In March 1988, Esma Mekhdad fled with her children when the Iraqi Air Force attacked her village. She was nine months pregnant.

THE LION-HEARTED

Calgary's Kurds live poised between a horrific past and an uncertain future.

By ALISON AZER *Photographs by* JAMES MAY

WITH ONE HAND, SHE PUSHES a cart of colour-coded cleansers, fraying mops and bulging garbage bags. Her free hand massages an aching lower back. She moves slowly, rhythmically, through the maze-like configuration of office cubicles—bending, emptying, wiping. When she passes the occasional worker toiling at their desk after hours, the most exchanged is a thin smile, a modest nod. Suffering from chronic back pain, gray hair springing out from her loosely wrapped scarf, a look of resigned acceptance on her weathered face, she is a woman most see without seeing.

But if we were to look—really look—we'd see a woman of astounding strength and resilience. A woman who in Kurdish, her mother tongue, is known as *sherdel*—the lion-hearted.

On a crisp evening in March 1988, Esma Mekhdad received word that the Iraqi Air Force had been deployed to attack her village of Benavie. Chemical gas attacks waged against other Kurdish villages in the picturesque valley had left hundreds dead and thousands injured. Esma knew she had to get her family to higher ground, above the reach of the deadly gases.

Nine months pregnant, she was alone with her six children. The youngest of them, Ravine, was desperately ill with pneumonia. Esma's husband, Tahib Hamid, was in the mountains, a member of the Peshmerga, the Kurdish fighting group whose name means "those who face death." He fought for Kurdish independence; she fought to keep her family alive.

Moving swiftly and calmly, Esma filled cloth sacks with bread, blankets and clothes. As her eyes scanned the room, she resisted looking at the family's collection of photographs and heirlooms. She knew from practice and instinct what was needed, and survival trumped sentimentality. She assembled her children, distributed the sacks and issued instructions. They were to stay together and keep walking no matter how cold or tired they became. Closing her door for what would be the last time, Esma prayed to Allah for protection.

Esma felt her first contraction upon reaching the foothills of the Zagros Mountains at the heart of the Kurdish homeland. With a weight of 20 kilograms on her back and clutching her gasping one-year-old daughter to her chest, she led her family on the journey of their lives. When Ravine slipped into unconsciousness and then on to death, Esma's wail of grief echoed through the mountain passes. But she kept walking for the sake of her five remaining children and the one pushing on her womb.

As her labour reached its peak, Esma urged her children to carry on. She braced herself against a boulder and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. After severing the umbilical chord with her hair clip, she swaddled the new baby in Ravine's clothes and named her after the sister she would never know. As Esma

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dug through the snow to prepare her daughter's shallow grave, the girls lay side by side—one last breath, one first breath.

Today, Esma is 49. She lives in a modest northeast Calgary home with her husband and a fluctuating subset of nine children. While life in Canada is not everything she dreamed of, Esma is grateful that her children are safe and have access to health care and education. She will be relieved, she says, when all her children are married and starting families of their own. When asked if the spouses must be Kurdish, she lowers her gaze and replies that it would be better if they were.

I appreciate her honesty, sensing that she feels awkward admitting her bias in my presence. For I am a white Canadian woman married to a Kurdish political refugee. And while I cook Kurdish food and am learning the language, I am close to the Kurds but not one of them.

Throughout our conversation, facilitated by a translator, Esma speaks with a powerful combination of precision and detachment that creates an atmosphere of archival credibility. It is at times disconcerting, given the intensity of her experiences. And yet the Kurds—otherwise exuberant, proud and hospitable people—still feel that the world does not believe their tortured history. They have learned not to be surprised by the privileged indifference of the "civilized" world.

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CONSIDERING THAT KURDS, at 30 million strong, are regarded as the world's largest nation without a state, the Kurdish issue has received little attention, particularly in North America. The Kurdish homeland is nestled within the Zagros mountain chain and is territorially divided among Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Kurdish nationalists regard these governments as occupying powers, denying Kurdish identity, banning the language and withholding legal and political rights. At times, they have used the Kurds to further larger geopolitical objectives—such as during the Iran/Iraq war, when Tehran supported the Iraqi Kurds' resistance movement against Baghdad. Such allegiances were tenuous at best. Domestic oppression of Kurds was the norm. Grievances run long and deep.

As early as the 17th century, the poet Ehmed-e Xani lamented the plight of the Kurds:

The Kurds in this world's state
Why are they deprived of their rights?
Why are they all doomed?
See, from the Arabs to the Georgians
The Turks and the Persians besiege them
From four sides at once
And they make the Kurdish people
Into a target for fate's arrow.

In the interest of establishing a homeland, Kurds have found themselves siding at various times with the British, the Russians and the Americans against the Ottomans, the Iraqis and the Iranians. For, as the history books show, promises of a Kurdish state were broken during 11th-hour negotiations to reach treaties at Sèvres, Lausanne, Yalta and Algiers. Former allies received various concessions—oil, land, waterways—in exchange for abandoning support for Kurdish independence. Too often, Kurds have been sacrificed in the winner-take-all manoeuvres of *realpolitik*.

Thus, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was heralded by many Kurds as their long-awaited golden opportunity. Having prospered for over a decade in the Anglo-American-protected no-fly zone, Iraq's Kurds were well positioned to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. Still, Kurds were criticized for collaborating with the Americans and once again risking betrayal.

But fate's arrow created a new arc in the Kurdish narrative. Kurds' role in the toppling of the Ba'ath regime and in the capture of Saddam himself curried favour with the Americans. Almost overnight, Kurds found themselves with front-row seats in negotiations to craft a post-Saddam Iraq.

In January 2005, when Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani (fondly referred to as "Uncle Jalal") was named Iraqi president, Kurds celebrated with three days of festivities. In national dress, they danced in the streets and waved the Kurdish flag, proclaiming that they were "one step closer to independence."

Calgary's Kurdish community rejoiced too. After all, most had fled Iraq to escape Saddam's wrath over their support for the US-led Persian Gulf War. They had travelled via Turkey, where they claimed refugee status and lived in dismal conditions until receiving approval from the Canadian Embassy. As landed immigrants, they came to Calgary with large families, little English ability, and a fierce determination to protect their cultural identity. Some 15 years since the first wave arrived, Calgary's Kurdish community is 2,500 strong and growing.

To be sure, life here is easier than it was back in Kurdistan or in the refugee camps en route to Canada. And yet, beneath the expressions of gratitude lies a deep yearning. For in the journey of exodus and exile, they have gained much and they have lost much. The stakes have been high on either side—security, comfort, education, opportunity versus belonging, identity, pride, collectivity. To some, it is a fair trade. To others it is a selling of the soul.

"Most mornings I wake up feeling like I live in a palace; other mornings I feel I'm serving a life sentence," says 41-year-old Farkhondeh Shafee. Recounting her story of being caught in the crossfire of the Iran/Iraq war, Farkhondeh's voice wavers due to a respiratory condition caused by exposure to chemical weapons.

On June 28, 1987, Farkhondeh, her husband Jafar and their one-year-old son Ramiar were living in Sardasht, a large Kurdish city along Iran's border with Iraq. That afternoon, Farkhondeh's sister and her three daughters came to visit. As she poured tea, Farkhondeh saw an Iraqi plane circling over the city. It wasn't the noise that frightened her but the silence.

"There were no sounds of conventional shelling," she says. Fearing that the plane was releasing something far more lethal, Farkhondeh dropped the teacup, grabbed Ramiar from his crib, and told everyone to follow her to the bomb shelter.

Between house and shelter, they ran through clouds of mustard gas. "We didn't know what was happening or what to do," she recalls. "It sounds ridiculous, but I remember being upset that the fabric of my new dress was dissolving. I can still see it, emerald green with lovely gold flecks."

Chemical warfare agents are classified according to the debilitating effect of the agent (incapacitating, asphyxiating, blood, nerve, and blistering.)

Mustard gas is a blistering agent, typically delivered by aerial bombs and mortar shells, and inflicting long-term illness on those who escape immediate death. It became a weapon of choice in Saddam's campaign to exterminate the Kurdish population.

Farkhondeh Shafee herded four children through clouds of mustard gas into a bomb shelter. Her dress began to dissolve.

After two hours underground, the effects of the mustard gas on Farkhondeh and her family had peaked. They began vomiting and gasping for breath. Spilling out onto the streets, they encountered shocking scenes of death, chaos and hysteria.

"Trucks stacked with pyramids of people were leaving the city for the mountains," Farkhondeh says. "No one would stop for us until I ran out in front of one of the trucks and yelled at the driver to let us on or run me over."

It would be a harrowing journey—made worse by the gradual onset of blindness—that took Farkhondeh and her family from one city to the next as they sought appropriate medical care. In Tabriz, the Iranian regime paraded them in front of the media in an attempt to expose Iraqi atrocities. But the Saddam of 1987 was more friend than foe to the West, and his chemical genocide would not be condemned by the international community until the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

When Farkhondeh, Jafar and Ramiar reached Tehran, each was taken to a different hospital. "My son was in terrible condition but I had lost my eyesight and couldn't see how ill he really was. I refused to give him to the medics until they said that his body was covered in blisters and if any of them burst, he would die." Weeks passed before Farkhondeh saw her husband and son again. As she lay in bed, nurses coated her in thick yogourt to soothe the peeling of her burnt skin. After two weeks, her eyesight returned and her condition stabilized.

Her brother Raouf would visit and bring carefully worded news of her husband and son. She learned that Ramiar and his two-year-old cousin Shekila were in a nursery with 11 other victims of the bombing. "When the children were admitted, each was scanned to predict their chances of survival. Only one showed any hope. But the setting was so chaotic that the nurses forgot which child was likely to survive so they were all given the same treatment."

The children began to die. Each time Farkhondeh visited, another bed would be empty. "I would run down the hall to the nursery, holding my breath and praying that my son and niece were still alive. And then one day I couldn't find Shekila."

Farkhondeh's eyes fill with tears. "I'll never forget how she looked the day Shekila came to visit me," Farkhondeh recalls. "She was wearing the prettiest red dress and her hair was tied with white ribbons. Just like a little doll, she sat on my sofa eating her favourite sweets."

Finally only Ramiar remained, cradled in cotton batting and sealed in a glass enclosure. As the boy's wounds healed and his immune system stabilized, Farkhondeh sat by his side crying and praying.

"On the day he was released from hospital, I sought out the doctor that treated Ramiar," she says. "I fell to my knees and began kissing his feet—thanking him for saving my son's life, for saving my life."

> Hishyar regrets missing the public service in honour of Nicola Goddard. "I admire her sacrifice—she was willing to die for what she believed in. As Kurds, we have fought for centuries to protect our culture."

FARKHONDEH AND HER FAMILY immigrated to Canada in 1992, arriving in Calgary on her 27th birthday. They were overwhelmed by the cold and isolation and requested a transfer to Winnipeg, where Jafar's brother lives. "We pleaded with the resettlement unit to let us move," Farkhondeh says. "But they asked us to try Calgary for a year. We agreed, and here we are 14 years later."

After a year of ESL classes, she spent three years upgrading her English, math and chemistry before being accepted at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology.

During her first semester, Farkhondeh worked at night stocking shelves at Zellers. When her shift ended at 7 a.m., she would make her way to school for a full day of classes. She did extremely well, often receiving the top mark in the class.

Still, social acceptance from her classmates eluded her. "I so wanted to make friends with them but I never fit in. I was older than most of the other students and had such different life experiences and pressures—I realize now that I must have seemed so uptight and anxious."

After earning her chemical technology diploma, Farkhondeh quickly found work in her field and, a couple of years ago, became the manager of a US-owned laboratory based in Calgary. Canada has been good to the family, and they've been good to Canada.

Farkhondeh suffers from the long-term effects of being exposed to mustard gas. Her symptoms, such as severe bronchitis and a compromised immune system, get worse every year. She has been diagnosed with subglottic stenosis, which requires daily medication and frequent surgical procedures.

I saw Farkhondeh a few days after our interview, at a celebration organized for Newroz, the Kurdish New Year. Having worked late, she arrives as the tables are pushed aside to make way for dancing, the evening's main attraction.

Kurds dance in serpentine coils, sometimes hundreds of people long. The muted palette of the men's attire creates a canvas for the vibrant sapphires, saffrons and ruby reds of the women's gowns. Holding hands and moving in seamless rhythm, they embody an oppressed nation's spirit of resilience, independence and hope. At one point, Farkhondeh moves to the front of the long line, waves a bright scarf in her free hand and sets a new tempo for the dance. It's a dazzling sight.

Later that evening, I learn that she plans to return to Sardasht for the first time in almost 20 years. Her excitement is tempered by uncertainty.

"The opportunity to see my family again is thrilling, but I am nervous. The situation for Kurds in Iran has deteriorated since Ahmadinejad came to power—it's possible that we will be harassed or detained in Tehran. But it's a chance we're willing to take."

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ACROSS THE ROOM IS HISHYAR REJEB, the husband of my good friend Merrare Mahmoud and father of two sons, both born in Canada. Like others in the audience, Hishyar is busy videotaping. I know that I will watch many recordings of the event at Kurdish homes over the next few weeks. The tapes will be played and paused to make room for conversation about whose daughter is marrying whose son, who is leaving for Kurdistan and who has just come back.

Hishyar is both a proud Kurd and a proud Canadian. In 1992, at the age of 21, he arrived in Canada after spending four years in a squalid refugee ghetto in Diyarbakir, Turkey's unofficial Kurdish capital. I interview him on the day that Captain Nicola Goddard, a Canadian soldier killed while serving in Afghanistan, is buried. Hishyar says he regrets not attending the public service held in her honour. "I admire her sacrifice—she was willing to die for what she believed in. As Kurds, we have fought for centuries to protect our land, our language, our culture. I wanted her family to know that, as a Kurdish-Canadian, I grieve with them."

When asked about his designation as a Kurdish-Canadian, Hishyar shyly admits the challenges of such a duality. He feels Canadian in the legal sense but not in the eyes of those "immigrants" who arrived earlier from lands of fairer skin and lighter eyes. "Sure, on paper, I'm a Canadian citizen. I follow Canadian laws and respect Canadian culture. I work hard, pay taxes, raise my children, and volunteer in the community. And yet, in subtle but hurtful ways, I'm not treated as a Canadian. It's like being an extra guest at the dinner party—they'll set a place for you at the table but you never feel totally welcome," he says.

After a year of studying English, Hishyar accepted a job at a meat-packing plant just outside Calgary. For eight dollars an hour he clamped the digestive tract of every cow that travelled down the line. The quota was seven cows a minute; Hishyar averaged 10. He became a prized employee, rewarded with modest hourly increases and small steps up the blue-collar ladder. In late 1999, Hishyar suffered a work-related injury that he says removed him from management's good books. He's since had a hard time proving his case to the Workers' Compensation Board and he's had to take an unpaid leave of absence while the union attempts to negotiate on his behalf. It's an unsettling time, especially with mortgage payments on the family's new home, but he is optimistic about the future.

In the meantime, Hishyar bursts with pride at the report

cards his seven-year-old son brings home from school. Daraav, who is fluent in both English and Kurdish, attends a charter school that offers classes in Kurdish language and culture. When asked why he wants his children educated in his native tongue, Hishyar is resolute. "So many Kurds lost their lives so that we can speak our language and express our identity. We want our children to know who they are and where they come from. It is their right, their responsibility, to learn their heritage. What they do with this knowledge in the future is up to them."

Hishyar's convictions are not universally shared. Indeed, Calgary's Kurdish community is dogged by many of the challenges facing other ethnic communities. To an outsider, it is vastly homogeneous in language, class, religion, politics and culture. But to an insider, even minor distinctions become fertile ground for infighting and dissent.

In early June, the community organized a town hall meeting with Art Hanger, MP for Calgary Northeast, where the majority of Calgary's Kurds reside. True to his Reform Party roots, Hanger told the crowd that immigrants need to prove themselves to Canada—a test that would only become more difficult as time passes. But Kurds from Iraq, he said, could contribute by helping rebuild their country of origin.

Was this a veiled suggestion that Calgary's Kurds return to Iraq now that they no longer face persecution? If so, few seem to be listening. The consensus within the community seems to be: visit, yes; repatriate, no.

Hishyar Rejeb is both a proud Kurd and a proud Canadian, though he shyly admits the challenge of such a duality.

Since the fall of Saddam and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, those who have gone to Kurdistan have embarked with exuberance, hoping to find the blueprints in place for the establishment of a Kurdish homeland, in spirit if not yet in territory. What they found has dampened some hopes and heightened others.

Social progress and economic development have been stalled by those bothersome 'isms'—tribalism, parochialism, nepotism. Meanwhile, officials are trying to reach a balance between supporting the Iraqi federation and nurturing the Kurdish dream of independence. Frustration, impatience and disillusionment are widespread. So too are pride, optimism and encouragement, along with a palpable sense of anticipation that Kurds are finally coming of age. For, like Esma, Farkhondeh and Hishyar, they are a nation of survivors. Even when they fail, they fail forward.

During the 1970s, my father-in-law, Karim Mahmudi-Azer, fought alongside the legendary Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani in his uprising against the Iraqi government. Their movement, supported by the US, Iran and Israel, was strong. But the Kurds suffered a stunning betrayal in 1975 when an agreement was signed between the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein. Overnight, all aid to the Iraqi Kurds was cut off. Forced to surrender and relinquish their arms, thousands were imprisoned, tortured and killed.

My father-in-law returned from combat injured, weakened and exhausted, but not discouraged. My husband-to-be, then a boy, asked his father how he remained hopeful.

The reply has since perplexed, haunted and inspired my husband. "Now is not our time, my son. But it will come. Likely not in my lifetime, but possibly in yours. Prepare yourself so that when destiny smiles upon the Kurds, you are ready. Until then, keep our dream alive."

While it has long been said that Kurds have no friends but the mountains, recent developments may be widening their circle. After all, change is dynamic—a swirl of micro movements and macro shifts—and as it gains momentum, it becomes impossible to contain.

The profound changes within the geopolitical hotbed of the Middle East serve to promote knowledge of the Kurds and their history. So too do Kurds in the diaspora, including the 2,500 Kurds in Calgary. Their struggle—to learn a new language, to understand a different culture, to find a balance between where they've come from and where they are going, and to contribute to a society that they feel both part of yet excluded from—is also profound. Journeys like those of Esma, Farkhondeh and Hishyar—from exodus into exile—are now part of the Alberta narrative. Our collective understanding of "who we are" becomes richer when we allow ourselves to see—really see—the unseen among us. ■

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