

Keeping hope

To whom and how will help a donation from the fast collection

Zaatari, one of the biggest refugee camps in the world, can be easily accessed by car. Usually, one sets off on a highway, which leads from Amman, the capital of Jordan, to the boarder with Syria. Once over the border one usually turns onto the so-called Baghdad road, drives through a mildly hilly desert landscape, and from a distance one can already see a big city. Before 2012, Zaatari described a small village. Everything has changed since the war broke out in Syria. More and more refugees arrived in Jordan. For the establishment of the refugee camp, Zaatari for several reasons proved to be a good place – a source of groundwater was needed, a crucial thing in the desert arid land. The camp was established in cooperation with international organisations and under the supervision of experienced Jordanian authorities; the country has a lot of experience with the arrival of refugees (see box).

At one time, more than 200,000 people were in the camp, and now their number has stabilised at 80,000. Regarding the area, it is kind of as if the inhabitants of Zlín had to settle in the area of Žižkov in Prague. It is quite tight in the camp. Otherwise, it seems like a regular city, albeit with special rules.

Meeting on the Champs-Élysées

Of course one can only get inside with a permit and through police and military patrols. But these are quite friendly, their actions seem like the swift control at the borders of a friendly country. What, however, captivates an inexperienced visitor for the first time is that the camp is an endless clutter of building cells, arranged carelessly. In each of them there lives a family with up to six members. Of course, the inhabitants of the dwellings keep improving them – extensions made of corrugated metal and other materials, often waste, which is at hand. A person accustomed to organised European cities has an impression of permanent chaos.

In reality, however, the camp lives according to rules. Each building cell has a descriptive number (even though a visitor does not understand their logic), the paths between them have their names and the heart of the camp forms a sort of main street, which is called Champs-Élysées by locals, like the famous Parisian boulevard. It obviously has its irony, but also pride – pride that even in extremely difficult conditions creativity and the desire to live can win.

The main campus of the refugee camp offers almost everything. There are two official supermarkets in the camp, where one can shop with special camp cards. On the boulevard, however, they compete with the semi-legal shops and establishments - there are, we are told, several thousand of them – and they offer almost everything. There is a wedding salon, a mobile phone or Apple computers store, and all other sorts of things. One can trade both for money and for goods; information and gossip are also shared here. It feels just like Paris...

So, as you can see, the camp residents do not have to fight for survival. Gone are the days when they only lived in tents, which did not protect them from the desert storms

or from the cold, and people were glad to have anything to eat. Today, a sewerage system is being built, the camp has been electrified for a long time (the Czech government also played a major role in this in 2015). The greatest risk for its inhabitants is lurking elsewhere – above all in idleness. There's nothing to fill your time here.

The end of dreams and ambitions

"Sometimes, in the morning, I convince myself that I'm in a hurry and I have to do a lot of things. I get up quickly, dress and have breakfast in a hurry. I go out and walk somewhere fast. There is no point because, in fact, I have nothing to do..." That is how today's 23-year-old Syrian Alad described the worst camp trauma to Diakonie's workers. When she fled with her parents from Syria, she was in the third year of high school. She was planning on studying law. Today, she might have been finishing and would be looking for her first job. Instead, she has been in the dull camp stopgap for several years. Her feelings are not uncommon; refugees from Jordan cannot work in order not to compete with locals. In a country without a great deal of wealth, there is a tax to maintain social peace. There are nearly ten million Jordanians, and almost three million refugees. Before the war, an authoritarian regime capable of eliminating its opponents with a terrible brutality ruled in Syria. Those, however, who did not care about politics were offered a decent standard of living - people could do business, and study for free at decent state schools. They often had similar ambitions and life plans that we have in Europe. But the war turned it all into dust.

"When the refugees arrived, they originally thought they would stay for a month or two. Today they have been here for five years," says the Czech Ambassador to Jordan Petr Hladík. He reverses the myth that the goal of all refugees is to continue their journey to Europe. "My personal experience - and I have been meeting those people for more than four years - is different. They want to go back home." But this is still not possible, and it does not seem like it will be in the foreseeable future. The war in Syria still carries on, its conduct is unclear, and no one knows how to stop it. You even have to remember that Syria will never recover its original form.

Thank you for your help

The most important thing now is to help people in the camp keep their hopes up and deal with feelings of frustration. That is what Diakonie is trying to do in what is called the Peace Oasis. In cooperation with the Czech government and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) it has built a complex from several cells, where there are courses for sewing and for working with a computer. There are also a children's playroom and an outdoor playground where football is played. However, it is becoming more and more important that people are allowed to talk openly about their pain, worries and hopes. A well-trained guide is also required. There is often a theme of violence against young mothers and girls, which they experienced during their escape. Children and young people in the camp conditions also need to be able to confide in somebody about their worries and their uncertain future. This kind of support can help prevent both conflicts and radicalization.

Besides the Peace Oasis, there is still a piece of free land. Diakonie, together with the Czech Embassy, plans to expand the meeting facilities in this small part of Jordan – to create a library and a community café.

The Czech Embassy will contribute some of the funds, and we would like to fund the extension from the donations of the Lent collection.

You can support our work at Zaatari:
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Thank you!

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