

Sara

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My Whole Life Was a Struggle

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**Born in winter** I entered the world on New Year's Day in 1958, in the village of Tahtı Halil in Dersim.<sup>14</sup> At the time my father was in the military. He didn't register my birth until his furlough in February, so my official birthday is February 12, 1958. Did it bode well to be born in the harshness of winter? Best to start off believing that it did, that it portended happiness. So in my opinion, to come into the world on New Year, in midwinter, in a snow-covered region, was auspicious.

Our village comprised 20 households. All the houses stood along a single street. At the upper end lived the Kocademir family, and at the lower end the Duymazes. Both families were large and beloved in the village. Our house stood in the village center, next to the water source. Our next-door neighbors were Uncle İbrahim and his family. İbrahim was regarded as the most amusing and courageous person in the village, and also the bravest. Once while he was working in the fields, it was repeatedly told, he'd fought with a bear. The bear had ripped out his internal organs, but he shoved them back into place and actually made it back to the village. Much more was said of him as well. He was our village's version of Nasreddin Hodja.<sup>15</sup> The villagers usually went to the threshing place, below the water source, to talk. There the elders entertained one another with jokes, eliciting peals of laughter.

The village water supply was of recent construction. The water flowed there from mountain slopes in Mazgirt, several hours away. The spring itself was in the terrain of another village, so a certain sum of money was paid for it. The male villagers dug a canal and laid in the pipes. If you walked along the iron pipes, you'd reach the spring. When we were little, we found it exciting to follow the pipes, as if by doing so we'd discover something new. The waterhole itself was large and built from concrete. It had a nice-looking box-shaped basin, from which high, wide steps led upward along two sides.

It was always very clean. Xezal, a high-spirited woman from the Kocademir family, usually saw to that. Powerfully built, she had a huge face with bushy eyebrows, and her large nose featured broad nostrils. The *kofı*<sup>16</sup> on her head was always tidy. Her headscarf, adorned with pearls and embroidery, was blindingly white. Her skirt had smocking along the hem. Over it she wore a wrap, and under it the elastic pajama pants

that in Zaza we called *manis*. The sight of her plunging her enormous copper bucket into the water was remarkable. First she'd clean the whole place with plenty of water, then she'd wash her hands, face, and feet. Only then did she fill her water container. She always repeated the same routine. Maybe that was why I observed her with fascination. All the villagers were impressed that she cleaned regardless of the weather. The village houses were normally all clean too, but Xezal and her house stood out. She had thick wrists and ankles, adorned with bands of pearls.

Keyzan, from the Duymaz family, was the exact opposite. Her voice was husky, and her body was smooth, tall, and thin. Unlike Keyzan, Xezal was authoritarian. Her domestic authority extended to the outside as well. The old women in the village enjoyed a certain natural respect, but hers went beyond that. She behaved cautiously around others. The young married women in the village adapted themselves to the prevailing traditions. They weren't openly pressured, but in their behavior toward the old women and men, they had to comply with certain norms. When they saw or spoke to elderly people, they covered half their face with their headscarf. That showed the necessary respect. It was also conventional not to speak in a loud voice or at inopportune moments. Infants couldn't be breastfed everywhere, or else the nursing baby was covered with a headscarf. The women who were somewhat older had it easier.

The widow Emoş, whose house stood opposite ours, on the other side of the waterhole, had a special position in the village. She had six children but was still young. Everything she did drew attention to herself and was immediately commented upon. The other women didn't like her much, treating her with overt suspicion and jealousy because she was a widow. They gossiped about her incessantly. But in general village life was harmonious, with warm bonds, respectful interactions, and little conflict. Nothing happened to seriously disrupt the peace.

I've never forgotten how Uncle İbrahim used to listen, over his huge, old-fashioned radio, to songs in the Kurdish dialect Kurmancî, which we called Kirdask. Whenever they broadcast singing by Ayşe Şan,<sup>17</sup> he'd turn the volume all the way up, and we heard it all over the village. Even in Şekerman, the next village over, people could hear it. Sometimes we'd hear radio sounds coming from over there. People listened to news avidly, and when something serious was happening, they were all ears. We children had no idea what any of it was about, but we imitated the grown-ups' seriousness.

**My parents: children of the Dersim genocide** My mother and father were born during the years of the Dersim genocide,<sup>18</sup> my mother a few years after my father. My father still remembers the repression and hard times after the massacre. He talked about it. My mother was a daughter of Hesene Hemedede Kalik, of the Kureyşan tribe. My grandfather was a tribal leader who owned several villages, mills, and shops. So my mother's family was considered well off.

By contrast, my father's family was poor. My parents' marriage was arranged, according to tradition, by their relatives. My father's mother had been married twice, and my father was the only child of her marriage to my grandfather. Probably my grandfather got the name Cansız<sup>19</sup> because he was tall and thin.

I don't remember either of my grandfathers—both died young. My father's family belonged to the Süleymanlı, a branch of the Kureyşan tribe—*Sılamanz*, one would say in *Zazaki* dialect. My grandfathers' good relations were said to have played an important role in my parents' marriage. But on their wedding night, my mother fled my father's house and returned to her parents' house in her own village. She couldn't accept his family's poverty or unexceptional heritage. But her father didn't approve of her behavior. Over the next three years, several suitors turned up for her, but he refused to let her marry any of them, telling her, "You are the bride of the other house—I won't allow you to marry anyone else." Friendly relations were important to him, and he still considered my mother to be the daughter-in-law of my other grandfather. Finally he was able to persuade her to return to my father. The incident hurt and angered my father, but he had the maturity and patience to wait for her.

At the time of the Dersim massacre, my mother was still in diapers. My grandmother hid, along with her children, daughters-in-law, and nieces, in a dense forest near the Munzur River. She never had a chance to nurse her children. My mother, the youngest, cried continually from hunger. My uncle was terrified that my diaper-wrapped mother's crying would betray their hiding place. Along the far shore of the river ran a street used by military vehicles. The soldiers sometimes took breaks there. They might very well have heard a crying infant. My uncle wanted to tear my mother from my grandmother's arms and throw her into the Munzur.

But my grandmother wailed, grabbed my mother back, and wrapped her in her arms. She beseeched my uncle and swore she could quiet my

mother. So my mother was saved. Later, when my mother got angry or found life unbearable, she'd snap, "Oh, if only they'd thrown me into the water—I'd have been spared all this!" It was mostly my uncle who told stories from that time.

My father's memories of that time affected us more. His experiences were more extensive and painful, and whenever he talked about them, he seemed to relive them. He had good recall, and his memories were vivid. In later years he expressed them with his *saz*,<sup>20</sup> in poems, and in songs.

The Dersim genocide started in 1938 and lasted into the 1940s. Between 1940 and 1945, military units raided more villages, looking for members of Demenan tribe, and hauled the male inhabitants off to military posts. My father's memory here was a little vague, given his age, but it persisted. I wish I could recall everything he told me, but unfortunately, I retain only a little.

"I remember very well the day the gendarme units crossed over the Pax Bridge into the village," he said.

They forced the men, including my father, to assemble in the village square. There they were tied up and had to hold out in the sun for a long time without bread or water. The heat was fierce. Later everyone was taken to the gendarme station over the Pax Bridge. I wanted to go with them, but they didn't let me. I cried. My mother and the other village women cried too.

The next day a group set out to figure out what had happened to the men. I went along. We had to wait in the yard. No one paid any attention to us. Suddenly an officer ordered the watchman at the military station—a Kurdish man, native to the region—go get the documents, *evrak*, from the Şekerman village. This man misheard *evrak* as *avrat*, wife, so he rounded up all the village women and brought them to the station. When the officer saw the guard coming with a large group of women, he burst out laughing and said, "Our smart-aleck brought *avrat* instead of *evrak*," and ordered him to take the women back immediately. I was relieved, because I'd been afraid the women would be tied up like my father and the other men were and thrown into prison.

Usually when my father talked about his experiences, he couldn't hold back tears. He constantly gave us advice and demanded that we be smart and do the right thing so that we wouldn't have to go through the pain

he did. “What you’ve experienced up to now—how are you supposed to know what life means? But look at what we went through ...”

All that repression and torture were said to be justified because members of the Demenan tribe were hiding in the village.<sup>21</sup> On the least suspicion, people would be rounded up, imprisoned, and tortured. I don’t have to recount what happened when tribal members were actually found in the village.

**“My father didn’t let me go to school”** My father was among those in the village who had gone to school. He finished primary school. His schoolmates included Ali Gültekin, Kemal Burkay, and Hüseyin Yıldırım. He’d always mention those names when speaking of that time. He was especially close to Ali Gültekin because they came from the same village and grew up in the same living conditions.

My mother, on the other hand, never went to school, and in fact she never missed an opportunity to complain mournfully that her father had prevented her from attending school. She possessed a kind of authority that derived from her advantage in coming from a well-off family. Moreover my father was influenced by the Alevi culture, with its respect for women, and he behaved toward her accordingly.<sup>22</sup> The effect was to make her even more authoritarian.

In society in general, when people refer to a family, to its children or its property, they use the husband or father’s name. It seems natural and alienates no one. Few things are referred to according to the female family members. But in our culture, people spoke of Zeynep [Sakine’s mother] as much as of İsmail [her father]. My mother’s family even put the emphasis on Zeynep. That was entirely normal, even necessary.

Within the tribe and the family, my grandmother too had authority and influence, but hers was different from my mother’s. Hers was based on her personal strength and on her dedication to the common good.

My grandmother’s name was Hatice, but we all called her Eze. She was tall and strong, with a fair complexion and blue eyes. Actually, no one could say precisely whether they were blue or green. If I say they were blue, I’m doing an injustice to green, and vice versa. In any case, her eyes were very beautiful. She was a beautiful woman, my grandmother. With her energy, her poverty, and her ability to master anything, she had a great influence on people around her. She was remarkably far-sighted. Her grandchildren, children, daughters-in-law, brothers-in-



law, neighbors, and relatives, the people in her village, and everyone she knew called her Eze. She enjoyed great general respect.

After my grandfather died, her reputation and her authority rose even higher. From then on she bore the responsibility for a large family with widely dispersed relatives. For any problem that arose—whether a daughter was marrying, or a daughter-in-law was coming into a family, a quarrel or a conflict—no solution was imaginable without her. Nothing happened without her approval. She had an enormous heart. She helped anyone who needed help, valued fairness, and tried never to hurt anyone. She assisted the needy, and newlyweds, and anyone who suffered a loss.

Whenever someone's jealousy or a quarrel resulted in a crisis, or even a death, my late grandfather would turn up at the scene. In Dersim most things were sworn "on Düzgün Baba,"<sup>23</sup> but in my family everything was sworn on the head of my grandfather. For my grandmother to swear something on his head was to resolve all misunderstandings, and everyone had confidence in her.

She was a very strong woman, my grandmother. She excelled at whatever she undertook and was hugely talented. At night she went out walking alone, checking to make sure everything was all right. If a wolf or other wild animal came near the stables, she shouted at it with her powerful voice, and the animal took flight. She always knew who was sick or who was fighting, and she intervened. The kind of attention she gave her fellow human beings elevated her reputation.

In my grandmother's house the tea was always fresh. Her big teapot constantly simmered over a flame. Our village had one street, and so whoever wanted to go to another village had to pass through ours. Many people tired from a journey found rest in my grandmother's house. They ate her food and drank her tea. Many good friendships came about this way, and my grandmother always enlarged her circle of acquaintances.

My grandmother's qualities fascinated me. I admired her and followed her around. I especially observed how every morning she rose early with the sunrise, stood with her face toward the sun, and prayed with her palms over her face. She did the same thing at moonrise. She prayed at sunrise and sunset, moonrise and moonset. During her prayers her face looked sadder. Whenever the sun or moon was eclipsed, she prayed, cried, and entreated, making my whole body shiver. Gloom hung in the air: the darkness aroused fear and a mood of hopelessness and pain. My

grandmother wanted the darkness to end quickly. And as soon as it did, she baked the kind of buttery bread that we call *niyaz*.

Another peculiarity was that she never let the fire in the kitchen go out. In the evening she buried the glowing embers under the ashes, so that at daybreak she could reignite a flame. It was considered a sin to get fire from another house or to have to pass fire along to another. If someone requested fire from us, she got annoyed and told the people to make sure every evening from then on that they'd have embers in the morning. Eze lived according to the Zoroastrian teaching. For her it was part of life to preserve fire, to find refuge in the sun and moon, and to be connected with the earth.

**Learning Turkish: a unique torture** I didn't have much to do with my paternal grandmother, and I have only a few memories of her. She rarely visited us—mostly she lived with her other children. I last saw her in 1973, when she was very old. Her face and hands were wrinkled, although her body was still vital and snow white. She was highly meticulous. She always carried around with her a mat made of thin material. Before sitting down anywhere, she'd spread this mat out first and adjust her skirt. Only then would she lower herself.

After finishing his military service, my father became a civil servant. He passed the exam at the vocational school and went to work as a clerk. By then I had already learned a few words in Turkish, like “mother” and “father.” Whenever I learned new Turkish words, I'd run into the center of the village and shout them at the top of my lungs, to annoy the other children my age. Learning Turkish words is one of my most vivid early memories. Nobody was forcing me to learn the language back then.

My oldest sibling was my brother [Haydar]. In between his birth and mine, my mother had brought another girl into the world, but she died at 6 months old. My brother entered school before me. I saw the city [Dersim] for the first time when I registered for primary school. In my first year of school, I ran from the village to the city every day. In the summer we could cross Harçik Creek as a shortcut. In the winter there was a lot of snow. The snowy winter evenings were unforgettable. We little ones were in the middle, and the grown-ups were arrayed in front of us and behind. During an especially heavy snowfall, there was the danger of losing a child, or we could encounter a wolf or jackal. So

a vanguard always cleared the path for us and kept alert for possible dangers. On such evenings a group of men usually met us, and together we made a racket to scare wolves away. Or we sang songs together. Later I learned that that not only dispels fear but raises the body temperature, reducing the risk of frostbite.

The worst was the way our hands hurt, after we got home from school, if we tried to warm them at the stove. It hurt as much as if we'd put our hands directly on the stove. Our teacher taught us to warm our hands by sticking them in our armpits, rubbing them, breathing onto them, and running them through our hair. That way they'd warm up faster and with less pain.

My first-grade teacher was a blond Turkish woman named Gönül, who taught us until third grade. Learning Turkish was a unique torture—even though we were eager to learn, it was very difficult for us. We learned new words quickly, but our teachers recommended that we always speak Turkish after school. “If you speak Kurdish, you'll be beaten,” they said. This threat, and some schoolmates who supervised us, induced us to learn faster.

My father's civil service career inevitably changed our living standard. We now could have bread baked from white flour and wear low shoes. When my friends wanted to trade two loaves of barley bread for one made of white flour, I was ashamed and did it right away. But I took only one barley loaf and said I liked cornbread the best. Sometimes I offered to trade so they wouldn't have to say anything. Sometimes we took a city-bought loaf of bread and hid it in homemade puff pastry bread and ate it that way. Later we moved to the city. In winter we'd live in the city and in summer in the village. That changed our lives. My knowledge of Turkish improved.

Our first house in the city was in the Dağ neighborhood. It was a mud-brick house—only the floor was concrete. And unlike in the village, here we had electricity.

**A fight in Tahtı Halil village** One summer night in the village, I awoke to a huge crash. My grandmother had a club in her hand and was screaming for the men to come and meet her in the village center. I'd never seen her so angry. Even before she started to scream, I'd heard some sounds but didn't understand what they were. A strange restlessness hung in the air. Many of those who showed up at the square

had only just awakened and were rubbing their sleepy eyes and trying to understand what was going on.

My grandmother asked them where my abducted aunt was. She cursed the abductors. My father wasn't there, and Mustafa Çalli, the husband of my other aunt, acted as if he didn't know anything. He pretended—cunningly—to have only just awakened. “What's all this about?” he asked my grandmother. “It's midnight—has something happened?” With that, he became the first to feel the brunt of the club. Many others tried the same trick as he. At first I had no idea what was happening, but gradually it came out that my aunt Melek had been abducted. It was like an episode in a movie: fear, excitement, adventure, it had everything. If my uncle hadn't stepped in, it could have led to a blood feud.

A man from the Rayber tribe had wanted to marry my aunt Melek, but our family rejected him, preferring that she marry someone from our clan. But my grandmother ignored the preference of the rest of the family and promised Melek that she could have the young Rayber man. So the others decided to abduct my aunt. It was mainly men who participated in the abduction, men who worked and had a certain intellectual background. The abduction itself was remarkable. The two villages lay at a distance, and in between were several others. As she always did, my grandmother took precautions. She slept outside on a wooden bed. My aunt's abductors approached the house from several directions. They must have had helpers from the village too. They had to pull the abduction off without a hitch, otherwise my aunt would be given to the other tribe.

Since changing my grandmother's mind had proved too difficult, they'd devised the following plan. One or two people would slip into the summer stable and cry out as if wolves were attacking the herd. The panic would lure my grandmother away from the front door. The others would then use the opportunity to grab my aunt and abduct her from the house and then from the village. Deceiving my grandmother would, of course, be the hardest part.

As soon as the panic erupted in the stable, my grandmother grabbed the club and ran to see to the herd. The group that was to carry out the abduction then ran into the house and searched for my aunt. They found her under the big wicker basket that normally held yogurt and milk. They clapped a hand over her mouth and dashed off with her.

My grandmother quickly grew suspicious. The group from our village went over to her and kissed her hands and tried to stall her by talking to her, acting as if it were a perfectly normal visit.

My grandmother answered them with the club, cracking a few skulls, but they succeeded in distracting her and so won some time for the other group. My grandmother swore and then called for my aunt. When she realized that she'd been abducted, she ran off to track her down.

The village had only two roads. The abductors had planned to take my aunt from Kavun village, not to Ali's village, but to ours, to Tahtı Halil. This route had advantages. But my grandmother went to Ali's village and right away started shouting and calling out. The residents came out into the square. My grandmother demanded that they turn over her daughter, but the villagers said neither Ali nor Melek was there. Finally my grandmother believed them and came to our village.

The men who had brought my aunt to our village were hiding on the outskirts. Others involved in the affair were by now sleeping as if nothing had happened. The abduction was successful.

But it didn't end there. When my grandmother left the village, her shouting had also aroused and informed the Raybers' village. She reported the abduction to the gendarmes. Of course no one could have imagined that anyone would get the state involved. But the next day gendarme units occupied the village and searched it. They continued the search into the outskirts. Because of the complaint, they were determined to find my aunt. The result was chaos. No one had expected the state coming in with its gendarmes. That could put an end to good relations once and for all. The gendarmes clubbed several village residents, blaming them for the abduction. And they accused my uncle Hasan, the tax collector. Others guessed that the Raybers were behind the complaint.

As it all got very serious, a group from the village came to my grandmother to mediate. She still didn't realize what had happened. But when her fury subsided, she withdrew her complaint, whereupon the gendarmes left.

My grandmother's reputation suffered from this episode. On behalf of her daughter, she'd turned against everyone else and had cursed and insulted people, hurting their pride. In the end, Melek and Ali got happily married in Höpük. Later they moved to Milli, where Ali worked as a teacher. A long time after that, my grandmother went to visit my aunt and Ali and reconciled with them.