

Berlin's Museum Tours Are a Bridge to Immigrants

By RACHEL DONADIO

BERLIN — The Pergamon Museum is home to the famous Ishtar Gate, a monument of blue tile decorated with golden lions that was once the entrance to ancient Babylon. When Kamal Alramadhani, a 25-year-old Iraqi student, saw it for the first time last month, “I got goose bumps,” he said, pointing to his arm.

“It’s from Iraq,” he added quietly, through an Arabic translator. “My country.” A native of Mosul, Mr. Alramadhani studied economics at the University of Baghdad and came to Germany in October, part of a wave of asylum seekers that is stirring opposition here but also leading the government to look for ways to help the migrants adjust.

That afternoon, Mr. Alramadhani and about 30 others — some of them teenagers who had walked much of the way from Syria — were visiting the museum for the first time, on a free Arabic-language tour. It is part of a new program to introduce the refugees to Germany’s cultural heritage — even, of course, when some of that heritage comes from the Middle East.

The visits can be fraught. “Sometimes people say: ‘The Germans have all our her-

Germany offers migrants a view of their own cultural heritage.

itage! They stole it!” said Razan Nassreddine, who led the Arabic-language tour that afternoon at the Pergamon Museum. But often visitors say the art is better off in Berlin because so much has been destroyed by the war and the Islamic State, she said.

Other times, the tours bring up raw memories. At a painted marble wall niche from a house in Damascus that dates to the 15th and 16th century and was inhabited by Samaritans, “some people want to cry,” Ms. Nassreddine said. “When they see the colors and the shapes, they get chills.”

Ms. Nassreddine grew up in Damascus and moved to Europe to study in 2010, before Syria fell into civil war. She is one of 19 guides — 18 from Syria and one from Iraq — who are part of a program, called *Multaka*, or “meeting point” in Arabic, which is aimed at training refugees to become mu-



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seum guides.

The program is largely financed by the German government. It offers two Arabic-language tours a week at each of four Berlin museums: The Islamic Art Museum and the Museum of the Ancient Near East (which are both inside the Pergamon); the German Historical Museum; and the Bode Museum, including its collection of Byzantine art.

Educators from the museums are training the guides, many of whom had good

jobs and social standing in Syria. “The nice thing is to give them something that gives them a purpose,” said Stefan Weber, the director of the Islamic Art Museum. The program also serves to help “many other newcomers find a way to the museums,” he added.

The Islamic Art Museum, which in recent years has also been involved in helping to track artifacts under threat in Syria, was founded in 1904. Most objects came from lands then under Ottoman control in an era

Kamal Alramadhani, center with scarf, an Iraqi, said he got goose bumps seeing the Ishtar Gate in Berlin. Iraq has called for its return.

when Western collectors bought (some critics say plundered) artifacts. The first fragments of the Ishtar Gate came to Berlin in 1903 after negotiations between Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Over the years, Iraq has called for the work’s return.

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Nassreddine’s group included a dozen teenagers with the teachers of their intensive German-language course. Mahmoud Khalil, 14, said he had walked about 600 kilometers from Syria en route to Germany.

He said his favorite part was the Aleppo Room, whose walls are painted red with elaborate floral motifs. (It originally decorated the home of a Christian merchant and was brought into the collection in 1912.)

Helin Hasan, 14, the only girl in his class, said her favorite part was seeing the high carved walls of the desert palace of Mshatta, built in the eighth century south of Amman, Jordan, for an Umayyad-era caliph. “It was the most beautiful,” she said of the walls, whose ornate carvings reveal the intermingling of Eastern, Western and Byzantine motifs.

After the tour, Ms. Nassreddine was visibly moved. She said it had been her best to date. “They asked me ‘What’s this?’ and ‘Why’s it here?’” she said. “It was really a dialogue.”