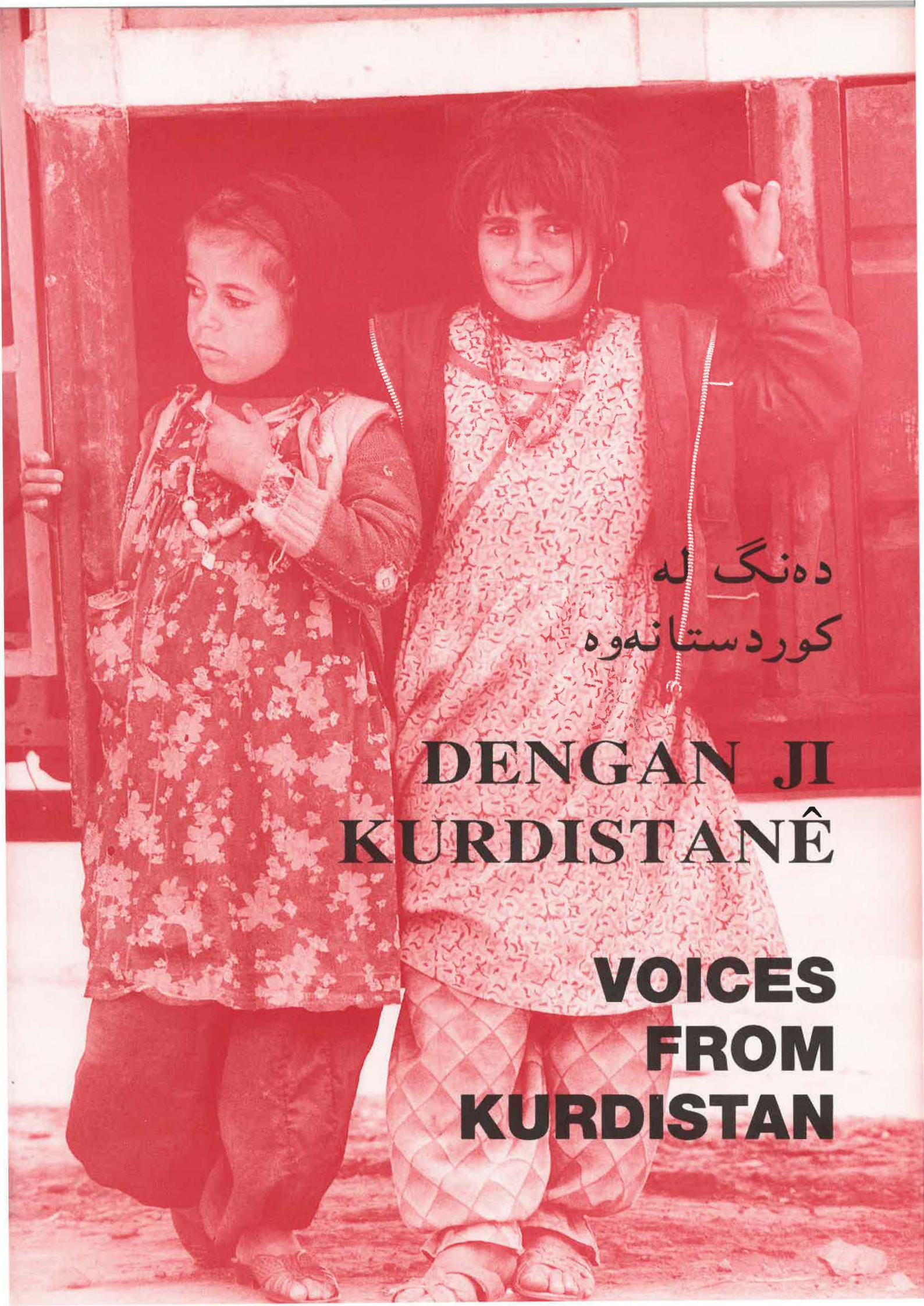

دەنگ لە کوردستانەوە

DENGAN JI KURDISTANÊ

VOICES FROM KURDISTAN

VOICES FROM KURDISTAN

Edited by Rachel Warner, Education Officer, Minority Rights Group

Rachel Warner has a degree in Psychology and a Diploma in Education (Language in Education in a Multicultural Society). She has taught English in India, and English as a Second Language to bilingual students in secondary schools in Leicester and High Wycombe. She was Head of the ESL Department of an inner London comprehensive school before becoming MRG's Education Officer in February 1990. She is the author of seven multicultural books for young children.

The Minority Rights Group was founded in the 1960s. Its principal aim is to secure justice for minority (and non-dominant majority) groups suffering discrimination by:

- *Researching, publishing and distributing the facts as widely as possible to raise public knowledge and awareness of minority issues worldwide;*
- *Advocating and publicising all aspects of the human rights of minorities to draw attention to violations and to aid the prevention of dangerous and destructive conflicts;*
- *Educating, through its research, publications and schools programme, on issues relating to prejudice, discrimination and group conflicts.*

The Minority Rights Group has been, since 1975, a constant publisher on the situation of the Kurds and has warned repeatedly of threats to them. MRG has frequently raised the case of the Kurds at the United Nations and has argued for their rights and protection.

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

These autobiographical accounts by Kurdish refugees were collected in English, Kurdish and Turkish by English as a Second Language teachers in London schools and by Sami Shoresh of the Kurdish Cultural Centre. After being written in English all were translated into Kurdish, in either the Kurmanji or Sorani scripts. An editorial decision was made to correct the English of the stories where necessary without losing the flavour of the original account. If there are any minor factual inaccuracies in the testimonies they have been left unaltered.

Suggested uses of Voices from Kurdistan

This book will be a valuable resource for English teachers encouraging autobiographical writing (National Curriculum English AT3) at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. The variation in complexity and length of the accounts makes the book very suitable for use at different Key Stages. Some of the accounts would support teaching about migration for National Curriculum Geography AT4. The book raises issues of human rights, being a refugee, living in a multi-cultural society, prejudice and discrimination, and so is a useful resource for the Cross-Curricular theme of Education for Citizenship, particularly to support the components 'A Pluralist Society' and 'Being a Citizen'. In addition it could be used for teaching the GCSE Integrated Humanities unit 'Persecution and Prejudice'. This dual-text book will meet a pressing need for relevant materials to use with Kurdish students and as such will be invaluable for English as a Second Language teachers, Kurdish language teachers and adult education tutors.

INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

There are approximately 15,000 Kurdish refugees in Britain, mostly from Turkey and Iraq. Who are the Kurds and why have so many fled from their native Kurdistan?

The Kurds are the fourth most numerous people in the Middle East and one of the largest minority groups in the world. They do not possess a state of their own but live in the mainly mountainous region, known as Kurdistan, where Iran, Turkey and Iraq meet. An old Kurdish proverb says: "The Kurds have no friends except the mountains." There are approximately 22.6 million Kurds, with 10.8 million in Turkey, 4.1 million in Iraq, 5.5 million in Iran and also 1 million in Syria, 0.5 million in the USSR and 0.7 million elsewhere. The Kurds are probably descended from Indo-European tribes which settled in the region 4,000 years ago. The Kurdish city of Arbil is one of the oldest cities in the world.

Few factors appear to unify Kurdish society. The Kurds do not share one religion: although the majority are Sunni Muslims, some are Shi'ite Muslim, some are Alevi and Yazidi (sects of Islam) and some are Zoroastrian. They have their own language, which is an Indo-European one and is divided into two main dialects with two different scripts (Kurmanji, using the Roman script in Turkey, and Sorani using the Arabic script in Iraq and Iran), and various sub-dialects and localised variations. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the Kurdish people have their own distinctive culture stemming from a tribal nomadic or semi-nomadic past. Until quite recently, many tribes earned a living from pastoralism and trade in livestock and animal skins. Despite political repression and urbanisation, Kurdish society still has a strong tribal component. Even in towns, kinship loyalty remains extremely important.

HISTORY

Before the First World War, Kurdistan was divided between the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Empire. The Ottomans and the Persians allowed the Kurdish tribes almost complete autonomy in return for keeping the peace on the rugged border area between the two empires. From the mid-19th century, using rifles and later machine guns and warplanes, the governments of the region increasingly took control of the border themselves and brought these previously independent tribes under direct control. Uprisings by Kurdish leaders began in the early 19th century, but later revolts were increasingly influenced by European theories of nationalism, which held that people with their own language, culture and traditions should be allowed to govern themselves.

In the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920, Britain and her allies proposed to divide up the defeated Ottoman Empire into a number of separate states and territories. One of these was to have been Kurdistan. However the Turkish government refused to agree to the treaty and under the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, the area inhabited by the Kurds was divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria and the USSR. The plan for a separate Kurdistan was dropped.

AN UNWANTED MINORITY

In each of the new post-war countries, Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the Kurds found they were treated with suspicion, and pressured to conform to the ways of the majority. Their old independence and traditional pastoralist way of life was rapidly reduced. They were expected to learn the main language of the state in which they found themselves (Turkish, Farsi or Arabic), to abandon their Kurdish identity and to accept Turkish, Iranian or Arab nationalism. As a tribal and traditionally minded society the Kurds wanted to be left in peace, but at that time few were nationalists. Some tribes tried to resist the encroachment of government while their rivals benefited from co-operating with the government. But an increasing number of Kurds felt the deliberate undermining of their cultural identity and this slowly forged a sense of Kurdish national identity.

TURKEY

Ever since the foundation of the Turkish Republic by Kemal Atatürk in 1923, the Kurds have been denied their identity. In 1924, all Kurdish schools, associations and publications were banned.

During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, Kurds in both countries took the opportunity, while the national armies were involved in fighting the war, to establish independent areas. In 1983 Iraqi-backed Iranian Kurds were defeated by Iranian forces and expelled from Iranian territory. However, Iraqi Kurds were more successful in their struggle and the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the newer Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), established control of a large area of northern Iraq, which tied down a quarter of Iraq's army. In 1987 and early 1988 the KDP and PUK, with Iranian support, began to advance slowly through Iraqi Kurdistan.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in August 1988 meant that the full force of the Iraqi Army, including the Republican Guard, turned on the Kurds. The Iraqi troops then drove KDP and PUK forces almost out of Iraqi Kurdistan using gas attacks, massive bombardment and the threat of shooting all Kurds found in prohibited areas, in what international observers have described as an official policy of genocide. On 16 March 1988, over 6,000 Kurdish people were killed in a chemical weapons attack on the town of Halabjah. (One of the Kurdish voices in this book, that of Asir Shawkat, tells of his escape from Halabjah, in the account entitled 'My Life'.) Iraqi troops made further gas attacks against Kurdish targets. In addition, a systematic attempt to drive the Kurds from Kurdistan was initiated by the Iraqi government. By August 1989, over 3,000 villages had been razed to the ground, over 60,000 Kurdish civilians had fled across the border into Turkey and as many had crossed into Iran where they were housed in squalid refugee camps along the border. Some of these refugees sought asylum in Britain.

THE GULF WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

After the end of the Gulf War in March 1991, there was a popular Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussain and his forces in Kurdistan, hoping for victory after Iraq's defeat. For a few weeks the peshmergas controlled large parts of Kurdistan, including the important oil town of Kirkuk. However, Iraqi forces launched a massive counter-offensive, killing thousands of Kurds. Hundreds of thousands more made the hazardous journey over the mountains towards Turkey and Iran, fearing the savagery of Saddam Hussain and a possible repeat of the chemical attacks of 1988. The Turkish authorities denied the great majority of Kurds access, despite the bitterly cold conditions on the mountains. Iran, in contrast, erected emergency camps along its western border, while many Iranian Kurds in border areas opened their homes, schools and mosques to the fugitives. On both borders, thousands of Kurds, mainly babies and young children, died of exposure or gastro-enteritis.

Embarrassed at this unexpected result to the Gulf War, the United States and Britain established 'safe havens' inside northern Iraq protected by their own forces. Perhaps as many as 300,000 refugees returned from the Turkish border to the safe havens or to other remote safe areas. In mid-April 1991 the Kurdish leaders opened negotiations with Baghdad, hoping to achieve a genuine autonomy agreement. Baghdad began to negotiate because of its weak position with sanctions still in place and the deployment of Coalition troops in Kurdistan. However, as time passed and Coalition forces began to hand over responsibilities to a lightly-armed UN observer force, Baghdad had less incentive for agreeing to Kurdish demands. The future of the Kurds in Iraq remains perilous. Without a political agreement between the Kurdish leadership and Baghdad, there is always a danger that Iraqi forces will seize Kurdish areas again.

Since the end of the Gulf War the Turkish military presence in Turkish Kurdistan has increased. Human rights activists in Diyarbakr and other cities have been harassed and killed while Turkish planes have pursued the PKK into Iraqi territory.

This book contains the voices of Kurdish refugees who are students at schools in London. They fled Iraq and Turkey before the mass exodus of early 1991 from Kurdistan, but like all Kurdish refugees they long for a free and safe Kurdistan. As Kurds in Turkey have been forbidden to learn Kurdish in school or to write their language, Kurdish students in exile from Turkey may see their language written down for the very first time in this book.

Rachel Warner *August 1991*

KURDISH IDENTITY

MYSELF

My name is Shilan. I am a Kurdish girl and I am 10 years old. My family and I can't go back to Kurdistan because of the war between Kurdistan and Iraq. I have wanted to see my country very much. Many Kurdish men and women are fighting for our country.

First when I came to England I could not speak English so I had no idea what people were talking about. I only knew my ABC and how to count up to 10 in English - I could only speak Kurdish.

We have different festivals. One festival is Nawroz. Nawroz is the time when the family gets together. It is the first day of Spring in our calendar. We lay out fire and dance around it. Our religion is Muslim and we are not allowed to eat pork. Alcohol is not allowed either in our religion. We have to pray five times a day and we have to wash our hands and feet to pray.

Shilan, 10 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

KURDISTAN

My name is Veian. My father went to Kurdistan when I was born, and then I came to England. I wish I was in Kurdistan - I would be very happy to be there. I wish there was peace in Kurdistan, and I would like to see all my family there.

Veian, 8 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

IN EXILE

I was born in Syria. My mum, four sisters and my uncles and aunts and I lived there for seven years. Every two years I would see my dad for one to three months. He was in Kurdistan. On 20th November 1984 we came to live in Britain. It wasn't very nice not knowing the language or understanding it. The religion was quite different too. In 1986 we heard that my dad got wounded by a bomb that was on the road for him and his friends. Little by little I got to learn English.

Although I am Kurdish, I have never been to Kurdistan. I would very much like to go there but right now I can't go because of the fighting that's going on. I have only seen Kurdistan in pictures. I am very proud that I am a Kurdish girl.

Zozan Masum, 11 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

Nawroz - *Zawen* نەورۆز

KURDISH FOOD

All Kurdish people know that traditional Kurdish food is really nice. One of the nicest Kurdish foods is *kebab. Kebab* is made from meat, onion, black pepper and a little salt. Firstly you have to cut the meat into little pieces, squeeze it and add the onion, salt and pepper. Then you have to flatten it down with your hands and grill it.

Another kind of traditional Kurdish food is *dolma. Dolma* is a special food in Kurdistan and it is our main meal. It is made from rice, mince, onion, aubergine, tomato and vine leaves. You take out the inside of the aubergine and mix everything together and then you cook it in a saucepan with water for an hour and a half. It's delicious.

Taban Shoresh, 8 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

KURDISH CLOTHES

There are two kinds of traditional Kurdish clothes - one for men and one for women. The women's dresses are different colours and have beautiful

Rachel Warner/MRG

هززان و تابان له گەڵ خوشکە بچووکەکەیان دا لە لەندەن

Hozan and Taban Shoresh
with their baby sister at home in London

patterns on. They are long. The men's clothes are made of nice material - they are trousers and a top and we have a long piece of material that we tie round our waist. Men also wear a hat. If we go to a Kurdish party we wear special Kurdish clothes.

Some people don't even know about Kurdish clothes. I think it would be nice if people knew our traditional clothes.

Hozan Shoresh, 11 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

LIFE IN KURDISTAN

I was born in Kasanli village which is in Kahraman Maras in Kurdistan in Turkey. There are six of us in our family. I am the oldest of the four children. Their names are Rustem, Mehmet and Nevzat. Rustem is 12, Mehmet is nine and Nevzat is five.

Our village had about 700 houses in it. The village earned its income by farming and keeping sheep and cattle. Everyone had one or two vineyards. We had a vineyard and a field. I started primary school in the village school when I was six years old. In 1984 my family moved to Mersin and I started my secondary education in Mersin. I attended school for a year.

At the end of the school year I did very badly in three subjects and I didn't take the exams. I left school in 1986. It was the summer break and I went back to the village. I was there for a month and a half. I stayed at my grandfather's. He had animals, orchards, fields and a vineyard. At the end of that holiday I went back to Mersin. I helped my father. He sold household goods. I helped him and then he bought goods for me to sell. I did this for three years. My father came to England and I took over selling his goods for five months until I came to

Rupert Conant

KSTUKAL LI KURDISTAN DA
Farming in Kurdistan

England too. Now I go to Hackney Downs School and my father goes to English language classes at Hackney College.

Ismail Ozdemi, 15 years old
Hackney Downs School, London

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

A CHAIN ROUND MY LEG

I've been living with Turks all my life. We would pretend that we didn't hear what they were saying and just put up with it. Before even knowing what Kurdish or Turkish was, I knew we were looked down upon. Even though I'm Kurdish, I haven't got a clue how to speak the language. You don't get a chance to speak Kurdish in Turkey anyway. When it came to schools, Kurdish children were as ambitious as the Turkish ones. But being Kurdish made it much more difficult to get on well.

When I was small, I would wonder how long this situation would last, but so many years have passed and nothing's changed - everything is just the same. As I get older, I'm beginning to see things more clearly. Everywhere I go and everything I do, being Kurdish is like a chain round my leg constantly pulling me back. I'm sure Turkish parents tell their children that we were bad news, although I never heard them do that. I'm sure if my parents had talked to me about Turkish children in the same way, I would have done the same to them. The Turkish children wouldn't stop swearing at us.

Despite all this, I've never been ashamed of being Kurdish. If you could chose after death what you would come back as, I would want to come back as a Kurd. I'm sure all Kurds feel the same way.

A 14-year-old Kurdish student from Barnet, in England for 11 months, written in Turkish

I'M PROUD OF BEING A KURD

I have lived with Turks for as long as I can remember. We used to put up with everything they said. When I was young, without even knowing what being Kurdish or Turkish was, we were looked down upon. They called us names I dare not repeat.

It's illegal to speak Kurdish in Turkey. We don't even know or speak our own mother tongue. They punished those people who spoke Kurdish, so nobody could speak it through fear.

When it came to schools there was segregation everywhere between Kurds and Turks. The teachers would just make it obvious. When we were young, we could never understand why they treated us in that way. As we got older and saw what was going on, we were beginning to find answers and really understand things. We came all the way to Britain to escape from being branded a 'Kurd'. But we haven't even escaped from that label here. I still feel the need to stick up for myself as a Kurd and deep down I'm very happy to be Kurdish. I would rather die than be Turkish. I'm proud of being a Kurd.

A 14-year-old Kurdish student from Barnet, in England for 14 months, written in Turkish

BEING KURDISH

Before the RE exam I quarrelled with a boy. He was very stupid. He told the teacher, "Teyfik is Kurdish." After the exam that boy laughed when he saw me but I didn't know why. I thought I did very well in the exam, and I thought I could get 8 or 9. The next week the teacher read out the students' marks and he told me I got 4. Everybody else got 7, 8, or 9. Someone got 10, but I got 4. Some students said, "Can I look at my test paper?" The teacher said, "Yes, you can look." So I said, "Can I look?" The teacher looked in my eyes and said, "Sit down, Teyfik, what are you looking for? You got 4. Why are you looking?" I didn't see my paper and I saw in school again all injustice comes to us.

A girl came to my school. She was very pretty. I had never seen a girl like this before. One night we met and we went outside. I went up to her. She looked into my eyes. I couldn't talk to her, it was like someone had cut my tongue. But she said, "Hello." I couldn't talk, I was looking at her eyes. She said, "Are you OK?" I came to myself and I talked and we met every day. She liked me. Her name was Semra. She was different to the other students. She helped people. Her father was in the police. I never liked the police, but when I saw Semra I couldn't listen to my family. Last month I had a quarrel with a boy. That boy was very jealous. He told Semra, "Teyfik is Kurdish," and she didn't come that night. I went to school and talked to Semra. She didn't look at my face. She said, "Are you Kurdish?" I said "Yes, I am." She was looking at my face. She said, "You will never see me again."

Teyfik Has, 15 years old
Ravenscourt School, Barnet

OPPRESSION

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF KURDISTAN

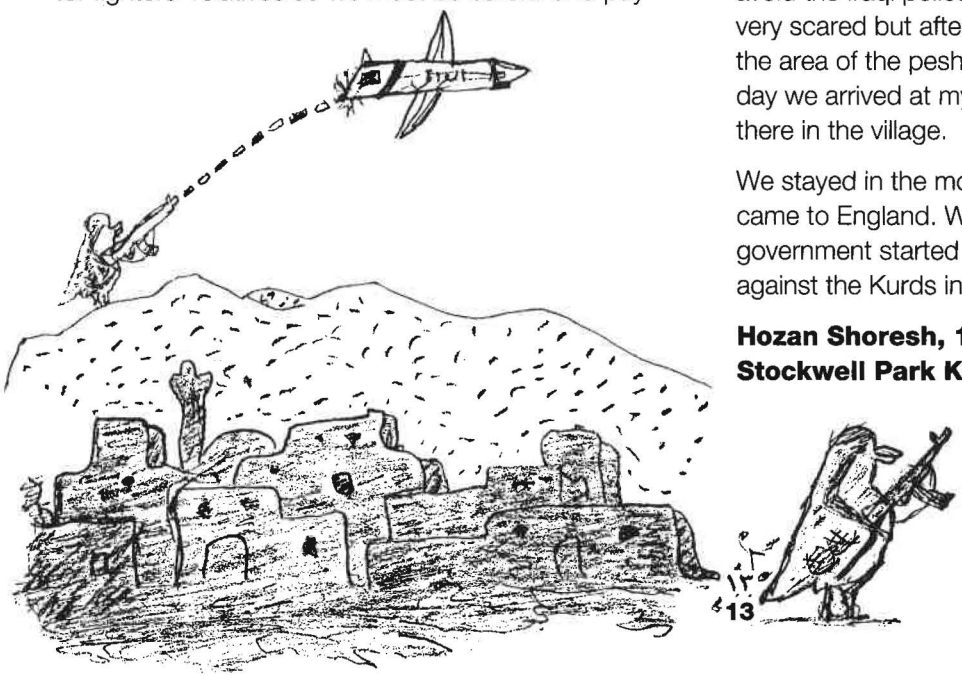
It was a terrible time in my country because they put my mum in prison. I was very scared because they were looking for me to put me in prison too. My dad was a peshmerga, which means a fighter who defends his people. Because of my dad the Iraqi government tried to hurt me and my mum and my sister.

After 10 days they let my mum out of prison. We went to another city far away from the government eyes and my mum tried to take us to school but after less than one week our relatives in Arbil sent us a message that the police had started to search for fighters' relatives so we must be careful and pay attention to our security. My sister and I were frightened because we knew they were going to come.

We were so scared and my mum told us that it would be better for us if we went to stay with my dad in the mountains of Kurdistan far away from the control of the Iraqi government. I remember so clearly that morning when we started to go back secretly to our nice city, Arbil, then after staying for a night in my grandfather's house we started our journey towards the mountains of Kurdistan secretly. It was a really hard journey, and we had to avoid the Iraqi police forces. My sister and I were very scared but after two days when we arrived in the area of the peshmergas we felt safe. The next day we arrived at my dad's village and we stayed there in the village.

We stayed in the mountains until 1987 when we came to England. We left because the Iraqi government started to use chemical weapons against the Kurds in the mountains of Kurdistan.

Hozan Shoresh, 11 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London



گوندیکی کوردی لە چیاکانی کوردستان دا

Kurdish village in the mountains
Hozan Shoresh

MY LIFE

Whoever wants to write his autobiography has to start from the very beginning of his life. For a Kurdish boy such as me it is necessary to start with what they've told me.

Before I was born my whole family - my mum, my brothers and my grandfather - were put in prison by the Iraqi government. They put my family in prison because my father was a peshmerga - a fighter for the Kurds. The prison was in the south of Iraq, far away from our city of Halabjah in Kurdistan. Hundreds of other Kurdish families were in the prison too.

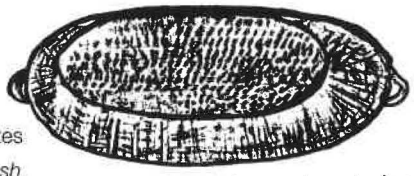
I was born on the 19th December 1976. My mother told me I was born in prison. My birthplace was an old hall in the prison. The building had been an abbatoir before the government made it into a prison. The hall where I was born had been where they had cut up the animals.

It was a sad night when I was born. As I told you I was born in a hall with 400 Kurdish women and children and old people. My mum said that the families in the hall used blankets to make screens to make private places for themselves. So I can say I was born in a room made from blankets! When I was born no doctors saw my mother and nobody gave her any medicine. For four days I stayed without clothes, just covered with a blanket because the government didn't allow anyone to visit us or bring any kind of clothes for me. After four days my mother made some baby clothes for me from the long cuffs from other people's clothes (traditional Kurdish clothes have long strips of cloth for cuffs which are wrapped round the bottom of the sleeve to keep it tight).

sleeve - *Taban Shoresh* قەقنیانە

When I was seven days old my family named me Asir which means 'prisoner'. The prison officers tried to get my mum to change my name but she wouldn't change it because she wanted to keep this name as a reminder of what the Ba'ath government had done to our Kurdish people.

My mother cried a lot at that time - she was sad and in a bad psychological condition. She made a basket for me out of the straw covering of the baskets of dates sent to the prison for us to eat.



basket of dates
Taban Shoresh
حەسیری لە کەڵاکی دارخورما دروست کراو

The conditions in the prison became worse day by day and we stayed in that prison for two years until I was two years old. During these two years we ate only once a day, and occasionally twice a day. My mum said that we ate dry bread and dates and sometimes soups. Because the food was bad, many prisoners became ill and many of them died.

In 1979, when the government gave up hope of catching my father, they let us out of prison on bail. We returned to our village in Sharazur, in the area of Halabjah. My village is four kilometres away from Halabjah.

After a short time the government started to catch Kurdish families again and unfortunately they caught my grandfather and beat and tortured him so badly that half his body was paralysed. They tortured him to find out where my father was hiding. Because I have mentioned my grandfather, I'll say now that he lives in a camp of the refugees from Halabjah in Iran.

My mother and brothers and I had to leave our house and city and relatives to go to live in the mountains of Kurdistan near where my father was. We had to move from place to place because the government kept shelling the area. When we got to school age at seven years my mother wanted to send us to school. There were no schools in the mountains so my mum had to send us to school in the Kurdish cities under the control of the Iraqi government. She put each of us three brothers in a different school and we had to change our names so the Iraqi government wouldn't know that we were the family of a peshmerga. We stayed with some relatives in the cities so we could go to school. If the government had known we were going to school they would not only have caught us but they would have caught the teacher too, as relatives of peshmergas are not allowed to study - or to work or live freely.

One of my brothers, Aram, was studying in a school and the government found out that he was the son of a peshmerga. The army came to school and told the teacher, who was Kurdish, they wanted Aram. The teacher hid Aram in a big box and told him not to move until the army went. The soldiers said, "If you don't give us Aram, we will take you instead of him." They put such pressure on the teacher that he had to give over the box with Aram in it. So he said sarcastically, "Take this champion fighter then," as he handed over the small boy in the box. When the soldier saw the sadness of the teacher and heard his speech, he said, "What can I do, it's an order from the higher authorities? But even if they hang

me I can't take this small boy." Some time later some other soldiers caught the teacher as revenge for this incident and he was transferred from his teaching job to another kind of job.

While we were at school we were afraid to meet new people or go to the doctors because we were afraid we would be asked whose son we were. When anyone asked us this question we tried to run away, or say a false name. When we were aware that someone knew we came from a family of peshmergas, we changed our school. But in spite of these difficulties my brothers and I were good students and the teachers liked us. Sometimes we would have preferred to be lazy because if you're clever the other children tease you and we didn't want to attract attention to ourselves of any kind. We stayed hidden for three years in school.

In the summer holidays from school we lived with our parents in the mountains and the rest of the year we went to the cities under the control of the Iraqi government to continue our studies. Sometimes when we were in the mountains we hid from the bombs that the Iraqi government dropped, in tunnels. We took medicines, food and towels because sometimes we had to stay for some time in the tunnels. We made the towels wet to protect us from burns from chemical weapons. We had to wake up before sunrise to go down into the tunnel, because the Iraqi aeroplanes came at sunrise. Another problem was the scorpions and snakes down in the tunnels. We had to drink stale, warm water from barrels. We couldn't play with other children because we had to hide. The government wouldn't just leave us to live a normal life. Friends and relatives from other areas brought us food because we were afraid that the government had put poison in the food that it had sent.

The government bulldozed our village and destroyed it in 1986. After the people had built it up, they came again in 1987 and destroyed it again. So my family had to move to the town of Halabjah. In March 1988 my brother and I were living in Halabjah with relatives. The Iraqi government destroyed Halabjah with chemical weapons.

Over 5,000 Kurdish people were killed at Halabjah and thousands were injured. My brother and I were saved from death because a few hours before the bombing we had gone out of the town to a village for some reason. Then the Iraqi government started bombing the villages around Halabjah with chemicals too. We had to go with thousands of other people towards the border with Iran. I walked with my grandmother and brother. Nobody took anything with them - we left all our things in

Frank Spooner Pictures/GAMMA

دوای بۆمباران کردنە کیمیاویەکەی هەڵەبجە

Kurds gassed by the Iraqi chemical attack on Halabjah

Halabjah. When we got to Iran they took us to a camp and gave us a tent. At the camp we found our mother and grandfather.

We lived in the camp but my father stayed fighting the Iraqi forces. While we were in the camp the Iraqi government started to get its agents to put poison in the food and water in the camp. Because of that my father decided to sell everything and borrowed money from friends and found a way for us to leave Iran.

I arrived in London on 17th September 1989 with my mum, dad and brothers. From that time until now I've been studying in Harrow. I'm learning English. We try to adjust to the life here, we wait for our country, Kurdistan, to get its freedom. At that time I'll go back with my family to live with my friends and relatives. And also I'll say thank you to those that helped us in those bad times.

Asir Shawkat, 14 years old
Stockwell Park Kurdish School, London

ئاوارەکانی شاری هەڵەبجە

Kurdish refugees from Iraqi chemical attacks

James Nachtwey/MAGNUM

LEAVING KURDISTAN

When I left Kurdistan in Iraq I was sad because I knew I would miss my family. After I left Iraq we went to Iran. I told myself that Iran was nice, but I was still thinking about my family in Iraq. I asked my dad why we were in Iran and so he told me that if we were in Kurdistan we would have to hide and I said that I understood. I asked if we would ever go back and he said he didn't know.

The day we left Iran I was happy because I thought we would go back to Iraq, but my dad said we were not going back to Iraq, we were going to London instead. I said that's nice, but that wasn't true, I just said that to make my family happy.

When we got to London I said to myself we are here at last. They took us to a detention centre and I asked, "Why are they taking us to jail? What have we done wrong?" My mum said, "Don't worry, your uncle will get us out." After a while he did and we went to my uncle's house. I couldn't stop looking at my uncle's house - it was so lovely.

Gona Faraj, 11 years old
Camberwell Kurdish School, London

COMING TO BRITAIN

When I came here everything was so strange to me in a place that I had never seen before. I couldn't understand the strange language. I was very sad because I wanted to go home. I was staying in my uncle's house with my mum. It was horrible. I had to stay for four months with nothing to do. I used to cry every day because I was so sick. I couldn't stand it. It was like a nightmare. I wanted to go out and play with other children but I was so scared. I felt like a prisoner and I used to think that I didn't belong to this place.

Four months later my dad came to London and I was pleased because we didn't need to stay with my uncle any more. After a while my parents started to work in a factory and I started primary school. On the first day I started school I was very scared but the teacher introduced me to the class and she asked who would like to sit with me and many hands went up. At first I didn't understand why teachers didn't hit children here like they do in Turkey. I stopped crying all the time and I had a feeling things were going to work out.

Ummuhan, 12 years old
Stoke Newington School, London

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Iraqi Kurdish refugee children
near Iranian border, April 1991