

Book review: "Diary from Gaza"

# "We cannot say we didn't know."

## A child psychologist's account of her work in Gaza

by Georg Koch\*

Katrin Blatz Brubakk is a German-Norwegian child psychologist who specialises in trauma. Since 2014, she has been deployed repeatedly by "Médecins Sans Frontières" to various locations. Gaza was her first mission directly in a war zone. Consequently, the rules had to be strictly adhered to:

"Never go outside the walls without being accompanied by a security guard." – "Always wear the white vest of Médecins Sans Frontières." – "Never stray more than 50 metres from the road."

Putting oneself in such danger to help others clearly requires a great deal of courage and compassion, which she documents impressively in her diary.

In August and September 2024, as well as in the winter of 2025, she was still able to spend five weeks at a time at the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, in the south of the Gaza Strip, helping traumatised children and young people, as well as their parents, through her compassionate care.

Since 1 March 2026, the Israeli occupying power – despite protests from international organisations and 20 European foreign ministers<sup>1</sup> – has banned 36 aid organisations from providing urgently needed assistance. "Médecins Sans Frontières" writes:

"Essential medical equipment, medicines and spare parts for water treatment plants are being withheld, including materials for amputations, disinfectants, water and fuel for dialysis machines. 18,500 people are awaiting urgent medical evacuation because they can no longer be treated in the Gaza Strip."

\* Georg Koch, social pedagogue FH, member of the editorial team of "Swiss Standpoint". He grew up in a town where many war invalids from the Second World War were housed and worked in a large care home. Later, he himself worked in Germany and Switzerland in various care homes and day centres for over 30 years with children, young people and people with disabilities. For the last 10 years of his career, he served as a guardian in child and adult protection services and, since his retirement, has continued to work in this field.



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Katrin Blatz Brubakk begins her diary with the following words:

"I have heard the sound of war. Not in the form of bomb blasts, but as the alarming, raw cries of terror from traumatised children. Cries so piercing and painful that they seem to embody all of Gaza's suffering. For over a year, the children have been living in fear of dying or losing someone they love. Many of them have already come very close to death."

It is a harrowing account, a book I had to put down time and again because I was overcome with tears. Yet it offers a glimpse into the reality the Palestinian population faces day in, day out, and which they must endure day and night.

She sensitively describes her daily encounters with the children and their families on the orthopaedic ward of Nasser Hospital.

To minimise the risk of infection under the circumstances there, broken bones must be fixed externally – using so-called "Ex-Fix" devices – and cannot be stabilised through surgery involving metal implants. The Ex-Fix looks like a small frame protruding from the arms, legs and hips. Ms Blatz Brubakk is committed to helping

the children – traumatised by the war and seriously injured – as well as their parents and relatives, to ensure they do not lose their will to live and to help them regain a little hope for the future. Despite the language barrier, she manages to connect with the children and their parents in this extreme situation.

“Our youngest patient is at the end of the corridor on the other ward. She is two and a half years old, has big eyes, long eyelashes, and her curly hair is tied back in a cute little ponytail. When I arrive, she is sitting in bed playing with an aunt. [...] She was rushed here after a wall had collapsed on her. When she was wheeled out of the operating theatre, both her legs had been amputated. She hasn't left the room since she was admitted, [...]”

Now that the external wounds have healed somewhat, Ms Blatz Brubakk tried to encourage the girl and her parents to dare to return to life outside the hospital room, despite their terrible fate.

“The little girl looks at me sceptically. I am the strange woman with pale skin, blonde hair and no hijab. What's more, I speak strangely. She leans against her father as if seeking reassurance, and as she does so, the two leg stumps become visible beneath her dress. One leg has been amputated almost up to the hip, the other just below the knee. Her mother, sitting next to her, has both arms in plaster from her fingertips to her shoulders.

As usual, I try to make contact through smiles, funny faces and silliness. But it's only when I get out the soap bubbles that the girl becomes curious. We blow a few bubbles in the room before slowly making our way towards the garden. She is still in her father's arms but seems unsure and wants to make sure her mother is there too. When she sees that her mother is coming along, she happily carries on blowing bubbles. She smiles and can't get enough of this game. Her father grows increasingly confident that she is fine and swings her up into the air to catch the bubbles. One by one they pop, and eventually she laughs heartily, just as only two-year-olds can.

Her laughter is infectious to those around her. Some look up and smile; a few others come closer because they want to join in. Sharing this carefree experience with this little child is like a shot of vitamins for us all. As long as children can laugh, there is hope.”

The author was also able to build a warm relationship with her Palestinian colleagues. Whilst the foreign aid workers were able to stay overnight in a relatively secure house and were

always driven to Nasser Hospital in vehicles under international protection, their local colleagues had to survive in their refugee tents or shelters. On the morning of her eleventh day there, the laboratory manager *Hanan* told the author:

“It felt as though the Third World War had broken out yesterday afternoon. They dropped their bombs right next to our tent [...]. My most peaceful moments by far were when, before the war, I would lie on the roof of my house and gaze at the stars... That's what I thought of as I laid my exhausted body heavily on the hot sand beside my tent tonight.

This time, my eyes followed the sound of the drones circling in the sky, often accompanied by flashes of light as rockets flew through the air, followed by a deep rumble. I had hurried to make sure everything was all right: Each of my children had their ID card, a mobile phone and 200 shekels with them, in case we had to flee in different directions.

I was properly dressed and wearing my hijab, in case I were to be killed. For a moment, I thought I should put on my only pair of shoes, as I might not have time to slip them on if we were attacked. But I was too tired for that.

I turned my head to check the two bicycles to which we'd strapped a gas cylinder, batteries, a fan and a solar panel. We didn't need to take any mattresses with us, as the last time we were evacuated we had neither the time nor the capacity to bring them along. [...]

I recited some verses from the Qur'an with deep faith in God. It was a long night of waiting for the next “surprise” that was bound to come.

I'm not sure whether it's a blessing or not that we're still alive. But I'm certain that we've all become empty shells with deeply traumatised souls.”

In her epilogue from July 2025, Katrin Glatz Brubakk writes:

“Now the bombs kill in three ways. Firstly, directly through the impacts. Some are so powerful that everything – entire buildings, beds, furnishings, toys and even people – is pulverised, or children are so badly charred that they are difficult to identify. But they also kill indirectly. The shortage of medicines and medical supplies has long been severe, but after the Nasser Hospital's medicine store was bombed, the hospital director described this as a death sentence for some of the patients.

Because of a shortage of everything, my colleagues are forced to let people die whom they could have saved. Medicines, scalpels for operations, bandages and blood reserves for transfusions. In the A&E department, there is now a

corner where seriously injured children are placed to die. Children who, under normal circumstances, could have survived.

The bombs are also causing us to run short of staff. As of June 2025, over 1,400 aid workers had been killed during the war. Some of them were even executed with a shot to the back of the neck. The entire healthcare system has literally been brought to its knees. In this context, a few lorries carrying sterile gloves and dressings feel like a slap in the face. I cannot comprehend how we, as the international community, are al-

lowing this to happen. We cannot say we didn't know."

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*

*Katrin Glatz Brubakk: Tagebuch aus GAZA. Der Bericht einer Kinderpsychologin über Verlust, Traumata und Hoffnung, Westend Publisher, ISBN 978-3-98791-313-6, Neu-Isenburg, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2025*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detail-ansicht-de-international/gemeinsame-erklaerung-zum-humanitaeren-zugang-nach-gaza-und-zum-registrierungs-gesetz-fuer-internationale-ngos.html>