

The Uyghur dream

1. The subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and co- operation.
2. All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

United Nations resolution 1514, December 14, 1960

inhOuDsOp

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It was Sunday, July 5, 2009. Not a cloud in the sky in Ürümqi, the capital of the "autonomous" region in northwestern China. Traditionally, many Ueigoers live there; they call the area East Turkestan, Uyghurstan or - somewhat more generally - Veten. Ürümqi is a beautiful city, surrounded by mountains with snow-capped peaks, where we regularly fetched cool drinking water, and by huge forests, above which eagles circle in search of their prey. When I was very young, I was afraid of tsunamis. An unjustified fear, because except for a few rivers, there is no sea in the wider area. My grandfather would always tell me that our city is blessed and that we are protected from tsunamis by the mountains, which you can see from almost anywhere in Ürümqi. Sometimes I stood on the roof of an apartment complex gazing at those mountains. Lovely to do, especially on warm summer evenings.

Now it was just summer vacation. In the weeks before July 5, things had been unsettled in Ürümqi. A violent

video on the Internet showing Uyghurs being beaten to death in Shaoguan, a city near Guangdong, in southeastern China. There was great anger about this within the Uyghur community and they wanted to seek redress from the Chinese government with a fearful demonstration on July 5.

That day, as I often did, I was playing in the street with my best friend Azmat while our mothers had gone to town to have dinner with girlfriends. Toward the end of the afternoon, Azmat and I also went to get something to eat when he suddenly received a phone call that would change our lives forever. It was Azmat's cousin. Azmat answered the phone cheerfully, but his face paled almost immediately and his hands began to shake. After he hung up, I asked what was going on. His cousin had told him that Uyghurs were no longer allowed to go outside, had to keep windows and doors closed and not make any noise.

While Azmat was still talking, we heard a huge explosion. After that huge bang, the sky turned black and people everywhere began to scream loudly. The sound could be heard throughout the city. I cannot describe how scared we felt at that moment, especially since our mothers were still somewhere downtown. The sky got darker and darker, and the screams of the people got louder and louder; like a swelling tsunami. Azmat and I didn't know what hit us. We

were boys aged 13 and 14, who had grown up in an almost perfect world. When our mothers returned from town a few hours later and they explained to us what was going on, we both had to cry. Around

9 p.m. that evening, the Chinese government had shut down everything: the Internet, telephone connections and electricity. The already lively and bright streets of Urumqi were now dead and dark. And, moreover, silent: not a single sound could be heard. There were no Uighurs singing together and no one bringing food to their neighbors.

Azmat and I were up with excitement. We went into the night full of fear of intruders and assassins. To combat the darkness, we had only a few candles.

1

The vOOravOnD

Over 1 million. That's how many people saw my TV debut on February 24, 2021. I was invited to the program *De Vooravond* on npo 1, where I got a nice stage to share my life story and tell about my struggle and my dream for the Uyghurs.

Earlier that year, my mother had been approached by a student, Selena. She had read my mother's story and was deeply impressed. As an Abkhazian herself, Selena had faced discrimination, so she could well empathize with our situation. She wanted to start an action for the Uyghurs and make a study assignment about our people. My mother and Selena agreed to continue talking through Teams and I joined to translate. At the end

of the appointment, Selena asked if I wouldn't like to tell the story of the Oei-geren on TV. She knew TV presenter Renze Klamer, who might be interested in the subject for the program *De Vooravond*.

We had not yet concluded Teams or I had heart palpitations of enthusiasm. Talking about my people on Dutch television and informing viewers about the Uighur question would be fantastic. I looked up the viewing figures for *The Evening News* on the Internet. An average of 1 million at a time, or one in seventeen Dutch people watched the program. I decided to immediately prepare myself thoroughly for the broadcast, just in case I was allowed to sit in. A few weeks later an editor from *De Vooravond* called me. She was also moved by our story and let me know that she would like to offer me the opportunity to talk about it in the broadcast.

During a few forest walks, I prepared myself in peace. I asked myself difficult questions while walking and then formulated a clear answer. By doing so, I wanted to avoid stuttering during the live broadcast. Of course I wanted to tell a good and relaxed story, because this performance could well mean that I would become the face of the Uyghur struggle in the Netherlands.

On Feb. 24, 2021, it was finally here. On a beautiful sunny winter day, I traveled by train to Am-

sterdam. Without any tension, I was very calm and confident. An hour and a half before the broadcast, I arrived at the studio to get something to eat and go over the last things with the editors. At 7 p.m. the broadcast began, and it would be my turn around half past midnight. China expert Ties Dams was also invited to give some geopolitical interpretation.

After the broadcast, Renze Klamer came up to me and complimented me on my clear performance. I asked if we could take a picture together with Fidan Kidiz, the other presenter of the program, so that I could share it on social media. Afterwards, I saw that I had received messages from many friends, as well as people I didn't know at all, about my performance that night.

On the way home, I was able to let everything sink in a bit. I put on calm piano music, put in my earplugs and thought about my father, who is still in a concentration camp on the other side of the world. How much I would have loved to be able to tell him about this experience. I also thought of all my other relatives, whom I had not spoken to at that time for about five years. I thought of my people, who are slowly but surely being wiped off the face of the earth by China. This whole evening strengthened me in my struggle for them.

2

rODe ball with white dots

I was born in the First Affiliated Hospital of Ürümqi on March 26, 1996. I was my parents' first - and as it turned out, only - child, and after two granddaughters, I was also a big surprise to my grandmother and grandfather. My mother, Asiye, did not yet have a job when I was born; she would only work in the tourism industry later. My father, Kasim, was an entrepreneur. He had a catering business and was a well-known man in Vetan. For example, half of Ürümqi knew that my mother and he were getting married. In Uyghur culture, your last name is your father's first name, which is why my name is Ahmedjan Kasim. He wanted to name me Ahmedjan, after the former leader of the Second East Turkestan Republic: Ahmedjan Kasim(ov). My

father hoped that one day I too would have the strength to stand up as a leader.

In the year after I was born, my parents and I lived in the house of my grandfather's sister, in which my mother herself had once lived for a while. In fact, her own mother, Maryam, my grandmother, passed away when my mother was only three months old. As a result, my grandfather was temporarily unable to care for her and her two older sisters. The three girls therefore went to live in his sister's house for a while. After my grandfather remarried Hankiz, my step-grandmother, my mother returned to her childhood home. My grandfather and my stepmother later had two more sons together - my beloved uncles. My mother was always her father's favorite child and had many "privileges. If she wanted something badly, he secretly provided the money. For example, when she was 10 years old, she had seen a pair of beautiful shoes in a fancy store. She really wanted them, but Uyghurs are poor. However, when she came home from school a few days later those shoes were there. My grandfather had collected money to buy them for her. She was so happy with them that the next day she even went to school with those expensive shoes. So I lived in that house until I was about one year old. Then we left for the interior of China, to Guangzhou to be exact, because my father had set up a Uyghur restaurant there. After several years in Guangzhou, one day my father was taken away just like that.

one by the Chinese police. I was three years old at the time, but remember the event very well. My father sat on the couch, heaved a deep sigh and lit a cigarette. He was already in handcuffs. I saw the tears in his eyes. Later I learned that he had given shelter to destitute Uighurs, who were considered criminals in the eyes of the Chinese government. This made my father "obligated to me. He was taken away by the police and we were then forced to sell the restaurant, leave the house in Guangzhou and move back to Ürümqi. I would not see my father for years.

One of my last memories of Guangzhou is a soccer ball. I wanted to take a treasured soccer ball with me to Ürümqi. But according to my mother, the ball could not go on the plane. Disappointed, I threw it off our balcony afterwards. I can still see that red ball with white dots bouncing up.

In Ürümqi, my mother and I stayed with my grandparents for a while. They lived in a small flat of five floors, where only Uyghurs lived. In front of the flat was a garden with some benches. In the afternoon, the neighbors sat there together, chatting, often with tea and sunflower seeds. They were other grandparents, whose grandchildren then played together. We were a close family, a real working-class family too: grandfather was self-employed, he made musical instruments and also worked as a carpenter. My grandmother managed the

him earned money well. My mother later told me that they certainly did not always have it easy at home, but there was always enough money. She proudly said that they used to be the only ones in the neighborhood with a TV at home. Many children from the neighborhood came to watch TV with us. All the children in the neighborhood knew each other and helped each other. Quarrels were solved together, food was shared and we discussed everything together.

3

the Uyghur empire

Uyghurs are a people belonging to a Turkish tribe from which several peoples have emerged. Think of the Kazakhs, the Uzbeks, the Kyrgyz and, of course, the Turks themselves. In 745, the Uyghurs - we call ourselves *Uyghur* - founded the Uyghur Empire. This was a huge territory in Central Asia, whose eastern border was in eastern present-day China. The Uyghurs had their own script and shamanistic beliefs, which they shared with other peoples in Central Asia.

Historians disagree on the exact year, but no later than the year 940, the Uyghur Empire fell. Most Uyghurs then founded a kingdom in the so-called Tarim Basin, in present-day Xinjiang. This lies in the extreme

northwestern China, bordering Russia, among others. In the centuries that followed, Islam spread through the area. As a result, the Uyghurs became a predominantly Muslim people. Incidentally, Uyghurs are a very diverse people. Over the centuries, various other Indo-European population groups blended into what we might now call the modern Uyghur identity. Today, you can see this in the different facial features of the Uyghurs: some look European, others strongly Eastern.

In the eighteenth century, Veten came under the rule of the Qing dynasty, the last Chinese empire. The Ueigoers depended heavily on this dynasty. After a series of rebellions, in 1884, based on the St. Petersburg Treaty, Veten came back into the hands of the Qing dynasty, which then named the area "Xinjiang," which stands for "new frontier. Before and during the Second World War, the Uyghurs founded their own state there: the East Turkestan Republic. The First East Turkestan Republic existed from 1933 to 1934, the Second from 1944 to 1949, which was under strong Soviet influence. But Soviet forces increasingly withdrew after the war, and the strength of the Chinese Communist Party (ccp) increased. This was the party that from 1949 ruled the country called the People's Republic of China since 1949. The Uighurs were left in the area without any help. Promises by the ccp that the Uighurs would have their own

governance and independence were never fulfilled. In 1955, Veten was only declared an au- tonome region, officially called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Re- gion. So in principle, governance should be in the hands of Uyghurs. But this was made impossible by the ccp, which never transferred autonomy to the Uyghurs. On the contrary, from 1949, the ccp was bent on complete assimilation of the Uighurs. Therefore, in key positions in the administration of Xinjiang, there are always Han Chinese who decide what is and is not allowed in the area; Uighurs have little say in this.

4

Ürümqi, between The Soviet Union and China

So the capital of Veten is Ürümqi. A third of the area of the Netherlands, that's how huge that city is. In fact, Ürümqi consists of three regions: Tangri-tagh Rayon, Saybakh Rayon and Bulak-tagh Rayon (*rayon* is Uyghur for "region"). The center of Ürümqi is in Tangri-tagh Rayon and is similar to Rotterdam, in part because of its many tall, modern buildings. In Tangri-tagh Rayon were all the fun things, think cinemas, western restaurants like kfc, shopping malls and the Grand Bazaar. That is a huge area full of stores, cultural institutions and tourist attractions.

Almost my entire childhood was spent in Bulak-tagh Rayon. When we went from there to Tangri-tagh

Rayon went, we only really went to "the city. To get there, we had to take the bus for half an hour to an hour. It wasn't until I was 12, in 2008, that we went to live in Tangri-tagh Rayon. In the third region of Ürümqi, Say-bakh Rayon, I actually visited very little. Although we were in Say-bakh Rayon from our old house rather than Tangri-tagh Rayon, we just didn't have much to look for there. It was more of an industrial area, with many distribution centers.

Ürümqi was a fantastic city to grow up in; I never got tired of it. This is also because of its beautiful nature. In Bulak-tagh Rayon, there are many natural areas, similar to the Veluwe, but with mountains. Near my grandparents' house was a beautiful park with a number of fountains. And if you walk on, you get to the mountains. In those mountains there were also two big bunkers, where I once explored as a child. We were with a group of boys, the oldest of whom told about the origin of these bunkers during World War II. That story may well be true, because Urumqi is very northern and the whole area was a kind of buffer zone between the Soviet Union and China. My grandfather once told me that these bunkers were made to flee from the Soviet Union's possible atomic bombs. After Stalin's death, the relationship between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated, there were rumors of preparing for an attack with nuclear weapons. The

bunkers could then provide a safe refuge for the Uighurs.

With the group we walked into the bunkers, the two elders had torches with them. We had to avoid losing each other, because without torches you really can't see anything. At one point we came to a place where we had to choose: we could enter one of the six side entrances or just walk straight ahead. We decided to do the latter, afraid of finding bodies from the war in those side entrances. But as we continued we were startled by a sound above us, as if someone somewhere near us was hitting someone with a hammer. One of my friends reassured me that the sound came from a basketball court about 300 meters from the entrance to the bunkers. I was surprised that we were already that far. Since it was terribly cold inside the bunker in the middle of summer, we decided to leave the bunker and go home. This visit was an in- pressure experience for me as a child.