**EPISODE 4:**

**July 22nd:**

**NARRATOR:** Rojava might be the friendliest place on earth. And I mean that in a purely literal sense of the word 'friend'. In Kurdish, "heval" means friend. I'm not a linguist, and I can't quite explain to you how it happened, but over the decades of fighting in Turkey and Syria the word "heval" came to take on a deeper meaning. Today, it's used in a manner similar to the way the Soviets used "comrade". When people in Rojava are trying to refer to the revolutionaries, the people in this region who truly believe in the ideology, they often call them "the hevals".

In English, a large heavily armed group of true believers named "the friends" would absolutely be a terrifying death cult of some sort. But the word 'heval' has a, for lack of a better word, *friendly* quality to it. While there's a certain militant formality to the word "comrade", "heval" feels so much warmer. You cross a checkpoint and the Asayish say 'hello friend'. A soldier offers you a cigarette and you say, "thanks, friend!" There's something addictive about the term, and Jake and I fall easily into using it on a regular basis.

The morning of July the 22nd, 2019, starts with Jake and I packing up our crap and paying for our time in the hotel. Alaan picks us, and our gear, up at around 8 AM. He offers us cigarettes. We're both hungover, thanks to the case of terrible Turkish beer I bought last night, and neither of us particularly wants to smoke, but we say "spas heval" anyway. *Thanks friend.* After our first puffs, we rather performatively smile and say "Bash!". That means "Good!" Alan responds with a wry grin and the words "spas bash", thanksgood! For the rest of our time together, every time Alaan offers us a cigarette he wiggles his bushy eyebrows and grunts "Spashbash!" at us.

It's a light, friendly jab at the fact that, like most foreigners "thanks" and "good" are about the only words of his language we know.

We get on the road and roll through a checkpoint just outside of Derik. Alaan slows to a stop to hand over his papers. I look out the window at the men and women manning the checkpoint and I'm stuck by how goddamned attractive they all are. Jake seems to notice the same thing, and he leans over to me to say: "Everyone here is gorgeous."

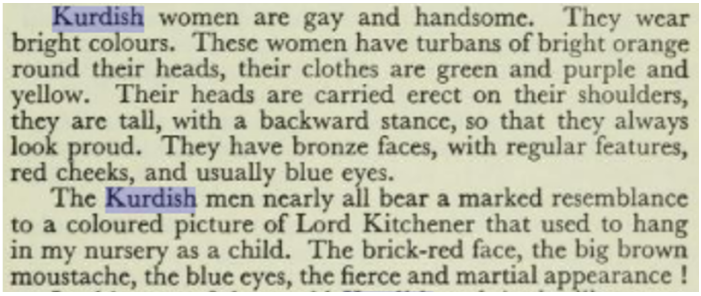
My eyes are particularly drawn to the man in command of the checkpoint, a grizzled male Asayish. I find myself staring at him a little while he converses with his colleagues. He has a broad, sculpted chin with a perfect John-McClane-level three-day stubble. His hair is a dusky brownish blonde. He looks like a militant Kurdish George Clooney. There's a cigarette in his left hand, while his right stays behind his back, gripping the magazine of his gun. As we pass by he catches me staring at him and smiles.

"Silaw, heval." He says to me. It means 'hello friend'.

Calling the folks here good-looking or attractive doesn't quite get at what Jake or I kept noticing. It's not that everyone here looks like a runway model. It's more that they all look like the exact kind of people you'd cast if you were making a movie. They're all *striking* people. Jake and I are not the first Westerners to come here and notice this.

In the 1930s Agatha Christie, author of *Murder on the Orient Express* and about a billion other books, traveled to Kurdistan with her husband. He was an archaeologist. Christie herself was quite an

adventurer, and she traveled widely through much of the region that is now Rojava. She wrote this about he appearances of the people here.



Kurdish women are gay and handsome. They wear bright colours. These women have turbans of bright orange round their heads, their clothes are green and purple and yellow. Their heads are carried erect on their shoulders, they are tall, with a backward stance, so that they always look proud. They have bronze faces, with regular features, red cheeks, and usually blue eyes.

The Kurdish men nearly all bear a marked resemblance to a coloured picture of Lord Kitchener that used to hang in my nursery as a child. The brick-red face, the big brown moustache, the blue eyes, the fierce and martial appearance !

We're waved on through the checkpoint and Alaan continues down the highway. As I stare out the window, slightly hungover, drinking coffee and smoking unspeakably bad cigarettes, I think about something Khabat mentioned yesterday. She'd told us that a decent number of the men she worked with in Rojava weren't really committed to the gender equality aspect of the revolution. She thought they were mostly kept in line by the fact that, at the moment, the weight of societal inertia was behind equality. In her opinion, a number of Rojava's men were just too afraid of being publicly shamed to rock the boat.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Well, no one wants to be the leper. You know what I mean?

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

JAKE HANRAHAN: As soon as you feel ostracized from your friends, you'll do anything to get back, you know?

KHABAT ABBAS: Exactly.

JAKE HANRAHAN: So that really works naturally, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, because no one—

JAKE HANRAHAN: So it's like, if they see everyone—like, oh, fuck, we have to respect women now, eventually it's just going to become normal.

ROBERT EVANS: I guess I have to respect women now, yeah.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Exactly—even if those men, I'm sure, deeply they are not convinced—or some of them.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Or they are not really—but there is a woman there, and what are we going to say?

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: The ideology is like that here.

JAKE HANRAHAN: But they can't really—

KHABAT ABBAS: No, no.

JAKE HANRAHAN: They have to roll with it, which is good. You have to teach. You have to—

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, yeah—just adapt it and do it. Then it became a habit.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

KHABAT ABBAS: It's hallas. But it became a habit.

JAKE HANRAHAN: And then their kids, it will be normal.

NARRATOR: "Hallas" is a bit of Arabic slang Khabat uses a lot. It means "finished", or "done". She's saying that in another generation, the bigotry hidden under the surface of some of Rojava's men will disappear, because those men will die and be replaced by young men who've only ever known women as their equals. This is a heartening fact, but also a scary one. Skin deep change is easy to revert.

I pondered this as we drove on, and it led me back to thinking about my own country. In November, 2019, the FBI reported that hate crimes in the United States had hit a 16 year high. As the Coronavirus descended upon American society, hate crimes against Asian-Americans surged for the first time since World War 2.

I think many folks were shocked to see so much racist violence and bigotry bubble up into the mainstream. Up till 2016, they felt like the fight against this stuff had been won. For the last few years, we've all had to confront the reality that this was not the case. Some of the explosion in bigotry is new racism, people converted in dark corners of the Internet. But much of it, probably most of it, is a result of people who were quiet bigots for years until they decided it was safe enough to be loud.

As Alaan's van trundled into the outskirts of Qamishlo my eyes were caught by a trio of young girls on their way to school. They walked together, heads bare, laughing and giggling and weighed down with probably twenty books between them. Not too long ago these girls had stared into a horizon dominated by the black flags of ISIS. I wondered what their future would bring. My mind was drawn back to something I'd seen the night before, in the bustling streets of Derik.

Jake and I had been poorly navigating the crowded market, looking for beer. As we'd stumbled about my eyes had been caught by a young soldier on his drive home, atop a scooter. His wife, in full niqab, sat on the back, her face towards the traffic at their rear. It felt like a clear illustration of the fact that many of the people here could still go either way. Rojava's revolutionary sentiments, its radical equality- that stuff enjoyed a lot of popularity. But the continued progress of those ideals relied on the mass of folks in the middle, acquiescing to progress because that's where the weight happened to be.

The most important I had to ask about Rojava was: will any of this really last? I knew my only chance at getting an answer lay in the hearts of the people here.

As we pass along it became obvious that tensions in the area had ratcheted up overnight. The guards at checkpoints all checked our papers, thoroughly, and there seemed to be more of them than the day before. A quick search through Google revealed that Turkey's President, Erdogan, had recently made more threats against the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF- the military of Rojava. U.S. emissaries were said to be en route to the region. As we waited in traffic I couldn't help but stare up at the Turkish border wall off in the not-too-distance. I could not see them, but I felt the weight in guns of NATO's second largest army, just beyond the horizon.

We pick up Khabat outside of her apartment in Qamishlo. She greets us with a thermos of instant coffee and we go again to her favorite food stand for more falafel burritos. For months afterwards I found myself periodically craving them. The closest U.S. equivalent I've found to the garlic sauce is probably the sauce at Zankou Chicken, in Los Angeles. It's not nearly as good though.

As we eat, Khabat walks us through our schedule. She's set up a meeting with the head of the Woman's Economic Development Council for the city of Qamishlo. The building is located in a residential neighborhood, one floor in a tall, dusty brown apartment building. We park outside and Jake and I grab the minimal necessary equipment to bring in. We have been warned that this location is a particular target for ISIS sleeper cell attacks. Security is high. I leave my backpack behind and just bring my recorder.

But I forget to remove my pocket knife. As a little bit of context, I always have a good, solid knife on me, particularly when I travel. I've used it to pry open bathroom doors in decrepit public facilities in Serbia, scrape off Nazi graffiti on abandoned buildings in Los Angeles, and to open more beers than I care to mention in more places than I can remember.

Bringing my knife is so second nature that I often completely forget its presence. And that's what happened as I stepped up to the middle-aged Asayish guard running the security checkpoint. His partners, I notice, are two women in their mid-20s. All three guards have AK-47s and they seem to be on high alert. But the old man is by far the most thorough, and the orneriest. He catches my pocket knife, tucked into the waistband of my pants, and he is profoundly frustrated to find it.

He laboriously explains to Khabat that I will have to pick up my blade on the way out. I say that's fine, but I can tell in Khabat's face that she is- somewhat amusedly- frustrated with me too. Knifeless, we are allowed entrance into the building.

The women's economic development headquarters is the cleanest building we've been into in Rojava. It smells sweet, a little like flowers and a little like fresh laundry. Pictures of female martyrs adorn the walls, and my eyes are immediately drawn to a colorful portrait of Arin Mirkan, one of the most revered shehids- or martyrs- in Rojava.

Arin was one of the YPG's female fighters. In 2014, during the desperate battle for Kobane, she stymied an ISIS advance by throwing multiple grenades into squads of ISIS fighters and then, in a last desperate act of defiance, charging into their ranks and blowing herself up. She is reported to have killed dozens of ISIS. I will come to know her face well: her straight black hair, her wide honest smile, white teeth and flush, round cheeks. Arin Mirkan hangs in thousands of homes and public buildings around Rojava.

In the Qamishlo Women's Economic Development Council meeting room, it hangs on the wall opposite from a gigantic woodcut portrait of Apo, the founder of the PKK. One end of the room holds a heavy bookcase, filled with Apo's books. There are two long couches on either wall. Jake, Khabat and I take our seats and Horiam Shamid, head of the Women's Economic Development Council, walks in and greets us. She takes a seat underneath the enormous Apo woodcut and we begin to talk. My first question is one I've been wondering for a while: what does she see as a bigger struggle, the battle against ISIS or the battle of the women in this region against entrenched male-supremacy:

[Play audio ZOOM0056, starting at 8:10. A voice actress will read this audio as we play the original recording at lower volume underneath it.

HORIAM: We see the women's struggle as much more difficult than the struggle against ISIS. Of course ISIS are a barbarous enemy. You come to fight them, and either you eradicate them or they eradicate you. But the struggle against customs and practices, against religion which limits the rights of women, the struggle to change the mentality of women, this is much harder.

[Audio from ZOOM0056 continues to play, low, under narration.]

NARRATOR: In Horiam's view, the victory against ISIS was just one battle in a longer struggle.

[Back to voice-over playing over interview audio, starting at like 9:52 in ZOOM0056]

HORIAM: Women have been suffocated in this society, by the politics of the Syrian state. Their rights have been limited, and this mentality has suffocated them. So they are scared to resist. To resist against the oppression around them, to rise up and say, "this is my right," "I exist," - we have difficulties with this. ISIS were well-known throughout the world, they were a barbarous enemy, not just for women, but for all people. But women also have hidden enemies around them: oppressive men, customs and practices, economic repression... hidden things. Women struggle in secret.

NARRATOR: Much of Horiam's work centers around helping the women of Rojava in their struggles against misogyny and bigotry. Rojava's war with ISIS captured the imagination of the world media, but this quieter war is the one that might bring actual, lasting victory to the women here.

[Play ZOOM0056 from 15:38, underneath English narration of these lines.]

HORIAM: …there was a woman whose husband was martyred in the war against ISIS. His family wanted to take back the children because she had no money, and they felt she had no opportunities. She was basically given the choice to either find a new man or give up her children to their dead father's family. Our job was to provide her with the belief in herself, and the economic opportunity, to struggle against her family and society.

[Continue playing ZOOM0056 on low under narration.]

NARRATOR: Before the war, educational opportunities for women in Syria varied widely depending on their family background and location. And after eight years of fighting, and years of ISIS occupation, many women in North-East Syria haven't benefited from the kind of basic education that give them a chance to survive as a single mother. This particular woman's situation was all the more challenging because she was deaf. But Horiam's center found her adult education classes that taught her how to sew.

[We should be at around 16:35 or so in ZOOM0056 when the voice actor cuts back in, reading this over the recorded audio.]

HORIAM: She works in a tailor's shop now, and her economic situation has improved. Her children are with her, and her late husband's family now has no excuse to take them.

NARRATOR: Years ago, when I worked for a website called Cracked, I spent four long days reading nearly a thousand pages of ISIS propaganda. It was filled with pictures of young men posing with enormous rifles, wielding swords and galloping on horseback, firing rocket launchers into onrushing tanks, in between articles about the proper care and raping of sex slaves. It was a veritable cornucopia of toxic masculinity.

I thought about that as I sat in the air conditioned meeting room and looked at the portraits of shehids on the walls. These women had been martyred in a struggle against the human distillation of misogyny.

Horiam clearly venerated them. But during our conversation she labored, repeatedly, to make the point that these martyrs were but the tip of an iceberg.

[Play ZOOM0056 from 26:24]

HORIAM: Even more women are being martyred by the male mentality, and by the capitalist mindset. In these times, our economy is based on money and earning money. Women who get caught up in this can lose themselves in it, and they too become martyrs.

NARRATOR: In 2013 American billionaire and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg published the book 'Lean In'. It advised women that they could move forward, fight against entrenched sexism in their industries, and succeed under capitalism if they did stuff like refuse to take off work just because they were pregnant. *Lean In* was a guide for women to excel under capitalism by pushing through the unfair, unreasonable demands and biases until they reached success.

Sheryl herself realized this advice was not as good as it seemed when her husband died, and she found herself trying to lean in as a single mother. The rest of the world realized that Sheryl Sandberg might not be the best source of advice on anything, when the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke. This was followed by an ocean of bad PR for Facebook, the worst example being an ethnic cleansing in Myanmar fueled by viral Facebook posts. It was soon clear to everyone that Sandberg, the 'adult in the room' at Facebook, had really just used her credibility to help gloss over the social network's reckless culture.

I am certain Horiam never read *Lean In*. But Sheryl Sandberg's mentality, the idea that women can force capitalism to treat them equally, this is very much what Horiam was arguing against. Equality, in her eyes, was not about enabling women to exploit people for money just as well as men. It was about providing women with tools to take care of themselves.

[Play ZOOM0056, 26:47-27:04]

HORIAM: "Western women…they work but receive less. They work in mentality of the men. If I am free here I can only be as free as the other women here."

NARRATOR: While we talk, one of Horiam's assistants brings in tea. Kurdish tea is normally served with lots of sugar, often half the glass- or more- will be sugar. But today the tea arrives unsweetened. Horiam tells us about her son, who fell shehid fighting against ISIS. She believes he died to make this woman's revolution possible. But that is only part of her motivation.

Horiam is a fierce looking woman. Tall, with a pointed jaw and large eyes that burrow into me. She answers our questions politely, but she radiates a strange coolness the entire time. It is not unfriendliness, or anger, exactly. I would describe the sensation of sitting in the room with her as a little like talking to a coiled spring. Later, over the course of days, I would come to recognize this particular type of energy.

Horiam is "from the mountains". That's the term people in Rojava use for the old fighters, members of the PKK who started off as Marxist guerillas in the mountains before coming down to help build Rojava.

The people from the mountains have a definite hardness to them, an edge that sets them apart from everyone else we meet.

NARRATOR: We bid Horiam goodbye, gather our gear, and make to leave the Women's Economic Development Center. On our way out Khabat points out a brightly colored mural on the wall: it says Jin, Jiyane, Azadi. This, Khabat informs me, is one of the Rojava's most popular slogans. It means: Women, Life, Freedom.

On our way back to the van we wave hello to the two young female soldiers at the guard post outside the center. They smile back and wave excitedly, so we ask them if we can take some pictures. The older male Asayish, the gruff man who'd taken my knife earlier, comes up to hand it back. He trundles away afterwards, rifle in hand, scanning the alleys around us. I find myself wondering how he feels about working with two women who are young enough to be his grand-daughters. I wonder how committed he actually is to this revolution for gender equality.

Khabat looks over to me and grins.

"Should we talk to him?" She asks. The question is rhetorical. We walk over to him, and he stiffens slightly in surprise. Before stopping to talk he steps back and puts his back to the wall, standing in the place that gives him the most secure view of his surroundings.

NARRATOR: Khabat asks him first what he thinks of the women's economic development center, and the work that Horiam and her colleagues did there. His answer is simple:

MAN: In my view, it's a very good organisation. We have many women who haven't had a chance to be educated, and this helps them.

NARRATOR: Next I have Khabat ask him how he felt, as a soldier, the first time he saw women in his community picking up guns to fight for liberty.

MAN: I was very happy. It's nice to have women in the military, and I support them.

NARRATOR: Finally, I have Khabat ask him point blank: does he consider himself a feminist? I wonder if, perhaps, Khabat will have to explain the term to him. But he doesn't ask for clarification. He scrunches his eyebrows up a bit, considers the question, and then answers.

MAN: No revolution can succeed without the women.

NARRATOR: We thank the old soldier for his time and get back in the van, just in time for Alaan to hand Jake and I two of his precious, terrible cigarettes.

"Spas", we say. "Spas-bash", Alaan replies with an eyebrow wiggle.

Our next destination is a place I've been excited to see for months, since long before I started planning this trip in earnest: Jinwar. Easily one of Rojava's most ambitious projects, Jinwar is a village for only women and their children. Most of the inhabitants are the survivors of abuse, women who had to leave violent spouses or oppressive, traditionalist families. Jinwar is a place where these people can remake themselves by building a new town from the ground up.

The word “Jin” means “women” in Kurdish, and “Jinwar” is a living expression of one of the concepts Rojava’s founder, Abdullah Ocalan, holds dearest. Along with the democratic confederalist system that runs this place, Ocalan is the creator and advocate of something called “Jineology”, or “the science of women”. It’s sometimes referred to as ‘Kurdish feminism’, but that definition doesn’t really convey what’s going on here.

At its core, all of Ocalan’s modern beliefs are rooted in the idea that women must be liberated in order to liberate the world. The oppression of the patriarchal system extends past just legal codes and religious rules and into the realms of what we’d call the social sciences. Jineology then is the process by which women re-evaluate history, economics, art, education, health and many other things in an attempt to cast off male-centred biases. On a societal level, advocates of Jineology hope this will lead to a more equitable civilization and a more accurate understanding of the world.

On an individual level, Jineology is a big part of the justification for ‘women’s-only’ spaces like Jinwar. As line written on the walls of Jinwar states: “Until women educate and empower themselves, no one is free.”

My first glance of Jinwar is of a lightly fortified desert compound: a dozen or so spacious, uniform homes with lavender painted walls and a tall iron gate, manned by a young woman with an AK-47. Atop the gate is the word “Jinwar”. This literally means “woman’s land”.

NARRATOR: It’s hot, dry and sunny today. The ground below us is baked rock hard, and it appears to be that way everywhere but the rows of crops in the middle of Jinwar. Outside the walls are more farmland, and rising pillars of black smoke. There are constant brushfires in Northeast Syria during the summer. Some are natural, some are caused by ISIS and some, surely, are the result of cigarettes.

ROBERT EVANS: What does your family think about you being here?

WOMAN 1: [LAUGHS]

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah?

WOMAN 1: I mean, it’s, of course—let’s say, it’s [INAUDIBLE].

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

WOMAN 1: I think—and generally affected by the—of course, the mass media. And in general, the [INAUDIBLE] when you say that you live in Northern Syria and if you sounded like this, it’s—of course, the things which comes to the mind of many people is war and war and war.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

WOMAN 1: So it’s hard, kind of, to—

WOMAN 2: Convince them that it’s peaceful.

WOMAN 1: —to understand what is it. And actually, me, I’m in the process of them understanding better, you know? They wouldn’t probably—

WOMAN 2: Do you want a water?

ROBERT EVANS: Oh, no thanks.

WOMAN 2: Jake?

JAKE HANRAHAN: Good, thank you.

ROBERT EVANS: No water, just coffee.

JAKE HANRAHAN: [INAUDIBLE]. Thank you.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, it's—when I told my family I was coming here, I think their vision was that I'd be dodging sniper fire the whole time and—yeah.

WOMAN 1: Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: Oh! Sorry.

NARRATOR: We're greeted by two women. One is in her mid-20s and Kurdish, the other is a tall German woman in her thirties. She is the first foreign volunteer I've met in Rojava. She's heavily tattooed, and initially suspicious of Jake and I. She questions us politely about our intentions here, and once she's satisfied with our answers she agrees to an interview.

[Play ZOOM0061, from :06-1:08]

NARRATOR: Yeah, I spilled coffee there. Khabat says it's fine though: spilling coffee is good luck if you don't do it on purpose. We sit and talk for a while, feeling each other out. Our Kurdish host asks me how aware most Americans are about what's happening in Syria right now. She makes a point to ask me if they think of our country's effort here, supporting Rojava, is seen as being a lot like Vietnam. I cringe a bit and explain that most Americans know very little about Syria. They know there's a civil war. They know ISIS was here. But that's most of it. She is not overjoyed by this answer.

JAKE HANRAHAN: In the UK, most people, they don't really know about it, but they will just be like, the Kurds in Syria—oh, yeah, they're the good guys, right?

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah. Yeah, you—

JAKE HANRAHAN: That's about it. Yeah, they seem—

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, a lot of Americans would hear "the Kurds in Syria"—

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, and they're like, we like them.

ROBERT EVANS: —and think, vaguely, they're nice. Yeah.

JAKE HANRAHAN: My friends at home probably have no idea what's going on, but they just think, they seem cool.

KHABAT ABBAS: "They seem cool." [LAUGHS]

JAKE HANRAHAN: They seem OK, you know? And that's about it.

KHABAT ABBAS: [INAUDIBLE]

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, they recognize that they seem—you know.

KHABAT ABBAS: Wow.

ROBERT EVANS: And they would probably say, the Kurds in Syria—oh, the Peshmerga. And it's like—

KHABAT ABBAS: Oh my god!

ROBERT EVANS: You're asking a lot for an American to realize that.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, it's confusing. Yeah.

NARRATOR: There was a lot of laughter at the idea that Americans would confuse Iraqi Kurds with Syrian Kurds. Tension broken, I pivot to another question, based on something she'd said a few minutes earlier before I started recording…

ROBERT EVANS: I was interested—she mentioned earlier seeing—growing up seeing that it seems like all the people writing books are men, all the philosophers are men. And there's the picture of a male philosopher—two of them—on the walls of this room.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: Would she like to see a picture of a woman philosopher adorn—or adjoin it at some point?

NARRATOR: The 'male philosopher' I mentioned there is Abdullah Ocalan. Jinwar's town hall hosts the obligatory very large framed picture of Apo. He looks a bit like Bill Cosby in this one, crossing his hands under his chin and grinning impishly out at the world. I'm still concerned about the 'No Life Without Our Leader' patches I've seen on some soldier's uniforms. The fact that Apo's portrait hangs in the center of almost every meeting room doesn't diminish my worries.

Her response, thankfully, is not the response of a zealot. She explains to me that students of Jineology in in Rojava have spent years combing through history books to find examples of female scientists, philosophers, inventors and thinkers whose stories were buried by the traditional education systems of the area.

KHABAT ABBAS: So this section of the Jineology [INAUDIBLE] researching, they found out that—they are still in the process—they came out with many philosopher women. And if really we were going to take the picture of all of them, then maybe there will be no place for all of their pictures, even.

NARRATOR: The women of Jinwar haven't separated themselves from men because they hate men, or because they advocate for permanent segregation of gender. The 'why' of this place is complex. But a large part of it is rooted in history. Not just Kurdish history or Arab history but human history. Over coffee we talk about the oppression of midwives and wise women for 'witchcraft' in European and American history. After coffee, they take me on a tour of the largest building in Jinwar; the school they've built for their children.

It's clean, orderly and decidedly low tech. In one corner of the room is a book shelf covered in pictures and recreations of ancient artifacts. The one that catches my eye is a large, colourful picture of the Venus of Willendorf. You've seen this, even if the name isn't instantly familiar. It's that small prehistoric statuette of a rotund, large breasted woman.

WOMAN: So it's a symbol of the woman, no?

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

WOMAN: It's like the woman body, the fertility symbol. It's like the woman goddess who was representing the society. And it's a clear message, no?

NARRATOR: The Venus dates back more than 25,000 years; it's the oldest known depiction of the naked female form. And starting in 1908 the universal archaeological consensus was: it's porn. The name is even a form of mockery. European archaeologists thought this statuette was erotic art from a 'primitive' civilization. This remained the scientific consensus until 1996, when Professors LeRoy McDermott and Cathleen McCoid carried out some novel research to suggest an alternate theory.

They took photographs of heavily pregnant naked women, positioning the camera in the rough location of the subject's eyes. They then compared those photographs to similar shots from the Venus, and found they were nearly identical. The Venus of Willendorf, long assumed to have been sculpted by a man, looked precisely like the kind of sculpture a pregnant woman might make if she was attempting to create a clay representation of her own body.

WOMAN: There is this analysis—when you look through the body of the Venus, it's like the women body looking down from top.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, I've seen that study.

NARRATOR: Back in 2016 I actually published a book, *A Brief History of Vice*, that discussed the Venus of Willendorf and the theories around it. I interviewed Professor McDermott, and he explained to me that the Venus was likely the very first medical device in recorded history; an obstetric aid made by women, for women. He explained, quote:

"Women alone faced the inevitable life-threatening and painful event of giving birth and it is very likely that the thought of preparing for it had crossed the mind of a woman long before the process became of intellectual interest to men."

It's always been fascinating to me that everyone just agreed, for nearly a century, that the Venus must be porn rather than even considering another possibility. Seven thousand miles away from my door, the women of Jinwar were struck by that same reality.

WOMAN: But it's crazy, you know? For example, if you go to different places and there is archeological research and there is figures appeared, many times, of course, the interpretation—oh, it was the goddess, it was the representation of the society, it was the symbol of the clan, it was—whatever. And when it's of a statue with a woman's body is found, then the interpretation is that it's pornography or that it's—

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

WOMAN: We can already see the mentality in it, how the historical moment and the historical foundation it's interpreted was the patriarchal mindset.

NARRATOR: Jinwar exists for the same reason that the YPJ exists, and the same reason that towns have women's councils as well as town councils. There's an understanding here that the sheer depth of oppression women face means they need dedicated spaces to build, and rediscover their history. And in keeping with the bottom-up nature of governance here, Jinwar's creation wasn't ordered by some central figure or agency. The initial idea came from the collaboration of a number of different local women's organizations, including Kongreya Star and the Free Women's Foundation of Rojava. These local groups and international NGOs provided some of the funding. But many of the raw materials that built this place were donated by the villages and towns around it.

WOMAN: So the villages around, they—from one region, they—because the houses—the foundation of the houses is a stone foundation. So it's a really big mound of stone which needs to be [INAUDIBLE]. So for example, that was one donation. Other donations which were used—for example, a really expensive thing is the wood because there is not so much wood. So from the different regions, people from different places, they donate this.

NARRATOR: Jinwar is one of the most peaceful places I've ever been. The color lavender is everywhere. The buildings are short, squat and handsome, resembling the architecture one finds in New Mexico. It's very quiet. But outside its walls wildfires race across the land, burning through dried brush in the brutal Syrian summer. I watch as a small fire tornado hauls ass just a football field or two away. Our guide admits that fire is a constant threat.

WOMAN: And fortunately nothing bigger happened, no? Nothing—no cables, no people were hurt. The children [INAUDIBLE]. And we took out his neighbors also with help of the surrounding people. We were fighting the fire with the women here.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Wow.

WOMAN: Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: It's almost kind of—it's an immediate danger, but there's also—it's kind of symbolic. As we were driving up here, we saw that big wall Turkey built.

WOMAN: Yeah, of course. Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: And sort of that threat looming—I don't know. It seems like—

WOMAN: Yeah, it's like an expression of it, no?

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, exactly.

WOMAN: I was also thinking about it, no? And it's like the direct threat here, also through the attack and for the political situation of the Turk troops and of the occupation of the Turks, it's still—it's really present, no? So it's kind of—

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

WOMAN: Yeah, you could see that it's—from a different side too.

NARRATOR: Three months after our visit, the Turkish military surged forth from behinds its walls. Artillery fire and missiles rained down on the land around Jinwar, and the town was-

temporarily- abandoned by its residents. I was surprised by how hard the news hit me. Seeing the fires from miles away doesn't make it hurt any less when they reach you.

NARRATOR: After our tour we head back into the town hall. A few more of Jinwar's women have assembled and agreed to talk to us. So we have another cup of coffee and sit down for an interview with a young Arab woman. She has a large flower tattoo on her left forearm and a t-shirt that says "Every day is a 2nd chance". I'll play a little of the audio from this, but my recorder started having issues at just this point in the day:

KHABAT ABBAS: It's a rotation to be a representative of the council.

NARRATOR: If you didn't understand that I'll repeat. This young woman was explaining to me that this month she was the village representative. This made her point-woman for talking to journalists, and also meant she was expected to represent Jinwar to the other towns in the area. All the women here take turns doing this job, which is scary for some of them but, our host points out, also forces them to grow as people. She, and most of the women we talk to, prefer not to use their names.

She explains to us how she came to Jinwar. Her husband was a tattoo artist, but over time he developed a problem with alcohol. And then he became violent. At first she thought that, maybe, having a child would fix their issues.

KHABAT ABBAS: So she gets a first child. Then it was not that bad, but it was still on the problems there. So she gets another child. She thought that it could be fixed there, have more children and their relationship would be more tight. That doesn't work. She had the third one. But the last year of her life with him, it was getting too bad, and she couldn't manage to offer that anymore, so she decided to get divorced.

NARRATOR: When she decided she'd had enough she went to the women's house in her town and reported him. These places were formed by an organization called Kongreya Star, a confederation of different women's groups across Rojava. Their core belief is that no society can be truly free unless its women are liberated. It's basically the same sentiment that old fighter expressed to Khabat and I: there is no revolution without the women.

The people at the women's house helped her to divorce from her husband and separate her life from his. They told her about Jinwar and suggested it might be a good place for her to make a new start. So she took her children and moved here. In the months since she has learned to farm, how to help manage a store and how to help administer a small village.

I ask her if she would ever have been able to consider leaving her husband before the revolution. Her answer is simple:

WOMAN: La.

NARRATOR: "La" is the Arabic word for "no".

We talk next to a woman who introduces herself as the wife of a shehid. She wears more conservative clothing and a fuller head scarf. She is also an Arab woman. One of the criticisms you'll hear sometimes is that Rojava is really a Kurdish supremacist movement, and that Arabs are oppressed here. It's an idea

the Turkish government has a vested interest in pushing. Several months after these interviews, in the wake of their invasion, they'll force hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians from their homes and move in Arab refugees to take their place.

We see no evidence of racial animosity in Jinwar. Our next interviewee expresses that her kids are happy here learning with the Kurdish kids and studying both the Kurdish and Arabic languages. She, and a number of the women I talk to in Jinwar, don't express a great depth of knowledge about Abdullah Ocalan's ideas, or any of the radical politics that have made this place such a cause celebre among the global left. I suppose some people might find that disappointing.

To me, it's a pretty clear statement about the lack of brainwashing that occurs here. The ideological underpinnings of this place are important to some of its residents. But no woman is denied a chance to live here because they haven't read enough political theory.

Jinwar is not large, just a bit over a dozen families. But it is also very young. Our hosts explain that the goal is to build more places like it. And not just women's villages, but other villages made using the eco-friendly construction methods used in the creation of these homes. The buildings in Jinwar all have high ceilings, and carefully positioned ceiling fans, in order to stay comfortable in the blazing Syrian summer without using AC. And it is, in fact, very comfortable. One day, they tell me, villages like this will help to reduce the influence, size, and ecological cost of overcrowded cities like Qamishlo.

This is a common sentiment in Rojava. The goals of the true believers here are always spectacular and ambitious. It would be easy to see them as a lot of hot air if it weren't for the huge amount of work that's evident all around me. It is far too early to say if what they aim to do will actually happen, of course. Everyone I speak to is conscious of the fact that this could all be swept away in the space of an evening, with the speed of a wildfire tearing across a windswept plain.

But in spite of all this they struggle on, putting one foot forward in front of the next. Doing the work, and hoping they'll get a chance to keep doing it tomorrow.

We say our goodbyes, pile into Alaan's van and drive away. I look back as we roll away and notice that the word "Jinwar" atop the gate has been split in half by its opening. Now I see the two halves of the word as separate terms: Jin. War. Women's war.