

## ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Selime Bilgic

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*Selime immigrated to the United States over a decade ago from Turkey and now lives in Rochester with her husband and three children. She has just successfully completed the ESOL program at MCC and is pursuing a science related career. She shares the story of her brother who was dismissed from his job, lost his rights, and had to leave his home country.*



*Selime Bilgic, 2017*

### Struggle to Earn Back Human Rights

It has been over four years since I last saw him. I have missed him very much. For now, we try to console each other with long telephone calls. He is the person I fought most with in my childhood, my best friend in my teenage years. He is the person that everyone thought was my twin. He is my brother, Salim. He is 12,000 km away from me and has been through tough times in the past two years.

After the controversial coup of July 15, 2016 in Turkey, like many others, Salim's life has been turned inside out, and he had to flee to Iraq. He also lost his 14-year job and his human rights. Now he has opened many cases against Erdogan's regime. With this interview, I tried to get information about his struggle to earn back his basic rights.

When we started the interview, it was midnight in Iraq and almost evening in New York. His beautiful daughter and wife were already fast asleep, and my husband and daughters were preparing dinner.

I asked him curiously, "Hi Salim, are sleepy?"

He answered with a tired look, "No, we can start the interview."

Before the coup, my brother was living in Uskudar, Istanbul. The coup started there. He explained to me the long night of the coup with a lot of anxiety. He would never forget his daughter's screams, the war planes flying above shaking their apartment, and the tanks in the streets.

In the morning of the coup attempt, the public had been very happy that it wasn't successful, but there was something going wrong. Erdogan's government had declared a state of emergency, and first fired many educated people from their jobs, and then arrested them with new laws. Salim said that he would have never expected to be fired from his 14-year job; he would have never guessed to be called a government betrayer.

While he was saying this, I was thinking about him. He has always been a peaceful, honest, and

respectful person. Unfortunately, like most of his other friends, he was fired from his long-time job and lost his human rights.

Salim explained just one basic right he lost out of many others, like this, "I couldn't get a full-time job anywhere else as a 'Financial Inspector' because they canceled all my certificates. Therefore, I could do only part-time jobs that didn't require a certificate."

He continued to explain with confidence that even though he and his friends went through a lot of disbelief with this unexpected event, they have tried to seek their rights in democratic ways, and even reached out to UN's Human Rights. However, the cases have not come to an end yet because the state of emergency has remained for 17 months and the public is still struggling with it.

My brother and his family didn't feel secure in Turkey. There had been speculation that Erdogan's government would start mass arrests. He said with teary eyes, "I was planning on finding a part-

time job and living simply in Turkey until my best friend, my brother-in-law Fatih, was arrested in front of my eyes.”

I know Fatih and his family. He was an architect. Still, I do not understand why an architect would get arrested for a coup. Now, when I think about his wife and his eight-year-old daughter, I feel deep pain in my heart. He is still in the jail since then without any trial.

At that moment, when I looked at my brother, I saw that he got older quickly; he had new white hair, and he had lost a lot of weight. It is very heartbreaking for me. I have never seen my brother like this. Anyway, he is now living peacefully in Iraq with his family and new friends, and he will always be thankful for the people of Iraq because they have

supported and helped him in this hard situation.

I asked him, “After these events, which one hurt you the most?”

He answered,” The fact that my valued friends and relatives saw me as a traitor. Whenever I would call them, they would be scared to answer the phone. They would turn around and go the other way if they saw me walking up the street. They were scared that they would be arrested. I learned who my true friends were in hard situations.”

When he told me about this, I remembered the quote by Martin Luther King JR, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

The truth is, my brother’s story is only one of the stories of nearly

two hundred thousand whom were labelled as traitors in one single night. However, his story is not as tragic as other stories. I know some other stories that the people committed suicide, got tortured, raped, their children got taken away from them or other worse situations came to them.

After all this, my brother still believes that he will return to our beautiful country one day and continue where he left off without Erdogan’s regime.

He determinedly gives this advice to future grandchildren. They shouldn’t do anything that they will regret. If one day their human rights are too taken away from them unfairly with flimsy evidence, they should always fight for their freedom and basic rights against the cruel and ruthless people.

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*ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. Each semester, we highlight students from different regions around the world. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.*

*Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, February/March 2018*

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