

The Heart of Jenin Stops Beating

by Marcus Vetter

On October 7, when I first heard the news about the gruesome attacks on Israel, I was on my way to Los Angeles to complete the final shooting of my film about the International Criminal Court.

The news brings back old memories that my subconscious has buried for good reason.

The scene that flashes in my mind is from April 4, 2011 in the West Bank town of Jenin. I was in the library of Cinema Jenin, a movie theater that I had been renovating for the past three years and about which I had also made a film, CINEMA JENIN – THE STORY OF A DREAM. Jenin was known for the fact that a third of all Palestinian suicide bombers came from this city.

That day I was supposed to meet with Juliano Mer-Khamis, the director of the Freedom Theater in the Jenin refugee camp. I had traveled to Jenin one last time especially for this meeting to ask him if he would like to run our well-equipped cinema. We had an appointment for the afternoon. On that very day, however, the Palestinian Minister of Culture had arrived to discuss with us a missing transfer of \$50,000, which was due to us from an approved grant but never reached our account.

Cinema Jenin opened in the summer of 2010 and had been showing films ever since. However, finances were strained, as many people in Jenin were afraid to visit the cinema because it was seen as a "normalization project" by certain Palestinian resistance groups. In their opinion, as long as Israel was "the occupying power," there could be no projects in Palestine that were not explicitly committed to the Palestinian resistance.

Juliano's Freedom Theater was a project committed to resistance – peaceful resistance through art and theater. It was founded in the mid-1980s by Juliano's mother Arna under the name "Stone Theater" and continued after her death by her son as The Freedom Theater. It enjoyed the protection of Zakaria Zbeidi, the head of the Al Aqsa Brigades, who was once Israel's most wanted terrorist but laid down his arms in a 2008 general amnesty.

When Zakaria was a young boy, he was one of the child actors in the theatre. Plus, he was also a character in one of Juliano's most memorable documentaries, ARNA'S CHILDREN – about his mother's work and the many young people like Zbeidi whom she introduced to the theatre.

Sadly, though, among all the young people portrayed in Juliano's film, two later blew themselves up as suicide bombers in Israel, many were killed in militant resistance, and only one of "Arna's Children" survived. That was him, Zakaria Zbeidi.

I had already interviewed him for an earlier film that I shot in Jenin in the summer of 2008. Shortly before that, I had contacted Juliano and told him that I was making a film about a Palestinian father, Ismael Khatib, whose eight-year-old son was shot by Israeli soldiers in Jenin in 2005 and who decided to donate his son's organs to Israeli children.

When I traveled to Israel for the first time for that very film – THE HEART OF JENIN – I had a queasy feeling about shooting in Jenin. My Israeli producer expressly warned me not to go there. But when I got Juliano on the phone, he just laughed and said: "No worries, Jenin is safer than Berlin."

Juliano set me up for an interview with Zakaria Zbeidi, who greeted us in the Freedom Theater. He handed his machine gun to one of his companions, sat down on the theater stage, and said he was ready for any questions – a scene that's vivid in my mind to this day. I could not help but notice countless scars on his face, inflicted by a warhead that had accidentally exploded.

The last time I saw Zakaria Zbeidi in person was in September 2010, a few weeks after the opening of Cinema Jenin. At that time, we had just facilitated a trip to Jenin by an Israeli woman, Yael Armanet.

Yael had lost her husband in a suicide bombing committed in Haifa by a young man from Jenin. After many years of grieving, she decided to visit the suicide bomber's family in the West Bank town, both as a gesture of reconciliation and as an attempt to recover personally.

I had met Yael at a screening of the film THE HEART OF JENIN in Haifa and asked volunteers from the Cinema Jenin project if they would make a film about Yael's journey in cooperation with a Palestinian director.

The result is the very touching film, AFTER THE SILENCE, which is also special in another way: Even though the film tells the story of an Israeli Jewish woman, it enjoyed the support of Cinema Jenin's team of Palestinians, something that, to my knowledge, had never been possible before in Israel-occupied Palestine.

However, just before its release, Zakaria Zbeidi spoke out against the film. And he addressed his words directly to Yael:

"My mother was killed by a sniper," he said. "Do you know what a sniper is? Do you want me to kill all your mothers, too? What are you doing here in Jenin, Yael? Why don't you go to the bulldozer drivers who are destroying our olive groves and erecting border fences in their place? Talk to them instead of coming to us."

His words were bitter. They highlighted his deep-seated wounds. And, unfortunately, AFTER THE SILENCE could never be shown in Jenin.

Shortly after our cinema opened, things changed dramatically. The interview I had shot with Zakaria in the middle of the night took place the day before I left. It ended with Zakaria dragging the manager of Cinema Jenin, Fakhri Hamad, out of bed at night and threatening him with a loaded gun for several hours before taking us back to the Cinema Jenin guest house at dawn.

It was a warning that I took seriously. Hours later, I left Jenin knowing that I would probably never return.

The only exception was that memorable day on April 4, 2011 when I was supposed to meet Juliano to hand over the management of Cinema Jenin. But I left him a message that I would be late because we were delayed by the minister. Even though Juliano and I had disagreed about the political orientation of Cinema Jenin, I admired him as a theater maker, actor and director. He lived for the theater.

Unlike The Freedom Theater, however, Cinema Jenin was not intended to be a resistance project. Rather, the idea was born out of Ismael's gesture of reconciliation, and we wanted to stay true to this idea. In retrospect, perhaps it was a naïve idea, but I still see it today as an important alternative to extreme polarization.

I could understand Juliano's attitude when he admonished me that any project in Jenin must address the Israeli occupation. But above all, I saw the people, including countless children, who had already suffered for a lifetime under this endless state of war.

In every war, innocent people die and hatred begets more hatred. Revenge brings on more revenge.

However, with his gesture of peace, Ismael Khatib has broken this vicious circle of violence and created rays of hope, which continue even today despite new clouds of darkness.

While shooting each of the three films, I witnessed the humiliation that Ismael, Fakhri, and cab drivers endured at checkpoints every time they took us from Jenin to Tel Aviv.

I saw the horrors of suicide bombings in Israel, such as the 2002 attack by a bomber from Jenin on innocent citizens at the Park Hotel of Netanya. I also saw the collective punishment Jenin endured in response, as bulldozers razed homes. All etched in the collective memory of a society.

I showed my rough cut of THE HEART OF JENIN at the Freedom Theater in 2009. After the showing, we sat for a long time at a café with the father, Ismael Khatib, and his translator, Fakhri Hamad. We discussed how to bring about peace and protect children like Ismael's son, Ahmed, who was shot by an Israeli soldier with a toy gun in his hand.

"How might we insulate them from the cruel collateral damage of war?" we asked. And it was on that summer evening that the idea of the cinema was born – to revive an old Bauhaus cinema in Jenin, the likes of which had become virtually extinct with the first intifada.

Fakhri and I later became close friends. I admired him for his

courage in reviving a cinema for the people of Jenin.

Unlike in the West Bank capital city, Ramallah, it was possible to speak Hebrew in Jenin, and I found the people of Jenin to be more open and less extreme.

In the end, however, they could not accept the cinema. They felt trapped. They were caught between the Palestinian Authority, which supported the project, and the resistance groups, who viewed it as a "normalization project."

I wanted the cinema to survive. So, even though Juliano's politics were not in sync with mine, I was weighing whether or not it would be best to hand it over to him.

With these ambivalent thoughts, I was in the meeting with the Minister of Culture, when Ismael's cell phone rang. His face turned white.

Just a few minutes earlier, Juliano Mer-Khamis was shot in his car with several bullets in broad daylight. He was in front of his theater, his one-year-old son in his lap.

The news spread like wildfire around the world. It also reached my editor, Saskia Metten, who, at that very moment was editing a scene in which Juliano makes a passionate plea for Palestine.

And yet, Juliano's assassin was also a Palestinian. The reasons for the crime will always remain a mystery. For years thereafter, the still image of that scene was, for me, a symbol of a shattered dream, and October 7 seems to shatter it again.

But on my flight to L.A., I see these these events in a different light.

The gestures of kindness and peace by Israelis and Palestinians are recorded in my three films for posterity. No one can go back in time to change that history. And all my experiences tell me that there will be a moment, perhaps sooner than most people believe possible, when those many kind efforts of reconciliation and peace will be remembered, revived, and renewed.

On the eve of Juliano's assassination, Zakaria Zbeidi gave a fiery speech in the Freedom Theater. It was the last time I saw him.

Months later, I read that Zakaria was involved in a gunfight with the governor of Jenin. It was the same governor who had given a resounding welcome speech to all our volunteers at the opening of Cinema Jenin, assuring them that Jenin was open to all religions and cultures.

After the gunfight, the governor died of a heart attack. It was never proven that Zbeidi was at fault, but he was arrested and locked up in a Palestinian jail.

He was later extradited to Israel and transferred to a high-security prison, where he's been ever since, except once: On September 9, 2021, Zbeidi and other Palestinians managed to escape through a tunnel but were recaptured shortly thereafter.

War and Justice

My flight approaches LAX for a landing, and a sudden jolt of turbulence awakens me from my daydream. I have an appointment that evening with Luis Moreno Ocampo, the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. I had met him back in 2009 in Berlin, where we won the Cinema for Peace Award for HEART OF JENIN.

Ocampo was fascinated by our work in Jenin and invited me to The Hague to discuss his idea of making a documentary film about the International Criminal Court. That's when the idea for WAR AND JUSTICE was born.

He was especially interested in Palestine because, after the Gaza war of 2008, a Palestinian delegation had approached him, asking the ICC to investigate possible Israeli war crimes in Gaza.

He explained that, since Palestine was not recognized as a state, it could not yet become a member of the ICC, and the Gaza war did not fall under its jurisdiction. Ocampo referred the case to the United Nations, which later granted Palestine observer state status in 2012. Three years later, Palestine ratified the ICC and became an official member state. Consequently, any war crimes, genocide and

crimes against humanity committed on Palestinian soil can be prosecuted by the ICC, regardless of which side commits them.

As my flight touches ground, it's October 8 in Palestine but still October 7 in California. The unimaginably cruel images of that day again block other thoughts I might have: A young Israeli woman drenched in blood, dragged into a van by her hair. Young people fleeing in the desert, pursued by men in combat fatigues shouting "allah 'akbar." At the same time, I'm aware that Palestinian war crimes can also be prosecuted by the ICC.

Back in 2012, Ocampo handed over his post as ICC Chief Prosecutor to Gambian lawyer Fatou Bensouda. Then, in 2021, Karim Khan became the current Chief Prosecutor, and in 2023 issued the arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin for alleged Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

I drive to Luis Moreno Ocampo's home. We record the last segment of WAR AND JUSTICE late into the night. And now, this project which began in 2009, co-directed with my dear friend, Michele Gentile, is finally complete.

Looking back, I ask myself: What single person best symbolizes the experiences, fears and hopes of the film's protagonists and all the victims of wars, past or present?

I remember Luis Moreno's first case at the ICC. It was against warlord Thomas Lubanga Dyilo of the Democratic Republic of Congo. And for the final hearing, Luis invited that person.

He was Ben Ferencz, the youngest prosecutor of the Nuremberg Trials. At the age of 92, he gave an impassioned closing statement about the right of every human being to be protected from the atrocities of war, declaring, "Revenge leads to revenge; violence leads to even more violence. The greatest war crime of all is war itself."

Three Months Later

Now, as I write these words, beyond the 1,200 Israeli's killed on October 7, more than 27,000 have lost their lives in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has again declared he will wage this war to the bitter end -- and in a way that Hamas will remember

for generations to come.

In Jenin, a boy I knew well, who was ten years old in CINEMA JENIN, has just been killed along with two colleagues, in a raid by disguised Israeli forces at Ibn Sina Hospital. A few weeks earlier, an eight-year-old boy, holding a toy gun, was shot dead by an Israeli soldier.

History repeats itself and other hearts of Jenin stop beating.

But despite the continued suffering, hope springs eternal, and I decide to relaunch the three films as THE TRILOGY OF HOPE. It includes

THE HEART OF JENIN,
CINEMA JENIN – THE STORY OF A DREAM, and
AFTER THE SILENCE

I will release them together with our new film, WAR AND JUSTICE.

Four films about people who have broken the vicious circle of violence and hatred. Four films about their still-fervent hopes for peace.

I would much prefer to stop making films about war and start making films about peace. That's the all-important transition that I pray WAR AND JUSTICE will help provide.

We must make wars obsolete. That's the same fervent goal that drove Luis Moreno Ocampo and Ben Ferencz to help establish the International Criminal Court. They understood the critical role of impartial justice to hold every head of state personally accountable for wars of aggression and for the war crimes that almost inevitably ensue.

As imperfect as this court may be, it is the only court of its kind, recognized by the United Nations and 123 member states. It seeks to protect, through justice, the victims of war, ending the vicious circle of violence and revenge.

No matter how reasonable some arguments for certain wars may sound, we must never cease striving for an alternative path. We

must end war.

www.trilogy-of-hope.com

www.war-and-justice.com