

APH PROJECT



a Breath

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A Breath

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We dedicate this work, which is based on true stories, to the thousands of people, who are deprived of their liberty and who still face persecution in their home country, Turkey. To the innocent people of Anatolia, who had to flee their country, who are separated from their families, and who lost their lives while crossing the Aegean Sea and Maritsa (Evros) River.



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Editor's Note

After the alleged coup attempt on July 15, 2016, thousands of people lost their jobs, arrested, and put on trial on the charge of being members of an alleged terrorist organization, the Hizmet Movement. Hundreds of people, who lost their hopes of surviving this hostile atmosphere in Turkey, risked their lives by trying to leave the country illegally. In fact, during these harsh and difficult journeys, many people lost their lives by drowning.

What you are about to read is a true story; some names and places have been omitted to protect the victims and their relatives in Turkey.

We would like to thank all who contributed to this effort by assisting with the interviews, compiling and editing the narrative, and preparing the visuals. Our sole wish is that the injustice and lawlessness from which many have been suffering in Turkey comes to an end as soon as possible.

Introduction

(APH Project – The Project of Recording and Archiving the Persecution of the Hizmet Movement) Advocates of Silenced Turkey is a civil society organization that operates on a voluntary basis and aims to investigate the human rights violations, unlawful legal proceedings, and allegations of torture taking place in Turkey in the past two and a half years and to publicize its findings in the international arena. After the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, more than 160,000 innocent people, suspected to have connections to the coup attempt dismissed from their jobs. Through the declaration of a national emergency on July 20, 2016, the state gained unlimited authority to combat terrorist organizations, while fundamental principles of democracy and the most basic universal human rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of press have been severely curtailed. Today in Turkey; more than 60,000 people from prestigious occupations, such as members of the judiciary, doctors, teachers, journalists, and academics, including 16,000 women and nearly 700 children, have been detained while awaiting trial.

As Advocates of Silenced Turkey, we engage in a number of activities to publicize the injustices that have been taking place in the current period of Turkey.

The project of recording and archiving the victim accounts aims to shed light on the injustices suffered by thousands of people in Turkey. The main purpose of this work is to ensure that these narratives are recorded in an accurate and impartial manner so that future generations can learn about these injustices firsthand from the victims. We also hope to trigger change by bringing the

human rights violations occurring in Turkey to the attention of academics, media organizations, human rights organizations, community leaders, and government officials both in the national and international arenas.

The story entitled “A Breath” is the product of a long-term effort. Each of our works reports a true story. However, to protect the victims and their relatives in Turkey, some names and places have been omitted. We would like to thank all who contributed to these works and sincerely hope that fundamental values such as the rule of law be reestablished in Turkey.

Editor’s note on AST and APH Project

“My Lonely and Beautiful Country!”

Many years ago, a poet, who didn't even share the same world view as mine, had to flee his country, much like I did, for being labeled a 'traitor' said: "My lonely and beautiful country..."

You don't choose where you are born, geography is a matter of fate, so the 'loneliness' became the fate for the 'beautiful' people of this country for many generations...

Everyone has a story of loneliness; mine, including a lot of people with the same fate started on the 15th of July in 2016. Our fate was tied to a fake and bloody coup scenario.

I was an instructor who had a ninety-eight percent success feedback at one of the private universities in Istanbul. The administration assigned me a busy schedule for the following year, most probably because of my dedication. I would later learn the hard truth of the bloody coup when I stopped by my university and found out from my department head that I was let go from my position immediately and without any explanation. The university administration, who had been telling me only few weeks ago that they had been planning to assign me a busier schedule, did not even care to explain their decision. Their only response was "We decided on it".

Everyone was in a big state of panic. A large witch hunt started without even knowing the draft of the coup attempt, mastermind of it, and any details. All of a sudden ordinary people began to lose their jobs and were taken from their homes and detained. An excuse, much like a state of emergency order, with the name "OHAL" was fabricated for all the illegalities and no one was judging neither the tortures nor the illegal detentions that were continuing for weeks on end.

As if that wasn't enough for my family and I, we would collapse as we found out that our son's school (Fatih Private Secondary School) had been shut down. Our nervousness increased as we could not find any respondent when we went to the school to ask, “What will happen next?”

Why Are You Burning Those Books Mom?

We began to hear from our neighbors: everyone who had some ties to the Gulen-Hizmet Movement was targeted by the police. Maybe today or tomorrow or the following day...The people who were blacklisted by the state as "Gulen Movement Sympathizer" had to be prepared for the police who were rushing into homes during the break of dawn. Like many of our friends, we could not sleep for weeks. Staying up late until morning, we were telling each other, "We should be presentable if they suddenly come to our home." This was maybe an excuse for us for not being able to sleep. But the stress was unbearable. As a result of being in a state of continuous nervousness and panic, we decided to move to a different address. We moved, but in order not to face the same turmoil there, we registered our address as if we lived in my wife's city.

We were going to visit my father in law and burn the books, even the Qurans. While owning a Quran which was published by a pro government company was okay, owning a Quran which was published by a Hizmet affiliated company was a sole reason to get arrested.

My younger son saw us burning the books in big clay bowl and asked in shock, "Mom? Dad? Why are you burning those books?"

How can one give a reasonable answer to such a question? My spouse and I just looked each other...We could only say, "We will explain this to you, but only when you get older...We promise..."

Raids Upon Raids!

We received a phone call from my wife's family after a couple months passed. Because our residency was registered there, the police raided their home and searched for hours. This would be the first of many times.

Our family was so upset and we were anxious. Eventually, I made a decision. In order not to get them in more trouble, I went to the residency office and changed my address.

My father in law was a person who was involved in political activities and known by a lot of people. More precisely, if we consider Hizmet/Gülen Movement and AKP (the governing party) as two opposite poles, he was closer to the governing side. As a result, he did not face many problems. Many people were taken as hostages because the police were not able to detain the other family members they were wanting. We would face the same tragedy. Their logic was like this: We will take a close relative then the main person we want to detain will become worried and have to come back.

As we learned that there was an arrest warrant for us, we had to change our home one more time. I even had to use one of my relative's (whose face was similar to mine) ID. He was of course aware of this, so we began to live in our new address with this new identity.

It was such an overwhelming time and we were unfamiliar with our own selves. Everyone in the new neighborhood was trying to get to know who we were, what business we were doing, and where we were coming from. As we had to adopt new names for ourselves, we also had to make up a story as well. We were practicing the story together at home. We were trying not to draw any attention and had to be on the same page. This was such a terrible situation for us, and it was becoming a traumatic. When you're telling made up stories you sometimes mix up the details and people find it strange. Each one is a problem within itself.

These were obstacles in our neighborhood, but our battle to survive in the society was wearing us down. There was a state of emergency which was renewed every three months. Police, who were doing searches, were everywhere and this was a special reason for anxiety. We were only going out when we needed to. We were constantly terrified. After all, I was carrying a

fake ID, and that alone could have been an enough reason for us to be arrested. I could possibly go to jail without saying good-bye to my family if it were found. And unfortunately, I was going to be face to face against this disaster.

One day, two friends and I were stuck at a police checkpoint. They asked for our IDs and we complied. There was no problem with my friends', but the police got suspicious with mine. I was paralyzed and my whole body began to shake. The policeman called the others and asked for their opinions. They told me that we were going to go to the police station and investigate it there. I felt like I couldn't breathe. I was done, finished! Everything was over. I thought of my family. As we were about to leave, one of the policemen asked me if I had another proof of ID on me. I showed the driver's license to him. Then the higher-ranking officer said to let me go and that's how I was able to leave.

You can imagine how stressful everything was. The fact that my children had to be involved in this made me even sadder. I am an experienced educator who specialized in special education. I was sadly becoming aware that the effects of the stress we were having begun to appear in them. Not being able to go out freely or have a good time at a picnic, and more seriously, to put pressure on them continuously at home, began to deteriorate their mental health.

We were afraid every time our door was knocked. We even warned our kids never to open the door when someone knocked and wait for us to take action. One day, my older brother visited us and as he entered the home, my

2-year-old son told him that he did not make any noise and waited for him quietly. My brother was speechless. We just looked into each other's eyes and became tearful. It is so difficult when a child's uncle is visiting him and instead of hugging him, yelling cheerfully, he was aware that he needed to be quiet. I told myself enough was enough and decided then to leave the country.

When Fathers Disown Their Children

In fact, there was another reason why I was not leaving the country until that moment. As known, many people lost their jobs as a result of law decrees and most of them were jailed for ridiculous accusations. The families and relatives of these people were living in extreme situations. I made it my responsibility to collect donations from charitable businessman and other patrons. I was doing this secretly because helping the victims was a crime in my country. Can you imagine this? Women and children were in even worse conditions. Some women's husbands were in jail, some people were isolated from the society, and almost all of them were not even able to work as a janitor because other people were black listing them as 'terrorists'.

You may ask if there was anybody else but me who would perform this task. The circumstances were so bad that people who had been your friends the previous day were now considering you an enemy. As a result, the charitable businessmen were rejecting the people who were knocking their doors because they were not able to determine whether they were real volunteers or police or agents. Fortunately, since they had known me for a long time I gained their trust. What would happen if I was not there? Who would organize these charities? I feared this risk.

You may wonder whether we had committed any crime or not. When you check the profiles of the people who support the Hizmet Movement, you will see that they are all well-educated, well-behaved, and high quality people. For instance, there was a full college professor whose articles were published in many journals and who had inventions. He was arrested by the police with the accusation of belonging to the token named terrorist organization designated to Hizmet Sympathizers as "FETO". From education to media, science, medicine, law, etc. in all areas many experts were arrested with the same accusations. There was a big brain drain from the country. You can say that all the highly educated people of the country were jailed or abroad. Is it

possible for so many highly educated people to commit such big crimes even though they had never committed one single crime before? For me there is only one possibility left: The ones who were accusing these people of being terrorists were actually themselves crazy.

A friend of mine, who was in similar condition, was jailed. The crime was being a sympathizer to the Hizmet Movement. His family did not even visit him because his father had disowned him. After a year they somehow convinced the father and he went to visit his son. As the family was waiting in the waiting room one of the prison guardians approached them and asked if he was the father of the convicted friend. He said yes shyly. Upon the answer the guardian was saying to him, "Don't you have any shame? We have terrorists, killers, robbers here and even their families visit them. How come you are his father and disowned him? There is something called family ties!"

Another friend of mine had not been able to have a child for ten years. When his wife finally became pregnant he got detained. As a result, his wife gave birth when he was in prison. The grandparents did not even visit her once and did not provide any support either.

You can understand the insanity in my country from these two examples. It is such a terrible place when a Muslim shows no mercy to another Muslim, or a relative shows no mercy to another relative. There is such a scary polarization when a father disowns his child, a brother disowns his brother. There are hundreds of these cases in my country.

It is time to pass the Maritsa River!

We had to leave the country, but how? There was an arrest warrant for me and I would be detained the minute I go to the airport. Therefore, I had to flee the country by other methods. I was hesitating when thinking about taking my family or leaving them alone. What if something happened to them? How could I live with such sorrow? What would happen to the families in need? Did I have to disregard my own family and let them suffer to be able to help the other victims?

I was lost in these thoughts and had a talk with a gentleman who was organizing the escapes. It was Friday and he gave me options for the departure day and I picked the closest one which was Sunday. There were a couple of reasons for choosing the two days after; I wanted it to happen as soon as possible so that I could get rid of the dilemmas in my mind, and in addition, February 4th which was the day to leave, was also my wife's birthday and I wanted to give her the gift of escaping.

We hit the road without much preparation. We got to know our fellow travelers at the point that they picked us up. An officer who was dismissed from the army was with his wife and two kids trying to escape. We were able to reach a city close to the Maritsa River at noon. The smugglers left us in the forest and told us to wait there until they would take us when it became dark. We did not have a chance to ask our experienced friends about it and we were expecting a stay in a tent or a cottage. However, it was an open area where we were waiting in the forest.

What if it rained heavily? We had never taken this possibility into consideration. We didn't have an umbrella nor a shelter. It rained continuously for 7-8 hours and we just waited helplessly under it. Unfortunately, we figured out after some hours that we could get some protection from the rain by using the plastic bags in our luggage. In the February cold, we felt as if even our bones were wet. I will never forget that my older son was sitting motionlessly

under the plastic bag. I snuggled him and asked if he was okay. He did not make any sound and sat paralyzed. We became worried about him.

Actually the real story was that we had told the kids that we were going to have an adventure and go on a safari. We of course made up the story in order for them not to fear and because my son's dream was to go to a safari with me. I told him that we would have a pre-safari where we would pass through mud, rivers and there would be a real one when he turned 15, if he could achieve it. My poor son was apparently trying to stay strong and not give up. However, to see him motionless gave us a good scare.

After endless hours and darkness, two people, whom I guessed to be Pakistani or Afghan came to us. They said, "Come on! We are leaving!", and also wanted us to leave one of the luggage behind since they could not carry them. Thus, I had to leave the luggage which contained my and my son's clothes inside. I took all my belongings in my backpack, picked up my son, and hit the road. It was not even couple steps when I slipped on mud and fell on my back. I got both panicked and hurt. My son began to cry loudly in fear. It was completely dark and even the smallest noise was echoing. Besides, the smugglers were continuously warning us to be quiet since there were soldiers patrolling. I begged him not to cry and told him they would hear us. My poor child sighed some and had to quiet down. Normally, my kids are grumpy but they were aware something different was happening, so they were quiet that night. For four hours we had to walk in the mud. It was raining continuously, everywhere became a swamp, we were buried in mud to our kneecaps, and we were hardly proceeding.

I will report myself!

Finally, we were able to arrive at the border of the Maritsa River. Our waiting for hours ended and we were about to pass across the river. As we were waiting in excitement, one of the guys told us to wait there some more and they were going to check around. They stated that there was a point which they could survey the river from a very good angle and they needed to make sure that area was safe. They told us they would be back in 15 minutes and left.

Time was passing and our respondents were not showing up. "We were probably lied to," we thought. We were thinking about what to do in the cold weather at that time of the night and then they came back. They told us that we had to wait there for 7-8 more hours. The gendarmerie was patrolling the border of the river and it was risky to move at that moment. But it was comparable to death to stay in those conditions any longer. I took a look around and thought to myself about other possibilities. The weather was extremely cold, we were wet, weak, had not strength left to walk, and most importantly, my children were shaking terribly.

Yes, I started this trip for freedom but I would not forgive myself if something bad happened to my kids. I made a very hard decision and told the smugglers that I would report myself because my sons would not be able stand those conditions. I told them that I would turn on my phone and turn myself in. I would be arrested but my children would survive.

I apologized to my fellow travelers for leaving them in the middle of the journey. They were more prepared for the trip and could continue to stay there. I told them they could go farther and then I would call the gendarmerie.

I was right about to turn on my phone, and then one of the smugglers immediately called their boss in panic. He told him, "He will do something crazy and expose all of us!"

I will report Myself!

Per the phone call, the voice on the other side of the phone call ordered them to take us no matter what was going on. At that moment there was another patrolling vehicle and we jumped into the mud in panic.

Death was whispering in our ears!

The smugglers had a rafting boat with them and were inflating it. One of the guides went back to eliminate evidence we left behind and picked up our luggage. We were going to pass the river with another person. I had simple life vests with me for my kids. I was so panicked at the moment that I threw them away instead of putting them on.

Everything was happening in seconds. We landed the boat in the river and 9 people (4 children and 1 smuggler were among them) got on it. We were kneeling and as we did we got buried in the water to our belly. Oh my God! The boat was losing air. In fact, I warned them about this in the beginning but they disregarded our warnings. We were at sea in that boat in seconds.

A deflating boat, extreme cold weather, patrolling gendarmerie, and the water which was reaching to our belly. Everything was against us and all the possible factors disappeared. The boat began to spin around. There was a scary stream due to the heavy rain, which did not stop whole day, the river's flow, and the winter. I felt a big regret to risk my family's life and attempt such an adventure. I thought I shouldn't have attempted this even if I had to spend my life in jail.

I was watching what was happening like a scary movie. More precisely I was thinking of everything bad which could occur in seconds. What if the boat sinks? How could I save them? How could I swim in this current? I remembered the woman who lost her husband and kids when they were trying to pass the Maritsa River. Her husband and kids disappeared before her in the river and she was able to reach the coast alone (she was either very strong or her friends had helped her)

Most probably, this was a day like hers. There was a strong flow and it was not possible to control the boat in the circulation in the river. I was felt death was so close to us. I was sure that we were at the end of everything and

our boat was going to sink right there. My fellow travelers were all hugging their kids and submitting themselves to the Creator. My little son was awake in my wife's lap and crying, "Mom! My feet hurt! Please let's get out of the boat!" I took a look at my wife who was helplessly trying to quiet him down. The boat was spinning around out of control and deflating. I was blaming myself and thinking that I did not have the right to do this to them.

I don't remember how long the trip took but I can only recall that the boat docked on a rocky coast. In fact, rather than docking we were drifting alongside the coast. At that moment, one of the army officer friends stood up and fell off the boat. Thank god he was able to grasp a branch while he was falling. If he tried to grasp the boat instead, we would not be able to talk about how he survived.

I got out first. While I was climbing the rocks, the guide was holding the boat tight and in order for the boat not to move, the others were holding the bushes. As I went higher, I fixed my feet somewhere and with my head upside down, tried to help the others climb out. I pulled the kids first, then women, and the army officer last.

I don't remember how long it passed but it felt like centuries. Suddenly everybody looked each other and began to cry with the relief of escaping. Was it really Greece? "Yes" said the guide. "You are in Greece!" Thank God, we had escaped!

The same boat that became a coffin for others!

We had somehow survived but the same boat was going to be a coffin for other friends only after 5 days! They made an agreement with the same smugglers we did, chose to take that stressful and sad trip, and as they got on the boat, they noticed it was deflating and began to pray to survive. However, they could not make it. For us not to be in their shoes was Gods choice.

We could not even breath when we heard about the horrific news. My wife cried for days, read the news again, and cry over and over. Because there was only one person who survived and the story he told was exactly the same as ours. Allah wanted them to be martyrs but we were in agony from their tragedy.

As a matter of fact, we thought about everything thoroughly with my wife after we escaped. We asked each other if we had to do the same thing over would we? The answer was “No”. It was impossible for us to think of doing the same even if we knew that we were going to escape in the end.

After that tragic river trip, we were going to land in Greece, and walk without a break for hours. Similar to our trip towards the Maritsa River, we walked hungry and thirsty in mud, for four hours. We were tired, had a big load, and the swamp was slowing us down. In the pitch-dark, we were not even able to see each other and had no idea what our appearance was like. We could see each other as it began to get brighter. We looked as if we were dipped in mud, and our jaws were shaking from cold weather. The children were the same. Their shoes and socks were completely wet. We attempted to take their socks from their backpacks, but they were wet too. As a last resort, we took of our gloves and put them on the children’s feet as socks.

You are our hero!

We were exhausted from walking and about to give up. My wife had no strength left from dipping mud. Like a miracle, my 6-year-old son was walking at the same pace with us. That little body was walking without any complaints. For a moment I took my younger child in my arms and moved ahead. The army officer friend and his wife were close to us as well.

I was to learn later... My wife was exhausted and about to collapse. But my precious son told her, "Mom let's catch dad! They passed ahead of us!" and did not let her give up. Afterwards, we would call him our "Hero". He was our hero. With the help of Allah, he motivated his mom and us even when his shoes were torn. This led to an injury for my son. But he did not even let us know this and continued walking. We were going to learn this later and felt so much sorrow for him.

God, it was such a long night! It was still not over after so much happened to us. It was around 4 am and finally we were able to arrive at a village. What were we going to do next? We found an old train station while we were looking around the desolated place. It was separated with small divisions. We entered the small divisions and changed our muddy clothes with damp but at least clean clothes, especially since no hotel or family would accept us in our prior condition.

The cold weather got even colder at that time of the night. Especially the kids, we were all face to face with the risk of becoming frozen. As a matter of fact, we were very close to the end point of our durability. We discussed with the other friends and as a last resort, we decided to knock on the doors of the homes there. Of course, nobody opened their doors at that time of the night.

We were helpless and weak, and lost all our hope. There was no human or car around. But we did not have the luxury of giving up. We at least could not give up for the kids. With little hope, we were walking around the homes

and finally one of the homes' door cracked open and the head of the homeowner appeared. As she saw us, she made a gesture as if to say, "Wait", and went to wake her husband up. When her husband showed up, I apologized and told them we came from Turkey. I stated that our kids and us were about freeze. I begged for help from them.

I have to confess that if I call my son as the first hero in this difficult trip, Mr. Dimitri who accepted people whom he did not know and saved them from the possibility of freezing at that time of the night, was the second. He took us to the first floor of his house which he was using as a repair room. There were two coal stoves and he lite them quickly. While he was serving tea and coffee to us, his wife brought milk and toast. These two beautiful people awoke from their sleep and served us at night. More precisely they became "Deus ex machina" for us.

We Turkish people unfortunately are raised with hostility against Greek people. In our narrow minds, we always consider them as traitors, evil, and invaders because of the education we received. God helped us get rid of those ridiculous thoughts by allowing us to meet Mr. Dimitri and his wife at their home. Not only that night but also the other days, we were going to witness the same nice manners of others as well. We always proclaim that the Turkish people are the most hospitable people in the world and would find out that those Greek people were better than us.

Uncle Dimitri did not sleep and stayed with us until 8 am in the morning. The others took a nap, but I was not able to sleep at all. He was accompanying me while he was trying to find solutions for us. He really wanted to help us but it meant, "To help illegal immigrants or smugglers", according to laws. He said he was okay with us staying at his home but could not help if we went out. He was going to help us and direct us to one of his friends' hotel in a near town since we were willing to take a shower and have a rest before we surrendered to the police. My fellow traveler did not have a passport and was afraid of not being accepted to the hotel. Uncle Dimitri

interfered again and ensured us that he would talk with his friend to comply with it. He talked with his friend and the friend accepted his request willingly.

After that horrific night, the hotel was like heaven for us. We took a shower, cleaned up, and had a sleep. We had the opportunity to think straight. We came up with a decision that we would surrender to the police in Athens. We heard from friends that if we surrendered in Athens we would not need to stay in the camp.

We decided to take our chance on going to Athens and left the hotel. While we were buying the tickets, the ladies were shopping for the kids' needs in a shopping center. Unfortunately, the shopping center was surrounded by police stations. The police noticed them and asked for proof of a passport. My wife called me in panic and as a result of her panic, I called some friends and asked what to do. They calmed me down and told us to buy blanket, water, food and surrender to the police. Eventually, we were going to surrender to the police in the end.

As a matter of fact, we bought the suggested things and surrendered to the police with our wives. We were transferred to a police station later. After having been held for 24 hours and our fingerprints taken, we were going to be taken to a refugee camp where so many people from different nations were staying. It was as if all the people in the world, all the women, children, and men were brought to that camp.

Not a refugee camp but a prison camp!

I am not exaggerating about it; this camp was the same as the Sana Prison in Yemen or Guatemala Prison. There was no torture but when you consider the conditions, it was the same. The sewer was leaking inside and everywhere was full of dirt. We were breathing the same air with hundreds of people inside and it was smelling extremely bad. It was almost impossible to breathe because of the heavy cigarette smoke. I am sure that the average earth occupant couldn't imagine such a place in his whole life!

As we entered and looked around with fearful eyes, a teenager approached to us. He was a 17-year-old boy who was sentenced to jail for being a terrorist and had to flee from his country. He was there for the last two weeks. He felt the need to approach and help us as he had noticed we had a sullen face. I guessed he was used to the camp since he was there for a while. He immediately went to the back of the room and got two bunkbeds emptied and surrounded them with dirty blankets for us. We were able to have some privacy like that.

After we had left the camp, we would stay in a hotel one more day and then make a transit pass to Athens from Thessalonica. As a result, we had to go in different directions with our fellow travelers. We wished success to each other and moved to our friends in Athens.

We had the opportunity to have a stay and think over there. We did not have any intention to settle in Greece. We took the trip in the beginning with the intention of going to the USA or Canada. Therefore, we did not have to stay there long and get used to the conditions. But we had a problem: In order to buy a ticket for USA, we needed around \$23,000 dollars. Beside it being so difficult to find that amount of money, we also were not able to leave Greece to another country freely. As a result, we decided to move to Georgia. Both tickets were cheap for Georgia and also we wanted to prove to ourselves that if we could go there then we could go anywhere else in the world.

We were anxious as we entered the airport. The official who took our passports asked us to wait there and left. In a while, he came back and told us “You are free to go but why Georgia?”.

We would soon be able to understand why he made that statement. He meant nicely, “Georgia is not a democratic country. I know why you are here and I am concerned for you.”

Since the very first minute that we entered the country, everybody including the official in the airport was treating us humanely in a way we were not used to. However, we did not have another option but trying to flee.

We'll deport you to Turkey!

We were relieved as we did not face any problems while entering Georgia. We were going to face the real challenges as we tried to leave from there. We would be able to understand very clearly what the airport official wanted to say. We had a plan like this: We had to pick a new route where we would pass Moscow, Cuba, El Salvador, and Columbia. We tried to have our flight in that route and had to use two different airline companies.

As we went to the airport, the respondent official who could speak some Turkish checked the passports of my children and stated there were no seals, which was a reason that he would not let us take the plane. I objected and told him that I had been able to come to their country legally and they had accepted us. I argued with them but they did not listen to me. The airport official was a very grumpy one and told us that he would deport us and did not care what we were to face there. We were scared to death and he was not listening any of our objections. He was going to send us back to Turkey by the 4:30 Pegasus flight.

God, did we have to endure all of these for only going back to Turkey? We were paralyzed and did not know what to do. He was an official and we were not able to argue with him. He suspected we were trying to go to Columbia from Georgia and was acting as if he said, "You are escaping from Erdogan, and I will not let this happen!" I tried to stay calm and speak English with him. Because he was able to speak Turkish but his English was not good, I pretended as if I could not speak Turkish and tried to convince him that we were not escaping from Erdogan.

His manager noticed the argument and came over. I was trying to express myself to him as well but the other official was interfering and trying to bring him to his side. The manager told us to wait and left with the other official. We were able to see that they were checking our passports. He called some other officials and used a magnifying glass to see the passports better. We noticed

We'll deport you to Turkey!

that the Greeks did another favor for us. They sealed the other people's passport as "Fugitive" but did not do this for our passports. Thus, there was only the regular exit seal.

My patience was fading away as they made the check longer and the flight time was also very soon. I quickly approached and told them that our plane was about to take off and we did not have any money left to buy an extra ticket. I requested them to let us go. The manager told me that he was holding the plane and it would take off after they make a decision about us or they would just send us back to Turkey.

At that moment I was not able to figure out whether he was making a bluff or not, but we would learn that he had been telling the truth in the next minutes. Only several minutes left for the airplane to take off and he approached us. He said "Okay, you are allowed to go." I could hardly contain myself not to scream with cheer. We had to look calm. At the very last minute they sealed our passports and we could get in the plane.

We have to ask Interpol about you!

We were lucky that we did not face any problems during our Moscow transition and would be able to get to Cuba. Actually we were transit passengers but since there was another security check, we would face more challenges there.

It was the same tension again. They took our passports and they stirred up trouble. As the officials told us that they had to consult Interpol, we became panicked. We were living the same nightmare over and over again. They took our passports and left again. We were not able to communicate well, did not have internet connection, and there was nobody who could tell us what to do. We were only waiting helplessly for what was coming next.

We were very stressed and our main fear was caused by the airport's terrible conditions. We could not even imagine how horrific the prison could be while the airport was in such a bad state. As a matter of fact, we would go to jail or be deported if they did not let us leave from there. We were between two fires.

As the time was passing by, we were getting more and more stressed. In addition, we were trying to hide our stress from the kids. They were running, playing games cheerfully and my younger son was acting like a cheerleader. My older son was asking me to play the iPad games with him. They were comfortable in their innocent world while we were scared to death. My wife and I were looking at each other's faces and having bad feelings since we could not know what was ahead of us.

All of a sudden I remembered my Turkey phone line. I had some data to make a call for couple minutes and called one of my friends immediately. He relieved my fears and told me that we would not face any problem if we had not messed up with the Interpol. He ensured me that in the worst case

We have to ask Interpol about you!

scenario, they would tell us that they would deport us and we could seek asylum. I was feeling much better then.

We are founding a company in Columbia!

After Cuba, our next destination was El Salvador. Happily, there was no passport control there. Afterwards, we flew to Columbia which was our last stop. We were very ready for new problems but nobody gave us a hard time and we could enter the country easily.

Columbia did not require a visa from Turkey and we had the right to stay there as a tourist for 90 days. After those hard days, we stayed in one of my friends' home for 10 days. Then we moved to a rental furnished apartment. We were not planning to stay there long but had to make a plan. My plan was to found a company on my wife's name and get a US or Canadian visa for my family because I had a visa but they did not. We founded the company in my wife's name. When we did it, they gave us three-year residency. This was so relieving for us. Then I began to have another fear when I was about to apply for a visa for my family: What if MY visa was cancelled? Even though I did not know the reasons, I was aware that some of my friends' passports had been cancelled. Luckily, I was going to have a short trip to the US and ease when I saw that there was no trouble.

I was going to have time to think over in the airplane when I was flying back. Recently, it was difficult to get an American Visa and I did not know if I would be able get it for my family. On the other hand, we did not have the financial conditions or a job to allow us stay in Columbia for a long time. In addition, my older son had to start school. Therefore, we needed to make a decision and settle down.

It was almost 2.5 months that we had left from Turkey, more precisely, we became nomads, this uncertainty began to get really tiresome. As a last resort, we decided to pass to America through Mexico. I was going to use the regular ways to go there but my family was going to try to pass the border. We were totally aware that this was very risky but did not have any option to make a choice. Eventually, we bought tickets and passed to Mexico which was our 5th stop.

5th Address Mexico!

One might have considered us a happy family who came to Mexico City as tourists carrying luggage. But on the contrary, there was a storm breaking in our hearts. Having stayed in a hotel in Mexico City, we would go to Tijuana and stay in a hotel there. Our intention was to explore the Mexican border with my wife.

We had a funny moment there which I would like to mention. We understood later that the cab driver dropped us off in the car transit area in the border. As we were looking around like in the Kemal Sunal movies (A famous Turkish comedian actor), a man suddenly showed up. Not showing up, he literally stuck to us and began to ask questions. "Are you going to US? Why are you looking around?" He was a strange guy who was carrying some Spanish writing on his clothes. Would he be an undercover police officer? Maybe...We panicked one more time and thought we finally got caught. We overcame so many obstacles, interrogations, and escaped from many dangers. We told the guy that we were tourists coming from Mexico City and looking for our hotel. It turned out that he was a scammer who was trying to steal money from tourists. We would not even understand what was happening, he called a cab and ordered him to take us back to our hotel.

We entered the hotel, made the necessary preparations and got out to do our exploration in a better way. That time, we checked it online and looked at the pictures which led us to the correct address. We hung around like tourists and took some pictures. We collected some memories which we will hopefully remember as good moments and tell our grandchildren after facing so much anxiety.

We sat and I had a detailed conversation with my wife. It was certain that we could not stay there long and had to somehow go to the US. The most practical solution for my family was to pass the Mexican border. They had to seek asylum afterwards. As a part of the plan, I took the first flight and went to

Houston since I was holding a visa. Right after I landed, I called my wife and told her to take action immediately.

I was so stressed and in anguish for them to accomplish this adventurous task. Moreover, my wife was experiencing this and I would like her to be able to tell her own story.

USA is really full of adventures!

(Narration from my wife)

As my husband flew to Houston, we had to stay in a hotel one more night. As you can guess, I stayed up whole night. I was extremely stressed. What was next? What was waiting for us? What would I do with my very limited English and how could I pass the border with two kids? We checked out from the hotel and took the cab that the hotel worker called for us. I told the driver "Border" but was concerned with the possibility that he could take us somewhere else. Thankfully, he was going to take us to the right place.

As we got out of the cab, we began to walk at a quick pace. I was so afraid of the possibility that someone could understand my plan from my state of panic. I was holding my suitcase in one hand and the kids in the other one. All of a sudden, I took a look around and noticed that everybody was walking at the same pace. I was moving fast because of my fear but they were doing this to be able to move ahead of the others in the line. I did not draw attention like that. I do not know how to define it, maybe, a long, hard Marathon extending to the gate...

What we called "the gate" was a simple border gate for daily usage. It was open and no police were watching it. Nobody asked us where we were going to and it was the initial point to enter the US. But after that point you need to submit your documents and there were not only refugees but also tourists as well.

We saw an available spot and immediately reported there. As the police officer asked for my passport I could only say, "I want asylum." Per my statement they took us to the side room. In the holding room, four people, whom I believed to be African, were waiting also. Although I would be able to go there with my kids, I was extremely anxious. I could not help that my hands and feet were shaking. Yet, I texted my husband and informed him that we were in America. He would think that we were in the wrong place and have a

short panic. I learned later that he thought we got caught by the police inside Mexico and burst into tears since he thought we would never be able to see each other. After such a long and difficult journey, this possibility was really bothersome.

After waiting for couple hours, a crowded group of policemen came for us. The ones who were seeking asylum formed a separate line. They had us take off all the accessories like our hats, hair pins, belts, shoe laces, etc. and began to take us one by one for the interview.

We were exposed to many questions like, "Do you have any diseases? Where are you coming from? Why are you here? Why do you seek asylum?" I spoke honestly and said that I was a member of the Gulen Movement and there was an arrest warrant for my husband. They were surprised about my statement and repeated the question again. I said the same and told them that we were victimized by the Erdogan Government.

As we completed our interview, we began to wait. The others also had to complete their interview. I only became aware that there was a long line at that moment. There were a lot of official procedures to be done. They took our passports, finger prints, and took us to a big hall. It was like a gym which had no chairs but some cushions on the floor and bathrooms on the sides. In the next hours, we were going to share the hall with approximately 60 people. It was such a huge crowd. There were only less than two cushions for my kids and myself to sleep on. I was leaning back to back on a woman whom I did not know.

Most probably, in order not to let germs increase, they were turning the AC to very cold levels and this was making my kids sick. Had we faced any bad treatment? Never! Everybody was doing their job calmly. They were serving food in short periods but the food was mostly not in our dietary restrictions. It was mostly ham and non-halal chicken. We were only eating bread when we

got really hungry. The conditions were tough and not to be able to know how long it would take was even making it more difficult.

It's such a difficult moment when you are locked up in a tiny place, not able to contact your husband or someone else, facing extreme cold, do not know the time (There was no clock anywhere), and being in an unsanitary crowded place. We were aware that they could not deport us without the judicial decision, but it was difficult to remain. The families we talked with before told us that we would stay there for a few days but the time was passing by and we were waiting with hope.

I was okay but I needed to keep the kids busy. We were praying to Allah together every day. Even my little son was praying to Allah and asking him to let us go to his dad over and over. I was teaching them some short prayers like "Subhanallah" to say. My older one said that prayer thousands of times every day. There was nothing else to be busy with but playing games and saying prayers.

We naturally had a lot of time to think at the hall. I was thinking to myself, "I cannot even wait here for couple days but my friends in Turkey were in jail for years and for no reason. How could they stand it?" It would be unbearable for anyone in those conditions. I even felt their agony. This was painful to imagine, but also helped me be more patient. It made me not feel the pain of being locked up while I was expecting to be free. Actually, this was an opportunity for me to be able to share a small part of their sorrow. I would never forget them in my prayers. I asked Allah to help them and finish all the cruelty of the people.

We only stayed there for 5 nights and I really tried hard to keep my kids happy. We were playing games, solving math questions, and chatting a lot. But what about the mothers who were in jails with their babies (in Turkey)? How could they stay in such bad places with little babies who needed care and love all the times?

The other people in the hall were not paying attention to us. They were mostly killing time by eating and sleeping. It sometimes drew their attention that we were playing games, chatting, and making cars and airplanes with papers. My younger one being just a little child, was playing games and not aware of that had become the source of joy for everyone there.

Finally, it was 5 days since we had come and our prison like days ended. It was the 30th of April and the Mevlit Night (Birthday celebration for Prophet Muhammed (PBUH)). We felt reborn again and thanked Allah for saving us.

Do we go to Canada?

It was amazing to reach my husband after a tiresome wait with my kids for 5 days. We were planning to settle there but I began to have different thoughts in the next days. Are we supposed to go to Canada? We were planning to move to Canada when we left Turkey. After overcoming this many obstacles, why not? The thing that was attracting us to Canada was that asylum process was faster and the conditions were better for us there.

After some discussion we decided to stay in the US. Because we had no energy left to have another adventurous border passing. After such a hard time, we really needed a peaceful and ordinary life. Eventually we submitted ourselves to Allah and decided to stay in the US.

The Maritsa River was a matter of life and death for us. We were so scared to be deported during the interrogations where they confiscated our passports. Now, a new life is waiting for us after all we had to face. We consider our new home as an opportunity like a window to freedom, innovation, and the free world. We endured all this agony for our kids rather than ourselves. Our only wish is that they will never ever forget why we had to stand up against all these problems.

a Breath

After the alleged coup attempt of July 15, 2016, thousands of people suspended from and lost their profession and were subjected to court trials and proceedings on the grounds that they were Hizmet Movement members. Hundreds of people, who do not have a hope to survive in this grueling atmosphere in Turkey, are striving to leave the country illegally by venturing into the risk and face up to death in order to live freely. As a matter of fact, there were also people who drowned in this difficult and harsh journey.

This book called '**A Breath**', tells the story of C.E., who was a successful academician but he lost his job after alleged botched coup attempt. Once it became impossible to live freely in his own homeland, he embarked on a difficult journey with his wife and two small children with the hopes of gaining back his freedom.

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