

Arif Qurbany

Zara

An Eyewitness Account of
Halabja and Anfal
Genocide

Translated from Kurdish by Abdulkarim Uzeri



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated

Remazan Ozturk

*The photographer, who took the
unforgettable picture of
Halabja(Omar Khawar) during
chemical attacks of 1988*

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INTRODUCTION

When I started collecting information for my first volume of a series of books on the Anfal crimes, I was determined to be accurate and realistic; going after the truth, all the truth, and depend on very reliable sources.

To me the most reliable sources were the witnesses who had been subjected to the genocidal operations but somehow could survive and rejoin their families or the remaining members of their relatives. Indeed some of them had lost their whole family! From this point of view, I had to visit villages and towns which officially, according to the presidential decrees of Saddam Hussein's government, became areas of extermination of the Kurdish nation. Beside these Kurdish victims, I tried to meet Arabs who participated in the executions of those crimes

and I succeeded in interviewing a bulldozer driver who had buried the Anfal victims. As he put it, some were buried alive, and among them was a 35 day old baby.

During my search, I could meet an elderly lady in the Garmian province who was rounded up at gun-point and taken along with her family to the Topzawa concentration camp. There in the camp, they were separated according to gender and age. She herself was sent to one of the most notorious prisons in the history of Iraq known as 'Nugra Selman.' The lady started telling what she had witnessed, "My son and I spend six months living on small pieces of rotten bread, but when some people from Halabja were transferred who had brought some rice with them, I couldn't stop trying to get a small portion of cooked rice. It smelled so wonderful!"

The fact that there were people from Halabja in Nugra Selman prison, and that they too were subjected to the Anfal genocidal

campaigns, was new to me and the other Anfal experts. First of all, I wanted to make sure that the old woman had meant what she said. She was very confident about her memory, and told many more facts. But what she didn't know was whether there were survivors among them or not. She didn't get any of their addresses or the name of a single well-known family.

Thus, I had to work hard to discover these new dimensions of the Anfal campaign. What casted doubt about the credibility of the story was the fact that the gassing raids on Halabja had happened well before the start of the Anfal operations.

I started looking for people who might have some knowledge on this matter but couldn't find anyone. It was well known that the chemical attacks on Halabja had happened well before the first Anfal operation and the inhabitants were either dead or injured and transferred to Iran for treatment. That means Halabja was deserted! So where did these

people come from? The only solution was to go Halabja itself and try to meet some survivors, survivors of both crimes.

For me it was impossible to visit Halabja because at that time it was under the control of Islamic extremists (Ansar Al-Islam). Indeed, I did not feel safe in my home town Chamchamal either. Those Ansar adherents were in there too but they were not so strong.

I didn't give up. I continued making my enquiries but I could only visit Halabja after its liberation by the Patriotic Union Forces (this liberation happened after the Ansar crimes on Awayee-Hama village near Halabja). I then made several visits to Halabja but I couldn't discover anything. I asked some friends to help and call me back when they found anyone who could help. On September 7 2002, one of those friends informed that he had found a family of one of the Nugra Selman victims.

I visited Halabja again and Farouq Jamil came along with me. My friend Lukman Aziz was already there. A member of the Patriotic Union put us up in his house and found the address for us. On the same day we found two more families. We wasted no time, and managed to record these three important meetings in a single afternoon.

In March 2003, I added these interviews to my third volume of Anfal Crimes. But because the volume was already bulky and these incredible stories weren't in a very prominent place, I decided to write separate books about each of them. It seemed that a single book might be enough for all three of them. However, as the stories were interesting and had happened in different ways, a separate book for each story seemed more appropriate. The sub-title of 'Halabja- Anfal Eyewitness' was chosen for each of them.

It is of significance to mention that those three ladies were gassed on the same day in the same place but they were taken by

different means and at different times to Iran. Even in Iran they were housed in different refugee camps: so each one has her own unique story.

All of them were deceived by false promises from Saddam Hussein that they would be resettled in Hawraman. But all of them were put onto buses and transferred against their will to Nugra Selman prison! They were in different convoys, faced different humiliations and tortures. It is noteworthy, that the gassed victims of Hawraman and Halabja were transferred to Iran on humanitarian basis but they were handed over to Saddam's regime as POWs. In this case, the United Nations and Human Rights Organizations should have supervised the exchange process and ensured their safe return to their homes.

Arif Qurbany

FOREWORD

The Ba'ath regime's campaigns against the Kurdish people were numerous and included a wide range of crimes.

The campaigns started with Arabization of inhabited areas in the southern part of Kurdistan including Kirkuk city and several towns like Khankin, Makhmur and Sengal. The original Kurdish inhabitants were forced out of their homes without being allowed to take their basic necessities, while the Arabs who occupied these houses received them for free, over and above the fact that they had already been given cash as an inducement to reside in Kurdistan. (It's worth mentioning here that Arabization was first commenced by the

British authorities in the 1920s, but those evicted Kurdish families were not recorded.)

The second main campaign was directed against the Barzanis. Thousands of Barzani families were forced out of their towns and villages and were gathered in collective settlements under military control. In 1983, eight thousand young men were rounded up at gun-point and taken to some unknown destinations in the south of Iraq. Thereafter, they all disappeared, and even foreign diplomatic efforts had failed to trace a single person. Reports from Iraqi military sources indicate that they were used as guinea pigs to test the effects of various chemical agents.

Another horrific feature of the Iraqi campaign was the regime's resorting to chemical weapon against civilian populations! On April 16, 1987, a chemical attack on the Balisan valley near Erbil killed dozens of civilians. On March 16, 1988, a sustained chemical attack was launched on Halabja,

where roughly five thousand civilians died and many more thousands were seriously injured.

Shortly after the chemical attacks on Halabja, the true barbarian nature of Saddam's regime manifested itself. The excessive appetite for bloodshed came to light; when in broad daylight, the mass killing of Kurdish civilians started. Saddam Hussein and his cousin Ali Hassan ("Chemical Ali") insulted the holy book of Islam and executed one of the ugliest crimes in history by launching the 'Anfal' campaign to exterminate the Kurdish people (Anfal is the title of a chapter from the Quran). Only recently, in March 2011, has the Iraqi parliament formally recognized these crimes as Genocide.

Documents show that over 182,000 Kurds were either shot dead or buried alive in the Iraqi Desert. Tons of the original Iraqi documents about the Anfal operations are being kept in the library of the US Congress.

After the liberation of Kuwait, the whole world witnessed the mad attacks of Saddam's

defeated army on the Kurdish population that led millions of them to flee their homes in freezing weather and take refuge in the rocky mountains near the borders with Turkey and Iran. Cold weather, starvation, dehydration and lack of medical care caused a huge death toll. In addition, the regime's economic embargo on the Kurdish North hit hard on the social, political and economic infrastructure of Kurdistan.

All these crimes are somehow publicized and recognized by the world community. But what was not revealed and still unknown even to Kurdish Anfal experts was the 'anfal-ing' of the already afflicted people of Halabja after the gas attacks on March 16, 1988! The author of previous Anfal books, my friend Arif Qurbani, was shocked when he first heard from an old survivor of Nugra Selman prison that she had met scores of Halabja survivors there. This moved Mr. Qurbani deeply and impelled him to undertake a further long investigation to find the whole truth. The only

way to achieve that would be to find some Halabja survivors from both the chemical attack and the Anfal operation. The investigation took more than a year of hard work to find three survivors. Zara, the heroine of this story, was one of them. Her story makes one quiver just as when watching a gruesome horror movie!

Zara along with thousands of other Halabja victims were handed over by the Iranians to the Iraqi authorities at the border points in Kurdistan. This took place after the cease-fire following the eight year-long war between them. The cease-fire was sponsored by the United Nations Organization. This means that the UN should have supervised the exchange of the POWs. Zara and other Halabja refugees had been informed that the Iraqi government promised the Iranians that all the people of Halabja and Hawraman would be relocated in their own renovated homes. What then happened was that all these poor wounded

victims were taken to the Anfal fields instead, and almost all of them were massacred!

Zara's story demonstrates two facts. The first one is the degree to which the UN, the Red Crescent Organization of both Iraq and Iran and dozens of worldwide Human Rights Organizations were totally negligent. The second fact relates to the degree of the underhand subterfuge of the Iraqi regime and its army. These refugees should not have been left as defenseless prey to the tyranny of Baghdad, and medical care should have continued to the injured people inside Iraq as well as Iran.

The translator: ***Abdulkarim Uzeri***

Zara Tells Her Story

My full name is Zara Karim Rahim, born in 1966 in the town of Biara which is the official center of Hawraman district in the Iraqi Kurdistan. My family was a large one, we were five sisters and had three brother. My parents were hard working people. For generations, they had made their living by looking after orchards and fruit gardens.

We had a very happy life, we all loved each other. We worked together, helped each other in the orchards, and knitted woolen Kurdish shoes (known locally as Klash) at home. In addition, my father was an employee in the local municipality office getting a fairly good salary. We could afford anything we needed. Over and above this, our town was in important border commercial center, all the people had many different

opportunities to make more money. Day by day, the life of the people was improving.

This happiness didn't last long, the fight between the Kurdish forces had resumed after some years of truce. In 1974, when I was just eight years old, I saw the Iraqi warplanes bombarding the peaceful city of Halabja. After this the Iraqi army, for so-called security reasons, rounded up all the villagers near the Iranian border and forced them to leave their homes. Somehow, we as the inhabitants of Biara were lucky because we were neither bombed nor forcefully displaced.

The situation remained quiet in our area until the Iran- Iraq War started in 1980. As the villages and towns of Hawraman were in the front-line between the two countries and Kurds are not kin to either Arabs or Persians, our area was hit badly from both sides. Besides, our human rights and our protection

as civilians was not respected at all. We were used rather as materials for war propaganda. For example, each of the two sides cried out that so many defenseless civilian mostly women and children were killed by the enemy!

Our lives became at risk. Artillery shells, rockets and air force bombs were pouring onto our area. Nobody could have a quiet night's rest or gather together to eat as a family because the bombardment never stopped. Many families left Biara and sought safer locations, we too did the same but only on a temporary basis. We had often to go back and look after our property no matter how risky the situation was: we had to put something on the dining table for our big family.

The lowness of the Iraqi troops and intelligent officers appeared clearly when they gave no advice to their own people by telling them the

right time to go into hiding. Although the war was well planned out in advance and lasted a long time, they never bother to build shelters to protect the people. In fact, they did the opposite! They planted hundreds of thousands of landmines round our houses and in our fields! Many of these landmines exploded under the feet of our citizens. I myself became a permanent victim when I stepped on one of them in our orchard. As a result, I lost one of my legs. I was lucky that I didn't die because of several other wounds and heavy blood loss. I fell unconscious, I don't know how they managed to take me to the hospital because car drivers feared being chased by warplanes and couldn't use their cars.

Yes, I lost my leg but fleeing and hiding was almost part of our daily routine. Nothing enjoyable remained in our lives. Weddings and marriage celebrations were also targeted by the warring parties. Therefore, such social

occasions became like stories of the past. As for me, I became a disabled person at the age of 21. It's worth remembering that the Kurdish town of Zardasht in Iranian Kurdistan was the first target for gas attacks by the Iraqi regime. It's worth mentioning that a high ranking officer once said, "The main question is how many Kurds can be killed?" This was the Ba'ath party's clear policy from the time they had come to power in Baghdad.

On paper, we were Iraqi citizens; our men served in the Iraqi army and participated in several crazy wars but the regime never cared about our safety. They used to set up their rocket launchers and heavy artillery near our homes. So when the Iranians wanted to destroy the source of bombardment, our houses became the targets for offensive fire.

Health care was also very poor in our area so I had to be taken to Baghdad for further treatment and to get an artificial leg. To stay

in Baghdad and get treatment was very costly. My family had to pay every single penny because the government didn't want to help its' war victims. It took a relatively long time for my care in Baghdad so when we eventually came back to Biara we couldn't find our family. They had been obliged to move to Halabja because the shelling had intensified.

Halabja itself only remained safe for a few months. It fell under the control of the Kurdish fighters who fought for the liberation of our land and nation. The Iraqi regime took this as an opportunity to kill Kurds as much they could. So on March 16, 1988, Iraqi warplanes launched several chemical attacks on the historic city of Halabja. Several types of sophisticated poison gases were dropped on totally defenseless people. Most of them were elderly people, women and children because most of the youth had joined the

Peshmerga Kurdish fighters and were outside the town.

My family and I were not in Halabja during the attack. A few days earlier we had returned to Biara. I was staying in my sister's house when the raids on Halabja happened. A thick colorful smoked covered the sky of that area. We didn't know what it was, but hours later we saw people fleeing the town. We also saw groups of people carrying their injured and burnt victims. The number of afflicted people was awfully high. There wasn't enough transport around, even animals were used to move people but many more were just left behind. They all rushed to Iran to find a safe refuge. Eventually convoys of Iranian car came and transferred their brother Kurds to the other side of the border. Indeed on many occasions the Iranian Kurds came to rescue us.

The inhabitants of Biara feared the same fate. We too, fled to Iran in a big panic. My sister and I couldn't find our parents and rest of our family. Apparently we were on the same route to Iran but in different cars. The Iranians took my sister and I to the Pawa refugee camp and the rest of my family to Baramawa camp. The both camps were in Iran but not very far from the border. It's unforgettable that while the Iranians were risking their lives to save us, the Iraqi regime was sending more airplanes to kill its own people at the border!

Although Biara was not very far from Halabja and the chemical agents also reached our town, we only realized the scale of the disaster when we met afflicted people from Halabja in the same refugee camp. We saw victims with burst eyes, swollen bodies and burned skin. There were others who appeared healthy but all of a sudden would vomit and pass away. They narrated such horror stories that we had never heard before. There were

large homes with a basement filled with many families with no single survivors. There were some families completely obliterated, not even small children remaining alive. Even the birds didn't escape Saddam's massacre, they had fallen motionless to the ground.

Weeks and months passed but the side effects of the poisoning remained. The medical care in the Iranian camps was not very effective. It was the security measures that they knew best: going outside the camp and receiving visitors was very restricted. In addition to the difficult life inside the camps, the agony of missed members of the family and relative never ceased. The people were confused; should they go back to Iraq to look for them? But the risk was still there. There were some lucky people who could reunite with their missing ones inside Iran. These reunifications could have been easier and more effective if the Iranians had shown more flexibility.

Excursions from and visits to the camps were all arranged by an information center called 'Tablighat' in the Iranian language. They had loudspeakers to call the names of both guests and hosts. But only immediate family members were allowed in. The camp was built over a very wide area so the sound of the Tablighat speakers was not heard at the far ends of the camp. As a result, visitors often couldn't find their families. There were some water tanks installed in the camp but they were too far from our tent, it was a long way for the weak people to get adequate amounts of water. Probably I suffered more than others because of my health condition. To prepare food for the family, my sister had to climb up mountains to get wood for cooking. In the meantime, our efforts to get reunited with my parents in the other camp had failed.

Everybody in the camp was provided with an amount of rice and flour. The quality was not the best but we did not have any other choice. However, as life continued we got used to the minor problems but missing our people and our home remained a deep wound in our hearts.

My sister and I divided the work. She used to go and collect wood for cooking. The amount of kerosene that was given could only light a small lamp. Since there were a lot of people living in that camp, the wood in the permitted gathering area was soon totally consumed. The Iranians told us that if we were to go further, we would face the risk of landmines. I was very scared when I heard about that killing device again. Therefore I chose the other duty of fetching drinking water. Although the water tanks were not close to our place and I was very weak and depended on a stick, I still preferred to carry a heavy water container than go near the fields of landmines!

One time, when I was waiting in a long queue for getting water I heard the announcement speaker saying, "Zara, come to the information tent. You have visitors." As quickly as possible, I left my belongings and ran towards the tent. I kept falling over and standing up again without caring about my inefficient legs. This was against the advice given by the doctors. I was in a hurry to meet my parents, sisters and brothers. But to my great disappointment, the visitors had come to see another Zara not me! With sorrow and disappointment I left the tent to go back and stand in the water queue.

The longer the days passed the stronger became my home-sickness. The image of my parents never left my mind. The call for Zara to meet her visitors stimulated my longings. I was thinking to leave the camp unnoticed and take the long road to Baramawa camp. But that seemed impossible. First of all, I was a

handicapped young girl and wasn't familiar with area at all. Besides, I was very scared of repeating the landmine explosion. I was used to sit alone and blame my luck and think about the black day that separated our family. I couldn't think why the same Iranian convey had taken us to two different destinations.

A kind of rumour was going around that we would be sent back to our home. Without thinking of the consequences, I loved the idea, mainly because that would be a great chance for us to meet my parents again. One day the dream came true. We heard a page calling all the residents of the camp to gather and listen to an important message. Almost everybody in the camp was waiting for the same news. They were all fed up with lifestyle in the Iranian camps. I think that was the reason why they responded so quickly. The gathering was incredibly big. The speakers were Iranians and I expected them to say what was already in my mind.

Some of the faces were well known to us. They used to come along with foreign visitors and journalists, and show them the places and the people they wanted. This time there were some new faces among them. They were the delegation who would tell us the important news. One of them started talking. He did not introduce himself and we did not ask who he was either.

He started talking about the concern of the Tehran government to Halabja city and its afflicted people. He pointed out the fact that they started with managing the gas victims, they had taken many of them to Iranian hospitals and sent the difficult cases abroad. He added that they made the whole world aware of what had happened in Halabja. He also mentioned the size of medical budget that was dedicated to the people of the camps. Actually he gave a long speech. He mentioned all the favours they had done for

us. Then he came to the main point saying that because the war between the two countries was now over it would be in the refugees' favour to return to their own homes.

He gave assurances that the Iraqi government showed willingness to rebuild what had been destroyed in Halabja, to respect the people and compensate all the damages. He went on to say that the Red Crescent would supervise the return of the refugees to their original places. When mentioning the Red Crescent organization, he put his right hand on the shoulder of a man who was standing next to him. That meant that this man was from that organization. The man gave a big smile as if he wanted to say that he was glad to do the job. However we had never seen the man before but so far the thing seemed acceptable by almost all of us. Besides, other international organizations were going to supervise the treatment of the

Iraqi government. This was the news that we and many others had been waiting for. Everyone's faces showed great happiness and tears fell from their eyes. I was the happiest among them, not only because I was going back to the place I belonged and leaving this damn camp, but I was going to enjoy the our beautiful family life in Halabja or in Biara.

In the end of his speech, the man told us that those who want to go back voluntarily can register their names at the information tent. Although the people looked satisfied with the chance of returning, they hesitated to register their names. Most of them were saying that they would rather watch and learn. Some said that it was better to wait until they heard news from others who returned back to Iraq and when it was sure they received a normal treatment they would follow suit.

I was the most enthusiastic person to accept the idea. I had pressurized my sister's family

to hurry up and go to sign the papers as if the information center would close down in minutes. "Don't worry about what others are saying, this is our life and we are free," I shouted at them. I even told them that our father would make his way home at the earliest opportunity. We went to the tent and registered our names. Very few people followed us.

Two days later they came back again. They called the names of those people who had wanted to go back to Iraq. The buses were waiting outside. They told us that apart from the tents we could take anything we wanted. We packed our stuff and went toward the buses that were waiting outside. There were six buses prepared for us, each one took around 25 passengers.

The journey started. The convoy of the buses was getting bigger and bigger because many others wanted to go back to their homes. We

reached the border point between the two countries. Iraqi soldier were waiting on the other side. Two Iranians soldiers got out of the buses and took some papers to the Iraqi side. They had them signed and came back to us. We were asked to get out of the buses. Then the soldiers of both sides worked together to carry our baggage and put them into the Iraqi buses. The Iraqis called us by names and asked us to get on the buses.

The Iranians turned back and we started our journey inside Iraq. To me, the green uniform of Iraqi soldiers meant fear, terror and killing. But I thought that we only stay temporarily with them, that we would soon go to our houses and forget about them. I enjoyed looking at the beautiful sights of Hawraman that I had been longing to see for the last six months. The bus was very quiet, we weren't talking to each other. It was only the children talking about birds and trees they could see on the roadside. As for my part, I was

thinking about my parents. Somehow I imagined the way they would hug me and tell me how much they missed me during the past six months. "Probably the others are also thinking about their missing ones," I said to myself. We passed by Tawella, Biara and several other towns but the bus never stopped.

The travelling continued until we reached the town of Seysadiq. We thought that this would be the place where we would be paid some compensation and then we would be taken to the renovated Halabja. But the damn bus never stopped, it headed toward Sulemania city. Here the passengers started shouting and screaming, "Where are they taking us!" Nobody knew the answer.

We arrived in Sulemania, to find miserable troops waiting for us. They ordered us to leave the buses and wait in a big open yard. They were the most impolite people you could

have ever met in your lifetime. They swore at us using primitive words. They accused us of telling lies on Iranian and worldwide television: that Iraq was the one who used chemical weapons in Halabja. My sister's looked at me. I understood that she was telling me of the terrible mistake I had made by persuading them to come to this hell. I felt really guilty that I had rushed to put their names on the returning list.

We spend few days in Sulemania. Apart from swearing, we didn't hear anything not even where they planned to take us. One day early in the morning, a group of soldiers came and separated out the men from among us and ordered us to get on Coaster minibuses. The men were put into smaller buses. It was still dark when the mysterious journey started. We kept going and going, leaving several cities and towns behind, even when daylight ended we were still traveling without any rest. Dusk covered the world but we continued the non-

stop travel. From the electric lamps I knew that we were passing other towns but the place looked like a desert. I had seen no trees. I begged God to finish my life in an inhabited place because one day our families may find our corpses. But if we are thrown in a desert, they will get nothing but heartache.

Our convoy stopped in front of a very well-lit castle. There several strong floodlights lightening the whole area around the building. The lamps were strong enough to make the car lights look pale. We were taken to a wide open yard. We got off the buses but we were not given a place to put our heads on. We spend that night sitting around in the yard. The men's group arrived too. They were confused. They had nothing to do but wander around. It was a moonlit night but the sky looked gloomy. I could only see very few stars in the sky. The place was hot and the air wasn't fresh at all, it was rather foul-smelling.

We waited till the morning, the sun shined. We could see nothing but walls and windows. To our surprise, the building was full of prisoners that were sadly looking at us. We were taken inside. It was so big inside that we couldn't see the other end of the hall clearly. We were taken into big rooms and the doors were locked behind us; thus we became prisoners for no reason whatsoever. I was deeply distressed as on the one hand, I was blaming myself for putting a part of my family in this hell, and on the other hand I was thinking of my parents and my other sisters and brothers. I had done all this for the sake of my parents. I had wanted to see them again but what had happened was contrary to my will. I thought that I had deprived even my sister to see them once more.

I had a strange feeling that my parents were in the same prison. I wanted to search for them room by room. But how could I and who would let me? How could I go upstairs

with only one leg? Would they come downstairs? Would I meet them by chance? Late in the forenoon, I heard the noise of the crowd. They were leaving their rooms and going down to the yard. I was looking closely at each of them. They looked sad, pale and weak. They looked like dead people. Nobody would like to see his family in that condition. From their dress, I could tell they were from the Gallali tribes from Qaradagh district south of Sulemania city.

What really caught my attention was that they were all elderly people! What the hell were they doing with all these aged people? What was their crime that they needed punishment for? Where were their families? Were they ever visited by sons and daughters? Do they know their whereabouts? In the beginning, I thought that younger people might be kept upstairs and were not allowed to go down.

I had a chance to talk to them. They told me that they had been detained with other members of their families but they were separated according to gender and age. The elderly were brought here. But they knew nothing about the others.

We didn't know much about Kurdistan after the chemical attacks on Halabja and Hawraman. The Iranians were telling us that they had publicized the Halabja case to the whole world and that they had urged the international community to look after the Kurds of Iraq; to do their best to stop Saddam's oppression against them. The Iranians were sure that the whole world would protect the Kurds of Iraq. But to our surprise, the people of Qaradagh claimed that all that had happened was well after the Halabja bombardment.

An old man told me about everything, he explained how the Ba'ath regime wreaked

havoc on Kurdistan and how they massacring the Kurdish people in front of the eyes of the world community. For the first time in my life I heard about the Topzawa concentration camp; there in that camp tens of thousands had been gathered at gun point and had been either sent to the desert for firing-squad or to jail for starvation.

It was time for me to rethink about what I had done to myself and my family; to compare the Iranian camp set in a beautiful part of Kurdistan with this damned rotten prison. I had been the one to force out my sister's children from paradise to this hell of Saddam's regime. The elderly people were telling about us the night stories, real ordeals of what they and their families had experienced under the rule of the 'progressive' national Arab hero Saddam Hussein. The elderly people in their turn asked their questions to us; they were simply

asking us about the logic of deciding to leave Iran so quickly.

Our stay in the prison lasted a long time without basic food and drink. I became so thin that the artificial leg couldn't stay on my leg anymore. Although I wasn't sure about the length of time or about days and weeks, but I think we spend over two months there. Then some soldiers came to tell us that handicapped and hopeless people (he meant those who may die soon if they stay in the prison) would be released. They registered my name and the names of all seriously ill people. Later on, they gathered us in the yard; an officer came and started reading an order that according to a decree signed by his Excellency, the president Mr. Saddam Hussein, the following names will be released from the prison and will be taken to their homes as soon as possible.

Then the officer asked all of us to pray for the kind president that God would grant him a long life and good health. We all did that, saying prayers just like parrots. As for myself, I never wished him a better fate than what all these poor people were facing in this prison or suffering in other places. I prayed to God that one day we would see him and his gangs' corpses thrown to dogs. However, the officer looked contented after the prayers and ordered the buses to be ready.

My whole body was trembling when I heard the word 'buses.' I started wondering what the next trick would look like? Would it be better or worse than the one given by the regime's official in the Red Crescent organization in Iran? However, we didn't have any other choice but to listen to these tyrants; who knows, maybe this time they were doing the right thing and this wooden faced officer was smiling so why shouldn't I go and ask him to release my sister and her children? I

collected my courage, went to him and told him, "Sir, as you see, I am a disabled girl. I can't survive without the help of my sister and if you would be so kind to order her release too! She would also pray for our president." He ordered her release without any delay!

My sister and her children were brought to the yard. I turned to her and asked her for forgiveness for all the troubles I had caused her and her family. "My dear sister, I am not sure where these criminals will take us. Maybe they are taking us to a worse place, but let us leave our affairs to God." My sister explained in a quiet tone that I was not responsible for what had happened and that God was the one who decides our fate. She went on to say that wherever we would be taken makes no difference! "My children are weak and sick, they will all die within ten days. What does life mean to me after their deaths? Let's go!" My sister's

confident speech created a great relief in my troubled mind.

We got on the bus and started another doubtful journey. It was late in the afternoon and the sun was shining. We could see the horrific castle clearly for the first time. When they had brought us there some two months previously it was late at night. We could not see the size of that castle which was built in the middle of a desert. I wondered why they had built it at all! Why had they turned it into a jail! Why had they bothered to put guards there as nobody knew where to escape to!

After almost three hours of driving, and darkness had spread over the desert, we saw the electric lights of a big city. There, they took us to a big barracks and lead us to a big dining hall. They offered good food and drink. They treated us properly and in a friendly manner. We didn't hear any dirty words or swearing!

We couldn't believe it. Just a few hours before, they were destroying beasts and now they were angels. They were showing us bathrooms with 24-hour hot and cold water. We were given soap, detergent and other necessary things to wash our clothes. The access to the separated bathrooms was as easy as at our homes.

Friendly officers were now looking after us. They asked us to use the bathrooms and have showers every day. They facilitated the laundering and ironing for all our dresses and clothes. They knew that the dirty prison we had left had turned our bodies and clothes into nests of lice.

As soon as we were revived, the boring lectures started. They started praising the big Father of Iraq, His Excellency President Saddam Hussein. We were told to praise him too. We were even threatened not

to retell the dark secrets of his progressive state. "He treats all Iraqis like his own children. He makes no difference between us. He looks after all of us. Due to Iran's aggression some disturbances had happened, but we all remain the respected citizens of this civilized country under his great leadership." This was part of their daily lectures.

We spent two weeks in that barracks. Two weeks of brainwashing and calf-fattening until we should look like healthy citizens. On the last day we heard a different lecture. They told us we were able to go to our homes but nobody is allowed, nowhere in Iraq, to speak about the treatment in the prisons. We were ordered to tell lies to tell that we weren't in an Iraqi jail, it was only the Iranian criminals who hadn't allowed us to come back home. They told us, "Anybody telling a different story will be punished more severely than before!"

They knew, and we knew too that all their previous lectures were complete rubbish. They did what they were ordered to do. And we had to pretend that we agreed with them. However, a part of the tragedy came to an end. They took all of us back to Sulemania and released us.

We had relatives in the city of Sulemania. I knew where their house was. I had spent a few days with them after my landmine injury. The family had looked after my medical treatment. They were shocked by our long absence and started asking us where we had been. But we, as good children of Saddam Hussein, had the ready-made answers. We guessed that nobody believed our story of being stopped by the Iranians but lying was the far lesser evil. Therefore, it was safer to deny that we had been subjects of the Anfal operations and that we had been taken to the Nugra Selman prison.

The family took us back to Biara, but to my disappointment my parents were not there. We had been told that they too had been deceived by the Iraqi government's promises. They had been taken to a camp called 'Girdachall.' It was somewhere south of Erbil, the regional capital of Kurdistan. I wasted no time. I went to see them. They were in a similar camp to that of the Iranians. It was fully controlled by guards and troops who questioned who was coming in or going out.

I cannot describe my happiness at being reunited with my mum and dad, and the rest of the family. It was like a prison but I enjoyed living with my parents. We stayed in that camp until we were liberated by our nation's uprising and the expulsion of Saddam Hussein forces from Kurdistan in 1991. We packed our belongings and made our way home. We didn't leave it again, even after the

great exodus of people in the same year of the uprising.

Since then I live happily in my home town far from the aggression of the Kurds' enemy. I'm married to Mudrik Hama Salih and have a lovely daughter named Govar.























