

Forced Marriage Among Europe's Immigrants: Hülya Kalkan's Story



Rhea Wessel | 08 Feb 2007

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles by Rhea Wessel on the rights of Muslim women in Europe, particularly Turkish women in Germany. The stories will appear occasionally on World Politics Review. Read the rest of the articles in the series [here](#).

STUTTGART, Germany -- Hülya Kalkan recently joined the growing ranks of German women of Turkish descent who have written condemning accounts of their young lives. In her book, "I Just Wanted to be Free," published in 2005, Kalkan relates how she and, a few years later, her younger sister Esme narrowly escaped being forced to marry strangers while visiting relatives in Turkey. In a recent visit here, Kalkan told me their remarkable story.

I met Hülya on a cold Tuesday in December. She picked me up from Stuttgart's main train station, and we drove downtown in her older-model black Renault Clio. While shopping and eating, we talked about her experiences and her work helping girls and young women whose families are trying to force them into marriage. Now 27, she is attending night school to earn a high school diploma. By the time she's 29, she'll be able to enroll at a university to study social work. Hülya is making up the school years that were stolen from her as a young woman.

Hülya was dressed in form-fitting chic jeans, brown leather boots and a brown t-shirt with three-quarter sleeves. Her long black mane gave her the air of an exotic world citizen who would be at home in Paris or New York, but her thick regional accent left no doubt about where her roots lie: the Swabian capital of Stuttgart.

As she tells it in her book, Hülya grew up taking care of her three younger siblings while her mother toiled at jobs as a seasonal picker or in a factory. Her father came to Germany in the 1970s to be trained, and his marriage to Hülya's mother was arranged while he was visiting home in central Anatolia. Hülya's mother came to Germany and the family lived many years in a small apartment in the village of Rielingshausen, an idyllic southern German town full of cross-timbered houses and surrounded by fields. During most of her growing up years, Hülya's father left the house in the mornings and didn't return until late. As the oldest girl, the responsibility fell on her to run the household.

Hülya learned German quickly, attended school and excelled in history and art, but her mother would often keep her home to do housework. "Girls don't need to go to school," she would say. When Hülya was 11, her mother announced a surprise trip to Turkey during summer break. A few days after Hülya, Esme and their younger brother Serkan arrived in the port city of Mersin, their mother revealed the purpose of the trip. The two younger siblings would live with an aunt and uncle, and Hülya would attend a Quran school while her mother returned to Germany.

School Hopping

"I thought I wasn't hearing right. I had just finished fifth grade at the Tobias Mayer secondary school in Marbach and my grades weren't that bad even though I often had to stay home," she says, though she never revealed these thoughts to her mother. Her mother had enrolled Hülya at the school and said she was to stay there until she became a Quran teacher.

Hülya slowly began to understand her mother's motivation. She had a dream that one of her children would become a Quran teacher. It was now Hülya's turn to try after her other brother, Hakan, fled a

school and returned to Germany. He, too, was plucked from his life and friends without warning.

"Just like Hakan, I have no desire to be a religion teacher. No way. My rejection of my mother's religion is just as strong as my hate for her," she wrote.

Later, Hülya would formally refuse the religion she grew up with, convert to Buddhism and live a multicultural life celebrating Christmas with German friends and Divali and Durga Puja with Indian friends in Stuttgart.

Hülya spent two years in the Quran school, never once receiving a letter or phone call from her mother. Meanwhile, Esme spent her days caring for their aunt Sultan's children while Serkan accompanied his uncle to work. After an incident at the school, and with just as little warning, Hülya's mother retrieved her from the Quran school and brought her back to Germany. There she tried to enroll in the eighth grade but was forced back, and struggled through the seventh grade -- twice.

Hülya's family moved a couple of times. One of these occasions opened up an opportunity for Hülya. She enrolled in a new school at which a secretary promptly announced that headscarves weren't allowed. To her mother's dismay, Hülya shed the scarf that she had worn since puberty. Hülya's father had asked his wife several times to take off her own scarf, but Mrs. Kalkan, alone in a foreign country and unable to speak the language, clung to the tradition for religious reasons.

"I was very thankful to the secretary. She showed me how liberating a ban on something can be," says Hülya.

Over the years, Hülya's mother continued to make comments about Hülya's eventual marriage, but Hülya never took them seriously. Instead, she tried to impress on her mother that girls need to go to school so they can avoid manual labor and keep from being dependent on their husbands in case of divorce, something her mother eventually came to understand.

The Break

Just after Hülya earned a diploma from an intermediate secondary school and finished a job-preparation program, her mother had another surprise for her. She would be allowed to spend some of her summer holiday with her uncle Kadir and his girlfriend Derya in Turkey. After the vacation, Hülya planned to look for an internship.

Although Hülya objected, Derya arranged a meeting with aunt Sultan, the same aunt who had been so unkind and unhelpful when Hülya was at the Quran school. After only a few minutes at Aunt Sultan's house, Derya announced that Hülya would be staying. It had all been a trick. Hülya's mother had paid for her ticket and arranged for Hülya to stay with her relatives until a suitable man could be found.

"Why did you do it?" Hülya asked Derya. Her answer: "Hülya, you're a bad girl. You have to stay here. . . . Your mother wants you to be a virgin when you marry."

"My crime? I was 17 and unmarried," Hülya says.

The betrayal by her friend was not as bad as the sting Hülya felt from her mother.

"How can a mother set such a trap for her daughter? I worked so hard to go to school and be there for my siblings. I did everything for her. And this is the way she thanks me? Do I have no right to live my own life? I had already told myself that I would never again fly to Turkey if mother made me do it, but I didn't

expect this dirty trick," she said.

In shock and under something similar to house arrest, Hülya had no way to reach friends in Germany to ask for help. So she put on the headscarf her aunt Sultan and aunt Hacer had set out for her, acted as if she had acquiesced and began to make a plan. She would lie and say that she had already lost her virginity -- with the hope that this would indeed mean no man would possibly want to marry her. If her aunts let her return to Germany, she would promise to marry the father of her child.

Her plan worked and Hülya was allowed to return home to Ludwigsburg, where she and her mother settled into an uneasy peace, ignoring the fact that Hülya was nearly married off to a stranger in a strange country.

The Road to Esme

But Hülya's situation wasn't as dire as her sister's eventually became. A few years after Hülya was allowed to return to Germany, Esme was taken from school in Germany and enrolled in a Quran school in Turkey under the care of none other than aunt Sultan. Hülya planned to visit her sister, but wouldn't go until her application for a German passport was approved. The risk of getting stuck in Turkey was just too high.

Hülya began to work with a lawyer to apply for a visa for Esme's return to Germany. But, at 18, Esme was too old to come to Germany under the law that allows families to be reunited. Eventually, aunt Sultan and Hülya's mother could wait no longer. Esme was engaged to an unemployed man eight years her senior. The wedding was scheduled for the following summer.

Hülya couldn't restrain herself any longer: "Mother! You were married to father against your will. And now you want to do the same to your daughter. What kind of person are you?" she screamed.

Eventually cooling off, Hülya decided on a new strategy -- one that could have landed her in big trouble.

"I decided to act under the law of a big sister, the law of love and the law of humanity -- even if I had to go to jail. People get out of jail. A forced marriage is worse," Hülya says.

Hülya began to act as if she supported the wedding and offered to help with preparations. She borrowed a Turkish passport from a friend in Germany and used it to enter the country. Shortly before the wedding, Hülya and Esme slipped out from under their aunts' watch in Mersin. Hülya departed the country on her German passport and Esme left a few hours later with a German friend using the borrowed Turkish passport.

Hülya sat through the longest wait of her life at the Frankfurt airport, wondering if she and her sister would be reunited or if Esme would be thrown in jail.

Finally, Esme and their friend arrived. Esme had been rescued.

Hülya's mother called on her mobile. "Where did you take Esme?"

"Esme won't be getting married. I kidnapped her."

Before slamming down the phone, her mother replied: "I hope you croak."

Forced marriage is illegal in Turkey and Germany and forbidden under the universal declaration of human rights. But the distinction between arranged marriage and forced marriage can be hard to make. In Hülya's and Esme's cases, it's clear that any marriage would have been unwanted and hence forced.

"For me, a forced marriage is equivalent to rape," says Hülya.

For someone who has been through so much, Hülya is surprisingly lacking in bitterness. Instead, she surprises those who meet here with her positive attitude, her ability to forgive and her determination to get an education. She quit her day job and is getting by with work in Germany so she can focus on her studies. She has written a book and a film has been made about her life for German television -- all this while she attends high school.

Hülya says she resolved to begin forgiving her mother as soon as she got her brother Serkan and Esme back to Germany.

"It takes way too much energy to be bitter," she said as we browsed for winter scarves in the Stuttgart pedestrian zone, looking for the right mixture of brazen color and warmth. She suddenly spinned around and asked, "Do you want to see a picture of me in a sari?" Hülya pulled out her mobile phone and showed me the picture on her screen. She radiated.

Hülya now believes that her mother really thought she was doing the best thing for her daughters and was a victim of her own traditions. Mrs. Kalkan says she regrets the two situations and felt pressured by her sister, aunt Sultan.

"The power of the community is much stronger than that of the mother or father," Hülya explains.

Hülya's mother knows she has written a book, but she doesn't know any details about it and wouldn't be able to read it since it's in German.

Their relationship has changed so much that Hülya is now able to refer to her mother as an "angel" and look for the things Mrs. Kalkan can contribute to her life -- like passing on the ability to knit or the art of baking the savory Turkish pastry, the borek.

In the meantime, Esme has moved into a group apartment, found a boyfriend and is being trained to work as a taxi driver. She wears her headscarf in a fashionable way and has been known to show up with it on at the disco.

Through Hülya's experiences in Turkey and her work for at an intercultural forum, Hülya has internalized the notion of a multicultural life. She dances Flamenco, experiments with Asian cuisine and is planning a backpacking trip to India.

Hülya said several times during our meeting that she wants to share the delights she has found in her life with other women of Turkish descent.

"Why shouldn't they have careers, drive cars, see films, go to cafes and go dancing?" she asks.

Hülya is focused on her own education and does not have the time or interest in becoming an activist. She was more eager to talk about the present and the future than her past that is so neatly laid out in her book. Hülya stressed that she wants to be seen as a role model for other young Turkish German women.

"They should see that it's all normal -- that I go to school, that I work and that I live alone, that I go to parties. It's all perfectly normal," she says.

Hülya Kalkan's book, "I Just Wanted to be Free," is available in German and Dutch.

Rhea Wessel is a freelance writer based in Frankfurt. She is at work on a book called "Honor Killings in Our Midst: The Fates of Three Women Who Broke with Tradition."