

Sabine's travel report, October 2012 (completed by Pascale)

Our two-week journey in October was shorter than the last one, which meant that we had to concentrate our activities in the villages of the Shomali plain (Laghmani) and didn't fly to Herat. I was accompanied by Sabine. She was a very valuable companion to me because of her positive attitude, curiosity, openness, and also her efficiency! Her travel report shows our project through other eyes. My more fact-based remarks will be added between the lines.

The history

It was in the autumn of 2007 that I discovered an article with photos about the embroidery project in Laghmani in a professional textile magazine. I was immediately enthusiastic, curious, infected! I sent an email to Pascale with the request to depict embroidery squares at an exhibition in my textile paper workshop "Wandelwerk" and also to offer them for sale. Right away and in my opinion with a great degree of trust, she sent me, an unknown person from Bochum, a parcel with a lot of embroideries, printed information, as well as two patchwork quilts.

There are many persons who feel very strongly about the embroidery projects, not only buyers but also many very active people who are involved practically in the sale of the embroideries. One example is Françoise, who assumed the great responsibility for an exhibition and merchandise stall at a major trade fair in Toulouse. It's not only the DAI and myself who are responsible and competent for the future of these projects, everybody may feel a part of it. Thanks!

Since then I have tried to sell the embroideries on various occasions in and around Bochum regularly several times a year and to present the project as well. Also I have been trying to integrate some of them in felt work. Time and again these small art objects are incitement and inspiration, a topic of conversation and an opportunity for reflection, for my customers and friends too.

In the meantime a small community of fans has been forming around here, so that I was also able to set up and administer the exhibition "Inspiration-Afghanistan" and the retail stall at the Creativa in Dortmund 2010, with the support of some of my friends. Finally, when in March this year Pascale and her friend Gudrun (also responsible for the project "Green carpet for Afghanistan") lived at my place during the Creativa it was very clear to me that I myself would love to travel to Afghanistan, just to see and discover all of this.

And Pascale took me with her! I am very delighted about the trust she has placed in me.

The report

On our first evening in Kabul I sit in the living room of the Hashimi family on one of the usual seat cushions, mounted all around the wall (at night these small mattresses serve for sleep as well). (Grand-)parents Marijan and Khan Shirin, sister-in-law Sahar (breastfeeding 18 months old Yusra), Khaled, discussing the program of the next day with Pascale, in the kitchen Khaleda, preparing the evening meal, as well as the two younger sons Jahed and Zahur (middle/end 20). There will always be such quiet family evenings in the next two weeks. I am very warmly welcomed and I would like to take the opportunity now to thank the family for their special hospitality! But now, first things first...

At the Frankfurt airport I met many people of Turkish and Arabic origin, who were obviously on their way to Mecca, as the Feast of Sacrifice was getting closer. The families also visit each other to celebrate together, like here at Easter or Christmas.

Stopover in Bahrain. Soon we had reached a different world. The flight to Kabul was comfortable, we arrived in Kabul before dawn. International airport: it reminds me of the airport in Nairobi in the 60s. Pascale is excited about how modern and well-developed it is compared to previous year. Passport control has to wait, morning prayer is more important. In a corner of the terminal building the prayer rug is rolled out. In spite of that we manage to leave the airport with the three heavy suitcases quite quickly and without any difficulties. A few women only, no others from Western countries. The scarf round my head gives me the illusion that I don't stand out. Khaled arrives and after a warm welcome we manage to fit into the obligatory Toyota alongside suitcases and bags, driving to have breakfast at Lailuma's place.

In the meantime the early morning has covered the tormented city with a pink light. Surrounded by haze the mountains lie in the distance (Kabul is located at 1807m altitude and has 3 million inhabitants now). The hills nearby are covered with countless small houses, some of them only semi-finished. Some dwellings are nothing but a provisional construction of wood, nailed together, without any electricity or water: illegal flats for people who have moved from the rural areas, hoping to be fortunate, but quite often are disappointed. It seems that the city is sinking under the many demands it has had to fulfil since its liberation from the Taliban in October 2001. Many streets are paved with asphalt, which quite often is not in a good condition. Some side streets still have a clay or gravel surface. Occasionally a flock of sheep is "grazing" at the piles of rubbish, somewhere in a corner. Waste is collected every now and then, but not at all in winter. I noticed many small channels next to the footpath. As Kabul has no water

disposal system and only the new houses have a drainage system, you can imagine the function of the channels!

Now I meet Lailuma. She will accompany us during the next two weeks and translate for us. A very warm welcome, tea, flat bread, jam and land butter, which was offered with a lot of pride.

We continue to Khaled's place, are offered tea and dried fruit. I enjoy this nice tradition! Our room is worthy of a small palace: reddish brown walls, lush curtains, soft (synthetic) carpets, many high windows, comfortable sleeping spots. It will be a place not only for resting and sleeping. We will also spread out embroidered fabrics, examine and assess them, discuss and prepare extra jobs and also hold some good conversations.

This year there were especially many extra jobs to be distributed. Specially selected embroiderers, because of their style or their need for additional financial support (as in the case of young Maleha, sole earner of her family) get an extra embroidery assignment in addition to their usual number of squares. It might be an order from European customers, but most of the time it's an experiment where embroidery is added to printed pieces of fabric or articles of clothing.

As we can keep up with our workload in these two weeks only with a strict schedule, we seize the day and drive to the silk weaving mill of Shaima Breshna, the project Azezana (www.zezana.com). Here are a few reflections and observations. The 22 women, war widows with their children, appreciate this project because for them this place is like a protective oasis. The light-filled courtyard, the well-kept, simple work spaces with the looms and the partly improvised tools create a joyful atmosphere in a living environment which is otherwise more chaotic. Middle Ages and electronics in one breath! Wonderful, figure-hugging silk scarves in many shining natural dyes are created. Shaima, the good soul, keeps an eye on everything. Later on we had a delicious lunch at her place, together with her husband.

Sarah reports on Shaima's project in the felt professional magazine "filzfun.de", December 2012. In spring 2011 silk yarns were dyed with plant pigments in Shaima's workshop (raw yarns were made available by the company "Madeira Garne" in Freiburg) which are partly used by the embroiderers from Sharak near Herat (2nd embroidery project).

Our day was rounded off with an afternoon nap in our pretty room and a first inspection of the material for the embroiderers, sent in a container and stored in the Hashimi's cellar. I couldn't have dreamed of a better start for the two

weeks! Already my first day in Afghanistan was filled with unforgettable impressions.

Thanks to the generous offer of the organization “Empor” (Munich) we were invited three times to dispatch our material together with theirs per road container. I am very happy to have a facility for storing material. This way the problematic shipping costs between Freiburg and Kabul are reduced.

I slept marvellously on the “toshak” (name of the mattresses) the first night and thanks to the earplugs recommended by Pascale, the muezzin’s early morning call seemed muffled and far away. But for us it was also the call to get up soon, because our plan was to leave for the villages at 5.45.

Days in the villages

The following three days we went to the villages to collect the embroideries. During the one-and-half-hour journey there was always the opportunity to look at the surroundings and take pictures from the car window. And we were able to discuss things. The street, these days in a relatively good condition, is heavily used and regarded as quite dangerous. It was only once that an alarmingly swaying bus approached us, obviously much too fast. Apart from that, Khaled’s good driving skills kept us calm!

Once again a miracle that we didn’t have to face a disaster; the guardian angels are very active, especially in Afghanistan.

The first day in Sofian payin we were welcomed with a good breakfast (the same in the other villages). With fresh flat bread, hot tea, yoghurt and honey and sometimes a fried egg with tomatoes and onions, it was always a delight to enjoy their hospitality.

Sabine doesn’t know what the situation was like in the past. It’s quite obvious that people in the villages have acquired many cows in recent years (max 1 per family): an indication that war is over and people have a bit of money. Because only a few people are able to organise feed for winter, they buy the cow after winter and sell it shortly before the following winter. In return they enjoy the milk and have dried cow dung as fuel at the same time.

Meanwhile the first embroiderers appeared and assembled in the inner courtyard on a piece of carpet. It was my job to offer drawing exercises in order to support the design work. We would like to see the embroiderers prepare the necessary preliminary drawings themselves, if possible. This would be positive for their self-esteem, since quite often it’s someone else who does the preparatory work: nephew, husband or sister. In the very last moment before my departure I got a

generous donation from the company Boesner, in Witten: 200 pencils and a few colouring pads. We distributed these things among the women and girls. The aim was to encourage them to draw their own drafts and most of all to gain more confidence and trust. For myself, I had to improvise; I had to think what a “drawing lesson” might look like under conditions that were completely unknown to me beforehand! Together with Zahur, “my” translator and assistant teacher (son of family Hashimi, 25 years old, law student and very attentive) and with the women, I gradually found a possible strategy.

Short summary of the various stages:

- 1) Having a look at embroidery – which square was drawn by themselves? (quite often I could say it was especially beautiful) – why don't you draw yourself? – what is it you prefer embroidering?
- 2) To find out how the embroiderer is able to deal with the pencil, the following tasks: draw...
 - a) a stalk with leaves
 - b) a flower
- 3) reflection – praise/criticism – referring to flowers and leaves around us – looking at details – encourage nature studies.
- 4) I show them some basic exercises: Hatching, horizontal waves, circles, horizontal figure eight, intended as curve-drawing exercises as well as relaxation exercises.
Some women couldn't hold the pencil the right way – they can neither read nor write.
Stimulation of fantasy: tendrils can develop from horizontal waves, circles are basic forms for different other forms and patterns, hatchings possibly create the background and so on.
- 5) Those who have time and interest should repeat the exercises at home, perhaps creating a draft and bringing it along the following week (payday).

Actually I did have a few returns, mostly from the young women with the courage (did they have time?) to present their attempts. Two outstanding drafts are now even being embroidered. We were able spontaneously to sort yarn into the required colours and now we are really curious what the result will be like. I think that it was quite a successful and inspiring action for the women. It remains to be seen whether the majority of them might really reach for a pencil. I am sure that it was a motivation for individual women and maybe an incentive to try it out alone. Anyway we laughed a lot together (even when I guided some of the women's hands and thus drew together) and they enjoyed the togetherness in the general chaos, with little space, always sitting on the floor. (Of course that was unusual only for me – my knees only just managed to cope with it!).

Another interesting day was when we met the village elders in the different villages. Pascale informed them about the present state of the projects. Possible changes were discussed. The village elder took the opportunity to ask for support for a small primary school.

Sofian payin (see above) is at the farthest point from Laghmani School (3-4km). Parents, especially fathers, are reluctant to send their small 6- to 8-year-olds, boys or girls, that long distance. We from DAI will do our best to solve the village elder's request to his full satisfaction.

In response to a proposal by the village elder of Kakara, there is also the concrete idea to integrate the resettled Kuchi (Persian name for nomads) into the project. His intention is to integrate the "aliens". There are still many prejudices against them, among other things because of their indifferent role in times of the Taliban. As they can't embroider, we are looking for a way to give them work crocheting lace. Negotiations are still under way: European prices and demand must correspond realistically, and the ratio to the embroideries has to conform as well. Not easy!

I was very impressed when the village elder of Kakara asked me two years ago if we could employ the nomad women, too. What he does is real integration work! We have met the Kuchi women four times and are hoping to put their brilliant crocheted bands on the market soon.

One afternoon we stopped at Laghmani School on our way back to Kabul. It was just the end of the boys' school day. We wanted to take Nasser (Khaled's uncle, who is living in Freiburg and who is responsible for children's sponsorship in DAI) back to Kabul, and had to wait "only" 5 Afghan minutes (5 Afghan minutes are similar to roughly 1 hour)... It was a good opportunity to watch the boys starting out on their way home. Isn't it always funny to see how similar this is all over the world: the cheerful 10- to 12-year-olds jumping outside, putting their arm round their friend, laughing, shoving one another. Next to them the dreamy one, walking quietly.

And now the "cool" ones, some of them already with well-styled hair, hardly able to walk "normally". They play their roles quite well (even if there aren't any girls nearby).

Those who look like young hooligans aren't missing either. They get on their motor bikes casually and rev the engines before they shoot off. Perhaps another cool dude quickly jumps on! And finally those who seem already very stern and adult; they seem to be on their way into a somewhat uncertain future.

Payday

Paydays are more quiet and business-like; €21.000 was distributed on 3 days. Only the unpleasant task of having to dismiss an embroiderer brings a certain

degree of uneasiness. This shows how difficult it is to balance the women's need for income on the one hand and the necessity for finding buyers in Europe on the other hand. Fortunately there is an alternative: establishing a sponsorship!

Since spring 2012, DAI has had an account for contributions to the embroidery project, which I promoted. It's called "Sticknothilfe", which means "embroidery emergency relief". By now 3 families of embroiderers and Soraya's family as well are supported financially every month.

My report has become very long. And yet there are so many things I haven't mentioned!

The observations I could make, the many conversations with very different people (even when waiting for my connecting flight in Bahrain), all this has made me even more curious about Afghanistan. The task of helping a bit to heal the wounds of the war, to spin the connecting threads, to exchange greetings and understanding with the people there – all this is worthwhile, even though it seems to be a mere drop in the ocean.

I remember a song from the 70s, and it's still up-to-date: The softest water breaks the stone.... the more elderly among us will remember that song!

The next journey to Afghanistan is almost in the planning stage.

Sabine Dryander

At the end I would like to describe two events:

Soraya's embroidery can't be sold any longer because of its bad quality, which would endanger the project. She is informed that she has been dismissed; a murmur arises from the women. They are very upset and say, "It's not possible – she's alone with two kids, one of them disabled, she works like a man in other people's gardens, she renovated their house alone". I come to the following decision: she won't go on embroidering (she doesn't have the peace and quiet for that job), but we support her with money from the embroidery emergency relief with €40 per month, which is a lot more than what she would ever have earned doing embroidery. What I wish her is a life with less stress.

The day of collecting the embroideries in Kakara is ending; 5 women are still missing. They haven't arrived yet, but we want to leave. Our hostess asks us to wait a bit, these women are very poor, they should by no means miss delivering their works. Luckily they soon arrive.

Both cases demonstrate a strong solidarity among the women, although they belong to different families and different clans. They are really concerned about those in trouble.

The best news as closing remarks: it was the very first time that we have seen three young girls running in the villages, who were old enough that they should have been wearing full body veils called Tshaderi (no longer because of law but because of tradition). These girls were only wearing a headscarf and were running relaxed through the village. This means that their father allowed this and at the same time it shows that he has overcome the thought "What will people think of me?" What an incredible sense of happiness to experience a scene like this!

Postscript: And where is Sarah? That is what many people have been asking me since I have been back. Is she no longer involved? Of course she is, and this year she has even travelled twice to Kabul, all alone. But this time it was my turn!

Pascale Goldenberg, beginning of December 2012