



THE **CHILDREN**  
OF **DIYARBAKIR**  
(MIN DÎT)

A FILM BY MIRAZ BEZAR



## SYNOPSIS

Ten-year-old Gulistan and her younger brother Firat live happily with their parents in Diyarbakir, the heart of Turkish Kurdistan. Tragedy strikes when their mother and father, a political journalist, are shot down by paramilitary gunmen before their very eyes on a deserted road one night.

Traumatized and orphaned, Gulistan, Firat and their infant sister remain at home in the care of their young Aunt Yekbun. She is trying to arrange passage and flights for her and the children to settle in Sweden. Before she is able to complete the process, politically active Yekbun disappears without a trace.

Gulistan and Firat patiently await the return of their Aunt Yekbun. They continue their daily life and try as best they can to care for their baby sister. But as days turn into weeks, the money that their aunt has left them runs out. Forced to live without water and electricity, the children must sell furniture and appliances for food and medicine. Eventually there is nothing left to sell to pay the rent.

Alone on the streets of Diyarbakir, Gulistan and Firat scrounge for food and a place to sleep. They meet tough 12-year-old Zelal and her blind grandfather, also homeless, who squat amid the ruins of the old Armenian church. Zelal coaches Gulistan and Firat on street survival, as they discover that there are numerous other children in Diyarbakir who share similar fates.

Gulistan strikes up a friendship with part-time escort Dilara, whom she accompanies on hotel calls, serving as a cover to help the young woman avoid trouble. One day, Gulistan is shocked to recognize one of Dilara's clients as the murderer of her parents.

There is no mistaking the loving family man is the cold-blooded killer. Feelings of fear and vengeance confuse the traumatized Gulistan and Firat. But they cannot remain silent. Remembering their mother's folk tales, Gulistan devises a non-violent way for the children of Diyarbakir to be revenged...

## MIRAZ BEZAR

**THE CHILDREN OF DIYARBAKIR (MIN DÎT)** is Miraz Bezar's first feature.

Miraz previously directed several short films, which have been screened at festivals worldwide, such as Montreal, Oberhausen, Istanbul, Munich, Aix-en-Provence, Hamburg, Valladolid, Florence and Berlin. **BERIVAN** was awarded Best Short in Nürnberg and **DURI** won the prestigious IFSAK Award in Istanbul. **BERIVAN** was also selected as part of a "New European Realism" touring package which included films by Mike Leigh and Wolfgang Becker.

Miraz was born in 1971 in Ankara, Turkey. After the military coup in 1980, he immigrated with his family to Germany. He graduated in Cultural Studies at the Berlin Humboldt University and started acting in Off Theatre groups. He studied directing at the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin (DFFB). Miraz currently resides in Berlin.



2009 **THE CHILDREN OF DIYARBAKIR (MIN DÎT)**

2001 **FAIR GAME (Freiwild)** (short)

1998 **DURI (Fern / Far Away)** (short)

1996 **BERIVAN** (short)

1994 **THE NEEDLE (Die Nadel)** (short)

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

During the civil war of the 90s in Turkey, the Kurdish provinces were declared in a state of emergency and put under military control. Amnesty International claims that over 18.000 politically active Kurdish and Turkish citizens were killed or disappeared during that time. While countries like Argentina and Chile have faced their cruel past, Turkey still stands at a crossroads. **THE CHILDREN OF DIYARBAKIR (MIN DÎT)** is an attempt to bring light into this dark past.





## COMMENTS FROM WRITER-DIRECTOR MIRAZ BEZAR

### DIYARBAKIR, CITY FULL OF WOUNDS

**MIN DÎT** was entirely shot on location in Diyarbakir, where the story is set. It is the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan. It is a town that grew into a regional metropolis through the constant influx of domestic refugees from surrounding rural areas. During the civil war in the nineties, the city grew from 300.000 to 1.5 million inhabitants. This city is known for its rich culture and folklore, but it has also been the focal point of the paramilitary's counterinsurgency drive that culminated into thousands of cases of the abduction and killing of Kurdish activists.

I moved to Diyarbakir in autumn 2005 with the ambition to shoot a film, but I didn't have a specific story in mind. I discovered a city in which people have managed to shut out incredibly violent pasts and cover up the scars left on them by their traumatic experiences. I found it intriguing to see how nearly every single family has to cope with the loss of a loved one, while the perpetrators are still living among them. Diyarbakir is a city full of wounds that remain unaddressed. It's a city full of people who continue to lead ordinary lives even though they often suffered extreme violence in their childhood.

## MUCH TOUGHER IN REAL LIFE

The plot is based on a number of fractions of reality. Everything I narrate in **MIN DÎT** has actually happened in Diyarbakir. There are numerous well-documented cases where journalists or political activists have been shot by death squads and their children were left orphaned, and in some cases ended up in the streets. But **MIN DÎT** shows you only a fraction of what you could see while on a casual walk through the city of Diyarbakir. Real life is actually much tougher there and the children are rougher and meaner. The war has deprived people of their future. They are stuck in a chaotic quagmire with little chance for development and progress. Prostitution and drug addiction are widespread, even among children. Many parents are psychologically damaged to an extent that often forces them to primarily care for their own well-being. Politically aware parents struggle to keep their children away from the streets. Although the adult characters in **MIN DÎT** might seem consumed by their political activism, they are still loving, responsible parents. Refraining from activism would not have made them any more responsible, and they are definitely not to blame for their children becoming orphans. As in most of our world's most difficult situations, children become innocent victims.

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN

None of the children in **MIN DÎT** are professional actors. The casting process involved visiting associations that work with children in disenfranchised neighbourhoods, initiatives like holiday camps or theatre projects.

Senay Orak (who plays Gulistan) was very assertive and basically imposed herself. After I met her, Senay returned and interrupted a later casting session with 20 other girls, informing them that the role was hers and no one else's. Her determination impressed me, then later her talent. Muhammed Al (who plays Gulistan's brother Firat) impressed me with his unerring commitment to acting. He played his role as if he were playing games with other children, completely absorbed in his performance all the way through.

I spent one week doing acting exercises with the children to help them get used to the camera and my mode of working. The shoot went very well as it turned out I had picked the right children. But the five-week shoot was physically and mentally extremely straining for the children. I only wish that I could have created better conditions for them. I still have regular contact with them and their families. They have become a part of my life, even now that I'm back in Berlin. But I have also come to understand that they are much too proud to ask me for support when they have to endure new hardships.



## STALKING THE MAN WHO KILLED HER PARENTS

In **MIN DÎT**, the young girl Gulistan very consciously stalks the man who killed her parents. It was a very demanding task to ask a child to re-enact such a traumatic moment. But Senay Orak was amazing in her ability to grasp the character. She had a spontaneous command over a wide array of emotions. The character Gulistan is driven by the urge to rid herself of the trauma, but she is also very conscious of the consequences of her actions. Confronted with seeing his parents' killer again, Gulistan's younger brother Firat freezes and wets his pants. I wanted to show how every child has different ways of dealing with traumatic experiences. Firat's reaction is actually very similar to known adult Kurd reactions towards their past aggressors. They become paralyzed, shocked into usually either helpless submission or an act of violence. Gulistan offers a third way of dealing with past trauma: revealing the killer to the public.

## THE WOLF'S BELL

When I was in Diyarbakir in 2006, I witnessed a civil disobedience campaign that entailed a stay-at-home strike, shutting down work-places and shops. While the adults remained indoors, the street children took over. They erected barricades, stopped cars and informed passengers about the campaign. These children are usually perceived as pickpockets and drug addicts, but here was an entirely different aspect of their being. They displayed a spontaneous idea of community organization that even went beyond adult behaviour. I found this inspiring since I do think that civil disobedience is a good way to end violence. Unfortunately, the adults behaved more passively, lacking the daring spirit of the street children.

In **MIN DÎT**, the tale of the wolf's bell inspires the character Gulistan to act differently toward her past trauma. This folk story was brought to my attention by my co-writer Evrim Alatas, who came across it in the works of the great Anatolian novelist Yasar Kemal. Because of its bell, the wolf can no longer harm anyone since it has been clearly marked. The children's revenge against the killer at the end of the film is like a fairy tale. It is visualized wishful thinking. Gulistan has to undergo a painful process in order to arrive at the realization that violence cannot be an answer to violence. By dealing with some of the painful events that happened in the past, I wanted to present in **MIN DÎT** an alternative for the future.

## WHERE PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS LIVE SIDE BY SIDE

In **MIN DÎT**, the character of Nuri Kaya is not only a killer and torturer, but he is also a loving family man. How is it possible that the same man can torture people during the day and go home and be so gentle with his young son? He has obviously found a way to justify his actions, and the distorted notion of democracy that frames his mindset literally allows him to continue to do what he does. The system encourages killers like Nuri Kaya to believe what they're doing is right. The boundaries between the good and bad are extremely fluid. This holds true for any situation of conflict and civil war. What intrigues me is how both perpetrators and victims live side by side in this rather small city of Diyarbakir.

## THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

The homeless children seek shelter in the ruins of the ancient Armenian church of St Giragos, situated in Diyarbakir's old town. I chose this site as a refuge for the children in order to show that the spiral of violence goes way back into the past. I wanted to show that the genocidal catastrophe the Armenians were exposed to in that same region a century ago has also not yet been dealt with. Since those victims have not been healed, the problem continues to occupy a place in social topography, even if only in the form of a destroyed church. The parallel to the Kurdish conflict is that refusal to discuss and come to terms with a problem will only cause it to persist, never fully disappearing.

The Kurdish folk tale about the tamed wolf stands for all the wonderful things that have not been lost or destroyed as of yet, the authentic cultural lore that has been preserved over the centuries. In **MIN DÎT**, the children listen to their mother's recording of the wise tale. This will eventually inspire them to find alternative ways of reacting to problems. Through this tale, Gulistan realizes how degenerate society has become after years of brutality.

## A STORY THAT REMAINS VALID

If I felt that Turkish society had already made an effort to come to terms with their recent history, then I would gladly have marked the period of the film as the 1990s, when political violence against the Kurdish population was at its peak. But as it stands now, I decided to set **MIN DÎT** in an indefinite time. I wanted this film to narrate a story that remains valid, regardless of time. I did not want to report events from a specific historic period. Human rights violations continue today, but the number of political assassinations has decreased since the 1990s. However, Turkey's political history shows us there is no guarantee that these dark days won't return unless society takes responsibility for past actions. People need to arrive at an understanding of the scars that the civil war left on the whole social fabric of Turkey, not only Kurdistan. Turkish soldiers are left without public assistance when they have to cope with war trauma. Many are doomed to lead lives of poverty and ignorance.

## KURDISH GRIEVANCES

The Kurdish grievances are very diverse. The most common objective is the constitutional safeguard for their language and their culture, the constitutional guarantee that they can exist as Kurds in Turkey and that the government embrace and support them in their development. Beyond that, there exist various ideas for devolution and administrative reforms that would grant people the right to local self-governance and regional self-determination, which would not only apply to the Kurdish region but to all of the different regions of Turkey. I think this would be a good thing for Turkey overall. Many Kurds think that this could address their grievances, but few are still campaigning for a separate state. By and large, they long to be accepted by and prosper in a democratized Turkey.

There are recent attempts by the Turkish government to address the grievances of the Kurdish population. But a limited number of politicians cannot solve the problem. People need the chance to voice their grievances. They need to comprehend the harm that they have inflicted on each other, and those who were uninvolved and unaware need to build up empathy.

## TWO LANGUAGES

In Diyarbakir, Turkish has become the language of communication in public, but the predominant language used at home is still Kurdish. The children of Diyarbakir, whose first language is Kurdish, grow up into a society where the use of Kurdish is still hardly condoned. There are no schools that teach Kurdish, so children must speak Turkish at school.

I wrote the screenplay of **MIN DÎT** in Turkish since this was the language most people involved could relate to, but had it translated into Kurdish. Initially, the child actors were slightly uncomfortable with it. I understood it was my task to help the children find their own way of expressing themselves. They changed the dialogues so that they would feel comfortable. In the end, I realized they were visibly more at ease when they spoke in Kurdish rather than in Turkish.

## A DIASPORA KURD

There are many Kurds who would view Diyarbakir as the capital of their homeland, but I do not have this connection since I am a diaspora Kurd. But staying there for two years helped me fulfil my old longing to get to know the place that was a home to my parents and demystify my notion of it. I find it difficult to associate myself with any one place in the world. I will always be a stranger in Berlin, and in Diyarbakir, and I am painfully aware of that. I do feel very close to the people I've met in Diyarbakir and especially to my child actors. Although they have become a part of my life, I am nevertheless aware of the fact that I will always be a stranger to the city.

I was raised in Bremen, Germany, and moved to Berlin in 1994. I turned to the idea of making a film in Diyarbakir, because I was frustrated by the lack of opportunities for young filmmakers in Germany and by the obvious absence of an equivalent to France's cinema beur (work by filmmakers of Maghrebi descent from France's former North African colonies).

I had no German government funding to shoot **MIN DÎT**, only private support that allowed me to rent an HD camera and start working. Some weeks into the shoot, my funds were used up. We all were too involved to quit. So my mother sold her house and my uncle paid the hotel bills for the crew. Upon returning to Germany with the footage, I did a rough assembly of **MIN DÎT** on my own. I screened a rough cut to filmmaker Fatih Akin, who agreed to support me through his company corazon international.





## THE CHILDREN OF DIYARBAKIR (MIN DÎT)

### Bezar Film

in co-production with  
**corazón international**

### MAIN CREW

Director / Writer/ Producer **Miraz Bezar**

Co-Producers **Klaus Maeck, Fatih Akın**

Associate Producers **Saliha Kutlay, Flaminio Zadra**

Cinematography **Isabelle Casez**

Editor **Miraz Bezar**

Sound Mixer **Garip Özden**

Set Design **Pınar Soydiç**

Music **Mustafa Biber**

Costume Design **Özlem Batur**

### TECHNICAL DETAILS

2009

Germany

102 minutes

35 mm Scope

Color

Dolby Digital

Dialogue in Kurdish and Turkish

### CAST

**Gulistan Şenay Orak**

**Firat (Gulistan's Brother) Muhammed Al**

**Nuri Kaya (Paramilitary) Hakan Karsak**

**Zelal (Friend) Suzan İtir**

**Dilara (Escort) Berivan Ayaz**

**Mother Fahriye Çelik**

**Father Alişan Önlü**

**Yekbun (Aunt) Berivan Eminoğlu**

**Mikaıl Mehmet İnci**

**Çekdar Çekdar Korkusuz**

**Bindest Recep Özer**

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RICHARD LORMAND - World Cinema Publicity  
www.filmexpressplus.com - intlpress@aol.com - skype: intlpress  
+1-337-214-4815 (USA) or +33-9-7044-9865 (France)  
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HOTEL DE LONDRES +34-943-440-770  
+34-617-972-969 or +33-6-0949-7925

**WORLD SALES:**

THE MATCH FACTORY GmbH  
Balthasarstrasse 79-81  
50670 Köln (Cologne)  
Tel: +49-221-539 709-0  
Fax: +49-221-539 709-10  
info@matchfactory.de  
www.the-match-factory.com

