



For
FREEDOM

journey away from oppression

APH Project

For Freedom

journey away from oppression



Scenarist Mina Leila



For Freedom

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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 Note

After the alleged coup attempt of July 15, 2016, thousands of people lost their jobs 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 of crossing the border and facing death in order to live freely. There were people who drowned in this difficult and harsh journey.

The account you read is a true story, but the real names and places have been changed for the safety of the victim's family.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this endeavor by preparing the visuals and dealing with the script of the narrative, and during the interview phases. Our sole wish is that the injustice and lawlessness and victimization that many have been suffering from will come to an end as soon as possible by the reestablishment of the rule of law.

About Hizmet Movement

Hizmet is a transnational civil society initiative that advocates for the ideals of human rights, equal opportunity, democracy, non-violence and the emphatic acceptance of religious and cultural diversity. It began in Turkey as a grassroots community in the 1970s in the context of social challenges being faced at the time: violent conflict among ideologically and politically driven youth, desperate economic conditions and decades of state-imposed ideology of discrimination where the un-elected members of the state penetrated excessively in people's lives and mandated a particular lifestyle.

Over the years, Hizmet has transformed from a grassroots community in Turkey to a wider social effort around the world where participants come from all walks of life — they are culturally, geographically, linguistically and religiously diverse. Their work centers on:

- Promoting philanthropy and community service
- Investing in education for cultivating virtuous individuals
- Organizing intercultural and interfaith dialogue for peaceful coexistence

Hizmet participants are inspired by the ideas, life example and vision of Fethullah Gulen, who advocated for deeper personal spiritual devotion that is expressed in social work through the understanding that serving fellow humans is serving God.

For more information: **www.afsv.org**

Introduction

(APH Project – The Project of Recording and Archiving Hizmet Movement Persecution)

Advocates of Silenced Turkey (AST) is a non-governmental organization that runs its activities on a voluntary basis. The aim of AST is to bring before international public opinion the human rights violations including torture and the unlawful court trials and proceedings, which have been encountered in Turkey for the last two years. After the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, more than 160,000 innocent people lost their jobs in both the public and private sectors, with accusations and unjust convictions of being connected with the coup attempt. When the state of emergency administration, which was announced on July 20, 2016, gave the state unlimited authority to combat the terrorist organizations, the fundamental principles of a democratic society and the most basic principles of universal human rights and values such as freedom of expression and freedom of press were devastatingly damaged. Today in Turkey more than 60,000 people from prestigious careers such as soldiers, members of the judiciary, doctors, teachers, journalists and academics, including 16,000 women and nearly 700 children, have been detained and imprisoned.

As Advocates of Silenced Turkey, we engage in a number of activities in order not to keep silent about the injustices that have been taking place in this long period of suspension of law in Turkey.

The project of recording and archiving the testimonies of victims aims to shed light on the injustices suffered by thousands of people in Turkey. Through the endeavors of our volunteers, the victimizations and hardships that the victims experienced have been recorded both in spoken and written forms. The main purpose of this work is to ensure that the victimizations are recorded in an accurate and impartial manner. Thus future generations may come to learn and comprehend the injustices and the victimizations from firsthand sources. On the other hand, it is a lofty goal to bring the oppressions that the victims in Turkey have been and are exposed to to the attention of academics, media organizations, human rights associations, prominent community leaders and government representatives at the international level.

‘For Freedom’ is the product of a long-term endeavor. Each of our works is the compilation of real life stories encountered by real victims. However, their real names and scenes of events have not been revealed for the safety of the victim’s relatives in Turkey. We would like to thank everyone who made tireless and valuable contributions to this work, and we wish the fundamental values such as the rule of law to be established in Turkey again.

Editor's note on AST and APH Project

Faith



Storyteller E.H.

(APH NO: 14-7-1018MA-GE)

The Footsteps of the Coup...

Hello...I wish I could introduce myself but this is not possible...As a matter of fact, as a person who lives in a country where people got killed in the Armenian Deportation like in the Holocaust, my name does not matter. I am a victim of the purge like the other hundreds of thousands of victims in my country right now.

I was born in Europe. As I came back to my country when I was 7 years old, I was naturally very happy to not have been aware that in my future, I would be called a terrorist. I was going to complete elementary, secondary and college education and start to work in one of the priceless cities of my country. This beautiful city was going to introduce me to my spouse and the Hizmet movement.

It was the mid-90s, I was married, and my husband and I were working in a Hizmet affiliated institution. This was not an intentional preference in the beginning. We were seeking jobs and that is where we found them. Later on, we were going to get to know some members of the Hizmet movement and would like them and be liked by them as well. We were going to work in different Hizmet affiliated institutions and have good days until the horrible incident in July, 2016.

I was working as an administrator in an educational association. My husband was performing accounting duties in a few institutions of the Hizmet movement. Like our friends, we were all concentrated on education. To have Turkey get better, to have universal peace, to support kids who cannot go to school because of poverty, to improve education...these were our goals.

Remember that the President blamed us and said, "What have we not provided for you?" Indeed, we from time to time did get help from the bureaucracy. But I can assure you that we never asked for any personal help. Our main goals were clear, and they only helped us since we were helping the country develop.

It was the year of 2013...The atmosphere began to get darker, footsteps of the military coup began to be heard and we began to be targeted. You probably heard about the detentions after the coup attempt, but in fact, they started long before the coup attempt. The sympathizers of the Hizmet movement first faced the prep-schools' shut down, then the slanders of "Parallel State" from Erdogan, and the isolation from society.

Our relatives who said they loved us, the people who were requesting us to educate their kids which we did willingly, the people who were our close friends-- all began to turn their backs on us. The reason? Because, instead of believing us--whom they had always known--they preferred to believe an immoral and lying politician who increased his wealth and stole from his people.. As a matter of fact, right after the July 15th coup, these same people wasted no time in making complaints about us to the officials. It was true what our God was saying that "But sure, humankind is much prone to wrongdoing (sins and errors of judgment) and to ingratitude."

The polarization in the society was making us restless. Then the prep schools were shut down and many friends of mine were left jobless. As I mentioned before, police detentions and persecutions began to take place, and the homes of the people closest to the Hizmet Movement were raided by the police. Since we had never faced such things, we were shocked. We did not know how to react or what to do. "Who is a prosecutor?" "Who is a lawyer?" were the questions which we had not known the answers to before.

They took our adopted child from us!

It was summertime, and our family was on vacation. We had four children of whom three were our biological children. Our fourth child we had adopted from an orphanage five months earlier. The governance gave the child to us, as they ruled that we were reliable people. She was a lovely three and half year old girl. When she came to us, she had problems, and we had thought we would be able to heal her with our love of which we gave her a lot. She had been healing--getting used to us and trusting us. It felt like the missing part in our happiness was completed by her. We were making plans for her about what schools she would attend, how we would raise her, and finally how she would marry the right person when she grew up.

When we were coming back from the vacation, it was the night of July 15, and in the car my son shared the news from social media about the military coup. . We entered our home around 11 pm and waited in fear until the morning. I was very sad and cried a lot that night.

In the morning, my brother's wife asked my daughter if we had orchestrated the coup! She got mad and scolded her, "Mom cried the whole night, are you aware of this?" Without knowing any details about the coup, people already put us on the spot as guilty for it. As a matter of fact, the main goal of the coup was to provoke that thought among the people.

I don't think it is possible that religion can be misused for someone's benefit more than they did, and that people can be provoked more than this.

Throughout the three weeks after the coup attempt, prayer call was recited from the minarets continuously. The TV channels, who were the loyal speakers of the government, were spreading the slanders 24/7 that Hizmet had orchestrated the coup. It would not be an incorrect statement if I say that I hated the prayer calls at that time.

Life became a torture for us in the following days. We were not even able to stay at home. We had not had problems with the neighbors, but we were still scared of them. It was such a chaos that everybody was reporting everybody. Eventually, approximately one month later, our landlord came to my home and told me that one of the neighbors was about to report us.

It was risky to stay at that home, and we did not have any option but to leave. We had a small house with a garden and we were going to stay there. However, we were fed up with living like fugitives. We could not even leave the house and take a walk. The village was small and since everybody knew each other, it was likely we would be reported.

I was jobless because my association was shut down. My husband was also jobless, and they also had seized all our assets. We stayed with my mother for a while, and our address was registered there, but later we could not dare to go to her house for fear of being caught. Eventually, we heard that the police had come there for my husband in October.

We did not know where to go and what to do. As a result, this anxiety transferred to our children. We did not have any joy left at meals. It was so demoralizing to hear that the police were raiding our friends' homes, detaining them, torturing them, and even some friends were losing their lives. I was going to learn later that there was an arrest warrant for me with the accusation of being a terrorist organization leader. How could I know those accusations while we were living isolated from social life?

Right after the coup, even before there was an arrest warrant for us, they took back our adopted child from us. No other trouble we had to face was going to affect us as much as this. We parted from each other in tears. We had become a family for a child who had nobody, but the authorities did not even let us have this happiness. As a family, we were all destroyed.

Two of my children were attending college, and the other one had graduated from middle school and had been admitted to a prestigious high school. But we were not able to send them to school. Our children were also anxious because they all had graduated from Hizmet affiliated schools, and they were doing their best to hide this. In order not to reveal this fact, we had even burned their school uniforms and thrown their school books away.

I wish your mother could go to her city!

Our address was registered as my mother's home. Because of this, the poor woman's home was often raided, sometimes for me and sometimes for my husband. Because of their fear, her neighbors were not communicating with her. Once, the police told her to convince us not to hide, not to flee; they said it was impossible to flee from justice. My mother told them bravely, "There is no justice in this country."

How long were we going to have to hide? The circle was tightening, and eventually my husband could not hide more. One day, as he left home to buy bread, he got stuck in the middle of a police stop and was detained.

I was shocked and did not know what to do. At midnight, one of our friends texted me and asked if I had hired a lawyer. I only figured out at that moment that I needed to hire a lawyer. I ended up talking with lawyers for the following several days. But none of them would accept the case. They were either asking extremely high prices, or saying they were busy, or just not accepting the case for no reason at all.

Finally, I was able to hire somebody. After a one-week detention, my husband was taken to court. My daughter was able to go there and see her father. Despite what happened to him or what he was exposed to in jail that week, he told my daughter, "It would be better if your mom goes to her family's city." He meant Germany, since I was born there. He wanted me to go abroad.

I wish your mother could go to her city!

But how could I leave the country? It was impossible to manage this legally because there was an arrest warrant for me with the accusation of being a terrorist organization leader. Then, I somehow managed to contact the smugglers. This was not as easy as it sounds. I was going to travel with my youngest son who was not able to go to school because of the police pursuit. Neither of us had another option but this. I guess approximately ten days passed. Days were like years for us. The home where we stayed was not safe, and police could come there at any minute. We could not even leave home for a minute since the police were everywhere. It felt like my soul was not able to breathe...

How can I go while my other half is here?

It was very difficult to live in Turkey but to leave was even more difficult. My husband was imprisoned, my two children were in college and I could take only one member of my family with me. But how could this be possible while the other half of my heart was still here?

I entrusted my husband to first my Lord and second to my daughter. She was going to monitor his trial, needs etc. from that moment on. I am not able to express completely how much it hurt to leave while I was driving to Bodrum. On the other hand, the fear of being caught was making me extremely stressed.

In a state of fear, we first arrived at Bodrum and then at the Greek islands by a small boat. We were going to go to Athens, but it was troublesome afterwards. We had to proceed to Germany but were not able to. As I was thinking about how we could we manage to do it, the smuggler who helped us leave Turkey told me he could help me again. So we were going to go by a boat again.

My 14 year old son and I plus two friends in similar conditions as ours, and captain got into a boat with a young man (who was fleeing for being convicted of a petty crime) and took off. We were told that the trip would take only two days, and that afterwards, we were going to be taken by car to Germany..

A storm caught us...

But the things did not go as we had planned. We were caught by a huge storm right after we took off. It was such a huge storm and was never ending. Our boat was being by slammed huge waves, and I was sure it would break up. Night, darkness, huge waves and we were powerless in the middle of an endless sea...At the moment when all hope disappeared, we did not have any other solution except for praying to Allah like prophet Yunus did. I told my son we should stay on the deck together. My plan was to find a place to hang on if our boat sank. But we got so seasick that we could not do anything but vomit. We had no choice but to go inside.

It was the longest night I have every experienced in my life. We had such a scary night, even more frightening than the ones with huge storms in movies. Our captain later told us that he had been at sea throughout his life but had never seen such a strong storm. The storm had not calmed down, but finally we were able to approach the coast. We did not completely land but waited in a safe spot. The captain told us that we had to wait for the storm to calm in order to be able to continue our journey. Before we had heard of a family who had drowned, and at that moment, I felt all my cells numbed. I didn't tell my son this because I didn't want him to be afraid of our journey, and I was biting my lips not to cry. I was so afraid, and all I could do was pray.

After all we endured, we finally arrived at the Italian coast. We were not able to land in our big boat, but we could maybe do it in the smaller ones. Then we were going to take the car waiting for us. Anyway, my son and his two friends left, and I was waiting my turn. As we were waiting, all of a sudden the coast

guard came.. I was so panicked--my son was gone and I was left there and did not know what to do. The captain was a nonchalant person and told me to calm down, we could make up a story. They hid me in the wardrobe in the captain's cabin. But, it was certain that it would not be good if they found me there.

I heard voices from outside, and my heart was beating fast. My son was panicking as he came across the coast guard.. Seconds were like years. Fortunately, they left, and we could approach the coast again. However, the harbor police were going to come there. The captain told us not to fear, and that the police were only going to take and check our IDs. We involuntarily gave them our IDs and began to wait for the captain who went to the police station with the policemen.

While waiting, one of the fellow travelers who had a brother in Australia called him. Per his warning to get off the boat and run away, we took our backpacks and left the boat. We could find the car waiting for us at the coast, but it would not be okay to leave without getting our IDs back. We waited for the captain for more than two hours. Finally, he returned, and we were able to move forward.

3 am in the morning...Our vehicle was stopped by the Italian police this time. They took our IDs again but we were extremely nervous. Our hope was fading as the minutes passed, and we told each other that everything was over. Our fate was to get stuck at the coast.

Is there anything impossible when Allah wants it to happen? This trip was going to teach it to us. My Lord wanted us to spend 6 days for a 3-hour trip and get rid of our sins with this challenge. After such challenges, we reached our freedom but on the other hand, we also reached faraway places where we would miss our loved ones. What will happen after this point? What Allah wills will happen, and we will lean on patience and fate.

The Great Disappointment



Storyteller L.A.

(APH NO: 16-8-1118HA-GE)

I Was Preparing My Students for The Mathematics

Olympiad

Like thousands of people who were declared as terrorists on a single day, I also had an ordinary life and an ordinary job. We--the people who were labelled as terrorists, assassins, traitors, etc. by the government and particularly by the president-- paid our taxes, and I am sure that we served our country more than the people who accused us. For instance, I was a Mathematics teacher and I was preparing the brilliant students of my country for the International Mathematics Olympiad. How can scientists have anything to do with terrorism and guns?

I was one of the two daughters of a family. I grew up in a small Aegean town. My father was a villager, but he was an open-minded man and he had sent both my sister and me to the city to get an education. I was eleven years old at the time and my father trusted the dormitories run by the Hizmet movement, and, as years passed, he saw that he was right in his decision. Both my sister and I did well on the university entrance exam, graduated, and got our dream jobs.

Before talking about the bloody coup attempt, I would like to talk about the December 17-25 period because pressure, defamation, and marginalization had started during that period. Our biggest problem was not being able to tell our concerns about ourselves to anyone. Both my husband and I started to experience problems at work and faced ridiculous accusations. People around us were bigots and they had no intention of listening to us and understanding us, so we had already stopped trying to explain ourselves. Even when they insulted us, we didn't respond to them.

What Were We Doing on The Night of July 15th?

On July 15, 2016, , which will be recorded in history as the turning point in a period full of oppression, persecution, and tyranny, I had been a teacher for five years, was the mother of a four-year old, and was 7-months pregnant. I still had a job, and I was about to go to sleep because I was going to go to work early the next morning. My husband called me. He said, “Come here! Something terrible has happened.”

We didn’t experience the coup in the 1980s, because we were too young at the time; but those who have seen the Turkish movie “Babam ve Oğlum” (My Father and My Son) know that most people burst into tears upon seeing the first scene. It is the story of a woman who is having labor pains on the first day of the coup, and her husband is striving to take her to the hospital but can’t reach the hospital because of the coup. The woman has to give birth in a park, but she passes away without seeing her child. I was scared because I remembered this movie. I said, “Oh no! How will I go to hospital for delivery? What if the baby decides to come out early? What if the government imposes a curfew and I cannot go to the hospital for delivery?”

...

My fears did not come true, but we experienced many things that before had not even crossed our minds. We lived in Ankara, and our home was very close to the National Intelligence Organization. In the following hours, because of the bombings, our windows and house started to shake. It was so violent that

my daughter woke up. I took her to the hallway, the only place in our house that didn't have any windows.

In the following week, we slept in the hallway with our daughter and with the lights turned off. My husband had to leave the house early in the morning of July 16, because without figuring out who had attempted the coup, the government officials immediately accused members of the Hizmet movement, and my husband had to go into hiding to avoid getting arrested. With my husband gone, I was left alone, pregnant and consoling my daughter and living in the hallway of our house. I had to live like this because the government supporters were chanting in the streets, firing shots indiscriminately, and trying to find members of Hizmet.

People on the streets were exerting immense pressure on us. For three weeks, they held democracy watch (!) on the streets. These people were made to believe that they prevented the so-called coup and saved their country. They went so far as pounding on doors and shouting, "Traitors are in their homes, patriots are on the streets." My door was also knocked on violently, and I said, "How can I come out this way? I am pregnant." But they were blinded by rage and said, "Country comes first; if it's necessary, you will sacrifice your child." What can you tell these people? "You're right. I will get ready and come," I said and then went back in, turned off the lights, and continued living in the hallway with my daughter for an entire week.

A Social Disease: Witch Hunt

No offense, but on July 15th, we did not witness legendary heroism. On the contrary, our country regressed from the level of a modern country to the level of a Middle Eastern country. We lived in the middle of Ankara and on the night of the coup, I saw people who took to the streets with knives and guns in their hands with the intention of killing people who they thought were responsible for the coup. They didn't care about the laws, they acted as if they were the lawmakers, the judges, and the prosecutors. With the TV stations accusing members of Hizmet continuously, these street thugs could have easily taken us from our home.

We lived in a big building, and even our neighbors acted like detectives. Although they didn't know about our affiliation with Hizmet, their eyes were all on me. I had to evade incessant questions like "Where is your husband?" and "Why doesn't he come home?" They even had a WhatsApp group in which I was included. They gossiped among themselves: "Is this neighbor from Hizmet? This person has relatives from Hizmet! Let's report this person to the police..."

To people who asked me about my husband, I responded, "He goes to work early." But I could no longer hide the facts when one night the police came to my house. In fact, things had happened before the arrival of the police. First, my husband was suspended from his job shortly after July 15th. He was accused of "helping a terrorist organization restructure through social media," when, in fact, he didn't have any social media accounts. He didn't even use

WhatsApp. We objected, and because we had an expert report that supported our case, my husband was reinstated in his job. He worked for two more months, and just when we thought that everything was getting back to normal, he was dismissed by another executive order, this time with no apparent reason.

After my husband's dismissal, we started waiting for the police, because that's what had happened to everyone that we knew. First, they were suspended from their jobs, then they were dismissed, and finally they were arrested. My husband had stopped staying at home, and he thought that I too should stay somewhere else, but how could I have done that as a pregnant woman? I don't have a mother (I have a stepmother), my father, sister and brother-in-law were all in prison, and, due to ideological differences, I could not stand living with my father-in-law for any period of time.

I was at home when the police knocked at my door at 1:20 am. I looked through the peephole. The police were hiding, and the building custodian asked me, "Where is your husband?" I understood the situation, of course. I was expecting this. I went inside and hid the phone with which I was talking to my husband, put on something appropriate, and opened the door. (By the time this happened, I had already delivered my baby. When I had started experiencing labor pains, I had entrusted my daughter to my mother-in-law, took a taxi to the hospital, delivered my baby, and then returned home after being discharged from the hospital. I had no one with me, so it had to be that way.)

When the police asked me why it took so long for me to open the door, I used my baby as an excuse. I also had to tidy myself up, as I was a woman wearing a headscarf. Six to seven police officers entered my house without removing their shoes and started going into the rooms arbitrarily. I told them to search the rooms one by one. My baby and daughter were sleeping, and I knew that they could also implant evidence. I told them that their search had to be

recorded on camera, but they refused, saying, "Do you have any idea how long it would take to bring police cameras here?"

Fortunately, my stepmother was with us at the time, and she took the baby to one of the rooms. My daughter was sleeping, and I was glad that she didn't wake up while the police were noisily conducting their search. But the next morning my daughter told me, "I woke up when the police came last night, but I closed my eyes tightly because I was afraid that they would take me."

...

One of the police officers confiscated the phone in my hand, and when I said, "Let me at least remove my children's photos," they ridiculed me. They behaved so rudely; they even wanted to wake my daughter up and ask her "Where is your father? When will he come? Are you in contact with him?" I was shocked; I asked in dismay "Will you question a four-year-old child? She is still a child." Fortunately, one of them was more sensible and said, "Don't be silly!" to the others.

They then started questioning me. They asked me where my husband was, and I told them that I didn't know. They didn't believe me, of course. My husband wasn't home in the middle of the night and I wasn't worried? "What if he is cheating on you?" asked one of them. I told him, unflappably, that if it was like that, that would be his problem. I added that he was having psychological problems after being dismissed from his job, and that he used to go out every night, saying that he was working as a taxi driver. They didn't believe that story either.

They tried to exert psychological pressure on me. They made veiled threats against me. They said that if I didn't tell them where my husband was, they would charge me with aiding and abetting and then arrest me. I defended myself, saying that I wasn't aiding and abetting him, and I genuinely didn't know where he was.

In the next three and a half hours, they searched the entire house and, of course, they did not find anything. The person who I thought was their chief questioned me relentlessly. He asked, "There is nothing in your house. When did you clean out the house?" and when I answered, "Because I work, I do my cleaning on Sundays," he was furious and said that I was ridiculing him. He tried to intimidate me by saying, "You probably have never been detained," and called the police station and gave them my national identification number. When he found out that there wasn't any arrest warrant for me, he said, "Ok, I will let you sleep with your baby one more night."

After our workplace were closed down by the government, I had found another job and had a good salary. They probably thought that our house was a little too nice and said, "How do you afford such a house even though your husband has been dismissed? Does Hizmet pay your rent?" I told them that I was working and, if they let me, I needed to go to work early in the morning. It was such a silly search/interrogation that while they were ridiculing and threatening me, one of the female police officers asked me if I was happy with my vacuum. Apparently, she was also thinking of buying the same brand.

Maybe they were employing the good cop/bad cop tactic. Apparently, they weren't happy with the answers they got, and one of them started questioning me away from the others. "Where did I meet my husband? Was it through the catalogues that were prepared for single members of Hizmet?" I said "No, we met on the Internet." They asked in which university my husband studied. When I answered KTU, she was upset and said "You got used to using codes for everything." I thought she was joking, but she was really serious. I said, "KTU-- everyone who has studied in a university knows that it stands for Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi (Black Sea Technical University)." In order to hide her ignorance she said, "Do I have to know what that is? Why don't you say it directly?" Then they asked where I stayed when I was studying at the university. When I answered KYK, she said angrily, "You are using codes again." This time it was my turn to be angry. "Are you kidding me?" I asked. It was impossible

that they didn't know that KYK was the abbreviation for the Kredi Yurtlar Kurumu (Higher Education Loans and Hostels Institution). Yes, I was indeed being questioned by a bunch of illiterates!

During this time, the custodian was looking at us in a puzzled way. Probably he was surprised that we were members of Hizmet. They must have interrogated him before coming to my house, because they knew that my husband had come home two days prior. Indeed, he had also brought my stepmother with him. "I wish you had come and taken him away at that time. What can I do?" I said unperturbably. They asked if he would come again. "I don't know. If you want, you can wait here," I said. When I gave such answers, they got angrier. But they were asking questions incessantly. They asked when my husband used to go to meetings. I answered, "When there is a meeting notice from the district governorate." (My husband was a public school teacher.) They said that they meant the "Hizmet meetings." I told them that he didn't attend such meetings. They told me that my husband was a terrorist and that I better divorce him immediately. A lot of humiliating questions and suggestions such as these...

It was almost morning when the police left, taking my cellphone and a USB drive that had my notes from my Master's classes. Although I insisted on having a copy of the official report, they left without giving it to me.

My Family Was Separated

I was in a very difficult situation. There was an arrest warrant for my husband. I was still working, but everyone around me was swearing at Hizmet (and, indirectly, at me). I didn't want to go out except for work. I didn't have anyone. My father, sister, and brother-in-law were all in prison. My father had an especially ridiculous arrest story.

Just after the coup, the imam of the mosque that my father frequented reported my father to the police with the allegation that he was a member of Hizmet. Consequently, he was arrested and taken to the police station in the district with ten other people. Can you imagine, a very small village and all the people reported by the imam were indigent? One of them even had aphasia; he couldn't talk. They were taken to the prosecutor who said, "You aren't criminals, but it is not okay to hold eleven people without arresting any of them. In this case, I will arrest the most educated ones among you." My father had a middle school education. He, another person with similar education, and a third person who had studied accounting for two years were arrested. Half of the remaining people were actually illiterate. As you can see, having an education was punished in my country.

My father was put in prison with the aforementioned justification, and he wasn't formally charged for an entire year. After three silly trials, he was released on grounds that he didn't have any connection to Hizmet. Although I

insisted that he should file an unlawful imprisonment claim, he didn't have the courage to file a claim against the government.

My elder sister's arrest was much more dramatic. When her and her husband were getting prepared to leave the country, they were arrested as a result of a police raid. We found out what happened when the police called us. They threatened, "If you don't come within two hours, we will give the children to the Child Protective Services." We told them that we were at least seven hours away and that it would be impossible for us to get there in two hours, but they weren't convinced. They said, "If you come in two hours, you can take the children; otherwise, we will send them to an orphanage." As a last resort, my stepsister rented a taxi from Izmir and managed to get there in two and a half hours and take the children.

This was a very difficult situation for the kids, too. The younger one, especially, developed serious psychological problems, including anxiety and tic disorders and hives. After ten months of prison time, my sister was released on her own recognizance. My brother-in-law was sentenced to ten years in prison.

When their mother and father were in prison, my nephew and niece stayed with me for a while; but when it was time for us to leave the country, I had to take them to their grandmother (whose husband was also in prison). Later, my sister's sister-in-law started taking care of them. Separation from their parents and the lack of a stable home environment affected these kids psychologically.

When my nephew and niece were with me, I used to take them to the prison to see their parents. Because they also arrested visitors, I couldn't enter the prison myself, and I used to reluctantly send the children into the prison on their own. One day, I found out that my older nephew—he was 12 years old at the time—had punched and kicked the walls saying, "I will destroy this building. We are not used to being separated from our parents, especially our mom. I want to meet with the prosecutor and tell him that my mother is innocent!"

One could witness interesting scenes in front of prisons. One day, while waiting for the children, I saw a woman in a burqa, sobbing. I thought that she was also a victim like us and asked, "Auntie, who are you waiting for here?" She lifted her head and said, "My son is in prison. I am waiting for him." I asked, "Is he in prison because of being a member of Hizmet?" She said, "No, Heaven forbid! He is in prison because of dealing drugs." In order to understand the hell we were going through, it was enough to look at that woman. The majority of people in the country thought that even drug dealers were more innocent than us.

We were so different than the other visitors when we were in front of the prisons. Although we came early and lined up, they used to push us back shouting, "Members of Hizmet: to the back!" We revealed ourselves through our clothes, our ignorance of the procedures, etc.

We Have To Run Away From The Country

In fact, when bad things started happening, we hadn't immediately thought of running away. When my husband's job was reinstated, all his rights were also reinstated. We could then apply for passports and leave the country easily. But we didn't; we couldn't. It was very difficult to leave our home country behind. We had the feeling that because we were innocent, the truth would eventually come out.

That is, until the police came to our house... Our friends stopped seeing us. After my sister and her husband were arrested, we had nobody around us. I used to work, but in order to avoid getting arrested, I had to resign. We were scared, especially for our children. We never forgot the day in which the police threatened to take my sister's children to the orphanage.

There was no rule of law anymore. When one gets arrested, one can tolerate it if one knew they would be tried in court fairly. My sister and her family were arrested when they were about to go abroad, and my brother-in-law had some cash on him. The police stole that money. When my brother-in-law asked, "You didn't mention the money in your statement. Will you be able to remember the amount?" they mockingly said, "We got it, don't worry." We never heard from those police officers or saw that money again. My brother-in-law's family filed an objection asking for their money back, but their case was dismissed.

Despite everything, I didn't want to leave the country because I was looking after my nephew and niece, but somehow my husband persuaded me. We

knew we were at risk of being arrested, in which case our children would be left all alone. I accepted my husband's proposal reluctantly. Because he had been living as a fugitive for months, we hadn't often seen each other. He just told me to be in Istanbul on a certain day.

It took us one week to get prepared. My younger daughter had gone into convulsions, and I had to buy some medicine for her. First, we stayed with a relative in Istanbul. Because the police were looking for my husband, he didn't want to put us in danger, and we decided to go to Edirne separately. My older daughter had a tantrum during the journey. She kept saying that she wanted to get out of the car.

She was only four years old. Can you imagine? At that age, she had witnessed her grandfather's arrest, the police searching our house, her cousins crying for their mom and dad. We told her that we were going to play a game of running from some bad people. She relaxed. However, separating from her loved ones proved difficult, and she cried, saying, "I miss my aunts. Let's go back." We had already cried a lot when leaving our relative's house. We faced two serious risks: prison, if we were caught; and death, if we failed to cross the Evros River.

Finally, we reunited with my husband in Edirne. One man brought us to a pitch dark place and told us to start running as soon as we got out of the car. We had two baby carriers with us. My older daughter was with my husband and my younger daughter with me. I had bought a more comfortable carrier for the younger one so that she could sleep more easily. When we got out suddenly and started running, I didn't have a chance to properly tie the carrier. Imagine eleven people simultaneously running in pitch darkness. I was lagging behind, but I couldn't say, "Stop, wait for me." I was trying to hold on to the carrier and catch my husband at the same time.

Our guide was Afghan and couldn't speak Turkish. The only thing he kept telling us was, "*No speak, no speak!*" Sadly, a person who didn't even know our

language was helping us run away from our country. When I fell behind the others, I felt very scared. I felt that I wouldn't be able to continue anymore. In the meantime, I kept turning back and looking. I had left my loved ones behind me. I will never forget the lights of the last village I saw.

As I was running, my backpack and baby started to feel heavier and heavier. Another person in the group noticed this, came to me and grabbed my backpack. I felt a bit relieved and started to run faster. We travelled four to five hours, partly running, but mostly walking. We were still within the Turkish border, and the smugglers had determined a route for us to avoid capture. Later, we had to go through rice fields. The swamp made the journey even harder. We kept sliding and falling down, and every inch of our bodies was bitten by large flies.

It was August. It was unbelievably hot, and we were trying to walk in water that was as high as our chests. I was also struggling to lift my baby above the water. I then reached a place in the rice field where I wasn't able to come out of the swamp. The more I moved, the deeper I sank. My husband was long gone. Just like in the movies, I kept sinking. The mud had reached up to my baby's nose. We were both about to drown in the mud and, in the darkness, it was unlikely that anyone would be able to find us.

In that exact moment, a person from the group must have seen my struggling and came closer. He said, "Excuse me sister, I will help you out of the mud." He needed to push me from behind, but was embarrassed to do that; he apologized profusely. Fortunately, he was able to rescue us. When we finally reached the group, I started walking even faster to keep up with them. There was a Syrian family with us and they had a one-month-old baby. When the baby fell into the water suddenly, the woman calmly picked up the baby, shook it, and then continued on her journey.

Fortunately, this seemingly endless journey eventually did come to an end when we reached the Evros River. We had a chance to sit down for a bit while

waiting for the boat to be inflated. I noticed at that moment that all my body except the part that touched the infant carrier was full of insect bites. I am not exaggerating; I had at least 150 bites. Later they swelled, collected puss, and gave me unbelievable pain. But interestingly enough, the flies had not bitten my baby even once!

Finally the boat was inflated, and the smugglers got us all on the boat. I mean eleven people on one boat! I resisted, "There are too many of us for this small boat," but the smugglers did not listen. When we were all on board, the boat sank almost to the level of the water. It was so bad that if any of us accidentally moved an inch, the water would come over the edge.. It was about 2 am. We were finally able to cross the river. My daughter was ecstatic. "Did we escape from the bad people? Did we succeed?" she asked.

Our journey, which we had started at 9 pm, ended at 2 am. We had finally escaped, but we still had a long way to walk. After a long period, we were able to reach a flat land by the river. The person who brought us there said, "You go ahead; I will follow you from behind if there are no police around." We started to walk quietly, but the Greek police spotted us quickly using their thermal cameras.

The Misery of The Camps

I told the police in English, “We are running away from Erdogan.”. This was the summary of our life, our ordeal. We were running away from a tyrant. The police officer said, “I know Erdogan, he is a very bad man.” Then the Syrian also interrupted, “Me too, I am also running away from Erdogan.”

We had told our daughter that this was a game, and that we were running away from bad people. Because she associated the police with oppression, when she saw the Greek officer, she started to cry. “Will they take my father? To the police station? Will we be able to see each other again?” We consoled her with great difficulty. Fortunately, the officer was nice to her and gave her cookies, and then she calmed down.

The police stuffed us in a van. It was some sort of panel cargo van with no windows and very little space. I had difficulty breathing and thought I was going to suffocate. My husband was really worried about the possibility of being deported. When we came to a police station near the border, they made us wait in the vehicle for about 40 minutes. I thought I was going to die there. We had given medicine to my baby before starting the journey, but now she was waking up and wanted to be breastfed. But I no longer had any strength.

When we finally got out of the van, a lot of sand fell off of me. We still had the strong unpleasant odor of the Evros River and the rice fields. Fortunately, there weren't any mirrors around, so we didn't get a chance to see how miserable we all looked. It was good to have been able to cross the Evros, but

it was embarrassing to be strip searched by the police. We had to keep wearing the same dirty clothes for ten more days.

The border police station was horrible. Some of our friends were lucky enough to deal with kind people, but we weren't that lucky. Aside from the awful conditions, I was strip searched, yelled at to remove my headscarf, and photographed, which was all very humiliating. In our detention cell, there was a significant amount of urine on the floor. I had to sleep on that floor on top of a disgusting foam mattress. As I didn't have any strength, I passed out on a mattress with my baby. After a while, my baby rolled off the bed and fell into the urine. I nearly lost my mind when I noticed that. I had no choice but to wash my baby under the faucet, but the faucet, too, was very dirty.

After some time, they took us to a prison. We stayed there for more than two weeks in horrific conditions. When we first arrived, a lot of men wearing only shorts were looking at us from behind the bars. When I saw them, I was terrified and at that moment, I regretted leaving my country. I thought, "Oh God! What did we do? Should we go back?"

Fortunately, there was a place in the prison where families stayed, and we were placed there. That place wasn't in such good condition either, but because our friends were there, it was relatively better. We spread some filthy blankets on the floor. My baby had only two articles of clothing, one of which was a white onesie. Because she kept crawling on the blanket, her onesie would turn black by evening. Every night I washed her clothes under the faucet

Later, they took us to a camp like place, but it was more like a semi-open prison. There were houses, and they placed eleven people in each. Family or single, it didn't matter! Once we stayed with some Afghan and another time with Syrians, but they were so careless about hygiene that we couldn't stand living with them. There were two toilets, and I finally solved the problem by saying, "Its better if you use one of them and we use the other."

Meals were another source of trouble. To bring food from outside or more precisely, to go outside, was forbidden, so we had to eat the food that was brought to us. We didn't eat meat and the other food was too greasy. One female police officer felt very bad for us and kept saying, "You don't eat anything. Please eat; otherwise, you will become sick." She was trying to persuade us by saying, "This meat is halal. We prepared it for you." After staying in the so-called camp for twenty days, we were detained again and were back at square one.

We had stayed in the camp for a month, but there was no progress in our case. Apparently, this was our bad luck because most people would get past this stage in two or three weeks. We were told that we were detained again in order to accelerate the process, but we were upset about returning to that place with urine on the floors. It was awful. Another strip search, another four terrible days. Fortunately, after four days we gained our freedom and went to Athens.

We Slept In A Park On The First Day Of Our Freedom

On our first day in Athens--I mean on the day that we regained our freedom after a month of imprisonment-- we had to sleep in a park because we couldn't find a house. Fortunately, it was summer time and having to sleep on the beach wasn't so troublesome.

The next day we booked a house through Airbnb and stayed there for a few days. However, we had to go to another European country in order to apply for asylum. Even though the climate of Greece was quite similar to that of our country, we didn't have enough savings to stay in Greece.

It was difficult for us to go to another country because we didn't have passports. We made a few attempts. Finally, we managed to fly to France. "Why France?" you might ask. Because we found cheap tickets; we actually wanted to fly to Germany.

It was October, the third month after we arrived in Greece. We managed to reach France. From there, we went to Germany by train.

We had made a choice. We left our country in order to preserve our family and not to be unlawfully imprisoned. On this journey, our trial was to stay in harsh living conditions. In contrast to some of our friends, who lived in better conditions, we stayed in a German camp with terrible conditions for six months and ten days.

We Slept In A Park On The First Day Of Our Freedom

After that camp, we were taken to a house. At the top of a mountain, in the middle of nowhere, we are now living in the attic of a house. We are completely alone. There are only one or two Russian workers staying in the same place.

We have no friends to talk to. The nearest market is four kilometers away. My husband got a driver's license and a friend we recently met gave us a car. I don't want to sound ungrateful by saying that we are going through a period of suffering, but I feel better when I think that these difficult days are numbered.

“Mom, When Will the Bad People Die?”

We had never thought of starting a new life in a new country. We are geographically very close to Turkey, but we feel so far away.

The ones who slandered us and forced us to run away from our country are very happy now. We have nothing of value left, and our adventurous journey left me with chronic acid reflux.

My younger daughter is not aware of anything, but my older one is not as lucky as her little sister. She has anxiety disorder. She is always looking at my face and trying to understand if everything is alright. Even if my voice changes slightly, she asks, “Mom, what happened? Is there anything wrong?” She is always nervous. She misses Turkey and cries a lot. She is always dreaming of the day when we will return. She bombards us with questions: “Have the bad people died? When will they die?” Whenever we feel happy about something, she asks, “Are they dead? Will we be able to return?”

While we are experiencing the difficulties of living in a foreign land, our loved ones back home are having different trials. My uncle didn’t even visit my father once in prison. Everyone had an excuse. Some of them said, “My grandchild is working for the government”; others proffered different excuses, but, in the end, they left their elderly brother alone in prison.

At the beginning, my father-in-law used to say, “You are innocent, but *someone* is guilty of attempting a coup.” However, after the police arrested my

father and us, he changed his opinion. He started to say, “It looks like they also arrest innocent people,” and he acknowledged that we were right. Since we came here, he has helped us by shipping our belongings. But, when he misses his grandchildren too much, he says, “If I had known that they would run away, I would have surrendered them to police myself. I wish they hadn’t left and they were near me.”

I think that all of these ordeals must be recorded, communicated to the world, as well as to future generations. Perhaps through literature or art. I have a knack for painting. I am trying to paint the things that I can remember. The last thing I painted was the Greek prison.

You must have heard about Teacher Gokhan, who passed away because of prison torture. He was my husband’s classmate, and his death affected us particularly badly. Whenever we hear about the death of a person crossing the Evros River or the Aegean Sea, we get quite upset. We also walked on those roads, and there is only one reason why we managed to survive: fate. Now that I think about what we did, I see that we risked death, but, at the time, you don’t feel that you will die. Those roads were indeed impossible to walk; what we did was indeed crazy... I still tremble whenever I think about those days.

This is not something one can get over easily. Both my husband and I still have dreams in which we enter Turkey illegally, visit our loved ones, and then try to leave the country in the same manner. It is not only us. We sometimes talk to our friends, and they also have similar dreams. I feel that we will not forget these things until the end of our lives. For example, my older daughter says that the earthy smell after the rain resembles the smell in the air on the day we crossed Evros.

I have a feeling inside. Is it anger or rage? I would say it is disappointment. Hizmet Movement is under persecution in Turkey and everyone is responsible. Police are guilty of arresting and torturing, judges are guilty of ruling unfairly, some people are guilty of slander and false reporting, some are guilty of

remaining silent, and others are guilty of isolating the victims... When some people died, others remained silent. I am disappointed because of this as well. I cannot accept any of this. If I ever return to Turkey one day, I will have a lot to say to people.

FOR FREEDOM

JOURNEY AWAY FROM OPPRESSION

Some voices were heard from outside, her heart was beating as if it would stop. Her son became so anxious when he saw the coastguard.

It was 3 am. That time their car was interrupted by the Italian Police... As minutes passed, she was becoming more hopeless, She was as if saying "It is all gone." She was going to experience the new opportunities one by one astonishingly. This journey taught her to believe. While she was saying farewell to her husband and two children in tears, and starting the journey with her 14-year-old son, she was leaving the half of his heart back? What about now? Now, she felt faithful and strong and she knew that one day she would meet the people she loved.

And a young woman. She was wise. She resisted the people who entered her house like bandits. She was pregnant at that time but she didn't give up. She took a taxi and went to deliver a baby on her own and returned home alone again. Her father was in court and the prosecutor was talking: "You are not criminal, but it is not possible to detain 11 people and not to arrest anyone. I will arrest the ones who are the most literate. And her father who was Middle School graduate was arrested. In this country, knowledge was punishing. And the young woman made her decision and started the journey of freedom with her family.

*Both of them were women...
Both of them were mothers...
Both of them were innocent...*