

## **Abandoned Hearts – Animals in War Zones**

Animal protection without borders

May 2016

How dare you go to Iraq? It's too dangerous there, especially because you are blond. What can you do there for the animals? The war zone is too close ....

The fate of the refugees pouring into our country last year touched my heart. I wanted to help. I thought about donating clothes or teaching German, but realized quickly that I have to do what I'm good at ... so I started a google research: Syria, Libanon, Iraq ... and I found Dr. Sulaiman Tamer Saed – a vet in Duhok, the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

It didn't take me long to figure out that this man is a saint for the animals there. He looks after stray cats and dogs, feeds them every day, does as many neuterings as possible, fights for zoo animals, tries to educate kids at school about caring for animals and visits the horrific animal markets.

I contacted him and we hit it off straight away. I was supposed to visit him in Kurdistan last year but I had to cancel my flight twice. The first time because I found it too dangerous to go and the second time because my airline canceled the flight because of a terror alert.

But we stayed in touch, Robin Hood sent money to him so he could buy more food for all the animals he tries to care for. And in April this year I actually got the chance to visit him. It was a mere three hour flight but I landed in another world. Nadine Papai from the Society for Threatened Peoples and a mutual friend accompanied me. They wanted to visit the refugee camps there so we were there together for the first few days.

Sulaiman picked us up at the airport and we went North, to Duhok, a journey of about 2,5 hours. It was very obvious that were in an oil state, mostly new cars and most of them white. It was a Friday – as sacred to the Muslims as our Sunday. There were a lot of families picnicking along the countryside under trees next to their recklessly parked cars.

It was a sunny day in Duhok, getting hot with about 28 degrees and Jasmin and roses were blooming everywhere. The town is surrounded by the Kurdistan mountains, the Kurdish flag is very present. I felt quite exotic with my blonde hair, men and women staring at me, not hostile, just rather intrigued. In Kurdistan women have rights, they don't have to wear headscarfs. Girls are allowed to go to University, women are allowed to drive cars and go to work.

Most of the time I followed Sulaiman around. We fed stray cats and dogs, he gave lectures at university about environmental- and species protection. I learned a lot about his culture and his fellow countrymen. There's always been war in Iraq as long as I can think back and even now the Peshmerga, the Kurdish soldiers fight the IS. The public treats them as heroes and their pictures are displayed on many a wall – just like the Kurdish flag which decorates cars, every house and even the tissue packs in my hotel.

We went to visit several refugee camps. You need an entry pass to do that and now I know why. Up to 50 000 people in one camp, one tent next to another, container next to container, no playgrounds for the children. They go to school, have food to eat and a roof over their head but do they have a future? It's the beginning of May and quite hot already. In summer there will be between 40 and 50 degrees. The refugees have lost everything, but they smile at us, say hello and the kids seem to have fun. The people here have no task, no chance to do something useful to improve their situation, no chance to look after themselves and their families ... and there is no hope for a change for years to come.

In the evenings I accompany Sulaiman on his daily mission to feed the stray dogs. Most of them are big dogs and a lot of them are Kangals, the big traditional Turkish sheppard dogs. Puppies sit next to dead sheep which are full of maggots. There is garbage everywhere. Shepherds are driving herds of sheep and goats across the still green hills surrounding the town. Sulaiman shows me some stray donkeys he is also trying to look after. The dogs are so shy that we can only fill up food depots for them. Then we meet a big brown dog sitting on a field near to a Kurdish farmer. The dog is not interested in the food we offer him. The farmer in his traditional wide pants and the red scarf around his head tells us that he just fed him two pounds of chicken meat ... nothing unusual as a matter of fact, because the Kurdish people have a heart for animals. Even the soldiers of the Peshmerga feed the strays near to their checkpoints.

Sulaiman is looking for three puppies he has been feeding for the last 10 days. Up and down several hills, no puppy in sight. Just a pack of Kangals is barking at us from a distance. And then we find one of the puppies – dead. Sulaiman is almost in tears. We find his brother in a stone cave. He seems to be sleeping ... but he is also dead. Sulaiman is very frustrated and I try to persuade him to continue with my kind of faith.... I tell him that we have to continue our work for animals in need, that we have to improve their living conditions as long as we can because I know that when I die, Robin Hood will die with me. Sulaiman is shocked. The next day he tells me that he had been thinking about my words all night, because the same thing will happen to his organization KOARP (Kurdish Organisation for Animal Rights and Protection) so he has to act now. How, I want to know. "I have to work harder" is his simple answer. Later that day we found the third puppy – alive - together with another young dog. Sulaiman is beside himself with joy. See – what did I say Sulaiman? We have to go on, Inshallah ... it's a sign for both of us ... we will never give up.

There is so much Sulaiman wants me to see. So after the refugee camps he takes me to some of the many animal shops, to animal markets, to the zoo, to university, to meetings, to

speeches he's holding and the days seem too short to fit everything in. In between I am cordially welcomed by Sulaiman's family. Every day they invite me for dinner and once his wife even cooks a vegan meal for me. On the other days I just take rice and vegetables. She even tailors a traditional dress for me. What a very special present!

Sulaiman takes me to one of many animal shops full of birds, squirrels and other small creatures. The noise is unbelievable. I'm trying to hide my horror seeing them in their small cages, chirping and chuckling, amongst lots of customers, men and children buying them .... Sulaiman buys 10 quails. And yes, we both know that this doesn't help at all. With the birds in a box we drive to the countryside. The green hills around us have a special glow from the setting sun. At a little pond with croaking frogs we set our "merchandise" free. Some fly away immediately, others just land at the next rock. They just sit there like frozen in disbelief – cannot believe that they are free. We sit down and watch them for a while, so happy to see free.

The next item on Sulaiman's long agenda: The Duhok zoo with more than 100 animals.

I feel queasy entering there. Apes, lions, wolves, bears ... most of them caught in the wild ... and birds again, so many birds, parrots, love birds ... you name it ... a white kangaroo ... dogs for breeding like Chowchows, Rottweiler, huskies with blue eyes, a Chimpanzee holding her baby, sitting in between empty tins and bags of chips.. another one being lead around on a rope for the amusement of the visitors. I'm allowed to hold him and my heart burns. When Sulaiman realized how I feel he tried to explain how much he has improved the living conditions of the animals of this zoo. That they have a better live here than in many other zoos of the country. The chimpanzee will go to a rescue centre in Africa. He shows me a baboon who lived in chains that had grown into his flesh for many years. Sulaiman had convinced the former owner to let him come and live in the zoo. It took him years but now the poor soul has his own large enclosure, no ideal place but at least his own little space. I tell Sulaiman how much I appreciate his work but that there is so much more to improve at this zoo ... the living spaces of the animals, trees have to be planted and much more. I am totally and utterly against zoos but when I think about the 50 degrees in summer, there's no shadow, they need distraction and variety in their daily gloom. We talk to the manager of the zoo and he seems a nice and sensible guy. I ask for the price of a Husky-puppy and he immediately offers to give me one for free. Fortunately there are no puppies at the moment.

Another day Sulaiman takes me to the City of Sinjar in the mountains, which is close to Syria and has been completely destroyed by the IS. We had to get a special licence that allows us to go there and I can see that Sulaiman is feeling uncomfortable about our trip. It's a 3 hour drive, it is very hot. When we reach the triangle area Iraq, Turkey and Syria we are being held up by soldiers at a checkpoint. We have to get out of the car, they check my camera and I have to wipe the pictures of the river I took shortly before approaching the checkpoint. Then we are allowed to pass. The landscape is changing, dried out soil, very dusty. I see sheep herds, dogs and lots of checkpoints and basecamps of the Peshmerga. The soldiers are all very friendly. They have built barriquades out of sandbags behind which they watch the

enemy lines all day. What an oppressive feeling to know that the IS is so close. The fauna, however, is so versatile here. Free wild birds, falcons, vultures ... this country has so many wild animals, even pumas.

Sinjar is a destroyed city, nobody lives here except the soldiers and policemen. A spooky silence, it is hot and windy. We pass by mass graves with boards telling the passerby to respect these places, burned out cars, some of them lying around upside down, ruins of houses with stairs that lead into nowhere. Only humans are capable of such destruction.

There's a dog trotting along the side of the road. A thick wire is trapped around his neck. He's very shy but eventually he comes up to me. The police and Sulaiman want to help but nobody has a wire cutter. I try to free him but my Swiss Knife stands no chance. Eventually we succeed. We feed him and drive away. Only later when I looked at the pictures I took I see something in his eyes that I will never forget. He was just one of many formerly loved animals with owners who now wonder around abandoned in this ghost town. But we couldn't take him with us because there is no animal shelter... yet! Part of our joint venture is, of course, a shelter for all these Abandoned Hearts. If we can convince the Mayor of the city of Duhok to make the old slaughter house available for us we will convert it into a shelter for emergency cases. Healthy cats and dogs will be neutered by Sulaiman and set free again. We will keep feeding them though and we have found several restaurant owners who will provide us with their leftovers. We will also buy food but cat and dog food is very expensive in Kurdistan. We also want to buy a car but cars are also very expensive here. A Pickup would be nice because there will be lots of things and animals that need transporting.

We come across a Yeside, sitting in a field just outside Sinjar tending his sheep. I recognize the red headscarf. He is a refugee but cannot join his family in the camp nearby because of his sheep. At the moment they still find grass here but soon all will be dried up. What will happen then? This man has lost his home and his land and he can't even be with his family. Makes you think ....

We take a trip to the mountains, the landscape takes your breath away. Just that the beauty of nature is interrupted by huge white spots which look as if various lakes are spilling the countryside. But it's the refugee camps hosting thousands of people.

Sulaiman is a fountain of ideas ... and I'm getting carried away with him. There is so much we can do here and after all, being the consular vet, he is a very powerful man in this country. He has permission to go to the slaughter house, he has enough influence to change things to the better at the zoo, he can give lectures at schools and universities....

We agree to have a big celebration in Duhok on October 4<sup>th</sup>, World Animal Day. We will invite the press and offer workshops to explain about zoos, alive animal markets and slaughter houses. Sulaiman will invite all the important people of Kurdistan and he has promised me that they will all come. They are open for new ideas – and actually that's what animal rights IS for them: totally new! So the chance to be able to change things is quite

realistic. Together we will get a change of law for catching and selling wild animals. The Peshmerga do have an environmental police squad but there is no law against people selling bear cubs, wolf puppies or eagles.

One evening we went to the bazar, bustling with people and with too many animal shops where they sell birds, squirrels and many more desperate creatures.

In front of one shop there are cages with young rabbits, no food, no water and one cage with an obviously sick cat... diarrhea. We have to save that cat, I told Sulaiman. But the price is horrendous... 100 Dollars ... for a sick cat. Sulaiman doesn't want me to pay so much. It doesn't make sense, he says – which is true, but buying squirrels and birds to free them doesn't make sense either. For the single animal of course but it doesn't save the overall problem. The cat meows and looks at me with broken eyes.... I wish I could save all the animals here. But I have to take the cat. They put her into a box for me and we take her to Sulaiman's house. He treated her and even found her a new home. He is doing such a good job in Kurdistan and I know that together we will be able to change animal welfare in this country – despite war, economical problems and a totally different culture.

Saying goodbye after a week full of adventures and special moments wasn't easy. I would have to write a book to tell the whole story. But I made a lot of new friends and since I'm back I'm getting messages from many Kurdish people, men and women, but also animal lovers from Syria, Libanon ... they are everywhere. I made another special friend in Kurdistan, a Peshmerga-soldier who writes to me on facebook every day. He is married, has two kids and is stationed in Mosul. A few days ago his picture on facebook was gone, just a black space. It was scary... something truly horrific had happened as he told me later: friends of him died because of a car bomb and an IS suicide assassin. I had been there, just a while ago ... and my friend is there every day. He feeds the strays ... sends me pictures of proof ... and when he is home he feeds the squirrels in his garden.

How dare I go to Iraq? Because I know I will find good people everywhere ... they are just rare. The more I see of the world, the more animals I see suffering, the more quiet I become. But my pioneer spirit is growing. My mind is set that Robin Hood has to help improving the situation of animals in countries where nobody else is lending a hand. We had a good start, Sulaiman and me. We will educate and spread animal rights, we will improve things at the zoo, at the animal markets, maybe even change some laws for the benefit of the animals. We will start a neutering program and we will have an animal shelter. There will be more projects we can turn to reality as long as you and your donations will keep supporting ROBIN HOOD. Inshallah.