

In the Heat of

KURDISTAN



Kaisu
Rissanen

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Writer: Kaisu Rissanen

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Translation: Annamari Kortelainen

Design: Hasan Dohogu

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Prologue

I have had the privilege of getting to know a people that have made a deep impression on me – the Kurds. I ran into Kurds for the first time at the Joensuu Refugee Centre in the 1990's. After moving to Hanko I met many Kurdish families there. Mohammad Nazari and his family became our friends. It is thanks to him that my husband and I got the privilege of travelling to Kurdistan for the first time in May 2008. I wrote a book on this trip called "*New Morning Rises from the Ashes of Kurdistan*".

"In the heat of Kurdistan" talks about our second trip. We received an invitation from the Minister of Cultural Affairs to come. Many interesting appointments were arranged for us. I got to see, hear and experience many things.

Of course my book is just an experience of a single outsider. I am a Christian and Christianity is reflected in the way I think. My sincere intention is to bring out the cause of the Kurdish people that are unknown to so many. I wish to say that all people are brothers and sisters irrespective of race and religion. We all live on the same little planet sharing the most valuable thing we ever can get – the very gift of life. Why destroy it?

The Bible quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

Departure

“We all have a right to feel valued and loved.”

I have received an invitation to go to Kurdistan. The purpose of the trip is to get to know the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in the north of Iraq a little more thoroughly. The invitation has come from a high authority and I could not refuse. I have written one book already. It is called *“New Morning Rises from the Ashes of Kurdistan”*.

I look at the weather forecast. The temperature is going to be from 47 to 49 degrees Centigrade. How would we Northerners cope with that? Our friend **Mohammad Nazari** from Hanko comforts us. We will cope just as well as the locals do. So must it be. We are unduly worried, because somehow people survive this ordeal that is going to last yet one more summer. Why would not we?

Our friend orders the tickets and takes care of the other travel arrangements. It is easy for us to jump on board. Everything is ready. I thank God for the ease. The Kurds have learned to help each other in the bitter suffering of their lives. They have surely one of the closest networks in the world. We hear later that the Kurds of Turkey have an especially efficient network. Whatever happens in the world, they are soon together taking care of their affairs.

I am going to fly with my husband. We made the first trip together, too. He is a calm and safe travelling companion. We have been all around the world together. We have seen many things and have learned to understand that all around the world there are people who are loved by God. We are all brothers and sisters to each other. Global understanding is increasing and, with it, the desire to meet people and to help where you can. We need each other.

People warn us not to go. “You must be crazy to think you are going to go voluntarily to the most restless corner of the earth!” People do not yet seem to know that the Kurds live in their own autonomous region of Kurdistan, whose borders are closely guarded. Passports are checked at the borders as well as within the region. There are security men and policemen everywhere. Kurdistan is a peaceful corner in the midst of the turbulent Middle East. We noticed this already during our first visit.

I pack scarves, jewellery, toys and other nice little things in my luggage to take to people as presents. I take a big stack of cards I painted of a Kurdish woman and an angel. I grab a little illustrated book, which I just managed to get printed before the journey. There are pictures of Kurdish girls and women in it. There are encouraging texts in English under the pictures. Some of the texts are from the Bible. All comforting words belong to all the creatures. “Every person is worth a song” they say in a Finnish pop song.



Kurdish woman and an angel

Route to Kurdistan

It is time to go. We do not need visas, because you can stay visa-free in Kurdistan for 10 days. We can apply for visas for the rest of our stay when we get there. We do not need any vaccinations, either. What we need is God's protection and guidance.

We jump on board a bus that leaves from the other side of the street directly to Turkey harbour. There we meet our friend Mohammad and his elderly mother, who is going with us. She will continue on to Iran, where Mohammad's family is originally from. During our journey we notice the little, seemingly weak, old lady is still tough and active. She feels lonely in Finland. The Kurds have a strong sense of community. The worst thing they know is to be alone. At times we were surprised that our friend was worried about us, if we were left alone for a moment. We had to explain many times and thoroughly that we Finns, in fact, love quietness and aloneness. We cannot talk the whole time. This is a great difference between the Kurds and the Finns. They look at us with pity, because in Kurdistan no-one is left alone, if only possible.

In Stockholm, Sweden, we are met by a Kurdish man we know. He does not drive a taxi anymore. He has a car repair business. We are soon in his shop having a great breakfast. He has bought a whole bagful of fresh bread from the wholesale market. He also gives us real comb honey.

The others stay in the shop and rest. My husband and I go for a walk. We soon find beautiful cliffs and a neat housing estate by the sea. We are really thirsty, because hot weather has surprised both Finland and Sweden. However, we do not have any local currency with us. We enter a café and explain we do not have Swedish crowns with us. The cheerful lady says that the café is owned by a church. She shows us a pot of iced tea, which is free. Soon we are given cups of delicious coffee, too. We leave a few euros in the money chest. We talk about our trip. The lady gets excited. She has a book of poems written by a Kurdish poet on the shelf. She gives it to us. His poems have often been read in this café. I am amazed.

The poet is called **Dana Marouf**. He came to Sweden in 1993 from Iraq. He works, among other things, as a theatre pedagogue at the teachers' training college in Stockholm. He has written books such as "*The Talking Picture*" and "*Another Life*", which was now given to me.

On the way home

in the country

in darkness

I met suddenly

my father.

As I came home

I stepped into light

*suddenly he disappeared in darkness again
I remained in light...*

(Dana Marouf)

Marouf's poems portray the heart-rending emotions of a homeless person. Perhaps we modern people can understand something of the life and feelings of a homeless person without a country. In a way, we have all been ripped off from our roots.

There is still time before the departure of the plane. We go to a Kurdish restaurant for dinner. It is a busy place with people coming and going. Most of them are Kurdish families, but there are also Arabs, Africans and all sorts of people. Kurds do not skimp about food. In every place they give you food in big dishes. In addition, there is a basketful of tasty Kurdish bread.

We are waiting for some friends. An author living in Holland with his wife and daughter is coming to meet us. They are visiting their relatives in the Åland Islands. He is originally from Iran, from where he voluntarily moved to Iraq. He was active in a political party and wrote articles for newspapers. From Iraq they moved to Holland, close to Rotterdam. He has no way to return to Iran. Only older women are allowed to visit there.

The man has bright, honest eyes. I like him, his family and friends immediately. There is something special about the Kurds. They have been through so many deep sufferings. They look quietly and pensively at the world with big, sad eyes. They laugh a lot and tell jokes, but still there is that sorrow. Could there be somewhere someone who would really want to listen to them and help them?

Jawanmir Marabi's story

"There are many countries in the world that have one million inhabitants. Unfortunately, over 40 million Kurds do not have a home country. The Kurds have always wanted to gain possession of their own land. Unfortunately the big countries have never really thought about the cause of the Kurdish people. They are only interested in their own affairs. They have not thought about what has happened to the Kurds.

We must have a change, however. This matter belongs to people who love justice. The Kurdish region should not be divided. The other countries should bear in mind that for example the Finns, the Norwegians and other peoples have each their own country. That is what the Kurds desire. They want to take care of their own affairs."

This is what the author I met said. He also talked about a teacher who had just been executed in vain, without any real reason, in Iran. I will tell his story later.

It is true that there are about 40 million Kurds. No one knows the exact figure. They live traditionally in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and a small minority lives in Armenia. The rest

live as refugees all around the world. Only the Kurds of Iraq now have an autonomous region, but they are still under Iraqi rule. They long for perfect independence and the possibility to decide about their own affairs in all situations.

The Iraqi army finally left Kurdistan in October 1991. Iraq accepted Kurdistan Autonomous Region in 2005. At the same time the Kurds got the right to speak their own language in the whole of Iraq. Kurdish became the official language of Kurdistan. Even before the horrific regime of **Saddam**, the Kurds have suffered from all the wars that have taken place in the region. I will write more about them later. In Iraq there are over five million Kurds, of which about 4,4 million live in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region. Some Kurdish areas are still under the Central Government. There are over one million Kurds in these parts. There is more information on the Internet.^{1 2}

The Kurdish Autonomous Region is ruled by President **Massoud Barzani**, who was nominated in the 2005 election. He was chosen as president again in the election of 2009.

Arriving in Kurdistan

The plane leaves Stockholm on time. Last time it was different. We had to wait as many as eight hours for the departure of the plane. The return flight was even more difficult. We were supposed to stop in Istanbul for a short time, but, instead, we had to spend the whole night and half a day there. The departure from Hewler (also called Erbil, Arbil or Irbil) was really late, too. In Istanbul we did get to spend the night free of charge at a good hotel. Fortunately, there are now direct flights to Hewler and Suleymani (also called Suleymaniya, Sulaymani or Slemani).

But now we are airborne. We get a lovely glimpse of the archipelago off the Swedish coast. We fly over Europe and Turkey. I admire the tiny dots of light in the night. They are lights of Kurdish mountain villages. The plane lands. We have reached our destination. We feel the heat, even though it is night time. The heat floods over us as soon as we step on Kurdish soil. We are soon outside with the other passengers. I think we are the only tourists. During the flight we got to know some people who live in Finland. They are going to celebrate an engagement in their home town. They think they can survive the heat, because it will be a little cooler in their town. But how will we cope?

We are met by some of Mohammad's relatives. Our luggage just fits in their car. Then we are off to Kawa village situated outside the capital. We have been there before. It was originally just a refugee camp, but it has developed into village among other villages. It is true people still live there without passport or full citizenship. There are many who share their fate. These people escaped from Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and came to Iraq. Saddam began to persecute them there and crammed them into a camp. The conditions were so bad that everyone understood the purpose was to get rid of them altogether. Fortunately the United Nations found them, and the conditions of the camp were significantly im-

¹ <http://www.kurdistan.fi/kurdit/253-irakin-kurdistaniin-parlamentti-vaalit-heinaekuuussa>

² <http://www.kurdistan.fi/kurdit/85-artikla140>

proved. Finally after several years, the UN chose quota refugees from the camp. Mohammad, his wife and two kids were among them. People were taken to different parts of Europe, Canada and the United States. Most of Mohammad's relatives remained at the camp. The camp was removed to Kurdistan. The rest of the people were promised flights to other countries. This did not happen, however. Unesco helped build houses. Then these people were forgotten. They still live as refugees in the village. Most of them are unemployed, hopeless and without faith for tomorrow. Yet life must go on. It is not good to sink in bitterness and sorrow. One has to cope somehow. Life goes on by joint effort from day to day. *"You cannot stop the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can stop them making a nest there!"*

We get to stay with the smiling **Papa Camillo**. On our last trip I started calling him Father Camillo. He seems so be the sunshine of the village, an arbitrator, peace maker, humorist and whatever else is needed. All you need is to see him smile to make you feel better. He quickly makes people laugh and to forget their sorrows and even their quarrels. Such a person is a real gift to his fellows. Even here in faraway Finland thinking of his smile makes me smile. He himself protests a little about being called Papa Camillo. Surely he does not have to take care of all the difficulties of his village.

Father Camillo and his wise wife have a deep sorrow in their lives. One of their daughters is handicapped. Her legs simply do not carry her. The young beautiful daughter sits on the floor day in and day out and watches the lives of others. The last time we were here **Sara** was depressed and did not smile much. Now there is a glad twinkle in her eyes and a smile on her lips. We cannot speak with each other, but we can look at each other and communicate with our eyes. "I care about you. I love you." Sara is special to me. If she lived in Finland, she would at least be sitting on a wheelchair and would be given treatment, rehabilitation and education. There is nothing wrong with her intellect. There are lots of people like her in this country. Inbreeding is very common here. Cousins often marry each other. Many say that not every child is disabled despite their parents being cousins. The television and the doctors try to enlighten people, but the old tradition seems to die hard. Handicapped children can be born even in next generations. This is a startling fact. Can it be so? On our last trip we were often asked, if Finland or another European country could take these children and care for them. I had to say that nowhere in the world can they heal children born handicapped. Something can be done, but total healing is not possible.

We begin to live on the floor like the Kurds do. We sleep, sit and eat on the floor. There is no furniture in the house, just a few chairs on the yard. There is an efficient fan in our room, more precious than gold in this heat. The temperature is still 48 degrees Centigrade. Even at night it is over 30 degrees. It has rained just a couple of times the whole summer. Part of the family sleeps outside. We have occupied their bedroom and I feel bad about it. In the morning the electricity goes off for a few hours. We sit outside and wait. We use small pieces of cardboard as fans to alleviate the heat. There is always water to drink. In every home and restaurant cold water is served first. I marvel at the availability of cold water even during the electricity breaks. Water is a necessity of life. Fortunately power comes

soon back on again and the fan starts working. I soon learn the Kurdish word for heat. I hear it said so often that I guess everyone is complaining about the heat. We learn to use the words “hot”, “water”, “bread” and “thank you”. They are the basics. People avoid being outside during the day. But when the sun suddenly sets in the evening, the alleys get crowded. At least the children, the young people and the men go out. Even then the women tend to stay mainly at home.

Food is served on a large piece of wax cloth on the floor. It is always delicious and there is more than enough to go around. We have learned to use the thin Kurdish bread as a spoon to wrap the food inside. In the houses where we stayed they make the bread themselves. Every morning one of the grown-up daughters makes the bread in the small, hot kitchen. There are many phases in the process, but those used to making it are clever with their hands. It would be another matter altogether with someone who has never done it before!

In the morning tea, bread and cheese are always served on a beautiful tray. After hot tea they bring a glass of cold water. For a snack we get tea and a big dish of fresh fruit - figs, grapes, and bananas - and we top it up with a glass of water. We are supposed to drink the water at once. The daughters get the glasses quickly and have more washing up to do. Although there are three daughters in the family, they are fully occupied, because in these homes people clean and wash up quite often. They love cleanness. The yard is washed with water at least once a day. Shoes are rinsed and washed. They are always left outside the door.

Dinner usually consists of rice and chicken or mutton, vegetable soup, a bowl of salad, tomatoes and cucumber. Meat is not eaten every single day and the poorer people cannot really afford it at all. The English or the Finns can buy two chickens with their hourly wages, whereas here it can take a week's salary to buy a chicken. Such is the difference in the standards of living.

I look at the family smiling. I feel I am among friends.

“God is the Creator of kindly laughter and a person that does not laugh at himself loses many a laughter.”

Visits

We have been given a tight schedule. It begins on the very first day. We travel between the camp and the capital at least once a day. We get acquainted with the barren landscape, where you can hardly see any green thing. The heat has dried up all vegetation. There are flocks of sheep, shepherds and dogs here and there. I wonder what the sheep eat in this barren area. The crops have just been harvested and the straws have been left on the fields. The sheep and the goats seem to eat these dry straws. Sometimes I see the animals devour plastic bags that lie everywhere.

I love to walk in the fields in the evenings and watch everything. There is a little boy gathering together a flock and trying to drive it to the shelter for the evening. I also see a group of women and children chatting by the pasture. A couple of shepherds are talking with each other. A lad is riding a motorbike. A group of boys is playing football. It is a very popular game here. Sometimes the players wear black suit trousers, sometimes a sports outfit. Fortunately in this country everyone is allowed to dress as he wants or can. The rules about scarves are not very strict. The women's dresses are very colourful. I often see bright red dresses in the fields. Kurdish women are beautiful, some outright stunning with their huge, dark eyes.



Football playing children

I soon buy a long, dark purple dress. It matches well with my lilac scarf. An inexpensive, beautiful necklace makes my outfit perfect. My scarf is really pretty. It has a thick band that fits around my head and a purple bow on one side. My Kurdish friends are delighted to see my outfit. It is surprisingly practical in the hot weather.

The capital grows fast. They build new houses everywhere. First we visit a wealthy lady at her house. She becomes my friend during these hot days in this interesting country. She has asked Allah to send only good people to her house. I have prayed God that He Himself would arrange every meeting here.

In this home people do not sit or sleep on the floor. The home is furnished with beauty and style. A Nepalese girl is serving us. The lady whom I'll call "**Sonya**" tells us, how she received the home help via a reliable organization. The organization also makes sure that the home helps are not misused or overworked. She has gone to a lot of trouble to make her aide feel at home. But even Sonya cannot help her servant's homesickness. The Kurds know about homesickness. I know about it too, being the daughter of an evacuee from Karelia. A swan will always remember the region where it was born. It flies back there every year. So would we people if we could. We would rise on our wings and fly.

I notice Sonya is a modern, very active lady. She wants to see a change in the politics of her country and especially in the position of women. She supports and acts on behalf of children. They ought to be treated with love, not with violence. Many things require a new attitude. Sonya has influence and wealth. I wish her success in her endeavours. It is not easy to accomplish things like this. She knows many wealthy women who think alike. I'm sure they can achieve a lot together. I admire her courage and her determination. I believe she is sincere and honest. She often mentions how well her mother brought her up. Her mother emphasized the significance of honesty again and again. You have to be truthful in every little thing. If you are dishonest in small things, you will be dishonest in greater things. Our God wants us to be true and honest. He sees our hearts in any case and knows our deeds. It is no good lying before Him. Lying is a shameful thing for a human being.

At some point we discuss the peace of soul. Sonya complains that she and many others lack real peace. All I can say is that I found peace only after Jesus found me. In Him we have forgiveness. No matter how much we think about our deeds or do well, we cannot make ourselves any better. God sent His Son, who was in heaven with God already when the earth was created, to atone for the sins of the world – for the sins of each one of us. In Him we have the reconciliation of sins. He forgives us our sins. I believe that forgiveness is the most important thing in the world.

The vicious circle of revenge leads to hatred. Hatred brings unending wars. The same is true about relationships. It is horrifying to hear that women are killed in some countries for a mistake, for a sin.

Sunni Islam of Kurdistan is tolerant, but many bad things still happen for example because of the honour of the family.

Sonya would like to build homes for the women that have no-one to care for them. Now they have to go to old age homes. She would like to change many wrong customs. You do not get proper care in the state hospitals, not even in the maternity wards, unless you slip some money in the nurse's pocket. Sonya thinks every woman has the right to give birth to her child and to get proper care without bribery. It is the basic right of every human being.

Sonya has been actively pleading for women's wages, but the proposal has not yet been accepted by the Government. She is concerned about many things.

I think that when people notice democracy does not seem to develop, greed and selfishness begin to grow. Soon the law of the jungle rules, the right of the strongest. The rich people in power get the best privileges, while others just watch sadly by how things go. Democracy means taking care of the weak, the sick and the poor and to offer all the citizens the same opportunities for a good life.

The following evening we go at Sonya's invitation to the theatre. We are late. Our seats have been taken and there are lots of people waiting outside. Mohammad says there is an author with him who would like to write about this play. The doors are opened to us immediately. I smile. I send a prayer of thanks upwards.

The play is called "My Second Face". It is written by **Karo Ibrahim**. The previous year he wrote a play about the marriage between a Muslim and a Christian.

There are armed guards in the yard. My bag gets searched. This has never happened before in any part of the world when going to the theatre, but there is always a first time. I understand the situation in the country.

I comprehend the play even without words. At times Sonya has to explain. It is about a woman's life. The woman acts extremely well. I would not say the same thing about the men. But they are the bad guys in the play. The father hits his daughter with someone else. She is dragged here and there like a rag doll. Then she falls in love with a guy. The strong-willed father steps in and brings the future husband of his choice with him – a rich old man. However, the woman has already fallen in love. And she is expecting a baby. Soon there is an aborted fetus moving about on the stage. The play is finished with the woman weeping her heart out.

The audience is full of young men. They give a storm of applaud. I feel I am a part of something new and unheard of. Camera lights are flashing. Lots of pictures got taken even during the play.

Times are changing and the people with them. Young men and women want to see changes. They want new values and thoughts. Sonya is crying. I am crying. I am crying for all the babies that did not even get the chance to be born.

Life is a gift of grace. Grace is life itself!

Lord, have mercy on us!

*We are nothing in ourselves,
we did not bring anything with us when we were born,
we will not take anything with us.
Our short moment on the earth
is like a grain of sand by the side of a huge mountain.
I wish we could share that moment
with each other in support and love.*

I return to our quarters in deep thought. We people make such wrong choices. We look for money and riches, but real love cannot be bought. The best gifts are free, real friendship, joy, peace and love. At any moment we may lose our health and life. Could we not be thankful for this short while and make each other's lives a little easier?

Talking with Leaders

We got the privilege of seeing several leaders and politicians during our journey. The meetings and discussions were very interesting. All of these men seemed to be wise. They had lived in England or Austria, become widely acquainted with the world and studied at universities.

These men care deeply about the fate of the Kurdish people. The fate of the Kurds has also presented them with many new challenges. Many Kurds still live as refugees in different countries. This has its advantages. They learn many things and languages, where they are, and pass their knowledge on for the common good of Kurdistan. Each of the men we meet wants to have a European system in Kurdistan – a real democracy.

I tell them a story from the Bible, of King Solomon. God gave him permission to ask for anything and He would grant it. Solomon asked for wisdom. Lord, give us wisdom! The land is built with wisdom. Money does not help, unless it is used wisely. The state of a nation can be seen in how well it treats its weakest members. I believe that every sensible and wise leader hopes for this very thing. It is always a great risk to have a rebellious and bitter nation.

I am going to tell you something about Finland. I said earlier that I understand the Kurdish cause because I am a child of Karelian refugees. In World War Two 400 000 Karelians lost their homes. The Soviet Union took over their region. Everybody left. They were given a new life elsewhere in Finland. The project was huge and expensive but it was finished successfully. Now there are Karelians living all over Finland. Their cheerful, lively disposition and ability to adapt has enriched the lives of the other Finns. The mixing of the blood has been good. Of course the longing has remained. It has produced tens of thousands of books, poems, songs, paintings, operas and films. The dream to get Karelia back is still alive. It was the most beautiful area of Finland. I, too, have this deep longing in my heart.

Before its independence Finland was an Autonomous Grand Principality (Autonomous Grand Duchy) under the Russian Tsar for a hundred years. That is when our language and culture began to develop strongly. Finland was fortunate enough to get many wise people as its leaders. They were honest and unselfish men and women. Finland was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. Before the Autonomy, Finland was part of Sweden for over 600 years, which is when the national development almost stopped. Towards the end of the Autonomy Russia began a strong Russianization our country. At that time we got a desire to become totally independent. We gained our independence during World War One. We got our own Parliament and became a democratic republic. During the Autonomy, however, there were lots of poor people in Finland. They

felt their lives were disregarded. These people were not serfs like the poor people in Russia, but the working people and crofters lived almost in similar conditions. This created great bitterness and a desire to rebel. So right after gaining independence, our country was plunged into a bloody and cruel civil war. This happened almost a hundred years ago, but we Finns are still ashamed of it and lick our wounds. The Soviet Communists were hoping to gain control of our country with the aid of Finnish Communists. That is why this war is also called the Freedom War. Only when World War Two began, were we able to defend our country as a united front against the superior forces of the Soviet Union. It was a battle between David and Goliath! Yet we were able to preserve our independence. This is an unbelievably important thing, which every Finn greatly values. During the war even the president admonished the people to pray. Many different miracles prove that God heard our prayers. We kept our precious independence.

It is an awful thing to have brothers killing each other, members of the same nation. I wish with all of my heart that will not happen in Kurdistan. War does not solve anything. It leaves both inner and outer wounds at least for two generations. The scars are sore. You must beg for wisdom and even more wisdom that this might not happen. It would be a good thing to pray for wisdom to divide the money justly.

One of the leaders told us he knew a lot about the dark streams of oil money going into bank accounts abroad, about widespread corruption. Almost all the Kurds I met seemed to be aware of the same thing. Where do the luxury homes and extravagant living come from? Not from nothing, that is for sure. Where does the money disappear that was meant for building good roads and homes? There are many unclear issues. This man that has had the courage to speak about these things openly as high up as at the Iraqi Parliament is in danger of losing his life. He knows this but is not afraid. He says that some have to offer resistance. Otherwise everything goes on just the same as before. Because of this mission he came from England to live here in Kurdistan. It is in the hand of the Highest One, when his life ends. Death can come as we cross the street, it can come anywhere. We all die at one point or another.

I think about death. I think about the 186 000 Kurds that died in Saddam's awful persecutions. Did they die in vain? Would this not be the time to give all Kurds a life that all human beings deserve? Renewing circumstances takes patience, of course. Kurdistan has had free elections since the beginning of the Autonomy in 1991. KDP and PUK have been strong political parties and received 90 per cent of the votes. Later there have been other parties like Goran, which wants to see change. There is a transition going on. The old tribal culture is disintegrating. The old agricultural and nomadic culture is soon gone. An industrial, urban time has evolved, where life is totally different. Family does not have such a powerful role as before. Individuals begin to become independent.

The public relations officer of the Kurdish Parliament **Abdilselam Berwari** has studied sociology. He knows much especially about cultural transition. He is aware of the changes that are going on in his country. That is why people have to be wise and patient. It is im-

portant that everyone in Kurdistan feel it is a safe home country to live in regardless of race and religion.

Mr Berwari tells me an example of old customs. If a man drives over a pedestrian who dies, soon a policeman appears. Along comes a relative of the person who drove the car. The relative says: "Do you not know that this man is a member of an influential family? You cannot charge him!" Things get often hushed up. The relatives complain and make demands. It is not easy to work in such an attitude climate.

There may be wrong things happening especially in the judicial system. I will write more about this later. At first I will tell a small example of the situation in Finland. We have found out that some members of the Parliament and even ministers have received too much finance for the election, in other words, bribes. This has become a big scandal. Some people have resigned from their posts before being forced to do so. We are talking about relatively small sums compared to, for example, the Iraqi oil money. In our country all financial gifts have to be written down and made public. Mr Berwari laughs. No one here in Kurdistan would believe that there is a place, where people are so honest! At that moment I am very proud of being Finnish, although I know that also in my country wrong things are done in secret. Yet our judicial system is the least corrupt one in the world. Once we had a man from India visiting our home who had written a doctoral thesis on the subject. He was surprised at our honesty. I was surprised at his surprise. Should not especially the judicial system show utmost honesty and impartiality?

The public relations officer talks about his difficult and challenging work among the media in Kurdistan. Many would like to control the use of the Internet, for example, but fortunately Kurdistan has decided to have freedom of the press. In Kurdistan it is possible to watch over 600 television channels without restriction. There is no control in the use of the Internet, either. Now the Kurds have six, seven TV channels of their own.

I think back on the people I got to know in the refugee centre in Joensuu, Finland years ago. There were people from different parts of the world, also from Iran and Iraq. There were several Kurds, too. Many Muslims were wondering at our culture. Do we not care about our children? They are free to go to restaurants to drink alcohol or to dance. They can smoke if they like or go live together with the opposite sex. Many of my Muslim friends were appalled. They thought they had come to a Christian country. Is this what Christianity is like?

I understood why they were shocked. Of course we care about our children. Who would not? Of course the parents mourn, if alcohol ruins the lives of their children. But can we force them to live a good life? Is that not impossible? We can only give a good example of how to live, but the choice is theirs. People have freedom of choice. If you force a person, all you get is hypocrisy. My children have chosen the right road themselves. They have become people who want to live according to the instructions of the Bible. I have prayed and pray for them. I help them and love them no matter what stage of life they are at. I have often wept and prayed for them. I am thankful to God, that He hears my prayers.

Every human being knows at the depth of his or her heart the difference between right and wrong. God has created us and given each one of us a conscience. We can also choose to let our consciences get hardened. But maybe the hardened hearts will get a chance to repent and turn back to the right road as the prodigal son did in the Bible. We should not judge people. The right to judge belongs only to God. We have seen how hardened criminals find God in prisons, how people addicted to drugs get delivered and how even prostitutes receive Jesus in their hearts. We cannot call certain people good and others bad. *Hope* has been given to *all*. All we can do is to pray and to help suffering people in their needs. During the times of Jesus the religious hypocrites were ready to stone a woman caught in adultery. Jesus looked at the men and said: “*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*” (Gospel of John 8:7, the Bible.) They all bowed their heads in shame. No one could take up a stone and throw it.

I want to state openly that I am ashamed of what **President Bush** from USA said about the *axis of evil*. Many Christians thought it was a shocking thing to divide the world into good and bad countries. In each of our hearts there is a continuous battle between good and evil. Evil is not far from any of us. Our number one duty is to protect our *own* hearts. Every person has hope as long as there is life. Perhaps even the Muslims remember that Jesus was crucified. We Christians believe that He gave His life as a great sacrifice for the sins of humankind. Beside Jesus they crucified two robbers. One of them asked help from Jesus, the other mocked Him. The one who wanted help entered Paradise that very night. He had not lived a good life. His life had not been exemplary. Yet he repented of his sins and received mercy to enter in the gates of Paradise. Both of these men had freedom of choice. So have we all. God expresses His love also in having given us this freedom. We bring suffering on ourselves, if we make poor choices. We should not divide the world into good and bad people but to tell everyone of God’s mercy, love and *hope*. Jesus Christ Himself looks at us from the eyes of every poor beggar. “*What are you going to do to Me?*”

The Trip to Suleymani

Hot weather continues. The burning desert wind blows sand into the yard and all over the place. Sometimes the wind is so strong you cannot walk. People turn and stand against the wind. Soon the women are busy cleaning the sand away from the yard. The yard stones are too hot to step on with one’s bare feet. My husband and I went to the top of the house once to admire the power of the storm. His neck was suddenly hit by a shoe flying in the wind. We went quickly back down again!

Beside the kitchen there is a large water reservoir with a long hose. The hose is important, because they use it to wash the dishes, the yard, clothes and other things with. Here people use a lot more water than in Finland. Fortunately it has never dried up. I hope it will never do so.

Mohammad has found somewhere a low-cost taxi driver. He has promised to take us to Suleymani, where we will spend a night. We embark on the journey without hesitation, alt-

hough we know that the temperature there is going to be even hotter than in Hewler, over 50 degrees Centigrade.

We drive via Kirkuk. We did not see this city on our last trip, because we took the beautiful mountain road to Suleymani.

It is lovely to leave the busy capital and drive to the countryside. I enjoy watching the little fields, flocks of sheep and clay houses. The village houses seem to be made from the surrounding brown scenery. In spite of the heat there are women labouring in the fields. Around the little fields there are tall sunflowers swaying like a protecting fence around the important crop.

Soon we can see mountain ranges in the north. Only the dried out river beds have some green in them. The rest of the scenery is vast and barren. I love huge open spaces, the ability to see far. Here you can do so. I would love to see also the beautiful, flowering spring. I have seen wonderful pictures of spring in Kurdistan. Beautiful flowery meadows, mountains and shining brooks. Spring was long and beautiful this year. The old people said it means a long, hot summer. So it has been.

As I watch all this and think about this land and its people, I feel a poem come up in my heart. The poem talks about a potter, who is making a valuable pot skilfully with tender hands. The pot is the country I am looking at and its people who have suffered so much.

Saddam wanted to destroy all these little villages. Their inhabitants were transferred to Iraq, and Arabs were brought in instead. A great part of the population was killed. Some Kurds have returned to their villages and Arabs to their own districts in Iraq. Some have stayed on in Kurdistan.

I am looking at the skilful, loving hands of the great Artist and believe that in His hands this land and its people can have a new, wonderful future. A new morning will arise from the ashes.

The Potter

*With great tenderness
the potter is spinning
the pot in His hands, with tender fingers
loving, wondering.
A few decorations are missing,
the burning heat of the oven.
The pot will soon be ready.
May shining, clear water
fill the pot*

*made with love
by skilful hands.
A mandolin is playing quietly,
children are singing softly,
flocks of white doves above the fields.
Streaming water for the thirsty.
A time of rejoicing has come.*

We soon arrive in the Kirkuk area. We can see oil springs here and there within thirty, forty kilometres and the fire and smoke rising from them. The best oil deposits of Iraq are here. This is both a blessing and a curse for Kurdistan. Because of the oil Iraq will probably never give Kurdistan total freedom. Now Iraq gets a great part of the oil income. Kurdistan gets only a little more than 17 per cent.

An old man sighs: "*We will be happy when we the oil runs out!*" There is a seed of truth in his words.

There was a horrific terrorist attack at a restaurant on the outskirts of Kirkuk some years ago. Now the building has been repaired. Everybody seems to remember the incident. Everyone hopes desperately that nothing similar will ever happen again. People love peace. They are happy about the peace that now rules in this part of Iraq. People feel safe. Yet there are always the ifs and the buts lurking somewhere in the background.

Travelling takes time, because parts of the road are in a bad shape. We have to take dusty roads with potholes in them to get around the roadworks. The road is new but so poorly made that they have to make substantial repairs. The side-roads we take are so dusty that at times we cannot see anything. There is a lot of heavy traffic, too.

We finally reach our destination. We arrive at the yard of a huge house. A relative of our friend lives there. He is a retired Parliament member and has held another high post, too. There are pictures hanging on the walls inside the house which tell the story of a high-ranking, respected family. Our host himself appears gentle, peaceful and good-natured. He serves us glasses of cold water himself and asks us to sit down in the big living room.

I have not seen a more beautiful room in a long time. There are big, soft sofas by the walls. The sofas are covered in pink, purple and white stripes. Very pleasing to the eye. There are matching curtains hanging by the windows. The men sit and talk with each other in this room, the sheikhs and their descendants, friends and relatives. The women have another big room for themselves. They sit together on the floor and spend the evenings together. The ceiling is high up. The atmosphere is oriental, fascinating. There are two older women present. One of them is a lively lady with grey hair and a great sense of humour. The ladies are extremely attractive. A couple of them have just moved back from Sweden with their families. We are able to have a conversation with them. Someone speaks English. They are all very well educated. Many of them are teachers by profession.

I get the privilege of sitting with the men in the living room and interview our host. He is into agriculture and keeps cattle. We get to see the cows, the sheep, the goats, the chicken and the turkeys. There are beehives by the wall in an alley shaded by grapes. One cow gives milk. Together with the goats' milk they get only about five litres of milk a day at the moment. It is enough for the needs of this big family, though. The man tells me he used to work as a shepherd in between his university studies. He felt he learned more of life at that time than during his many years at the university. I said that God called His great men Moses and David to be shepherds for years to learn about life. Everything I see proves this man takes good care of his animals. He would not need to do this, unless he enjoyed it.

"Yes, Saddam destroyed 5000 villages. The Kurds were taken away and Arabs were brought to live in their place. In 2003 most Kurds returned. But not many of them want to farm the land. We do have schools and even colleges of agriculture."

We both think it is sad that people are not interested in farming any more. Every country ought to be self-supportive regarding its basic groceries.

The water situation this summer is good. This man has his own drilled well. At the depth of 8-10 metres there is enough water for them. It is pure and shining.

We talk about the political situation in Kurdistan. It is difficult and confusing like in the whole of Iraq. Iran would like to have control over the Shiite Muslims, Syria over the Sunnis. Everyone wants to have his say.

"We need good counsellors to give us advice about how the Parliament and the judicial system ought to function. There are so many problems."

"Taking bribes is shameful in Kurdish culture. It does not belong to our ancient culture at all."

Our host wants to talk about the time when Saddam destroyed thousands of people with gas in Halabja in 1988. Iran told the whole world at the time what happened and said truthfully that Saddam was to blame for this horrific deed. The world saw the pictures, but no-one reacted. Iraq and USA claimed that Iran lied. Perhaps the world believed them. No-one did anything about it. It was like no-one cared for the massacre of the Kurds.

Iraq and Iran used to be wealthy, powerful countries. Now the value of money is very low in both countries.

I, too, fear that USA and the other countries think only about their own profit – money and oil. Europe, too, may be on its toes because of financial reasons. It does not want to get involved in the difficult and confused situation of these countries.

A couple of elderly men came to me at our refugee camp and asked: *"Could we, too, get compensation like the Jews have received from Germany for the horrors of the Holocaust? Have we not been through the same?"*

What can I answer them? Getting compensations would take decades. Yet I believe that somehow justice will come to pass in the world. God is just and after watching events for a time He may act quickly. Evil regents have suffered sudden deaths before. Their times, too, are totally in God's hands. Also the Old Testament talks about these things. The Bible talks about an area called Mesopotamia. It was where modern Iran and Iraq exist. These countries are full of Biblical history. Many Kurds think that **Abraham** himself was Kurdish. The names Ibrahim and Sarah are very common in Kurdistan. I cannot disagree, because Abraham lived in the Kurdish region when God called him to be the father of His own people. For us Christians he is an example of a man who believed in God and obeyed Him. Kurds have a tolerant attitude towards Jews. They are the only nation in this part of the world that has given Jews land to be farmed and have helped them escape during persecutions etc. The Kurds have similarly helped other people in need. Those that have suffered a lot understand the distress of others.



A village near to Iranian border

In the afternoon we make an excursion to the border of Iran. Our host wants to offer us this interesting trip. His own relatives live on both sides of the border. Many Kurds share his fate. His grandfather's father was a sheikh in an Iranian town. The sheikh is still remembered and the people in that area still like him and his family.

The scenery is barren but beautiful. We have come to the mountains. The road runs very close to the Iran's border. Sometimes we see an Iranian border patrol station, sometimes a Kurdish one. The road is good. Saddam had it built in his time for the Iran-Iraq War, not for the needs of the inhabitants of the mountain villages.

Our Kurdish friends points excitedly at a high mountain. He was born in a village on the Iranian side of that mountain. I understand why he feels so strongly about seeing the mountain. He does not have many memories of the village. He has just heard that his old mother has managed to cross the border safely. She is somewhere there at the moment.

We drive past a border patrol station. There is a long line of trucks waiting to cross the border. I saw earlier a Finnish truck in this hot, barren desert. I respect all these truck drivers. Their job is not an easy one.

We go on our way. We turn back and take another road. There are little country villages and herds of sheep and goats. A huge flock of sheep is coming down a mountain slope in the light of the setting sun. The vision is almost supernatural. Lord, You Yourself are the Good Shepherd! Take care of these sheep, these villages and their inhabitants – people on both sides of the border.

I pray quietly that our Chief Shepherd would also give good shepherds for these countries – good leaders. A good shepherd takes care of the weakest sheep of the flock. He is ready to lay down even his own life for one single sheep. He is ready to roam through the deserts, ravines and valleys in search for the lost sheep. He nurses the sick and the wounded. That is what a real leader is like. A hired man only looks after his own interests. He lashes the sheep and makes angry dogs drive the flock. He does not see the wounded or have any concern for them. He only thinks about his own position and wages. The flock is afraid of the shepherd. It is driven forward by sheer fear.

For some reason I remember **Nelson Mandela**. One of Kurdistan's wise leaders mentioned his name. Mandela is an example to the whole world of forgiveness. *Forgiveness* is a mighty word that can change everything. Yet Nelson Mandela admits that they have partly failed in developing the financial situation of South-Africa. This brings new disquiet to the region.

We get home when the first stars appear in the sky. We make another visit to our friend's wife's family. It is a really fun visit. The new wife of a widowed husband receives us with open arms. She is a cheerful, energetic lady. She "orders" me to have a shower. Then she brings me Kurdish clothes. I put them on. Soon everyone is having a great time!

We have a meal sitting on the floor like people are accustomed to doing here. There are children and grandchildren present. There are happy voices and laughter! I keep marveling at the happiness of the atmosphere. After all the years of sorrow it is time to be glad and laugh. People dance together when they celebrate something. Dance is an essential part of Kurdish culture. It fuses people together. It is no more individuals dancing but a great crowd together as one body and soul. I have had the privilege of watching Kurds

dance at their celebrations at Finnish refugee centres. All over the world Kurds do their country dance. Others, too, may join in. Then you can forget about everything else!

The next day our Kurdish friend spends the day with his relatives. Our guide is a young man who speaks English. He takes us around town in his car. We do not go to the city centre. We remember it from our last visit, especially the huge bazaars. Every imaginable item is available there. Suleymani is more western and more beautiful than Hewler. It is also known for its artists.

The young man takes us to see houses under construction. There are lots of them. They were meant to be inexpensive homes for ordinary people. Their prices have, however, gone up all the time so that they are now obtainable only to the wealthy. "This is how things are done here. Always differently than they were meant to", the man ponders ironically. It is hard to believe in democracy, when it is possible to buy votes with money and give your vote several times!

Then he takes us to a poor village nearby. The village had an awful fate in Saddam's time. Its inhabitants were killed, some even buried alive. The bodies were hacked to pieces. It was something so dreadful that people do not want to talk about it. In fact I do not really care to interview anybody. It is enough to know that horrors have taken place. My stomach hurts and I do not feel well in the burning heat. I do not want people to think of me as an intruder, who wants to gain benefit from their fate. I suggest we give the villagers the toys and other little gifts that I have brought with me.

Gift distribution begins. The toys are ripped from my hands. Scarves and jewellery fly in the air. Suddenly we all have a great time in spite of the chaos. The visit is over in a moment of time. The women and children wave to us. I am happy. This is what I wanted to do. The young man tells me that the villagers are so poor they cannot afford anything extra, let alone toys.

A few of the women go on baking round their oven. The oven is like a big cauldron set in clay, with fire underneath. The thin bread is cast on the sides of the cauldron. It cooks in a moment in the heat of the oven.

Give us our daily bread. The Kurds ask for the same thing from their God. No-one should have to beg. It is best to ask for the necessities of life from God.

Is not bread everything?

The clearer of the field, the soil and its tiller,

the ancient seed,

winds and storms,

the blessing of rain and the strength of the sun,

man's work and labour,

the gladness of the baker, the happiness of the eater.

Lord, we thank you for bread.

We are looking for the new cemetery near the village. We finally find it at the end of a narrow sand road. It has been recently completed. *One hundred nameless graves.*

We step out of the car into the scorching heat. It is as if the heat speaks also of nameless pain before this awful memorial. The villagers have managed to gather body parts into these graves, but no-one knows exactly who has been buried here.



Nameless graves

A grieving man walks in front of us round the cemetery. Two of his brothers are buried here. This is his first visit. His steps are heavy and his eyes teary. Our steps get heavy, too. A whirlwind lifts up sand nearby. It is as if heaven and earth themselves cry out the pain of these people. Lord, have mercy!

I remember when I was together with my friends, praying. The Lord spoke to us through His Holy Spirit: *“Do you humans think that I am not where man’s pain is deepest? That is exactly, where I am.”*

I knew in my heart that this is true. The whole universe is in the hands of God. He will judge all people and nations in the end. His judgments are absolutely just. He himself will

wipe tears away from the eyes of His own. He will take them where there is no more death, pain or suffering.

Do I see white doves soaring in the sky? Yes, God's doves.

For the rest of the time we sit at the man's house waiting for our friend. We talk about faith and the differences and similarities between our religions. I have given many the web address of a discussion forum between Muslims and Christians. I think dialogue is important. It is important that we Christians respect and appreciate all people. Our Bible says that one day there will be a huge number of people from *all* languages and *all* nations. We must not have any enemies. Our job is to pray for everyone. I believe that many Muslims, too, share this thought.

Many Muslims claim that our Bible has been forged and changed. Language changes and develops, of course, but we Christians consider it of utmost importance that the message remains the same. We also think it is important that everyone gets the chance to read the Bible in their mother tongue. When translating the Bible people are especially conscientious. It is vital to us. In the last chapter of Revelation, which is the last book of the Bible, we are told not to add anything or take away anything from the Holy Book. God judges those that do such things. It is a matter of honour to preserve the message of the Bible correct and pure. There are some sects who have added to the message. We consider them to be heretics.

On the way back we get a flat tyre. While it is being fixed I marvel at the mountains and the prickly plants that grow on the ground. People are tough. We grow up in so many different kinds of circumstances. I am looking at the little brick factories that are present everywhere. They take material from the soil, they make the bricks and build houses with them. In Finland we have our forests. We still use their wood to build our homes. What else does a human being want? A peaceful life, a home, a family, acceptance, love, friends around and bread to eat. Enough money to buy food – not too much or too little.

Then we return to our refugee camp, this time to a different house. Our luggage has been removed to Father Camillo's wife's sister's home. We shall stay there for the rest of our time here, about ten more days.

We go to bed tired. We have diarrhoea for several days after the trip and it taxes our strength. But this is not new. We have had tourist diarrhoea several times. Yet we are thankful for everything we have experienced. We saw majestic mountains and wonderful people. We were there only for a short while, but we can think about it over and over again.

Life is a journey. It can be a long one like that of a vagabond or a short one like that of a falling star in the night sky. Yet every moment is a great, precious gift.

Interesting Visits

We visit an orphanage. Sonya comes with us. She has visited the same orphanage before and cannot believe her eyes as we enter a new, great looking children's home. US soldiers have renovated the home completely. They have also built more facilities. We are glad to see all this.

The Director receives us in his room. There are 47 boys living in the homes at the moment. The rest of them, over a hundred, are placed in families. There are 35 girls in the orphanage and 150 in families. The first orphanage was built only for boys in 1970. Girls got one in 1977. The children come from various backgrounds. Most of them have lost both parents; some come from divorce families; in some cases parents sit in prison. If the parents are in prison, the children are taken into care on a temporary basis. Some children have lost their parents in the war. Sometimes a poor mother is not able care for her children by herself. Most of the children come from a poor background.

I sense that one of the nurses thinks we doubt their ability to take care of these orphans. I explain that this is not the case at all. We have visited a great number of children's homes all over the world and I have never questioned the ability of the nurses to take care of their wards. The atmosphere lightens up and people treat us very kindly after that. I get permission to take pictures of the small children. It is enough for me.

I have brought the Minister of Culture, Kawa Mahmoud, a present. It is Miina Savolainen's beautifully illustrated book with pictures of girls in a children's home. The girls themselves got to choose a beautiful dress to wear and the spot where they were photographed. For a moment they got a chance to be beautiful princesses. Yet each of these Kurdish children, too, is a prince or a princess. They carry past generations in them and the dreams and the hope for the future. They are much more valuable than we can think.

"I am one of the loveliest girls in the world, and I am proud of it!"

"When I look at my picture I feel whole and strong!"

"It means so much to me that I can see myself beautiful!"

"I think that people pay far too much attention on outer beauty in these days. I believe that everybody is beautiful as he or she is and that everyone can feel special and important!"

I picked the above sentences from **Miina Savolainen's** book. Some of them I also used in an illustrated book I made for this trip. I gave them as presents in the orphanage.

We had a lovely time with the children. My husband and I sang "*The Lullaby of a Lappish mother*". The Kurds loved it. In the song the mother is lulling her baby to sleep, a child of the mountains. She describes the beautiful country of Lapland to the baby. When the baby grows up she will receive this beautiful country, in this case the country of Kurdistan. I believe that. Every mother wishes the best for her child. It is the right of every mother in this world. A loving nurse in a children's home can also act as a mother.

With the little boys we play a game called “*The magpie cooks porridge*”. Sonya knows the game. It is played also in Kurdistan. I suddenly notice that the game suits all too well to this situation. The children have not been able to live in their own homes but have had to search for a new nest. In the game the nest is found under one’s arm, which the other person gets to tickle. Home is a place where we receive love. There are lots of children in the world that do not receive love in their own homes.

I am glad to have Sonya with us. We have to go, but she is able to stay. She can bring all sorts of new stimuli to the home with her group of willing ladies. The sun is shining today outside but also in our hearts as well as the children’s.

Every child asks us:

Do you love me?

Every child says in his or her heart:

Did you know that I am a prince or a princess?

We move on. We visit poor homes. The first home is a dismal, stony room housing a 100-year-old woman, a daughter and her children in utterly dire circumstances. The son gets a flute and small presents and sweets. We also collect some money from our pockets. There is nothing else we can do.

We Europeans think that society ought to do the helping. But it is not long ago when we auctioned poor children in Finland and there were of lots of other injustices taking place. If we point a finger at someone, there are four pointing back at ourselves. Of course I wish everybody well, but I would not want to be the judge here telling people what to do and what not to do. I pray for wisdom to the leaders. The best ethical rule for the whole mankind is to do to others the same good things we wish others would do to us. This is called *empathy, the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s position*. In the Bible it is called the Double Love Command. Love your neighbour as yourself. It means we must accept ourselves and take care of ourselves, too. Many help others so much that they become exhausted under their burdens. It is not very sensible, either! A happy, peaceful mother is the best one, not one strained and weighed down by cares. It is a skill to know how to be merciful towards oneself. It is a gift to be able to be carefree and even lazy at times.

We leave the family. An efficient young man has joined us. He is a television reporter who is filming and reporting on the circumstances of poor people. Many want to help. He shows us his stack of papers. Everything has been recorded. Many families have received help through his and his friends’ activities. I feel he is our brother. He has a heart for those who cannot help themselves any more. I bless his work. The next day we see this frail, 100-year old lady and her home on TV. I believe that help is found through this channel for them, too.

We continue on our journey. The next home belongs to a widow. She was the second wife of his husband, who passed away. All of their nine children are now her sole responsibility.

I can see from everything that she is a wise, hardworking and respectable person. She takes care of her children willingly. There is not just enough money. There is a well-kept little garden outside the house full of all kinds of useful and beautiful things. There is a pretty little girl sitting beside the lady. I give the daughter colourful headbands, which I have knitted at home. They have pearls and crocheted flowers as decorations. I give her also a box of pearls and crocheted flowers. I believe she will discover soon, how to use them. I rejoice deeply when I see her sincere happiness. Meetings like these give me real joy.

The next place is a cold hall not fit to be a human abode. By the wall there lies a man, whose expression tells us he is not okay. He is crying. His hair and his beard are unkempt. His eyes wear the fearful expression of a distressed animal. How will he cope? What will happen to the three little children he lives with? One of us is sick.

Sonya's lovely daughter gives her toy to one of the children. We have just been at a restaurant. The taxi driver gives away the part of his meal that he had taken with him and wrapped in paper. There is enough to eat for the whole family for today. But why is the man suffering so? We are about to find out.

The man was working in a remote area on the roof of a house in the winter, when he suddenly fell off and was stuck in snow up to his underarms. He had no mobile phone and there was no help. The man got frostbitten. When he was finally found, his skin had become dark almost up to his heart. His feet got frozen. He still has a constant ache in them. They will soon be amputated. The wife and her family could not bear the situation. The man had to leave his home and take three of their children with him. But how could he take care of his children when he cannot take care of himself? The smallest of them is still a baby with a baby bottle in his hand. The office of the New Alternative Party is on the other side of the street. They help the family every day. But surely this cannot go on indefinitely. Sonya thinks that the children ought to live at a children's home or in a family instead of this corner in a dirty, cold hall, with no other furniture than two narrow rugs. I have never seen such a dismal abode before. I ask if I may pray for the man in the name of Jesus. He says yes. I know that also the Koran tells us to ask Jesus for health. Many miracles have happened. I hope something good will happen here, too. The Lord only knows, what will happen. But He does not share His glory with us. That is why we do not always need to see or hear, what will happen. We might become proud. We human beings are prone to pride and to taking honour to ourselves. We sometimes steal the honour that belongs to someone else to lift ourselves up. Yet it is good to remember, that *all* good gifts come from above, from the Father of lights. We are just indebted to thank Him deeply for all the good things we have received. Instead of asking why all the bad things happen we ought to ask why we have received so many good things.

The parents of a blind child ask why their child is blind. Have they committed a sin? Jesus would answer them and did answer during His time on earth, that they have not done anything wrong. The person was blind because God wanted to heal him. Sickness and disability are not God's revenge. There just happen all sorts of things in the world. Every one of

us is imperfect, sinful and handicapped in one way or another, maybe even a refugee, who is perhaps escaping from himself.

I love a Finnish film called "*Blessed Madness*". It depicts us human beings insightfully. The brothers are going to take their "mad" brother to a mental institution. All sorts of funny incidents take place on the way there. Finally when they arrive at the mental hospital the doctor does not know, which one is the patient. All of them look like patients to him. In the end the whole gang gets to return happily home. We human beings are like that. We are *all* "patients" and meant to help each other. Even though you may be a nurse today, you may be a patient tomorrow.

Pain

The hardest thing in human life is pain. It seems like an enemy but can lead us to something new. In the valleys of sorrow we may suddenly find the well of living water. In a hot furnace we are honed into diamonds. Things have always at least two sides to them.

Pain

*Wolves are howling on the shores
the moon is crying
the whole earth is black.
On the shore
of the stream of death
a black swan is weeping.
Wolves are howling on the shores.*

*In the valleys of grief
I learnt my deepest lessons.
In the midst of my sorrow
I found the Giver of joy.
I am ready
to walk with the sorrowing
along the stony road of life.*

We are staying at a camp, where many families have seen sorrow. Many have lost their loved ones far too early. They have all lost their home country. They do not have enough money to get properly by and there is no work in sight. They are like the dry desert around us, which seems to sigh wearily, without water. The hot winds beat on it and send dust flying in the air.

Our hostess is a wise, strong lady. I can see the sorrow of the Kurds also in her eyes, but otherwise she is cheerful and active. Her word is the law in this family as in many other Kurdish families. Grandmothers have a strong position in this old matriarchal culture. Men respect their strong, individual ladies. They have endured all the sufferings of their people together with their husbands. The women are tough like willows by desert streams. "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept... There on the poplars we hung our harps...*" when we did not have any more strength to sing. (Psalm 137:1-2, the Bible.)

There is a surplus of young women at the camp. The young men have escaped abroad. I happen to meet one young man planning an escape. It would take him another two years to get enough money to travel to Europe. He would have to pay a substantial extra fee to be able to escape safely. Only one of his six brothers is married and even he is unhappy about it now. He has no possibility to escape. I chide the youth playfully. Why does he think life in Europe would be better? He will surely be disappointed. Foreigners can have a tough time in Europe, and it is not certain that any country will accept him as a refugee. The leaders of Kurdistan hope to hang on to their young people. This land needs her sons and daughters. I am very sad for the young girls. They do not seem to have the prospect of marriage at all. Yet they are beautiful, talented and well-behaved. An old man jokes he would have one of them as a second wife, but they do not want him! He laughs heartily.

The hostess of our house has lost her husband and one of her sons. One son is in Germany. Another son lives with his family on the other side of the yard in his own house. They have two sweet children, Sara and Sana. Sana is only 6 months old. She is everybody's pet and we take turns holding her. She soon gets to know us, too, and likes to sit on our knees. Three of the daughters bake, cook, wash up, clean and serve. One of them likes to pray and read the Koran. She is not disturbed by the hustle around her or the television that is on all the time. When the time for prayer comes, she covers her head, feet and hands and begins to pray. I also pray, but silently in my mind and do not want to show it to outsiders. I think we could learn a lot from Muslims. They are not ashamed of their faith. They pray diligently. I wish we would do the same. If we did, the world would be a much better place.

Why are there pain, distress and even inconceivably atrocious things in the world? God did create human beings in His image, but the devil transformed them into beasts. I read this wise thought in a book recently. Dictators are cruel because they have given themselves to serve the devil himself. Only real evil can cause so much cruelty. Stalin got his own people killed without hesitation. Hitler almost annihilated a whole nation from the face of the earth. There is lots of undeniable evidence of these things. There seems to be no end to these dictators. They are cruel, selfish and greedy for power. They are often driven by a paranoid fear that makes them have even the members of their own families killed. Is not personified evil behind all this?

Yet evil is a problem for us all. We cannot accuse other people, because each one of us has broken the laws of God. Before Him we are all sinners and can only beg for mercy. We can choose freely, in whose troops we wish to stand. If we hate our brother, we are

children of hate and on the wrong road. It takes courage to stand for truth against all the evil of the world. It takes real manliness to be a weapon of love in this world of violence. Yet love and goodness will overcome. Love is stronger than death itself. Men can take our lives but not our eternal soul. Then why should we tremble? When God is for us, we do not need to fear. This is a promise of the Bible.

“Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise,” says the LORD. „I will protect them from those who malign them.” (Psalm 12:5, the Bible.)

The Lord remembers also those needy people, who do not yet know how to approach Him, because they do not know Him or know anything about Him. There is more security in this promise than in any military powers, weapons or human treaties which are often made just to be broken.

But the lovely, little **Sana** is with us. She is watching us with innocent eyes and smiles back immediately when we smile to her. **Sara**, too, is a lovely little girl. Little girls are still wading in a sea of dreams. They have an unseen net in their hands with which they catch all beautiful and lovely things. They have gladness and laughter in their hearts. They play princesses and build sand castles. They row to fairy tale islands and sing their secret lullabies. We, too, can fly to children’s world for a moment and meet each other there with innocent eyes and smiling lips. We adults, too, can laugh and sing.



Typical Kurdish market

We visit several homes at our camp. We are well received in every place. Lots of people gather. We are sometimes looked at like aliens from outer space. But soon we are able to smile to each other, hug each other and look deeply in each other's eyes. This is the language of the heart that needs no words. We know only Kurdish words: "hot", "water", "bread" and "thank you". And saying even these words makes everybody laugh. It is hot. Everybody knows that. Water helps with heat and bread helps with hunger. "Thank you" is a beautiful word that anybody can use in any situation.

Children gather round us as soon as we step outside the gate. They come with a great hustle and bustle and scream happily. The adults get irritated and try to chase them away. It makes me sad. But we meet each other again at some street corner as the evening gets dark. Then we play again "*The magpie cooks porridge*" and "*Is the dog at home*". As I touch their thin arms and tangled hair, my heart becomes tender. How I wish they will have a good, happy future. They are already enrolled in the great school of life in this barren village far from the minds and eyes of people.

There is a shopping street close to our house. All necessities can be bought there. In addition, many have a little shop at home. They try to earn a few extra dinars for the family. Every cent is necessary here. I buy all my gifts here to take home with me. Our friend often goes to see his relatives and friends on his own. We have to get by without an interpreter. We notice that surprisingly many can speak some English. We do not have anything to worry about.

When evening comes and the moon rises in the sky we walk on dark paths to the field. We sit on a little piece of cardboard on the ground that is still warm. It is comforting to watch the moon, the stars, and boys playing with fire on the outskirts of the village and to listen to the crickets and other sounds of life. These are valuable moments to add to the necklace of our lives.

Everywhere people are kind, peaceful and glad. Many feel sorry for us having come during the hottest time of the year. They would want us to come in spring when flowers blossom and everything is cool and green.

But we did not come just to see the nature but to see you, dear people! I hope that one day you all will know that names of all the free birds, flowers, trees, mountains and oceans of the world. I hope that one day all wrong things will come out to the open and justice will rule in your country.

At a House of Mourning

A relative of a family has died. We all go for a visit. I get to go, too. I put on one of my black Kurdish outfits. Women are led to the women's house; men go to the men's house.

The event is simple. The women sit beside each other by the walls. I get introduced. Some look at me straight in the eyes, smiling. Others look at me hesitatingly and seem more re-

served. We get a glass of water. Nothing else is served. Some leave, others come in. This goes on at least for three days.

An older woman is not able sit any more. She is led to rest on a mattress. It is she, whose husband has passed away. When the man died, the wife's left arm and leg were paralyzed exactly at the same moment. The women are massaging her swollen leg and comforting her.

A couple of the ladies move closer to me. A young girl has her English notebook with her. She asks me to help her pronounce certain words. I think this is not really appropriate in the situation. However, I proceed to help her.

We have to leave soon. The men are already waiting for us outside. We return home. The little bus is full. It is a long drive. My husband is wondering, why he did not get a permission to sing at the occasion, although he had asked to. He rarely asks to sing, so I believe he got really disappointed, when they did not let him do so. He would have wanted to offer consolation by singing. Afterwards we were told that it is not customary to sing at funerals. Singing at funerals is, in fact, taboo, and it can be considered as a disparaging gesture in Muslim culture! We were about to insult the mourners in our ignorance. This was not our purpose.

I remember a special afternoon from our last trip to Kurdistan. We had been at a memorial occasion for Saddam's victims in a village, where over 2000 people had been killed. We were in the company of men, who had all lost loved ones during those times. They themselves had fought as guerrillas in the mountains for years, suffered from cold and hunger and seen a lot of death. After the occasion we set up a camp at a place where many had escaped the bombings. There under the shade of the trees after a great meal the men began to sing. The singing changed soon into wailing. The men actually embraced each other and wept. I will always hear that song in my soul. It was very moving, unique and beautiful. Words pale before that experience. White little fruit was falling down on us from the trees, manna from Heaven. The birds were chirping in the bushes and the great stream was calm. We took our instruments from the weeping willows and sang out the great sorrow of our hearts.

About Politics

I am not a political person. I hardly understand the politics of my own country, let alone the politics of a foreign country and culture. Yet I do understand that the affairs of a country can be taken good or bad care of and everything in between. I am sure each of us hopes to have a country where things are well attended to. I remember what a Finnish member of the European Parliament once said. "*If things have been badly managed, this stands out during a time of crisis.*" That is why it is important to have a well-functioning democracy and to manage affairs well and honestly. Then the country will be able to endure difficult times as well.

We get an invitation to visit the office of the new Goran Party. The name means “change”. More and more people seem to be talking about it. We have already met the wise leader of the party. He will not be present now, but we will be received by the leader of Hewler’s division. The party cannot accept the principles of the present government. Goran wants to have the police forces and the economy absolutely under government control. The present parliament and its leading parties will not agree to this.

Goran is run by volunteers on a small budget. It does not have military forces and does not even want to get them. Both leading parties have armed forces of their own. I, having been brought up in a European democracy, feel fearful about such things. Yet the situation of the country is unique. The land is not fully independent and has just survived a war. The situation in Iraq is still extremely explosive and uncertain. No one is able to predict, what will follow. Anything can happen, after the Americans leave. Many hope it will take long before they finally go.

There are many counsellors, but the land has to make her own decisions. People say they want a European type of democracy, but when it is time to act, perhaps they do not really want it after all.

PDK has 30 seats in the present Parliament, PUK has 29, Goran 25, another Muslim party 6 and yet another 4. In addition there are three smaller groups, for example Christians with 5 seats and Armenians with one. Majority decides. There are 111 members in the Parliament. PDK and PUK took part in the election under the name Kurdistan List. The official information is found on the following websites.^{3 4}

The Goran Party got 25 seats in the election of July 25, 2009, which is 23,73 per cent of the votes. The next election will be in 2013. In order to form majority, the party should get either 51 per cent of the votes or 56 seats in the Parliament.

Goran Party wants to look after the rights of women, too. The country will regress, unless the cause of women is attended to. They must have the right to get a decent education and the right to work. There is a long list of issues that need addressing. The leading parties could make a difference in all of them, if they wanted to.

In the Christian Quarter

In Kurdistan, there are lots of Christians, too. They have a quarter of their own in the capital, for example. Next we are going to visit that area.

Somehow the city feels different, more Western. We have a splendid lunch in the best restaurant of the city. The deputy mayor of the city, who has had that position for a long time, arrives soon to greet us.

³ <http://www.perleman.org/default.aspx?page=sitontentsc=parliament-history2009>

⁴ <http://kurdistan.fi/kurdit/293-irakin-kurdistanissa-korruptio-aresyttaeae-aeenastaejiae>

He seems to be a pleasant, wise man. He wants to tell us something about the Christians.

There are at least 200 000 Christians in the country. Some of them arrived after 2003. At that time Saddam had threatened to kill all Christians, unless they became Muslims. 70 per cent of the Christians in Iraq decided to go north to the Kurdish region, where they were welcomed. They left everything behind – their homes, things, cars and all other possessions. President Barzani opened the doors for them and said that Christians are their brothers and sisters.

“Now we have everything. We have good homes, cars and everything we need. Iraq burned the churches. Here we have been helped to build them. Kurdistan is good to us. I want to thank the President once again for all this!”

“Hewler is an ancient city, over 5000 years old. There are about 30 000 people in the Christian district. 90 per cent of these are Christian, 10 per cent Muslim. Most Christians are Assyrian Catholics. 100 families belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Christian Church of Kurdistan is ancient. There were Christians here already in the third and fourth centuries. The oldest preserved church is 1800 years old. The ancient Margodis Church has just been renovated. It dates back to 820 A.D. Kurds have always respected Christians and lived together for a very long time. Kurds have also helped Jewish people. There were lots of them in Hewler before Saddam’s time. Now they have all gone.”

“There are about 50 churches in Kurdistan. I am proud and glad to be a Kurd. Kurdistan is precious and important to us. We are, above all, Kurds.” I ask **Fahmi Matti Solaka**, how he feels about Muslims and Christians co-operating for example to help the poor. He says he has thought about the very same thing. Perhaps it will be possible in the future. At the moment the churches have their own relief organizations.

“The amount of Christians in Kurdistan is growing. This tolerant Muslim land respects everything. This is a very good thing, zor basha. I wish the other Muslim lands could respect others in the same way. Even the Pope has expressed his thanks to the Kurdish Government for helping Christians”, explains the cheerful deputy mayor, Mr. Solaka. He hopes this book will be translated into Kurdish and Arabic.

Our journey continues. We visit the home of a Christian childhood friend of Sonya’s. I immediately like the lovely, grey-haired old lady. I give her a cross necklace and a few Christian cards and books. She is overjoyed. She says she goes to church every day.

Sonya’s friend is the headmistress of a school. She is charming and beautiful. This is how I seem to describe the women in this country. They are charmingly beautiful. She takes us to her church. They have a short communion service there. I am glad, because this is the only time during our trip when we get to take part in a Christian church service, and they happen to have communion! The lovely old lady is standing on the steps of her house as we go. I will always fondly remember her standing there.

The inside of the church is simple and beautiful. The ceiling is high, there is a big cross at the front and the benches are simple. The choir members sit on the benches on the left.

The middle aisle is beautiful, with white lilies by its sides. We walk on it slowly towards the priest who gives us the communion bread that has been dipped in the communion wine. Simple and beautiful. I feel close to God. I feel clean like the beautiful lilies. When our Lord looks at us during communion, we are as beautiful and lovely as lilies in His eyes. The blood of Jesus Christ has again washed our hearts clean.

I get permission to photograph the church. The outside is impressive, too. It is like a huge pyramid with a beautiful cross on top. The empty cross talks about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead. His body exists on the earth no more. The grave is empty.



A church in Hewler (Erbil)

The choir is practicing in an annex. I would love to listen to the Gregorian type of music longer. But we have to go. The day with all its visits has been tiring and hot. We need and deserve a rest.

I am glad there is a country like this in the world where Muslims and Christians can live in peace with each other. This is how it should be. I thank God for it.

Visiting the Minister of Education

We have been at the Ministry of Education once before. Then we were met only by the young, bright secretary. Minister **Parzheen Abdulrahman** had an emergency meeting, which is why our visit was postponed.

We wait for some time on comfortable, soft chairs. Sitting on the floor is tiring, because we are not used to it.

In the end we get invited to the Minister's office. I ask the Minister to tell us about the school system. He has a lot to tell. Everything has been started from scratch in this country. During Saddam's regime even the schools were destroyed. When Kurdistan became autonomous, the Kurds immediately started to build new schools. Most of them are ready. Electricity is another thing. They hope to have electricity in all schools by 2015. At this moment only half of the schools have electricity. Electricity enables the schools to take advantage of modern technology. They have now started to train teachers for the new school system. Every summer teachers get extra training. At first the wages of teachers was really small. Some of them worked without wages. Even now the teachers get paid far too little, although 20 times more than in the beginning. Most teachers are women.

In 1994 an international treaty concerning the rights of the disabled was signed. Now the disabled get education at already 300 schools.

The private schools of the country use a Lebanese school system. All the state schools, too, will have the same system later. Everyone has the right and the possibility to go to school. College students get a grant.

"There is a lot of work to do. Many are against the reforms. But that is how it is in everything!"

The Minister said he had visited Vatican. He told the people there about the tolerant atmosphere of Kurdistan. Vatican said Kurdistan must be a Paradise. The minister answered he had always thought Paradise and Hell come only after death!

The number of schools is still far too small. And there are far too many students in each class, as many as 50. The school lasts only for four hours a day at the moment. They are planning to add to the number of lessons. Later on they will have Arts and Physical Education, too. The minister is well aware of the fact that sports and music enhance brain functions and learning. They do not have enough resources for everything yet.

The country is thankful for all help from the outside. The Minister welcomes Finns, too, to come and build schools. All knowledge and every skill is needed, friendship across the borders. I tell the minister that many Finnish schools have a twin school (friendship school) in another country. Our own daughter has been involved in this work with her school. The friendship school work has been interesting, eye-opening and very rewarding. They have made a film where African children talk about their lives, fears and joys and the Finnish children about theirs. They have also made a book together, where the children have dictated their stories. The children hope to have one, common village in this world, where we all are brothers and sisters together.

I tell the minister something of the history of Finland. During our Autonomy Finns got to have Finnish-speaking schools. After gaining independence we got a good, democratic school system. Soon children from poor backgrounds got an opportunity to study at uni-

versities. They often had a greater motivation to study than the rich children. People themselves are the real treasure chest, where we can dig. Every person is more valuable than silver or gold.

Now I know that the world needs 15 million new teachers, because every fifth inhabitant of the world is still illiterate. The problem exists in poor, developing countries. I also think about the resources that are yet to be discovered and the amount of knowledge and skill that is yet to be developed!

Two shoe merchants went to a country where most people went bare-footed. One of them returned all disappointed. Nobody would buy shoes there, because everybody has bare feet! The other one returned really excited. What an opportunity! No-one has shoes yet! We ought to have an optimistic attitude. What possibilities there are yet to be discovered!

Every child ought to have the right to get a good, honest teacher, who is ready to develop his or her own skills to benefit the children. It is a pity that teaching does not receive due appreciation in many countries. Attitudes need changing. If we understood that in the children of today we have the hope of tomorrow both for families as well as for nations, perhaps attitudes would change. Finland has been able to develop its school system into one that is considered one of the best in the world. It was just a short while ago when the people in the countryside could go to school only for a short time, with a teacher that moved from village to village. Some of these former pupils are still alive amongst us. They learnt the most necessary things, to read and to count.

Later on I meet a young man that I have already met in Suleymani earlier. We visited his school. The school badly needed a renovation. It has now been finished and the situation is rather good. The teacher says some of the pupils are so poor they cannot even buy a pencil for themselves. So he often uses his own small salary to buy little things for the pupils. He also gives little encouraging prizes bought with his own money.

I think it would be a good idea to give scholarships to poor children who have a real desire for learning. Perhaps Sonya's wealthy friends could start a scholarship system. It would be a great opportunity for the rich to help the poor. In Finland scholarships are given in every school. Well-behaved children can get a special prize. There are lots of different possibilities.

Our time goes quickly also at the Kawa camp. We have become acquainted with many of the people. Many ask us to visit them, but we do not have time to visit everyone. We watch the women work and play with the children. At times I write or draw. Sometimes I watch a TV program with the women. There is a Syrian film that I understand even without interpretation. It is a love drama where the wicked get punished in the end. It is just as oriental and exotic as you can imagine. Beautiful women with big eyes, luxurious dresses and overly dramatic gestures and handsome men with their whims. The bad guy meets a really bad end. He gets executed. The real mother gets her child. The film ends with the actors and us in tears. We people need to escape at times from our everyday lives. We need the the-

atre, films, books, arts and sports. Young men play war games on the TV screen. The quickest and most skilled one wins.

I think about the sad consequences of war. Our war ended 65 years ago, but we still talk about it. We who were born during or after it feel that we somehow still suffer from it. Many of us had a fatherless childhood. Our fathers were in the war for almost five years. Our mothers had to work too hard. They did not have normal possibilities to take care of their children. They had too much to do. Many women were left alone after their husbands were killed in the war. After the war we quickly started to rebuild our country. We had to get almost 500 000 Karelian refugees settled in other parts of Finland. We had to develop industry, pay a great war debt to the Soviet Union, build new houses and clear new fields. There was not much to think about how the children were coping. Did they get enough attention and love from their parents? Perhaps we would do things differently today, if we could.

I often watch the Kurdish men admiringly. They hold children in their arms, cuddle them and play with them. Even little boys carry smaller siblings in their arms, kiss them and show them affection. The family is important. I would take this family centeredness with me to the stressed Europeans, if I could. We all long for love. Without it we will grow stunted and warped like trees in the desert. Love helps us grow roots, which the fiercest storms cannot break. Both girls and boys need acceptance and respect.

Muslims do not drink alcohol, and this is very good. I don't see drunken people anywhere. Yet we know that drugs have become a big problem in Iran and probably here, too. Muslims often think that Christianity and alcohol go together. But at least in Finland real believing Christians do not drink. Sometimes one can drink a glass of wine or beer, but drinking is mainly avoided. Alcohol is a big problem to many, and we believing Christians rather want to save people from that mire than to lead people into it. Every sensible person understands that the use of alcohol demands wisdom. If alcohol becomes your lord and idol, it will not go well with your life. We must take care of the temple of our bodies, treat it well and not destroy it.

Living in market economy we know that alcohol is a great business in the world, and so is the medicine industry. They market their products for their own benefit. Make-up and fashionable clothes are marketed by taking advantage of the idea of youth. It is good to ponder about things and be on our guard. Do we need all this junk, every possible experience and all possible stimulants?

As I have been travelling in different parts of the world, I have noticed that all sorts of unnecessary things and junk food have become more and more popular. We are offered unhealthy sugary drinks, sweets, ice-cream, crisps and snacks. Artificial junk food. We know full well that it does not enhance our health, but, on the contrary, causes weight gain and illness. Diabetes and many other illnesses become more and more common. Normal food ought to be enough. Every country has its own basic food, which God has given us. It should be enough for us. In Finland it consists of vegetables, fruit, berries, milk products, meat, fish and mushrooms.

But here in Kurdistan I get the privilege of enjoying the delicious food we are served. Sometimes we go to good restaurants. The portions there are so big that it is impossible to eat it all, no matter how much you would like to.

Mealtimes are important. Eating together unites people. Bread is like life itself. As we eat we remember those that do not have their daily bread. *“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.”* (Proverbs 30:8, the Bible.)

We often talk about idols. What are they? The Bible tells us to believe in the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul and mind. Anything that comes between man and God can be an idol. It can be money or something else. It can be selfishness, bitterness, lust for power etc. The statues seen in India, for example, are not the only idols there are. Idols can be found in our own hearts. People are alike in this respect all around the world. We can begin our lives on the right road, humble and devout, but money or power can blind us at the first opportunity. Our ego can become more important than God. This is what has happened in postmodern Europe. Man has made himself a god. He has lifted up his own knowledge, understanding and deeds in the place of God. But many brilliant scientists have noticed that man only knows that he does not know nearly everything and not even enough to understand this world. There must be Someone who has planned all this. Everything has been fashioned in such a great way, that man could not do it even in his dreams. Man cannot form one single living tree leaf. If we realize this, we become humble and thankful and able to marvel. Or else we become proud and lift our own egos on the highest place. And yet, which one of us can lengthen his or her life or prevent death? No-one! On his deathbed Stalin threatened to get his personal doctor killed, because he understood that the doctor could not save him from death. Stalin died before he got the doctor executed. We are so weak. When the wind blows on us, we are no more. Yet the memory of good people lives on from one generation to another. The memory of an evil person is a warning to us.

The people living at this camp think fondly of their relatives. Many of them live on the other side of the border or far away abroad. One evening an older, erect, handsome man comes to the village. He tells us his life story. I want to share it with you.

Hassan Palani’s Story

“He that has seen the face of dictatorship can never forget it, not for one day. But after war comes peace, and now we live in peaceful times. War solves nothing, nothing at all!

*I came to Iraq from Iran in 1979. With me came 12 000 other refugees. We were afraid of **Ayatollah Khomeini**. We came, because we did not approve of Ayatollah’s thoughts or actions. I left everything behind, my house, my fields – everything! Ayatollah was apparently going to capture both Iraq and every other neighbouring country. But his time came to an end. Now we fear that there may be another war, if the present ruler gets to continue. Then there will be problems for the whole earth. I fear there will be evil times ahead.*

I came from Iran to the village of Charkelawi. We were there for three years until 1982. Saddam took us to a camp called Rumadi, where I spent over 20 years. We have seen every possible evil. At Saddam's orders fences were built round the camp. We were often without electricity, water and food. We were given only half an hour per day to go out to the city. Even then our passports were checked. Somehow we found food for our children. We used all our wisdom to do that. Fortunately UN and the Red Cross found our camp in 1985.

When the USA came to Iraq in 2003, the Arabs were very angry at us. We were hated. We did not get any work or food. Our life was extremely difficult. The whole of Iraq was in chaos. USA, the terrorists and evil people did anything they wanted.

We asked our persecutors, why they disturb and persecute us. We asked why they took our wives and children away. We said we were human beings, just like they.

They answered us: "You are Kurds! We hate you!" The Arabs said those wearing Kurdish clothes or speaking Kurdish would be killed immediately.

We were advised to leave for Hewler as soon as possible. It would be a good, peaceful place. People were divided into three different camps. Some of them were headed for Sulaymani.

I thank the Kurdish government. The United Nations has built a good and safe place for us here. I thank everybody who has helped us."

I ask Mr Palani, if he has ever held a weapon. He has never been to the military. He has been a refugee for most of his life like the rest of his fellow sufferers.

Mr Palani says he is very sorry for the fact that Iran has sent terrorists to Europe. Kurds did not want anything of the kind to happen.

He has nine children, three of whom live abroad. These people would hardly survive without the gifts sent to them by their children living abroad.

The Urgent Issue of the Iranian Kurds

We get an invitation to visit Hassan Palani's party office in Hewler. The political party in question is PDKI, a refugee party that cannot function in its home country. It can be operated in Kurdistan, though. It can advertise itself and use the radio as its medium. There have been no disturbances.

I meet their sympathetic, peaceful leader **Tahir Mahmodi**. The first thing he says is that their only weapon is the pen. He believes we understand how difficult their situation is.

The party was founded in 1945, the year I was born in.

"We want peace. We have tried all possible things with Iran, but nothing seems to help. We would like to take care of our own affairs and educate and bring up our own children.

*We do not want anything else; we do not want more land or power. We want democracy. The Kurds were never treated as human beings in Iran. It was like this already during the Shah's regime. All Kurds remember the murder of **Dr. Abdurrahman Ghassenlou** during the negotiations in Vienna on July 13, 1988, and that of the Kurdish leader **Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi** in Berlin on September 17, 1992. Only now 20 years after Ghassemlou was murdered, has a good friend of his written a book about him called *The Passion and Death of Rahman the Kurd: Dreaming Kurdistan*⁵. The author's name is **Carol Prunhuber**."*

Tahir Mahmodi shows us the thick book like a great treasure. Books like this give strength and hope in the desperate situation.

Kurds have learnt to help each other in these circumstances. Nobody is a demon or an angel at birth. It is important to be an accepted member of a family. Especially women get oppressed in Iran. Mahmodi's political party respects women and has women workers. There is a group of women that helps needy Iranian refugees.

Tahir Mahmodi talks about the last presidential election in Iran. There were 475 candidates, but the dictator chose only four of them for the election. The leader himself chose the candidates. Millions protested against this injustice. Many of them were killed. However, in Iran not only protestors or members of the opposition get killed but anybody can be on the list. The present regime uses fear as its weapon. It is an ancient method which all dictators have used. Few are courageous enough to stand for justice at the cost of their own lives.

I know that Tahir Mahmodi is one of these brave ones. Many Kurdish leaders and politicians have been killed in Iraq and even abroad. The latest appalling thing is that Iran has given the names of the opposition politicians to the international police as supposedly dangerous terrorists. Many men of peace, who fight for justice with words and pens as their only weapons, have had their names written on the list of dangerous terrorists. This fight is fought with the power of lies.

Kurds are not the only people who have had to suffer in Iran. Other people groups and those who think differently suffer similar persecution, also Christians. In spite of this more and more people become Christians in Iran.

Tahir Mahmodi tells me about the great drug problem in Iran. The best hospitals of the region are in Iran, but they do nothing for drug addicts. Cheap drugs are offered especially to young Kurds. They can be purchased at low prices even in prisons. The drugs of Afghanistan stream to the market mainly through Iran. Drugs have already come to Suleymani and other parts of Kurdistan. A nation can be destroyed without weapons, from the inside. Young people are the most vulnerable group.

I listen to these sad facts. I hear more and more about them. I feel I must write about them. We, the rest of the world, do not quite seem to understand, what is going on. Or we do, but

⁵ <http://kurdistan.fi/kirjat?task=view&catid=2&id=84>

we do not want to do anything about it. At this point I would like to add the story told me by author Jawanmir Marabi in Stockholm in the beginning of our journey.

Teacher Farzad Kamangar

Farzad Kamangar was a teacher in Kamyaran, Iran, for over 16 years. He was teaching in one of the villages there. He was just a teacher. He opened even a small library in the village. He was always helping the poor children, giving them of his own money. However, unfortunately the present rulers did not approve of his actions.

Mr. Kamangar was imprisoned without any reason, without having committed a crime. All he had done was to teach. He spent over four years in prison. Even there he wanted to teach the other inmates. He was looking to connect with human rights organizations. Instead he received a death sentence on February 25, 2008. It was carried out on May 9, 2010 in Tehran, the capital of Iran.

This man was just a teacher with a great desire to teach children. The whole world should know about this great person, Farzad Kamangar. His death sentence was totally unnecessary. We should choose a special day for celebrating his memory.

Similar things happen in Iran all the time. I will not write more about these things, but everyone can read the news in the Internet. There is a lot of information available for one who wants to know. Unfortunately there are so many Kurds who have received a similar fate that we could commemorate at least one name every day of the year.⁶

The Christian Point of View and an Exhortation to Christians

The God of the Bible forbids us to kill or to use weapons. Weapons do not solve anything. They just leave a mess behind. God gave us life as a gift so that we would appreciate our own lives and the lives of others. God's enemy, satan, hates this gift of God. Its aim is to kill and destroy.

We have life; we have the gift of God. This is a good starting point. Yet we humans have turned away from God. He is not distant. He is alive and feeling. He knows everything and sees into everybody's hearts. He chose Israel to be His special people, but has He left Israel unpunished when she has done wrong and sinned against Him? No. The Lord says He will judge Israel twice as severely as the other nations. When Israel repents and turns to God, He will have mercy on her again. If God treats His own chosen people like this, should not we, too, tremble before this God? He will also judge all the other nations justly. If God uses a nation as a punisher, He will judge that nation in the end, too. The more we receive light, the greater is our responsibility.

We so-called Christian countries have a responsibility. God does not turn a blind eye to our deeds. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not just debauchery but, primarily, *indif-*

⁶ <http://kurdistan.fi/kurditsuoemessa/340-suomen-kurdit-tuomitsevat-poliittisten-vankien-teloitukset>

ference concerning the distress of people and nations around them. I believe and know that this sin of Sodom is our greatest sin, too. *Indifference!*

We think we do not have anything to do with the problems and sufferings of people in other countries. Jesus sees the value of every human being and loves each and everyone. He spoke well of the Samaritans, who were despised idol worshippers of His time. Yet only a Samaritan was willing to help a man that had been robbed by bandits. (The story of the Good Samaritan is in the Bible, in the Gospel of Luke 10:25-37.) The others walked past in indifference. Only the Samaritan came to thank Jesus, after He had healed ten lepers. When Jesus met a sinful woman, He offered salvation to her, too. He treated everyone with love and consideration. He wants us to act likewise. We are all equal and sinful before Him.

If we only love our own family or those who believe in the same way, what kind of love is that? It is not enough according to the Bible. It is not godly love. We must pray even for our enemies! The fates of countries and nations could change, if we did this. I exhort Christians to start praying in earnest for everybody in Kurdistan and in the neighbouring countries. If God tells us to do something when we pray, we ought to act without hesitation. Our lives are in God's hands. Nothing evil happens to us without His knowledge. And if something bad happens, revenge is in God's hands, too, not in ours. Man was created by God putting His breath in him. Each one of us is still breathing in this gift of God, life itself.

Let us pray for the political leaders of the world. Let us pray for those that are persecuted and suffer. Let us pray for those in prison and those sentenced to death. Let us pray for drug addicts, refugees and those that fear for their lives. Let us pray for orphans and widows. Let us pray that the Lord Himself would comfort them and renew them through His Holy Spirit. We live in the same world. We share the same planet and the same human life. Let us have thoughts of peace. Let us put away hatred and bitterness. Love will overcome.

The Child Within Me Weeps

*I cannot help
that the child within me weeps
so bitterly that
the tears make a great ocean.*

*She weeps for the children of the world,
for the rejected, sick and hungry children,
for the orphans, for the abused, kidnapped children,
for slave children, for those rejected by their mothers,
battered by their fathers and deprived,
for the sexually abused,*

*for the child-soldiers
and for the homeless ones.
She weeps for the indifference,
selfishness, cruelty and wickedness of people
and for the whole, unjust world.
I know God weeps, too.*

I am glad that the Prime Minister and the other political leaders of Finland are talking about having Finland in a peace promoter's role in the world. Our former President **Martti Ahtisaari** was recently granted the Nobel Peace Prize. We wanted to promote world peace already during President **Kekkonen's** reign. Our Holy Book promises happiness, positive blessedness, to peace makers. The mission is demanding and hard, if we embark upon it. But each of us can be an example for others.

A Bridge

*I would like to build a bridge
across all boundaries
and prejudices.
I would make a golden bridge, where
everyone could come,
the rich and the poor, the small and the great,
a bridge that would reach
every place and every person
across the countries and the oceans.*

The Arms of Love

*The arms of love are so long
that they reach millions of children.
Yet there is space for the squirrels, the birds and the flowers
and all the oppressed ones of the world.
So long are the arms of love.*

Storm

*A storm arose over the earth,
roaring whitecap waves.*

Do I hear and understand right?

*The cry of man in the wind,
the drums of distress,
the great trumpets of terror!*

*The clouds cover the starlit sky.
There is no light.
Is there any hope?*

*Above the storm there stands He,
Who has the power to bind the winds.
Just one word, and the storm calms down.
I hear the great music of promises.
His Majesty, the King
is standing with the winds in His hands,
with the pure weapons of love,
with the sword of the word in His hands.*

*The earth sighs, the ocean becomes still.
Man and the forest deer
bow down before the Master.*

A Trip to the Mountains

We have been planning an outing for days. We all want to see the mountains and other things besides the dusty capital. **Hussein** promises to take us there in his minibus. He knows a good place to visit.

We leave early in the morning. We pick up Sonya, her cousin and their child and domestic help. Soon the bus is full of people and food.

We are heading north-east. At first we travel across lower mountains and valleys. Then we rise up to higher mountains and again descend to a valley. After this we arrive at the highest mountains. Before this we stop to buy fruit to take home. Little boys carry live chickens to our bus, but we cannot buy those at the moment.

The scenery is getting more and more beautiful, downright breath-taking. One of the mountains is 3600 meters high. The mountains are like fairy-tale giants guarding this land. Each one has his own figure and character. Between the mountains there are deep gorges, where the sunlight rarely shines. The road begins to get higher and the ascent takes

longer. At times the road runs close to a precipice and a deep ravine. Fortunately the road is good and lined by strong concrete bars. I have been on worse mountain roads.

At one point Hussein stops and wants me to take a picture of him standing on the precipice. I get dizzy. I find it really hard to take this picture. My head is giddy and I am afraid. We see Kurdish families having picnics on the precipices. They have spread rugs on the earth to sit and eat on. I am glad we do not decide to camp here.

There are practically no houses anywhere. Could anyone live on these barren, rocky mountains? Yet many a drama has been acted here. The guerrillas have been hiding amongst the mountains and suffered from cold and hunger. Many refugees have walked on the paths of life and death. There are so many stories, sad and happy tunes and poems. So much weeping and longing.

We finally reach our destination after having driven for hours. In fact I and my husband have stopped keeping an eye on the time here. Life goes on even without looking at your wrist watch. There are 24 hours per day, no matter what we do.

There are cars and people everywhere. We drive on a bridge to the other side of a river and look for a parking place. It is hard to find one in this heavy traffic. Why are all these people here? We soon find out. There is a chute that roars down from within the mountain. People want to be refreshed in its waves. The bravest ones hold on to trees and let the strong surges wash over them. Some boys are balancing on a tree trunk that has fallen down. Each one wants to cool himself down in the scorching heat. What would be a better idea than the cold, bright mountain water?

People have come here by bus all the way from Baghdad to cool down. I find it interesting to watch the beautiful women. They are wearing extremely fashionable clothes. Of course there is a bazaar, too, where people crowd to shop. We eat at a restaurant, which lets the cold mountain water run on its floors. Now and then we go and stand up to our ankles in the cool, or actually ice cold water running in narrow canals on the floor of the restaurant. Never before have I been at a restaurant with water flowing on the floors. The children are excited. They are wondering how my husband is able to stay in the cold water. Of course he can, having been brought up in Lapland, in an arctic country!

After this we visit another place. There are high water falls there, with a little, shining lake underneath. Some people are rowing there in boats. Most of the people admire the falls and want their pictures taken by them. I take pictures of others and they take pictures of us. I have Kurdish clothes on, so I blend in well. The falls go on as a river. I don't like to see people throw rubbish in the river.

Our Kurdish friend is happy. Now that she has seen these mountains and brooks she understands what real Kurdistan is like. This is by far the best day of our journey.

We turn back. I look at the wonderful shapes of the mountains for as long as I can. At times the shapes are like great, stony mushrooms; at times they look like people. God's

art. The road rises up to enormous heights. I cannot see the bottom of the ravine, however far I try to stretch my neck.

Kurds love picnics. They take the whole family to go out with and spend at least one day in nature.



Picnic

We drive again across the lower hills and valleys. Soon we are in the capital. It is like a great unorganized anthill. There are new and old buildings, mainly new. I can see high skyscrapers here and there. They seem like aliens from outer space in these surroundings. Many houses have been painted beautiful ochre or yellow. Some fences have paintings on them. The gates of the houses are special. Who has the most beautiful gate? It would be difficult to choose from the many great candidates. Only the sky has been the limit of imagination. One can work wonders even with wrought iron.

Sonya asks us to come for a visit. She has bought me a bagful of presents. How lovely! What nice gifts she has bought! She says her heart has told her what I like. Her heart has been correct. I get jewellery and a lovely, flowery night dress made of silk. I am especially pleased with a traditional wooden Kurdish necklace. She also gives me a bag knitted with a traditional Kurdish loom. Among the presents are a leather wallet and scarves. Sonya's lovely daughter has made me a necklace of seashells herself. As an artist I have paid attention to how great the Kurdish people are with colours.

The day has been very rewarding. I will keep the mountains and ravines of Kurdistan in the treasure chambers of my heart. These mountains hide many hidden treasures within themselves, gold, copper and many other valuable minerals. The great deserts are also still unused. There are lots of plants that could be grown in the desert. Modern technology makes many things possible. Human life consists of hard work. But at times we need refreshment and memorable outings. Life keeps changing. Sometimes it takes us to deep valleys, sometimes to mountain tops close to heaven. The road can be stony and hard. Then everything becomes light and easy.

Downtown

It is high time we went shopping downtown before going back to our country. I have decided to get an illustrated book of Kurdistan. Will I find one? We park the car far away from the bazaars and walk the rest of the way. There are crowds of people everywhere. There are street vendors in the alleys in their tiny spots. They sell all sorts of things. But I do not hear any shouting or noise. Most of the people walking outside are men.

Our friend finds a shop where we can buy clothes and she helps us to find clothes that fit us. The waist of the trousers is too tight. We find a shoemaker, who widens the belt. While he is doing it, we go look for a book shop.

All the time we see the old Citadel above us. It is 5000 years old and protected by Unesco. It is an old town and citadel surrounded by an ancient wall, high up on top of a hill looking at the new town and the new times underneath it.



Erbil citadel

The Citadel has seen a lot of history, both that of Iraq and of the world. The town was originally a worship place of the Assyrian god Ishtar. Then it got the Aramaean name Arbil. Caesar **Darius** the First destroyed the city in 522-521 BC. It saw **Alexander** the Great who found a wife there. It heard the noise of battle, where Alexander won Darius the Third

in the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC. The Persians had superior forces including 15 war elephants, but Alexander the Great overcame that army losing just 500 soldiers himself. Next he conquered Babylon, Susan and Persepolis. The Citadel saw people worship the sun. It saw how **Cyaxares**, king of the Medes, settled in the city with the tribes from the Zagros Mountains in about 600 BC. The name Hewler means a place of sun worship. The Citadel witnessed how the city was transformed into a strong hub of early Christianity. One of the queens embraced Christianity later, and Christianity spread to the whole area. The city became a strong centre of Christianity and a great metropolis for the Eastern Church. Even the bishop lived there. Also Jews had a strong representation in the city. The ancient city of Ninive is not far away from Hewler. It was there that the Old Testament prophet **Jonah** preached to the people so that the whole city repented and believed in God. Parts of the walls of Ninive have been restored. The Citadel saw 350 Christian martyrs die in 350 AD. The Aramaean Assyrians were almost totally destroyed when the Mongols attacked the city in 1379 AD. Only the people of one Christian village survived. After this, Muslim culture became dominant in the area. Hewler became a strong market town between Bagdad and Mosul.

We find the bookshop close to the ancient Citadel. The owner himself comes to help us. At first he says he does not have a single illustrated book of Kurdistan, but in the end he takes us to a locked room and finds two beautiful books. One is the last copy and a bit tattered, but it is exactly what I want. It has beautiful pictures of Iranian Kurds and picturesque mountain villages. The other one is an illustrated book of Kurdistan. The third book I buy is an art book. It is about a talented artist **Rostam Aghala**⁷ and his colourful, modern paintings. The man has lived a tragic life in great poverty with people looking down on him and his art. He was discovered later, but the new phase did not improve his life. He depicts women in a fine way. It is as if he knew their sorrows, joys and longings in his own bones. I saw his huge painting describing a woman and the tree of life on the wall of the Parliament. It was very beautiful and full of interesting details. His paintings fly between imagination and everyday life reaching at times the level of ballads. His paintings seem to say: "Should I not, a woman in my clay hut, fly with my wings to the skies, to the moon, to the light? The whole world is mine, its flowers, crowing cocks and hens, its fruit trees and all the love, longing and passion it offers."

There are big beautiful paintings hanging also on the walls of the Ministry of Culture portraying women and their life. I was very pleased with their colours. Could more beautiful colours be found anywhere? The painful look in the girl's eyes, the sorrow of the bride in her own wedding, the tears of the mother and then the boundless joy and the play of colours. At the background there is a man who is like Jesus Christ in the Bible with hands outstretched over all life. I do not know the name of the painter.

I show the books I have bought to our friends. The people of our camp look carefully and long at the life of Iranian Kurds as shown in the book. There are villages on steep mountain slopes just covered with snow, and children and adults going down the slopes in

⁷ <http://www.rostamaghala.com>

sledges. What happiness! There are pictures of women and men weaving fabrics in dusky rooms. There are women baking bread, men having their own meetings. Everything is as it should be. The blaze of the evening sun on the mountain slopes, the darkness in the valleys. The ebb and flow of life. Fortunately the pictures are left. Of course the mountains are there, too, and even many of the villages and people. The people at the camp are refugees only dreaming of their home regions. The book is called *Kurds of Iran*. The photos have been taken by **N. Kasrayan** and the text written by **Z. Arshi**.

I am terrified by the narrow, stony mountain roads in the pictures and wonder at the villages perching on the steep mountain slopes. If you had a fear of heights, you could not cope there. I gaze at the proud looks of men and the gorgeous clothes women are wearing. There are Nomadic tents, flocks of sheep, fruit trees dressed in white blossoms and cattle markets. There is a picture of a procession which takes a bride from one village to another followed by a great crowd. I see beautiful clay pots, snowy mountain tops, men playing a tambourine, people dancing together. There is also a picture of the ancient writings of Kermanshah in an old temple. The writings praise Darius's victory of his enemies. It is Kermanshah my friends come from. Yet they had to leave the area with other refugees. Many are leaving even today.

The next day, our friend Mohammad Nazari helps an old handicapped man, who has just come to Kurdistan from Iran. He has sold some of his lands and leased out some. Many leave. Most of them come legally through customs, but some still illegally across the mountains. Life is hard.

I remember the people I have met in Russia. One of them used to say: "*But what can you do? What can you do?*" She was an old teacher from Russian Karelia telling her life story. They had left Finland for Canada and left Canada to build the Soviet Union. Afterwards they ended up on one of Stalin's terrible camps in Arkangel. Most of the people died of cold and hunger. This teacher survived. So what can you do? You just have to live on one day at a time. Life is like that. It has been real life, flesh and blood, sweat and tears. There have been weddings and children have been born. *Life!*

*Snow still melts on the mountains,
dazzling brooks still flow.
My heart still grieves and
my eyes flow with tears.
I sing songs to my children,
I lull them to sleep.
There will yet come a day,
when my heart will rejoice,
when all the mountain flowers will blossom
and the waters murmur more sweetly than ever.*

*Then will the sorrow of our hearts melt.
A new time will come.*

Goodbye, Kurdistan

The time of our departure has come. It always comes and one has to say goodbye. Yet life goes on and the moon continues on its course. It is sad to go and leave these people, with whom we have shared so much. We could not speak with each other, but we understood the language of the heart. I will miss them and pray for them. I hope to be able to write a constructive and beautiful book of all my experiences here. Here I am in the final stretch, writing the final lines.

We are at least 15 hours delayed. The flight gets simply cancelled. We spend the time at the airport. It is not like the European airports. Services are almost totally non-existent. Instead, they check your passport at every turn and do a body search. But I do not mind it any more. The first time round I did. The new Erbil airport built according to modern standards will be opened soon.⁸

Mohammad's friends and relatives give him worried phone calls. He gets over 20 phone calls as soon as his friends hear about the delay. They are all ready to help, to come to the airport to pick us up or even to bring us proper food to eat. The network of friends and family works efficiently in this country. We have seen it many times. Mohammad assures that we could well spend at least six months in the country and be able to stay with one relative after another. There would be food and drink and accommodation. His own part has been to visit as many relatives as he has been able to. He has had several cell phones with him the whole time and they have kept ringing constantly. I'm sure he must hire a secretary soon!

However, we have to turn off the telephones to be able to get some sleep. We have to spend the night on the airport. We do not want to visit anybody. Afterwards I wonder at how quickly time went. At first the waiting passengers kept themselves to themselves, but after a few hours we started talking to each other.

There was a large Arab family waiting close by. They live in Sweden. Soon I was talking with a young Arab woman. She had just gotten married. She and her husband are Christians. They read the Bible together and pray every day. She is very glad for being able to serve Jesus. Her family comes from Hewler. They have never had any trouble from the Kurds. They have been accepted as Christian Arabs. I am glad about that. We exchange email addresses. She wishes me God's blessing on my writing and my whole life. She is so mature. We talk about life's difficulties and God's guidance. "If we are really asking God to guide us, the Lord can take us to places and things we would not ourselves necessarily have chosen, but as we obey Him, we get blessed. The most important thing is to be obe-

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbil_International_Airport

dient. Life is not easy. Difficulties and sufferings belong to life. Jesus is with us in them.” This is what the young, beautiful bride talks about in the dreary night of the airport. I feel much refreshed by her words. The Lord is with us here, too. He led us together.

I meet an artist. He told me of the part of Suleymani where artists live. Kurdistan is a political card game. Salt and sugar are both white, but here they can be badly mixed with each other.

The artist talks about how he has described the suffering of his people in his works in his new homeland. The work has been demanding and difficult. We all process our sorrows in our own ways. An artist paints, a poet writes poems and a composer makes music. Each one of us has a secret garden inside our hearts where we can plant a lovely, fragrant garden. First we have to weed out the herbs of bitterness and to break up the soil. Perhaps it has already been watered with tears. It is time for the sun to shine and for the gentle winds to blow. Life is a valuable gift, every moment of it.

At last our plane lands at the Stockholm Airport. We stopped in Romania. Now we have to spend the night on the ferry and then travel home from the harbour.

Shakho Nagishbandy’s Story

I have had the privilege of getting to know a wise Kurdish man. He has lived in Finland already for over 20 years. I asked him a few questions on Kurdistan and he was happy to answer them.

1. What is the present situation in Kurdistan like?

“The situation in Kurdistan has improved from what it was when Saddam ruled. The situation is developing step by step politically, economically and socially. Political democracy has been advancing since we Kurds got our own parliament and government. Politics has become more positive. People’s income has increased. There is still poverty. It takes time to get rid of it totally.

The situation of the society is good, even excellent, if compared to the situation of Kurds in the other parts of Iraq, in Turkey, Iran or Syria.”

2. You have been involved in peace work. Could you talk a little about that?

“As soon as I came to live in Finland, I wanted to talk about my people to Finns. I thought that associations and societies would be the best way to go about this. I wanted to join a Finnish peace organization, because peace is important to me and to the other Kurds. Our occupiers and enemies have always chosen to wage war against us, although we have always preferred to use peaceful methods for solving problems. Saddam’s government used every weapon to get rid of us.

In the peace conferences which I have attended, I have tried to explain to the other participants, how important peace is to us all and especially to Kurds. For example in the Mexico City Conference in 1998, which was about mines and the handicapped, I talked about the mines that Saddam's government sowed in Kurdistan. Every day many people lost body parts or their lives because of the 15-20 million mines Saddam sowed in Kurdistan. They still endanger the lives of children and country people.

In 2004 I took part in the Hiroshima Conference in Japan. I showed the other participants photographs proving that Saddam bombed the city of Halabja with chemical weapons. Thousands of people lost their lives in a few minutes. Halabja and Hiroshima are similar cases. Many participants had never heard of the chemical bombing of Halabja.

I have taken part also in many other conferences around the world. The next one will be in Oslo on September 22, 2010.

3. The world is often made to think of the Kurds as a warlike, wild people. Is this true?

Unfortunately the world does think that the Kurds are wild and warlike, but this is not true. The enemies of the Kurds have lots of political power. They pay millions to the mass media to present the Kurds to Europeans as a wild people. It is a good thing that Kurdistan has opened her doors for people to come and see if we are wild and warlike or if we are peaceful.

Of course there are old war pictures still on the Internet. It takes time, before we are able to forget all the evil we have suffered.

4. Would you tell a bit about yourself and your visits to Kurdistan?

*My name is **Shakawan Shekh Muhamad**, but I get called Shakho Nagishbandy. I come from a religious Kurdish family, from an Iraqi village called Mwylyan, which lies 15 kilometres east from the city of Rawanduz. Saddam's government destroyed our village three times. My father built our home many times, but unfortunately it was destroyed. I left Kurdistan at the age of 23. I have lived in Finland for 20 years. I have visited Kurdistan many times. I have brought help to them with for example **Kalle Augustson**. I have also visited Kurdistan with the Finnish Television and with a delegation from the newspaper Vasabladet.*

Shakho Sadig has written a book about his life called "From Kurdistan to Ekenäs". Both he and his wife have done a lot for the Kurds. They understand what peace means. Like the other Kurds it is what they most deeply desire.

Epilogue

I am thankful for the open doors I have been privileged to enter to see with my own eyes, how the Kurds live. They are so peaceful! Starting from taxi drivers, I see these people have entered a new, better period. They are happy to have the war in the past. They wish before all else that there will be no more wars. What else do we human beings desire than to live our lives in peace, eating our bread surrounding with our families and friends in a beautiful, free country?

Many new flowers have sprouted in my heart. I can hear different lullabies in my ears, the quiet, fragile music of hope. The world is beautiful and each one of us valuable and worthy of love.

May God bless Kurdistan!

I wish to express my thanks to everyone I met,

Kaisu Rissanen



Author in front of Kurdistan Regional Government's parliament