The Ay family became famous in Britain - emblematic of the miseries endured by asylum seekers trying to make their home in the west. They were split up, imprisoned, then deported. What happened next? Diane Taylor and Simon Hattenstone report.

June 2003  The barbed wire loops along the top of the metal wall. Dungavel used to be a prison, but now it is a detention centre for asylum seekers. Not that you'd notice the difference. The visitors' room is a gloomy, institutionalised place with gloomy, institutionalised easy chairs. The Ay family have been here almost a year. "When we got a letter from the Home Office saying they were at liberty to put us into detention, I thought they meant detention like at school where you have to stay behind for 20 minutes at the end of the day," 14-year-old Beriwan says.

Beriwan is the eldest of four children. Since their father was deported to Turkey, she has found herself taking on his role. She is the public spokesperson, the voice of the family. It is Beriwan who tells the immigration officials and social workers, the politicians and pressure groups, the psychologists and the media what it feels like not to belong, why they have spent their lives on the run - from Germany to Greece, back to Germany, to England, and to this detention centre, in Scotland.

In some ways theirs is a typical story. Like many asylum seekers, Beriwan's parents were so terrified of their fate in their native country that they risked their lives in travelling to Germany and then later, with the children, to the UK for a new start. Like others before them, they didn't tell everything to the German authorities in case they were sent back to Turkey and punished yet more severely for speaking out. And, like others, despite the misery they have experienced in the west, they cling to the belief that this is the place that will ultimately allow them to be free.

In other ways they are exceptional: an entire family of asylum seekers pushed from pillar to post, and held in detention for so long; they are a cause célèbre in the press and television, and cited by human rights activists as an example of the worst treatment meted out to asylum seekers. They are also a remarkable family themselves - gentle, funny and stoic throughout a desperate odyssey.

In Dungavel they fear, with good reason, that the government will deport them to Germany because that was the country where they first claimed asylum. But if they are returned to Germany, the likelihood is that they will then be sent to Turkey, a country where none of the children has yet set foot.
Yurdagul and Salih, Beriwan's mother and father, married when she was 16 and he 21. They came from the village of Nerinjin, in the Sirnak area of south-east Turkey, and were proud of their Kurdish identity. The couple refused to change their Kurdish names to Turkish ones and spoke Kurdish rather than Turkish. For this, Salih was jailed six times and Yurdagul three, usually for several weeks. Her father was jailed for three years when she was small because he couldn't speak Turkish. Salih was repeatedly beaten for the same crime when he did his national service. First his arm was smashed, then he was forced to clean floors one-handed.

"They would come looking for Salih, and if he wasn't at home they'd put me in jail instead," Yurdagul says in Kurdish. Beriwan looks intently at her mother as she translates. The third time Yurdagul was jailed, in 1988, she was eight months pregnant. Prison guards put her in an underground cell for several days. "It was freezing," she says. "The guards pushed me around, and after a few days I went into labour. I told the guards, but they didn't believe me at first. When they saw that I really was in labour, they let me go. The baby was born two hours later. She came to this world for just one hour."

The term Kurd was first used in the seventh century AD to describe the nomadic people who lived in Mesopotamia at the time of the Arab conquest. The area of land that is Kurdistan has fluctuated historically, but is generally the geographical region that spreads across the mountainous area where the borders of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey meet. Turkey has always denied the existence of Kurdistan. There are no official population figures for Kurds, but it is accepted that they are the largest ethnic group without a state in the world.

Yurdagul and Salih, a farmer and minibus driver, felt that it was too dangerous to bring up children in Turkey. When Yurdagul became pregnant again later that year, they decided to run. They paid for forged papers and boarded a plane from Istanbul to Frankfurt. They had heard that Germany did not discriminate against Kurds and believed they would be welcomed. But things didn't work out like that. After 18 months, they were told their asylum claim had been rejected. By this time, Beriwan had been born. Again, they fled - this time to Greece for two years. Newroz and Dilovan were born there.

In 1991, they discovered that they were allowed to make another asylum application in Germany, so they returned. This time the family stayed eight years before a decision was made again to deport them. "We heard that England was a safe place for asylum seekers and my father paid some mafia, from Kosovo I think, for places in a lorry," Beriwan says. It was a horrific, airless journey that had a devastating effect on Medya, the youngest child. "We thought we were going to lose her," Yurdagul says.

But life in England was better than they had dared hope. They claimed asylum as soon as they stepped out of the lorry and were given a house in Park Avenue, Northfleet, Gravesend. This was the first time they ever felt that they had a home.

The children started at local schools, picked up English swiftly and shone academically. They were popular with teachers, pupils and neighbours. "The three years we spent in Gravesend were the happiest in our lives," Beriwan says. "We had barbecues in the garden and we all loved playing football - our whole family was a football team. My mum was a great goalie. " As the children flourished, they made plans for the future. Beriwan hoped to be a human rights lawyer.
Then, in March 2002, their world was turned on its head - again. Salih had to report to the police station monthly, as do many asylum seekers. This time, instead of the usual bureaucratic ticking of boxes and a nod signifying that he was free to go, he was arrested and deported to Germany. The rest of the family were left behind in a state of shock. "No matter what happened to us, we always assumed we'd be together," Yurdagul says.

Salih spent three months in Germany, most of it in jail awaiting deportation to Turkey, but he did make a visit to the Turkish embassy in Germany and overheard two officials say that the rest of the family would be arrested and deported soon. "He called us and urged us to go into hiding to avoid deportation," Yurdagul says. The family hid with friends, but this was no life, unable to go to school or show their faces in the community. After two months, they gave themselves up to the police. Detention swiftly followed.

"They came for us early in the morning," Yurdagul says. "We had only 20 minutes to pack." Most of the time in detention has been spent here in Dungavel, on the border between Lanarkshire and Ayrshire. The family are locked indoors for 22 hours a day, have limited access to education and healthcare, and few other children to mix with.

Medya fidgets, and looks through the window. In half an hour, she'll be unlocked to play. They have been here for almost a year now, the longest that child asylum seekers have been incarcerated in the UK. There has been a growing sense of outrage in Scotland, and the Ay family are becoming an embarrassment for the government.

A video camera has been smuggled into Dungavel, so they can be interviewed. The film, shown on the BBC, is heartbreaking; Beriwan tells their story and Newroz sits by her side, at first silent. Tears stream from behind her glasses. She smiles as if to say sorry. "My name is Newroz," she tells the camera, "and it's horrible here. I don't feel like a normal person any more because I can't go to school and do normal things."

Father Vincent Lockhart, a Catholic priest, has regularly visited the family. "I noticed that Newroz in particular started to get quieter and quieter," he says. "When she first arrived, she was just a normal girl. Then a distracted, intense, faraway look developed in her eyes, a sense of foreboding - what the marines call the 500-yard stare. For most children, the significant events in their lives are birthdays and holidays. For the Ay children, they are points in the legal process - appeals, hearings and bail requests. They were in a perpetual state of hope and tension followed by deflation each time a bail request was turned down."

**August 2003** The family are transported to the removal centre, Tinsley House; they are about to be deported to Germany. In the visiting room, Medya is watching The Wizard Of Oz on television, Dilovan is as keen as ever to talk about football and his team, Chelsea, but the two older girls are quiet. When Yurdagul speaks, Beriwan strokes her hair. They are beginning to look like a mirror image of each other.

Beriwan looks at Medya. "She could read and write perfectly in English when she was at school, and now she's forgotten it all. And now we'll have to start all over again in Germany. I've forgotten most of my German."

We stare at the planes landing and taking off outside the window.
January 2004  Kirchen is an hour's train journey from Cologne, the nearest city. The family have been placed in a social services-owned flat at the top of a steep hill, next to dense forest. It seems like the edge of the world. The flat is warm and spacious, a huge improvement on Dungavel. It's snowing outside. The children appear much happier. Medya and Dilovan are playing Ching, Chang, Chong, the same game they played in detention. Beriwan and Newroz are reading the English magazines we have brought for them, and talking Justin Timberlake and Eminem like normal kids. It's hard to rouse Beriwan from her magazines. "This is the only time I escape into a different world," she says.

School is a 45-minute walk away, as are the shops. Life is a series of journeys up and down the hill, and longer trips to their solicitor's office and the courtroom. They are delighted to be back in a proper school again, but have been put in the lowest-ability class.

Yurdagul cooks for us. Chicken, salad, rice. She's in her element. "You like?" she says. "It's good?" Dilovan is playing a word game with Medya - two words, five letters and two. It's Salih Ay, and Medya guesses straight away. "My father was a kind and funny man," Beriwan says. "Not knowing whether he is dead or alive is like not having a father at all." Neither Turkish nor Kurdish human rights groups know what has happened to him.

Whether or not you are granted political asylum seems to be a matter of chance. All but three adult members of Yurdagul and Salih's extended families have fled Turkey to seek asylum in European countries. All lived in the same region in Turkey and escaped for the same reasons. Two of Yurdagul's sisters have permission to stay in Germany, as does her brother in Finland. Six other relations are in limbo, awaiting decisions. Three of Salih's family have been granted asylum. The Ays have been told that Salih was sent back to Turkey because of his involvement in the PKK, an outlawed Kurdish organisation.

February 2004  Their appeal against deportation has failed. They are devastated. Their case is gathering support in Germany, but it's probably too late. Viraj Mendis, the Sri Lankan activist who sought refuge in a Manchester church in the late 1980s and now lives in Germany, is helping them. There is growing support from around the world - including from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The writer Thomas Keneally has condemned the treatment of the family, particularly their time in detention, saying, "In a liberal democracy you can only maintain a policy of locking children up behind barbed wire by spreading lies and demonising the dispossessed of the earth. In the future, these children will tell their stories. There's bound to be literature that comes out of it, and people will gasp and say, 'How did that policy ever get through?'"

In Germany, the Ays' last chance is a humanitarian appeal to the Petitionsausschuss, a body that is part of the apparatus of state government. They are granted a three-week stay of execution, but they need to present new evidence to the committee. Beriwan mentions that, after several years in jail, her aunt has escaped from Turkey to Germany within the past year. We visit her tiny flat in Cologne, where she lives with her husband who escaped from Turkey several years ago. Pain is etched into her hard eyes and her mouth. She is heavily pregnant and shifts with difficulty, the weight of the baby exacerbating the injuries she suffered in jail. White, horizontal scars lie just above the base of her spine. Her story is later used as evidence that the Ay family will be at risk if deported to Turkey.
"Outsiders say the Turkish government is giving Kurds freedoms," she says, "but if you're on the inside you know this is not the case. If a Kurdish person speaks out in Turkey, they are put in jail." She bows her head and then half raises her eyes. "I'm ashamed to say what happened to me. They took off my clothes and raped me and beat me too many times to count. Sometimes I have so much anger inside me because of what happened that I even hit my own husband."

April 2004 At the flat in Kirchen, every knock on the door, every ring on the phone makes the Ays jump. They say they are waiting for the inevitable. "In Dungavel, Medya used to have nightmares and cry in her sleep," Yurdagul says. "Now Dilovan is having nightmares and is scared to sleep alone. He says it's no use going to school and learning things because we'll be deported soon. Newroz keeps everything inside her, and then she gets frustrated and starts screaming."

The absent Salih is at the centre of much of their conversation. There is a little picture on the wall of the whole family cuddling close together. It is beginning to fade.

Yurdagul and her stateless children are constantly fearful for their future. "We are nothing, we don't belong anywhere," Beriwan says. "I've been running all my life and I'm tired now, really tired. Even when I'm at school, I can't always control my brain, it goes off thinking about other things." She rubs at her tears with her sleeve. "I wish I'd never been born. I wish Germany would kill me now rather than sending me to Turkey to die." Not having a country, she says, is like not having a mother and father. "But why do we need countries at all? I don't believe that God created Kurdistan or England or Germany. The way God created it, it's just one world."

September 2004 The family have finally found a specialist willing to examine the children. Because it is expensive and because it takes weeks to get the written report, and they are so desperately short of time, only Newroz and Medya are examined. The conclusions are shocking. Newroz talked extensively about her fear of what has happened to her father, her fear of being imprisoned again and her fear of being deported to Turkey where her aunt was imprisoned and tortured. The doctors says she was in a volcano-like state with more and more pressure gathering inside her and that both girls need medical help they are unlikely to receive in Turkey.

We ask Yurdagul whether there is anything she would do differently if she could start again on the stony road to shelter? "Not really. We never really had any choices. We made the decisions we made because we thought they were less likely to lead to deportation, because we thought it would give us more chance of surviving."

November 2004 We hear that because of the medical report the family are to be granted indefinite leave to remain. The children are told the news at school. Beriwan tells us how all the kids cheered. "I feel like I've got a different heart; a much happier heart," she says. Yet, in many ways, the hard work is yet to start - searching for their father, healing the psychological scars, trying to get back to Britain (all the children say they still feel British, and they speak English to each other) - but this is the result they had hoped for. Celebrations prove to be premature - the German government has only granted the Ay family a limited stay so that the children can receive medical treatment.

April 2006 We receive an ecstatic call from Beriwan - her father is alive and has been in touch. It turns out that initially he fled from Turkey to northern Iraq, but has been persuaded by his mother to return to Nerinjin, the Turkish village he spent more than 13 years running away from. It has taken him two years to track down the family
he had no idea they were in detention, let alone that they had been deported to Germany. The initial euphoria that he is alive soon subsides into confusion - what to do next? There are so many things to weigh up. The family desperately want to be reunited with their father, but their first two languages are now English and German, they consider themselves European, and they are at vital stages in their education.

January 2007 The family have been moved from the top of the steep hill to the valley below. They have a pleasant flat close to Kirchen station and are thrilled to have hot water. All the children are doing well at school and, three years on from Dungavel, are more grown up, but largely unchanged - innocents in a bleak world. Beriwan, now 18, has started her Abitur (A-levels), and still has hopes of becoming a lawyer. Newroz, 16, fancies becoming a clothes designer, while Dilovan, 15, is hoping to get trials with the local football team, Siegen. Medya, 11, starts secondary school this year.

The daily fear of immigration police banging on the door at dawn is suspended for the time being. Yet still their lives are full of shadows. The immigration laws in Germany are changing and immigrants not involved in work or study will no longer be allowed to remain. With high rates of unemployment, the chances of Yurdagul, who struggles to communicate in German, getting a job are limited. Temporary permission to stay in Germany may not be renewed when it runs out this year. Yurdagul feels torn between the needs of her children and her desire to be with her husband.

We finally get to speak to Salih, three years after first trying to track him down. He is devastated that he has been separated from the family, but is adamant that the children must not go to Turkey to be with him. "I would do anything for my children - anything to make their life easier. Things are very bad here, army, police, no opportunities," he says. The Turkey 2006 Progress Report from the European Commission supports his assessment. Despite a comprehensive legal framework enshrining the rights of minorities such as Kurds, many cases of torture are still reported. "There is a lack of attitude change on the ground and a culture of impunity in relation to torture and ill treatment," it says. According to Turkish government statistics in the first quarter of 2005, there were 1,239 reports of torture and ill-treatment cases filed against law enforcement officials.

Beriwan has seen pictures on TV of villages in the Kurdish south-east of Turkey and, having lived her entire life in western Europe, can't imagine what it would be like to be uprooted now and forcibly moved to the land of her parents. "Kurdish girls who live in Turkey have to wear long clothes and cover their heads and they're married off from the age of 14. They've never known our life and we've never known theirs," she says. "I don't know where we belong or why the British government split us up and deported my dad separately. But all we want is to be reunited with him so we can be a proper family again and to be in a safe country. It's something my school friends take for granted, but for us, after all these years, it's still an impossible dream."