

# What Happens When Your Oppressors Are Next-Door Neighbors?

## A Story Out Of Kurdistan

### Part Three

Naples Council on World Affairs  
Naples, Florida

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November 13, 2006

Several years ago, an intern of mine gifted me an autobiographical book titled, "The Long Loneliness" by Dorothy Day, a Christian activist known for her life-long dedication to the needs of the dispossessed in America. I was, to be honest with you, taken aback by the book's melancholic title. Was it a subtle reference to the struggle of the Kurds and Kurdistan, my preoccupation in Washington, DC? If so, my intern was right on target. But I seldom go on my whims alone and, just to be on the safe side, delved into the tome to see for myself if there was more to the title. There usually is. It didn't take me long to come face to face with an amazing story of an incredible woman who had marched to the drumbeat of her own heart to change the world for the good. Perhaps my intern wanted me to walk in her footsteps. Perhaps I had taught her a thing or two about the stateless Kurds. I still haven't asked her why she gifted me that book, but I am definitely a better person for reading it. I was also reminded of a line from Lord Tennyson, "I am a sum of all the people I have met". I am grateful to fate for making her, a daughter of Minnesota, a part of my journey on this earth.

This afternoon, I am a part of your journey in this corner of America known as Florida, for at least an hour. I am not so sure if you will be as grateful to me by the end of this lecture as I was to my intern by the time I finished her book, but I have promised Mr. Bumstead, my kind host, that I will, unlike President Bush, "stay the course", and in my case, tell you about Kurdistan, my forsaken homeland and its persecuted people. Others, however, have come up with fancier names for it, like Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish Kurdistan, Iranian Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan. I, to be honest with you, have trouble pronouncing such fanciful and mouthful misnomers. I like it better when people don't take themselves too seriously and work with the reality to make it more conducive to human happiness. A little bit of humility, on the part of those who speak for our humanity, can cure most of us of most follies that beset our existential experience on this earth. Dorothy Day was certainly one of those women who knew a thing or two about modesty and how it could right some of the wrongs that we think as insurmountable. In a chapter titled, "Love is the Measure", she says, "When I walked into my apartment, I found waiting for me a short, stocky man in his mid-fifties, as ragged and rugged as any of the marchers I had left [behind]. I like people to look their part, and if they are workers, to look like workers, and if they are peasants to look like peasants. I like to see the shape of a man's hands, the strength of his neck and shoulders."

If one were to expand on this observation of Dorothy Day, one could reasonably say, one can, after a few pleasantries, tell a Japanese when one sees one and do the same with a Russian, or a German, or a French. Can you, however, trust yourself with a Kurd? What is a Kurd like at the dawn of 21<sup>st</sup> century? Since we are not allowed to define ourselves, in Kurdistan that is to say, should we, those of us who are abroad, trust the Turks, the Arabs or the Persians with the task? Have you ever heard a Turk say a kind word about a Kurd? Do you know how Saddam Hussein portrayed the Kurdish characters in his novels? Should I make you privy to the insulting platitudes of Persian leaders towards my compatriots? The question, or should I call it a challenge, that we Kurds face is how to acquaint you with the run-of-the-mill Kurds of Kurdistan, simple folks with simple desires, like human rights, linguistic rights, cultural rights, and why not, since we number some 30 to 35 million souls, yes, you are going to hear me say something that drives the Middle Eastern leaders crazy, *self determination* as well. If you think catching Osama Bin Laden is hard, multiply our task with one thousand times, and we are as close to defining a Kurd for you as you are to closing in on the killer of your loved ones on the mountains of Hindu Kush, in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

I can almost hear you say NO, NO, NO, and NO, it should not be so difficult to define a Kurd and one should not belittle the Herculean efforts of American Special Forces, or NATO units for that matter, who are engaged in a life-and-death struggle to capture the Saudi billionaire turned mass murderer. I will only counter by saying, just remember how Adolf Hitler defined the Jews and how the Jews define themselves. In the 1920s, the Fuehrer appointed himself an authority on the wandering Jew, wrote a book to prove his point, and ran for the highest office in the land to realize his aims. In the 1930s, he won the elections, consolidated his base, and unleashed the awesome power of the state to fulfill the fantasies of his sick mind. Today, you may find it surprising, but we have plenty of Hitler wannabes in the Middle East. They are not as strong as the Fuehrer once was, but they are cut from the same cloth and pursue identical aims. If anything, they are more insidious, more cunning, and more devilish than the wannabe artist from Austria. Like him, they are ranting, openly and in broad daylight, as long as they rule the Middle East, the Middle East will have nothing to do with Kurds and Kurdistan. And yes, as you can imagine, how they define the Kurds and how we define our people are two completely different things.

In the so-called democracy of the Turks in Turkey, where close to 20 million of my compatriots live, there is simply no reference to the Kurds. I carry a passport in my pocket that notes my nationality as Turkish. Imagine telling a Frenchman inside his country, from now on, he has to call himself a German and, on top of it, bury his past and glory, loudly and proudly, in things Teutonic. In the theocracy of Persians in Iran, where close to eight million of my compatriots live, we are competing for the first place in the heart of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, my candidate for the looniest man ever to walk on the face of the earth, with two of his favorite peoples, the Jews and you, the children of "Great Satan". In the dictatorship of Arabs in Syria, where close to two millions of my compatriots live, the Kurds have three choices: some are called,

“Maktoumeen”, the invisibles; some are called, “Ejnebi”, the foreigners; and the rest can call themselves Kurds, but doing so will only get them into trouble in a society still reeling under the domination of a race based ideology of the Baath Party enjoying its meridian power in Damascus. And of course, we have Kurds in Iraq, some five million strong, basking in the sunshine of what I would call an Indian summer, the accidental beneficiaries of a botched policy, courtesy of your government.

But there is more to the story of the Kurds and Kurdistan than this brief survey of a dismembered geography and an abused people, reminding me of the helicopter rides that one takes over quaint places with the pilot acting as a tour guide. If I were that pilot and you were my passengers, I would have wanted to land you in a place called Halapja, in southern Kurdistan, occupied by Iraq, and acquaint you with one its residents whom I got to know on the eve of the war. In February and March of that year, like most far-sighted Americans, I was filled with trepidation for my people, the Kurds, and your loved ones, the Marines. With the talk of war in the air, I become a news junkie, read all kinds of reports, watched all kinds of television programs, and attended all kinds of demonstrations to raise my palm, as high as I could, for the Kurds and Kurdistan. Mine was often the loneliest voice in the crowds. Like my people in the Middle East, I didn't fit the two prevailing paradigms. I carried an odd sign saying, “No War, Down with Saddam Hussein”. I was then as I am now opposed to the Arab domination of the Kurds and couldn't, in good conscience, support the U.S. domination of the Arabs. Saddam, I knew from experience, had hurt millions of people in both Arab Iraq and Kurdish Kurdistan. Thousands were aching to settle scores with him. If America had done for them what France did for the founding fathers of this country, Saddam may not have had his day in the court, but his one-way ticket to hell would have been an item in the history books today. Unfortunately, commonsense had gone on a holiday break in Washington in those days. Unfortunately, a quagmire is now staring us in the face.

I am, as usual, digressing from my main point. It happens to me often when I think the company is going to be a friendly one. But you have things to do and I have a promise to keep and so I would like to take you to the city of Halapja where I want you to meet a Kurdish woman whose story was chronicled in a wire report before the missiles rained on Baghdad. The reporter who interviewed her noted that she was a survivor of the chemical attack on her city on March 16, 1988. On that memorable day, she was only eight years old. When the interview took place, she had become 23. In the course of her conversation with the stranger who had shown an interest in her story, it became clear that she had trouble expressing herself and would often stop in mid-sentence, gasping for fresh air, and then continue with her frightening tale. She had, in other words, inhaled chemical fumes into her young lungs, and had crippled them forever. A conversation that might take other people 15 minutes was now taking her twice as long. Empathizing with her condition, the reporter did something that most reporters do not do, and that was, he asked her some personal questions. If she were granted a wish, he wanted to know, what would she want? She had said, the exact quotation now escapes me, but something to the effect, I want to marry,

but no one wants me. She was no longer a woman; her new name was "kimyevi", someone who had been subjected to chemicals, which translates to a life of loneliness whether one likes it or not.

I don't know what kind of reaction this story evokes in you. As a Kurdish man, I can't get her wish out of my mind. I will say more, I view it Godly, and think if God had bothered to speak to us about the Kurds and Kurdistan, he would have said the same thing. No one wants us. Everybody can disdain us. Chemical weapons can be used on our children in broad daylight. The suppliers will never account for their commerce of death. Their users will face as much opprobrium as the scientists who test them on the mice. What is wrong with this picture? Is it right to condemn an entire people as no good? Why is it that our intolerant masters are welcomed on your shores, or better yet, supported in their capitals to perpetuate their evil systems on the Kurds? Can anyone tell me the difference between this miserable Kurdish woman and Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl, who had to spend more than two years of her life in hiding and then die of typhus in a concentration camp? The whole world now condemns Adolf Hitler and his race-based Nazi ideology, but has found a way, yes, a way, to accommodate the race-based ideologies of Baathists in Damascus, Kemalists in Ankara and that Shiite absurdity in Teheran that knows how to get its adherents to rise to their feet in defense of Palestinians in Palestine, but not Kurds inside Iran. Can someone in this hall stand up and prove any of my points wrong? And I won't mind if the same person also sings, "What a wonderful world!"

I can't sing myself, but if I were to try it, Dorothy Day would yell at me from her room in heaven and warn me in plain English, if you persist in your folly, everyone will reach out to their car keys and leave you alone in this hall and register their complaints with Mr. Bumstead for hosting not a speaker but a singer wannabe clueless about his lack of talents. You can take off your hands from the keys; I will not engage in such silliness, but instead do what I am better known for and that is to plead my people's case for equality in the Middle East. I have chosen the use a literary device, a letter, for this purpose. It is from the pen of the hapless Kurdish woman of Halapja to Anne Frank. As it is customary in compositions like this one, the faults are entirely of my own. Its merits, if there may be some, are meant to edify you and make you, if at all possible, a friend of my people's everlasting struggle for liberty in Kurdistan. If I were to highlight some of its salient points, it is that I see the situation as dire, grim, bleak and daunting. The hope, like a mirage in the desert, keeps receding before our very eyes. God, it is clear to this activist, has forsaken the Kurds. His bewitched children, the Turks, the Arabs and the Persians, are feverishly at work, marching in the footsteps of the destroyers of cultures and humanity, to cleanse the Middle East of its Kurdish component. May God have mercy on the Kurds! And may he also instill some sense in our adversaries for the sake of their children.

I have exhausted the preliminaries. I am now ready to read you the letter to Anne Frank. I ask for your indulgence.

Dear Anne,

I am writing from a city you never knew existed in this world. It is called Halapja. It is a Kurdish city, but most people think of it as an Arab one. Some have even shocked me by calling it a village. I don't like it when people don't know what they are talking about. It leaves me with the impression that they are trying to hide, yes, hide, something. Tell me Anne, do you know why some people are so allergic to truth? Is it laziness or ignorance, or a combination of the two? It really, really bugs me when people misspeak about my city. I can never forgive President Bush for saying, and on national television to boot, Saddam Hussein, an Arab man, "gassed his own people", and the people the president is referring to are my loved ones and myself, the inhabitants of Halapja, who are, without an exception, all Kurds. Imagine if I told you Adolf Hitler gassed the Germans! You would never talk to me, would you? That is why I don't ever want to talk to President Bush.

I said gassed, didn't I? Yes, Anne, your people and my people have the dubious distinction of being two of the gassed peoples in this world. I survived it, if you could call it that, and there are 500,000 people like me out there, but envy the lot of those 182,000 Kurds who didn't. You didn't survive the camps, but your diary has left us with an impression of you that will, I dare say, last till the end of time, that is, of course, assuming that the good folks will always fight and prevail over evil. Will they? One thing else Anne, it is amazing that you were so precocious at the age of 14 and 15. You never celebrated your 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, but if you had, you would have had a blast, for your tormentor in chief, Adolf Hitler, was no more, he had committed a suicide on April 30, 1945. I am now 26 and my tormentor in chief, Saddam Hussein, just got his death sentence by hanging on November 5, 2006. I guess this makes us both happy campers, doesn't it? I have to be honest with you, Anne, I am feeling neither happy nor good.

I am feeling the blues, because no one is speaking of a solution to the Kurdish Question in the Middle East. Some people are afraid of their shadows lest they offend Turkey, a country that, on the face it at least, doesn't seem to have any goals at all other than molesting its Kurdish inhabitants. I can't help it but quote your own observation: "... there are no greater enemies on earth than the Germans and the Jews." Substitute the word Germans with the Turks and the Jews with the Kurds; then you will have a clue as to what I am talking about. But a deaf world has decided to hear none of our concerns, and, please get ready for a shocker here, is on its feet applauding Turkey for almost qualifying to become a member of the European Union. But when I tell the same Europeans that what Kurdish rights are to Turkey is what chastity is to Paris Hilton, they treat me as if I am speaking in a foreign language. I am beginning to think these Europeans have learned absolutely nothing from your experience. I hate to think that you are going to second me here. Are you?

I have been quick to compare the lot of the Kurds with what happened to the Jews in Europe, but I also need to tell you of the differences that exist between our respective peoples. Your people were defeated by the Romans and pretty much dispersed all over their empire in the succeeding centuries. With the rise of racism in Europe, Zionism made an effort to reclaim the old country for the persecuted Jews all over the world. After the Holocaust, the United Nations felt

obligated to give its blessings to the project. On May 15, 1948, the world witnessed the birth of a new state, Israel. My people still live on their lands. We number some 30 to 35 million souls. Our homeland is as large as France. But when we say we want to have a state of our own, there is a chorus of naysayers out there who shout, "you are dreamers", "you are simpletons", and if they are mean, "you are retards", and these pass themselves off as doctors of our humanity in the world. As you can imagine, I dislike them with every cell in my body! Do you know what our adversaries call us, Anne? Terrorists!

I wouldn't have minded the misnomer if we weren't classified with some of the really ghoulish characters in this world. It is shocking to me that people trusted with positions of authority can not, or should I say will not, make the distinction between most Kurds who wish to live unmolested lives and those who actually think freedom corrodes their dogmas and wish to extirpate it from the face of the earth. I guess I am engaging in generalities here and I want to give you a concrete example to make my point. As I write these lines, America is waging a war against a group of people who call themselves Jihadists. They are, to be sure, a nasty bunch, people with no pretensions of modesty at all, who, given a chance, would plunge any society back 1400 years, to a time of supposedly eternal bliss where God favored one language and considered, through his angels, one people as his favorite. It goes without saying that I wish America good luck in bringing them to their senses, and if that fails, to their knees.

But if I say, only their success will give birth to an independent Kurdistan, you are probably going to jump at my next sentence to see why I would make such a shocking and contentious statement. Yes, Anne, if the Jihadists were to win tomorrow, they will establish their little fiefdom in Anbar province, but Kurdistan will break away from Arab Iraq forever, the way a ripe fruit falls off a tree. When the fighting is "mano a mano", we have never been wanting in courage, patriotism and sacrifice for equality with our neighbors. The success of America against the Jihadists, on the other hand, will mean a united Iraq, equipped with surplus American weapons, one in which we have to submit, again, to the children of Saddam Hussein. I, for one, think it is the duty of every friend of liberty to contribute actively to the demise of that deformity, the out of wedlock bastard of Winston Churchill, known as the state of Iraq. I find solace in the words of one of the founding fathers of America, Benjamin Franklin, who once famously noted, "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Anne, I need to tell you something else, something horrible, something really, really loathsome, something I wish I didn't have to tell you to shake your faith in the human race on this earth. It fills me with trepidation and reminds me of a passage in your second to last entry in your diary. Remember how you said, "I see the world being slowly transformed into wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions." Just to prove your point, only 2 % of all the Soviet boys born in 1920 made it to 1946. One sick man pretty much caused the death of 65 million people. But to continue with what is bothering me, like you, I feel the approach of a similar catastrophe and am sick to my stomach to feel so helpless about it. Again, let me support my

premonition with an example. It is disturbing stuff and please don't tell me I didn't warn you.

A live American can fetch as much as half a million dollars in the hands of kidnapers in Baghdad these days. If Samuel Johnson were alive, he would have certainly changed his famous maxim: "nothing concentrates the mind like the prospect of hanging" to "nothing concentrates the mind like the prospect of beheading." Yes, Hitler may have perfected the art of gassing, Churchill, that idol of yours, had experimented with it on the Kurds, because they had rebelled against his beloved Iraq, but these Al Qaeda types love to make use of their kitchen knives and are not short on cash, thanks to America's addiction to oil, to engage in their sick, sick, sick fantasies. While I am at it, let me also tell you that when an American soldier dies in Iraq, the insurance pays his loved ones \$ 400,000. If the Marines kill an Arab by mistake, the U.S. Army pays his or her loved ones \$ 2,500. Such are the variations in the price of human life, or should I say human dead, in the birthplace of western civilization. I view the phenomenon disturbing to say the least. I am dying to know what you make of it.

The time has come for me to say goodbye to you. Rereading my letter, I feel like it is going to make you sad and angry. I wish I had better news for you. But I am going to try to part on a hopeful note. When Lawrence of Arabia played his revolutionary role in the Arab revolt against the Turks, he wrote his account in a book entitled, "Seven Pillars of Wisdom". In its last chapter, under the heading, "The Last Summons", he recounts the story of liberation of Damascus, the present-day capital of Syria. He was in the frontline units, and made it to the city, as the last of the Turks retreated from it. It happened to be the prayer time, he writes. A crier went to the minaret, as it is the custom in the Islamic faith, and called on the faithful to pray. But, apparently, he didn't stop there and added, referring to God, "And He is very good to us this day, O people of Damascus." It was an apt addition considering four hundred years of Turkish brutality in Arab lands. I am now looking forward to the day when an American marine will compose a similar memoir and note an identical scene of gratitude, this time from a Kurdish crier, proclaiming the emancipation of an old nation, with the help of the children of Jefferson in exchange for some Kurdish oil. I can't wait to read such a book. I will be sure to send you a copy.

In Solidarity,

Your hapless sister from Halapja