

Sample translation from

The Forgotten People

by Brenda Stoter Boscolo

Translated by Eileen Stevens

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- An essential historical document, and the heartbreaking human face of a devastating tragedy and a community in peril
- Intimate portraits of a little-known people under persecution
- ‘Brenda Stoter Boscolo is not afraid of the devil nor anyone. She doesn’t rest until she has gained access to worlds that are closed to many journalists.’ Xandra Schutte, journalist, editor of De Groene Amsterdammer

About the book



In the summer of 2014, ISIL invaded the region of Sinjar in northern Iraq. Their aim was to systematically exterminate the Yezidis, an ethnic minority with its own ancient religion and culture. The men were murdered while the women and girls were sold into slavery; sons were forced to become child soldiers and the youngest children were sold to ISIL families. Journalist Brenda Stoter Boscolo travelled to Iraq to write about the Yezidi genocide.

While international reporting has focused mainly on the sexual slavery imposed on Yezidi women after the ISIL invasion, little has been said until now about the larger and deeper attempt to destroy the Yezidis as an ethnic group. In refugee camps in Northern Iraq, Boscolo interviews dozens of women, men and children whose lives were irrevocably damaged by ISIL, but in the process she discovers a troubled history fraught with persecution in a hostile land. She is overwhelmed by their willingness to tell their harrowing stories, which they hope to share with the world.

We meet Yezidi's like Ismael, who lost 35 family members, and Majdal, who was trained as a child soldier. There's Nadima, who bore an ISIL soldier's son, and Turko, who became Muslim to save her children. Boscolo also speaks with government officials, religious leaders, doctors, students, professors, activists and soldiers. It is a journey that doesn't leave her unscathed and she is often frustrated and distraught by the stories she hears though more convinced of the necessity to record them.

Boscolo investigates the social repercussions of genocide: How has it changed the traditions which forbid members to convert religion, as so many women and children were forced to do to survive? And what about the Yezidi children fathered by ISIL soldiers? How has Yezidi human-rights activist Nadia Murad inspired other women to come forward with their stories?

Along the way she makes connections and builds friendships, learning about the Yezidi culture. Caught between the Iraqi Arab and Kurdish communities, with whom they have historically uneasy relationships, the Ezidis see themselves as their own ethnicity. They have their own religion, whose holy books have been lost in the 74 genocides they have survived. They are poorly understood and often portrayed as devil worshippers,

making them targets for fundamentalist Sunni groups like Al-Qaeda before ISIL. Many of the Yezidis feel they have no one to turn to but each other.

Writing with an open, personal style, Boscolo flows between intimate interviews and thoughts, sketching small moments of beauty or humour in a bleak landscape. She reveals the essential strength that lies in community, if not individual human resilience and the ability to find meaning in life after trauma. As such, *The Forgotten People* is an essential historical document. It is also the heartbreaking human face of a devastating tragedy and a community in peril.

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About the author



Brenda Stoter Boscolo (1984) is an acclaimed Dutch journalist who writes about the Middle East. She has master's degrees in sociology and in media and journalism from Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Her second thesis was about the Iraq war and the media. Her articles have been published by *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Al Jazeera*, *Middle East Eye*, *The New Arab* and *Al Monitor* as well as featured in Dutch newspapers and magazines, including *Trouw*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *De Tijd*, *NRC Next*, *Het Parool* and *De Groene Amsterdammer*. – Photo: Chris van Houts

The press on *The Forgotten People*:

'Brenda Stoter Boscolo is not afraid of the devil nor anyone. She doesn't rest until she has gained access to worlds that are closed to many journalists. She manages to beautifully combine compassion, a keen eye for detail and lucid analysis in her stories.' – Xandra Schutte, journalist, editor of *De Groene Amsterdammer*

'I know few people who wear their power and vulnerability as purely as Brenda does. She'd go through fire for other people. Her work is just as inspiring, gripping, moving and overwhelming as she is herself.' – Fidan Ekiz, journalist and presenter

I. Introduction

A woman wearing a long velvet dress and a lavender headscarf places a tray in front of us. She waits until Mariëlle and I have helped ourselves to tea, cookies and a piece of fruit before joining us on the tan sofa. There's a vibrant painting of a dark blue peacock hanging on the wall, its colours bright as the woman's clothes. 'Is that the peacock angel?' I ask, curious. The woman nods: 'Tawûsê Melek is the most important of the seven archangels. He's at the heart of our religion.' She tells us about praying to the sun, fasting and the importance of nature, the basic tenets of the Yazidis' peaceful, uncomplicated faith, for which they have endured years of discrimination. So much so, that increasing numbers of friends and family have left the country. 'There are a lot of misconceptions about us.'

In the spring of 2013, I was in northern Iraq with photographer Mariëlle van Uiter, working on a story about the Yazidis, a community neither of us were familiar with at the time. 'You're going to Iraq? Then you must visit the Yazidis – a religious sect with a remarkable history and a breathtaking temple,' a fellow journalist had urged. What we found was not a religious sect, but an ancient ethnic-religious community that welcomed us with open arms. We interviewed people in the Lalish temple and in their homes. Everywhere we went, we were offered food, introduced to others and shown around.

After offering us a place to sleep, this woman thinks it would be fun to have us try on some of their traditional garments, too. Mariëlle and I pull the flowered dresses – embroidered with beads – over our heads. Then the woman covers our hair with a lavender headscarf before allowing us to look at ourselves in the mirror. 'Lovely,' she says, satisfied, taking a step back to admire the effect. 'You look like genuine Yazidis!'

Mariëlle agreed that the story we were working on wasn't particularly in-depth – in fact it was more like a tourist item. But while we're playing dress-up, I do some gentle probing into the Yazidis' place in society and then the conversation takes a serious turn. The woman explains that for centuries, Yazidis have been subjected to attempts to eradicate them because of misconceptions about their religion. One of the most persistent rumours is that Yazidis worship the devil, making them a popular target for fundamentalist-Sunni factions. 'A few years ago, there was a major attack by Al Qaeda, and hundreds of Yazidis were killed.'

As we take off our Yazidi garb, the woman explains that although things are now peaceful, her community is always on the alert for extremist attacks.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if there was an onslaught sometime soon,’ she says, looking worried. ‘There’s something in the air.’

We fold the dresses and scarves and hand them back. The woman asks if we want to keep them, but we decline politely. The dresses seem expensive, and we wouldn’t wear them in the Netherlands. She plucks the two lavender scarves from the pile. ‘Keep these instead. You can wear them around your neck as a keepsake of our community,’ she says, stuffing the scarves into our bags.

A little less than six months later, when I was back in Rotterdam, I saw on Twitter that Islamic State had mounted a fresh attack. Hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where emergency camps were being hastily set up. Those who weren’t able to escape gathered on a mountain, where the situation became increasingly dire. There wasn’t enough to eat and drink, and if help didn’t arrive soon, people would die of starvation and thirst. Online, I came across photographs taken on that mountain, showing men, women and children with dust-covered clothes and scorched, anguished faces. They were sitting in barren clearings, with no shelter from the sun and nowhere to go. When I zoomed in on their clothes, I saw that some of the women were wearing white and lavender head coverings, which they’d wrapped around their faces to shield them from the elements. I looked at the scarf hanging on my coat rack, and suddenly the full realization hit me: Islamic State had attacked the Yazidis.

The woman I’d met in Shaikan had been right. However, she couldn’t have known that the seventy-fourth act of aggression against her people would turn out to be history’s most brutal. Disaster awaited those who fell into the hands of IS. The women were separated from the men and nothing was off-limits, because the militants viewed the Yazidis as infidels. The men were executed and dumped in mass graves; boys on the verge of puberty were taken to military training camps. The women and girls were kidnapped and sold as slaves. The United Nations spoke of genocide.

However, it wasn’t the horrific conditions on the mountain or in the camps that prompted me to write a book about the genocide. It wasn’t even the article I’d written in 2015 about IS’s former slaves. The idea only crystallised in 2017, when I had the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with survivors over an extended period. I spoke with dozens of women who had been enslaved, with boys who had been interned in training camps, and with men who had lost their entire family in the blink of an eye. I heard how IS had sold the youngest children to adoptive parents, and how Yazidi women who pretended to embrace Islam were granted certain privileges. Islamic

State had stopped at nothing in their attempt to wipe out the Yazidi community, and the genocide encompassed far more than the sex slavery which so obsessed the media.

There was one man in particular – someone who eventually became one of my closest friends – who urged me to write a book about his community. His family bore scars resulting from every aspect of the genocide: men had been executed, women and children enslaved and his youngest brothers had been sent to a training camp, after which IS forced them to carry out a suicide bombing. He wanted to contribute to my book by telling his story and helping me in any way he could.

People often ask me why the Yazidis are so open. Sometimes it's just that they want someone to listen to them, but more often than not, they want to tell their personal story because of the broader implication of genocide. Everywhere I went, people young and old described how, for centuries, the Yazidis had been the victim of attempts at eradication. These people didn't mind me using their real first names, although at times I did change them for security reasons, along with specific details, without damaging the context.

At first, I was astonished that even the rape victims were so candid, but it quickly became apparent that Nadia Murad, the Yazidi activist, had set an important precedent. Nadia became the face of the Yazidi genocide, the voice of her community, when in December 2015, she testified before the Security Council of the UN. There, she described what had been done to her people. For the first time, a Yazidi woman talked openly about how Islamic State had sold her into slavery. Her tale unleashed a mini-revolution among Yazidi women, inspiring increasing numbers of them to tell their stories, with the result that people began to sit up and listen.

In the winter of 2018, I met Nadia in a Paris hotel. She was poised, soft-spoken, and used hand gestures sparingly. She seemed overwhelmed and exhausted, but resolute. The three hundred interviews she had given by that point were all part of her urgent mission to expose the criminal acts perpetrated by Islamic State. According to Nadia however, her efforts had had little effect. More than five years after IS attacked her community, the Yazidis are still living in Iraqi Kurdistan, in temporary camps for the internally displaced. They can't go back to Sinjar, which is littered with landmines; political and military tensions make it unsafe, and everything has been destroyed. After many years in captivity, when women and girls finally break free, they end up in those camps, badly provided for and with no psychological help. 'We all know what was done to them while they were captives of IS. No other group of people was enslaved. And yet,' she said, 'they are left to their own devices.'

For Yazidis all over the world, Nadia is much more than the face of genocide; she represents hope. Wherever she goes, people cling to her, they kiss her cheeks and hands, burst into tears. However, she is anything but a born activist. To her, this isn't a job, but a cry for help. 'I wish I didn't have to tell people about this,' she once said in a documentary about her activism. 'I would rather be famous for being an amazing seamstress, an excellent athlete, a student or a hairdresser, and not because I'm the victim of terrorism at the hands of IS.'

When the hour was up, Nadia's interpreter, who is now her husband, tapped his watch. She had another appointment in her endless round of public appearances to fight injustice, this one with French President Emmanuel Macron. As we said goodbye, I told her I would soon be going to Sinjar to write an article. 'In that case, you must look up my sister,' she said. It was the only time she smiled during the entire exchange.

I had been planning to give my interview with Nadia a prominent place in my book, but after our talk, I changed my mind. In Paris, walking along the banks of the Seine, it suddenly occurred to me that I had heard Nadia's replies from the other people I had interviewed through the years. And not just in northern Iraq, but in Germany, the US and the Netherlands as well. The details of Nadia's captivity are well documented in her memoirs and describe everything from being sold as a *sabiyya* (slave), to her current struggle. The stories of the other people I had met, however, had not yet been written down.

Writing a book about such a weighty and complex subject as the Yazidis is not easy. A great deal has already been written about Islamic State – I've researched the topic myself for years. And eyewitness accounts can easily be crosschecked with newspaper reports and the experiences of other Yazidis. However, very little is known about the group's religious practices and history. The sacred books of the Yazidis were all lost during previous massacres. That's why I went to Lalish, their holy temple, to speak to their religious leaders and learn first-hand about their faith.

In writing this book, I spoke to dozens of direct victims of IS: men, women and children who were kidnapped or whose family members had suffered a similar fate. I also interviewed members of government, religious leaders, doctors, smugglers, students, professors, activists and soldiers. I used social media to become acquainted with other Yazidis, firing countless questions at them about their history, holidays, traditions and customs. The more straightforward details were the ones that proved the most elusive. One time, I casually enquired about the meaning of a red and white armband

and received four different answers. When I asked a friend about the significance of a particular religious festival, he replied, ‘How should I know?’

‘You’re a Yazidi, aren’t you?’ I laughed.

He didn’t consider himself to be especially religious. Like most Yazidis, however, he viewed his community not as a religious faction within Kurdish or Arabic society, but as a completely distinct ethno-religious group: the Ezidi.

Before I started this book, I had planned to leave politics well out of it. However, when I explained that to the Yazidis, they just chuckled. The reply was always the same: ‘Don’t you realize that here, everything is political?’ Over time, I began to understand that it wasn’t just the Kurdish and Iraqi governments – and the international community – who had failed to protect the Yazidis, still unable to offer them the prospect of a safe homeland. Every aspect of the genocide at the hands of IS carries political weight – be it immigration, identity, dealing with suffering, or even writing an article in Sinjar. I hope these stories will be treated with respect, because the last thing the Yazidis need is for the genocide to be used as a pretext for political agendas.

A few months after we first met, Nadia was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her vital contribution to raising awareness of the fight against sexual violence as a weapon of war. She shared the prize with Denis Mukwege, a Congolese doctor. In her acceptance speech, Nadia thanked those present and said she was honoured, but that the award couldn’t compensate for the suffering the victims had endured. ‘The only prize in the world that can restore our dignity is justice and the prosecution of criminals.’

This book is about the people who have been overlooked by the media, all of whom represent the face of genocide. Those I interviewed were acquaintances who later became friends, and I visited them again and again in recent years to hear about their progress. They were my eyes and ears, telling me about their life and the past, and I wrote it all down, often frustrated or in tears, but sometimes with a smile.

I hope I have done justice to their stories, so that this book contributes to the recognition of the Yazidis’ suffering and helps highlight the strength of this forgotten people. Above all, I hope that this book will aid them in their struggle for justice, peace and security, so that it will never again come to pass that a woman with a lavender headscarf, living in dread of a 75th attack, will witness her most horrific nightmare becoming a reality.

4. Majdal. An IS child soldier

‘My friends are in heaven now.’

‘Look, that’s me when I was in Daesh,’ Majdal says, showing me a video on YouTube. In the stifling refugee tent in Khanke, the harsh sound of a Jihadist nasheed, or Islamic religious song, drowns out the hum of the air-conditioner. His Samsung cellphone displays images of a training camp for boys in the caliphate. There’s Majdal, wearing khaki camouflage, with an IS headband around his black hair. His face looks younger. ‘It’s still really strange to see myself like that,’ he says softly.

This is only one of the numerous videos the terrorist group has released in recent years. When the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria began to fall apart, more and more propaganda material appeared, often showing the children of militants training and carrying out executions. Increasing numbers of Yazidi boys began turning up in these clips. Islamic State was proud to show off their domination over the Yazidis. The videos were intended to humiliate and terrify the Yazidi community and to inspire other supporters of IS.

Today, Majdal is wearing sneakers and a T-shirt and he has a trendy haircut. At first, he seems like an ordinary fourteen-year-old, but he hasn’t felt that way for a long time. Everything to do with his childhood was destroyed when IS attacked his village, Kocho, in August 2014. Majdal was separated from his mother and sisters and taken to Raqqa. He was just eleven when he was sent to an IS military training camp. There, the first words the IS leader said to him were, ‘Forget your religion, your family and your past. As of today, your name is Abu Otman, and you’re a Muslim.’

We’re in the tent where Majdal lives with his brother Bahjat, his brother’s wife, and other family members. The dwelling resembles those in the women’s camp: it’s made of plywood, tent canvas and cement, and has several rooms. This appears to be Majdal’s first interview, and because he’s underage and has been through a trying time, I proceed with caution. Before our talk, I ask permission from Bahjat, the oldest family member present, after which I also ask Majdal for his consent. I reassure him that he can tell us anything – ‘no answer is wrong or weird’ – but he doesn’t have to tell us anything he doesn’t want to.

‘He says people have to know what IS did to boys like him. That’s why Majdal agrees to go ahead with the interview,’ Bati translates.

The interview gets off to a chaotic start. Children run in and out, Bahjat's newborn daughter starts to cry, and in a corner, a parakeet adds to the din. Majdal's family also takes part in the interview, chiming in with answers. They're all extremely friendly and well meaning, but Majdal becomes more and more withdrawn. He sits quietly in the corner, staring at the floor and fiddling with his jeans.

'Do you think we could get Majdal alone for the interview? That would be less distracting,' I say to Bati, my interpreter. He puts the suggestion to Bahjat, who agrees, gently ushering the rest of the family out of the room. Only the parakeet remains.

'It must be difficult for you,' I begin, 'but can you tell me more about the time you spent as a captive of IS?'

Majdal nods. 'You can't imagine what life was like there. No one can. Everything revolved around violence: from the best way to commit murder to how to make a bomb.' He stares at the wall, not meeting my eye. His dark eyes seem to look straight through it, into the distance.

I'm here today to interview Yazidi boys who were trained by IS to become child soldiers. It wasn't just the enslaving of Yazidi women that IS had so carefully prepared; they also had detailed plans for the boys they kidnapped. When the extremists separated the Yazidis according to age and gender, they had to decide if the somewhat older boys would be grouped with the men or with the women and children. Age was one criterion, but when in doubt they inspected a boy's armpits. Those without hair joined the women and children, while the rest joined the teenage boys and men, who were led to a nearby field and executed.

A different fate was in store for boys on the edge of puberty. They were separated from the women and sent to what are known as cubs of the caliphate camps. It was Yazidi boys in particular, between the ages of seven and fifteen, who ended up in those training facilities, although in some cases, the boys were slightly older or younger. In the camps, the boys were continually bombarded with jihadist propaganda. They were subjected to military training and were ultimately forced to take up arms for the terrorist group.

'Every day, we had to be in bed by ten. We got up six hours later and they kept us busy around the clock,' Majdal explains. Between the hours of 4 and 5 am, the boys had to perform Islamic morning prayers. Intensive military training came next – lasting several hours – followed by theory lessons about the life of the Prophet Mohammed, the Koran and Islamic military law. The classes went on until late at night. 'We had no time to memorize passages

from the six books we were assigned, but Daesh didn't care. If they found out we hadn't been studying during our scant free time, they bound our hands and feet and beat us with electrical cables.'

In addition to Yazidi children, there were Syrian and Iraqi boys in the training camps, along with the children of foreign combatants. At night in the dorm, Majdal could hear the other Yazidi boys crying for their mothers. 'Don't cry,' he'd say, trying to comfort them. 'If they find out you miss your family, they'll make life miserable for you. Act like you're one of them, and some day you'll be free.' That ended up being his survival strategy, as well.

During the final phase of boot camp, he'd been dreading the day when he would 'graduate' with eleven other boys. His unit was then sent to the outskirts of the Syrian city of Aleppo to fight the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At first, Majdal and a few other child soldiers from his unit – made up of Yazidi and Arab youths, including orphans – refused. 'It's either fight or starve,' the jihadists threatened. Their meals were laced with drugs. 'After eating, I felt invincible, like a hero. If they'd asked me to set myself on fire, I would've done it without any hesitation,' Majdal said.

Under the influence of these drugs, Majdal and the rest did what they were told. They stormed the rebels of the Free Syrian Army, firing wildly in the air. They feared nothing, but that wasn't true of their adversary. 'I'll never forget the astonished looks on their faces when we flew at them. They retreated right away.'

One particular event is etched in Majdal's memory, the moment when Bassem, a sixteen-year-old Yazidi boy, was killed. 'We saw the enemy in the distance. Before any shots were fired, Bassem rushed at them and started shooting. Just as suddenly, he sat down, calm as you please, in the open field. That's when the FSA fighters shot him dead.'

No one can say for sure if Bassem was planning to give himself up or if it was a suicide attempt. For the first time during our talk, which lasted for hours, Majdal gets tears in his eyes. To distract himself, he takes out his phone and opens his Facebook page, the one he'd set up after his escape almost two months earlier. He adds Bati and me. 'My friends are in heaven now,' Majdal said, engrossed in scrolling through his timeline.

During his captivity, Majdal did what he could to avoid combat. One day he feigned illness, hoping he wouldn't be sent to the front. The leader grabbed a large club and hit his left arm, probably much harder than he'd intended. 'They took me to the hospital. My arm was broken, and I was still a prisoner, but at least I didn't have to fight.'

Because Majdal was temporarily unfit for battle, he was assigned work in a gun store. It was an ordinary house in a residential district where combatants went to have their firearms and other weapons repaired. What's more, the shop was a secret arms depot. Similar storage facilities were a prime target for airstrikes by the Syrian government as well as the international coalition, which was intensifying its attacks on IS strongholds at the time. It was a dangerous place, but the chance of survival was still better there than on the front line.

In addition, his new job offered more opportunities for escape. He worked in the gun store with a boy named Abu Khattab, the 12-year-old son of a prominent Lebanese IS commander. Majdal tried to befriend him in the hopes of gaining some extra privileges. It was his only option, because contact with the locals was strictly forbidden. His plan worked, and the two became close while repairing weapons and cleaning the shop. Abu Khattab even put in a good word for him, so he was sometimes allowed out without supervision. Later, he would take advantage of that freedom to call his brother in Iraqi Kurdistan using a cellphone one of the soldiers had inadvertently left behind. Then, Majdal's family devised a secret plan to smuggle Majdal out of the caliphate. The smuggler first took him to the YPG (or People's Protection Units) in Syria, where Majdal was held for fifteen days and interrogated about key IS locations.

After a few weeks, Majdal was released, but he still doesn't feel very free. He is worried about the fact that his community has been living in tents for years now, hardly receiving any assistance. Majdal never thought that life after his liberation would be like this. He's not been offered any psychological help and isn't allowed to go to school because there are no provisions for children who've missed so many years of education. 'To be honest, I don't think about the future; I just need to rest,' he says slowly. He has bags under his eyes from exhaustion, something I'll only notice later, when I look at the picture of him that I took for my article.

'I'm looking for other boys like you, who were also in the camps. Do you happen to know any other Yazidi boys who were recently freed from the camps, or anyone who fought alongside you?' I asked.

He shakes his head. 'I never saw the Yazidi boys who were in the camp with me again, and the boys who fought alongside me must be dead by now.' He can't be sure, but he suspects that ninety per cent of the boys from his front-line unit were killed.

'Why did IS send you in first, when that was so obviously futile?' I ask.

‘As cannon fodder to clear a path for the adult combatants, so we would die first,’ he replies sadly.

I swallow. Bati too, seems at a loss for words.

‘So much cruelty,’ I mutter, allowing my hair to fall over my face. I pretend I’m busy taking notes, but my eyes well up so much I can hardly see. The tears leave splotchy rings on my fake notes. I rip the sheet of paper from my notebook and crumple it up. A journalist who starts to cry is of no use to anyone, especially a teenager who was imprisoned by IS.

