



BOOK REVIEWS

NEVER CAN I WRITE OF DAMASCUS: When Syria Became Our Home by Theresa Kubasak and Gabe Huck. Just World Books, Charlottesville, VA, 2016. Reviewed by Glen Lawrence.

Although *Never Can I Write of Damascus* may seem an odd title for a book that describes the authors' stay in Damascus, it is derived from the first line of a poem by Nizar Qabbani, which is followed by "without my hands becoming a trellis for her jasmine."

Since I met Theresa and Gabe, I have admired their ceaseless energy for doing admirable works for peace and justice. They describe how their work with Voices in the Wilderness for a few years during the sanctions in Iraq, prior to the US invasion in 2003, led them to feel they needed to make amends for the injustices done by our government. Two years after the invasion of Iraq, they decided to move to the Middle East to do something for the millions of Iraqi refugees who had been displaced by US arrogance and incompetence that brought extreme violence and destruction to Iraqi citizens. They decided to settle in Syria, which was the most affordable for them and had also become a haven for some 1.2 million Iraqi refugees, many of whom were living in Damascus.

Theresa and Gabe settled in Damascus in 2005 and they give wonderful descriptions of their adopted home that is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth. Their descriptions of the various neighborhoods read like a personal guided tour of this historic city. They also give numerous descriptions of other cities and landmarks around Syria that they visited

standing the complexities of their goals, they decided to interview prospective candidates and select a limited number of those who seemed most likely to succeed. The students had learned some English prior to being admitted into ISP, but most had not encountered teachers who spoke English as their mother tongue. Theresa's teaching experience was a great asset for organizing and implementing the necessary preparation for college level studies that began in the fall of 2007.

By early June 2008, thirteen of the first fifteen students in the program had been accepted to US colleges with tuition waivers or scholarships and had their student visas approved for study in the US. Considering that the young people had experienced the Iraqi educational system under years of sanctions, plus extreme violence, often with family members killed, and numerous difficulties as refugees in Syria, this was an amazing accomplishment. Perhaps a quote from the mother of one of the students as she was waiting with Theresa and Gabe outside the US Embassy during the visa interview is most telling: "Whether my son gets to college in the US or not, this program has changed his life."

The descriptions of their teaching strategies to get students prepared for college level studies is something that would be

for two years on the outskirts of Damascus. Mazen, the son of Palestinian refugees in Syria, is now a refugee in Istanbul.

They often mention how various ethnic groups lived together in relative peace before the US invasion of Iraq. One might attribute that to ruthless dictators who prevented any dissent, but there is no denying that Shia, Sunni, Jews and Christians had lived together for centuries in these areas without the animosities that have erupted since Western military interventions. The book is a laudable description of a land and people that may well be shattered permanently by recent wars. The very fabric of the Middle East may have reached a point of no return as Western powers have provoked ethnic, sectarian and religious differences.

This book is not only a testament to the dedicated work that Theresa and Gabe were able to accomplish under dire circumstances, but also provides marvelous descriptions of architecture, culture, food and life in an area of the Cradle of Civilization that few of us have experienced. Their humble demeanor brings out the beauty and strength of character of the numerous individuals they encountered, as well as the cordial and welcoming nature of the people, even under such trying circumstances. ✚



monastery at Deir Mar Mus. Theresa touchingly depicts the relationships women have in the *hammam* (Turkish bath) when there are no men around. Numerous boxes of text are interspersed throughout the book to provide supplementary information, descriptions, poems or works from others that garnish the narrative. I found these very effective at providing context or useful and interesting asides that worked well to give a fuller appreciation of place and people.

I have worked with the Iraqi Student Project (ISP), which was a major product of their endeavors with Iraqi refugees in Damascus. They got the idea of the project from Cathy Breen who wondered whether it might be possible to find scholarships in the US for young Iraqi refugees who were unable to study at universities in Jordan or Syria without paying foreigners' fees. They explored the idea and were determined to send a group of Iraqi students to US colleges by the fall of 2008. This meant: getting them prepared for college level studies in English; scoring well on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language); getting colleges and universities to agree to take Iraqi refugees with scholarships and waivers for other expenses; helping them complete the application for admission to those colleges; and finally helping those who got accepted to pass the biggest hurdle of all, getting a student visa from the US State Department. They managed to get a sizable list of colleges and universities to provide tuition waivers and many to offer room and board. They set up local support groups for each student to give students financial backing, housing in many cases and moral support. Getting all of this to happen during the first year of their program was no small feat, yet they were extremely successful.

Theresa and Gabe began by spreading the word among Iraqi acquaintances in Damascus and posting informational material in strategic locations. Under-



Susan MacMurphy

useful to many educators throughout the world, regardless of language or culture. They had numerous English speaking people helping them as volunteers with Writers' Workshops, Literature Circles and numerous discussions on history, culture and other disciplines. They utilized many resources that were available in Damascus to get the students prepared, but also provided many works of literature to help them with language, reading, analysis and inquiry. As the years progressed their library and resources grew, yet they recognized their limitations in terms of the number of students they could handle each year. Over the five years of preparing students in the program, which terminated about a year after civil war started, they managed to get sixty Iraqi refugees accepted into US colleges and universities. Nearly all have completed their baccalaureate degrees now and many are pursuing graduate studies.

The book also gives many brief biographical or personal sketches of people they encountered during their seven years in Damascus. One chapter entitled "Portraits" describes their relationships with several people they met in various contexts, from a landlady, to a physician, a like-minded activist and an elderly Iraqi woman caring for her younger disabled brother. Theresa also interviewed their former Arabic language teacher, Mazen, from the Palestinian camp where they lived

**THE DRONE EATS WITH ME: Diaries
From a City Under Fire by Atef Abu
Saif. Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2016
Reviewed by Terry Rogers.**

Atef Abu Saif, a writer and teacher, wrote in his diary every day during the fifty-one day Israeli attack on Gaza that began July 6, 2014. On that evening he was sitting with friends listening to a scheduled program of the radio about youth problems in Gaza. Two drone strikes had been reported earlier in the evening, but each was described as "one-off" by the commentator.

"At 11 pm the guest is cut off and nationalist song starts playing. The mood on the radio changes completely. A few minutes later Abu Annas' mobile ping with information on a third attack. Two young men killed in an attack in El Burj Camp. We look at each other. This is 'escalation in tension.' A moment later, the war introduces itself properly. We hear explosion, some way to the north, echoes across the city. Hearing a bomb in real life for the first time in a couple of years, is like having a PTSD flashback. It jolts you exactly where you were two years ago, five years ago, four decades ago, to the most recent, or the very first time you heard of it. As the first explosion subsides, it's replaced by the inevitable whirl of a drone, sounding so close it could be right beside us. It's like it wants to join us for the evening and