**The Interpreter**

*Human beings are like chain. We need each other for emotional and moral support and never more than during lockdown.*

My name is Shahsavar Rahmani. I am from the [Sardasht Kurdish region](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sardasht,_West_Azerbaijan) located in Southwest, Iran.. On June 28 1987 [Iraqi aircraft dropped Mustard gas bombs](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/my-scorched-land-story-of-sardasht-s-unhealed-wounds/) (chemical weapons) on Sardasht civilians and residential areas. Hundreds of people died a and thousands of people were [injured](https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/years-after-gas-attack-the-horror-lingers-in/) on that day. I am survivor of the [Iran-Iraq War](https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-war-that-haunts-irans-negotiators) which lasted 8 years and [took the lives of over a million people](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/iran-iraq-war-anniversary). As a young boy, my childhood was destroyed by this war as it was for all children. I had to leave Iran in 2007 and came to the United Kingdom as a political refugee. I have been living in Swansea for almost 13 years.

I am an interpreter. I translate from and to Kurdish, Farsi, Turkish and English. These languages are spoken in the Kurdish diaspora daily. As a sociable person I have got to know many of the people whose lives, hopes, dreams and traumas I have communicated to various organisations and authorities. I love my job. To help others and people in need to communicate their needs is a privilege for me. So many people have opened their lives and hearts and trusted me. I guess I have become known as The Interpreter and am called upon by many Kurdish people all over the world.

At the beginning of lock down, I received dozens of phone calls and messages on social media from Iranian and Kurdish refugees in the UK but also from my wider networks of Kurdish refugees across Europe and across the globe. They were really scared and panicking. Newly arrived families in UK or Europe who did not speak or understand English were especially vulnerable. I had a constant stream of requests to translate the letters which they had received from the Home Office or information leaflets about how to protect themselves. They asked lots of questions about Coronavirus. Sometimes I spoke on their behalf online with their doctors, social workers, housing managers, community support workers. Sometimes I had to manage Universal Credit accounts for those who had a problem getting in touch with the Job Centre. I heard many tales of poverty and hunger.

At the same time, I had to look after myself, to stay safe, fit and strong to cope with the virus and be there for people in need but not to get crushed or depressed by the hopelessness or the terrible troubles so many asylum seekers were and still are experiencing.

As an interpreter, I listen to people. I listen to their stories wrapped in happiness and sadness. I listen and sometimes I learn. I learned about how to cope with Covid-19. I learned just how dependent we are on each other as human beings. I became intensely aware of how much we need each other emotionally and morally. Without mutual support, life is difficult even impossible. I learned how as human beings we can be positive and hopeful, even in our darkest hours. We find ways to be creative. We take advantage of the time we have. We play music, study, read, write, garden, arrange flowers, draw, take photographs. Most of all, we spend time with the people live with and love. And if we live alone, we find ways to be supportive of others and to cope ourselves. We have a fundamental survival instinct – most of us.

During lockdown, I also volunteered as an interpreter for a project run by [Swansea Asylum Seekers Support](https://sass.wales/) (SASS). It was called the Telephone Tree. I would listen and talk to vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, especially those who do not speak English. I would make sure they are safe. I would ask them if they needed anything. I would pass their requests to SASS staff who would help out if they needed food or a place to stay or a phone top up or whatever.

Being an interpreter is a strange, beautiful, amazing role. You act as a bridge between worlds. Once people trust you, people tell you things you could not even have imagined. You see human life in all its forms bitter and sweet, light and dark, beautiful and ugly.

Not long ago, I interpreted for a Kurdish woman in hospital with her psychiatrist. She was a new arrival in the UK. She was traumatized. She had tried to commit suicide. She was desperate. On top of the trauma of her journey to safety, she had received letter from the Home Office that she would be deported back to Hungary under the Dublin Regulation. We all know [how badly Hungary treats asylum seekers](https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/22/hungary-asylum-seekers-denied-food). Miraculously, ger suicide attempt failed. In fact, she was rescued by the family who had offered her a place to stay. Welsh neighbours and the police helped to save her. An extraordinary take of despair and hope. I called her to make sure she was ok. She said she was feeling better but when I spoke to her 6-year old son asked me this question - “if my mum dies here in UK, will they deport her body to Hungary or to her home in Kurdistan or will they let us to bury her here to stay with us? I don't want to be apart from my mum.” I was really shocked and so heartbroken to hear a child ask such a question. Two weeks ago, I had a phone call from them. Her husband said they had good news from the Home Office. They agreed to consider their asylum application and would invite them for interview in the near future. They would not be deporting them to Hungary. Everybody was happy. The mother’s son was the happiest one of all.

During lockdown I also spoke with another Kurdish family in Sheffield who came to UK as refugees. I spoke to their 5- year old daughter. When I asked her what she wanted to do in the future, she said “I would like to be a scientist and to make a corona virus vaccine”. Then, suddenly, she changed her mind and said “No, I think I want to be lawyer or a judge to help refugees to have better life.”

When I am not an interpreter, I like to read, for example, the poems of Rumi, Omar khayyam and other Kurdish poets helped me during lockdown. I read "Love in the Time of Cholera" a Novel by Gabriel García Márquez and "No Friend but the Mountains", a very famous book by [Behrouz Boochani Iranian Kurdish writer](https://www.rferl.org/a/kurdish-iranian-writer-boochani-refugee-new-zealand/30744545.html) which I really enjoyed. We need art and literature to nourish our souls and spirits when we are troubles. This is something that so many people told me in their different ways. With time to think, we all start thinking about our lives, our loves, our dreams, our pasts, our futures.

I left my home and family 13 years ago. Not a day passes when I don’t think of my home and family in Iran. Under lockdown this feeling of homesickness is even more intense. But I try to convince myself, to say to myself "Home is where you are now Shah."  Swansea is my second home. I love the Gower peninsular, the beautiful beaches the friendly people. This is my life now described by the Welsh poet and writer Dylan Thomas as "a lovely ugly town" and "the graveyard of ambition." I know I am lucky to be living in Swansea under lockdown and yet…..

As long as Iranian Kurdistan is not free, I will not rest. I cannot rest.

*I dedicate this piece of writing to Thor Ekvall who taught me the true meaning of friendship.*