

Primary Source Reading: “Ber Tevna Mehfûrê (In Front of the Weaver’s Loom)”

This short story was written in 1927 shortly after the failure of the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925), an uprising in which a number of Kurdish and Zaza tribes rebelled against the Turkish Republican government. The event’s precursor was the August 1924 Beytushabbab Rebellion in southeastern Anatolia. The Beytushabbab Rebellion was a response to the Turkish Republic’s Turkification program, its abolition of the Caliphate, and the forced removal and deportation of Kurdish elites to the west of the country. The event’s leaders expressed their motivations as both religious and nationalist and the uprising was organized by members of the *Azadî* (Freedom) organization. Many of its leaders killed after the rebellion’s suppression in October of the same year. The 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion, occurring in the region of Diyarbakir, was prompted by similar anger towards the Republic’s policies, exacerbated by heavy-handed security forces operating in the wake of the 1924 uprising.

The rebellion commenced in February 1925 under the leadership of Naqshibandi sufi Sheikh Said (1865-1925) and Halil Beg Jibrân, a former military officer and head of the *Azadî* organization. The rebellion spread throughout the countryside of the Diyarbakir region, with rebels quickly capturing towns and small cities in the area. However, the bulk of the rebellion army laid siege to the walled city of Diyarbakir, which was defended by the better equipped Turkish Army and Air Force. The failure of this siege caused the rebels to scatter, many seeking to escape east to Iran, but by mid-April its main leaders were captured. In response the Turkish government executed not only the rebellion’s leaders, but also executed a number of Kurdish notables and intellectuals throughout Turkey who were suspected of supporting the rebellion.

This short story begins shortly after the rebellion’s failure. In it we are introduced to four figures, an unnamed mother, a son named Gefo, and two sisters named Rindê and Zizê, as they try to survive in the wake of the execution of their father and brother by the Turkish government. It discusses contemporary attitudes towards Kurdish nationalism and the experience of Kurds living in the Turkish Republic. The story’s author, Jeladet Ali Bedirxan (1893-1951), was the president of the Xoybûn Kurdish nationalist organization founded in 1927. He is remembered as one of the principal architects of 20th century Kurdish nationalism due to his work with Xoybûn, his creation of the journal *Hawar* (The Call), the Latinization and standardization of Kurmanji Kurdish, and for publications on Kurdish literature, history and the Yezidi religion. He was the grandson of Bedirxan Beg, leader of the Bedirxan Rebellion of 1840-1847. The annual Kurdish nationalist holiday *Roja Zimanê Kurdî* (Kurdish Language Day) is celebrated in memory of *Hawar*’s first date of publication (May 15th, 1932).

Ber Tevna Mehfûrê (In Front of the Weaver's Loom)

From *Hawar*, 1 no. 4, 3 July 1932.

Celadet Alî Bedirxan

Rindê and Zizê were siblings who had recently lost their father. Their father, Bengi Axa¹, their older brother Zinar, and a few of their cousins had died for the homeland and nation during the time of Sheikh Said, having fallen in the war for Kurdish independence. Rindê was sixteen and Zizê was fifteen years old. They had a younger brother named Gefo who had just turned nine years old.

The war for independence had gone on for more than eight months. The Kurdish soldiers had captured the region of Diyarbakir and had started operations in the region of Harput and several other Kurdish cities. However, because they were not unified or well-organized, and because few of them working for the independence struggle were well-educated, and due to bad luck itself, the uprising was not successful, and the Turks renewed their control over Northern Kurdistan [Kurdistan region of Turkey]. Its leader Sheikh Said, and other sheikhs and important figures of the Kurds were executed, then thousands of their women and children were murdered, and they [the Turks] burned their [the Kurds'] houses down. During this period the house and village of Bengi Axa were plundered, and his wife and children were left hungry and thirsty. The surviving people who were tied to Bengi Axa could no longer survive in their village, and so they fled elsewhere.

The family's mother, a resourceful woman, gathered up the children and fled to a small city, one where no one would know who they were. From morning until evening she worked in peoples' houses, and at night she spun wool, and in this way she was just barely able to provide for the family. However, she would try to set aside a small amount of money, collecting it so that Gefo might be able to go to school.

Had Bengi Axa not ordered that Gefo receive an education? That he would grow up, bring an end to the oppression that his father and homeland faced, and work upon the path of the salvation of the homeland? He surely would have wanted money to be saved for his education. She steeled her resolve, and worked harder and harder, but nothing seemed to amount from it towards her goal. And so, in order to fulfill her husband's wishes, she made a decision: that her two daughters would have to start working.

In that city there were several looms in operation. The mother decided that they would have an easier time if they worked together, to maybe make a game of it, so she found them work in the same place. Every morning, the three children would go their different ways, the two girls to the looms and the son to the primary school.

¹ Axa, or Turkish Ağa is a title for local notables, indicating leadership of a tribe, village or other community, but is not an official government rank.

A harsh winter fell upon them. Their clothes were old and ragged, and so they were always freezing. A few times Zizê ended up getting sick. Still, whether or not they wanted to, they couldn't stop working, or else Bengi Axa's wish would never come to pass. And so they endured the depths of winter, and the mother would overhear that "so-and-so was freezing last night" in the morning.

The streets were covered in snow, and a few times even their roof collapsed from the weight of the snow and ice. The workshop in which Rindê and Zizê's loom worked was damaged too, as the corner of the building with the chimney had fallen in, making the chimney inoperable. Yet they continued going to work. One day both siblings sat in front of their looms, setting their combs upon its warp and weft. Both of them were shivering from the cold, their teeth chattering. Zizê's fingertips became frozen, and so she would lose her grip on the comb, and be forced to rub her hands together to try to warm them up faster. She could no longer stand the pain caused by the cold, and so she said to Rindê "Rindê, sister, haven't we had enough? Can't you see that both of us are freezing? Let's head back home and warm ourselves back up." Although Rindê had felt this way she decided not to give in. Instead she grabbed her sister and gave her a hug.

Rindê was almost two years older than Zizê. But at that age the difference between two years is like five years would be later in life. Rindê was in better condition than her mother, and was already taking care of her sister. Zizê was quietly crying, but trying her best not to make a sound. Rindê took her sister's hands between her own and rubbed them together to warm them up. After a moment she sat her sister down beside her. She said to her sister, "Zizê, don't you know that we are working to help Gefo? It's for Gefo's education." Zizê replied, "yes Rindê, how could I not know? It was clear when our mom made us start working." Rindê followed this acknowledgement by asking, "Then why are you crying?" to which Zizê retorted "Don't you see I'm no longer crying, but something has to be done. We're now stuck in the middle of winter, but later it'll be spring and summer. If only Gefo could study in the summer, and we could all stay at home during the winter, wouldn't that be better?"

Rindê: "Maybe Zizê, but our father made his wish clear that Gefo become well-educated, and take on the world. So him just studying in summer wouldn't be enough. He has to study during the winter too, to make sure he can learn as much as possible."

Zizê: "For what Rindê, let him study for what? Our older brother Zinar was educated, wasn't that enough, what did that amount to? Studying for what, why?"

Rindê: "For the homeland, Zizê. If our older brother Zinar had been even a little better educated, when the Kurdish soldiers fought to capture Diyarbakir he wouldn't have allowed the soldiers to split up into groups, traveling off to different cities without a plan and leaving Diyarbakir undermanned. But instead they [the Turks] were able to take the city in one attack and clear them out. Let's curse these enemies ourselves. Now you've seen why Gefo must study."

Zizê: "Yes, let Gefo study and the homeland –"

Rindê: "The homeland will be free, the homeland will be saved by the work of educated men."

Zizê: “So it’s saved, then what?”

Rindê: “So it will belong to us?”

Zizê: “So it will belong to us.”

At that time the workshop’s foreman, who happened to be a Turk, walked by them scowling and said in Turkish “These dirty disgusting Kurds...” The girls did not understand Turkish. But they had realized he was insulting them from his tone and demeanor. The other girls that worked in the workshop, along with most of the city spoke Turkish and could watch out for themselves [to not speak Kurdish in public]. But only Rindê and Zizê didn’t know Turkish, and so they caught the ire of the foreman. The foreman said again in Turkish “These creatures, these dirty Kurds...”

This wasn’t the first time it had happened, but Rindê and Zizê couldn’t get used to it. Every time it stung them like it was their first time hearing it. But they didn’t utter a word in response. Their mother told them “keep your mouths shut about this, don’t put us into debt, deal with it until we get hold of our reward – that Gefo becomes educated.”

When the foreman was out of earshot, Rindê said: “If only Kurdistan was ours, then everything would be for the sake of the homeland, everything would be for our sake. The foreman would be chosen by Kurds, and he wouldn’t curse at us for being Kurds, he would praise us for our effort. Not only the foreman, but everyone from judges to laborers would come from us, they would be from *our* nation. And then, the language which we speak together, which is so dear to us, would be spoken and heard everywhere. Today we are paupers, and our homes have been stolen from us. And why?”

Zizê: “Because we are Kurds, and there is no country for the Kurds.”

Rindê: “Our father, our brother, our cousins, they were hanged by the government. They were powerless in the end. But once we become independent, then we’ll have the right to live how we should live. But to do that, it is our duty to make sure that our brother can study. If only our homeland already had well-educated young men then it would be free, and our father and brothers wouldn’t have been killed, and we wouldn’t have fallen into this awful situation, and our foreman wouldn’t curse at us. Now it is your responsibility too to make sure that you and I work hard so that we can help make sure there’s one more educated man. Our little brother Gefo will grow up to be such a man.

Zizê was silenced by what her sister had said. She didn’t cry, she didn’t argue. She immediately grabbed her weaving comb and set to work, moving her fingers and fingertips so quickly it was as if they were on fire. On their way back home after working Zizê asked her sister not to tell their mother about how she had acted earlier.

The next morning the weather was even colder. Rindê and Zizê went to their jobs, working until twilight. When they came back home and gave their mother their daily earnings, the mother noticed that Zizê had brought home a few coins more than what she was bringing back home before. The mother was perplexed by this and asked Zizê where this extra had come from. And Zizê told her “Before now I didn’t really understand very well why we were doing

this. Rindê explained it to me, and I really get it now. So now we've been competing to see who could work hardest, and I tied 150 knots more than her today." The mother asked, "What exactly did Rindê tell you Zizê?" Zizê replied, "to take responsibility, that the way I was complaining showed I didn't understand the importance of what we were doing."

Rindê and Gefo came and stood beside them. Rindê started to speak, but her eyes welled with tears. The mother began crying too.

A waist-dagger that had belonged to Bengi Axa was hanging in a small alcove in the corner of the room. Aside from this, the family had no other objects left from him. They had made a custom that during difficult moments, they would stand together next to the dagger. They would all turn, face the dagger and embrace one another.

Beirut, October 5th, 1927