

Voices and Views from Kurdistan
Christian Peacemaker Team Iraqi Kurdistan
May 5, 2017
Weldon D. Nisly

Greetings dear family and friends,

Beyani Bash (good morning) and bekker bet (welcome) to Kurdistan and CPT life in Sulaymaniyah.

I have been here with the CPT Iraqi Kurdistan team for two weeks already and have been welcomed many times and ways by amazing people in an amazing place. With this first word to you from this time and in this place, I extend a Kurdish welcome to you. I wish all of you could encounter this welcome first hand. I hope some of you will encounter this genuine Kurdish welcome in person someday by joining a CPT delegation to Kurdistan over the coming years. Especially on a delegation while I am here.

Let me paint a picture of welcome with portraits and vignettes from these first two weeks here. I will share visual faces and places from Sulaymaniyeh and Kurdistan when I am home. For those of you beyond Seattle, I welcome invitations to come share "Voices and Views from Kurdistan" in the near future. For now I paint word pictures so that you may begin to "see" the beautiful faces of those with whom I share life and encounter in this place that is "home" for these two months with CPT.

It was a long and good journey from Seattle to Suli with stops in O'Hare and Amman airports. Honestly I welcome the flying journey as an important part of my transition from my Seattle to Suli homes. Long flights and airport layovers are a kind of monastic "place" of transitional time and space for me. It offers me an opportunity to be "alone" amidst people coming and going from places and cultures and languages around the world. In transit I observe and wonder the lives and loves of other global journeyers. I read and reflect, meditate and muse about the world God creates and our calling to compassionately connect people and places around the world with all the mystery of our common humanity and diversity. This particular journey offered me a welcome surprise when I arrived at Amman, Jordan's new airport to begin a 9 hour and 20 minute long layover. We had just landed after a nearly 12 hour flight from O'Hare. At a security check point for transit passengers, a gracious woman informed me that my long transit merited a hotel room. I asked with polite but puzzled skepticism, "Where is this hotel? And how much will it cost?" She kindly assured me that it was at the airport and was free. Royal Jordanian Airlines is very good to long transit passengers. It was a welcome gift of over 6 hours in a quiet clean room to enjoy a luxurious shower and get a few hours of sleep with the bonus gift of a fabulous buffet dinner. Refreshed and rested, I was ready for a 2:15 a.m. flight from Amman to Sulaymaniyah International Airport, with an on time arrival at 4:15 a.m. on Friday, April 21. It was a mere 38 hours after I left home on Wednesday morning, April 19, with the 10 hour time difference between Seattle and Suli.

CPT members Kasia and Latif were welcoming faces at the airport. We chatted sleepily on our 15 minute drive from the airport to the CPT house as the mountains surrounding Suli began to show the first hint of the dawning of a whole/holy new day. After four hours of sleep, I awakened to a new day of beautiful warm sunshine -- truly welcome coming from the Pacific Northwest's long record-breaking rainy winter. It was a festival day in Kurdistan as well as Friday being the Muslim holy day. Suli too has known winter rains and this was the first really warm sunny weekend. It is celebrated by families everywhere going out to picnic and having village festival celebration in the mountains surrounding Suli.

A few Kurdish CPT friends joined us for a drive across winding mountain roads. Finally we arrived at a festival as guest of our CPT team mate Latif's sister and brother-in-law and his family. After warm welcoming hugs and handshakes -- and a hug from a Kurdish elder who welcomed me with a kiss on both cheeks. Soon blankets were spread under a tree laden with Kurdish food. We ate our fill of delicious dolmas and bread. Kurdish music filled the air as villagers gathered in front of a simple stage to dance traditional Kurdish songs. Kurds are very festive and free to form dance lines of male and female, old and young in traditional Kurdish dress dancing to traditional Kurdish music. No, I didn't dance and, yes, I have photos. It was a long and festive welcome for my first day in Kurdistan. That night back in Suli we went to a Kurdish restaurant the team frequents to enjoy Kurdish food indoors followed by the always welcome Kurdish tea. It was the team's welcome to me. Sulaymaniyah is spelled at least four ways around the city, plus the abbreviated common references to Suli or Slemani. The formal spelling I use is the one on the International Airport. The diversity of spelling is due to transliteration of Kurdish to English letters and sound. I usually refer to the short and simple name Suli -- which gmail consistently and annoyingly changes to Sulk. Suli is anything but a sulking place. Suli is a bustling city of a million people in northeastern Iraq. Erbil, in north central Iraq, is the capitol of the Kurdistan Regional Government, which is the semi-independent northern region of Iraq. But Suli is the primary center of culture and activism in Kurdistan. About 80% of Iraq's poets, artists, writers, numerous human rights agencies, and political and nonviolent activists are in Suli. All kinds of cultural and civic events are common. There are numerous parks and people spend a lot of time outside. It is a fairly modern and growing city with modern stores, restaurants, and hotels. But the real Suli life is on-the- street happening in and around our neighborhood. Within a few blocks of the CPT house, there are more than a dozen shops where we buy fruit, vegetables, eggs, frozen food, and dry goods. Immediately next door to the house is a small pharmacy where a doctor will even come and check you if needed. One of our teammates got a bad rash from bug bites on an overnight camping trip last weekend and went to this pharmacy to see a doctor and get itching salve.

Especially welcome, are two small bakeries a half a block away -- one baking the traditional Kurdish flat bread, the other the traditional round bread. We eat lots of both and buy it fresh and warm out of the oven in the morning. There is even a little pizza store three blocks down the street called Pizza Hut. A small convenience store a couple doors from us sells frozen food, including all kinds of ice cream bars. At least once a week ice cream bars serve as our mid-afternoon break. There is even a watermelon street vender across the street a half block away in front of the local Mosque.

Across from our house is a public Muslim school. We hear the sound of children arriving around 8:00 a.m. Sunday to Thursday mornings. The weekend is Friday, the Muslim day, and Saturday. Next to the school is a mosque awakening the neighborhood with the call to prayer at a set time prior to sunrise. So it is a few minutes earlier each morning. This morning it was 3:30 a.m.

I feel at home with this call to prayer awakening in me memories of the 3:45 a.m. ringing bells of the first call to prayer at the Abbey of Gethsemane, a Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky (Thomas Merton was a monk there from the early 1940s until his death in late 1968), where I used to go on retreat when I was pastor at Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship.

A main street through Suli is Salim Street, only a few blocks from the CPT house. It begins near the airport end of the city and ends at the bazaar. It's a huge maze of shops with everything you could imagine, spread across blocks of streets and alleys.

On my second day with the team, Saturday, April 22, Latif and I enjoyed a long walk along Salim Street all the way to the bazaar. There we first stopped to enjoy cup of tea -- Kurdistan's cup of welcome hospitality. A little later we were refreshed with a delicious watermelon smoothie. The bazaar is a public gathering place and place to buy everything. Equally important is that the bazaar being a public gathering place for everyone. I was welcomed in various ways, especially when encountering friends of Latif. Chatting with one friend on a crowded bazaar corner, he offered a genuine, "See you on the other side" as his parting welcome and way of saying, I look forward to seeing you again.

On the long walk home from the bazaar we wandered through one of Suli's many parks and through the endless storefront and sidewalk vendors along Salim Street. We stopped to savor one of my favorite Middle Eastern foods -- a chicken schwarma sandwich. It was well after dark by that time but the public life in the bazaar and along the street was just beginning. Nighttime sidewalk life is an every night public gathering space to share tea, food, and conversation in Kurdish life. However, as darkness falls it is an overwhelmingly male street life.

There are 5 of us in the CPT house, where we work and play, cook and eat, clean-up or not, and talk, joke, sleep, and shower together. Ok, the latter two we don't do really do together. But we do share the same simple space to carry on this CPT life and work together. The CPT Iraqi Kurdistan team (CPT IK) is made up of four full-time members plus reservists and interns spending a few months at a time here on the team.

In May and September a CPT delegation joins us for a couple of weeks. Our primary preparation at the moment is for the delegation that will be here from May 6-19. This 8-person delegation organized by Code Pink means we will have 13 people in this house for days at a time, with some days spent traveling to meet our CPT partners in other parts of Kurdistan.

CPT is part of a consortium of numerous human rights organizations committed to nonviolent peacemaking. We have other partners in other parts of the country to build relationships with as we work and walk with them to "overcome violence and oppression."

Over my time here from April 21 to June 7, I will share more about our work with these partners as I encounter them and the work we do together. During this first week I have worked with the team to prepare for the delegation, identify dates and locations of Turkey's nearly 40 bombings in northern Kurdistan, plan for the coming months when team members will each be taking being away for holiday, updating some CPT polices, getting my Kurdistan Residency card that lets me stay here for several months, meeting with two French journalists, Skyping with our CPT Project Coordinator who lives in Bogota, Colombia, and doing lots of everyday household tasks needed for the team.

I want to introduce my colleagues who are full time CPT members so you begin to have a sense of people and life here. Julie Brown is from the Des Moines, IA, Catholic Worker House who is in her second year here. She grew up on an Iowa farm and has been a long time activist, who loves French fries, coffee, conflict resolution, and a good laugh.

Latif Hars is a Kurd from Ranya in north central Kurdistan. He is a lawyer who has long worked for peace. His initial CPT experience was in Sep-Oct 2014, as a member of the delegation I was on the last time I was here. He loves to sing Kurdish songs, spending time with his family back in his home village but loves living in Suli and being with CPT. He navigates the Kurdish political and legal maze for CPT and often is the CPT driver.

Rezhiar Fahir is from a mountaintop village, where he was planning to take us for a couple of days week week, until some deadlines and CPT car problems postponed that offer of family and village hospitality. He has been an educator and activist who worked for the Iraq section of the International Mine Advisory Group identifying the countless unconscionable land mines across Kurdistan that are long term consequences of the hell of war. These mine fields are marked by small piles of stones and a flag staked in the ground to remind locals that walking across that land is an endless risk. When I was here in 2014, Rezhiar took us to the village of Kormor in the hills where an oil and gas drilling company had closed the village access road and polluted the water and air endangering their life's and damaging their livelihood. Rezhiar is the CPT leader of the Code Pink delegation and will take them to Kormor to check up on them again. He loves cooking and teasing, reading and music, good food and film. A week ago he had a cataract removed from his right eye and has been working with one eye.

Kasia Protz has been here since March after having been here on a 2015 delegation followed by an internship for several months last fall. She is Polish-Irish, having lived the first half of her 21 years in Poland and then her family moved to Ireland. She is a very mature and experienced 21 year old, who loves horses, especially her horse Horris in Ireland. She embodies a passion for people, peace, and process. She is a joyful and generous young person who makes friends easily and enjoys life to the fullest, welcoming others to share a life of joyful nonviolence and friendship.

These four CPT team members are incredibly diverse with complementary gifts. They not only love peace but love each other and live together with grace and humor, vulnerability and honesty, banter and blessing. They work with intensity and intentionality as a CPT team while living as a family passionately dedicated to the same purpose. They welcome me fully into the team and already I am very much at home with them and our life together. I am grateful to be on the team with them and building friendship with them.

I have been welcomed to share numerous other opportunities to experience Kurdish life in my first week:

One night Kasia invited me to join her and her special friend Ariz to enjoy food and film in a café run by a woman committed to promoting community and culture. The film was Denzel Washington's "John Q" -- as real and relevant, troubling and traumatic today as it was when it came out in about 2002. Given the madness and meanness of Republicans joining the President to wreck health care for those most in need in the U.S., see "John Q" now even if you have seen it previously.

Another night Laitif invited me to walk to Salim Street to get something to eat -- a chicken liver wrap from a street vendor. Of course, tea followed the sandwich.

After an all morning and afternoon team meeting on **Thursday**, we began our **Friday-Saturday** weekend that evening. Julie left with a friend to go camping, Latif returned to his family in his home village. Kasia went out with a friend. Rezhiar invited me to join him and friend Enaz to see a film and eat at an outdoor café on a warm evening. Over a chicken wrap, salad, and tea, I had my most intense lesson in Islam yet. Enaz' father is Arab and mother is Kurd so she grew up embracing both Iraqi and Kurdish culture and language. She teaches poetry at the university and is an avid reader, mostly in English. She is a friend of CPT committed to building partnerships of respectful diversity. I asked Rezhiar and Enaz what being Muslim means for them and how they identify with and practice Islam? We had an extensive and vigorous conversation that could have continued long into the night -- ending for the time-being by seeing a Sci-Fi film "Ghost in Shell," which also merits conversation.

Last **Friday**, Enaz, plus CPT friends Meedi and Anna Grace, joined Kasia, Rezhiar, and me for a day-long rugged hike in the beautiful mountains of Kurdistan. Spring rains the rocky hills of Kurdistan into a beautiful green speckled with blooming flowers. Every highway and winding mountain road is lined with families playing and picnicking, a favorite pastime. A couple of hours of hiking across a flowing stream and high up along rocky ridges led us to a mountaintop ledge where we could see both sides of the mountain. For several hours we sat on rocks and grass amidst the mountain flowers and shared a lunch of bread, tomatoes, cucumbers, cheese, hard boiled eggs, and fruit while we talked about our lives and experiences, concerns and struggles, hopes and dreams and what motivates us to make the choices we do within our family systems and culture and religion. We were six people sharing a diversity of age, experience, nationality, and faith finding amazing common ground in concern and commitment, values and vision for a world that engages and embraces each other rather than fears and fights the other.

Last **Saturday**, was a day off and our last quiet day for the next few weeks with the delegation coming. Rezhiar and I picked up the first delegate to arrive at 4:15 this morning. The others arrive at 1:30 and 2:30 a.m. tomorrow morning. So Rezhiar and I will make two runs to the airport in the middle of the night. Tomorrow noon our two weeks of delegation begins for real. Next week we take the delegation to the mountains to meet villagers and our partners for peace and to monitor the bombings of villagers as together we seek to transform violence and Oppression.

Together in peacebuilding partnership,

Weldon