

Arif Qurbany

# Hapsa

An Eyewitness Account of  
**Halabja and Anfal  
Genocide**

Translated from Kurdish by Abdulkarim Uzeri



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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to  
Martin van Bruinessen

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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 women 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. Hapsa, the

heroine of this story, was one of them. Her story makes one quiver just as when watching a gruesome horror movie!

Hapsa 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. Hapsa 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!

Hapsa'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***



## **Hapsa narrates her sad story...**

My name is Hapsa Hama Najm. I was born in 1950 in the 'Ababaile' village, near Halabja. It is difficult to know how to start a life story that has never seen security, safety or peace. I have never tasted tranquility, I have never had peace of mind.

I was the firstborn child of my parents. My dear mother died shortly after my birth. Thus I remained a single child of the motherless family looked after by my father. My father told me that he had only spent two years of married life with my young mother. Therefore, he had no choice but to marry another woman.

My father was a poor man. He didn't have a permanent job. He was often using his mule to transfer other people's goods. Mules were the only suitable mean of transportations in our mountainous area especially in 1950

when there were no paved roads for vehicles. One day when trying to load his mule, the mule kicked my dad very strongly and killed him immediately.

So I was left to live with three other half-brothers and a cruel stepmother. I was a motherless and a fatherless child. My stepmother had no sympathy towards me whatsoever. In fact, she left me alone and went to live with her parents. My uncle, my father's brother was so kind to take me to his house but his wife didn't like the idea of helping a fatherless child. She was another stonehearted woman who wanted to get rid of me.

Therefore, my uncle thought of a new solution; to marry me off to the first man who asked for my hand. I was too young really for marriage and, to my bad luck, an old man came to my uncle and offered to take me. My uncle agreed without asking my opinion. Thus I was married to a man called Abdulla Kalley. However, the man was too old and turned my

life into a hell. We didn't know the meaning of happiness together at all. I couldn't live with him. The age difference was unbearably big and so one day, I left him and returned to my uncle.

I chose the lesser evil by returning to my uncle's wife, for although I was not welcomed by them their house was the only possible choice for me to live in. Our society had a name for people like me, a blind tree, because no-one else from my own family remained alive. My uncle's wife started planning to have me kicked out of the house again. They found a new man for me. His name was Rahmman Abdulla.

Rahmman turned out to be a nice chap. We started a new life together. He loved children. I gave birth to six of them, five boys (Mariwan, Hiwa, Rafeek, Shafeek, and Muhammad) and a girl, Tara. All-in-all, we had a happy life. We enjoyed our time with our lovely children. We didn't face any trouble and Saddam Hussein's tyranny didn't

generally reach our area. In 1974, after the collapse of the peace talks between him and the Kurdish leadership headed by Mustafa Barzani, he waged his dirty war on the civilians. He attacked our cities Halabja and Qaladze with unconventional weapons. The attacks were performed by military airplanes. They targeted houses and families killing lots of defenseless people!

In 1980 the Iraq-Iran war started. The war seemed to be a particularly long-lasting, destructive and unjustified one. The two countries share a very long border. The inhabitants living near the border were targeted by both sides. Iraqi forces were attacking both sides because they were targeting Kurds of both countries. The Kurds were particularly targeted because they weren't Arabs or loyal to the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad.

The people of Halabja had become used to living under aircraft bombardment, artillery shells, rockets attacks and landmine

explosions. After eight years of dirty war, the peaceful Kurdish nation became the main target of the Iraqi forces. The mass killing of the Kurds had started under the false pretext of their allying with the Iranians. Even a 35 day old baby was buried alive for the same reason. In 1988, the war intensified in our area. Fire was coming from everywhere. There was nowhere safe to hide, not even in the mountains. Moreover, the Iraqi government was deeply involved in destroying Kurdish villages. The villagers had no choice but live in collective settlements under the control of ruthless Iraqi troops or move into the towns and cities nearby.

The fighting armies were getting closer to each other and civilians were caught in between. None of the warring parties respected the international conventions to protect the civilians during war. As for the Iraqi side, the more the casualties among the Kurds, the greater their war gain was.

The Kurdish Peshmerga fighters had also increased their struggle against the Iraqi government. They liberated Halabja town in March 1988. The Peshmerga fighters were aware that the regime in Baghdad would resort to the chemical weapons therefore they advised us how to protect ourselves from gas attacks. We had been instructed to take refuge in enclosed basements and cover our heads with wet cloths when are exposed to gas attacks. Those who lived in the suburbs were advised to go to the river banks and drink fluid as much as possible.

We didn't need to wait long for the killing airplanes to arrive. My husband wasn't at home at that time. He had gone to a food store to bring some necessary supplies. I guess nobody knew what would happen exactly, otherwise we would have all headed toward the safer enemy Iran. Within minutes we saw Saddam's airplanes dropping colorful bombs that exploded in the air. The sound of the explosions was deafening.

I remember that I asked my children to remain in a closed room and to cover their ears with their hands so they could keep themselves from the bad effects of the reverberations. The planes were bombing the whole town and its outskirts because they wanted to kill all those who wanted to escape the hell of the chemical weapons.

My children and I were scared to death. The room seemed too big for the children to hide away so they were seeking protection under my dress. I wished I was courageous enough to comfort them, but I was more frightened than them! I was shivering and almost out of control. The sound of the explosions was horrifying. On the other hand, I was worried about my husband. Would he rush home to protect me and the children, and take us to a safe place or would he try to stay in a suitable place until the stoppage of the bombardment? Honestly I had no idea about the active duration of that poison gas or its after-effects. We were used to airplanes coming, killing a

number of people and destroying some houses, and then going back to where they had come from.

We knew that other places in Kurdistan had been gassed but we didn't know the details and we didn't dare ask either because the Ba'ath regime wanted to keep such crimes as a state secret. And if the events were to be discovered, we were to say that the Iranian government had done it and not the progressive rulers of Baghdad.

Shortly after the big explosion we smelled a very nice scent in the air as if the planes were spreading perfume. Seconds later I saw two of my sons going red in the face and darkened skin. But worse was to come, both of them began bleeding from their noses and ears. Then my turn came; I felt dizzy, my head became heavy, my vision turned hazy and breathing became difficult. I fell to the ground. I was semi-conscious, I saw my children staggering around and falling down one by one.



It is never easy to describe this moment. I was the mother who couldn't help her children in their most difficult moments! I couldn't help myself either. I was struggling to get some air. I remember touching my neck to check if there was a rope around it or not. I was between life and death. I thought that my death would cause my children endless pain. Would their father get married to another woman who would punish my children the same way my stepmother had done with me?

My thoughts were all completely wrong because my poor husband was badly hit by the chemicals and died in a place called 'Kane Ashkan' near to Halabja. My children had fallen motionless. The dark smoke came overhead. We were left alone. Others were fallen in the streets nearby, we could hear them wailing and crying out in pain. Our neighbours were also struggling. I wanted to go and help them; they were very nice

people, but I couldn't help anybody not even my dear children.

My children were moaning and groaning. They were calling me to help them; they were complaining from such heat as if their bowels and windpipes were burning. Somehow I had collected my strength and crawled toward them. Their complaints were almost the same; they couldn't get air. Their whole bodies were burning. I crawled outside of the room and wanted to find somebody who could help. I heard others who were crying in pain and appealing for help. Some cars were leaving the place quickly. I wanted to ask for their help but I could not utter a word. I collapsed and lost consciousness. I don't know for how long I was unconscious and who had come to rescue me. All I knew was some people somewhere were suddenly trying to awaken me.

I learnt that I and many others were brought to a school. I have been told that some people had managed to run to safety at the

Iranian border and had come back to help the others. The halls of the school were filled with wounded people and they were all struggling. Many people came to look at the afflicted victims. They were looking for the members of their families and relatives.

The visitors were indeed very cooperative. They wanted to dress our wounds, bring us drinking water, and trying to tell us the whereabouts of our concerned ones. As for my children they were brought and put close to me. They also managed to provide some first- aid. It was a very long night not only because of the pain we had had but because of the strange experiences we lived in. Such stories were not narrated, not even in horror movies. The long night was over, the dawn came heralding new hopes.

The rays of the sun drove away the darkness. I managed to have a look around. I felt we were all breathing under a sea of blood. The beautiful Halabja had been turned into a hell on earth.

I can remember that in the morning, Iranian people were helping us, taking us to their cars and transferring us to the other side of the border. I can remember that the cars were filled with injured victims. I don't know how deep we were taken inside Iran, but we found ourselves in a hospital. Iranian doctors were in a great hurry to offer their help, but they couldn't cope with the large numbers of patients exposed to the gas attacks. New convoys of cars were arriving and bringing more masses of victims.

The media was there too. Reporters were putting questions and cameramen were taking photos. In the meantime they were extending a helping hand. I had a chance to check on my children. Wounds were covering all over their skin, they were having difficulties to breathe but somehow they looked better than the other exposed people. Some of them had lost their sight, others had extensive burns. We were given some rest and then taken to Pawa town refugee camp in

the center of the frontier district. There, I felt that two of my sons, Shafeek and Muhammad, were very ill. It took a long time for the doctors to come and see my children because the camp was already overcrowded with sick people. There wasn't enough medical staff to serve all those refugees, there wasn't good drinking water either. However, the doctors arrived and examined the children and found that the boys had only slim a chance of survival.

Two hours later, after the doctors had left, my little Hiwa fell sick and died. Yes, one of my children passed away and two other were struggling to survive, this was a very hard situation for a woman who had just lost her husband, was living in the middle of nowhere, and now had to witness the death of her sons. The camp inhabitants were kind enough to bury my son somewhere near the camp.

This death of my son outside my own hometown was another hard shock for me. Day by day, I was getting weaker and

weaker. There was nobody to console me or to share my deep sorrow. I was missing my husband, the only person who had given me happiness after the terrible emotional suffering with my stepmother and my uncle's wife. Apart from my oldest son, Rafeek, my other children were not doing well. Rafeek wasn't too bad from the very beginning and completely recovered after the medical treatment. Luckily my other son Mariwan had recovered too.

We stayed for several months in the refugee camp. Our living condition was going from bad to worse. Many of us were unhappy about our stay in Iran and wished to go back to Iraq despite everything. It is too difficult to live in another country against your will. I had one other reason for wishing to go back home: deep in my heart I believed I might find my husband alive. I hadn't attended his death and so I was certain that he had in fact died. It was only reported by some neighbours, who told me that chilling story.

New rumours were spreading that we could be able to return back to Iraq. So after a time, this dream came true. The Iranian soldiers informed us that we can return back if we wished to and those who wanted could write their names at the information tent. I was in hurry to queue up in front the information tent. I feared that if I were late to register I might not get to travel back. We waited for almost 10 days before the confirmation of the home journey. Our names were on the list. They told us that the reason for the delay was that the Iraqi side had to be informed to arrange vehicles and accommodation.

One day a convoy of buses was parked in front of our camp. We hurried up to get seats. I still remember that there were many others who had first been reluctant to go back, but now they rushed to the information center and asked if they too could go home! The answer was yes and they could join us immediately.

Eventually, we were on the bus. This is what I wanted. But to tell you the truth, strange thoughts were coming into my mind as if I was not sure about what I was doing. "How can I leave the tomb of my dear son so easily?", I asked myself! This was my dilemma in going back home leaving the place where my son was buried. However, as I was hopeful that we could now live all together under one roof in Halabja, I decided it was best to go back home. Being a woman who had lived all her life under difficult circumstances, I trusted in God and hoped that we could now have a happy life with my husband and the rest of our children.

The bus convoy set off and headed to the Iraqi border. They reached a point where we were asked to get off, line up in queues and go to the Iraqi side. The soldiers brought our baggage along and handed them over to the Iraqi troops. They had also exchanged some papers. I thought they were lists of our names.



However, the routine work was over; we were heading into Iraq! It was a summer hot day, but I started shaking. The reason was the feared oppression of the Iraqi soldiers who were accompanying our convoy. Nevertheless, when we passed by Halabja, we saw that the whole town was ruined. It was not rebuilt as had been promised. We passed it by and the convoy did not stop. We were shocked but we couldn't help it anyway.

The convoy continued on its non-stop journey. We passed through several Kurdish towns and cities like Saisadek, Arbat, Sulemania and Kirkuk without stopping or having even a little rest. A livestock merchant would have dealt better with his cattle! We travelled the whole way without being given anything to eat or drink or without letting us use toilets along the way.

Thank God, we had brought some food and drink with us from Iran. Otherwise, we would have starved or dehydrated. The mysterious journey continued, daylight was not enough;

we continued through the night. The bloody bus never stopped. From the streetlights we realized that we were passing by several cities. The car stopped at one of them but it was only a petrol station and nobody was allowed to get off the bus.

My children were exhausted and tired. They started asking me logical questions but I didn't have any reasonable answers. All I could do was quieten them and give them false hope. The endless trip continued, the children finally fell asleep and I had a chance to think, to think about my terrible mistake! "How on earth could a person like me trust the Ba'ath enemy after they gassed my family and my children, after they turn my house to ashes? What was wrong with Iranian camp, couldn't I see things for as they are and learn?" I was blaming myself!

The dawn ended the dark night, but our journey went on. The sun rose but brought no smile on anyone's face. The sky didn't get clear either, it was gloomy and dusty. We

found ourselves in a dead desert. Sand was rising from everywhere.

The morning started. No breakfast was offered, not even a cup of tea was served. The only thing I could do was look through the window but I didn't see a single tree, not even a bird in the sky. With all my heart, I wished that the driver would take us all the way back to Iran. I wished I could have gone back to the camp to tell the rest of the people not to trust the Iraqi promises. But it was too late!

The first thing that came into sight in that dreadful desert was a big white castle. We had driven miles and miles before reaching it. Looking at it, I realised I had never seen such a big building before, the gate was so big that the bus could go through easily. All the buses went in, and then the lorry carrying our belongings also came through. The walls of the building were so high that it made the courtyard look like a well. We could see anything apart from the sky overhead.

There were innumerable halls and rooms in that building. People inside the building were looking at us through the windows. I guessed they were all Kurds. I first thought that they were all from Halabja but when we mixed with them, they said that they were brought from Qaradagh.

What they had experienced was much more bitter than what we had faced! They had been subjected to the notorious Anfal genocide operations. Their families had been taken to Topzawa Concentration Camps where girls, young women and children were taken away separately. Men were taken to the firing-squads and the elderly people to this place. They told us that they were given old pieces of bread and a bottle of bad water each day.

Every day around ten people of the detainees was dying from starvation, dehydration and the lack of medical care. Moreover, the dead bodies were thrown to wild dogs instead of being buried. They all talked about a cruel

man of the prison who behaved like Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and Chemical Ali in Kurdistan. His name was Hajaj. He used to torture poor prisoners until their last breath in the prison's yard in front of everybody. He used to terrorize his colleagues too.

The word Qaradagh meant something to me. Actually, while we were in the Iranian camp, we heard about what had happened to the inhabitant of Qaradagh and several other districts in Kurdistan. We knew that their towns and villages were leveled to the ground, and of course we knew that the people were displaced. But what we didn't know was the Anfal genocide, the mass killing of the people either by shooting them at the edges of the collective graves or by exterminating them here simply by starvation. However, the destruction of half of Kurdistan should have meant a fact to me that the Iraqi regime is far from being a reliable government and that I should not have allowed myself to be brought to this slaughter

house. I really regretted all the mistakes that I had made. Yes, the Iranian soldiers were not friendly, they treated us in a bad manner, but that was incomparable with the barbarian nature of the Iraqi army. We defenseless people were taken away to such a faraway place which was more than 24 hours drive away from our home. Indeed I had thought that we had been taken to another country!

Our food and drink was just enough to last for three or four days. Then we too had to line up for the bread and water. In the beginning we couldn't drink the water. It was dirty and contaminated. But little by little we got used to it. Our problems did not finish there; I was beaten several times by the soldiers. Once because I took more than a bottle of water, other times because I was lining up twice in the queue. I was doing so to get water for my children too. In vain, I wanted to explain to those ruthless soldiers that I had my children with me. They used to give one person only

one share, because the other people were separated from their children.

Poor nutrition, undrinkable water, lack of medical treatment and filthy conditions in the prison all worked together to cause the health of my children to deteriorate. Day by day, they were getting physically and mentally weaker. In addition, two of my sons started misbehaving. They started playing with their recovered wounds. They were removing the healed parts of the wounds and caused new bleeding.

The soldiers seemed to be happy with the mental problems of my children. They kept coming and taking them to the rooms of the elderly people. On the one hand, they were urging them to misbehave and on the other hand, it made them remember their own lost sons and daughters. This dirty psychological game was hurting me more than anybody else.

The games the soldiers played were moderate in comparison with the physical torture meted

out by 'Hajaj the terrible.' He was used to take my sick children for torturing session in the prison. I was too weak to stop that big bloke. Nevertheless, I did once try to stop him. He turned on me and hit me on the head with a cable. I fell semiconscious as a result. The trace of this hit is still physically palpable on my head.

The older inhabitants had told me even more about that man's cruelty. They said that he hated the prayers. He told them that nobody is allowed to pray, fast for Ramadan or bend down to God! So when he saw somebody praying, he had him or her beaten or whipped while they were still on the prayer mat. He also promised more severe punishment if the prayer was repeated.

I didn't want to believe their stories saying that that was against the will of the Great God. I refused their advice until I myself was caught and received the due punishment. We weren't the only people to be tortured by Hajaj. I remember once a policeman had



been reported giving a piece of onion to one of the prisoners. This report had come to Hajaj who arranged to have him taken out of his room, tied to a column upside-down and beaten in front of all of us. None of the guards could open his mouth or try to stop him. Hajaj carried on beating him until blood covered his entire body. The policeman fell unconscious and was then thrown into a military car and taken away. When I asked a soldier about his fate, he said that he would be thrown into the middle of the desert and would be able to find his way to the hell from there!

The longer we stayed, the more our health condition deteriorated, the more people died and the more scorn we had to face from the guards. The psychological tricks became stronger. They knew what we were eager to have; for example, we did not have a cup of tea for such a long time so they brought their own tea to drink in front of us. They didn't let even a child to taste it.

I can remember that one time, when the soldiers had finished their tea, one of them threw the waste and washed out the teapot. An old woman who was watching them went and their collected the waste and ate it. They used to pour out containers of drinking water for washing the courtyard at the very time when I was being beaten for trying to get an extra bottle of water for my kids. They were bringing in tons of ice cubes without letting us having even a small piece of them. They were playing the same game with the food. They let us smell it but never have a bite of it!

It's very unusual to find a group of people among whom nobody has a little love or sympathy for children. However, if you knew how mercilessly they had tortured one of their colleagues just because he threw a piece of onion to an old woman, you can understand what type of people they were.

I don't think there was a single brave man among them; otherwise how would they have accepted all those humiliations from that

stupid man called Hajaj? They could have stopped him rather than letting him take their lives, especially when they were in the middle of a desert. We have heard that there many other big prisons around and that Hajaj was a regular visitor to all of them. The other prisons were also filled with elderly Kurds.

This means that he had divided out his torture staff among the different jails. Should he have had only one jail, he would have come to hurt us every single day. I wouldn't consider that as a benefit! But as all things are relative; the more the jails where Kurds had to suffer, the less he needed to be engaged with us.

My dear son was getting weaker and weaker. In addition to his wounds and dry skin, he wasn't getting enough water to ease his thirst. He was in such pain that he couldn't control himself, he was hitting the walls with his head, producing more wounds to his little body and more psychological pain to me and his brothers. Even the tragedy of this little child did move the sympathy of the officers

and the soldiers! I often asked myself, "Is there no-one with a heart for children among these hundreds of troops who see them suffering?" Shockingly no-one helped! They were people without hearts or souls. Mariwan's struggle came to an end, to a sad end. He died. His little corpse was taken with ten others and was thrown to the wild dogs. Mariwan's passing was even more bitter to me than the first one because my first loss was buried and I could visit his tomb several times. What can be more difficult for a mother whose son asks for help but she is unable to do anything for him?

Weeks passed and this tragedy continued. One day, something different happened; the prison was visited by a high ranking military man. Everybody there was on alert. There were many other officers with him but they were all saluting him and calling him, 'Sir.' This visitor inspected everywhere in the prison. He told us that, "Our kind and glorious

president Saddam Hussein granted amnesty to all of you!”

However, when he toured the rooms he chose only a few of us. In the beginning, he ignored me but when he saw my children, he ordered his assistants to register my name as well and they did so.

After a short while, they called our names out and we were ordered to gather in the yard. They had prepared buses for us. We left the most horrific castle of history and I left with the image of the unluckiest child in the world! The buses roared and created smoke and dust behind them, and added more sadness to the faces of the poor prisoners who were watching us from the windows.

While in the bus, I noticed that our group was made up particularly by Halabja people. Garmiani’s and Qaradaghi’s were also separated. Another mysterious journey started. I was not sure about the real destination, but I didn’t care. I had already tasted the bitterest experiences of life! Do

they take us to our ruined houses or to another slaughter house?

Well, the journey was as long as the first one. It took more than 24 hours. This time we stopped somewhere and food and drink were served, but for the rest of the rest journey my children were kept hungry. During that break I had a chance to count 12 buses in our convoy. God! Twelve buses loaded with passengers but the damn prison still looked full when we left it. I had seen so many disappointed faces watching us through the windows while we were leaving. Eventually we reached Sulemania city. The other buses continued their trip to Qaradagh and the Garmian district.

We were then informed that the people from Halabja had yet another trip ahead of them. I couldn't get the name but it started with the word 'Hushter' which means Camel. The word camel was synonym to Arabs and their land, therefore it gave an impression that they would take us back to the desert. We headed

west toward Kirkuk. But when we reached the city the bus turned right and took the road to the regional capital of Kurdistan, Erbil. After another hour's drive we reached a camp called Bar-Hushter. It was similar to Pawa camp which was also guarded with several military posts.

We were handed over to a military information center. Our names were registered and we were taken to our residences. The rules and regulations was a copy of what had been done at the Iranian camp. Leaving the camp or having visitors needed special military permission.

The camp was full people from Halabja. Many of them came to us to look for their missing ones. They asked us if we had had seen them or if we knew anything about them. I also asked them if they had any clue about my unlucky husband. However, I have been told that there was another camp for our people called 'Girdachal' and that he might be kept there. However, because of my children, it

was not possible for me to leave the camp and look for him.

My children hoped that they would find their father; I had the same dream. All I could do was tell them to remain optimistic and to trust our God.

We remained in that prison-like camp until the Kurdish National Uprising of March 1991. We were liberated and allowed to go back home to our dear Halabja. There the first thing I did was look for my husband. To my great disappointment, I discovered that he had died soon after the gas attack and had been buried somewhere near Halabja.

Since arriving back there in 1991, I have never left Halabja: not even during the great exodus of Iraqi Kurds in 1991. Quite simply I didn't want to repeat my past experience in Iran. To this day, two of my sons are wandering the streets of the city suffering from psychological trouble and I also am quite ill, but unfortunately we are left without medical and social care!





























