

My Life in Iraq **Barbara Lakeberg '70**

Spring 2009

It's twelve midnight on Sunday, 8 March – International Women's Day – and I'm sitting here at my kitchen table in my office in Ain Sefni, a rural town in Sheikhan District of Ninewa (Mosul) Governorate in northern Iraq whose population is a mixture of Izidis, Christians, Muslims, Kurds, Arabs, and Hostas ("Gypsies") – and one Buddhist - me. Maybe by writing about my experiences today, I can give you a nutshell-taste of the life I've been living here in Iraq since 2003.

I work as the General Director of Concordia, a local Iraqi nongovernmental organization that I helped start in November 2003 after visiting Iraq twice on organizational work with the American Kurdish Center of Fairfax, Virginia. To fill you in briefly, I was living in Philadelphia in the spring of 2003, newly divorced after 11 years of marriage to a Tunisian man, when I decided to take a job near Washington as the executive director of a small Kurdish-American organization with a project in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil, now the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. I worked six months with the AKC and found I liked living in Iraq much more than in the suburbs of Washington – the people in Iraq were friendly and welcoming, and I loved the Kurdish culture of colorful clothes, dancing at weddings, delicious lunches and dinners, and hospitality toward strangers. The people here seemed more genuine and more involved with basic things in life than Americans typically are, and I felt at home in the land of pistachios, apricots, and sesame.

After helping to organize and run two training workshops in September 2003 in Erbil and Kirkuk in trauma counseling and peace education for local Iraqi organization members, teachers, and health-center staff, I quit my job at the AKC and moved to Erbil, living three weeks in a hotel before relocating in December 2003 to our first Concordia office – a two-story house in Ainkawa, a mainly Christian town next to Erbil where many organizations had their headquarters. With eight Kurdish Muslim friends from Dohuk and Erbil, I started Concordia, planning to do democracy and human rights educational projects, trauma-counseling training, and other local civil society-development work.

By February 2004, after two training workshops for school counselors and directors, we were planning a large project with financial support from an American NGO, Research Triangle Institute. For the next five months, our office in Ainkawa and our newly established office in Dohuk carried out hundreds of democracy and human rights-related dialogues with local people, 16 workshops, and one art exhibition ("Women and Human Rights") featuring the paintings of a young Kurdish Izidi artist who became a close friend of mine. Concordia quickly had over 30 staff divided across two offices in northern Iraq and a solidly developing reputation for good work with local citizens.

Since the RTI project, we've had funding from a number of international NGOs (American, Swedish, and Norwegian), UN agencies, and some regional Iraqi Kurdistan ministries in the north, with the bulk of our funding coming from non-Iraqi sources. We've worked hard to keep ourselves separate from political party control and have never taken money from any of the political parties. This is important in a place where almost no NGOs are truly independent of political control, and it's allowed us to help a number of persons from different political sides of the fence.

Most of our work has been in the area of human rights and democracy education and human rights advocacy and protection, with additional work in the areas of trauma counseling, social problem solving, and environmental education. We work with women and men of different faiths and cultures, and our board and staff are an eclectic group of people – Izidi, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist (me) – mainly professionals (teachers, lawyers, engineers, and artists) with others mixed in who have less education but are interested in working in a democracy-oriented organization and have skills to contribute to our work. Because the population in the cities where we live is mainly Kurdish, we don't have so many Arabs working with us, but some of our staff are mixed Arab and Kurdish, and Arabs from Mosul, Kirkuk, Baghdad, and Karbala have sometimes participated in our workshops and art exhibitions. Occasionally we've been able to include Turkomans in our workshops, too – they're a much smaller minority in Dohuk and not so large in Erbil, where we closed our office in March 2005 after moving our headquarters to the more-northern city of Dohuk. Our board and staff also include ChaldoAssyrian Christians, and we've had Armenian Christians as colleagues, workshop participants, and volunteers in our activities, too.

So, on to what I did today:

- I woke up around 8:00 this morning on the floor of our kitchen in Sheikhan – actually, sleeping on a "dooshek" – mattress – with my two cats, Denge ("my voice") and Doo-khal ("two spots"). It's warmer to stay in one room with the kerosene heater at night, although it's not recommended to sleep with it going all night long – can be asphyxiating! Fed the cats a mix of crushed fava beans (out of a can) and tuna fish (also canned), since we can't buy cat food here. The kitties were small in late-May 2007 when I found them at the local firehouse without a mother – one of them (the noisy one, Doo-khal) was being pushed across the road, somersaulting all the way, by the foot of a soldier who was guarding the main street into town. Apparently, the fireman had had enough of her meowing (but they were only feeding the kitties bread – no milk – and the cats were hungry!!!), and someone decided this was the best way to get rid of the problem – push the kitten across the road into a grassy field and leave her there to fend for herself or die – a typical way to deal with problems either too large or too small to handle. In the case of cats, almost everyone here is afraid of them – either after bad experiences as children being attacked by wild cats, or because they think cats are dangerous carriers of toxoplasmosis, will infect women, and all future babies of those woman will die!



- After my own breakfast of falafel, halwa (a candy of sesame paste and sugar), cheese, and Arabic coffee, which I cooked myself, I showered – glad to have had enough general electricity during the night for the water in the pipes and tank to be warm – and dressed for the day. A former staff member called me around 10:00 to wish me a good International Women's Day – he said he loves Concordia and is still one of my Program Officers, even though he's a well-known television announcer now in Dohuk and hasn't worked with us for the past year and a half.
- I set off to the local Education Directorate office to check with a friend who works there on a report I'd heard from another colleague this morning about an Izidi woman doctor

from the hospital in Ain Sefni who was said to have been kidnapped by terrorists while traveling on the road between Ain Sefni and Bahzani where she lived – about a 30-minute drive. Bahzani is about 14 kilometers (10 miles) from Mosul. I later heard from a former staff member that she may actually have run off to marry a Christian or Muslim man and that this "terrorist" story may actually be a cover story to protect her and her family from problems from the community.

- I headed to Dohuk in my 2007 Suzuki SX4, which I bought in December 2007 with money from my savings in America (I currently make only \$900 per month, plus a travel allowance for car costs, and free living space in our offices) to replace my worn-out 1995 Opel Vectra that I'd driven into the ground over three years of traveling around Kurdistan, on bad roads and potholes. I needed to take care of some things in Dohuk before returning to the Sheikhan area later in the day to prepare for a multicultural ("living together") music festival Concordia is making on Friday and Saturday this week with local artists – a first-of-its-kind festival for this area, I think. Driving through the Ba'adre Mountains, I am always reminded of how beautiful the scenery is where I am living. I love being in the countryside and in a small town, even though we miss many of the things Americans take for granted – pizza shops, cinemas, K-Marts, and so on. Instead, we have falafel and ges (grilled meat) sandwich shops and local corner shops.
- My first task in Dohuk today was to go to talk to one of the general prosecutors in the court of Dohuk about a young woman who'd been shot to death by her father a month ago in her apartment in Dohuk – two years after she'd given birth to a baby girl before being married to the baby's father. She was the man's second wife – simultaneously – and her father apparently had decided that the shame her pregnancy had brought on the family was too much for him to take. To make matters worse, he somehow had been locally pardoned for his action through the intervention of a sheikh (important tribal person) from one of the leading families in Kurdistan Iraq and was not in prison or going to trial – at least not at the moment, until the prosecutors catch up with him, which we are trying to help them do. And the woman's baby girl reportedly was murdered – smothered to death a week or two after birth – by the father of the baby, to the anguish of the young mother. It seems that the baby's body was never sought for nor found, although new information may help the police search for the body.
- On the way to the court, though, I was sidetracked by a car-repair job I needed to take care of – finding replacement parts for my car. No shop in northern Iraq sells any of the main parts I need to fix the car after bumping into another car in Sulaimaniyah in December at an intersection without stop signs or traffic lights, or any cars in sight, on Christmas afternoon. (The houses and surrounding walls came directly down to the curbs, and it was impossible to spot the oncoming driver, at a 90-degree angle to my car, until it was too late to stop properly. And my brakes really needed replacement at that time, but I couldn't find the right ones despite nearly a year of trying... which contributed to the accident.) I found that the Kurdish man who sold the car to the dealership in Dohuk where I bought it was in town from Serbia, where he lives and imports cars from Hungary, so I chewed him out for selling me a car that cannot be fixed. He promised to bring me parts from Europe within two weeks – same promise as a year ago...
- After the car-shop visit and my talk with the prosecutor, I went to the Dohuk office of Concordia, where our office assistant for the morning had kindly fixed me lunch. I was so late that he'd already eaten his share of the spaghetti (his Iraqi version) and salad he'd fixed

us, since he had to be at the other place he works at 3:00 – the Center for Short People. He is a dwarf, since his mother and father were close relatives – a very common problem here in Iraqi Kurdistan, where many times people marry first cousins. The society is still very tribalistic.

- I drove my colleague to his center so he wouldn't be late and then stopped at the "lafita" shop – the painted-banner shop where we make signs for our workshops and art exhibits and for the upcoming music festival. There, I thought I'd spend about 10 minutes describing the banner I wanted, but it took about 45 minutes and several phone calls to arrange to make the banners (12 of them) – 8 in the Kurdish Bahdini dialect and 4 in Arabic – that we'll hang around the various cities where we hope to draw local participants for the music festival this weekend. I never heard of lafitas until coming to Kurdistan. Here, these are the ways people advertise public events, including funerals.
- I then went off to pay a staff member his February pay, for helping to prepare the art exhibit for human rights we made with seven artists (me as a photographer, plus two sculptors from Kirkuk and four painters from Zakho, Dohuk, Mosul, and Sharia – an Izidi town near Dohuk) in a new hospital building in Qadish, a town close to Amedia about an hour's drive from Dohuk. My colleague had just gotten married a few days ago, but I'd missed his wedding because I thought it would last four hours and I arrived five minutes after the bride and groom and all the guests had left. The weather had been cold and the wedding hall did not prepare heaters to keep the room comfortable, so everyone was cold. And the women and the men – including the bride and groom – were separated, as some conservative Muslims do in weddings, on different sides of the wedding hall. So maybe it's not so bad that I arrived too late for the event... I came to the couple's family home the day after to greet them and give them my envelope with the money-present I'd prepared for them, greeting their relatives who'd stopped to congratulate them, too, and enjoying lunch and tea with the guests.
- I then drove back to Sheikhan, back through the mountains, and went to another colleague's house in an Izidi collective town – the kind of town where the houses are usually concrete-block and cement constructions, replacing the villages that Saddam destroyed over his many years of attacks on the Kurds and Christians, and sometimes on Arabs, too. I wanted him to accompany me to the village where our music festival will be held, but he had given up on waiting for me, his mobile phone had run out of credit (we all use prepaid cards), and he had gone to visit a friend. I rushed on my own, since the sun was setting, to the nearby village, so I could view again the field where we'll hold the festival and meet the mokhtar (community problem-solver) and his wife and family to tell them that yes, the festival is going to happen. We'd talked together, the mokhtar and I, about four weeks ago and I hadn't had the chance to see him recently. This worked out fine, and I then went back to the house of my friend (after phoning him), and he and I took off (after I was fed a tasty supper of grilled tomatoes, yogurt, bread, fried eggs, sliced cukes and tomatoes, and tea, prepared by the women in the family) for a neighboring town, Alqush, where we picked up a friend and went to the mayor's house to continue with arrangements for the festival. The Assyrian Christian mayor was busy entertaining friends, and we were given Arabic coffee and chocolates when we arrived, sitting with him and his friends while he finished his business with them and then helped us with the questions we had about the festival and arrangements he also had been making.

- Then, on to home, dropping my friends along the way at their houses, and stopping first for an hour at the house of one of my Sheikhan colleagues to see how he'd made out with calling his brother in Shingal (Sinjar), an Izidi area on the other side of Mosul near the border with Syria, to see how his brother was arranging to come to our festival. His brother has a musical group and plays for weddings in Shingal, and we wanted them to be part of our festival. There, at my friend's house, I enjoyed fruit juice and conversation with him and his wife, her sister, and his mother-in-law – and a short visit with my dog, Lucy,



an Iraqi dog I'd saved as a puppy two years ago from the road when I found her with both back legs broken and her skin afflicted with mange. I'd taken her to many vets all around Kurdistan and had finally found surgery in Sulaimaniyah for her – and then the kind help of my colleague and his wife in caring for her. I give them about \$12 each week to pay for her food, and they buy extra rice and chicken and so on and feed her what they eat, and she is a healthy,

happy dog! She's always delighted to see me, and her happiness reflects how many people here face life – ignoring their problems and trying to enjoy what they have, since the only other choices are to either give up completely and die (many do commit suicide) or leave. So far, I haven't done either. And I continue to hope for a better future here for myself and all the people of Iraq, though it's awfully hard at times to imagine how the people I know and love will ever be free of the negative tribal traditions and dictatorial mind-set that keeps so many of them living in misery so much of the time.

And now I have to stop because the battery on my laptop is almost out and it's 1:49 a.m. A typical time for me to go to sleep in this place where the work never finishes and the days seem so full and the nights provide no sufficient respite. Every morning I wake up feeling tired and discouraged, but I continue to live and work here because I have so many friends and the work we're doing is so important and I can't think of another better place to live.



Friends at the historic Khanis ruins



A neighbor in Concordia's garden