking weeks of trying to find a diplomatic solution, we received another email from the immigration authority, informing us that, due to the Ukraine war, which had just broken out, they would not be deporting people from church asylum, at least for the time being. We rejoiced but still felt the strain.

I was thinking about all of this as I waited for her in the doctor’s office. My thoughts were disrupted by a loud, painful whining coming from the back of the office. One of the nurses rushed over to me and asked if I could join her. The surgery had been successful, but in this state between consciousness and unconsciousness, Shirin’s trauma had found an outlet. “She’s

been through a lot.” I explained between her cries. What else could I possibly say? The nurse still wanted it to stop. This was a dentist’s office, after all, and Shirin was scaring the other patients. I stood there helplessly until the anesthesiologist joined us. “She can’t help it.” he confirmed and sent the nurse away.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and then repeated apologetically: “She’s been through a lot.”

“I am sorry, too”, he said, and it was clear that he was not referring to the disruption she was causing to others. “Just stay with her,” he said, as he walked out.

I nodded in gratitude and sat down to wait it out.

Sr. Makrina Finlay

Is this the Church?

A History of Hospitality

“Is this the church?” Sometimes they have asked in German, sometimes in English or Kurmanji but I always know what they are getting at: they need church asylum. It is hard to know how to respond: “Is this the church?”

Over the past seven years, we have been able to take about 150 people into church asylum. Just a drop in the bucket? Maybe.

But each drop is a person with hopes, dreams, a family. Over the years, I have lost touch with many of them but I know that only one of them has left Germany and that was of his own accord. When I scroll through my phone I see pictures of language course certificates – A2, B1, B2; drivers’ licenses, residence permits, wedding announcements, all from people who have been in church asylum.

Several have completed a professional training and others are busy founding families. A woman who came to church asylum pregnant, recently came back with her husband and son. The little boy did not know me, of course, but I could

not help feeling connected to him as I recalled hearing his heartbeat at that first doctor’s appointment.

Some of the people who stayed with us are working as barbers, mechanics, medical assistants, builders. Some are cooks in family restaurants. Some are here with their whole families, united at last. Others are the lifeline for parents, siblings, children and spouses back at home. Each one of them has a unique story and each one of them understands that they have been given a chance. Although most are Ezidis, we have also taken in Christians and Muslims, Kurds and Arabs. Each of them has found a different way of expressing what church asylum means to them but I was especially touched by the words of a young man from Iraq.

“The last days have been really hard for me. I miss you every day.

From the moment I said goodbye to you all in Dinklage, I felt like saying goodbye to a part of me. You have been so wonderful to me that there are no words in any languages to express how grateful I am to you.

And what I think about is that if there is a God in this universe, it will be the one you wish for, without a doubt, because you really represent all the values, morals, and mercy that any person might expect from God.

In the end, I would like to say that you will remain in my memory forever, and I will always want to return to Dinklage. With my best regards to all those in charge of the Dinklage Church. “

Sr. Makrina Finlay





**Where is the
Journey Going?**



Regenerate Shingal e.V.

Making Home Liveable Again

In 2014, ISIS attacked Shingal and killed or enslaved more than 10,000 Ezidis. They displaced the entire population of 400,000 people, robbed their property and destroyed the natural environment. The intention was to annihilate the Ezidi people and make their ancestral homeland uninhabitable.

The more I heard and read about these injustices, the more it shook me. There had to be a way to help the Ezidis! My initial response was to consider how the remaining Ezidis could move to Germany. There are no more than one million Ezidis worldwide and Germany had already taken in the majority of the Turkish Ezidi in the 1970s and 80s, as well as 100,000 Ezidi from Iraq in 2015. This country has the capacity to host the small Ezidi communities from Iraq and Syria as well.

However, the more Ezidis I got to know and the more they told me about the situation in Iraq, the more I understood: As horrible as it was and as much as they had sacrificed to get to Germany – what most of them wanted was for their homeland to be

restored. As I gradually became more proficient in the Ezidi language of Kurmanji, I also started asking more questions: “What do you want most for the Ezidi people, for your family?” “Do you think that returning is possible and, if so, how?”

I had been asking these questions for a year when a Ezidi man from Southern Shingal came to us in church asylum. Unlike most others who desired to return but had no idea how, he responded that the best strategy would be for Ezidis to return to their ancestral villages on Mount Shingal.

Until then, I had never even heard of these villages. As I looked more closely at their history, I learned that Ezidis had been displaced from their ancestral villages in the 1970s and 80s. This was part of an Arabization campaign intent on limiting the power of Kurds – and with them, Kurdish speaking Ezidis – during the Iran-Iraq war. They were resettled in villages some 15 km distant from the mountain on Shingal plain. They were given hospitals and schools as a consolation but were also separated from their ancestral homes,



shrines, burial sites and the natural resources and protection provided by the mountain. The collective villages were built to make it easy to control the population and Arab tribes were settled between them so as to distort the original demographics.

It became evident to me that any truly sustainable recovery had to respond not only to the genocide in 2014 but also to the situation that made them so vulnerable in the first place. But how?

Between 2018 and 2020, I conducted research together with Jerry White¹ on this question. His commitment to the ban on landmines was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. We also worked with a team of students from the University of Virginia. We asked global experts as well as local Ezidis what they thought: the consensus was that if any strategy could

succeed, a return to the ancestral villages would be it.

I do not know how long it would have taken to get a project going, but Covid 19 sped things up. During the first months of the pandemic, displaced Ezidis, including the partner families with whom we were in conversation, were confined to their tents in Kurdistan. Moreover, for months, no one was allowed to leave Shingal, which meant that families with some members in Shingal and others in Kurdistan were separated from one another. Lockdown meant that laborers could not go to work. Families that had already been living hand to mouth reached a point when they simply had nothing more to eat.

In our project group we agreed to support a group of three families in returning to southern Shingal. With a donation of

\$10,000, they moved back. They restored the one room still standing on their property, walling in what had once been a patio and setting up tents next to the rubbish of what had once been their stately house.

Over the next three years, we supported our local partners as they developed a farm in one the ancestral villages. They also restored a well that ISIS had targeted. ISIS knew that it had been the life-line for 10,000 Ezidis who had fled to that part of the mountain and that many brave people had risked their lives, driving a water tank between the well and the masses of people stranded on the mountain. When ISIS got there, they did everything to block that well so that it would never produce water again.

I remember vividly as I watched via video call in 2020. The workers worked carefully, digging down into the ground. When they

reached the original depth of the well, they tried to get water but nothing came out. Uncertain, they called a hydrologist who told them to dig deeper. Yes, dig deeper than ISIS. When they did that, the water began to flow.

Since then, our work in Shingal has expanded. The first trees planted in 2021 are starting to bear actual crops. They are big enough to serve as mother plants from which cuttings are taken. Our partners have planted the first 2000 trees from their own cuttings with many more to follow in the years to come. They also now support 25 of the poorest families in the region.

In addition to the practical work on the farm, I was asked to take on a project on the intangible culture of Ezidism in Shingal. This allowed me to visit most parts of the mountain and talk with Ezidis, old and

young, about how things once were and how they hoped they might be. It allowed me to see the consequences of displacement on both the natural landscape and the community. It increased my sense that something must – and could – be done.

From this basis, we were able to found the organization Regenerate Shingal e.V. in December 2023. Together with a strong team of partner organizations, local fami-

¹ Managing Director and founder of the 'United Religions Initiative'
<https://www.uri-deutschland.de/ueber-uri/>

lies and regional and international experts, we are developing a plan that prioritizes water management and reforestation and serves as the basis for sustainable returns to the ancestral villages on the mountain.

Sr. Makrina Finlay



Courage to Walk Together

Interfaith Prayer for Peace at Burg Dinklage

” *The longing for peace, the mission to remind people again and again that God’s / Allah’s peace is a promise of salvation to us, connects religious people of different denominations, religions, churches, congregations and communities. Our ideas of God / Allah may differ and the content of our faith may sometimes be incomprehensible to each other – but the pursuit of and prayer for peace unites us.*

With these words, the abbess of Dinklage Abbey, Sr. Franziska Lukas, and the then chairman of the Cardinal von Galen Foundation| Dinklage Abbey, Hans Eveslage, invited people to an interreligious prayer for peace in the monastery church for the first time in 2017. This was preceded by encounters with Muslim and Ezidi faithful on our premises, our long-standing good cooperation with the local Protestant community, contact with the working group “Christianity and Islam” in Oldenburg, a visit to the sisters and brothers in the Ahmadiyya mosque in Vechta, as well as the

touching celebrations of religious festivals with our Ezidi asylum guests. We wanted to bring together all these experiences in common prayer under the motto: **‘Courage to stand together’**.

At the first prayer, in 2017, two religious representatives – Pastor Fridjof Amling from the Protestant community of Dinklage and Imam Syed Salman Shah from the Islamic Ahmadiyya community of Vechta – were invited to make a speech. The second and third prayers were shaped by prayers, song and speeches by various participants. In 2018, the subsequent press release stated:

„People from at least ten countries and three religions were represented at the 2nd Inter-religious Prayer for Peace at Dinklage Abbey. The event was initiated by the Cardinal von Galen Foundation/ Burg Dinklage and the Benedictine Sisters and held on Sunday in the monastery church. The prayer service began with the Lamentations of Jeremiah from the Old Testament, which in the Christian tradition is sung on Good Friday: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every

morning; great is your faithfulness.” After this promise, many fears, worries, political and personal concerns were named in the free intercessions and then entrusted to God by lighting a candle. Short testimonies on the “courage to stand together” encouraged reflection on one’s own understanding of “us” in our society.

One of these thoughts was to also accept people who I do not understand linguistically and cultural; people who challenge me out of my narrowness and who enrich our cultural identity. A Kurdish man, who had to flee from Turkey, sang songs and played the baglama guitar; music that was as strange as it was wonderful for Western ears. Even if many could not understand linguistically that one of the songs was about the genocide of the Kurdish population in Turkey, the sounds of mourning and suffering reached everyone.

Afterwards, many of the participants remained in the monastery courtyard for a long time, enjoying drinks and pastries from German and Arabic cuisine, as well as conversations in all languages. In the evening, those responsible learned that people attending a meeting concerning the Lohne – Rixheim partnership in the neighbouring town of Lohne spontaneously joined in the a peace prayer in the French tradition. The “we” is

spreading! It is already clear that there will be another interreligious prayer for peace at Burg Dinklage“.

The preparations for the prayer meeting were not without tension and were educational for us sisters. No, we had not previously known that for a Protestant free church, praying together with Muslims could be a ‘no go’; we also learned that Islamic cultural associations and



mosque communities are not necessarily on friendly terms with each other. The challenge was particularly present for the Ezidi participants.

They had fled from the genocide in their home country, which was caused by the hatred of Muslims for their Ezidi neighbors. Now they were supposed to join them in the same room to pray for peace! This was only possible because of the

trusting relationships we had already developed with them.

“Courage to stand together” lives on. The world situation has changed dramatically again since 2017. The need for prayer for peace remains unbroken.

We sisters at Dinklage Abbey want to continue praying with all those who share our longing for peace. Together, let us keep alive the vision of a peaceful coexistence of different nationalities and religions on our shared home – earth.

Sr. Ulrike Soegtrop



Outlook

The picture on the cover of this brochure makes it clear: the night does not last forever, it will be day again and life will grow! At least that is our wish and the hope of Ihsan Abou Said, an artist who fled from Syria.

We and many others have embarked on this journey alongside refugees and we wonder just where it is going.

We wish and pray every day for peace that is greater than all darkness and that makes brotherly and sisterly coexistence a reality on our beautiful earth.

And we are also filled with great gratitude. We have always received competent and encouraging support on our way through the sometimes dense jungle of laws, regu-

lations and ever-changing politics. Again and again, we have received financial support at the right time. We were never alone even when we sometimes felt powerless in the face of the painful situation in which we live worldwide.

Many people were involved in writing and creating this brochure. We say "THANK YOU" from the bottom of our hearts.

The journey that began in 2015 shows that strangers have become neighbours. Our hope is that the journey we are on will lead us home – be it the one we came from or the one we arrived at. May night become day!

Abbess Franziska Lukas

Imprint

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Note on the text: The names of the refugees have been changed.

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„Ziegel Kunst“ – old shingles from the roof of the church of the monastery Burg Dinklage, designed by Ihsan Abou Said, a Syrian refugee from Damascus, interior designer and painter. He fled with his wife and child across the Mediterranean in 2015 and now lives in Leipzig.
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