Gülizar Oral History Interview Transcript

November 26, 2022

Seth: As a Yazidi person who lives in Germany, what does it mean to be both a Yazidi and a German? What about these aspects of your identity are important to you?

Gülizar: This is such an interesting question. I love this question, actually, because it took me years to figure out who I actually am. You go through different stages in your life. Obviously, I was born here, I am not a refugee. I was born in Germany, and I was raised in a Yazidi way and also in a German way. So, I have lots of German friends, we have German neighbors, I do live in a German area, but I do have a Yazidi family, and my religion is Yazidi. It's really hard, because you go through steps in your life when you realize as a kid that you're not like everyone else. You have black hair, you have brown eyes, and you don't look "the German way," which is really important to keep in mind, because you always face German history. German history is still quite present here. So, you go through your Kurdish identity and you also have "the German history," and some people still struggle here with German history, so it's always a part of our identity. We are always facing it in school, facing it at university, facing it in our daily lives. So, here I was, being a little girl, and thought that we are all the same. Human beings are all the same, we are all friends. But actually, I had to experience racism, as well as the fact that I wasn't seen as German from the point of view of German people. I always thought that I was seen as a German, but I wasn't. You can always see my migrant background. So, it takes a while to identify yourself, like how you see yourself.

I endured a lot of racism throughout school, daily life, and at university, but I also have German friends, so I can't say that all people are racist. They are not. There are always idiots out there, you won't be able to change that. During my teenage years, I really struggled, because I was at a school with only German people. There were maybe only a handful of people with a Middle Eastern background, or at least with any kind of migrant background. So, I was at a school with lots of German people, lots of blond hair and blue eyes, if you want to say it that way. It was hard; I had issues finding out who I was. You came back home and you had parents who spoke German but also spoke Kurdish. And then, I was a Yazidi, so I learned and experienced my religion and still live in that community. But, we also celebrate Christmas and Easter, and we have German neighbors and friends. We also go to soccer and tennis matches and have piano lessons, you know? So, it's kind of both. I do have both inside me, but through all my travels over the past years, I have felt my connection to my Yazidi identity more strongly. I went to Australia and I saw Aborigines, and I saw Māori people and Irish people when I was flying to Ireland as well. I saw all of these people who really stick to their background, religion, and culture. I kind of learned from it. I started exacting myself, and it was a huge journey. I am really happy now that I know who I am. I think I'm finally there. I see myself as a Yazidi-German. I

am German, but I would never deny my roots. I am a Yazidi first, and I do live in Germany. When I go overseas, I always introduce myself as a German woman, because most people don't know who Kurdish people are, to be honest. I am a Yazidi-German woman, I would say. I do have both cultures inside of me, and I do have both identities, but my bond with my Yazidi culture and religion is really, really strong. The older I get, and the more I face my roots, the stronger the connection gets.

Seth: How would you describe your religion as a Yazidi to those who aren't familiar with it?

Gülizar: I've had very up-and-down feelings when talking with other people about my religion. We are always having [discussions]... In the news, at university, and at school, the popular topic is that immigrants need to assimilate, they need to be part of our society and the Western world, the European world. And then I realized that my parents have lived here now [for decades]. I think my dad has lived here for over 30 years, and my grandad has lived here for nearly 40 years. So, I am the third generation, and my siblings are like the fourth generation. It's really sad when you do your best to integrate into a new country and into another culture, and you don't see any interest from the other side. People are like, "What is this? I haven't heard of it." In my hometown, we have so many Yazidi people, and we have lived here for 40 years. How come that you don't know who your neighbors are? What? We have been living here for over 40 years and you still don't know who we are? It's kind of sad, and it's sometimes really upsetting and makes me angry as well.

When people ask me, "So, what is this, and who are you? What do you celebrate?", I always say, "We are one of the oldest religions in the world and we are endogamous: we marry within the culture, within the diaspora, within our people. We have a really strong bond with our religion, our people, and within our families. We never lose contact, we always try to stay together." And then, most of the time, all of these questions pop up, like, "Are you modern? Are you allowed to do this or that?" I am a German Yazidi, of course I am, I am a part of society. I always try to introduce my religion to non-Yazidi Germans as really old and that we don't have a lot of people out here. We are a small community compared to other migrant groups, like Muslim communities, Russian communities, or new Korean communities. We are still quite small, we are not many. So, that's how I try to describe it to them. I just try to explain to them what my religion is like, and that we also celebrate Christmas and Easter like everyone else.

Seth: I found your comment about your neighbors not knowing who you and your community were for 40 years to be very astounding.

Gülizar: I had this conversation the other day at work. People were like, "Oh, we've never heard about you." This actually made me really upset, and I said, "[the genocide] had been on the news

in 2014,[1] 24/7, all the time! How come that you still don't know who we are?" I am a German Yazidi, and I don't know if it is the same in the US, but in school, we have religion lessons. You have Christian lessons and you learn some things about Christmas, about Jesus, and about the Bible. But, you always have the opportunity as a parent to put your child into Turkish lessons, into some ethnic lessons. These lessons can be anything else; it doesn't need to be a particularly Christian lesson. My parents always supported us in learning something about the Jewish and Christian religions. We always joined these religious classes and lessons in order to learn more about our [German cultural] environment. And here I am, living [in Germany], me and my parents and my grandparents for 40 years, and people still don't know who we are. I was actually really disappointed.

Seth: Going off of that, what are some major misconceptions that non-Yazidis have about the Yazidi people and their religion and culture, whether it's in Germany or elsewhere?

Gülizar: What I think is that people are sometimes really suspicious. They don't know what to think about us. I have so many German friends who know other Yazidi people, and they always say, "Oh, we have so many misunderstandings, like we always thought that you're so strict, and you're not allowed to do this or that." They have just been thinking in this bubble, do you know what I mean? They are like this only with us, only with Yazidi people. I think they are sometimes scared, maybe not interested enough, or just see us as any other typical diaspora. I think people are always kind of suspicious if they don't know the other side. When they get to know us, it's all fine. There are no misunderstandings and everything is okay. Like, my dad came here when he was 18 years old and he's still in contact with his soccer boys down in Germany. You're familiar with *Oktoberfest*, right?

Seth: Yeah.

Gülizar: Everyone knows *Oktoberfest*, and they [Gülizar's parents] drive down to the south of Germany every couple of years. They visit this old village that he [Gülizar's father] entered as a refugee. This was his first stop when he was a refugee, and he is still in contact with his German friends. So is my mom. She came here when she was three years old. She is still in contact with her old German friend from her hometown. So, I have the feeling that people are a little bit suspicious. They are maybe not brave enough to ask about who we are. But as soon as they do get to know us, it's quite fine. They are okay. They realize that we do have German friends as well, that we do live in German neighborhoods, that we go to university as well, that we go to work as well, that we also celebrate Christmas and Easter, and that we go to the *Oktoberfests*. So, we are a part of this community.

[1] Gülizar is referring to the 2014 Yazidi Genocide, in which the Islamic State jihadist group attacked Yazidi areas of northern Iraq, killing or capturing over 10,000 people.

Seth: What would you like non-Yazidis to know the most about the Yazidi people, whether about those who live in Germany, their identity as Germans, their religion, or their culture?

Gülizar: I also had this talk the other day at work with my colleagues, and they didn't know that I was Yazidi. They knew that I was Kurdish, but they didn't know that I was Yazidi, which is a huge difference because you have so many distinct religions in the Kurdish community. I heard one of them say, "Oh, why do they not integrate [into German society] enough?", or, "Why do they just marry with Yazidi people and not with other people?" I always try to point out that we had a really, really rough history. We had so many genocides; we are always saying… I think it has been the 74th now,[2] like something around that. So, we had quite a tough genocide, and you can also see this in the Jewish community. After the 2014 genocide, people came closer together and tried to protect their religion and culture. This does not mean that we're not modern or that we're not open to other cultures or the European, Western way. No, we are, but we experienced so much pain, and you can't expect people to be so open-minded, from 0 to 100%, when they experienced war, genocide, and losing their families. We had refugees coming here. They had other issues, they had so many traumas, they had to work through losing family members. They had such different problems in spite of becoming part of [the German] community right now. And this is what some people forget.

I wish they wouldn't see us as a strict circle who just live only with ourselves. That's not true: we do have German colleagues, we are becoming doctors, lawyers, Ph.D.'s, we are going to school. We are part of this community, and I wish some people wouldn't see us as the problem, like as a community that is always interplaying with each other, because this is not true. And I wish they would accept this way [of life]. I wish they would accept that we are the way that we are, because I don't see anything bad about it. We are not harming anyone. Like, why is it so important who we are going to get married to or how we are celebrating our religious days? We are not harming anyone. Do you know what I mean? It's like, with Indian people, they have their system and have strong bonds, it's like Jewish people, they are still celebrating their religious days and no one is screaming, "Oh, They are not integrating," or something. I wish people would see it in more of an open way. We see ourselves as a community, as a German part of the community.

Seth: What is your family's history? Where did your family come from before Germany, and do you still have contact with people in that area?

Gülizar: My dad and mom come from the Kurdish part of Turkey. The Yazidis who are from Turkey, and some of them who are from Syria, have lived [in Germany] for quite a long time. We are the first ones who came to Europe. There was a first wave. I don't know if you've ever

[2] According to Yazidi tradition, the 2014 Yazidi Genocide is counted as the 74th genocide against the Yazidi people, who have been persecuted for centuries by Muslim groups because of their religion.

heard about *Gastarbeiter*, "guest workers," in Germany. Do you know this? After the Second World War, Germany was destroyed, and we needed cheap guest workers. These workers came from Portugal, Italy, Greece, and especially from Turkey. You had all of these people from Southern countries[3] who came to Germany as guest workers. Back then, Germany thought that these guest workers would come to the country, build it up again, and leave. But this never happened! We all stayed! We all stayed in Germany!

My granddad and most of my uncles came to Germany as political refugees. Do you know the history of the Kurdish people in Turkey? There's a long, long history, and it's similar to that of the Armenian people.[4] Living in Turkey was quite tough for them. So, my family fled to Germany as political refugees, and the family of my aunt, my aunty from my dad's side, still lives in Turkey.

Kurdish people are quite known for living in the mountains, so in Germany, we would [call them] *Bergkurden*, like, "Kurdish people from the mountains." I am one of them. I come from the mountains, deep in the mountains. I have been to Turkey, to my home village. I have been there three times. The first time was when I was a little kid, and the second time was in my teenage years. My dad and mom planned a little cultural tour through Turkey, so we did some sightseeing and drove through the villages where we came from. I am [from a village] quite close to Batman.[5] It's actually spelled "Batman," if you want to Google it later. I am [also] quite close to Hasankeyf.[6] It was in the newspapers here because it is one of the oldest villages in Turkey and it's getting destroyed at the moment because the [Tigris River] is overflowing it.

So, this is where I am from. I also tried to figure out where [my family] came from before my great-grandparents lived in Batman. I know that [Batman] is not the origin point of the Yazidi people. I know that it's somewhere around Lalish[7] in Sinjar,[8] somewhere around there.

Seth: Based on your own experience, how have Yazidis generally been treated in Germany? Has treatment mostly been negative, or have there been positive aspects? Does it depend on the people you meet?

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[3] Gülizar is likely referring to "the Global South," a group of countries in the southern hemisphere of the world that are generally less economically developed than countries in the northern hemisphere.

[4] Kurds and Armenians were historically persecuted in the Ottoman Empire and currently face oppression in modern-day Turkey. These groups have been persecuted for a variety of reasons, including ethnic, linguistic, religious, and nationalistic differences from ethnic Turks.

[5] Batman is a city located in southeastern Turkey.

[6] Hasankeyf is a town on the Tigris River that is close to the city of Batman in southeastern Turkey.

[7] Lalish Temple is located in the Sheikhan District of northern Iraq. It is believed to contain the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, who is the most important saint in the Yazidi religion.

[8] "Sinjar" refers to the Sinjar District of northern Iraq, which, along with the nearby Sheikhan District, constitutes the historical homeland of the Yazidi people. "Sinjar" also refers to the town of Sinjar, which serves as the district's capital and was largely destroyed during the 2014 genocide.

Gülizar: It was quite hard about 20 years ago, but I can only speak from my experience. I am not that old. I am only 27, but I remember as a child that Turkish and Kurdish people always had conflicts [against each other]. So, 20 years ago, there were way more Turkish people in Germany than Kurdish people. It was actually really hard, because I was born here, and after I was six years old, this was the first time when I came when home from school and said to my mom, "Am I a migrant?" She could tell that I was actually really confused, and she said to me, "You are six years old, and this was the first time that you understood that you are actually not 'German-German,' that you do have a migrant background." This topic came up at school and I remember that other kids were saying, "You're not German." Kids can be mean, you know?

Also, it was hard because at school most of the migrants, like migrant kids who were at school, were Turkish kids. At that time, there were more Turkish guest workers than Kurdish guest workers. So, the [migrant kids] you could interact with were Turkish people, and there was always some kind of conflict. I didn't really understand Turkish, they didn't really speak Kurdish, and then I also had my German friends. So, school was hard sometimes. I wouldn't say that I was going through some "mobbing" [group bullying]. It was never that way, but of course, you had some kids who were mean sometimes.

I have experienced, throughout my whole life now, lots of racism. I love Germany, I am German myself, and I wouldn't say that everyone is the same. You always have idiots. But after 2014, the populace got really bad. There is a strong nationalist scene here at the moment, and you can feel it. I had teachers at school who were like, "Oh, she's not made for the *gymnasium*." This is the highest educational level you can reach [in Germany] before you do your college, before you go to university. "She is not made for this, made for that, blah-blah-blah." You always had teachers who tried to put you down, but then on the other side, you always had teachers who supported you, who had your back, pushed you, and believed in you. You always have the bad side, but you also have the good side, so it's kind of like on the same level.

I'd say I have lots of German friends and colleagues, and they are quite nice, but you always kind of experience racism. Not only me, but even other Yazidi people, even our old people. Old people do experience quite a lot [of racism] because they are not strong in the German language. But I was born here, I learned it from Day One when I was a little kid. You don't even hear an accent when I talk. If I'm on the phone, you would never think that I am Kurdish. And this is what some people say: "Oh, I didn't know that you were Kurdish. You don't sound Kurdish at all." And I'm always like, "Well, what does a Kurdish human being sound like when you talk to them?" It's really confusing, you know? And you always have people who are saying things like, "Oh, you're so integrated, you're such a part of society, not like others of you." And I'm like, "Well, what am I supposed to say now? What does that mean?" So, you always experience racism, but you also have the ones who always support you, who see you as a German, who

welcome you. You have both sides. It's hard to tell: there's no bad, no good, it's in the middle. You need to swim. Especially as a German with a migrant background, you need to find your own way in searching for your identity and accepting who you are and how other people see you.

Seth: From your experience, does the Yazidi community in Germany generally have strong ties to Yazidi communities in the Middle East and elsewhere?

Gülizar: This is such an interesting question! This is why I tried to explain to you before that Yazidi people from Iraq are so different from Turkish and Syrian Yazidi people. When we came [to Germany] about 30, 40, 50 years ago, we immigrated quite fast. We always had strong bonds within our own society, and we are still very close. But I can tell that this has changed through the years. From generation to generation, it is getting less [strong]. I'm not saying that [we] are losing our bonds, but it's getting less [strong].

We have a handful of cities in Germany [where Yazidi people live], such as Bielefeld, where I'm from, and then Hannover, Oldenburg, and Moers. You have [about] five to six cities where lots of Yazidi people are, same as in the US. You have the first people who came, and everyone else is coming as well. All of these cities have a [Yazidi] community house where we can meet. When we have funerals, we go there. When we have important religious days, we meet there. When we have our beginning of the New Year in March, we go there. So, we still have a strong bond and a strong community.

But, we are lucky that the refugees from Iraq came [to Germany], because they showed us that we kind of lost contact with each other. We lost our bonds, and they brought it back again. We have felt so much stronger ever since they have been coming here because we are not as few anymore. There weren't many Yazidis before the refugees [from Iraq came]. There had been some, but not as many as there are now. And ever since they have been coming, we have felt that we are present [in society]. People have heard about us. We are so many now, and you can see differences [between Iraqi and Turkish Yazidis]. We kind of look different. You can even tell that their culture is a little bit different from the Yazidis from Turkey. Our food is a little bit different. Our Kurdish is different: they have Arabic slang in their language, and we have a bit of Turkish slang in ours.

We had a strong bond before [the Iraqi Yazidi refugees] came, but it wasn't as strong anymore as it was 30 years ago. This is normal, because from generation to generation, as you assimilate into a country, it changes [you]. And ever since [the Iraqi Yazidis] came here, we are really proud again. We don't feel that we are not enough anymore; we don't feel like we're fewer people. This is actually really beautiful, because [German Yazidis] have the opportunity now to have interactions and learn more about [their] language. Since most of the Yazidi people [in Germany]

were from Turkey, the ones who are my age and younger don't really speak the language [Kurdish], and if they do, it's broken. We are getting stronger again, this is what I am saying.

Seth: Did you know anyone personally who was targeted or impacted by the 2014 Genocide?

Gülizar: So, the Yazidis who had been living [in Germany] before the genocide were mostly from Turkey. There had been some people from Iraq and Syria as well, but we didn't have a big connection with them. We had [some] connections with them, but not as much, obviously, because we were not family. When you saw these people, you talked to them, you greeted them, and then you left again. Everyone was going their own way. But, we found out that some of them had family members in Iraq and that they really suffered.

What I can talk about is that in 2014, when the genocide happened, I think I was around 18 years old. At that point, I didn't really have a strong bond with my culture and religion. I knew who I was and I knew what my religion was and I lived it, but it wasn't really intense. However, when this genocide happened, everyone was waking up. We woke up and got scared, and we were scared for people who we didn't even know. We started donating money and collecting clothes [for Yazidi refugees]. One of my cousins actually flew four planes with clothes over to Iraq and Turkey. [The genocide] was on the news all the time, and we tried to reach out to the Yazidi people here from Iraq and ask them, "Is everything okay? Is your family okay?" This was the first time that the diaspora kind of woke up, so we had a really strong connection and community that I had never ever seen before. This was the first time that I had seen, in my hometown, 10,000 people demonstrating in the street. I had never seen so many Kurdish people in my entire life on that day, who all came together because of that genocide. It was a planned occasion, but it was beautiful seeing all of us being really supportive of these people.

I remember when the first refugees came over. My dad had a connection to one of them. He got this connection because of the religious house [Yazidi community center] that we have here in my hometown and in which we can all meet each other. He helped [this refugee] bring his wife and his kids over. I remember that my dad flew to Turkey because many refugees were on the Iraqi-Turkish border, and then they all came across the border. You had a huge war going on on the other side [Iraq] and then you had Kurdish people on the Turkish side [of the border] who were waiting to pick [the refugees] up. The village where I am from [in Turkey] was a "lost village." Pretty much no one lived there anymore, only one or two families. We started to pick up the refugees from the border and bring them into the country. If you drove through Turkey [back then], you could see so many villages packed with refugees, packed with Kurdish people again, and it was overwhelming. That all happened [when the refugees] were fleeing over to Germany.

And now, it's really funny, because we have quite a strong connection with Yazidi people from Iraq ever since they came here. Yes, they are a little bit different from us, but we do have some connections with them.

Seth: How has life been different for you and other German Yazidis after the 2014 genocide?

Gülizar: It has been hard and different because we have changed. Even the Yazidi kids who had been born here and barely spoke their language started to get interested in who they are and where they came from. I would actually say that the Yazidi community from Turkey has changed a lot. Ever since the genocide, we have been going back to our roots again. We want to know who we are and what our religion is like. There are so many of us who didn't speak the [Kurdish] language but want to learn it now. We don't want to lose our roots, and this is all because of the genocide. This [also relates] to what I [studied] in my diaspora course [at university]: most of the time, when do diasporas build up again or get stronger? It is sometimes after these kinds of [tragic] occasions, and this was our one. It was after the genocide of 2014 that we got stronger again and became interested in who we are. Yeah, [life for Yazidis in Germany] really changed, actually, and for the better as well, because people know who we are now. I had the feeling that the world didn't know who we were and where we came from, and now it feels like they do have a sense of who we are. This is a huge step.

Seth: In your opinion, what are the best ways for non-Yazidis to either raise awareness about or help Yazidis in Germany or around the world?

Gülizar: I think that intercultural festivals and societies would help. Another way to help is to support [Yazidi] cultural places and be interested in cultural exchange, because, at the end of the day, we are all living together. We can't change the fact that this is going to be our lives. We are going to be neighbors for the rest of our lives, because we [the Yazidi community in Germany] are so many now, and we can't change it. And some people can't go back [to their homes or countries] because there's war, it's dangerous. Most of the Iraqi Yazidi people won't be able to go back, so they will stay [in Germany] like we are going to stay, you know? So, I would just recommend [that people] just have intercultural exchanges, talk to each other, and try to reach out to [other] people like we do. This is how we immigrated here, because we reached out to German people and society, and I think it is really important to do it the other way around as well.

Seth: Thank you so much for speaking with me and answering my questions.

Gülizar: No worries!