

Freed Iraqi Christians tell of life under the IS

by [Kristen Chick](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

When Christians fled the small town of Bartella in August 2014 as militants from the self-declared Islamic State swept toward them, 14-year-old Ibrahim Matti and his elderly mother stayed behind. Without a car, they waited on a relative who promised to return for them after ferrying his own family to safety.

But by then, it was too late for a rescue. Matti and his mother, Jandark Nasi, both Assyrian Christians, spent more than two years living under IS control in and around Mosul. They endured physical violence, constant threats and intimidation, and forced conversion before finally escaping as the Iraqi Army pushed into Mosul in November.

They are among the few Christians who have emerged so far from territory controlled by the IS amid the Iraqi offensive that has retaken parts of northern Iraq. The historic heartland of Assyrian Christians in Iraq was seized by the militants in 2014, and nearly all fled in the face of IS requirements: convert, pay a tax, or die. The ordeal of Matti and Nasi offers a glimpse of what life was like for those unable to escape.

Ammar Siman, priest of the St. George Syriac Catholic church in Bartella, about 14 miles east of Mosul, said 100 Christians were missing from the Christian villages around Mosul after August 2014. The relatives of many of the missing fear they did not survive.

Siman fled to Erbil in 2014, and while he has been back to see the church, he said no one has moved back to the town yet.

“We are very happy to receive them alive,” he said of those who had recently managed to escape. “Of course they need too much help. They’ve suffered a lot.”

Three days after the IS took Bartella, Matti and Nasi also tried to flee to Erbil, the capital of the semiautonomous Kurdish region where many Christians had taken refuge. But militants stopped them at a checkpoint and sent them first to a detention center in Mosul and then to one in Bartella. The prison was full of other Christians and Shi’ites, all of whom were being beaten, Matti said. There, militants

told the teenager he must convert to Islam, urging him to recite the Muslim profession of faith.

“I said there is no God but Jesus,” he recalled.

The militants then went to the next cell, where they were holding Shi’ite Muslims, whom they consider heretics. Matti could hear as an IS member demanded a man convert. “He didn’t accept, so they shot him in the head. Then they took me to his cell, showed me his body, and told me if you don’t convert to Islam, you will have the same fate,” he said. “I was frightened.”

When the militants again demanded that the two recite the profession of faith, they complied. “We said it. But it wasn’t coming from our hearts,” he said. “I have strong faith, but with everything that happened, we were under threats and pressure. When you say something that’s not from the bottom of your heart, it’s not to be believed.”

Yet their torment did not end there. Over the next two years, the two lived on the outskirts of Mosul and in the village of Bazwiya, and IS militants regularly visited them to test their commitment to Islam.

“I didn’t memorize their prayers, so they were beating me,” said Matti. “They beat my mother with sticks because she didn’t know how to pray.”

Militants would torture them if they answered questions incorrectly, he said, and they told him that if he missed three consecutive Fridays at the mosque, they would kill him. Whenever he didn’t go to the mosque, they found and beat him, he said. He was also forced to wear the short trousers preferred by the militants and to grow his beard.

At the mosque, Matti listened to the imam proclaim the rest of the world infidels and urge residents to pledge obedience to the leader of the IS and participate in jihad. Over the two years, he said, he often saw members of the IS who were not Iraqi. He also saw public executions, including the stoning of a woman accused of adultery, when he visited a central Mosul marketplace to buy food. But the two say that some Mosul residents secretly helped them, giving them food and supplies.

“I was always praying in my heart to Mary and Jesus,” Nasi said. “I was praying in the bottom of my heart, and crying. For the sake of my son, my gift from God.”

When the Iraqi Army offensive reached the area where the two were living on the eastern outskirts of Mosul, IS members gathered all the residents and forced them to retreat into the city. From there, Matti and Nasi were able to flee to territory taken by Iraqi forces.

Asked how it felt finally to be free, Matti smiles for the first time in an hour and a half of talking. "I still don't believe it," he said.

While Matti and Nasi lived in and near Mosul, two elderly Christian women stayed in the town of Qaraqosh. Zarifa Baqous Daddo didn't leave when all her neighbors fled the IS onslaught because her husband was ill. He died 15 days later, and Daddo went to stay with another elderly Christian couple.

One day, the man went out and never returned. Militants briefly took the two women to Mosul before returning them to Qaraqosh and forcing them to recite the profession of faith under threats of violence.

She said the militants didn't beat them, possibly showing deference to their age, and regularly brought food and water to the house where the two women remained. But they terrorized them, issuing false reports of territorial conquest.

"They were always telling us, you have no relatives left, we have taken over Erbil, we have taken over everything," she said. "We didn't have anything but our prayers. This was the only thing we had to do."

Security forces found the pair after they pushed the IS from the village.

Daddo, Matti, and Nasi all said no one has blamed them for doing what they had to do to stay alive.

"We were visited by two priests, they told us not to worry about that," Nasi said. "They said, 'You don't have to fear anything now. We are your people, we are your family.'"

Siman, the priest from Bartella, said they would receive only love from God and the church. "I think they were obligated to accept something they didn't believe," he said. "Do we blame them? No."

Matti, a quiet and slight teenager, and his mother now live in a small room in a church-run center for displaced people in Erbil. Rosaries hang on the wall above the

two simple beds, and the floor is covered by carpet scraps. A bare lightbulb hangs from the wall. After more than two years without television, they enjoy a Bollywood film on a donated TV set—they are partial to Indian and Egyptian films.

Matti said he wants to obtain medical care for his mother and to continue his studies, which stopped at eighth grade. Both see a future outside of Iraq.

“We spent two years [under IS], two horrible years. We don’t want to go back,” Nasi said. “We want to leave Iraq, to leave this pain.” —[*The Christian Science Monitor*](#)