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My Whole Life Was a Struggle

Sakine Cansız



“Surrender leads to betrayal, resistance to victory”: Cansız with photos of Leyla Qasim and Mazlum Doğan on the wall behind her, Çanakkale prison, 1990.

Sara

Prison Memoir of a Kurdish Revolutionary

Sakine Cansız

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Taken by surprise The morning of May 7, 1979, was peaceful, with hardly any other vehicles in the streets, just the police van that had been part of the raid.

The van sped along the Malatya road to 1800 Evler, a prison on the outskirts of Elazığ, in one of the poorer quarters. Most of the residents were working-class families from Dersim, in temporary housing. We'd been active in this area, done educational work and held meetings, distributed leaflets, and put up posters. I'd been here myself. Our work had been meaningful to the people here. Young women had expressed interest in us, and students. Our resistance to feudal institutions and our use of revolutionary violence against fascism was especially appealing to young people.

But this morning my journey to 1800 Evler ended in secluded building on the periphery, under a large sign announcing "Agricultural Equipment Authority." Its walls were thick enough to muffle any screams, so they wouldn't be heard outside.

The police who'd arrested us were in a fine mood. They had carried out the raid without a hitch—there had been no shooting. Our traitors had given them information under torture, which had greatly simplified matters for them. This first phase of their operation was a success. Initially police arrested only a few of us who had been active around here, but later they would capture most. Later the police's "wanted" list would be leaked to us—and we saw our names on the list of cadres. So they'd been after us for a while.

We'd been arrested just as we'd been expanding our operations here. It was hard to accept. Oh, why had we used that flat as a meeting place, or stayed in this neighborhood at all! Obviously, these arrests weren't random. We'd talked about the dangers, but we'd taken no serious practical precautions, let alone followed them consistently. Now we were paying dearly for our negligence.

This thought weighed heavily on me. We'd made a grave mistake, and our recklessness was inexcusable. That we'd fallen into the enemy's hands so easily was horrifying. No amount of cursing on our part could help. Now the three of us would come face to face with the enemy. Even though storms raged inside us, however, we mustn't fall apart. A struggle

lay ahead, and it was of paramount importance that we prepare for it deliberately and consciously. We'd just entered a war zone. From this point, everything we did would count: every look, word, grimace, tone of voice, and gesture. The enemy would notice everything, and wherever he found a weak point, he would strike.

No proof The van pulled up in front, near the gate. The police got out and bustled around. We heard a commotion—somewhere a celebration was going on.

They brought the three of us into a room where clubs, tires, and dirty strips of fabric were strewn around an uneven floor, amid puddles of water. There was a single chair. Clearly this was no ordinary waiting room. People were tortured here. The objects in the room were used for *falanga* [beating the soles of the feet]. The strips of fabric were used as blindfolds and to bind hands and feet. What the tires were for, I had no idea, but I was in no position to think about it.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and found a few notes I hadn't had time to destroy in the flat that morning—I'd stuck them there so I could swallow them when I got a chance. Now I tore them to shreds and dampened them in some wet cloth. Since no policewoman had participated in the raid, I hadn't been searched, but one could show up here at any moment. So the three of us gave each other warning looks, to take care of whatever we had on our persons.

Hamili was nervous—his temples were pounding. “Was there anything important in the apartment?” he asked. “Anything they could find?”

“No.” Before opening the door to the police, I'd burned some things and thrown other stuff out the kitchen window. A copy of the *History of the Bolshevik Party* was all that remained in the flat, along with a copying machine, a typewriter, and a pile of tracing paper, colored paper, carbon paper, and regular paper. *Any normal apartment would have a typewriter*, I thought—they can't charge us for having one. Unknown to us, beneath the stack of paper was a flyer called “To Our Heroic People.” But as far as we knew, the objects they confiscated would be no great problem.

But something else would be.

The enemy had made a direct hit on our organization in this district. The flat where we were captured had been exposed—apparently someone had broken under torture, which could lead to more arrests. Şahin Dönmez had been around, and other friends from outside the

district might still arrive. But three people from the district committee were now in the enemy's custody. Hamili and I had been taken after Ali [Gündüz] was arrested, and a few friends from the subcommittees. Deaf Metin and Hüseyin Topgüder were still outside—Hüseyin had been transferred to [Gazi]Antep. If they didn't take care, many more cadres could be arrested.

Even though so much had been happening, Şahin had seemed so relaxed. Normally he stayed overnight with friends. Anyone who wanted to expose one of the organization's flats would've chosen one of them.

A dangerous game was taking place. Within the organization there were people who caused problems, consciously or not, and so put everything at risk. First Antep, then Dersim—now certain people were trying to disrupt the organization in Elazığ. Would they succeed? The uppermost committee consisted entirely of cadres from elsewhere. Some people considered them "outsiders." Those who had problems anyway could easily latch on to this point.

I remembered my last encounter with Rıza Sarıkaya. Tempers had flared. Rıza had come to us from Dev-Genc and was an older cadre. But in Elazığ he hadn't been able to resign himself to playing second fiddle. His careerism led to competition and an alarming degree of infighting. We'd tried to discuss his errors with him, but he didn't change. Finally Cemil talked to him, which temporarily solved the problem. Rıza could go to another place where he was needed, we said. It would have been a good idea, allowing us to gain time so we could get to know him better, but he wasn't satisfied with that solution. And just at that point, he had been arrested. Maybe the enemy had caught wind of his discontent. There were many spies in Elazığ. Our groups operated as openly as possible, but that meant the enemy found out about everything right away. We weren't sure, but we had suspicions about what Rıza, after his arrest, had said in his statement.

[Hamili and Ayten and I,] by reminding each other what statements we'd agreed on, were expressing a definite concern. The outlook was grim. In a mass arrest, a sign of weakness or a mistake on the part of a single individual could encourage the enemy, who would then try to divide the arrestees and turn them against each other. A week earlier Hüseyin [Taze] had been arrested, then released—he had said something about this. All the arrestees were housed alone and interrogated alone, both to inflict psychological pressure on them and to induce them to

turn on each other during interrogation and make statements that could be used as evidence. Such methods could be more effective than even the most brutal torture.

We could have got away! Back in the apartment, while the police were searching it, they'd asked who lived there. I'd jumped in and said, "It's my apartment. Sometimes my siblings come to visit. I've only just moved in. My family pays the rent. I'm looking for work. I've got nothing to do with politics. I'm just an educated, progressive-minded person." My calm, composed reply surprised the police. A few shook their heads, others smirked maliciously, as if to say, yeah, we'll show you who you really are.

Among them was a commissioner whose name I later learned was Zafer Karaosmanoğlu. He'd been calm too. He'd expected to find more people staying in the flat—he hadn't found everyone he was looking for there. The cops spent a long time counting the dirty glasses in the kitchen, looking for evidence of more people. Maybe they'd expected to find Şahin and some others.

During the search, they barked questions to test our reactions. The first impressions we gave them, our reactions to their tests and attacks, would be very important. The impression you make on your opponent will influence what comes later.

My first encounter with police had been back in Izmir, during the workers' resistance at Bornova.² I'd been arrested, along with many others. But this time was different—this hit had been targeted. And this time I was responsible for the organization. I had to protect it, to avoid doing anything that could damage it, and to adhere to my convictions under highly unfavorable circumstances. That would require hard work. The enemy would use every possible means against me. It wouldn't be enough just to assert my revolutionary will. The prison novels I'd read—*War of Resistance*, *Red Rocks*, and *Report from the Gallows*—depicted unimaginable torture and also unprecedented resistance, all of which was based on reality.

So it was important to assess the opponent correctly. Only then could we fight him properly and hope to prevail. Every moment that passed, every second, was crucial. Innumerable thoughts raced through my mind. Never before had I thought of so many things all at once. To understand this kind of situation, to get what we were feeling, you'd have to experience it yourself.

Could we have fled this morning? I wondered. *Could we have reached the building next door?* Was I imagining the impossible? Once, I'd tried to lay down a plank from the kitchen window across to the adjacent building, but it hadn't been stable enough. Then no one had bothered to look for a sturdier board. The people across from us were a nice young couple from Siverek. When I asked the woman if we could use the space between the windows when we had a problem—say, with the key—she'd said yes. So if we'd been better prepared, we could have held off the police long enough to disappear into the building next door.

And then there was the top floor. Dammit! I'd heard that police van coming! If only I'd got suspicious a few minutes sooner, or even seen it out the window—we could have run up to the roof and escaped that way. By the time the police climbed the stairway to our flat, we'd have been in the neighboring house already. We could have got some clothes from Gülay and scarves to wear as masks and slipped away.

But now it was too late. These were good ideas, and imagining them was very nice, but we had to face reality. We were no longer in the flat but in an interrogation room. It was useless now to imagine what might have happened. I was furious at myself. We just shouldn't have let ourselves be captured so handily.

In these first hours, the enemy's methods were already becoming clear. We had no time to ruminate. We had at most ten minutes to think and to compare notes. Time was as crucial for us as it was for the enemy. Every minute they allowed to pass [before questioning] was a chance for us to think and prepare ourselves and so was a win. Every second we used well could have positive effects in the days to come.

Capitulation, betrayal, and resistance They took me in first, to a room at the end of the hallway, on the right side. It was full of police, including those who'd carried out the raid and search. They were sneering, as if they were about to fight a bull in an arena. Well, the observers and the bull stood ready. Only the matador was absent.

"Let's have at it," one of them said.

Another scoffed, "Just look at how she strides in here. You can see in her face how much she despises us!"

A cop sitting at a table shoved a transcript at me and said, "Sign!"

It was a list of the confiscated objects. I read it, then pushed the paper back to him. "I won't sign this," I said. "These things were not found

in my possession. I already signed a list back in the apartment.” That infuriated them. When they asked for my ID, I replied mockingly and arrogantly, enjoying showing them my contempt.

I wasn’t following any particular plan, but from their questions, I could tell they’d obtained information about me from others. I pretended it wasn’t serious. Certain points that seemed important to them—I acted as if they were trivial.

After this brief initial phase, the nature of the questioning changed.

We know everything about you. We know Cemil Bayık, Metin, and Şahin live in that flat. Yesterday evening you were all together. Judging by the number of used glasses, several people were there. Where have you hidden the weapons? You’re one of the organization’s leaders. Oh, you say you’re an “educated, progressive-minded person”? Yeah, well, tell it to someone else! As for progressivism—no, your apartment belongs to the organization.

One question after another spilled out of them.

Clearly they didn’t quite know what they were looking for. They were still trying to piece together the information they had to form a clearer picture of me. The actual interrogation hadn’t yet begun.

Then they asked about the men friends who’d been previously arrested. They showed me the IDs of Zeki Budak, Rıza Sarıkaya, Aytekin Tuğluk, Saim Dursun, Hüseyin Taze, and Ali Gündüz. Did I know them? I know none of them, I said. They taunted me, saying they knew who I was and what my role was. They’d spent a long time with Ali Gündüz.

“Maybe he knows me from Dersim,” I countered. “Dersim’s a small place—probably he heard my name there. That’d be normal.”

They asked about Hamili and Ayten. I repeated that I’d known them in Dersim. Ayten, who’d been my neighbor, had come to Elazığ because she was ill. I spoke without hesitation and without contradicting myself, and soon they didn’t know what to ask anymore.

It made them nervous to keep repeating themselves. Then they attached a cable to my finger and turned on the electricity. How much more they enjoyed my twitching and screaming! The shocks flung me against the wall. So that was what they’d meant when they’d said, “*Laugh now—soon we’ll be the ones laughing.*” They upped the voltage while pouring water over me. My screams became more muffled. They took off my shoes and socks but didn’t apply the falanga. They asked me more questions.

Finally they said I should think things over, and they took me into another room. It was a small cell, with a toilet and a double bed with filthy, blood-smearred blankets and mattresses. The windows were nailed shut and whitewashed.

Soon after that I heard a man's screams. Hamili was being interrogated. Time slowed to a crawl. The screams, elicited by electrical shocks, were interspersed with thuds of clubbing. I didn't hear Ayten's voice. I assumed they'd be more careful with her because she was pregnant, and torture would be risky for her. They requisitioned a woman officer to take her to a doctor to find out if she was really pregnant. The woman officer was delayed in arriving, so they brought Ayten to my cell. We laughed darkly about my statement, but Ayten was also uneasy.

The enemy had already interrogated people from many groups and squeezed information out of most of them by various methods. These initial encounters taught us which ones he planned to use on us. We had only just been arrested, and he didn't want to apply the most extreme tortures right away. He'd proceed according to a plan. Our battle with him wouldn't be confined to a single time or place. Rather, we would struggle at every moment of our lives and must never be deterred from the goal. Is that not the most important mark of a revolutionary life?

Earlier in the 1970s, as we vividly recalled, the state had repressed all progressive and revolutionary tendencies. Through its executions, tortures, and massacres, the state revealed its very nature. Whole books had been written about the interrogation system used around the time of the March 12 [1971 coup]. Some comrades had capitulated and betrayed one another, while others had resisted. Some betrayed even to the point of turning their family members over to the enemy. That behavior and its important consequences were discussed in schools.

Betrayal contributes to the defeat of a social uprising, but it doesn't account for it entirely. When someone betrays, the consequences depend on how organized the base is. The grassroots base of the resistance plays an important role. In Kurdistan in the 1970s, there was no avant-garde or organization, as the necessary conditions for an organized struggle weren't yet in place.

Historically, our struggle had had fellow travelers who went on to betray. In Antep, the actions of just a handful of betrayers had had a huge impact, but in Dersim they'd been punished. Tekoşin, [a PKK split-off,] had been such a betrayal. Celal Aydın had betrayed us in Elazığ

and in Malatya. Letters that we intercepted showed that in Malatya, he had planned to wreck the organization, but his plan had been exposed and prevented. Şahin had driven to Karakoçan to pick up information, but he hadn't been involved any further. After the [execution of] Celal Aydın, Ali Gündüz was downcast for a few days. It was the first time he had killed a person, and he was struggling with himself.

Revolutionary vengeance requires profound class-consciousness. Hatred and revenge, anger and love, will be misdirected if they lack the correct foundations. Unless consciousness, emotions, and wishes are tied to an ideal, they have nothing to do with courage, virtue, and confidence.

The passion that united us Sharing circumstances with someone allows you to get to know them well. We all show various aspects of ourselves in various contexts. To understand someone, you need to know what just happened with them, then try to see where it could lead. But some circumstances reveal a person's true nature more clearly than others. In some situations you can no longer hide who you really are. All eyes can see you, and all ears can hear you. Your racing heartbeat and your pallor make obvious what you're feeling. Your body betrays you! Because by this point, [if you're a traitor,] you're nothing more than a shell of a human, with no personality.

When you're interrogated alone, you face the enemy alone. I could understand Rıza, and even Ali's behavior didn't surprise me much, but why had the others talked? These arrested friends were all from the district leadership. Every weakness they showed would have negative consequences on others. Their statements differed in length, and not all of them had capitulated entirely, but every single word, every short explanation, was an advantage that the enemy could use. Knowing how to exploit every weakness, the enemy applied group interrogation to them as well.

Meanwhile I had stuck to my statement that I was just a "progressive intellectual." The police had disbelieved me from the outset. They showed me what the others had said about me in their statements. Now they wanted to hear it from me directly.

So one morning they subjected me to a special kind of interrogation: the falanga. Aytekin, Zeki Budak, Rıza, Ali, and Hamili were all present—I recognized their voices—and maybe others were present as well. I was blindfolded, as they surely were too.

At first I didn't utter a word. It wasn't all that hard to endure the beatings. They clubbed my legs, between my legs, and my back. That kind of pain numbs the brain.

But when my fellow prisoners started to speak, I exploded with insults at them—of course, without political content. “You animals! I don't know you at all!” I shouted.

I only know Hamili because his wife lived in the same neighborhood as me! Dersim is a small city. Maybe Ali heard my name there, but there's no connection between us. You damn animals, you sons of donkeys, what are these allegations?

I was bleeding a lot, and finally I was taken from the room. Zafer Karaosmanoğlu, head of the district, was always present at my interrogations, performing the fatherly role as part of their psychological warfare. Now he sympathized with me, as if he hadn't been present at the torture, and he even brought me a clean undershirt to stop the bleeding. “There's no gauze here,” he said. “Would you like to use this?”

But the police must have come to regret this tactic, since afterward, apart from Rıza, none of the others would repeat their statements. Clearly it's good to defend yourself!

My behavior had impressed the friends. When they were taken back to their cells, Aytekin said (so I later heard), “When they bring me in with *her* again, I'm not going to say anything more.” Hamili was moved too. After this episode, I almost wished always to be interrogated with the friends present. Whenever the police showed me a statement that one of them had made, I demanded a face-to-face confrontation. That gave me a psychological advantage. And it gave me self-confidence, since the demands annoyed the police.

But I also learned things that depressed me in these confrontations: comrades whom I'd trusted really did betray organizational secrets. Not that I lost faith. I didn't despair—I considered it just a temporary weakness that wouldn't be carried too far. If anything, their behavior stirred defiance in me: *I will say nothing! They will get nothing out of me!*

Ayten was to be taken to interrogation after me. To spare her, I didn't tell her all the details. Statements had also been made about her. But she wasn't beaten. She was mainly used as a lever to pressure Hamili.

One day a commotion broke out. Car tires screeched, and inhuman screams were heard. New arrivals, we realized, were on the way.

I'd been taken to interrogation early that morning, which boded ill—they wanted the new arrivals to hear my screams, another effective form of psychological torture. A woman's scream has a different impact than a man's. It makes some people hate the enemy more, while it terrifies others to the marrow. Fear is the great precondition for defeat.

They let me go to the toilet, but I couldn't walk anymore. Ayten supported me on one side, and a guard on the other. As we shuffled forward, we passed an open door, and there, in another interrogation room, amid others, I saw Şahin. When his eyes met mine, he bit his lip, and his eyes widened in fear. I made my face impassive and continued on.

They must have left the door open on purpose! Were the police testing him, or were they trying to share with me the joyous news of his arrest? They'd always said they'd arrested all the friends—"Oh yes, we've arrested Cemil, Hüseyin Topgüder, Apo, all of them!"—as a way of dialing up the pressure.

Where, in what apartment, had Şahin been arrested? Not to know was itself like torture. I later found out that he had been arrested, along with Haydar Eroğlu, in the flat in the Fevzi Çakmak neighborhood. Once again, no precautions had been taken. Why had Şahin still been in the district at all? Hadn't anyone learned from our mistakes and fled? And why had he gone into an apartment that had long ago been exposed? It was unbelievable.

But the sight of Şahin shook me more than anything up to that point. Yes, it was bad whenever any of us, no matter who, fell into the enemy's hands. But Şahin's arrest was alarming. I had never sensed in Şahin any feeling of responsibility for the organization. I distrusted him so much that I wished they could have arrested anyone else. Had I developed an unconscious animus toward him? Was it right to feel so disquieted about his arrest? After all, other comrades I trusted had already talked. But no, I still trusted them, at least up to the point where their weaknesses didn't overwhelm them.

So I said to myself, *If his attitude toward the enemy is agreeable, then I'll be so disagreeable they hit the roof.* I didn't do it deliberately or think it through—it just happened by itself. As I passed the interrogation room, I had great pain in my feet, but the sight of him there made me snap to. I raised my head and proceeded with determination. His presence had the effect, reflexively, of enlarging my awareness of my own responsibility. His weakness meant I had to rise to the occasion. In a torture chamber,

it is immeasurably important to avoid showing fear or indecisiveness. In a way, his presence made me feel stronger and more courageous than before.

Toward evening, he was interrogated in a room adjacent to Ayten's and my cell. The police called it "letting him sing." We could hear their voices. We pressed our ears to the wall, and I heard a rush of a clubbing and Şahin screaming, "*Abi!*" [big brother]. That was all! That was the entirety of Şahin's resistance! And then he started to talk.

I couldn't stand it and pounded my fists against the wall. Ayten said, "Stop—they can hear that!" That was probably the moment in my life when I cursed the most. There was nothing else I could do.

Comradely relations are like a fire that warms our hearts, and they create connections like nothing else. This fire, the basis of all our comradely relations, was what brought us all together. But I'd never really shared that fire with Şahin, never really befriended him—no honest, straightforward affection and respect ever developed between us.

I'd never trusted this swine, never liked him. As a member of the [Kurdistan Revolutionaries], he had belonged to the first organized group in Dersim, but we didn't have much to do with each other. [My brother] Haydar had thought Şahin had already been a traitor back then. After the bomb attacks, many people had been arrested and tortured at the police station, but Şahin had not been beaten and had called the police "*Abi.*"³ Oh, my brother had been right!

I didn't meet him or get to know him till after I'd left Dersim.⁴ I formed my impressions of him at the assembly in Izmir-Incirtali, and his later behavior in Elazığ and Bingöl reinforced my distrust—he had shown no awareness of responsibility for the organization. He was and remained a stranger to me—the heat of shared comradely fire never caught him.

Then Şahin had behaved strangely at the founding congress, and I was so disturbed that on the return trip, I told Cemil what I thought of him. Had the chairman [Öcalan] noticed his behavior? He'd been very patient. But the chairman was always calm and tried to understand. Surely the chairman had seen through him—surely he recognized Şahin's careerism and ambition.

Şahin had even been elected to the central committee! All of us were surprised. He had done nothing to earn it—it was just that all the other friends had withdrawn their names. I thought about this question often, and the conclusion I came to was that the chairman wanted to get to

know him better through this important work—that was one way he interacted with people.

And now Şahin had capitulated at the first opportunity. With him, the enemy had no need for sophisticated methods. The enemy had had only to knock on the door. What happened to conviction, force of will, and the interests of the organization? No, his whole personality structure was geared toward treachery, with its fine line between revolutionary behavior and treachery. In the revolution, you have to put your abilities and strengths at the service of the struggle and apply them to the task at hand. Instead, he tried to suit the task to himself.

I had a splitting headache. In his statement Şahin described not only his own work but that of the organization in the Elazığ and Dersim districts. It wasn't that he had shown weakness in the face of police torture—they never really even tortured him, but he spilled everything just as if they had. He reported on what he had done in Elazığ, how long he had been here, when he had gone to Ağrı, his activities there, and his return to Elazığ. It went on for hours.

I dearly hoped he'd stop there. If only Cemil had been arrested instead of Şahin! All this rotten coward did was encourage the enemy, who previously hadn't known much about us and couldn't even tell us apart from other leftist groups. They didn't know how to ask the right questions, so little information did they have. Oh, why hadn't this scumbag left Elazığ after the first arrests?

He kept on talking, even without the police asking questions. When he started talking about the founding congress, I flipped out and slammed my head against the wall. I could barely contain my fury. I wanted to scream, but [knew I] mustn't, so I bit my lips so I wouldn't make any noise. My throat burned. Ayten was shocked, even frightened. "Don't get all crazy!" she said, "If you do, these guys will pick up on it!" But she didn't realize the scale of Şahin's betrayal. She assumed he was just saying things under torture, but that wasn't it—he knew too much. As for the men friends, they didn't know what was happening—they couldn't hear Şahin from their cells, and other interrogations were taking place in different rooms at the same time.

He even gave the enemy tips on how to break certain comrades and who had which weaknesses. He made it so easy for them. And this was just the beginning—how much farther would Şahin's betrayal go? Because he spilled so much, the enemy left the others in peace for a few days.