

Lost youth becomes seed for Kurdish dream

● A childhood punctuated by bombs instead of music is driving a Kurdish Iraqi's desire to open a school for Kurds.

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Serwan Sereni was in first grade when he heard his first napalm bomb. "We grew up with the sound," Sereni said.

"No instrument can compare to the sound ... not even the drum," he said.

He dreamed of being the best violinist in his country. But his country was Iraq, and as a Kurdish Iraqi, he spent much of his youth dodging attacks by Saddam Hussein. At school, which stayed open only three hours a day, he had to wait in line with the other students for a chance to play one of a few violins.

Sereni, 40, who lives in St. Paul, has a new dream — to open a school to give Kurdish children a chance to learn music in ways he couldn't.

In January, Sereni, who plays

with the volunteer Kenwood Symphony Orchestra, went to Kurdistan and met with Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani to try to get funding for the school.

He doesn't know whether he will get the commitment he needs to start his school, but he doesn't worry about the war in Iraq. "It's very secure there [in Kurdistan]," Sereni said.

But he's not a stranger to violence. He remembers the airplanes dropping napalm bombs on his village. He remembers the taste of chemical gas from an attack near his hometown of Dolyalan in 1989. That was the year after the attack on Halabja, a six-hour drive from Dolyalan, which killed 5,000 civilians.

Most of all he remembers regret. "I lost all my time in war," he said. "If I had the opportunities American children have, I



Serwan Sereni plays with the Kenwood Symphony Orchestra.

would have been the best musician in my country," Sereni said from his home north of the State Capitol, where he lives with his wife and three daughters.

Still, by age 30 he established the Kurdistan National Symphony Orchestra and taught at the Institute of Fine Arts in Irbil, Iraq.

But violence against Kurds increased and he decided to leave. "More than 200 of my friends were assassinated," he said.

Sereni came to the United States in 1999, and he now manages Kurdistan Auto World, his

car dealership in Becker, Minn. He said it is important for Americans to know the reality of the Kurdish struggle.

Of the denial of Kurdish history, he said, "For me personally, it was like torture."

Kurds are a people without a nation; they live where Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the former Soviet Union meet. There are more than 25 million Kurds in an area the size of Texas. Kurds remain a separated people.

"Like one family divided into parts they hope to reunite again," Sereni said of the Kurds. "I am free ... but millions of my nation are not free."

Kenneth Freed, musical director of the Kenwood Symphony Orchestra, said of Sereni: "Only someone like Serwan ... can be so sincere and fearless about making music a force for change in the world."

Aisha Eady is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.