



BEN MAUK

ILLUSTRATIONS THROUGHOUT BY DANICA NOVGORODOFF

WEATHER REPORTS: VOICES FROM XINJIANG

UNTOLD STORIES FROM CHINA'S GULAG STATE

We met in cafés and empty offices. A young wife spoke for the first time about her missing husband. A nephew had lost his aunt. Many mothers had lost many sons. Some had never shared their story with a stranger before. They sat on benches and in hallways, waiting their turn to speak. Some had left their villages before dawn to drive or hitch a ride to the city. When they finished, they stood up and went home again.

One man brought a tattered red-and-gold Chinese registration book belonging to his dead father, who peered out from beneath an imposing fur hat in the identifying photograph. Another man brought his two sons. A woman arrived with the names of her fourteen missing grandchildren. Some brought records of births and marriages, deeds, letters, family snapshots, petitions, or copies of UN conventions. Others were empty-handed.

They came to tell the stories of loved ones who are among the estimated eight hundred thousand to two million people believed to be detained inside concentration camps in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Some were former detainees themselves, victims of the most ambitious mass internment drive in recent history.

Xinjiang is China's largest and most diverse administrative area. It is larger than any country in Europe save Russia—if it were a country itself, Xinjiang would be the eighteenth largest in the world—and, with around twenty-four million people, about as populous as Australia. It has sometimes been called China's Muslim frontier. For centuries, Xinjiang has been home to a variety of Turkic cultures and ethnic groups, including Uighurs, who number more than twelve million in the region, alongside more than one million traditionally nomadic peoples such as Kazakhs, Mongols, and Kyrgyz.

In the 1940s, Xinjiang was briefly the site of a Soviet-sponsored East Turkestan Republic, and a strain of independence has long persisted among a small minority there. Following an increase in violence and suicide attacks, allegedly committed by Uighur separatists, in 2014 China launched its Strike Hard Campaign against the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism—a People's War on Terror that soon metastasized into a war against all forms of Islam and virtually every facet of minority identity, including language, dress, and family ties. Over the past five years, authorities in Xinjiang have implemented the most advanced police state in the world. It is an exclusion zone of high-tech surveillance, roadblocks and checkpoints, the compulsory collection of biometric data, forced labor, and political indoctrination for millions of Turkic Muslims.

Chinese officials initially denied the existence of mass internment camps in Xinjiang. Since 2018, they have described them as vocational and educational centers for “criminals involved in minor offenses.” But leaked documents suggest that residents are targeted for detention en masse based on their ethnic background, religious practices, and any history of traveling abroad. According to one internal report by Xinjiang's agriculture department, the drive has been so thorough that “all that's left in the homes are the elderly, weak women, and children.”

No independent monitoring is permitted inside Xinjiang. State-sponsored tours for journalists and government emissaries are highly choreographed. The region has become a black box, with little reliable news getting in or out except through extraordinary channels: satellite photography, secret communications between family members across borders, and a handful of former detainees who have escaped China. Foreign correspondents who travel to Xinjiang are closely monitored and report being harassed, assaulted, and even kidnapped by authorities.

In 2018, I began to travel to Kazakhstan to interview the family members of Xinjiang's imprisoned and disappeared. I also interviewed former detainees who described their own experiences. Most had crossed from China into Kazakhstan in the weeks, months, and years before our meeting, either by applying for residency and citizenship or by escaping across the border. The result is an oral history of life in contemporary Xinjiang. To my knowledge, it is the first document of its kind.

These accounts were recorded in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, in collaboration with the volunteer-run human rights group Atajurt. In spring 2019, Kazakhstan's government curtailed Atajurt's activities as part of a crackdown on public criticism of China; the group's leader, Serikzhan Bilash, was arrested in March and placed under house arrest. The speakers here have nevertheless chosen to use their own names and the names of their relatives, despite the risks of censure in Kazakhstan and of reprisal for family members still in China. In doing so, they hope to pressure the Chinese government to reconsider its policy of mass detention in Xinjiang.

—Ben Mauk

INTRODUCTION

We do not have such an idea in China.

—Zhang Wei, China's consul general in Kazakhstan, in response to a CNN report on mass internment camps in Xinjiang, February 7, 2018

We are trying to reeducate most of them, trying to turn them into normal persons [who] can go back to normal life.

—Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, November 28, 2018

Some international voices say Xinjiang has concentration camps and reeducation camps. These kinds of statements are completely fabricated lies, and are extraordinarily absurd.

—Shohrat Zakir, governor of Xinjiang, March 12, 2019

The situation there is absolutely stable and fine.

—Zhang Xiao, China's ambassador to Kazakhstan, May 28, 2019

IF I RETURNED TO CHINA, MY DAUGHTER WOULD BE RELEASED

Kulzhabek is wearing a blue takiya embroidered with swirls of gold. Beneath it, the face of a worried father.

When my daughter was arrested, my niece told me not to call her. I'll call you, she said. I was living here in Kazakhstan. My niece was in the village where it happened—the same village I come from, in China. For a few days, she updated me by phone. First she said the police were only checking Saule's documents. I still hoped everything would be fine, even with my daughter in jail. On the third day, she was taken to the camp. My niece accompanied her there. That's the only reason I even know what's happened to her.

You see, back when I lived in China, I worked at the Oyman Bulak mosque. My first job was as the muezzin. I made the call to prayer five times a day. Over the next eight years, I eventually worked my way up to imam. The state itself sent me to be trained! That's what makes all this so unbelievable. It was an official position. I was part of China's official Islamic Association. The authorities said we could practice Islam and, at first, we could. But in April 2017, the situation changed. They started sending imams to camps. Then they began sending those preaching Islam to camps. Then anyone who knew anything about the Koran. Finally, they began arresting people just for having a Koran at home, or even for praying.

When it became clear I would be detained, I decided to flee and join my daughter in Kazakhstan. Up until that moment, I'd always done as I was ordered. You get a lot of orders as an imam in Xinjiang! I would take part in political classes whenever they asked, sometimes for weeks at a time. I always complied. But this time I was in a panic. I left my property, my home, my sheep and cattle. The only thing I thought to do was to hire a caretaker to look after my livestock.

When I got to Kazakhstan, the caretaker I'd hired called me. The local police had broken into my house. They were looking for forbidden books, he said. They wouldn't have found any. All my books were stamped with the government seal of approval. But the call confirmed my fears. They really had come for me.

My daughter had graduated recently and found her first job at a corporate firm, a joint Chinese-Kazakh venture. The firm had her traveling between Kazakhstan and China. She had a Chinese passport and a Kazakh visa. It never occurred to us that anything might happen to her.

For a little while, my niece was keeping me updated. Even then, we didn't dare speak of Saule directly. Speaking in code, my niece had told me my daughter was working as part of the camp system, possibly as a teacher. But I've lost contact with my niece. It's been three or four months since we've spoken.



Now, after months without news, I just recently got a letter from my daughter's colleague. Their firm had become concerned with her case. They managed to send a colleague to the camp to speak with her. In the letter, my daughter told her colleague she felt completely brainwashed. She said she felt like she had been born in that place, like she'd spent her whole life in the camp. She said she could barely remember her family. The colleague's letter was sent to me here in Kazakhstan, and included another new piece of information: if I returned to China, my daughter would be released.

Why do they care about me? I've heard each village has to meet a quota of how many people are sent to each political camp. Most people are taken into the camps for religious knowledge or for having relatives in Kazakhstan. I fall into both categories. I imagine I'd be useful for filling those quotas. And not only was I an imam, I overstayed my visa by a year. I was supposed to go back to China one month after I came to Kazakhstan. I violated the terms of my visa. If I go back, I'll be put on trial. When my daughter's firm

inquired at the camp to ask why she was being detained, they received the following reply: it's not about her; it's about her father.

—Kulzhabek Nurdangazyluly, 46 (Saule Kulzhabekkyzy, daughter)

Interviewed August 2018

THEN I'LL ASK, HOW IS THE WEATHER?

Magira is the oldest of three children. Her mother died a month before the family immigrated to Kazakhstan. Her father later remarried, but the stepmother is afraid to look for him. The task falls to Magira.

We don't have anything left in China. We gave up our land, our animals, everything to come to Kazakhstan. We came legally, thanks to the migration legislation passed after the fall of the Soviet Union. It was 1992. I was ten years old. Eventually I became a citizen, and so did the rest of my family, with one exception. My father remained a Chinese citizen, a requirement for receiving his pension.

In 2000, my father got sick. They couldn't diagnose his sickness here. They even said he would die soon, that it was hopeless, and they discharged him from the hospital. But he went to a hospital in Ghulja, in China, and in three days they diagnosed him. He was treated there for a month. He got well. Afterward, he traveled to China twice a year, in the spring and fall, for continuing treatments. He felt it was keeping him alive. Each year, he spent his whole pension on these treatments.



The last time he crossed the border was on October 22, 2017. A week later, he called me. They've taken away my passport, he said. Please don't call. I'll call you myself. At the time, he said they promised to give his documents back in a week or two, but they didn't. Still, he called every month to update us. Then, in March, he broke his leg. He became crippled. He still couldn't get a response from the local police. We couldn't talk openly on the phone. Let's not discuss it, he said. We pleaded with him. Why don't you tell them you don't want the pension anymore? Tell them you just want to come home. Please, he says, not on the phone.

He now lives in his brother's place in Shegirbulak. It's a hard place, the security is strict, and his leg isn't getting better. It's so hard to communicate—we worry that everything is being listened to. We can't talk with him directly. I call my cousin's sister in Ürümqi on WeChat. She calls her parents. They talk to him. That's how he gets news to us. For almost a year, we haven't heard his voice. Communication with her is easier, more frequent, because Ürümqi is a more liberal city.

Just to be safe, though, we always use codes to talk to each other. I might ask my cousin's sister, Do you have any news? Meaning about my father. Then I'll ask, How is the weather? This is how I ask about my father's condition. If the weather is calm and good, so is he. If it's cold or hot, windy or rainy, his condition is poor. We're careful. We never say the word *China*. We never say *Allah kalasa*.¹ We don't use any religious phrases. But we can communicate events using this code. It's how all of us talk with our relatives in China. Everyone knows about it. For example, I know that my father went to the police two months ago. He told them he needed to treat his leg. He needed his passport back. They couldn't help him. They sent him away.

Last week my cousin's sister visited Shegirbulak for a friend's wedding. While she was there, she made a video call to us on WeChat. It was the first time we'd actually seen him since he went to China last year. I took a screenshot. Look at how old he is. See those crutches leaning against the wall? He needs them to walk. His leg has gotten worse. I want him to visit the consulate in Ürümqi, but he can't walk. No one will help him. Everyone in the village is for himself. They're afraid. If you help someone

with connections to Kazakhstan, you can get in trouble. So nothing is happening. I spoke with my cousin's sister just the other day. The last report went like this: No news, no change in the weather—it's calm.

—Magira Toktar, 36 (Toktar Sanasbek, father)

Interviewed August 2018

IT WAS IN SOME MOUNTAINOUS PLACE

Zharkynbek was in a camp for eight months. His escape still seems to surprise him. "I thought they were going to dangle my freedom in front of me forever," he says.

It was in some mountainous place. We drove out in a windowless van with a metal grate inside. I couldn't see anything. Before, at the police station, they'd given me a medical exam. They'd taken a blood sample. I couldn't understand what my sentence was—what I'd done wrong.

I was born in Ghulja in 1987. I came to Kazakhstan when I was twenty-four. The next year I got married to a local girl. For five years I worked as a line cook in a café. I had a residence permit, but my Chinese passport was about to expire, so I went to the consulate. They told me I had to go back to China to replace it. I crossed the border in January 2017. At the crossing at Khorgos, I was detained. They took all my documents and took my bags. They interrogated me, checked my phone. You know, WhatsApp is illegal in China, they told me. At some point, they asked about my religion, and I told them I prayed five times a day. I told them I was a practicing Muslim.

They took me to Ghulja. There the police interrogated me again. The same questions, but this time they beat me. You've been to a Muslim state, they said. Why didn't you take their citizenship? Why are you here? After beating me, they brought me a piece of paper to sign and put my thumbprint on it. Then they took me to the camp.

At the camp, they took our clothing away. They gave us a camp uniform and administered a shot they said was to protect us against the flu and AIDS. I don't know if it's true, but it hurt for a few days.

I was taken to a room equipped with a security camera and twelve or fifteen low beds. There was a toilet in the corner. For eight months, I lived in this camp, although not always

¹ "God willing"

in this room. They moved us from room to room roughly every month, seemingly at random. All the rooms were similar to the first. I began to realize it was a huge building—it seemed endless. Once a week we were made to clean some part of it, scrubbing and sweeping. That's how I learned that all around the building stood a high fence and that every corner had a camera stuck into it.

They had strict rules. This is not your home, the guards would tell us. Don't laugh or make jokes, don't cry, don't speak with one another. Don't gather in groups. The guards came from every background. There were Kazakh and Uighur guards, but the Chinese guards were the ones who would beat you. They told me just what the police had told me. You've been to a foreign country, they said. Your ideology is wrong.

We had Chinese-language lessons. We learned the Chinese anthem and other official songs. We learned Xi Jinping's policies. I couldn't speak Chinese and I can't say I learned anything from the classes. If their purpose was to teach us Chinese, why did they have so many old people in the camp? How could they learn Chinese? What I gathered from those classes was that they just wanted to erase us as a nation, erase our identity, turn us into Chinese people.

It was cold. The whole time it was cold. I've got health problems now because of it. I was disciplined more than once. My second night at the camp, I turned off the lights in the room so that we could sleep. It was against the rules to turn off the lights, even at night, but I didn't know that. So in the middle of the night they burst into the room. I admitted that I was the one who had turned them off. We don't switch off the lights, they said. Don't you know the rules? And they beat me with wooden batons, five or six blows on my back. You could be punished for anything: for eating too slowly, for taking too long on the toilet. They would beat us. They would shout at us. So we always kept our heads down.

Since we couldn't talk to one another, we shared notes in class. I got to know five others in class with me in this way, all of whom came from Kazakhstan. We became good friends. Like me, they'd been detained for having WhatsApp, or else for holding so-called dual citizenship in China and Kazakhstan. I have no idea what happened to any of them.

I tried to behave well in the camp. I understood that because I had relatives in Kazakhstan, I was likely to get out sooner. I saw it happen to others. Even when I was at the

camp, although I didn't know it, my wife was complaining. I don't think they would have let me out of the camp without those complaints. She was publicizing my case, and in August, after eight months in the camp, they released me to my parents.

The police drove me to their house around midnight. Early the next morning, officials came by. Don't go out, they said, and don't let us see you so much as holding a phone in your hands. You have no documents, they said, so you can't leave the house. They had a reason for everything. It was never their fault, never their decision. It was always due to some rule.

All the while my wife was working to publicize my case. One day the police came and said, It turns out you have a wife in Kazakhstan. She is complaining. We'll get a WeChat for you. And just like that, they let us talk on the phone. Of course, we cried at seeing each other. It turned out my wife had been filing endless complaints and petitions while I'd been in the camp, and uploading videos to YouTube. The police asked me to tell my wife to stop complaining. They wanted me to convince my wife to come to China with our son. I suggested to them that they should just let me go. You're a Chinese citizen, they said. You should stay here. I replied that I had a wife and son in Kazakhstan. Well, they replied, this is none of our business.

The officials were always present in the room when I called, so I did as they said. I told her to stop complaining and suggested she come to China. But she refused. I won't stop, she said, not even if they put you back in prison. I won't stop until you're home. The policemen wrote down all my information, and after three days they called to say they were going to let me return to Kazakhstan. They promised they would send my passport as long as I swore not to tell anyone in Kazakhstan about the camps. They made me sign a pledge not to disclose any information about "internal developments" in China, and to return to China once I'd visited my wife and son. I had to sign it to get my passport, but still they wouldn't give it to me. Your passport is ready, they said, but your wife will not stop complaining! Didn't you tell her we were going to send you back? Every step was a struggle.

Even when I finally got my passport, even with a plane ticket my wife had bought in my hand, I still found I couldn't leave. I'd traveled to Ürümqi. At midnight, I was at the airport, ready to board. As I was about to get on the plane, they



stopped me. We have a notice here that your local police force didn't authorize your exit from the country. So they called the local police, who said I'd forgotten to sign some form. I threw my passport at the airline employee. I threw all my documents onto the desk. I have the visa, I said. I have the passport. Why don't you let me go?

I had to go back to my village. I called my wife and she started another campaign. She contacted the embassy. Within fifteen minutes of her making that call, I got a call from local police. They returned my passport again and told me I was free to leave as long as I told them when I was planning to leave the country. I took my passport but didn't tell them anything. Instead, I went straight to Khorgos. When I reached Khorgos, I got a call on my cell phone. It was the

village police, asking where I was. I'm at my nephew's, I said. I'll come to you straightaway. I was already at the border, inside the free-trade zone. I took the last minivan of the day to the Kazakh side of the border. The border guards asked my destination. Kazakhstan, I said. Did you get permission from the police? Yes, I said, and held my breath. As soon as I crossed the border, I took the SIM card from my phone and threw it away. I bought a new SIM card and called my wife. I'm here, I said.

And now I'm home, but my health—to put it simply, I don't have health. For the past five months, I've been tired. All the time. I lose my memory. Sometimes I can't remember anything, and—I'll be frank—I'm impotent. I went to the doctor and they found microbes in my blood.



All through my detention, I tried to have patience. I told myself that everything that was happening was a test—that I should endure it. When I looked around the camp at my Muslim brothers, at my Kazakh, Uighur, and Dungan brothers, I saw that this was an attempt to divide and destroy our identity: a tool of Chinesification. I don't think they were ever planning to let me go.

—Zharkynbek Otan, 32
Interviewed May 2019

LOSING A LOVED one inside Xinjiang seems as likely to happen to men as to women, to the young as to the old, to farmers and pensioners as to artists and schoolteachers. At seventy-nine, Abylay Mamyrzhan, a retired herder, is the oldest emigré from Xinjiang I meet. The youngest, Akzhol Rahman, is sixteen. He is trying to find his father, Rahman Rahymbay, a retired middle school teacher who was sentenced to nine months in a "political learning camp," and who disappeared in China following his release.

Akzhol is wearing a new flannel shirt and his hair is freshly cut. He is in tenth grade, and is shy but determined. "We can't get any news directly," he says. "None of our relatives are left in China. So whose house is he living in? How is he?"

WE TRUSTED WHAT THE OFFICIALS TOLD US

That's my family in the pictures. My wife and our three children. It's been two and a half years.

Here, this is our daughter Ulnur. She's thirteen. She likes—I remember—she likes painting. She did well in school painting this and that.

This is my daughter Gulnur, born in 2008. She was talented in mathematics. I remember when she was in second grade, she was solving equations easily without a calculator. They were good sisters, the two of them. They got along.

Their brother, Yernur, was born in 2010. He was seven when he left for China with his mother. He's started school now.

In 2014, three of us came to Kazakhstan together: my young wife and our youngest kid, our son. My two daughters didn't have passports. Passports aren't normally issued to school-age children where we lived. There's a long process to get them. Our daughters stayed behind with my wife's parents

while we made arrangements to bring them to Kazakhstan. We visited them often in China. My wife kept her Chinese citizenship so that it would be easy for her to work on bringing our daughters to us.

The authorities called my wife's parents in February 2017 and told them to inform us that we could now apply for our daughters' passports. My wife went to China with our son. Our daughters did get their passports, in fact. But the authorities took them away almost as soon as they were issued. And they took my wife's and my son's passports as well. We'll check your documents, they said. In a week's time, we will give them back to you. Maybe she should have left then, with all our children, without telling anyone, in those first five days when they still had their documents. But we trusted what the officials told us.

In the days that followed, my wife went to the police station three times. On her third visit, they reprimanded her. If you come one more time, they said, we'll send you to political study. Now even if I tell her to go, she refuses. It's been two and a half years. They're living with my parents. My oldest daughter, Ulnur, is no longer there. The authorities put her in a student dorm in a boarding school. They're doing it all over the region in order to divide minority students among many schools. There are too many Kazakhs where my parents live. She comes home only on the weekends. Even if she's sick during the week, she can't come home; she can't call anyone. In the fall, the same will happen to Gulnur. She'll be taken to a boarding school somewhere.

As for my wife, she's been made a guard at a bank. They trained her and gave her a uniform. Otherwise I don't know the details of their lives. My wife won't say. She's afraid, most likely. She won't even tell me what she makes. Probably she works for free. She kept her Chinese citizenship only to make it possible to help our daughters. We never thought it would become impossible to leave.

—Oralbek Kali, 35 (Gulzira Ramazan, wife; Ulnur Oralbek, daughter; Gulnur Oralbek, daughter; and Yernur Oralbek, son)
Interviewed May 2019

SHE DIDN'T READ NAMAZ

Shalkar hasn't been to China since his parents brought him across the border, in 2003. But many of his relatives are there.



He shows me appeals he has written to the European Court of Human Rights and the Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nothing has worked.

In Kazakh we say “sister,” not “aunt.” The truth is, she really is a sister to me. We’re separated in age by only a few years. We used to talk on the phone every month, just to say hello.

In 2017, they started to take Uighurs and Kazakhs from their villages. I don’t know why. My aunt spent three months in a camp. After three months, she was placed in a prison. No one knew this at the time. It was only a few months ago that I heard from one of our relatives that she had been convicted and sentenced. Without any reason, without any guilt. This January, I started writing petitions and complaints here in Kazakhstan. I gave interviews and I posted videos online. The next month, her husband was called by the local authorities. They told him to get in touch with me to tell me not to complain.

At the time, her husband didn’t even know what had happened to his wife. He was in the dark. When they called him, he learned that she was being held in a women’s prison in Ghulja. She had been sentenced to thirteen years.

I don’t know why she was sentenced. I heard it was for religious reasons, so probably she visited an imam at some point. But she wasn’t such an observant Muslim. She didn’t read *namaz*.² And her husband wasn’t sent to a camp. I don’t know why. He’s left alone to take care of their daughter, so maybe that’s the reason. But why her? My aunt worked as a housewife. She didn’t have any education. She was just an ordinary person.

—Shalkar Bakyt, 27 (Gulzia Nurbek, aunt)
Interviewed May 2019

ONLY THEN DID WE START TO LIVE DECENTLY

One wall of Atajurt’s office is covered with photographs of the known missing: hundreds of faces, maybe a thousand. Khalida, a small, persistent woman in her sixties, pulls me over to a corner to show me her family members. “Here,” she says. “And here, and here, and here, and here...”

A small hamlet called Karagash is where I was born, in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. A pasture for cattle. My mother died when I was two years old. I heard my father was a party activist, but—let me be frank—I never knew him. After my mother died, my father remarried and forgot all about me. I was sent to live with my mother’s relatives. I lived with them until I was five. Then they didn’t want me either. I lived here and there, with people who knew my mother and took pity on me. An orphan. I’m illiterate, to tell you the truth. There was no one to support my education.

In 1975, when I was twenty-one, I met my husband. He was an orphan like me. His relatives had moved to China during the famine, before he was born. When they moved back to Kazakhstan, he was left behind without anyone. His name was Rakhymbergen Kittybay. He died last year, on September 9.

² One of the five pillars of Islam, reading *namaz* means praying five times a day in accordance with Koranic prescriptions.

I was pregnant eight times. My first four pregnancies, including one set of twins, were unsuccessful. Four sons, one daughter—I lost my first five children. Then my son was born. Among Kazakhs, when you have miscarriages, or when babies die one after another, a new child's life is understood to hang by a thread. So when my son was born, we gave him immediately to our neighbor. The neighbor kept him and fed him for the first week of his life. We refused to see him at all. Then we bought our baby back. We brought presents, clothes, firewood. We passed the presents through our neighbor's door and took the child back through the window. It worked. After that, I had more children and they all lived. But until our firstborn son was twelve, my husband held him like this—like an egg. He was always hanging on his father's neck, even when eating. We were so afraid to lose him.

They were difficult times, those early years of our marriage. I would have my son strapped to my back all day while I worked, cutting cornstalks, threshing wheat. My husband did the same. We were sharecroppers. It was backbreaking

work. When we had our second child, I would tie them both to a post in the field like sheep so they wouldn't wander off.

In the '90s, the state allocated some land to us. Only then did we start to live decently. For the first time in our lives, we didn't go to bed hungry. We planted wheat, corn, soy, sometimes beets for sugar. Our own crops, on our own land. After the border opened, my husband went to Kazakhstan to try to find his family. He managed to find his mother. His father had already died. From then on, he stayed in Kazakhstan to look after her. He would come to China to visit for five or six days at a time, then go back. I was raising my sons alone. His mother didn't die until 2007, at the age of 103.

After my first son who lived, I had three more sons all in a row. The three eldest all work together in construction, building houses from the ground up. The fourth was still a boy when we moved to Kazakhstan, but the elder three all made lives for themselves in Xinjiang. All of them married. In fact, all of them found Uighur wives. It's true we lived in an area of mostly Uighurs, but there was another reason: We were poor. We had no savings. When you marry



a Kazakh girl, you have to pay a dowry. We couldn't afford it. Uighurs don't have dowries. So one by one they stole their Uighur wives and we didn't pay a penny. We bought only their clothes.

When they started arresting people, my three eldest sons were taken first. They took all three on the same day, last February. They lived together in the same village in Kunes. The wife of my second eldest son called me to say they'd been arrested. The next day, she called me again. Mama, she said, they took my sister. Your daughter-in-law. They took Toktygul. They had arrested my eldest son's wife. But I don't know [*breaks down crying*] what happened to my grandchildren. They had five children. I don't know where they are.

On hearing the news, my husband came down with a migraine. The next day, when our daughter was taken, it got worse. But we decided to wait and see. I told him to hold out. When we hadn't heard anything by the end of the month, I called the administrator of Karagash, a man by the name of Nurlybek. I asked Nurlybek what had happened to my sons. Where are they? Where is my daughter-in-law? They're being reeducated, Nurlybek said. He told me my other two daughters-in-law had also been taken to the reeducation camp. They, too, were being reeducated. Political studies was how he described it. I have fourteen grandchildren in China. Some are very young. I asked Nurlybek where they were. Where are my fourteen grandchildren? They are all studying, he said, and hung up.

After that, my husband could no longer walk. He lay in bed. From the end of February, he never walked again. I took care of him. I couldn't go anywhere, couldn't leave the house. He got weaker and weaker. Months went by. We didn't tell anyone what had happened to our family. Then, on September 9, 2018, he had a bout of strength and shouted all his sons' names: Satybaldy! Orazzhan! Akhmetzhan! He turned to me. I am entrusting my sons first to Allah, then to you, he said. As for me, I am finished. He died later that day, at 5:00 p.m.

After he died, I spent ten days at home. I didn't say a word to anyone. Then I decided to find my children. I came to Atajurt and met with Serikzhan. Others wrote letters for me because I can't write. The letters explain that my children are gone, and that my husband couldn't stand to see his sons and daughters taken away. That it had killed him.

Only my youngest son is here in Kazakhstan with me. But even he's married now, and their apartment is too small for me. I live alone, and I don't have a pension here, so I have to work. My youngest son helps. He goes in together with a dozen other people to hire a truck to bring vegetables out of China. I take my share and resell them at the bazaar. Cabbage, cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce greens. I can't afford a stall. I sit on the street with my carrots and cabbages. But my youngest son is good. He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke. He used to drink before, but he gave it up. He has a family to take care of.

—Khalida Akytkankyzy, 64 (Rakhymbergen Kuttybay, husband; Satybaldy Rakhymbergen, son; Toktygul Mametzhan-kyzy, daughter-in-law; Orazzhan Rakhymbergen, son; Sharapat [surname unknown], daughter-in-law; Akhmetzhan Rakhymbergen, son; Miray [surname unknown], daughter-in-law; and fourteen grandchildren)

Interviewed April 2019

NURMYLAN IS WEARING an orange vest with yellow polka dots. He sits in his grandmother's lap, whacking her phone against the desk. "For the first time in two years, just the day before yesterday, we got a video call from our daughter-in-law," the grandmother, Gulzhanat Baisyan, says. Her daughter-in-law, Adiba Kairat, had called and asked to see her three-year-old son. Gulzhanat had turned the phone camera to Nurmylan. "She cried," Gulzhanat says. "We were all crying."

Adiba vanished into China two years ago. She had taken her two daughters, Ansila and Nursila, and left Nurmylan, who had just turned one, with his grandparents. It was meant to be a short trip. Adiba was going to visit her parents. The authorities took her passport and put her in a camp for a year. Now she is working in a factory somewhere, and the two daughters have been left with distant relatives in the village. No one watches them closely. Once, they caught lice. Gulzhanat places a photograph on the desk between us. She received the photo from Adiba's relatives. The girls in the photo are bald and very thin.

"I think they let her call us so that she would tell us to stay quiet," Gulzhanat says. "She just kept saying, 'Our situation is good. Please don't complain.' We'd been talking to reporters, posting videos online. I think she was being forced to say this. I didn't play along. I told her to come home. I told her we couldn't care for her son by ourselves. She was just crying."

She didn't reply. 'Do not complain,' she finally said. 'It will not do me any good.'"

AT NIGHT, THEY UNCUFFED MY ARMS BUT NOT MY LEGS

A café, empty and closed. Orynbeek pauses often to make sure no one is listening behind the door.

I don't want to spend a long time talking to you. I was born in 1980 in a village in the district of Chuguchak. That's the old Mongolian name; the Chinese call it Tacheng. It's in the mountains that cross into Kazakhstan. Until 2009, there was a border crossing near my village, but I never used it. Until I was twenty-four years old, I never left home. I helped my father in his pasture. We raised sheep and cows. I didn't get much schooling.

I first came to Kazakhstan in 2004, just to see the country. My younger brother was studying in the arts school in Almaty. He wanted to become an actor. I liked it here, and the next year I decided to come back for good. It was easy back then to cross the border. Kazakhstan was encouraging *oralman*³ to move, part of its repopulation efforts. I came back, renounced my Chinese citizenship, and became a citizen of Kazakhstan.

In 2016, my father died. He was one of twelve children. [*Takes an old passport photo of his father from his wallet and places it on the table.*] Most lived in China, but he had two siblings here, my uncles. I decided to go with them to China to the *zhetisi*, the ceremony that takes place on the seventh day after a funeral, to reunite with his other siblings. The crossing was easy. I saw my relatives at the banquet. We ate lamb and horse. After the ceremony, I came back to Kazakhstan. I had no trouble.

A year passed. In November 2017, I decided to go to China again. My father's funeral had put me in mind of old friends from my village. I wanted to see some of the people I hadn't managed to see at the ceremony. This time was different. At the border, I was stopped. They explained that my records of having left China were gone. An official from the Chinese

government, an ethnic Kazakh, explained that this was a serious issue. He asked for a document explaining the absence of this document. Well, I didn't have one. So they took my passport. They told me I was holding dual citizenship. This is a crime in China, they said. I didn't have the paper in my records that confirmed I'd renounced my citizenship. They said they didn't have any records at all.

After a long time, maybe twenty-four hours, I was allowed to enter China. I was shaken up by the encounter. I thought that I should probably go directly back to Kazakhstan, but I couldn't. They had taken my passport and told me they would see about my case. As I was leaving, the interrogator took me aside. If anyone asks why you came to China, he told me, tell them you wanted to settle your registration and check on your citizenship status. Whatever you do, don't tell anyone that you were trying to visit family or friends. I don't know if he was trying to help me or deceive me—I couldn't understand any of it—but later on, I took his advice.

I went to my hometown and stayed with my relatives. The village was unrecognizable. My own family was afraid even to talk to me. It was nothing like the year before. Every day, local authorities would come by and explain to me that I couldn't leave China until I presented this paper renouncing my citizenship, which I'd been told I would receive soon. One day they asked me to sign a document. They said if I signed it, they would restore my registration, cancel it officially, and I could go back to Kazakhstan. So I signed.

After some weeks, on December 15, the ethnic Kazakh interrogator from the border came to see me. He was accompanied by three Han Chinese men. They said my paperwork had gone through. They were going to take me to the border. But first, they said, you need to be examined by a doctor.

They drove me to a large office building. It was shiny like a hospital and everyone was wearing white medical clothing. But it was also somehow different from a hospital—I couldn't tell you exactly how. We went from room to room for different examinations. There were several doctors, male and female, and they checked all over my body, from head to toe, the women as well as the men. I don't speak Chinese. I couldn't understand what people were saying. I wanted to resist, but I was afraid.

We finally left the facility that wasn't a hospital, and they drove me to a multistory building surrounded by walls and barbed wire. It looked like a prison. I knew we were in the middle of Chuguchak somewhere, but I didn't know more than

³ "Returnees," ethnic Kazakhs who have repatriated to Kazakhstan since independence

that. When I saw the building, something took place inside of me. I didn't believe they were taking me to the border. I took my phone out of my pocket and tried to make a call—I don't even know who I was going to call—but they saw what I was doing and took my phone away. As we entered the building, they told me simply that I had to go through a check-in process here. Afterward, they said, you will be set free. They asked for my shirt. Then my pants. I was left in my underwear.

I was angry and afraid. I didn't know what to think. I asked them: Should I stay here in my underwear? Without any clothes? They brought me some clothes—camp clothes. I dressed, and as I dressed I kept shouting at them: What are you doing to me? I am a Kazakh citizen! They cuffed my hands behind my back and cuffed my legs together. I said I hadn't committed any crime. Prove that I committed a crime, I said.

They put me in a room with eight or nine other people, all Uighur or Dungan.¹ I couldn't understand any of them; I don't speak their languages. There was a single table, a sink, a toilet, a metal door, and several small plastic chairs, the kind of chairs you see in schools, for children. Above the door was a camera. I came to know this room well. For the next week, I didn't leave it. During the day, I sat in a chair, my arms and legs cuffed together. At night, they uncuffed my arms but not my legs. My legs were always cuffed, with just enough chain to move them if I had to walk, although I wasn't allowed to walk except in the morning, to wash myself at the sink. I wouldn't have been able to run if I'd tried. Seven days and nights passed like that.

The other men in the room avoided me. They seemed afraid of me. I don't know why. But I was the only one whose arms and legs were restrained. The rest of them were free. Every day they left to go somewhere, while I stayed behind. I wasn't allowed to move from the chair where I was sitting. In the morning I washed my face, but otherwise there was no bathing. I was alone all day. And no one, or almost no one, talked to me.

On the morning of the seventh day, two people came and took me away. We went to a new room, much like the first. We were alone. One of the interrogators was either Kazakh or Uighur; the other was Chinese. The first asked whether

I knew why I was there. First of all, he said, you've been using dual citizenship, and that's a crime. Second, you are a traitor. And third, you have a debt in China.

None of it was true. I told them I don't have dual citizenship. I'm a Kazakh citizen. What's more, I told them, I don't have any debts in China. I left a long time ago. I don't owe China anything and China doesn't owe me anything. I repeated what the man at the border had advised me to say, that I came only to check on my registration status. I don't know why I'm here, I told them. I didn't commit any crime. I asked them to prove to me that I committed a crime.

He told me not to ask questions. We ask the questions, he said. Then the real interrogation began. Tell us who you communicated with in Kazakhstan. What did you do? Do you pray? Do you uphold the Islamic rules? How many times a day do you pray? I told them the truth: I don't practice Islam, I don't read the Koran, I don't have much education. I herd cattle. I'll tell you what I told them, which is that I didn't have schooling. I spent two years in first grade and then graduated second grade, and that was it. I was helping my father in the winter and summer pastures after that. My father gave me my education, and that's what I told them. If you look at the records, I said, you'll see that I'm telling the truth. But they didn't believe me. Uneducated people don't go to Kazakhstan, he said.

Then they asked me all about my property, my cattle. I told them my home address in Kazakhstan. I told them that I was married in 2008 and divorced in 2009, that I had no kids. I told them everything I could think of, my whole life story. I answered all of their questions. But they kept telling me I was a traitor.

They took me into the yard outside the building. It was December and cold. There was a hole in the yard. It was taller than a man. If you don't understand, they said, we'll make you understand. Then they put me in the hole. They brought a bucket of cold water and poured it on me. They had cuffed my hands and now told me to raise my hands over my head. But it was a narrow hole and I couldn't move inside. I couldn't raise my hands. Somehow, I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I was back in my room. There was a Kazakh guy beside me. I'd never seen him before. He said, If you want to stay healthy, admit everything.

I slept, I don't know for how long. When I woke up again, there were two new prisoners. One was Kazakh, like me. He

told me he had been detained for traveling to Kazakhstan. He'd gone to visit his wife and child. But I couldn't find them, he said. The other guy was Dungan. He didn't speak Kazakh. But the Kazakh guy told me that his mother had died, and that he'd organized a funeral in his village according to Islamic traditions. The police had accused him of being a Wahhabi and had taken him away. I still felt poorly from the hole, where I was told I'd spent the whole morning unconscious. Afterward, I had a fever. But the two Muslim guys—the Kazakh and the Dungan—helped me to recover. They watched over me.

Time passed, and people came and went from the cell all the time. All told, I spent thirty days in that room, including the week before the hole. Every day the men went out and I stayed behind in the cell, although now I had the Kazakh and the Dungan to keep me company. Every few days, four or five men would be moved out and new men would arrive. I remember a guy named Yerbakit, who had permanent residence in Kazakhstan but held Chinese citizenship. There was also Shunkyr, a professional athlete who had never visited Kazakhstan. A third man was called Bakbek. We didn't talk much. I didn't want them to get in trouble for talking to me. We didn't say words like *Allah*. We never said *Salaam aleichum*. We were afraid.

Every Sunday our cell was searched. We all had to kneel and put our hands on top of our heads and look down as they tore the cell apart. We could see the guards' pistols right at eye level. I don't know what they were looking for. We would joke with one another that we should probably produce whatever it was we'd stolen, so that the searches would stop.

One day they took us all out and cut all our hair. Shaved our heads.

Once I asked my cellmates where they went every day. At first, nobody wanted to say. Then Yerbakit told me they were being taken to political classes. He said they learned Chinese sayings and songs by heart. Not long after that, one of our guards gave me some papers with three Chinese songs to learn myself. The words were in Chinese. I told them I couldn't read Chinese, and they took the papers away. They gave me a notebook in which someone had written the songs in Kazakh script,⁵ and they told me to learn them by sound. One of the songs was an anthem. They told me it was the Chinese national anthem. The second was a song describing the current policy pursued by the Chinese leadership, an educational song. I never found out what the third song meant. We all had to learn them. The Dungan guy spoke Chinese and learned the songs quickly, but my Kazakh friend and I had a harder time. We used to cry together. We would hug each other and cry, and try to learn the songs by heart.

I believe I will never forget those thirty days.

In mid-January, my two cellmates and I were finally allowed to attend classes with the others. We were placed in classes according to our level. Because I wasn't educated, I was in a low level, with many women. It wasn't just men in the camp; there were eighty or ninety women there, living separately. It was a big building, although I can't tell you how big it was. They would count us off room by room, but never all together. They counted in the morning and the evening, the way you count your animals in the pasture. I remember on the third day I went to class, I found they had cut the women's hair. They didn't shave their heads like they did the men's, but they cut their hair above their ears.

Of course, all the time I attended



⁵ That is, Arabic script, the official alphabet of Kazakh in Xinjiang

classes, I didn't know what I was doing there. I discussed it again and again with my teachers. They said I was to study for a year and a half, but if I was unsuccessful, I would remain there in the camp for five years. I felt I would rather die. On several occasions, I contemplated suicide. Once, I even tried to strangle myself with a shirt in my room, but because there was a camera in the cell the guards came in and stopped me.

While in class, we could write letters to one another. I happened to know one girl, Anar, from my childhood village. At first, she pretended not to know me. There were two other women from my village in the camp who did the same. Then I wrote her a letter. Please forgive me, she wrote back. Of course I know you, but I said I didn't. I was afraid. Why are you here?

Anar shared a bedroom with another girl, Ainur. The three of us would write letters and throw them to one another under the table during class. We talked through those letters. We made an entire world. In one letter I wrote about my feelings for this girl, Anar. Affectionate letters, you know. But at the end of February I was transferred to another prison. I never saw those girls again, and I haven't heard anything about what's happened to them.

Tell me again why you're asking all of this. Who are you? I believe there are Chinese spies in Kazakhstan. When I was released, they told me: If you tell this story to anyone, you'll be imprisoned again in China. I am doing this for my people, in the name of my Kazakh people. I'm the only one I know from my part of Xinjiang who has been released. The only one. And if I go back to prison, I won't be sorry. My only crime in going to China was being a Kazakh. My second crime is that I'm telling the truth.

I don't know if it's any use telling you all this.

One day, seven of us were transferred. We were handcuffed and taken to the yard and told we were being taken to another camp. They searched us and cuffed every two people together and put us in a car. As we drove, I had the idea that we were being sentenced to death. Our heads were covered. I thought they were going to kill us. Instead, they only took us to another cell. It turned out to be a former military camp. We sat in more political classes, and my teachers again told me I would stay in this camp until I'd learned Mandarin Chinese. They told me to prepare to study for a year and a half. I was sometimes beaten in this second prison.

I was asked to tell them things I didn't understand. I thought I might be inside for the full five years.

Five days before my release, my interrogations became more frequent. Some lasted through the night into the early morning. During these interrogations, they asked only one question: Why did you come to China? They made me sign papers that they said would determine my fate—whether I would go back to Kazakhstan or remain in China—but I couldn't understand what I was signing.

One day before my release, they sat me down and showed me photos of my relatives. They asked if I knew any of these people. At first I said no. I was afraid. We will make you remember them, they said. So I told them who they were: My mother, my cousin, my brother, and my father. Even my father was there, although he was dead.

When I saw these photos, I despaired. I thought my family had all been detained. The photos looked just like my own prisoner photos. *[Removes from his wallet an ID card with a photo in which his head is shaved, along with two unlaminated versions of the same photograph, and places them next to the photograph of his father.]* I didn't know how else they could have gotten photographs of them all. I couldn't understand it. My father died in 2016; my mother lives in Urzhar, in Kazakhstan. How did they have these photos of them? My first thought was that somehow they were all in the prison with me. All of my relatives from Kazakhstan, every one.

They waited while I identified each of my relatives. When I got to my father, they tore the photo in half and threw both halves in the dustbin. I cried that night until morning, thinking of my relatives somewhere in the prison, and not understanding anything that was going on.

The next day, they took me to the yard without warning. You will not take your notebook with you, they said—this notebook had all the contacts I'd made in prison—and you will not be able to say goodbye to your friends. They brought me to my cell. When I got there, I saw a prisoner I knew, Arman. He was from Astana. There was a sense of joy in the room. He was being released too. But I didn't say anything to anyone. Arman and I were cuffed together and taken away by car. It was springtime. They drove us to the border.

Later, I counted the days of my detention: 125 days. Before they set us free, they made us commit ourselves to silence. If you say anything, they said, you will go to prison, even if you're in Kazakhstan. I believed them at the time. I signed different

papers that were placed before me. I was made to recite a pledge to Allah that I would not talk about what happened to me.

I believe that Allah will forgive me this oath I made in his name.

They drove us to the border. So now I'm here in Kazakhstan. And I'm tired.

Now I want you to write the truth without adding any lies.

—Orynбек Koksebek, 38

Interviewed August 2018

ABYLAY MAMYRZHAN HAS a goatish white beard and wet blue eyes. "My father was born in Xinjiang in 1906," he says. "We were nomads. We used to herd our cattle like our ancestors did, moving from place to place."

Abylay can still remember the early days of the Cultural Revolution. His father had been forced to give up their livestock to a collective farm. The Chinese Communist Party had wanted all the nomads where he lived to sedenterize. His family lost their long-standing grazing rights and all their accumulated animal wealth. As a teenager, Abylay was forced to wear a gaomao—a high paper hat that identified him as an enemy of the people—to community meetings. His homeland

was lost to him. People were starving to death in the fields. "Everything there was taken from us," he says.

In the 1990s, the government allotted his family some land. "The forest was untouched. It was bountiful, with coal and gold deposits. Now I don't know what's happened to it. We're supposed to get compensation, but I suppose the local officials are using it for their own benefit." He wants to see his land again but feels it is impossible. "If I go, I'll be detained," he says. His relatives can't tell him anything. "What happened in Mao's time is happening again."

EATING WITH THE STUDENTS AND SLEEPING IN THE CLASSROOMS AT NIGHT

ZHEMISGUL: I'm a hairdresser in Taldy-Kurgan. Makeup, hair, skincare.

SUNGKAR: I'm in college in Almaty. I'm a philosophy student. But I was still a schoolboy when our parents went to China. It was March 2017. I was in eleventh grade. Our family





had some land that had been given to us by the government. My parents farmed melons, corn, and wheat there. When we left for Kazakhstan, we rented it out. Within a month of our parents' arrival, the local authorities took their passports and told them they had to give up their land for good. My parents went to speak with our renter. He was supposed to sign a paper agreeing that my parents were giving up the land so that they could return to Kazakhstan. But he wouldn't sign it. He said he was worried about what would happen to the land after our father left. Would the government take it away?

ZHEMISGUL: Our parents are both Kazakh citizens. Our father went to China on a three-month visa. It was about to expire, and they were refusing to let him leave—he felt he had no choice but to do as they said. They told him that even if he gave up the land, he would have to pay back all the rent money he'd gotten from the Chinese renter. This was impossible. We didn't have any way of finding such an amount. The only other option, they said, was to give up his Kazakh citizenship, to become a Chinese citizen again. He had no choice. It was his name on the lease.

SUNGKAR: They lived at their relatives' place until December that year. Our mother had a one-year visa, and when this was almost up she decided to return to Kazakhstan. But the authorities wouldn't let her go unless she divorced my father.

ZHEMISGUL: They told her that if she didn't want harm to come to her husband, she should sign the papers and then she could go to Kazakhstan. There was no ceremony. They just took them into a room where they signed the divorce papers. She came back in December.

SUNGKAR: Last we heard, our father is working as a security guard at Dórbiljin Administrative Sector School #1. He lives there as well. That's right: at the school. Relatives are afraid to have him in their house, so he has nowhere else to go. We heard this from our mother's older sister. She sees him in the street sometimes, and updates us on WeChat. But she's afraid. She told us he was eating together with the students in the school and sleeping in the classrooms at night.

ZHEMISGUL: Our father is afraid to talk to us. It seems like he'll be punished if he does. We hear about him only

from our distant relatives. And our mother is living alone. Normally she's the one who talks about our situation, who does this kind of thing. We're not used to it. But the stress has given her heart problems. She's had to spend some time at the hospital. That's where I'm going now, to see her.

—*Zhemisgul Yerbolat, 26, and Sungkar Yerbolat, 20 (Yerbolat Zharylkassyn, father)*

Interviewed May 2019

ORDINARY PEOPLE WEREN'T BEING DETAINED YET

The photograph: a young man, head shaved, leaning on the bars of a hospital bed. He is wearing an Adidas jersey and has an intravenous cannula in his left arm, held in place by medical tape. Two women, one young and one old, are helping him stand. His gaze is urgent.

I've been complaining since last January. A year and a half. But I'm sharing this picture of my son in the hospital for the first time. I've been afraid they would find out who sent it. There are many, many Kazakhs who haven't complained yet, who haven't told their story. They're afraid. I had to make a decision for myself. What do I have left to be afraid of?

The living conditions in Kure village, when I was still living there, were free at the time, but there were rumors. We heard they were detaining mullahs. Our village had two mullahs, and one day both disappeared. Word got around. Then we heard that Uighurs were being detained. Then they started sending police officers to our ceremonies. At a wedding, there would be policemen at the door checking guests' citizenship. I didn't think much about it at the time. Ordinary people weren't being detained; not yet.

I moved to Kazakhstan, and in 2016 my youngest son joined me. He bought land and built a house in a village called Batashtuu. His intention was to move here for good. After he built his home, he and his wife went to China. They owned a barbershop there and wanted to sell it. They left their son in my care. It was supposed to be only a short trip. When they got to China, their transit visas were taken away.

The day they crossed, he called me at the border. I'm being interrogated, he said. Please send my son's photos. I need

proof he's in kindergarten. I sent the photos by phone, but I'm not sure he got them. Two hours later, the phone was switched off. Two days later, my daughter-in-law wrote to my eldest son, who lives in Kazakhstan. Your brother was taken to study, she told him.

That was it for six months. Until June 2018, we heard nothing from him or anyone else. The first news we heard came in June, and it was this photo from the hospital. His wife had been called there to visit him. He'd had an operation. I don't know what the operation was, or even what organ was operated on. We don't know anything and our daughter-in-law can't tell us. I don't even want to tell you who sent me this photo.

After twenty days in the hospital, he was taken back to the camp. More silence. Months passed. Then, in November, he was released. Now he's out of the camp, but we have no direct communication with them. Since November, my son has called us only twice, both times from a police officer's phone. It's the only way I can communicate with you, he told me. Don't worry about us. We are OK, he says. Everything is OK.

But it seems he can't get back his passport. It's been almost two years now. My grandson is five and I'm still taking care of him. I need help. I want my youngest son back in Kazakhstan. He was supposed to take care of us, his parents. That's the custom. Now my husband and I are alone in this big house and working odd jobs. Our son built this house for all of us. It's ready; it's a lovely house. But now it's empty.

—Madengul Manap, 52 (Uljan Jenisnur, son)
Interviewed April 2019

SERIKZHAN BILASH MOVED to Kazakhstan in 2000, became a citizen in 2011, and co-founded Atajurt in 2017, as rumors began to spread about a mass internment drive of Muslims in Xinjiang. Atajurt became a lightning rod for refugees and whistleblowers, many of whom were entering Kazakhstan from China. His group of volunteers worked to resettle new arrivals and find money and housing for families who had lost their means of support. They also collected the testimonies that, starting in 2018, became the basis for much of the international media attention surrounding the camps.

We meet for the first time in Zharkent at the extradition trial of Sayragul Sauytbey, who had been forced to work as a

language instructor in a camp before escaping into Kazakhstan. "We've never had a trial like this, open to the public, to foreign journalists," Serikzhan tells me on the courthouse steps. "This will show the world what is happening in Xinjiang. It will show the truth about the camps."

We meet again in the offices of a pharmaceutical company on the fourth floor of Almaty's House of Printing, a Soviet-era building that smells like fried bread. One of Atajurt's volunteers has invited me there to interview family members of some of Xinjiang's disappeared. That August, in 2018, the room is constantly full. Serikzhan and his team are recording several testimonies every day.

Kazakhstan's government refuses to recognize Atajurt as an official organization, despite Serikzhan's frequent attempts to register the group. In February 2019, a court fines him more than six hundred dollars for the crime of leading an unregistered organization, a penalty that turns out to be only a prelude. In March, he is abducted from his hotel room by the state authorities and bundled onto an airplane bound for Kazakhstan's capital city, now called Nur-Sultan. The police say his crime was "inciting national discord."

I fly back to Kazakhstan in April 2019. My plan is to continue my work with Atajurt. But when I land in Almaty, Serikzhan is still under house arrest hundreds of miles away. No trial date has been announced. In the meantime, authorities have raided Atajurt's offices. The group has relocated to a building nearby, but when I show up, most of the volunteers are gone. The rooms are quiet.

I DON'T KNOW—PROBABLY HE ALREADY DIED

I'll tell you a story that describes my father well. I met and fell in love with a girl from Kazakhstan. We planned to move there together and get married. I was living in China and we were both teaching at the music school in Ürümqi where we'd met. She was famous, actually, a famous traveling musician, at least in the world of traditional Kazakh music. I'd admired her long before we met. It was a dream to have such a girlfriend!

Before the wedding, when it came time to celebrate the *qyz uzaty*, the girl's farewell, we were still living in China. My father is old—he's seventy now—and in bad health, so in the

end he couldn't come to Kazakhstan for the wedding. But he attended the first wedding, as we call it, the girl's farewell, and as a gift for my wife-to-be he brought two small books on China's Main Law and Criminal Law. Now you should memorize the laws of China, he told her. You are married to a Chinese citizen. Both of you must know the laws of China and Kazakhstan. You see, he was so confident in the law, in the Chinese judicial system, but in the end he experienced the full and exact nature of that system—he got it exactly.

Before he retired, my father had worked for the Ministry of Culture. He was an educated man living in a place where the literacy rate was still low, and Chinese script in particular was not widely known. This was in Tacheng, which Kazakhs call Tarbagatai.⁶ In retirement, he spent his days helping people fill out papers in Chinese. Mostly, they were writing complaints. He wasn't a lawyer but he knew the laws very well, so he helped people file complaints and petitions with local authorities. That's just how he was.

With us, he was strict but loving. Education was everything to him. After I was born, he never spent a night outside the home. He was at my side while I studied; my brothers too. He sent the three of us to the Chinese-language school. You have to study, he would tell us. You have to learn calligraphy. He taught us both Kazakh and Chinese script. He devoted himself entirely to raising us. When I first showed an interest in music, he bought the family a piano. If he didn't have the money, he borrowed it.

⁶ This prefecture is also called Chuguchak in Mongolian. It is not uncommon for the same location in Xinjiang to go by two or even three names, a product of the region's linguistic diversity. This complexity is further compounded in English translation by evolving methods of latinization from Arabic or Cyrillic script, or from Chinese characters. In general, I have followed established transliterations for common place names and phrases.

We never heard a word about money in the house. We were always provided for. As I got older, my father bought me music-studio equipment—nothing big or fancy, but it was still an expense. We weren't rich. Somehow he got the money.

I left home when I was nineteen and drifted, as musicians do: Ürümqi, Beijing, Shanghai. In 2014, I met my wife, and we came to Kazakhstan looking for jobs. My father had never traveled anywhere, but when I told him

we were moving, he accepted it. You know your own mind, he told me. It's your life. As I said, he didn't attend my wedding, but when my child was born, in 2016, he came, even though he was already in bad health. He had no teeth, and his legs were fractured everywhere. He suffered from cirrhosis, heart disease, arthritis. He could barely walk. Even now, I don't know his feelings. Did they want to move to Kazakhstan? Stay in China?

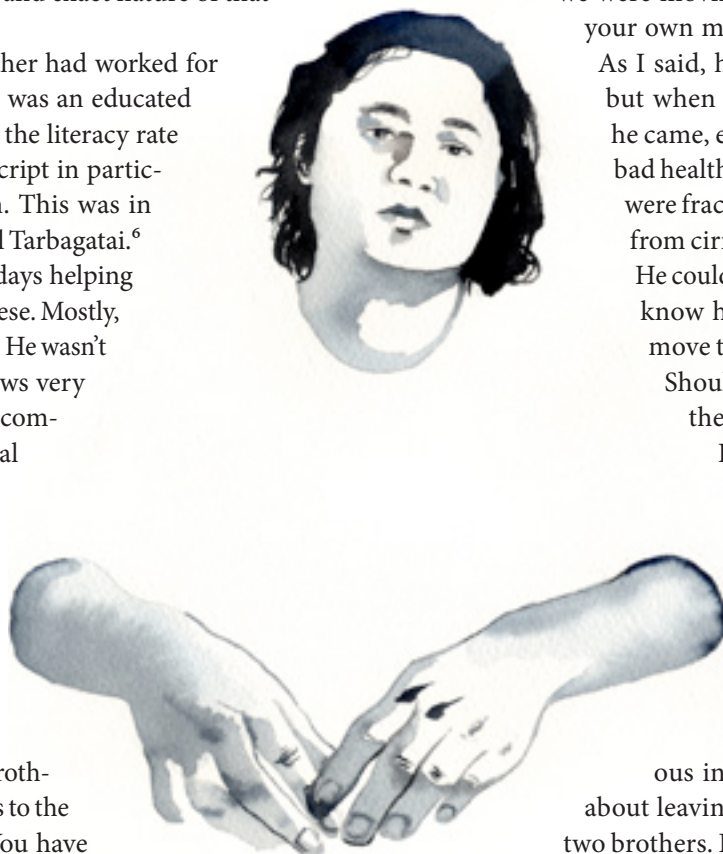
Should I have suggested it? I know they were afraid. If they died in

Kazakhstan, would their relatives be able to attend the funeral? I regret that

I never asked my father if he wanted to move here, but people in our town weren't used to speaking openly about Kazakhstan.

It's considered almost treasonous in China to discuss it—to talk about leaving. I only ever talked with my two brothers. I urged them to come here. As for my elder sister, she's married to a party official. Her husband doesn't want to move.

In March 2018, I had just become a Kazakh citizen. Every day, I'd send my mother a picture of our daughter on WeChat. That was how we kept in touch. Gradually, her messages became less frequent. Of course I'd heard that Xinjiang was getting difficult. I suspected this was the reason for her silences. That month, she removed me from her WeChat contact list altogether. I asked my brother why. I called him on video chat. He was visibly upset but couldn't cry. It's difficult here, he said. Not like before.



I was afraid local authorities might not treat my father well. He was a thorn in their side, helping neighbors write complaints. Before I hung up, I told my brother to let me know if anything happened.

The complaint that finally did him in was about a murder. A man named Zhumakeldi Akai was beaten to death by security guards at a reeducation camp. They took his body to his home to be buried. He had awful wounds. His wife came to my father. She wanted to make a complaint. They killed him, she said. She begged him to help. So my father wrote a letter to Beijing, but the letter never left the prefecture. The local authorities confiscated it. They paid my father a visit. So, they said, you want to blame us for this death before our superiors?

This information came to me through different channels. I'll tell you exactly how, but I don't want you to write it down. I don't want the authorities to close these channels, and I don't want the people helping me to get in trouble. In short, my family members were all detained right after my father wrote this complaint about the murdered neighbor. Someone—I don't want to say who—told me soon after it happened.

But even before I was told, the night before their arrest, I had a bad dream. My heart was aching. I saw security guards following me, trying to catch me, and in the dream I had a thought: What is going on at my house? When I woke up, I knew something had happened.

As soon as I got the news, I called my sister in Ürümqi. Even with her husband's status, she didn't know anything. But she called our aunt and confirmed they were detained. I began to gather information from different sources. I called everyone I knew. In some cases, I don't want to say their names. They're still back there. These days, everyone knows about the weather code, so no one uses it. If I said that it was getting warmer, those listening would know what I was talking about. I have a different code. I don't want to say what it is. But I have a code I use.

Eventually I got the whole picture from different people, some of whom had been detained with them, others who lived nearby or who heard secondhand. First, they detained my father and my two brothers. They did it without any warrant. They just disappeared. My mother went to complain to the local district authorities. She asked them for an explanation. The officials were happy she'd

come. Ah, good, you've brought yourself in, they said, and detained her too.

After several months, my mother and brothers were released from the camps, but my father was taken somewhere else. He vanished. In the absence of any news, my wife compiled four invitation letters—the letters you write to bring family members into Kazakhstan—and sent them to the local council in my father's village, if only to get some information about his fate. This January, we finally got a response: a letter stating that in October 2018 my father had been convicted to twenty years in prison.

Now I don't know if he's alive or dead. We didn't get any information about the trial or any crimes he had committed. Not even my mother was aware of his sentence. All I know is that he's no longer in the local prison where he was being held. I expect he was transferred to a place for people with long prison sentences. But he can't eat, as I've said. Even in the local prison, they served him only stale bread and hot water. People who shared a cell with him there told me they would wet the bread in the water and feed it to him. He was handcuffed; he has no teeth. Without their help, he would have starved to death. [*Despairingly*] I don't know—probably he already died.

I'll tell you something else. My father was tortured. I can't tell you where I got this information. It came from a prisoner who was released, and who managed to escape to Kazakhstan. There are many people like this. Most of them are simply in hiding. They don't reveal what's happening, because they're afraid. This particular informant lives in Kazakhstan but won't do an interview himself because his daughters are still in Xinjiang. I communicate mostly with people like this, often people I know personally from back in China. I know I can trust them. I don't want to spread rumors or exaggerations. First, we should find the facts, what the reality is.

Now my brothers and mother are home, but a camera is installed in their house, watching what they are doing. I know they suffered in the camps. I am ready to die for them, and for my father too. I'm not sleeping. I cry. Men aren't supposed to cry, but I cry. Twenty years? It's a death sentence. And why? If there was an error in the last complaint he helped write—show me the error! My father was arguing that this man's death was against Chinese law, which was not written by me or my father or any Kazakh. It was written by the government. It should not be subverted.

Law is not like physics or mathematics—it's not confusing. What it says is clear. We can understand it. It should be followed. My father did not break the law. He was following the law. It's the authorities who are violating it. And now my family is back in China, but my father is nowhere.

—Akikat Kaliolla, 34 (Kaliolla Tursyn, father)

Interviewed April 2019

KAIRAT SAMARKAN ONCE dreamed of becoming president of Mongolia. "I don't know why," he says. "Since China was such an enormous country, and Mongolia was small, I suppose I thought I had a better chance there."

He grew up in a family of herders in Xinjiang, near the Mongolian border, in a village where everybody kept cows and sheep. His parents both died suddenly, a few months apart, when he was still a child. After that, he says, he was grotesquely poor, an orphan with no one to take care of him. We meet in August 2018. As we sit drinking apple juice in the dim private room of an empty café, he goes on to describe a more recent ordeal: his arrest in Xinjiang, in 2017, and his subsequent detention in a camp in Karamay village.

"I was disobedient at first," he says. "I wasn't used to such strict orders. They put me in restraints, a chair with cuffs for my hands and legs. They bound my chest, and made it so I couldn't move my head. There was a separate room for the disobedient. Usually they would put people in the room for three hours. After three hours, it would hurt like hell."

At other times, he was forced to stand in stress positions for hours. "They didn't beat people," he says. "They made them stand like this or like this"—he stands up to demonstrate the positions—"or they forced you to sit down and stand up over and over again." The threat of torture made it impossible to do anything other than submit to authorities. "It didn't take me long to start obeying them."

AT LAST MY BACK CAN MEET THE MATTRESS

My uncle Raman Zharkyn was born in Zhiiek, a small hamlet in Kurty township. His name should be Rakhman. But it was a religious name—forbidden—so my family entered Raman in the ledger. He was a prominent

man in our village, and in May 2017, he became the head of Zhiiek. On November 20 of the same year, he was taken to a reeducation camp. He was abducted directly from his office.

The reason given for my uncle's detention was this: Every Friday he'd been going to the mosque in Kurty, the administrative center nearby. At some point, he and a few friends decided to raise money for the building of a new mosque in Zhiiek. He and his friends were all arrested.

For seven months after he was detained, he was in a prison under interrogation. He spent those months in a small, damp room, cuffed to a chair, his hands and feet restrained. He wasn't allowed to lie down. He sat day and night. During his first month in the prison, he was also restrained by a cuff around his neck, connected by a chain to the table. This cuff created an open wound that wouldn't heal. He developed a fever. At last, they took him to a hospital. They called his brother, another uncle of mine, to the hospital, and that's how we heard all that had happened to him.

His brother said that when he first came to the hospital, there was a black cowl over Raman's head. When they removed it, his brother didn't even recognize him. His hair was matted and uncut. He'd lost weight. The wound around his neck was severe but he was still wearing the cuff. The officials refused to remove it until the doctors insisted that the wound wouldn't heal otherwise. Only then did they take it off, after securing permission from some higher authority.

After this ordeal, he was sent to a political study camp, where he spent another eight months. But he got sick again and was returned to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His mother managed to see him after he was transferred to the camp. It was the first time she had been able to see him. He told her that, compared with prison, the camp was like a home. At last my back can meet the mattress, he told her. His mother has since lost her eyesight. It's the stress. She's had two operations on her eyes, and one is now completely blind.

Raman's wife, my aunt, had been a housewife. When her husband was taken to prison, she went to work as a dishwasher at a restaurant. But she had to quit to take care of her mother-in-law when she went blind. Now they're surviving on charity.

IN THE HOMES OF THE DISAPPEARED

As Gulshan speaks, she grips a crumpled pack of tissues.

Mostly men are taken to the camps. What happens then? The authorities send loyal Chinese families from the coast to live with the women in the homes of the disappeared. A Han Chinese man is sent to Xinjiang and placed in the house where the detained person had lived. Or it could be a couple. Or a family with kids. But sometimes it's just one man who is sent to live in a house full of women...

They lecture their hosts about the Communist Party. They continue to live among the family even when the detained family member returns. Everyone I know who spent some time in the camp, who was released to their home in China—in every case I know about, they have Chinese families living with them, lecturing them. And the families will report on any misbehavior. If you so much as look at them in a disagreeable way, they might tell the authorities and have you taken away to the camp. My husband's relatives have such people living with them. As a result, these days their phones are almost always switched

off. They're afraid. I try to reach them to find out about my husband, but they call only when the "visitors" are out of the house.

I grew up speaking Uighur. My family is Uighur. My parents escaped to the Soviet Union in 1969 and settled in Kazakhstan. Back in China they were cattle herders, but in Kazakhstan they became cooks. Later, when I was young, we went to Uzbekistan looking for work. They opened a café there. I'm an Uzbek citizen, actually. I met Aishanjiang and we were married in Tashkent in 1997. He was visiting from China, doing some business there. He worked with textile



In March, my uncle was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. My father is worried about the fate of his brother. But his own heart is bad, so we don't tell him all the news. Only his wife is allowed to meet with him, and then only to bring him his tuberculosis medicine. [*Through tears*] I don't think he will be alive by his release date. The conditions there are harsh. The food is bad. That's the question that bothers us all: Will he be alive by the time he's released from prison?

—Zhainagul Nurlan, 33 (*Raman Zharkyn, uncle*)
Interviewed May 2019

factories, importing fabric from China into Central Asia. The border was easy at the time: you just crossed it. I came with my husband to Kazakhstan and we opened a shop here. We were just starting our business when he was arrested.

He was going to visit some of our factories in Ürümqi. As soon as he entered China, his passport was taken from him. He was brought to Atush, his birthplace. And from there he wasn't allowed to leave. At the time, we hadn't heard anything about the camps. He went into China without any knowledge of them. Such cases of people being taken to camps are rare in Ürümqi, where he did business, so when they told him to come in for questions, he went.

The day he was taken, he had some idea of what was happening. He called me to say he was going to be taken to a camp. I don't know if I'm going to be back or not, he said. He couldn't say any more. He couldn't describe his situation. What are you going to do? I asked. Why are you being sent to a camp? To study, he said. But you're old, I told him. You're almost fifty. He said that one of his relatives—almost eighty years old—was already studying in the same camp. Age is irrelevant, he said. That was last October. Since then, he's vanished. I heard he's in prison now.

And others—there are many others. My husband's older brother died in the same camp where my husband was. He was almost sixty years old. The authorities said he had a pre-condition, an illness of some kind, but he was healthy when I knew him. And my husband's sister's son was sentenced to twenty years in prison for making hajj. My sister-in-law's husband, the imam at Atush, was sentenced to fourteen years. I've heard from his wife that he's in the prison hospital. His condition isn't good. And there are many other relatives whose fate I don't know. Probably they're all in prison but I don't know. I can't tell.

—Gulshan Manapova, 43 (Aishanjiang Kari, husband)
Interviewed May 2019

**WHY ARE YOU REFUSING TO EAT
THIS FOOD PROVIDED TO YOU BY THE
COMMUNIST PARTY?**

No matter the occasion, whether an interview or a press conference, Gulzira never lets her young daughter out of sight. She is in her lap now, laughing and squirming.

I saw enough while I was there. I want to speak. I want what happened to be published. The thing is, my relatives are against me. They're my enemies now. They tell me not to talk about these things. Even my stepdaughter is against me.

I remember my parents telling me that in Mao Zedong's time, there were activists and political events where things got violent. During Mao's time, they burned Korans and other religious books. They silenced you. We were cut off from family in the Soviet Union. But then Deng came to power and things calmed down. I remember when I was young, at some ceremonies there might be a Chinese state flag, but that was the sum of my political awareness.

In fact, thinking back to my childhood days, I didn't care about anything. Then I got married. I grew up. Ours was a traditional Kazakh wedding. My father paid a dowry. My face was covered. I was wearing a traditional dress. Now they're gone, all those clothes. When I think back to these times, I think of how good they were. I can't understand how



all this happened. In 2014, they started taking away school-teachers. We knew something was happening—it was quiet, but something was changing. That was the year my daughter was born. We got our Chinese passports and went to Kazakhstan to visit my husband's mother's family. The three of us came: my husband, my daughter, and I. We came here and decided to stay.

The only problem was my father. Back in Ghulja, we'd been farming corn. My parents had been cattle breeders until the party made them give it up for farming. I can still picture the summer herding pasture from my childhood. But they became farmers, and then when my father turned fifty, he lost the will to walk. Doctors couldn't find any reason for it. He just stopped. He became an invalid. Eight years later, my mother died, and he was alone.

For years, my husband and I looked after my father. We ran the farm. We would get a loan in the spring, use it to farm in the summer, then we'd collect the harvest in the fall and repay the loan to the bank. It was hard work. We certainly weren't getting rich. When we came to Kazakhstan, we gave up all that and became hired hands, milking and herding someone else's cattle. At last we got our permanent residence permits. After that, I would go to China to check on my father. We tried to support him from afar. My brother looked after him.

In 2017, I heard from my brother that our father was dying. No treatment was possible. [*Starts to cry*] I went back to see him. I was still breastfeeding my daughter at the time, but I decided to wean her and leave her with my husband. Yes, I was still breastfeeding her at three years. [*Laughs and shakes her head*] What can I say? My life is strange. I took an overnight bus. At Khorgos, the Chinese authorities stopped me. They checked my papers. Something was wrong. They notified the police in Ghulja, and soon enough the local police came to Khorgos and interrogated me. They were stern. They told me I would never return to Kazakhstan, then took me to my village in a police car. It's fifty miles to the village, and—let me tell you—it was the longest drive of my life. I was thinking to myself, *Shit*, and I was crying. Stop crying, they said.

They took me to my brother-in-law's house. The next morning, I went to the local police station. I went to see the head of the Fourth Unit of the Dolan Farm, in Ghulja County. I asked him to give me back my passport. He refused. You're

going to study for fifteen days, he said. The man is himself Uighur. Everyone's caught up in it.

I still hadn't seen my dying father. I asked them to let me visit him. Don't worry, the mayor said. It's only fifteen days. At the time, I thought they were probably right. Why would they lie to me? My father would live for at least another two weeks. So I asked permission—I was still in the mayor's office—to get my clothes and things from my brother-in-law's. He refused. They drove me straight from the mayor's office to the camp.

At the camp, I was given a uniform: a red T-shirt, black trousers, Adidas trainers, and some Chinese-style slippers. That was all. They also gave me a shot. They said it was a flu shot. Then, after a month in the camp, they took a blood sample. After that, they would take a blood sample every once in a while. You never knew when it might happen. I don't know what they were doing, what sort of experiments...

I saw many Kazakhs brought into the camp while I was there. When I asked them what they'd done, they told me they'd visited family members in Kazakhstan, made phone calls to other countries, things like that. As for me, we had some security officials in the camp who told me that Kazakhstan was on a list of the twenty-six most dangerous countries, not to be visited. As a result of your visit, they said, you will be reeducated for a year—that's when I learned the truth. Not fifteen days but a year! I tried to tell them about my travel permit. They didn't care. You are a Chinese citizen, they said, so we will reeducate you, as is our right. Do what we tell you and write what we tell you. The interrogations began. They asked for my full biography, including all of my relatives' names, especially any relatives in prison or abroad. My brother's name is Samedin, and they wanted to know why he had been given a religious name. When you're in a camp, they'll keep asking you the same questions, over and over, all throughout your stay. Nineteen times: I counted. They interrogated me nineteen times.

From July to November I was living in one reeducation facility, the first of several. There were eight hundred women there. I didn't see any men except for some of the security officers. We were about fifty women in a classroom, plus three teachers and two security guards. There were cameras in the classroom, and in every other room, 360-degree cameras running twenty-four hours a day and filming everything. The classes were what you've heard. We were made to say

things like “I like China” and “I like Xi Jinping.” We were told our first priority should be to learn Chinese. Then we could work for the government or get a job in mainland China. Even then, we knew this was ridiculous. I saw disabled old women in the camp. Deaf girls. Were they to get a factory job? I remember two women who had no legs. How could they work? But the instructor would say that even without legs, your eyes are healthy. Your heart is healthy. You’ll be fit for work anyway.

When we weren’t in class, we lived together in a long hall, a kind of shed. Each shed housed thirty-three women. We were obliged to make our beds every morning, just like soldiers in the army, not a wrinkle. Once, the inspector didn’t like how I’d made my bed. He took my bedsheets over to the toilet in the corner and threw them in. It was the same if we were too slow—we had only three minutes to make our beds in the morning. Otherwise, into the toilet.

Should I be saying all this? I don’t know. In any case, my name is everywhere. I’ve said it all before. I’m not trying to visit China anymore, not even to see my family. Most likely I’ll die here.

In November, they took me to a new camp, a medical facility—it looked like it had once been a hospital, a new one—but they’d turned it into a camp. From the outside, it looked good. Once in a while, when some inspector from the Central Committee—or, anyway, from outside Xinjiang—came, they tried to spruce it up. If you looked close, you could see barbed wire on the fences outside, which they tried to disguise by also adding fake vines, and they put fake flowers in every window to hide the fact that they were barred. As soon as the inspector left, they removed these decorations. This was one of the Professional Reeducation Centers of the Ghulja region.

In the second camp, they let me talk to my relatives. Once a week you could talk to them on the phone. And once a month they could visit. We would be brought into

a room with our relatives on the other side, beyond a wall of wire mesh. The guards would remove my handcuffs. We spoke through the screen.

Mostly we ate only rice and steamed buns—plain, empty buns—at every meal. Probably they put some additives into the dough for nutrition, I don’t know. We never, ever felt full. Once, there was a Chinese holiday and they made us eat pig meat. I mean, they forced us to eat pork. If you refused to eat, as I did once or twice, they put you in cuffs and locked you up. You are not mentally correct, they would explain. Your ideology is wrong. You people are going to become friends with Chinese people, they said. First we are going to destroy your religion, then we will destroy your extremist nationalist feelings, then you will become relatives of China. We will visit your weddings, and you will visit ours. And at our weddings, you will eat pork. They would handcuff you to a chair and reprimand you.



Why are you refusing to eat this food provided to you by the Communist Party? You would sit for twenty-four hours in that chair. They called it the black chair or the lion chair. After the first refusal, you got a warning; after the second, you got the chair. The third time you refused, they took you to another facility, one where it was said conditions were harsher. I didn't refuse a third time.

I was lodged with mostly Uighur women. I think they didn't want me to be able to communicate with other Kazakhs. There was only one kind of interaction they encouraged. My husband was in Kazakhstan, but for those women who had husbands available, they could meet them once a month for two hours at the camp for marital visits. A room was provided. They were left alone. The husbands were told to bring bedsheets. Before seeing the husbands, the women were given a pill. A tablet, I mean. And sometimes, at night, the single women, taken... *[trails off]*.

I shouldn't even say "encouraged." They were forcing every woman who had a husband to meet with him. Even an old woman had to lie in bed for two hours with her husband. They would shame the old women. Don't you miss your husband? And afterward, they would take the women to bathe. As for the pill they received, I think it was a birth control pill. They didn't want any births. If you were pregnant when you came to the camp, they performed an abortion. If you refused, they took you to a stricter place, one without visits with relatives. That's what I heard.

From November until July, I was in the hospital-turned-camp. I remember one time they made us burn a pile of prayer rugs they had collected from people's homes. While we worked, they asked us questions: Why does your brother have a religious name? Do you have a Koran at home?

In July, they transferred me to a third camp. This was an ordinary school they had turned into a reeducation camp. What I remember most about this camp was that there were no toilets. We had to use a bucket. And, as I said, there were fifty people in a class. Here, too, they would interrogate us, asking us about our husbands and children. Sometimes they would take away three or four women at a time. These women would never come back. Other women would soon arrive to replace them.

In August, I went to a fourth and final facility—we were transferred overnight—where I lived for the remainder of

my detention. They kept promising to release us eventually. If you behave, they said, in a month we will teach you a vocation. If your ideas improve. They never did teach us a vocation, but on October 6, 2018, some ethnic Kazakh officials came to the camp. One of them said that good news was coming, and the next day, about 250 women were released. Of these, 150 or so were Kazakh. I know because they separated the Kazakhs from the others and counted us. While we were separated, they told us we had to keep our mouths shut. They said: We have to make our two countries friends. You will be treated in a friendly way, but dangerous ideas are coming from Kazakhstan, so once you're back in Kazakhstan, say only good things about the camp. There was a threat implied here. When one member of a family is taken for reeducation, others often follow. My husband's younger brother was taken. It was a spiderweb. They are taking everyone inside.

When I was released, I was taken back to Ghulja, my husband's village, where the authorities held a ceremony for me and some of the other women from the village. There was a Chinese flag, a podium. They made each of us speak. We had to say nice things about the camp. They told the local population about my achievements. You see, they said, Gulzira is now well educated. She will now work as a teacher for you.

I went to my father's village at last. I was able to see him. But even here, my sister-in-law was made to spy on me. The authorities asked her to watch me and listen to what I said. I spent five nights at my father's house. Then they gathered all the women in the area who came from Kazakhstan and told us we were going to work at a factory.

While all this was happening, my husband was working toward my release. Together with Atajurt, he was uploading videos about my detention in China. But I wasn't aware. I was taken back to my husband's village and was forced to begin work at a factory. I'd thought I would be sent back to Kazakhstan, but the people I asked were saying contradictory things, and in the end, I was sent to the factory, a kind of sweatshop, I suppose, making gloves. I was told the factory made handbags and some clothes as well, but I only ever worked on gloves. The products were exported abroad, we were told, and sold to foreigners. You made some money, but if you stopped working, they sent you back to the camp. So there wasn't much of a

choice. They told me to sign a contract agreeing to work at this factory for a year. In the end, I worked there for a month and a half. It was piecework. I earned one jiao⁷ for every glove I finished. All told, I made more than two thousand gloves and earned 220 yuan.⁸ So, you see, it was like slavery.

One good thing, maybe the only good thing, about the factory was that we were allowed to have our phones again. We could call our loved ones. After more than a year, I finally got to hear my husband's voice. One day I took a photo of the factory on my phone and sent it to my husband. He showed it to Serikzhan, who published it. They took away my phone. Then they interrogated me. They asked all the same questions they'd asked me many times, and more, all night long. But it worked. They let me go. They took me back to my husband's village. His relatives were angry with me because of what my husband had done. What have you done? they asked. You're international news! My relatives wrote messages to my husband. Stop complaining, they told him. You should praise the country! You should thank the government and the party!

I was taken back to my father's place in January. I saw my father again, probably for the last time. Now he needs care like a child. The police told my father and the relatives that I'd better not speak about the camp, or else my father would be arrested. They took photos of us all drinking tea together. Back at the mayor's office, I had to write a letter thanking the party for reeducating me for a year and a half. Then, at the border, they interrogated me for another four hours. Finally, they let me cross.

Probably this is a lasting consequence of the camp: I always feel tired. I have no energy anymore. Doctors say I have kidney problems. I'm just happy my husband was here. It's because of him I was released. There were women in the camp who didn't have anyone outside China to help them. They were taken to the mainland to work in factories. What has become of them?

I think until Xi Jinping dies, life for Kazakhs in Xinjiang will not change. It's like it was in Mao's time. But I will dedicate my life to helping them. Even if it means my family has turned against me. Even my stepdaughter, who was

herself detained in the camps, tells me to stop complaining. But I won't. You can come talk to me anytime. But I don't know my phone number. My memory is bad. It's gotten bad since I was in the camps. My focus. And I forgot one other thing: We were allocated only two minutes for going to the toilet in the camps. If we couldn't do it in time, they beat us with a stick. I suffered five or six beatings because sometimes I was slow. Only in the head. They always targeted our heads.

—Gulzira Auyelkhan, 40
Interviewed April 2019

GULZIRA'S ACCOUNT IS a rare firsthand look inside the camp-to-factory pipeline to which several testimonies from Xinjiang have alluded. Later, I learn that news organizations have found the factory where she claims to have been forced to make gloves. According to an article for Agence France-Presse, she worked for the Yili Zhuo Wan Garment Manufacturing Company, in Yili, Xinjiang, which produces fifteen million dollars a year in gloves for export, mostly to Europe and North America. "We have more than 400 skilled and experienced workers," reads the company's Alibaba profile.

IF I DON'T GO BACK, MY RELATIVES WILL HAVE PROBLEMS

My mother worked as a physics teacher in China her whole life. She retired and came here to help us with childcare when my wife went back to work. She kept visiting China once a year, though, for her pension. She went dutifully every year. On her most recent visit, authorities took her passport. Months went by. Whenever she checked on its status, they told her that her documents were with higher authorities. There's nothing we can do, they said.

In December, I heard from relatives in Ürümqi that my mother was losing her mind. She'd lost her final hope of going back to Kazakhstan. It crushed her. She hadn't slept in a month, they said. Even in Kazakhstan, her health had not been good. She'd had surgeries on her gallbladder, on her uterus. I wanted to find out how she was doing, but it was hard always communicating through her relatives. We could never speak for long. How is she? That's all I could ask. Your mother was complaining again, they would reply.

⁷ One-tenth of a yuan, or about \$0.015

⁸ About thirty dollars



Probably I will not see my children again, she said. Probably I will die like this.

This January, she was committed into a mental hospital in Ürümqi. She was there for a week. My relatives visited and let me talk on the phone with her. I didn't know what to say. I just told her to take care of her health. Now she's back with family, but they've lost patience with her. She'd practically become an invalid. Let your father's relatives take care of her, they told me. We have to work. We can't look after her anymore.

Three times a delegation from China came to the consulate here, and each time I met with them. The first was in October of 2018. The second was in November. They couldn't tell me anything concrete about my mother. I went for the third time this January. This time, they told me that probably she doesn't want to come back. It's her choice, they said.

I've heard they're letting some Chinese Kazakhs come visit. Family members back in China are the guarantors—they'll face problems if their relative doesn't return to China. Sentenced to a camp, probably. I've met a few of these visiting Chinese Kazakhs. One is the father-in-law of my cousin's sister. He's been here for two or three weeks. I took him aside to ask why he was planning to return: Why don't you apply for citizenship here? He said, If I don't go back, my relatives will have problems. So I'll go back. They can reach you even from a distance. This father-in-law is eighty years old and can't always control himself. His relatives keep him in the house. Even in Kazakhstan, they won't let him go out in the street. They're afraid he talks too much.

—Bauyrzhan Yerzhan, 35 (*Bekezada Mukash, mother*)

Interviewed May 2019

**THEY SIMPLY SAID IT WAS THE WRONG
THING TO DO, TO GO TO KAZAKHSTAN
AND HAVE A CHILD**

Bikamal has three children. The youngest two are in the room with us, crawling over everything.

In China, my husband was working at the Karamay oil fields. He's a steam worker, generating steam for the oil pumps.

When he retired, we moved to Kazakhstan with our two children. Then my daughter was born here, in December 2016. In May 2017, when she was six months old, his oil field boss called and said he had to come back to China. There was no reason. You have to visit us, they said. Just come. He did as he was told. As soon as he crossed the border at Khorgos, he was taken away. First they took him back to the oil fields. From there, they took him to a reeducation camp nearby—the Maytau camp. The police brought my husband's bag to his sister's and told her they were interrogating him. She knew this meant he was heading to study.

It's been two years now and he hasn't been released. I heard he was transferred to a second camp, and as far as I know, he's still there. The irony is that not long before he went to China, he'd submitted our paperwork for Kazakh citizenship. As of September 2017, we're all Kazakh citizens! But I can't even tell him. I have no communication with my husband. Last winter I heard that my mother-in-law had a meeting with him at the camp. But there was a mesh screen between them. They could speak only by phone. I asked her why he was detained, but no one knows. We don't have any debts. We have no legal issues. I just can't think of a reason.

My relatives did tell me this: They said officials came to my husband's sister's house and told them I was as guilty as my husband, due to the fact that I gave birth to my child in Kazakhstan, and implied that if I came to China, I, too, would be detained.

They simply said it was the wrong thing to do, to go to Kazakhstan and have a child.

—Bikamal Kaken, 42 (Adelhaze Muhay, husband)

Interviewed May 2019

HE IS A LONER, SHY AND MODEST

Yerzat is an artist. He paints saturated landscapes of mountains and yurt-dotted meadows peopled by the nomadic warriors of centuries past. The village of his birth lies in the northernmost corner of Xinjiang, near the mountains that cross into modern-day Mongolia and Russia.

There was no reason. You have to understand—none. My brother never committed a crime. He got detained, and my father, who lives in China, couldn't meet with him. For more than two years, my father couldn't see his son.

Bierzat is three years younger than I am. I came to Kazakhstan to study painting at the arts academy, but my younger brother and father have always lived in China. Bierzat visited me here twice, but that's all. He doesn't travel much. He's a farmer like our father. Mostly wheat. He was always modest, very shy—almost debilitatingly shy. We never argued





growing up; he was so quiet. He liked working with wood. As a side job, he was producing unfinished wood for furniture makers in our village. But his main job was taking care of our father. I was out here; he was close by. Our father is old and crippled, and Bierzat cared for him and worked the farm.

They came for him last April while he was treating wood in his workshop. At first, they brought him to a detention center of some kind. As soon as he was arrested, our father went to the police station. They told him not to worry. Probably we'll let him out soon, they said. We already have too many people in prison. Instead, he was sentenced to seventeen years in prison. Neither my father nor I know why. They notified my father only once he'd already been sentenced. I'm not even aware of any trial having taken place. But my brother didn't pray. He didn't practice Islam. He didn't even keep a Koran in the house. He never touched anyone, he was so reserved. He was married briefly, but they got divorced the very next year.

I've tried to find out through my father what kind of crime he committed and why he received such a long sentence. But he didn't know anything. I know that he doesn't drink or smoke. That's all I can think of. This has become a liability in Xinjiang. It's the religious implications. One of my relatives told me a story about visiting a nearby village and finding a cultural association there, and the members were all drunk. They were always drunk, he learned. One of them explained why. If we don't drink, he said, they'll get us. So maybe—I'm guessing—my brother's guilt was that he doesn't drink or smoke. I don't know. He's a loner, shy and modest. They couldn't just leave him alone.

—Yerzat Bolatkhan, 37 (*Bierzat Bolatkhan, brother*)
Interviewed May 2019

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO KNOW MY LAST DAY

Rahima works in a clothing workshop.

Yes, I was in the camp. For more than a year... We were thinking of our children, you know? And their future. That's why we moved here. We came because it's the motherland. All Kazakhs should return to Kazakhstan! That's what we were told. So, in 2013, we came: my husband and I and our four little children—two daughters and two sons. But since I had a permit for visa-free travel, I went back and forth. My parents were still in China, so I'd go to see them. And until 2017, there were no problems. Crossing the border was easy. That summer I even worked at the border, at the International Centre of Boundary Cooperation at Khorgos. It's the free-trade zone. Do you know it? I was working as an interpreter at one of the Chinese bazaars: the Yu bazaar. Kazakhs would travel there to buy Chinese goods. I worked as a translator. When my children were about to go to school, I went back to Almaty. In August 2018, my parents called me back to China. The authorities had been to see them.

Ours is a very small village in Tekes County. It's simply called Military Horse Farm. When I arrived, the authorities wanted to see me. They took a blood sample, my fingerprints, recorded my voice on a computer, took my picture from the front and in profile, then let me go. At the time,



they didn't tell me what it was for. I didn't understand it. They took my phone number and I went back to Kazakhstan. Later that month, they called me and said I had to come to China again. At first I said no. Three days later, my parents called. The authorities had been to see them again. So, you see, I had to come.

That October, I crossed the border, spending the night at a guesthouse at Khorgos. I reached my village the next day and spent the night at my parents' house. On the morning of the sixteenth, the authorities showed up. They told my parents that if I didn't come with them, we'd be in violation of some law. They took photos of my mother and father, they photographed the house, then they took me away. They didn't tell me they were taking me to a prison. They said I just had to answer some questions.

I was taken to prison in what was, for me, a new mode of travel: a police car. The guards didn't say anything, didn't explain anything. As I was about to enter the prison, they cuffed my hands and my legs. That's when I realized I wouldn't be going back home.

There were a lot of us in the prison. There were twenty girls in each room and there were many rooms. We sat, stood, and ate in this room. We slept there too. There was no exercise, no yard. We were in the room day and night. The guards weren't violent. They didn't beat us for nothing, but we couldn't leave, and if we didn't follow instructions quickly, they shouted and cursed at us. Eventually I got to know a few of the other women. Some I've kept in touch with, if I was able to find them after our release. Some of them spent a long time there. As for me, I was in prison for only seventy days. That December, they took me from the prison to a camp.

They called it a Professional Reeducation Center. We took Chinese-language lessons from morning till evening, every day. We also studied domestic politics. I already speak Chinese—I worked as a translator—so these lessons weren't useful for me. But forget about me; there were people in the camp who were college graduates! Who am I to complain? What were these people doing there?

All this time, I didn't know what was going on. I wondered: What did I do wrong? What crime have I committed? Why am I here? When I asked at the camp, they told me I was here because they'd found WhatsApp on my phone. You are guilty of using WhatsApp, they said. They

claimed it contradicted the law. It's a foreign application: Why are you using it in China? I told them that I lived in Kazakhstan. I bought the phone there! I tried to explain. But of course it's clear to me now this was just a pretext. If it hadn't been WhatsApp, they would have found another reason. Everyone there had his own story. Some were similar to mine. Some said they had been charged with reading *namaz* or studying the Koran. Some wore the hijab. I heard their stories when we were in our bedroom together, another large room that housed twenty or thirty people. We could talk inside this room. Outside, it was forbidden to make any noise at all.

The authorities in the camp were very strict, much worse than in the prison. They treated us not like humans but like animals. They would beat us, interrogate us, punish us by making us stand for hours, call us bad names, shout at us. Once, we were climbing the stairs to go to class as a group, and I felt ill. I'd had a headache that day. I got dizzy and stumbled, then began to fall, and someone—one of the guards—stuck me with an electric prod. My whole arm went numb. Another student had to hold me up so I wouldn't keel over. Then we had to keep moving to get to class.

These prods, they used them constantly.

In the morning we would drink boiled water, one glass, and eat a plain steamed bun. For lunch we would eat Chinese cabbage boiled in water, simple as that. For dinner, we often had the same thing. There was no meat. Maybe once a month we would have *plov*.⁹

It was the same situation for the entire year. We were never told when we would be released, if ever. We went to class every day. Once a week we were given an hour to exercise in the fenced yard outside. It would have been nice to know my last day—to be able to look forward to it—but they never told us. Each day was exactly the same. Some people in the camp had already been there a year by the time I arrived. I suspect some of them are still there. Some, I heard, were later sentenced to prison terms between five and twenty-five years. They claimed we were being trained, but I think their only goal is to destroy religion, to destroy nationality, to destroy tradition.

While I was in the camp, starting last August, my husband and children started to make petitions and videos

⁹ A Central Asian dish made with rice and meat

about my case. They began to put pressure on the authorities. I think it's because of the petitions, because my case was made public, that I was able to come back. It all happened suddenly one day. A guard came into our dormitory room and read my name aloud. Four of us were named, and they told us we were going to return to our homes. I was sent to my parents' house first, but even then, for a while, they wouldn't give me my passport. My family had to keep complaining. I got out of the camp in October and was finally able to leave China in December. So I've been home for only five months.

Except for the day I arrived and the day I left, only one day in the camp was different. That was the day of the open trial. They brought in seven women from a nearby prison who had been charged with gathering in a private home to pray together. During Ramadan, in the evening, you celebrate *auyashar*,¹⁰ and the seven women had organized a meal and a prayer. That was their crime. At the trial, they

¹⁰ A "mouth opener" (known as *iftar* in Arabic), *auyashar* is the meal that breaks the fast.

read these accusations and sentenced each of the women to seven years in prison. They called it open court. None of the women spoke.

—Rahima Senbai, 31
Interviewed May 2019

A TYPICAL MUSLIM

Zhumugali sits between his two sons. Every so often, he reaches out to touch the younger one. The older one is brooding. On Zhumugali's T-shirt, a phrase in English: HEAD FOR THE HILLS.

My wife is a housewife. She's never worked. I think the only reason they're holding her is to get to me. When I lived in China, I practiced Islam. I was a devout Muslim. You know, there are many types of Muslims in the world. Well, I was a typical one. A Kazakh Muslim. I follow the path set by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan. I'm not against the Chinese government. I don't call for it to be overthrown. I know there are Muslims who call for this, but I'm not one of them. I can't understand what they want with me. But I've heard they keep a list of those who practice Islam. And I didn't just practice; I worked at the local mosque: I helped with its construction. I was an assistant to the imam.

In May 2017, our wife took our one-year-old to China to see her relatives. She spent a week there. Then, at the airport



in Ürümqi, they wouldn't let her board the plane. They took her passport. Then they put her under house arrest. Now, since she doesn't have her passport, she can't leave, can't go anywhere. It's been almost two years. The authorities have told my wife I should come back to China with my sons. The first time they told her this was a couple months ago. She can't say so openly, but I could feel as she was saying this that she didn't want me to come, that she was afraid. I could hear it in her voice over the phone. But all she said was that this is the reason they're not letting her go.

Two of my sons and my older brother, Ozabled, who is mentally disabled, are here. We've always cared for him. So I have two kids and my brother to care for, and for two years now I haven't had an official job. I've been working as a taxi driver. Of course, my younger son here barely remembers his mother. He wasn't even six when she left. And look at the other one—the weight he's lost!

—Zhumugali Zhalel, 27 (Gulnar Murat, wife)

Interviewed May 2019

THE WEATHER IS GETTING BAD

Bilimbek comes from the village of Shunkyr, in the Altai Mountains, near Mongolia. There, he studied water engineering. In Kazakhstan, he is a herder.

My wife was a schoolteacher, teaching Chinese calligraphy to Kazakh children. Most of her work was in China, so she kept her citizenship when we moved here with our daughter. She would live in China during the school year and then come stay with us during the summers and winters. It was easy for us to visit her, too: we just crossed the border.

Bakytgul and I have known each other since we were children in the same village in China. We've been married thirty years. Until 2012, we had a house together there. Then I sold it and she lived in a dorm with other teachers. Even then, we felt that China's domestic policies were starting to tighten. You could feel a change. We wanted to get out. We hoped she would settle here soon, but for the time being we needed the work. My daughter is in her seventh year of medical school. She's training to become a pediatrician. We were saving up, preparing to start our lives here as a family.



So my wife kept working, despite her age. Two years ago, she had surgery on her hip. She has problems with her coxal cavity, where the pelvis meets the femur. Not enough fluid. She had her joints replaced. She had to use a cane after that, and for a long time she was convalescing at a relative's home in China. [He shows a picture on his phone of a frail woman dressed all in pink. She is using a walker.] She was recovering for almost a year. In April 2017, she went back to the dorm and back to work.

That's when she was detained at a camp.

Now it's been four months and I don't know what's happened to her. I don't talk with her directly, but my sister lives nearby. We use the same code words as others do: What's the news? What's the weather? My sister was her colleague. They worked together in the same school. We're in contact, but I don't dare call her. Last time I heard from her was ten days ago. I just have to wait and hope she'll call. She could be

in a camp herself now. They all say it's inevitable. My relatives all agree. Eventually, everyone will be put in a camp. All my family members are just waiting to be placed in a camp. The weather is getting bad, they say. We'll soon be going to study.

—Bilimbek Suttibay, 54 (Bakytgul Aitash, wife)
Interviewed August 2018

"IT'S OUR WISH that you publish your piece as soon as possible, that my kids see her soon, that she help me with my brother," Zhumugali says.

"Whenever there is a journalist here, I come to talk in the hopes of some positive action," Zhainagul says. "But so far nothing has happened. Even if it's small, we hope for something. Maybe he can be transferred to house arrest."

"I sent a letter to the foreign ministry of Kazakhstan," Bauyrzhan says. "It was a request for family reunification. I got no response."

"We got a letter from the foreign ministry," Gulshan says. "It says they cannot interfere with the internal policies of China."

"There are eight of us here who are Kazakh citizens who have been released," Orynbek says. "We are asking one million dollars each from the Chinese government. Of course, they will not pay."

"Our only wish is for him to live under house arrest," Gulserik says.

"I want him back in Kazakhstan," Madengul says. "He intended to live in Kazakhstan."

"This is our request: We want attention from human rights organizations. Our family is separated. Our only request is to unite our family. We miss our granddaughters. We are worried about their fate," Gulzhanat says.

"I wrote many, many petitions," Oralbek says. "To the foreign ministry, to Nur Otan."¹¹ I even got replies. One said that my wife is a foreign citizen but that they would try to find a positive solution."

"Of course our demand is that they return my father's documents, that they return him to his family," Magira says.

"I want to know about his condition," Akikat says. "I also want for there to be an open trial where the authorities can produce some evidence about what he's done."

"My only wish is that the international community know about the repression in China toward the Muslim community,

especially ethnic Kazakhs," says Bilimbek. "We have so many disunited families, children separated from parents, wives separated from husbands."

"My only dream is my husband returned," says a woman who asks not to be named. "We don't need anything: just return his passport. That's my only request."

WE WERE BURNING EVERYTHING AT NIGHT

How did we meet? It was in a café in Almaty. March 8—International Women's Day! [Laughs] He'd been living in Kazakhstan for a year. We introduced ourselves and exchanged numbers, and later he called me for a date. I was a college student at the time. I studied engineering at the Almaty University of Power Engineering. I'm a thermal engineer by training.

My husband is Uighur, like I am, although he was from China, a foreigner. When we got married, we didn't bother to register officially in Kazakhstan. We just went to the mosque. The imam there married us.

A year later, we had a son. We were living in Chundzha, near the Chinese border, and I can tell you, there's no great demand for my specialization out there. I couldn't find a job. I worked with my husband, importing fruits and vegetables from China and selling them, wholesale and retail, in Kazakhstan. But business was bad. Then, in 2013, I got pregnant again. We decided to try our luck in China.

For the next four years, we lived mostly in Ürümqi. Then we moved to Ghulja, in the city, where his family lived. We already knew about the camps. We knew about the arrests. We had lived for a month in Kashgar in 2016, fixing up a house my husband's family owned, to rent it out. When we got to Kashgar, we were shocked. They were stopping cars at every corner, checking our phones, coming into our homes to count the number of people inside. We couldn't believe some of the rumors we heard. People getting detained for having photos of Turkish movie stars on their phones, new mothers separated from their babies and forced to work in factories like slaves.

Things kept getting worse after we moved to Ghulja. Teachers at my son's school would stop by our house to warn us not to pray in front of him. It turned out officials were interrogating children alone at school, asking whether their parents

¹¹ Kazakhstan's ruling political party

prayed. Praying itself became grounds for detention. I had to stop wearing a headscarf, of course. Even old women had to go bareheaded. I took it off and—as you can see—I'm not wearing it now.

In Ghulja, every Monday, every resident of our district was required to come to the district office, raise the Chinese flag, and sing the national anthem. They would take attendance at this meeting, so you had to go. Sometimes there were announcements. One Monday morning, they told us we were now forbidden to own Korans at home, or any book with Arabic script. So I went home and burned our Koran.

We were living in fear. Everyone was afraid of the police. If someone knocked on the door, we were frightened. People wouldn't greet one another in the street anymore. What if their relatives had already been taken to a camp? How could you know who was safe to talk to and who would get you in trouble? It might then be asked of you: How do you know this person?

The local police liked to say that they were watching us through their satellite system. We know what you're up to in your kitchens, they said. We know everything. We had a friend at the time. A police officer told him that special equipment was installed that allowed them to see right through walls into a house, and that nothing could be concealed. Who knows what's true anymore? So we were burning everything at night—Korans, prayer rugs, traditional clothing. We burned them at night because we were afraid the satellites could see us during the day.

As a foreigner, of course, I was interested in politics, in the news, but we had to destroy our phones. We were too afraid. I was afraid they would see what websites I visited. I'd already deleted all the foreign apps on our phone, even the little games my children liked. Then we got rid of our phones altogether. I was imagining what the police would say: Why do you let your children surf the web and download apps from foreign sites? My children liked one particular game about a cat called *My Talking Tom*. It was harmless. But even a children's game could be used as a reason to send someone to a camp.

It was completely unpredictable. Take my nephew, for example. My nephew has a friend who never knew his father. The father had left for Afghanistan when he was still in the womb. He never saw him. Years later, the father called from Afghanistan. The son called his mother, the mother called my nephew—a long chain of phone calls. The police traced

the calls and took every single person to the camps, even my nephew. Because of this, because of a phone call, my nephew spent a year in a camp. When he got out, he was a different person.

On May 1, 2018, my husband got a phone call. An official was on the other end. Are you home? the official asked. Please stay there. We have to ask you some questions. A few officers showed up, not in uniform—in plainclothes. They came into our house and sat down with my husband. They wanted to know about his childhood. For a time, when he was fourteen, he had studied the Koran with a neighbor. They knew about it. So, they said, it appears that when you were young you studied the Koran. My husband admitted he had, but said he was underage. The officials conferred with one another. Then we'll have to detain your parents, they said. No, he said. In that case, I was sixteen at the time. The truth is, he hadn't studied the Koran at an official school. There was just an old guy around his village, a teacher who knew the Koran. Teenagers would go in a group to study at his house. My husband went for a while. They accepted this and left. Somehow we believed that was the end of it.

Four days later, on May 5, they took him. That day, the police called my husband again and asked him to come to the nearest police booth. On every street corner of the city in Ghulja, there is a police booth. He left home with his brothers. At the booth, the officer was already expecting him. When my husband approached, he was asked: Are you Nurmamet Mamentimin? As soon as my husband handed over his ID card, he was handcuffed. His brothers watched the whole thing happen. My husband realized he was being sent to a camp. He pleaded with them. My father, he said. My father, he's in a wheelchair. He's disabled. Can I say goodbye to my father?

They drove him back to our house. It was a large house. We were all living there together: my brothers-in-law, their families, and my husband's father. That's where I saw him for the last time. We had time to say goodbye. I remember the handcuffs. These weren't tiny bracelets. They were huge. You couldn't miss them. My children saw their father in handcuffs. They were surprised. My son was old enough to wonder: Is my father a criminal?

We gave him some warm clothes. We already knew it was very cold in the camps. We had heard that it was cold. Outside the house, next to the police car, we said goodbye.



We were crying. Then they put a black hood over his head and guided him into the car. We were standing right there, his whole family. Neighbors could see us—everyone could see as they put the hood on. I think they wanted everyone to see.

So they took him away, all because twenty years ago, when he was fourteen years old, he had studied the Koran with some other teenagers at an old man's house. By asking around, we found out that the police have detained all of these teenagers, or former teenagers—everyone who studied there.

They told us they were taking him to a camp—*Zhuliiz* is what the name sounded like to me. It's about fifteen miles from Ghulja. But we never saw him there, and I haven't had any contact with him in a year. The camp wasn't far, but none of us dared to visit. One local policeman who took pity on us would come to our house just to tell us he was all right. Don't worry, he told us. He's doing fine.

A month after my husband was arrested, I went back to Kazakhstan with our children because our visa was expiring. I wanted to extend my visa in China because my son was going to a Chinese school and I wanted to be near my husband.

But when I got to Kazakhstan, I was told that such visas are no longer issued, and that children need a permit from their Chinese-born parent. And this parent—his father—was in a reeducation camp.

After I came back to Kazakhstan, my husband was permitted to call his mother. He said he wasn't in the camp any longer. Now I'm in a prison, he told her. They had transferred eight thousand people overnight from the camp to a prison in Kunes, forty miles away. They numbered every person, so my husband was able to find out how many there were in total. His own number was six thousand and something. As far as I know, there wasn't any trial or any sentence.

I began to speak about his case only recently, just a week ago. Before that, I didn't complain, because his parents warned me not to. But now my in-laws have approved my efforts. We're planning to file complaints. We can't speak directly about his case, but I tell them that I'm collecting documents for my son. I use my son as a way of talking about my husband. When I say "son," they understand that I mean "husband."

My son, my real son, has become aggressive. He was eight when his father was taken. My daughter is still young; she

doesn't understand what happened. She just asks when he's coming home. My son took it harder. But they both know he's gone. They're traumatized. They both saw it happen.

Two months ago, in March, I got a tourist visa. It was a three-day visa for a group tour, the only way you can get a visa to enter Xinjiang anymore. I was planning to break away from the group to go to my in-laws' house. I needed money. I don't have enough to feed my children. My specialization is not in demand in Chunja, and to go to Almaty for work I would have to leave them. So I called my husband's parents and said I was coming. The next day I got a call from my mother-in-law. It was very early in the morning. The weather has changed, she said. It's not worth coming after all. You'll get rained on.

—*Shakhidyam Memanova, 31 (Nurmamet Mamentimin, husband)*

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