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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## **“HOPE AGAINST GENOCIDE” BY TABAN SHORESH**

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



I'll never forget the day back in the early eighties when, at the tender age of four, my life was turned upside down forever.

I was playing quietly with my doll at home in Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq, when I heard a sharp rap on the front door. Two men in uniforms barged in, demanding to know where my father was. I was too young to know this, but they were Saddam Hussein's secret police.

While my father was in hiding in the mountains, my mother, grandparents and I were bundled into a blacked-out car and taken away. Then, in an airless room, Hussein's men interrogated my mother and grandparents who gave nothing away. We were locked in a cramped and dirty prison, with not enough space for us all to lie down. The sanitation and stench was appalling; the food just as bad. I remained silent throughout and clung to my mother for comfort, utterly bewildered by this alien and hostile place.

**Two weeks later, dozens of us were ordered onto a dusty old bus, which was flanked by two giant diggers. Many of the adults fell to their knees and began weeping uncontrollably. Confusion was everywhere, but only much later did I realize that we were about to be driven to our death, buried alive in a mass grave.** Even today, devastating collections of human bones and skulls are occasionally unearthed at sites across Iraq: relics of Hussein's monstrous regime.

We were the lucky ones though; while being transported to such an undignified end, two Kurdish rebels forged a deal with Hussein's men. Suddenly, we were free. We had no idea how, but **their courageous intervention never ceases to amaze me, or to summon up a gratitude so deep I hardly know how to express it.**

Our ordeal was not over yet, and we dodged bullets and bombs as we undertook the perilous journey across the border to Iran. Once there, we found my father in a critical condition, Hussein's soldiers had poisoned him. Another twist of fate saw Amnesty International step in, and my father was flown to London for urgent medical treatment. We followed a few weeks later, and so began our new life in this glittering city, filled with wonder, surprise and opportunity. A city at peace.

Fast-forward 20 years, I was enjoying a successful digital marketing career in London Financial District.

I had a wonderful son, a busy social life and all the ease of western living. Yet, I never, ever forgot where I came from, the indelible experiences of my youth profoundly determined why the news coming out of Iraq in the summer of 2014 felt so personal and painful. Having survived one genocide, I saw in horror that yet another mass killing was unfolding in my homeland. ISIS militants were seizing towns and villages, killing innocent people, raping and enslaving women, radicalizing young children. Thousands were displaced, torn apart from loved ones and left with nothing.

**It shook me to the core, and I knew I had to go back and help. I left my gratifying and comfortable job from one day to the next. And two days after I arrived, I was up in a helicopter, with the local foundation I had signed up with, distributing aid to thousands of refugees trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar.** Witnessing their suffering was heart-breaking, but it made me even more determined to make a difference. Over the next year, I helped establish a large refugee camp in the Dohuk province, which offered a sanctuary and safety to thousands of people whose lives had been left in tatters.

I returned to the UK in 2015, emotionally wrecked and in need of respite. But every time I closed my eyes, the horrors I had witnessed kept replaying endlessly in my mind. The tears of the innocent, the loss and the despair; the sheer scale of basic humanitarian need. **Aid teams like ours had delivered so much, yet the mission was a mere drop in the ocean. I had to do more. I could not just walk away.**

It was then that the idea for the Lotus Flower non-profit was born and now,

Four years in, the Lotus Flower is blossoming. Based in the Rwanga Community camp in Kurdistan—where 20,000 people have been rehomed—we currently run six key projects in our specialist centre. They include computer training, adult literacy and English language, while our 'Sewing Sisters' scheme teaches women professional skills so that they can earn a living from creating textile products.

The centre has become a true icon of survival. Like the lotus flower itself, it has emerged from the mud; a strong, bright beacon of hope.

Witnessing these women and girls return to some level of normalcy with a prospect for a genuine future inspires me every day. This is only the beginning. A long journey waits ahead but I know where these women and girls come from and they see where I have gotten.

When fighting against the likes of ISIS soldiers who strive on destroying hearts and souls, hope bred by solidarity remains the most valuable currency.





